

Newark teen's online identity stolen and used to destroy her reputation

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NEWARK — Nafeesa Onque's Facebook page had all the trimmings of a teenage girl's internet home: Her cell phone number, favorite movies, relationship status and photo albums were just a click away, lined up neatly beneath a smiling photograph of the pretty 15-year-old.

But the person who built the profile was nothing like the Newark teen who was a popular cheerleader for years and spends most of her time working toward a Rutgers University scholarship. Someone else was behind the computer screen, someone who stole Nafeesa's online identity and was using it to destroy her real one.

For nearly three years, an online bully plagued Nafeesa, following her across the social networking spectrum, hounding the girl and her friends on MySpace, Facebook and a video chat service called ooVoo, according to police and her family. In 2009, the bully started impersonating Nafeesa, according to police and relatives, using several fake profiles to hold her online personality hostage until police tracked down the impostor last month.

Nafeesa's mother, Karima, worked relentlessly to end the harassment, pleading with internet providers, school officials and Newark police.

There were momentary victories, but every time the mother managed to get a page deleted, a new one would spring up within days.

The tormentor used varying online identities. A fake Nafeesa, calling herself "Nafeesa McPomPoms Onque Onque," sent "friend" requests to dozens of city teens as well as family members on Facebook.

Shortly after accepting an invitation from "Nafeesa," friends found their inboxes and Facebook "walls" flooded with threats, sexually explicit comments and profanity-laced tirades, police and family said.

One girl became so angry she attacked Nafeesa, striking her in the face outside a city school last March. After years of attacks, the impostor was caught, but Nafeesa's ordeal and the family's frustrated attempts to help her

speak to the larger challenges facing law enforcement as cyber-bullying becomes a more visible national problem, experts say.

"No one knows where or how to report cyber-bullying. They just don't. I am that person. I do this all the time, and apparently I am failing and all of us are failing," said Parry Aftab, executive director of WiredSafety, the country's oldest and largest nonprofit internet safety group. "When it happens, everyone thinks they are the first person it ever happened to."

Aftab said Nafeesa's experience may have been harrowing, but it's also fairly common.

She fits the profile of a typical victim of online harassment, according to a 2010 study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. Cyber-bullying victims are normally between the ages of 14 and 17, and 38 percent of "all online girls" have reported that they experienced harassment, according to the study.

Aftab says impersonations account for 70 percent of all reported cyber-bullying crimes, calling it the "most dangerous" type of online harassment. Online attacks have led to several high-profile teen suicides, bringing increased attention to cyber-bullies, who Aftab says can leave teens "desperately, desperately hurt with scars that just don't heal."

The bully's first attacks came in 2008, but they were aimed at Nafeesa's sister Faiza, the girls' mother said. The suspect created a profile pretending to be one of the teen's classmates on MySpace. Within days, dozens of insults were flying, and the Onques' home and cell phone numbers had been posted on the page.

Karima Onque contacted MySpace, which took the page down. Life returned to normal inside the Onque family's quiet Central Ward apartment.

But a few months later, Nafeesa became the target.

She and her mother eventually tracked the rumors and threats they were hearing about to a MySpace page that bore Nafeesa's name and picture. MySpace deleted the page, but that wasn't the end of it.

When Nafeesa began high school in 2009, she created her own Facebook page signed "Nafeesa McPomPoms Onque," in reference to her cheerleading. Soon, the stalker found her again, creating a new fake page under the slightly different name "NaFeesa McPomPoms Onque Onque."

Once again, it took the Onques months to track the rumors and threats to a Facebook profile.

Nafeesa says she was terrified. Friends, even people she didn't know, would approach her and ask why she was sending nasty messages to them. At the same time, Nafeesa began to withdraw from the social world of her school.

"I didn't know who to trust. It could have been anybody," said Nafeesa. "How do I know that you're not the stalker just pretending to be my friend?"

When she should have been out at sporting events and school dances on weekends, Nafeesa stayed home, a virtual prisoner.

"For a while I couldn't walk to the corner store by myself or do the things I wanted to do because my parents were worried about my safety," she said.

As months passed, the bullying became more personal, and far more disturbing.

The impostor started posting Facebook status updates saying Nafeesa "just had sex." Family members said the fake Nafeesa would sometimes flirt with random men on Facebook and proposition them for sex. During an online conversation in late 2009, "Nafeesa McPomPoms" started cursing at Karima Onque and telling the Newark mother things no parent would want to hear: "and i had sex last year with this boy named syid," wrote the impostor, according to a transcript of a Facebook "chat" with Karima Onque.

Last year, the suspect posed naked from the neck down in a video on ooVoo, according to family and police, and someone "tagged" the real Nafeesa in the web clip on Facebook, making it visible to hundreds of relatives and classmates.

"Even my mother could see that popping up," said Sulaiman Onque, Nafeesa's father. "Everyone is on Facebook."

Despite the continued bullying, Nafeesa did not take her own Facebook profile down.

