
Blue Whale Challenge: A Game or a Demon

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Abstract

Every species has an innate instinct for self-preservation. In this context, how could people take their own lives just to complete an online game? The article begins with providing an overview about cybercrimes such as cyberbullying and cyber-suicides. It also, discusses the impact of the major deadly online games like the 'Blue Whale challenge' and 'Momo challenge' in the rising rates of suicide and serious injuries; and presents a psychological analysis of the phenomenon. The article also discusses the role of parent, teacher and students in dealing with such cases. The article concludes by referring some of the steps that can be taken socially and legally to stop this technological demon from spreading.

Keywords:

Online gaming
Blue whalechallenge
psychological and social
impact

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1. Introduction

Every other day a mystifying variety of games emerge with more up-to-date fun and entertainment elements to attract adolescents. Games, in general, are intended to reduce stress and enhance both children and adult's cognitive development. Teenagers are always curious to indulge in new games; and e-gaming is one such platform, thanks to the internet facilities, that offers easier access and faster fun (Mukhra, Baryah, Krishan & Kanchan, 2017). The techniques in which individuals conduct themselves online continue to expand with the growth and extension of the Internet. This implies a more complicated, sophisticated, and thought-out criminal activity.

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**BA (H) Applied Psychology Sem V

One such online criminal activity is that of cyberbullying. It is the use of technology like the internet, cell phones, email, pictures or social media to harass, embarrass, threaten or target a person. Usually, it occurs among young people. But when an adult is involved, it may be considered as cyber harassment or cyber stalking, a crime that is very heinous and can have legal consequences including imprisonment (Kumar, 2016). From a legal and social perspective, this form of online trolling, cyberbullying, cyber-suicide, and possibly murder is extremely concerned. We all have come across one or other online trolls ourselves. Be it through comments, spam messages, uploading of pictures, offending tweets and the list just goes on. And as a result, the teen or even an adult for that matter when fails to overcome these trolls is left with no choice but to end his/her life due to the frustration and mental baggage that these harassers cause them (Rossow, 2018).

There is nothing new about the fact that young people are increasingly exposed to the idea of suicide, online, as well as in, television and movies, in a manner that does not discourage the act, but often actively glorifies it. The statistics make it clear: young individuals around the globe suffer from true mental illnesses, as a consequence of which they are increasingly choosing to end their own lives (Mukhra, Baryah, Krishan & Kanchan, 2017). The occurrence in popular media and the spread of suicide and self-harm challenges is one development that may be accountable for the latest rise in adolescent suicides. This is also termed as 'cybersuicide'. It refers to the use of the Internet for matters relating to suicide and its ideation (Narayan, Das, Das, Bhandari, 2019). These websites are luring vulnerable youth. Therefore, they obtain various methods of deliberately harming themselves. One example of this was the "blue whale game".

While the absence of case studies has led many to question the mere presence of this game, one case has been recorded by medical professionals at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), confirming that the game exists. In a medical journal called "Asia-Pacific Psychiatry" (Jha, 2018). It's neither an application nor an online game, but users get a link to join this game of "death" through social media chat groups (Haleem, 2017). What's sad is that, despite the common knowledge that the lethal game began and spread on VKontakte, a very famous Russian site, no controls were taken to prevent or block the network. A VKontakte account can be created simply. When you log in and search for #bluewhale, you find young people's psychotic, highly depressing texts, frenzied about playing the game and taking their own life. Their profiles are as ghully as they can be (Ashraf, 2017). The strategy of the game was to target vulnerable teens and socially isolate them in order to maintain the confidentiality of the challenges. The worst part is that the game doesn't provide with an exit option, thus leaving the 'victim' with no choice but to end their own lives. In its utter form, the Blue Whale Challenge could be seen in the modern world as an illegal, unethical and vicious endeavour.

What is the "Blue Whale Challenge"?

A depressed teenager comes across a social media group known as Blue Whales. He is encouraged by the group to take his life. It also ensures that by turning the suicide into an exciting game it will ensure his exit from this world, fun. The teen is assigned tasks for the following fifty days after signing up. It involves inflicting self-injury, watching horror films, waking at odd hours, to wrap up the assignment and even carving on the arms a whale-like figure. With each passing day, the assignment continues to become more threatening. The admin asks the teen to kill himself on the last i.e. the 50th day (Padhiyar, 2017). Those who want to back out from the game are pressurized to play the game or else their loved ones will get hurt or the curator would upload sensitive content against the victim if they don't abide by the sport rules. There is no exit. This is what the blue whale challenge is all about. It got its name from the blue whales only, who, are believed to strand themselves on beaches in order to commit suicide. It's also referred to as 'beaching'. It is basically

caused either by disorientation due to naval use of sonars or naturally by earth's magnetic field. (Lupariello, Curti, Coppo, Racalbuto&Di, 2018).

