

Clicks, comments, and cruelty: Teen life online

Online spaces can build friendships but they can also turn harsh. For many teens, cyberbullying is real, fast, and hard to escape, affecting confidence, focus, and well-being far beyond the screen.

BY GLORIA IRANKUNDA

In today's fast-paced digital world, being online is no longer a choice for teenagers, it is part of how life works. Through sharing moments instantly on platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram, friendships grow, and conversations continue long after the school ends.

But sometimes, those same spaces turn against you.

It may begin with a comment that feels off, a joke that crosses a line or a photo that gets shared without your permission.

Martin Ocen, a digital safety advocate based in Kampala explains that cyberbullying hits differently because of how visible it is.

"When something is posted online, everyone has access to it. For a teenager, that kind of exposure can feel overwhelming and difficult to escape," he explains.

It is not "just online"

There is a common belief that cyberbullying is less serious than physical bullying. That if it becomes too much, you can simply log off and move on. But for most teens, it is not that simple.

"Online spaces are part of a young person's real life," Ocen says. "This is where friendships exist, identity is formed, and validation is often sought."

Because of this, what happens online does not stay online.

"We see students becoming withdrawn, losing focus in class, or constantly anxious. Some begin to doubt themselves because the criticism feels public and permanent," he says.

Why it spreads so fast

Cyberbullying moves quickly because of how digital spaces work.

A single post can be shared across multiple groups within minutes. Screenshots make it hard to delete something completely while anonymous accounts are not accountable.

"There is also pressure to respond immediately. Teens feel like they have to defend themselves, but that reaction can sometimes escalate the situation," Ocen explains.

What follows is a cycle. A post leads to a reaction, the reaction is shared again and the situation keeps growing.

Pause before you react

When faced with hurtful messages or posts, the natural response is to fight back or to explain yourself. But reacting immediately often worsens the situation.

Claire Namutebi, a content creator, says the first step is to slow down.

"The instinct to respond is strong, especially when you feel attacked. But emotional responses can make things worse," she says.



When something is shared online, it can feel like control has been taken away. But there are still ways to create boundaries.

Instead, she encourages teens to pause. "Take a moment before doing anything and do not rush to reply. The goal is to regain control, not to win an argument online," Namutebi recommends.

That pause creates space to think clearly and act deliberately.

Save the evidence

One of the most practical steps you can take is also one of the most overlooked.

"Document everything, take screenshots of messages, posts, usernames, and timestamps," Namutebi advises. It may feel uncomfortable to keep those records, but they are important.

"If the issue needs to be reported to the school or the platform, evidence makes a difference. Without it, it becomes difficult to prove what happened," she explains.

SET BOUNDARIES EARLY

Not every negative interaction is cyberbullying but repeated discomfort is a warning sign.

"If someone constantly makes you uncomfortable online, that is enough reason to act," Ocen says.

You do not have to wait for the situation to become extreme.

"Mute, unfollow, or block them early. Boundaries are easier to maintain when they are set before things escalate," he explains.

Learning to recognise your limits is part of protecting your mental space.

barrassment and worry about making the situation bigger. Others believe they should handle it on their own and this often makes things heavier.

Joel Ssemanda, a school counsellor at Lakeview Progressive Academy, Entebbe emphasises the importance of seeking support when facing online attacks.

"If something is affecting you, talk to someone you trust. It could be a teacher, a parent, or a school counsellor," he says.

Ssemanda mentions that early support can change the outcome.

"When an issue is addressed early, it is easier to manage. Waiting allows it to grow and become more complicated," Ssemanda explains.

Role of friends

Cyberbullying rarely happens without an audience. There are always people who see what is happening, whether in group chats or on public posts. What they do matters.

"Sometimes other students make it worse without realising. They share harmful content, laugh, or remain silent," Ssemanda shares.

Silence can feel like agreement to the person being targeted. Instead, he encourages teens to act differently.

"If you see someone being bullied, do not join in or forward the content. Check in with the person privately and let them know you are there," he advises.

Support does not have to be loud or public. Even a simple message can make someone feel less alone.

Take breaks when needed

Sometimes the healthiest decision is to step away. Taking a break from social media can help reduce stress and give you time to reset.

"This is not about running away. It is about creating distance so you can think clearly and take care of yourself," Ocen says.

Even a short break can make a difference in how you feel and respond. Cyberbullying does not always end when the posts stop. The emotional impact can linger. Teens may become more self-conscious and avoid posting. They may feel like others are judging them, even when nothing is being said.

"Recovery takes time and involves rebuilding confidence and a sense of safety," Ocen explains.

He encourages teens to reconnect with supportive spaces.

"Spend time with friends who make you feel comfortable. Engage in activities you enjoy and focus on areas of your life where you feel in control," Ocen advises.

Avoid comparison

Social media often shows a filtered version of life, achievements, celebrations, and carefully chosen moments. But it rarely shows struggles.

"Do not compare your reality to what you see online. Everyone has challenges, even if they are not visible," Namutebi notes.

Comparison can deepen feelings of insecurity, especially after a difficult experience. Focusing on your own journey helps reduce that pressure.

Find your way forward

There is no single way to respond to cyberbullying. Each situation is different and each person reacts differently.

But some principles remain clear. Pause before reacting, save evidence, protect your space, speak up and seek support.

"These steps may seem simple, but together they help you regain control," Ssemanda states.

Deleting everything immediately might feel like relief, but it can remove proof that could help you later.

Protect your space

When something is shared online, it can feel like control has been taken away. But there are still ways to create boundaries.

"Use the tools available to you, block the person, report the account and adjust your privacy settings. These are ways of protecting yourself. You are deciding who gets access to your space and who does not," Namutebi explains.

Simple steps like limiting who can comment on your posts or who can message you can reduce further harm.

Know when to speak up

Some teens choose silence when they are being bullied online. They fear em-