

'Catfished' woman warns of being hooked online

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WHEN a University of KwaZulu-Natal student set up her Facebook account to search for a young, good looking and rich man, she never thought she would fall prey to an imposter.

Seemingly desperate for a man who ticked all her boxes, Phumelele Ngcobo, 21, never imagined she'd be catfished.

Catfishing is a world phenomena, where people online impersonate others to dupe unsuspecting victims, usually for cash, explicit photographs or for other criminal activities. The craze led popular US TV network MTV, to document stories of imposters online in *Catfish: The TV Show*.

On the reality show, the producers work with victims to track down their online flings, only to be crushed when it was confirmed that the person they had virtually fallen in love with online, was not who they claimed to be.

In some instances, young women were found to be old, burly women.

"I didn't think it would be so hard to get a boyfriend. I wanted a rich guy and the first guy that inboxed me happened to have all the qualities I needed in a man. He was rich and popular," said Ngcobo of Newlands East, Durban.

She and her "admirer" were studying on the same campus, but when they crossed paths in the corridors of the university, the man never noticed her, but was eager online in their chats.

"He said he would be at the opening bash and he would like us to meet there. I told him I'm not interested, after noticing every time he saw me on campus he showed no interest.

"He lied and said we couldn't be seen in public since college just opened and because his family is well known he'd like to keep our relationship 'under wraps'," said Ngcobo.

Months later they exchanged explicit photographs privately as their virtual romance blossomed, despite never interacting in person. After the photographs, the man requested a R1 000 loan from Ngcobo, claiming he had a fight with his parents, but Ngcobo insisted they meet and talk in person first.

"He threatened to expose my nude photos on social



Student Phumelele Ngcobo was catfished online.

media. I then told friends about my relationship. We confronted the guy who was in the pictures and he told us he did not know us and had no idea what we were talking about. We showed him the account and he said he did not have a Facebook account."

Ngcobo never reported the incident to the police but did so with law firm Shepstone and Wylie, who advised her on the best practices for online.

Advocate Verlie Oosthuizen said the catfish craze was on the increase in South Africa.

She said some people were falling victims to catfishing syndicates while others did it for their own "amusement".

"There are weekly complaints about it shared with us. While people do not often take serious legal action against perpetrators we are hearing about it increasingly. Sometimes victims are asked for money, especially in instances where it is a criminal syndicate.

"When there is a personal relationship, it is usually not money that is asked for, it will be an attempt to humiliate the victim and it is a form of cyber-bullying," said Oosthuizen.

Police spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Thulani Zwane said he was aware of the activity and cases were reported weekly of young women falling prey. "If someone is trying to extort money from you, do not pay them... If necessary, report them to the police."