

TEENAGERS AT RISK FOR BAD DIGITAL FOOTPRINTS

By John Ricks Kayizzi

Imagine you are set to travel abroad, but you are denied a visa. Perhaps nothing can be as heartbreaking as that for any teenager with big dreams and aspirations. That, however, is not far-fetched.

It is now mandatory for US embassies and consulates to look up applicants' social media footprints as part of the visa and immigration vetting process.

During this process, applicants are required to provide their social media information from the past five years, and in some cases, adjust their privacy settings to "public" to facilitate review. This means their entire digital footprint is laid bare.

Unfortunately, this stringent vetting process has caught many teenagers off guard, as they are often careless with their social media posts.

The new rules are hitting teens hard — in-person interviews are now mandatory for almost all ages (even under 14s who were previously exempt), causing anxiety and



travel headaches for parents.

Isaac Mwesigwa, a computer scientist, said the Internet keeps a history of what one posts.

"Young people should be cautious about what they post on their social media accounts because it could come back to haunt them several years later. One is often judged by what they post on social media," he said.

Dr Charles Olaro, the director general of health services at the Ministry of Health, yesterday said: "The lack of a mechanism to minimise screen time for the children leads them to post

inappropriate and at times inadmissible content, and results in attention deficit.

"We are currently seeing many cases of internet addiction, leading to loss of time that the children cannot get back," he said.

Olaro noted that such cases result in developmental deficits for the children because they lack time to build social relationships.

"We are now getting many children who are anti-social due to limited activity, which results in obesity and, in some cases,



Dr Olaro said internet addiction is rising among children

finding companions online, who compel them to engage in negative activities, some of which they post online," he said.

Yasito Kayinga Muddu, the executive director of the Community Transformation Foundation Network, said teenagers leaving a bad digital footprint can severely damage their reputation, ruin their career or college prospects and admissions.

"This would increase risks of cyberbullying, and harm their personal relationships by exposing sensitive information or past actions out of context, creating long-term security vulnerabilities," he said.

He added that it can also act as a permanent online resume that can lead to significant professional setbacks

BETWEEN THE LINES

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and personal dangers.

Kayinga, who is also the director of the Masaka-based Kwagala Community Schools-Early Childhood Development Centre, said many teenagers have been caught with old, out-of-context content, which they posted several years ago.

"It may misrepresent who they are now, and eventually affect how people view them."

Dr Sabrina Kitaka, a paediatrician, said children are becoming increasingly more aware of the Internet and some are using it for more than six hours a day.

"The World Wide Web poses dangers to children, including exposure to inappropriate content [violence, pornography, hate speech], cyberbullying, online

predators seeking exploitation, privacy risks (identity theft, data breaches)," she said.

Kitaka added that internet addiction can also have impacts on mental health (anxiety, self-harm, depression) from online pressures and unrealistic comparisons, requiring strong parental guidance, digital literacy and safety tools.

"As parents introduce their children to smartphones and tablets connected to the Internet, they should be prepared to support and sustain supervision in these environments. Friendling your child on social media apps is essential."

Vision Group initiated the campaign to equip children with tips on how to use media platforms responsibly. It is also hoped that these conversations will inform policy in addition to engaging parents and guardians to identify and address instances of abuse and misuse of social media platforms.

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