"I couldn't delete my page. If I deleted it, then everybody would have believed that (fake) page was the real one," she said. "I had to put up a fight."

Things came to a head last March, when a 14-year-old girl attacked Nafeesa in a city schoolyard after the impostor challenged her to a fight. Her mother filed a report with Newark police the same day.

But when Karima Onque asked city police for help in pursuing her daughter's online tormentor, she said a detective told her nothing could be done.

Newark does not staff a cyber-bullying unit, but a police spokesman said he doubted a detective would have simply dismissed the complaint.

"When the department was contacted, we did generate the necessary reports as part of our investigation," wrote Detective Hubert Henderson in a statement.

Aftab said law enforcement authorities are often confused about how to tackle cyber-bullying issues.

"Cyber-bullying has really hit law enforcement over the back of the head with a snow shovel," she said.

There were other complications. Like many parents whose children become the victim of a cyber-bully, Karima Onque had trouble reporting the problem. Family members and friends often tried to contact Facebook by using the site's "report abuse" feature between December 2009, when they discovered the page, and March of last year. Karima Onque said Facebook did not reply.

But Andrew Noyes, the manager of Facebook's communications department, said Facebook records show it received only two reports regarding the impostor's page, and deleted the profiles within days.

He said Facebook tracks complaints from the moment someone clicks the "report abuse" link on its website.

"Consistent with the practices of other major providers of free online services, we offer e-mail support for Facebook because it enables us to most effectively and efficiently serve our over 500 million users worldwide," Noyer said in an e-mail.

He could not confirm or deny how long the impostor was harassing Nafeesa on Facebook.

Authorities said Karima Onque provided the State Police with records detailing "several months" of abuse on Facebook. She may have had trouble properly reporting the incidents because the bully used several variants of the "Nafeesa McPomPoms" handle, police said.

Experts say parents and victims are often confused about how to report abuse, and the sprawling nature of social networking sites doesn't help.

"One of the problems with these sites is that they are great at making content available to very large audiences, but they are not very good at addressing the concerns of individual users," said Douglas Salane, director of the center for cyber-crimes research at John Jay College. "They would need enormous staffs to go and address all of these issues."

The fake profile vanished for a few months after the fistfight. But in early October, Nafeesa and her mother were shaken by two separate events.

On Sept. 30, reports surfaced of the suicide of Tyler Clementi, the Rutgers freshman who leapt from the George Washington Bridge after classmates allegedly streamed his intimate encounter with another man over the internet.

Days later, "Nafeesa McPomPoms Onque Onque" returned to Facebook.

"When I saw that, I knew I had to do something," Karima Onque said. "It was much worse than what happened with Nafeesa, but still. It felt like he was my child. As soon as she found out there was another page, it was like her whole world came down."

After some time being bounced around, Karima Onque connected with someone who could help.

First she went to the Federal Bureau of Investigations Newark field office, which referred her to the National Center For Missing and Exploited Children. From there she was sent to the desk phone of New Jersey State Police Sgt. Chuck Allen.

A 10-year veteran of the State Police's Digital Technology Investigations Unit, Allen said his office handles about 500 complaints of online bullying per year. Only a dozen rise to the level of a criminal act, he said.

But when he received a call about Nafeesa's case one morning last October, it "stood out," he said.

"You have a situation in which a girl was physically assaulted based on things that were posted on the internet," said Allen, 37. "As a parent myself, I could relate to what she was saying," he said.

For the next six weeks, Detective Chris Camm and Allen poured through Karima Onque's records of the attacks, and dozens of MySpace, Facebook and ooVoo profiles. They were hunting for the impersonator's internet protocol address, which would reveal the predator's online identity.

By December, Allen and Camm had the name and hometown of their suspect. Allen and Camm approached the suspect in January, not long after they spoke with the Onques. They didn't have to travel very far.

The IP address led police to a home near the townhouse complex where the Onques have lived for years. Authorities confirmed Nafeesa's tormentor was a 15-year-old girl she had suspected since day one.

State Police arrested the alleged bully in January and charged her with wrongful impersonation. The suspect's identity was withheld due to her age.

Nafeesa could only speculate that the girl was bitter that they did not have a closer relationship.

"We were just acquaintances, but she must have thought it was more serious," said Nafeesa, identifying the impostor only as a former friend. "When we got in school I would just say 'hi' to her, but she must have wanted me to do more than that."

The bully appeared jealous of Nafeesa's popularity, according to a 2008 conversation between Karima Onque and the suspect on MySpace.

"y did you send a message to my son that nafeesa ugly and phony and u hate her??? that was mean and nafeesa said she always nice to u," wrote Karima Onque.

"well i said that because i'm always the one at recess standing by myslef with no one to talk to," the alleged bully wrote back. "i try to talk to the rock group but they always playing with some boyz or doing something else."

The case was referred to Essex County Family Court, said Sgt. Allen.

While the suspect's age may get her a modest sentence, experts like Aftab say tougher prosecutions might help stem what looks like an epidemic.

"It's a horrible situation," she said. "The answer isn't an easy one."