The game is said to originate from Russia. Its developer being Philipp Budeikin, 21, currently held in the Kresty Prison, in Saint Petersburg, and on May, 2016, pled guilty of inciting the suicide of at least 16 adolescent girls. "Do something beautiful at least once in your life, it feels great to die young". "Life is awful, it will not get better". "You are the rare, selected one," is what he told his victims. However, he, seems to have no remorse and guilt. Instead, he explained that he was "cleansing the society" of "biological waste", he was helping those, who were "happy to die". He was asked if he really did drive these girls to suicide and he said: "yes". "I truly was doing that". "Don't worry, you'll understand everything". "Everyone will understand". A student of engineering and psychology, it was very easy for him to design such a game and manipulate his victims (Stewart, 2017). Budeikin's friends, talking to investigative journalist Evgeny Berg, challenged the assertion that he was an evil mastermind. In reality, they said he filled up internet groups with Rina Palenkova-related "shock" material and suicide to get as many supporters as possible-and then he would advertise his music (Adeane, 2019). Psychologist, Dr. Pulkit Sharma, suggests the network appears to be created by a psychopath. Such individuals, he says, think they're bigger than life. They are on a unique task and have a strange agenda that is only meaningful to them. They are psychopathic and fanatical. They see things in extreme manner, like how the Blue Whale game's supposed creator thought this world would be a happy place if it eradicated depressed individuals! Such a psychopathic mind may result from severe violence, negligence and trauma in childhood (Ashraf, 2017). "At some point, it becomes necessary to push the teenager not to sleep at night". "In this way, their psyche becomes more susceptible to manipulation". This is what he told when asked about his manipulation tactics (Jaini, 2017). Revealing that he even got a huge amount of love letters from young girls he added: "They were dying happy. I was providing them with warmth, understanding and attention, something which they lacked in the real life" (Surendran, 2018). Psychologist, Veronika Matyushina, said; "those young girls who fell in love with Philipp were most likely not getting enough love and attention from their parents, and this attractive young internet fellow gave some support and attention they needed" (Stewart, 2017).

But what make theyoungsters so susceptible and vulnerable to such technological traps? *Dr. Samir Parikh, director, department of mental health and behavioural sciences, Fortis Hospital explained, "teenagers undergo internal struggle, and face questions like 'who am I?', 'do people like me?', 'do my friends find me good enough?', 'am I lonely?', etc. hence, they automatically become the best targets for such games that look out for vulnerable teens who seek acceptance, acknowledgement and attention from their social circle."* Leading ahead in such games that dares you with tasks like waking up at odd hours, causing self-injury. listening to horror music, etc. is a boost to self-esteem and sends positive stroke. And in that adrenaline rush, they forget that it's coming at the cost of their lives (Sharma, 2017). The perspective offered by the "interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide" by Joiner can provide with one answer to this question (Joiner, 2009). One hypothesis of this theory is that those who have reduced fear of death and pain sensitivity, make serious suicide attempts if they develop suicidal ideations (Van, Witte, Cukrowicz, Braithwaite, Selby, Joiner, *et al.* 2010). Applying this theory to the Blue Whale Challenge, it can be seen that the initial tasks of the Blue Whale Challenge game are sort of those tasks which increase physical pain tolerance and therefore reduce the fear of death (Ramamurthy, 2017). The game also aroused aversion, curiosity, blame on players and was perceived as a strategy to commit suicide (Rossow, 2018).

Some of the challenges in this game are listed below. Although it is not a standard list of challenges.

