The Deadly Gamification Challenge of #BlueWhale

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Abstract

This manuscript reviews the past literature on the Blue Whale Challenge, which is known to be a dangerous gamification activity that spreads on social media to target vulnerable teenagers. It aims to nurture workshop discussion for collaborative future research directions on the matter.

Keywords: bluewhale, deadly gamification, bluewhalechallenge, #bwc
Introduction

Recently, the Blue Whale Challenge, also referred to as the Blue Whale Game, attracted public attention due to many unfortunate news about teenagers harming themselves as they engage with the so-called game all across the world (Balhara, Bhargava, Pakhre, & Bhati, 2018; Sousa, Filho, Cavalcanti, Santos, & Neto, 2017). Even though known as a game, it is reported to involve a series of self-harming tasks (Narayan, Das, Das, & Bhandari, 2019) that often propagate via social media for completion in 50 days (Yılmaz & Candan, 2018). Amongst these tasks, the latest final task is indicated as to commit suicide (Khattar, Dabas, Gupta, Chopra, & Kumaraguru, 2018; Volkova, Kadyrova, Rastorgueva, & Algavi, 2017). Victims of the disseminated challenge are frequently teenagers and young adults; therefore, concerned families demand the topic to treated as that of a severe public health issue (Kumar A., 2017). To the best of known till today, blue whale challenge is the only gamification, where completion demands its player to end his/her life (Mukhra, Baryah, Krishan, & Kanchan, 2017). This workshop proposal aims at providing a literature review of the past research on blue whale challenge in an attempt to develop a discussion of the topic for future research.

Literature Review

Initially spread on the Russian social networking website named VKontakte (VK), Blue Whale Challenge is reported to have spread to Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit as well as other social networks (Khattar et al., 2018). Philipp Budeikin, who was 21 years old when he got arrested in November 2016 with charges for inciting teenagers to suicide, is known as the creator of the Blue Whale Challenge told Russian media that “there are people, and then there
is a biodegradable waste. I was cleansing our society of such people. Sometimes I start to think that it is wrong, but in the end I had the feeling I was doing the right thing (Adeane, 2019).”

The pending question is, how is the ‘game’ still flourishing when its the original curators in jail. It appears that there are numerous misconceptions about the Blue Whale Challenge, where one of them is considering that it is only a game available on some website or an app. Blue Whale Challenge is not an application, but thrives on social media due to those involved in the hunting of vulnerable future victims to direct them with gamified self-harming ‘tasks.’ In their analysis of social media data, Khattar et al. (2018) reveal the different types of users involved in the game, grouped as potential victims, propagators or pretentious curators, and hashtag hijackers.

In their letter to the editor of Asia-Pacific Psychiatry in 2018, Balhara et al. (2018) stress that medical literature remains short of matching the extensive mention of Blue Whale Challenge related cases media appearance. Therefore, they present a report of the consultation provided in a health care institution with regards to an admitted boy that carried out Blue Whale Game resembling tasks that he accessed through a mobile phone application. Accordingly, the boy received a link through his social media account. Upon clicking, an application with a big fish icon installed on this mobile phone. Early tasks included activities such as clapping twice and saying out loud that he was powerful. Following tasks though, turned out demanding hurtful actions such as carving F15 on his forearm with a pointed object. The careful father, who was informed about the Blue Whale Challenge from appearing cases in media, realized the newly installed app in the boy’s mobile phone, and immediately deleted it. Along the same lines, the boy was taken to a behavioral addiction clinic for diagnosis and treatment of any psychological conditions. Other than being a healthy child with no unusual behavior, the boy was referred as someone who prefers to be by himself as much as possible, but there were no observed changes
to his behavior during his involvement with the game. The boy revealed that it was his curiosity that kept him engaged with the tasks, though he was aware of the link of the Blue Whale Challenge with suicidal cases.

Another similar case was reported by Narayan et al. (2019) about a 17 years old boy admitted to the Gauhati Medical College Hospital in India when his class teacher noted a scar depicting a fish carved on his left forearm skin. Along the same lines, other past research on the topic refers to an ultimate brainwash of the players’ minds in order to lead them towards self-harm via tasks such as “waking up at odd hours, listening to psychedelic music, watching scary videos and inflicting cuts, and wounds on their bodies (Khattar et al., 2018).”

Conclusion

Despite its importance to the public and families, and the widespread coverage of the unfortunate cases in media, Blue Whale Challenge has not yet attracted sufficient interest from scholars of digitalization. Though it is known as a game, it truly is gamification ran by curators, who can be just any individual with bad intentions against vulnerable teenagers. It appears that the societal impact of researching the topic could be beyond measurability as understanding its dynamics would provide both families and policymakers with opportunities to prevent its further dissemination, hence bears the possibility of saving future lives. Therefore, future research is needed.

References


