

A Study on the Knowledge and Attitude Regarding Internet Blue Whale Game Among Adolescent School Children in a Private School in a Rural Area of Kerala, South India

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Abstract

Background: "Blue Whale Challenge", is a social network phenomenon which has allegedly been claimed to be an online "suicide game" aiming adolescents and young adults. The story of the Blue Whale challenge began with Rina Palenkova, an adolescent from South-eastern Russia who posted a selfie on 22 November 2015, with a black scarf wrapped around her mouth and nose with her middle finger up at the camera looking as if it's covered with dried blood. The photo's caption read: "Nya bye" "which in Russian language means "good bye" "The next day, she took her own life. Later in May 2016, an article in Russian newspaper reported many suicides among teenagers and linked these to a Russian-based VK social network. Thereafter nearly 130 claims of suicide have been made so far linked to the "Blue whale game" all over the world, including India. Present study was undertaken to assess the impact of this deadly game of "Blue Whale Game" among the adolescent students in Thrissur, Kerala.

Material and methods: Present study was a cross sectional study conducted among adolescent students of 06-12 grade of Vidya Vihar Central School, Kakkasery, Thrissur. A total of 189 students were enrolled in the study.

Results: Present study revealed that 74.5% of students used internet every day for 2-6 hours.

Further, 84.7% of them were willing to take the challenges while 94.2% of them were willing to take the risk. The study brings out a negative impact of social media and internet use on academic performance as well as outdoor activities among the study subjects.

Conclusion: The study brings out an urgent need to educate our children about the potential hazards of indiscriminate use of internet and malicious social networking sites.

Keywords: Blue whale Challenge; Social Media; Internet; Suicide.

Introduction

Blue Whale, also known as the "Blue Whale Challenge", is a social network phenomenon is claimed to exist in several countries since 2016. This internet based social site game consists of a series of tasks which are given to the players by game app administrator spread over several days, initially innocuous but finally challenging the player to commit suicide.¹⁻²

The origin of the name "Blue Whale" is not well documented. However, some researcher bring out that in November 2015, a Russian teenager

posted a selfie with the caption “nya bye” before committing suicide and her death was thereafter discussed in internet forums and groups, leading to scare, stories and folklore. Some researchers also report that it took its roots from a song by the Russian rock band Lumen. Its opening lines are “Why scream/when no one hears/what we’re talking about?” and it features a “huge blue whale” that “can’t break through the net. Another group of researchers believe “Blue whale challenge” to be associated with “beaching”, where whales get stranded on beaches and finally die.³

“Blue Whale” first attracted news coverage in May 2016 when an article in Russian newspaper “Novaya Gazeta” linked many suicides among children to members of group “F57” on the Russian-based VK social network, which created panic in Russia. However, this news was later rubbished as it had no causal link to these suicides. Thereafter, several claims of suicide were linked to the “Blue whale game” all over the world but none of them could be authenticated.⁴⁻⁵

According to published reports, this deadly game had spread its tentacles all over the world during 2017. India, reported its first allegedly “Blue whale challenge linked death on 26 July 2017, involving a 16-year-old boy from Kerala in Southern India who reportedly committed suicide, after completing the tasks of this deadly game. The Kerala Chief Minister thereafter wrote to the Prime Minister expressing his concern and requested him to ban the game. Similar incidents were also reported among adolescents from Mumbai and Solapur (Maharashtra), Indore (Madhya Pradesh) and Midnapore (West Bengal). Thereafter, the Supreme Court of India directed the Indian government to ban the game, following which the government responded by clarifying that “Blue Whale Challenge” wasn’t an application, hence it cannot be banned. However, the “Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology”, requested all the internet companies to remove all related links which directed the users to this game. Further, detailed investigations were carried out into this issue by Government of India in 2018, but found no direct evidence that any of these deaths were linked to “Blue Whale Challenge”.⁶⁻⁹

In the backdrop of above, present study was undertaken among adolescent students with the following objectives:

1. To find out the impact of this deadly game of “Blue Whale Challenge” among the adolescent students.
2. To explore the influence of social media and internet use on them.

3. To sensitize the students, teachers and the parents towards the harmful use of malicious and dangerous social networking sites.

Materials and Methods

Present study was carried out among adolescent students of 06–12 grade of Vidya Vihar Central School, Kakkasery, Thrissur. A total of 189 students were selected by stratified sampling method from various classes and asked questions related to the usage of various social networking sites and their impact on them. Besides; newspapers, online journals and various social sites were also browsed using various search engines for extracting relevant information. A self-administered validated questionnaire was used for collection of data.