1. 'Carve with a razor "f57" on your hand, send a photo to the curator'
2. 'Wake up at 4.20 a.m. and watch psychedelic and scary videos that curator sends you'
3. 'Cut your arm with a razor along your veins, but not too deep, only 3 cuts, send a photo to the curator'
4. 'Draw a whale on a sheet of paper, send a photo to curator'
5. 'If you are ready to "become a whale", carve "YES" on your leg. If not– cut yourself many times (punish yourself)'
6. 'Task with a cipher'
7. 'Carve "f40" on your hand, send a photo to curator'
8. 'You have to overcome your fear'
9. 'Wake up at 4:20 a.m. and go to a roof (the higher the better)'
10. 'Carve a whale on your hand with a razor, send a photo to curator'
11. 'Watch psychedelic and horror videos all day'
12. 'Listen to music that "they" (curators) send you'
13. 'Cut your lip'
14. 'Poke your hand with a needle many time'
15. Do something painful to yourself, make yourself sick 17. Go to the highest roof you can find, stand on the edge for some time. 16. Go to a bridge, stand on the edge'
16. Climb up a crane or at least try to do it'
17. The curator checks if you are trustworthy'
18. Have a talk "with a whale" (with another player like you or with a curator) on Skype'
19. Go to a roof and sit on the edge with your legs dangling'
20. The curator tells you the date of your death and you have to accept it'
21. Wake up at 4:20 a.m. and go to rails (visit any railroad that you can find)'
22. Don't talk to anyone all day'
23. Every day you wake up at 4:20 a.m.'
24. Watch horror videos'
25. Listen to music that "they" send you'
26. Make 1 cut on your body per day'
27. Jump off a high building. Take your life'

The Damage Done

Although Philipp Denied reports that he and his game were directly accountable for more than 130 fatalities, he argued that he had affected only 17 fatalities directly. He said others communicated with him and committed suicide later, but without him having any direct influence. Chillingly, he said 28 more individuals were willing to take their own life. 130 is just the number of teens who committed suicide in Russia. There are still no reports which might even estimate the total amount of damage done around the world because of this sinister game (Stewart, Jeffery & Hodge, 2017). The game lead to not only deaths of many teenagers but also caused havoc in the minds of those who survived. Some of the cases around the world are listed below (Sharma, 2018):

- **RUSSIA-**
 1. Two 15-year-old girls, on February 2017, jumped off a building in Siberia as per the final task of the game. Before jumping, they uploaded a picture of a blue whale with the caption, 'bye' on their social media accounts.
 2. Another girl named Ekaterina, 15-year-old, was in critical condition after she threw herself out of the building in Kransyonarsk, Russia in February, Russia.
- **INDIA-**(Banerjee, 2017)

1. A 14-year-old boy named Manpreet Singh, a student of class IX, Mumbai, committed suicide by jumping off from a seven-storey building on 30th July, 2017.
2. A class VII student was pulled away before he could jump from the building. The incident took place on 10th August, 2017
3. Anken Dev, 14 years old, from West Bengal, suffocated himself to death with the help of a plastic bag and a cord on 12th August, 2017.
4. A 16 year old, class X student from Jaipur, left home on Monday and was rescued in Churchgate area in Mumbai by the city police. He was tracked by the location of his mobile phone and a knife was also recovered from his possession. He said that he was in the last stage of the game. The incident took place on 13th of August, 2017.
5. J. Niveditha, a 24-year-old student from Chennai, jumped from her seventh floor flat in Virugambakkam around 11 pm on Monday night and landed on a car parked below on 19th August, 2019.
6. A 16-year-old Delhi boy jumped off the fourth floor of a building in Ashok Vihar on 20th August, 2019.
7. Two boys from Kerala committed suicide on 26th August, 2017. Their mother claimed that the suicide was assisted by the blue whale challenge.
8. Vignesh, 19 year old college student, committed suicide on 30th August, 2017. He was found hanging from a ceiling fan at 04:15 pm with a whale carved on him arm.
9. A 17 year old class XI student from Delhi was admitted to hospital in Dwarka with severe injuries on his hand and face. He admitted that he had downloaded the deadly blue whale game and was on the stage where he was given tasks of self-harm, hence he used compass to injure himself. The case dates back to 2nd September, 2017.
10. Nishant, a 13 year old boy of class VII, Shimla, committed suicide on 21st September. His friends told that he played the game on his friend's phone and had discussed about the tasks many a times.
 - Also, there is ample amount of evidence, that such cases were found in various other countries like Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, Kenya, Italy, Paraguay, Portugal, Serbia, Saudi Arabia, United States, Venezuela, etc.

ANOTHER NIGHTMARE: THE MOMO CHALLENGE

Nearly a year after the blue whale challenge led to a number of teenage suicides around the globe, a similar game surfaced, called 'Momo challenge,' with a somewhat related agenda. It was supposed to have begun on Facebook, where people were 'challenged' to interact with an unidentified individual. It also featured difficulties that encouraged adolescents to participate in a number of acts of violence that ended with suicide. Momo challenge was a social media account on popular platforms that used a doll picture with monstrous characteristics, big eyes, and a broad mouth to stimulate children's curiosity. Some individuals claim it was a hoax, though. There is no powerful proof of any of the opinions.

