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Cybersecurity, Digital Vulnerability and the Risks of an Increasingly Connected World



Introduction

Cybersecurity is often understood in terms of stolen passwords, fraudulent emails and financial scams. As digital technologies become embedded in everyday activities, cyberattacks increasingly threaten not only personal information and financial assets but also the physical systems on which societies depend. Recent reports from Zimbabwe, Ghana and France illustrate this widening range of risks. In Zimbabwe and Ghana, WhatsApp account takeovers have enabled criminals to exploit trusted relationships to solicit money fraudulently. In France, reported cyberattacks on supermarket refrigeration systems disrupted food preservation and caused financial losses. Although these incidents involve different systems and methods, they reveal a common vulnerability: digital access can be exploited to undermine the social relationships and essential activities that technology supports. This article examines these developments and their broader implications, arguing that cybersecurity is no longer merely a technical concern but a fundamental issue of economic security, public safety and resilience in an increasingly digital world.

Digital identity and the exploitation of trust

In October 2026, Zimbabwean users reported losing access to their WhatsApp accounts. Telecommunications provider Econet Wireless said it was working with Meta to assist affected customers, while the Zimbabwe Republic Police warned about fraud involving SIM replacement and account takeovers (Takawira, 2026; The Herald, 2026). The reports point to a serious account-security concern, although the number of affected users and the precise methods involved have not been independently established. Studies have shown that account takeovers can occur through social engineering, theft of verification codes, fraudulent SIM replacement or the unauthorised linking of another device. These methods do not necessarily indicate that WhatsApp's underlying encryption has been compromised.

The consequences can extend beyond the account holder. Once criminals gain access, they can impersonate the victim and contact friends, relatives, colleagues or customers with requests for money. The apparent familiarity of the sender makes the deception convincing. This allows criminals to exploit relationships that already exist rather than having to establish trust with each potential victim. Similar practices have been reported in Ghana, where compromised WhatsApp accounts have been used to solicit loans and fraudulent transfers. The Ghana Cyber Security Authority has warned users about verification-code theft, SIM-swap fraud and the misuse of compromised accounts (Cyber Security Authority, 2024).

These incidents expose a weakness in digital communication: familiar phone numbers and profile photographs are not reliable proof of identity when an account has been

compromised. For traders and small businesses that depend on messaging applications to communicate with customers, receive orders and coordinate payments, the consequences can include financial losses, disrupted transactions and damaged reputations. Security measures such as two-step verification can reduce the risk of some account takeovers, but they cannot eliminate every threat. Users must also protect verification codes, check linked devices and independently confirm unexpected requests for money. Platforms and telecommunications providers have a responsibility to strengthen authentication, prevent fraudulent number transfers and make account recovery more accessible.

When cyberattacks disrupt physical systems

The reported attacks on French supermarkets in October 2026 demonstrate a different dimension of digital vulnerability. According to Reuters, incidents between 11 and 12 October affected refrigeration equipment at hundreds of supermarkets, including stores operated by Intermarché, Carrefour and Coopérative U. Intermarché reported that approximately 150 stores were affected. Refrigeration temperatures reportedly rose sharply in some installations, resulting in food losses, while fires were also reported at some locations. French authorities began investigating the incidents, with the National Cybersecurity Agency involved in assessing the threat (Reuters, 2026).

Initial reporting pointed to vulnerabilities associated with connected refrigeration-management equipment, including outdated firmware and software used in refrigeration control systems. However, the exact attack method and those responsible had not been definitively established in the initial reports. The incident illustrates the risks of connecting operational technology to digital networks. Remote monitoring and control can improve efficiency and reduce maintenance costs, but insecure access can expose physical equipment to interference. When refrigeration systems fail, supermarkets may have to discard perishable food, interrupt operations and absorb losses from damaged inventory and equipment. The effects may also reach suppliers, workers and consumers. Businesses further along the supply chain can experience cancelled orders or reduced sales even when their own systems have not been compromised. The security of a refrigeration controller can therefore become a concern for food safety and economic continuity, not merely an issue for an IT department.

What the cases reveal

The incidents in Ghana, Zimbabwe and France differ in their immediate targets, but their wider significance lies in the dependencies that digital technologies create. Digital dependence creates vulnerabilities that can spread beyond the original target. A compromised messaging account gives criminals access to an established network of relationships. A compromised refrigeration controller can disrupt food preservation and

commercial operations. In both cases, the effects extend through systems that depend on the compromised technology.

Second, cybersecurity is an economic concern. Individuals may lose money through fraudulent requests, while small businesses can lose customers and credibility. Retailers may suffer inventory losses and operational disruption. These costs are not confined to the direct victim. This is because they can also be transferred to customers, suppliers, workers and other dependent businesses. Cybersecurity investment should therefore be treated as part of ordinary operational management rather than an optional technical expense.

Third, digital insecurity undermines trust. People rely on familiar contacts to communicate and conduct transactions, but a compromised account can reproduce the appearance of a legitimate relationship. Repeated fraud can make users more suspicious of online communication and less willing to engage in digital transactions. Protecting trust requires more than asking individuals to be cautious: platforms and telecommunications providers must also maintain reliable security and recovery systems.

Finally, the cases highlight inequalities in the capacity to manage digital risks. Individuals with limited digital literacy may struggle to identify scams or recover accounts, while small businesses may lack the resources to maintain secure systems. Even large commercial organisations can remain exposed when connected equipment is outdated or inadequately protected. Wider digital participation must therefore be accompanied by accessible security education, affordable protective measures and responsive institutions.

Strengthening cybersecurity

Effective cybersecurity requires coordinated action by individuals, businesses, technology platforms and governments. Individuals should never disclose verification codes or PINs, should verify unexpected requests for money through another channel and should regularly check which devices are linked to their accounts. Two-step verification offers an additional layer of protection, although no single measure guarantees complete security.

Businesses need to keep software and firmware updated, restrict remote access, use strong authentication and prepare for incidents that interrupt essential operations. Organisations relying on connected physical equipment should identify exposed systems and establish contingency plans for safely maintaining operations when digital controls fail.

Telecommunications providers and digital platforms must strengthen identity verification, detect suspicious account activity and provide timely assistance to people who lose

access to their accounts. Governments should support cybersecurity education, investigate digital crime and coordinate responses to attacks on essential infrastructure. Because digital networks and supply chains cross national borders, international cooperation is also necessary.

Emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, may make some forms of impersonation and fraudulent messaging more convincing. However, the incidents discussed here demonstrate that serious attacks do not depend on AI. Weak authentication, compromised accounts, inadequate maintenance and insecure remote access remain important vulnerabilities in their own right.

Conclusion

The reported cyber incidents in Ghana, Zimbabwe and France show how digital insecurity can affect far more than the technology directly targeted. WhatsApp account takeovers exploit social trust to facilitate fraud, while attacks on connected refrigeration systems can disrupt physical operations and threaten food preservation. Both demonstrate how the consequences of a digital breach can spread through economic and social relationships.

As digital technologies become integral to communication, commerce and essential services, cybersecurity must be treated as a shared responsibility. Individuals need practical knowledge to protect their accounts, businesses must maintain secure and resilient systems, and governments and technology providers must strengthen prevention, accountability and incident response.

The success of digital transformation should be measured not only by how widely technology is adopted, but also by how reliably the systems supporting everyday life are protected.

Reference

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