After collection of data, health education sessions were organized for the students, teachers and their parents. They were explained the importance of the internet as a learning tool, and also how to browse various learning sites; as internet contains wealth of knowledge that can be accessed anytime. They were also explained to stay safe on line and avoid use of dangerous and malicious web sites. Needless to say that student is seeing search engines like Yahoo, Google etc. as additional teachers and the “internet” as a new school.

Results

Table 1 brings out socio-demographic characters of subject adolescents. The study brings out that majority of the adolescents (36.50%) belonged to 17–19 years age group; followed by 14–16 years (35.44%) while remaining (28.04%) adolescents belonged to < 13 years age group. Majority of them (57.15%) were male while female adolescents accounted for the remaining 42.85% study subjects. Further, nearly half (50.26%) of the students under study belonged to senior classes i.e. Xth to XIIth standards, while remaining (49.74%) students belonged to VIth to IXth standards. Further, most of the study subjects (57.67%) belonged to social class II and III.

Table 1: Demographic characters of adolescent (n = 189).

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
<13 years	53	28.04
14–16	67	35.44

Demographic Variable	Frequency	Percentage
17-19 years	69	36.50
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	108	57.15
Female	81	42.85
<i>Class/grade</i>		
VI-VII	45	23.80
VIII-IX	49	25.92
X-XII	95	50.26
<i>Social Class*</i>		
Social class I	27	14.28
Social class II	44	23.28
Social class III	65	34.39
Social class IV	41	21.69
Social class V	12	06.34

*Modified BG Prasad Classification.

Table 2 brings out awareness among adolescents about internet, social media and blue whale challenge game, number of hours spent on internet and willingness to take challenge and risk while playing game on the internet. The study brings out that that 98.40% of the adolescents had “fair to good” knowledge about internet and social media. The study also reveals that large proportion of the adolescents (35.6%) learnt about the game from their friends while 25.9% of them learnt it from the web itself. Further, 84.7% of them were willing to take challenge, while 94.2% of the adolescents were willing to take risk while playing the game. It was pleasantly surprisingly to find, that almost all of them (96.3%) knew that this game had been banned. On an average, 53.4% students spent 2-4 hours on the internet, while 21.1% of them spent 4-6 hours every day. Majority of the students (61.9%) also admitted that spending time on internet did affect their studies adversely; as well as their schedule of outdoor games.

Table 2: Distribution of study subjects according to awareness about internet, social media and blue whale challenge.

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Internet and Social Media Awareness</i>		
Good	89	47.08
Fair	97	51.32
Poor	3	1.58
Total	189	100
<i>Information regarding blue whale challenge</i>		
Friends	67	35.6
Others	73	38.6
Web	49	25.9
Total	189	100.0
<i>Willing to take Challenge</i>		

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Not sure	5	2.3
No	24	12.7
Yes	160	84.7
Total	189	100.0
<i>Willingness to take risk</i>		
Not sure	1	.5
No	10	5.3
Yes	178	94.2
Total	189	100.0
<i>Average time spent on internet per day</i>		
< 02 hours	41	21.6
2-4 Hours	101	53.4
4-6 hours	40	21.1
>6 hours	07	03.7
<i>Effect of use of internet on studies and outdoor activities</i>		
None	06	3.1
Insignificant	66	34.9
Significant	117	61.9
<i>Knowledge that “Blue whale challenge” is banned</i>		
No	7	3.7
Yes	182	96.3
Total	189	100.0

Figure 1 brings out distribution of availability of “Blue whale challenge” game on the internet and social sites by the students. The study brings out that 48.1% of the students reported its non-availability, while 36.5% said that they had no problem in getting the game on line.

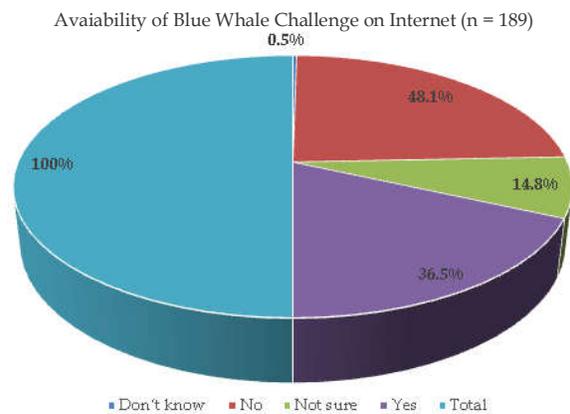


Fig. 1: Distribution of adolescents based on their knowledge of availability of blue whale challenge game on internet.

