BLUE WHALE: FAKE OR REAL AND THE DANGERS FACING SA KIDS

Category: Commercial Law,Dispute Resolution,Media and OTT
written by PPM Attorneys | May 17, 2017



It seems a panic has swept the globe due to the “new” online social media game: the Blue Whale.

After signing up, players are assigned a curator who then issues tasks; similar to a scene straight out of the movie “Nerve”, except with no reward. The tasks range from waking up at weird hours to watching strange videos. On the 50th day, a player is allegedly assigned the task to kill themselves.

Unconfirmed media reports state that as many as 130 teen suicides are related to the game.

But is this latest media craze even real?

The Blue Whale game is nothing new. Evidence shows that it has been active since late 2015. With the recent surge of fake news doing the rounds, it seems the game is the perfect topic for sensationalist “news”, causing panic and fear. In truth, it may just be a great marketing ploy, but no one will truly know. The story was inexplicably picked up months after first appearing by international tabloids, with claims that the game is spreading across the world (cue the copy-cats).

A potential case of copy-cat games arising is a scary reality, as people now intrigued about the Blue Whale game, will start doing online searches to see it for themselves. It is possible that the game never existed but since the crazy amount of media coverage lately, copy-cat games have sprung up, luring unsuspecting or vulnerable victims. The result is fake news becoming a reality and a real threat.

It is not argued that deaths have been a result from this game, but it is suggested that since the game has been so widely reported, deaths may now be directly attributed to the game. The old saying, ‘*curiosity killed the cat*’, is applicable to the current situation.

The fear and panic from the sensationalist media coverage of the game detract from focusing on the real issues of mental illness, suicide and the proper treatment of these issues. The game must not be allowed to be used as a reason or excuse for suicide.

This is a prime example of fake news leading to real consequences.

A game like this whether fake or real has a real and dangerous impact on the youth of South Africa. Teenagers are particularly susceptible to engaging and becoming enthralled by games such as these. The teenage years are a tumultuous time what with raging hormones, bodily changes and severe peer pressure. Not to mention the feeling that anything that does go wrong “is the end of the world.” The completion of each task would give the child/teenager a false sense of confidence or even power, making them feel invincible. They may share the game with friends and feel obliged to carry out the tasks till the very end, once a friend/group is involved. A false sense of belonging to something “trending” or “big” on social media can also attract many insecure children/teens.

The key is educating children/teens on the dangers of becoming involved in a game like Blue Whale.

Any developments in this game should be watched closely by the Films and Publications board, who should act immediately by banning the game if it does in fact reach our shores.

The most important watchdogs however need to be parents and adults. Parents and adults need to be internet savvy and aware of the increasing dangers online and off, that face children/teens daily.

By Darren Epstein and Diana Schwarz