SIGNS

1. If the teenager spend long hours on tablets, mobile phones, computers and his/her intensity of craving for these gadgets is increasing day by day. This is the initial sign that the teen might be involved in such challenges.
2. If the teenager wakes up at odd hours and hence is feeling drowsy the whole day.
3. The child shows sudden interest in watching or listening to horror and psychedelic movies and music.

4. If the child suddenly starts liking spending alone time and keeps himself/herself locked inside his/her room.
5. The teenager has started long hours of alone time on terrace.
6. The teenager has frequent bruises and cuts on his/her body.
7. The child has started updating depressing and strange posts and updates on his/her social media accounts.
8. If the child suddenly withdraws himself/herself from family and friends.
9. The child loses interest in activities that he/she previously enjoyed a lot.
10. Changes in eating and/or sleeping habits
11. Shows impulsive behaviour frequently and without any valid reason.

What Can We Do About It?

On the basis of above-mentioned symptoms, there are some suggestions proposed for students, parents and teachers. They are:

- FOR STUDENTS-
 1. The students must not try to copy, imitate and follow their peers blindly. They must think before they act and try to take decisions wisely.
 2. They must involve themselves in yoga, outdoor games, physical exercises, meditation and maintain a healthy lifestyle which will help in eliminating stress and anxiety.
 3. One should try to be happy, develop purity in feelings and overcome negative emotions like anger, lust, greed, worry, hatred, jealousy, etc.
 4. Spend quality time with family, elders and siblings. Talk freely about all the problems because they can suggest possible solutions and give suitable advice.
 5. Choose your circle wisely and never do anything under peer pressure.
 6. If you can't talk to your parents, consult a teacher. Attend workshops and take interest in activities which makes yourself mentally healthy.
 7. The students must engage themselves in productive activities in their free time because an empty mind is a devil's workshop.
 8. Students should be allowed to access useful sites like online studying platforms.
- FOR TEACHERS-
 1. Teachers and other school staff should keep a close watch on all those who may be showing abnormal and erratic behaviour as they might be involved in such games.
 2. If any of the students seem lost, lonely and depressed, school management must take serious and immediate action to get them involved socially in real world and divert their minds by conducting activities or giving them something new to learn.
 3. Teachers should spend more time with students and build a trusty relationship so that they feel comfortable in discussing their issues.
 4. They should make them aware of such games and challenges but in a way that it does not make them curious enough to engage in such games. A study was conducted to assess perceptions and knowhow of the first responders in the medical profession about online challenges. Results showed that Thirty-five (65%) of the total participants have heard about the Blue Whale Challenge but lacked further knowledge about the game. Ten percent of total participants knew about other internet challenges. Only 26% of total participants were largely aware of the details and harmful nature of the game. Only 12 (22%) participants knew the signs to identify the children playing this game. None of the practitioners reported

having encountered any parent or child enquiring or reporting this in their practice at the time of conducting the survey (Mahadevaiah & Nayak, 2018).

5. If a student seems prone to depression and vulnerability, one should provide emotional support without judging him/her.
 6. The teachers should encourage school authorities to organize mental health activities in school.
- FOR PARENTS (Sharma, 2019)-
 1. Parents should assist their child to take care of themselves, tell them that it is okay to feel the way they are feeling and its okay being himself/herself.
 2. Encourage your child to do exercise, yoga, meditation, as physical activities help in keeping the serotonin levels high.
 3. Allow children to talk to you without any hesitation or boundaries. Listen to them without judging/avoiding/criticising. Give them advice when they are in confusion/trouble/need.
 4. Share your experiences of puberty and let your child know that you have been through the same phase.
 5. Build trust between you and the child.
 6. Indulge your child in creative activities to help them channelize their emotions in the right path.
 7. Let your child know that you love them as they are and are always there for them.
 8. Encourage them to be true to themselves and not take on a personality just to please others or to prove something to someone.
 9. Timely check you child's company as it matters a lot. You must intervene if you see them falling into bad company. One should remember that, adolescents are sensitive on such topics and may not take criticism well.
 10. Keep an eye on your child's behaviour and changes his/her appetite, sleep patterns and moods.
 11. Do not spy on your child or accuse them of any wrong doing. Encourage them to talk and be honest. Tell them what your concerns are and discuss the problems openly with them, it will build trust and strengthen the bonding.
 12. For extra safety, parents should synchronize their phones with the child's just to make sure that the child isn't involved in wrongdoings.
 - Apart from that, some legal measures can also be taken to prevent the spread of such a game. Like India's Ministry of Electronics and IT, web platforms such as Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Yahoo have been working to remove links to such online games. Followed by a Women and Child Development Ministry petition calling for a ban on games. The Russian Parliament also enacted a law on May 26, stating that it is a criminal offense to create pro-suicide communities on social media. And President Vladimir Putin has signed the law that imposes penalties for suicide inducing minors. The law therefore imposes a six-year prison sentence (Baruah, 2017).