Table 3 brings out the distribution of students based on the knowledge of availability of game on specific web sites. Surprisingly, a large majority of the students (88.4%) were not aware of any specific web site where the game was available, while a very small number (3.7%) confirmed it be available on 9apps.com/Bluewhale@.com/Bluewhale@.link.

Table 3: Distribution of students based on their knowledge of the game websites (n = 189)

Websites	Frequency	Percentage
9apps.com	5	2.3
Bluewhale@.com	1	.5
Bluewhale@.link	1	.5
Don't know	167	88.4
Facebook	9	4.8
Software apps online	1	.5
Sorry	1	.5
Yes	4	2.1
Total	189	100.0

Discussion

Human life completes its journey through various stages and one of the most vital stages is adolescence. This is the period of transition from childhood to adulthood and brings lot of excitement as well as poses many challenges besides demanding adjustments on many fronts.¹⁰ This is also a period of physical, cognitive, affective and psychological development and brings about a paradigm shift in relationship from parents to friends and peers. Needless to say that at this stage of life, the adolescents start searching for their own identities and recognition besides looking for challenges, even if these are risky or dangerous.

However, every single human life is invaluable. As studies and media reports claim that “Blue Whale Challenge” is a dangerous game and has claimed or endangered many precious lives all over the world, majority of them adolescents, including nearly a dozen children in India. We all know that social networking is an easy platform to meet people, which may be a good pass time for some people while a great opportunity for many. Nonetheless, it is our duty and social responsibility to ensure safety of our children and educate them to use internet and social sites with caution and also how to stay away from malicious, dangerous and misleading social sites, lest it is too late.

Present study brings out that a large proportion of students (84.7%) were willing to take the challenge while 94.2% were also willing to take the risk as well. Majority of them (74.5%) were found to be using internet every day nearly from 2–6 hours. Further, a large number of the students also admitted that indulgence in internet affected their studies as well as outdoor activities.

Wenliang Su, *et al.*, in their study in Italy among 1105 adolescents brought out the crucial role played by attachment on adolescent's excessive internet

use and found unpleasant feelings of isolation, anger, detachment in the relationships with their parents and distress among them.¹¹

In a cross-sectional survey conducted in China in 2009, it was observed that using the internet for catharsis, was related to poor lifestyle habits in adolescents while using the Internet for purposes of gaining knowledge and finding information positively predicted healthy lifestyles among them.¹²

A study by Govidnappa Lakshmana, *et al.*, in Karnataka titled “Internet use among adolescents: Risk-taking behavior, parental supervision, and implications for safety” brought out a significant difference in emotional and personal level risk-taking domains between male and female children indicating boys were taking more risks than girls. The study also revealed significant difference in emotional problems and sex-related risk domains between parental filtering and non-filtering groups indicating higher risk-taking behaviors among internet user adolescents those who were in lack of parental supervision.¹³

Recommendations

1. Parents should spend more time with their children, educate them about various unfriendly social sites and their negative impact, encourage them to open up if they have any problem which is bothering them and encourage them talk to them without any hesitation or fear and advise them what is best for them instead of judging them, when they are confused or stressed.
2. Children, especially adolescents, should spend more time playing outdoor games, exercise and practice yoga and meditation instead of spending time on internet and becoming a social media addict, which may have adverse effects, both on health, as well as on academic performance.
3. The adolescents should first analyze merits and demerits of various social networking sites and follow the advice of their parents and teachers before using any such sites and should not blindly copy their peers and friends.
4. Teachers should keep a close watch on all those students showing abnormal behavior i.e. looking lost, lonely, depressed or show a drop in academic performance. Teachers need to spend more time with students and find out their problems and counsel them regularly.

Limitations

Present study had the limitation of small sample size and being done in a rural school. Further, the period of study was also very short (i.e. three weeks), thus lacked the advantages of a longitudinal study.

Conclusion

Internet and social media bring about a platform where a large number of people can interact and share their knowledge in a most convenient manner and virtually at an insignificant cost. However, this is not without risk, as there are a large number of social sites which are malicious and generally target adolescents and young adults. Needless to say that interacting with such sites can be dangerous and at times, disastrous. Therefore, there is an urgent need that teachers and parents educate their children about the advantages as well as potential hazards of indiscriminate use of internet and interaction with malicious and dangerous social networking sites.

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