

The Twitter murder that never was

By Pietro Lombardi, for CNN

⌚ Updated 1508 GMT (2308 HKT) January 13, 2016



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South African Twitter user sparks debate on sexual violence



Story highlights

Twitter user told story of a young South African woman who was murdered in series of tweets

The story was a fake -- but many social media users, activists and journalists were fooled

The story has sparked a debate on sexual violence in South Africa -- where it is a major issue

(CNN) — The horrific story of a young woman raped and murdered -- told in a series of tweets -- has shaken up South Africa.

The tweets, which were sent late last week, caused an outburst of emotion and each was retweeted hundreds of times.

Women's rights activists, officials and the press in South Africa all picked up on the compelling tale -- which later turned out to be completely made up.

So what exactly happened?

In a series of 70 numbered tweets sent over several hours, user [@JustKhuthi](#) told the horrifying story of the disappearance and eventual death of her childhood friend Kamo Peterson, a young actuarial science graduate heading for a career in professional tennis.

The hint that the story was fiction not fact was in this tweet, not numbered and sent before the rest. It says: "Story time ... "

Story time ..

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

But many missed that once the story went viral. Here are some of the early tweets in the

series of 70:

1) I met [@Kamo51702562](#) when I was 12, our mothers had met at some work function & developed friendship almost immediately. She was 15.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

2) I was fascinated by her feisty persona. Well that, and the fact that she was a twin and I struggle tell them apart for about 2 years.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

20) 10:36, we hugged and I wished her a safe travel. She hugged everyone goodbye and told me ↴ bae she'd see us in JHB.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

23) I last spoke to her when she had just entered Pretoria at around 4 late afternoon. Said she was going to have dinner with her dad. Cool.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

As the tweets continued, the tale became increasingly tense and emotional. Kamo had disappeared.

25) Her dad called me at around 9 in the evening, asking me if I knew where she was because she hadn't shown up for dinner.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

27) At around 11, we reached Pretoria and headed straight to Sunnyside to pick up bae's brother. sign of Kamo yet. Now I'm worried.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

They detailed the desperate search that ensued:

33) We drive around that entire area, with hopes of seeing her car or finding her. But dololo.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

36) First reaction when we found her car was to puke. I was paralysed with fear when I saw how battered it was. Where is she?

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

37) Windscreen & driver's window was smashed to pieces. Driver's seat was stained with blood. H bags and wallet are still in the car.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

Then the moment she was found, lying in a hospital bed:

43) 8 January was the longest day of my life. We were on our way back from Wits, to Sunnyside w we received the call. They found her.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

48) They don't know how it happened exactly, or how many there were. But they were certain tha after they abducted her, they had their way.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

51) She had already lost a lot of blood, she was already unconscious for way too long to a point wl most of her organs couldn't function.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

And, finally, described Kamo's death.

54) These selfish men put a father in a position to switch off the machine of the only surviving member of his family.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

69) I'm only 18, but I feel like I'm 43. I'm tired of being South African. Please be safe out there. We live in such a cruel world.

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

70) Will we get justice for Kamo? Probably not. Peace? I don't know. But I pray to forgive and heal. We live in peace lover [@Kamo51702562](#) ☺

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

The author even linked to her friend's Twitter handle, adding in one tweet that they didn't have pictures of her.

Thousands of Twitter users believed the story was real, and tweeted messages of grief and emotion. The hashtag [#RIPKamo](#) was used thousands of times.

[@iamSivN](#) [@RediTlhabi](#) the story makes me want to cry soo hard ☹️☹️☹️ [#JusticeForKamo](#) [#RIPKarr](#)

— Dolce Khumalo (@khumalo_sthe) [January 10, 2016](#)

The author didn't correct them. She retweeted some of the messages and replied to others, continuing the hoax.

Thank you ☺ <https://t.co/zl1a7trBgC>

— January 21st ☆ (@JustKhuthi) [January 10, 2016](#)

The South African Department of Women tweeted: "Please be counted in and help us fight violence against Women and Children. The story of #Kamo is heartbreaking. GBV (gender based violence) must end!"

Please be counted in and help us fight violence against Women and Children. The story of [#Kamo](#) is heartbreaking. GBV must end!

— Department of Women (@Dept_of_Women) January 10, 2016

Even the press was fooled.

On Monday morning, South African newspaper The Star ran the [story](#) in the print edition, with the headline "Tears for Kamo as her young life is senselessly and brutally cut short."

The paper was later mocked on Twitter, with users questioning its professional standards.

Hi [@leratombangeni](#) how did you and your editor publish a fake story? No follow up, no finding fan
[#RIPKamo](#) pic.twitter.com/Yq1oeYxOkL

— EAST GOD (@VuyoTheGreat) January 11, 2016

Hours later, editor Kevin Ritchie, [admitted](#) the mistake: "We are red-faced and not happy with this at all," he said. "We are doing whatever we can to learn from this because this is not the journalism we pride ourselves on practicing."

The journalist who wrote the article about Kamo's story tracked down @JustKuthi, the author of the hoax, who is an 18-year-old woman from a town in the north of the country.

She [said](#) that the impetus for the hoax was "a story I read on the internet and it made me

feel like I didn't want to live in South Africa anymore, so I made up my own story to show people how bad it is to live in South Africa."

"I apologize for misleading everyone," she added.

Hoax sparks debate

The fake story has sparked a real debate about sexual violence -- a major [issue](#) in South Africa.

The Department of Women and many other users posted tweets saying that, although Kamo's story was fictional, sexual violence is a real problem.

If the actual account of Kamo is a work of creative writing, it is inspired&reflects a sad reality of Wo
in our country [#itsnotjustastory](#)

— Department of Women (@Dept_of_Women) [January 11, 2016](#)

As fictional as the story was, Our concerns, prayers & tears were real and they were for every 'Kan
who has truly experienced such horror.

— #LEGiTxBOiTY (@Boity) [January 11, 2016](#)

According to South African crime [statistics](#), more than 50,000 sexual offenses were reported between 2014 and 2015.

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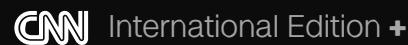
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