Discussion and Conclusion

With each passing day, dependence on technology is increasing. And as a result, the gap between the virtual and the real world is getting blurred. Social networking sites bring people together across the internet in a broad sense but it creates social isolation as well. And cyberbullies take advantage of this vulnerability and trap people, mostly, young teenagers. This leads to development of games like the blue whale challenge, momo challenge, etc. and hence engagement of children

with them. While any adolescent may try to explore the challenge from a sense of curiosity or adventure, those with an underlying depressive episode or other psychiatric morbidity are at the greatest danger of actively participating in it. Children who grew in abusive environments or families that lack attachment and recognition may be susceptible to such addictive games. Also, people in their teens become more susceptible to suicidal ideation and some might even commit suicide (Singh, 2018). The article mainly focused on the blue whale challenge, which originated from Russia, which targeted young teenagers from various online portals and gradually forced them to commit suicide.

It is essential to note that cyber hygiene must be ensured in conjunction with physical hygiene. Mental health care professionals should advise patients, especially adolescents and their guardians, on the instant measures at the moment of the crisis: removing the gadget, exploring solutions to surfing the internet and offering an attitude of comprehension. Calling lines of crisis, friends, or family members may also provide help. Clinical therapy should be undertaken without delay for psychiatric morbidity (Narayan, Das, Das, Bhandari, 2019). Many psychologists and doctors have analyzed that why do people engage in such games in the first place and then continue playing it despite having the knowledge about the bizarre consequences that they would have to face later on. Some say that it's because of the lack of attention and love from the parents and peers, while another suggested that they play out of curiosity and eventually fail to leave the game. Also, if we analyze the tasks closely, it can be seen that many of the tasks involve infliction of painful stimuli on oneself. After repeatedly undergoing these painful stimuli, the participants develop increased physical pain tolerance and thus, a reduced fear of death. On successful completion of many of the tasks, the participants thus, can tolerate pain better and are somewhat no longer afraid of death. Such people are said to have acquired capability for suicide. Hence, when the final task to "jump off a high building and take your life" is given by the administrator of the game, they comply. Of course, only the vulnerable individuals who are probably depressed, lonely, or suicidal would go through all the tasks. Thus, one can predict that individuals who have played the initial tasks have already developed an "acquired capability for suicide" because of the experience of completing the tasks (Ramamurthy, 2017). Hence, it is possible that these individuals who haven't followed through the final task till date might still be at increased risk of serious suicide attempts and may complete suicides in future if they develop suicidal ideations. In order to curb this risk, steps were taken and the game was banned (Baruah, 2017) but different names/links like "a silent house", "a sea of whales", etc. also link back to the game (Rajendran, 2017). However, due to late implications by the government, many teens had already lost their lives. Apart from banning such games to such large-scale destruction, steps should be taken by the teachers and the parents to save adolescent from such situations by monitoring their use of the social networks, friend lists, online activity, etc. One should educate them about the potential hazards of social networking and remind them that social network sites are not an accurate representation of the reality. Parents should keep an eye on the sleep, eating patterns and the behaviour of their child. Frequent cuts and bruises are also a sign of alarm. With all that said, it can be concluded that, it's a game of mind. So, if your mind is healthy, you won't fall for these types of baits.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS-

1. More researches on the possible preventive measures against cybercrime, cyberbullying and cybersuicide need to be conducted.
2. Studies about such impactful topics should be accessible to the general public for the purpose of awareness.
3. Psychoeducation of parents and guardians with respect to the cyber threats is required.

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The main references are international journals and proceedings. All references should be to the most pertinent and up-to-date sources. References are written in APA style of Roman scripts. Please use a consistent format for references – see examples below (9 pt):

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