



# RAGE IN THE CYBER FRONTIER

Picture: Fotolia

*Local social media groups are a wealth of information, but why do they generate so much negativity? Psychologist **Lisa Grant-Stuart** explores the issue*

**P**ublic online groups are great for advice, sharing common interests, and exchanging goods and services. Participating in forums has been associated with enhancing well-being, preventing loneliness and providing members with an old-fashioned sense of community, but what about the more detrimental effects?

Some online groups are created for the very purpose of naming and shaming people, whilst other more “ordinary” groups are frequented by users who regularly rant and/or over-share personal information. So why does this occur?

The Online Disinhibition Effect: The absence of face-to-face interaction on social media sites, such as Facebook, lulls users into a false sense of anonymity and security, thereby increasing the likelihood of uncensored communication. The absence of

physical social cues, such as grimacing or frowning, prevents users from modifying the tone of their comments. In fact, research suggests that an overwhelming majority of users admit to slanderous or, at best, “out of character” behaviour within forums.

Attitude Polarity: This social psychology principle dictates that when people feel that their attitudes are under scrutiny, they will attempt to strengthen their position by defending opinions vigorously and without consideration of others. Within the context of Facebook, this may explain the formation of two distinct camps within forums, often pro or against an issue, each becoming increasingly militant in their attempts to prove the other wrong. Having opinions supported by other members, via comments and likes, is also a powerful self-esteem booster.

Group Member Differences: Many members of public online forums naïvely believe that the groups are comprised of

like-minded people, simply because they are formed around a common goal. However, any group is a microcosm of society, containing the do-gooders, the pleasers, the jocks and the bullies, and one will find all of these personas online. In fact, cyberspace brings a unique population of users, known as Trolls, whose sole purpose is causing trouble online.

No Frame Of Reference: Many cyberpsychology experts agree that society is still attempting to establish a frame of reference for online behaviour. This does not pose a problem for individuals who are moderate in their offline behaviours, but for those who already struggle with social interaction and boundaries, this lack of clarity around what and when to post leads to oversharing and/or brashness. People who overshare in forums do this to gain support, while actually perpetuating the opposite – rejection and criticism.

An Absence Of Immediate Consequences: Public forums are usually managed by very competent site administrators, but the groups remain difficult to monitor from a logistical perspective. In many instances, the forum rules, such as no controversial topics and blocking procedures, are not explicitly stated from the outset. As such, members are able to impulsively post comments without fear of swift retribution.

In reality, there are very dire consequences for those who unwittingly or intentionally engage in inappropriate online behaviour. Once information is shared online, it exists indefinitely. Prospective employers, clients and love interests will often search social media to form a preliminary impression of someone. Cyberbullying is a form of slander and is a prosecutable offence. The “few degrees of separation law” also applies online – the person you are shaming may turn out to be your in-law or boss one day.

For those who have been the victims of cyberbullying and/or of harmless posts gone wrong, the costs can be even greater and include loss of employment, relationship difficulties and, in some instances, suicide.

So what is the solution? It would start with the realisation that online forums are comprised of a few people who won't stick to the forum's agenda. Cases of malicious cyberbullying can and should be reported, but the benefits of belonging to these forums far outweigh the occasional tiff.

Naming, shaming and flaming is a new age problem, which may require an age old solution – if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it at all. \*



## EXPERT OPINION

**Lisa Grant-Stuart is a counselling psychologist, part-time lecturer and psych student supervisor, as well as a wife and mother to two children. She has a special interest in trauma and problems of everyday living, including adjustment, bullying and grief.**

**MUSGRAVE**  
OPENING SOON

**LADY JANE**  
unapologetically  
SEXY

Stockists of luxury imported lingerie and adult massagers (including Lelo, We-Vibe, Swan, Je Joue and Fun Factory)

**ADULT GIFTING  
SEXUAL HEALTH  
PRODUCTS**

**GILLITTS**  
Gillitts Shopping Centre, 1 Clifton Rd  
031 764 6054

**UMHLANGA**  
4 The Sentinel, 15 Equinox Rd,  
Gateway, 031 566 3755

[www.ladyjane.co.za](http://www.ladyjane.co.za)  
[info@ladyjane.co.za](mailto:info@ladyjane.co.za)