



## Developing a sensitization program on the Blue Whale Challenge for Teachers and Adolescents in India

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Received: 22-Decr-2017 Accepted on: 2-Apr-2018 Published on: 7-Mar-2018

### ABSTRACT

The Blue Whale Challenge has become a topic of discussion presently due to the negative aftereffect it is carrying with it. It is evident from the reports that there has been an increasing number of teenagers who are being trapped into this deadly internet game Blue Whale Challenge. The Google Trends of past 12 months report a sharp increase in the searches related to the blue whale challenge in India. Around 200 suicides have been reported all over the world by the players of this game. It is of seeming importance that there is a need to sensitize schools, teachers, families and parents of adolescent populations on a broader level to understand psychological impact of such games. Internet addiction in adolescent population all over world has come up as an eminent problem in the present scenario. There has been a volatile growth in the use of internet not only in India but also worldwide in the last decade. There were about 42 million active internet users in urban India in 2008 as compared to 5 million in 2000.

*Keywords: Blue Whale Challenge, Internet Addiction, Gaming Addiction, Teachers Sensitization*

### Introduction

The Blue whale challenge poses as a greatest threat to the adolescent population all over the world. It has been estimated as to be the most searched item on google. This life threatening game brings in a hype of mystery and danger in its framework. All over the world, the trackers and authorities are making consistent efforts to break the code of accessibility of this game. These efforts are all going in vain and there is least information available on this particular game (Indo Asian News Service 2017). There is a need to understand the reasons behind the adolescent population falling prey to such gaming addiction (Indo Asian News Service 2017).

This paper focuses on analyzing the psychology behind the gaming addiction. It also aims at providing information related to the Blue whale challenge and coins out an approach that would work against such gaming addiction. It aims at highlighting role of teachers at schools and colleges to generate awareness on such games. This review also suggests importance of training teachers and care givers to help the

victims and identify potential ones to prevent them from engaging into any kind of life threatening and risky gaming addictive behavior.

There is a considerable debate on addiction and abuse of Smartphone among adolescents and its consequent impact on their health; not only in a global context, but also specifically in the Indian population. The rate of incidence of internet dependence among adolescents in India has been reflected in many studies. These studies revealed that about 74.5 per cent of adolescent population were found to be moderate to high users of internet. About 0.7 per cent were found to be addicts and 24.8 per cent were possible addicts (news18.com 2017).

Easy availability of new media and mobility has paved the way for internet addiction to arise as a potential problem in young people (K. Young 2010). The American Psychiatric Association aimed at including Internet Use Disorder in the appendix of the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders. As there is a growing research indicating the risk of adolescents being prone of developing internet addiction (Leung and Lee 2012).

### Internet Addiction

Internet addiction as a term was proposed and coined by Dr. Ivan Goldberg in 1995. This term was proposed for pathological compulsive internet use (Davis 2009). Later it was considered as a subset of behaviors that meets the six core component of addiction. These were, tolerance, withdrawal, salience, mood modification, conflict, and relapse (Mark 2000). The term Pathological internet use was accepted later. It was because addiction related more to the dependence on psychoactive substance (R. A. Davis 2001). Excessive internet

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Cite as: *Integr. J. Soc. Sci.*, 2018, 5(1), 22-26

©IS Publications

IJSS ISSN: 2348-0874

<http://pubs.iscience.in/ijss>

usage was also linked to pathological gambling, which is a defined term for a disorder of impulse control in DSM IV (Young 1998). Young in her research studies gave various types of internet addiction. These are cyber-relationship addiction, net compulsions, cyber-sexual addiction, information overload, and computer addiction (K. S. Young 2004). The Pathological Internet usage as a concept was researched and studied further by Caplan (Caplan 2007). His findings indicated that social isolation plays a greater role in behavioural symptoms of PIU than does the presence of psychopathology. Problematic Internet usage was the new term coined and suggested by Caplan to replace it from the term Pathological Internet addiction (Caplan 2007).

### **Theoretical Implication to addiction**

Different theories are put forward to explain the internet dependence and gaming addiction.

#### **Social learning theory**

In accordance to this theory, modelling and imitation are the major factors that work in developing any kind of behaviour. It gives importance to role of family set ups, parenting style and peer influence in developing internet dependence (Bandura 1977). Adolescents spend an increasing amount of their time with peers compared to parents. The higher level of exposure results in adolescents being more likely to imitate peers who have modelled positive rewards from internet and games (Abrams and Hogg 2006).

#### **Social Identity Theory**

A person seems to identify better with an individual or a group who have common interests and habits as the person himself. This theory describes the term self-concept as the basis of peer influence that works in internet dependence in a person (Abrams and Hogg 2006). The individual who uses the Internet and plays digital games, would definitely identify with a group which has members with same habits and interests. According to this theory, the group eventually should be homogenous.

#### **Primary Socialization Theory**

It proposes that norms and behavioural patterns regarding a particular aspect are transmitted through social sources. Parents and immediate family environment along with peers are major social sources. These social sources in combination with individual factors increase the likelihood of indulging into a behaviour (Kobus 2003).

#### **Social Network Theory**

It focuses on interdependence and relationship between individuals within the existing social system. This social system is comprised of schools, neighborhood, peer group and relationships within these. This theory states that individuals living in a social system interact with one another and influence each other in terms of their behavior, attitudes and the decisions that they make. Internet dependence also has its roots within the system. Directly or indirectly, it is evident that internet and gaming addiction arises mostly within the criteria's of an individual's peers and social structures like family and neighborhood (Simons and Farhat 2010).

### **Reasons of Addiction of Gaming and Internet**

Many parents are concerns about their children's Internet use. Data in a study conducted by Pew Research reflected that

around more than 50 percent of 13 to 17 year-olds go online many times a day and nearly a quarter are online almost constantly. This research gave a statistics of about 60% of parents reporting their kids as internet addicts. (American Psychiatric Association 2016). These statistics specify the need to understand the concept of gaming addiction and sensitize all the strata's involved. These would include parents, families and friends alongside the teachers and adolescents themselves.

Internet gaming disorder is identified as tenacious use of Internet games. This situation leads to problems functioning normally and distress. Specific symptoms include preoccupation with Internet games, problems in relationships, unsuccessful attempts to limit participation, loss of interest in other activities, ignoring required school and college work because of Internet games, deceiving others about the amount of time spent on games. Research indicated that online role-playing games were particularly enhancers in gaming addiction behaviour (Conrad 2017). People that meet the criteria for Internet gaming disorder experience similar symptoms like that of substance use disorder. There is a compulsion seen in their behaviour. They also build up the tolerance and experience withdrawal symptoms when they are prohibited from gaming (American Psychiatric Association 2016).

#### **Social reasons**

The modern family set ups like that of nuclear families residing in the cities have adapted a routine pattern of living. This routine pattern leads to lack of communication between the family members. The adolescents find more and more time to spend in the virtual world. The children of working parents do not have time to cater to their children's needs on an interpersonal communication level. About 80% of the adolescent population residing in the cities find solace on the internet world. They interact here and form relations (www.hindustantimes.com 2017). The social factor also significantly includes socializing, chatting and making new friends in the game. New relationships are formed.

#### **Variable Ratio Reinforcement Schedule (VRRS)**

The VRRS reasons internet addiction (e.g., gaming, gambling, shopping, pornography, etc.), due to the reward layers it provide to an individual. When a person is continuously surfing, it leads to multiple unpredictable rewards. This would relate to the factors like viewing friends and relatives profile to get access to their life's happenings. In gaming addiction, getting involved in the virtual world leads to an escape from reality. A person who is not so strong in real world, can role play a heroic character while playing a game (Kuss 2013). Every time an unpredictable result comes up, it maintains the level of interest and increases the involvement of the person. Games, like MMROPGs (massively multiplayer online roleplaying games) example-World of Warcraft and Ever quest lead to Internet addiction because, they never end practically and provides for an individual to act powerful and supreme (Gregory 2017).

#### **Biological Reasons**

Deficient levels of Dopamine and Serotonin are also found to be contributing factors to the internet addictive behaviours. The chemical deficiency relates to the requirement of engagement into compulsive behaviours to receive the pleasurable responses (Koob and Le 2008). To achieve pleasure, an individuals might engage into internet and gaming addictive behaviour. Predispositions of Internet addiction were

also found related to anxiety and depression. One may turn into virtual world for getting a relief from the anxiousness and depressive situations. It is easy and relieving situation online because it does not require interpersonal interaction and it is emotionally rewarding.

### **The Blue Whale Challenge**

The media has been attracting attention all corners of the World about the dangerous game of death popularly known as the blue whale suicide game. It goes by many names including A Silent House, A Sea of Whales and 'Wake Me Up At 4:20am. The Blue Whale challenge, reportedly was created by a former convict in Russia. The Blue Whale game through social media targets vulnerable adolescents and uses abuse tactics, grooming and manipulation to drive them to commit suicide. It psychologically provokes players to indulge in daring, self-destructive tasks for 50 days before finally taking the "winning" step of killing themselves. Each task must be filmed and shared as "proof". It is believed to be a suicide game wherein a group of administrators or a supervisor assigns a particular task which is to be completed on daily basis and continues up to 50 days. The 50th day is the final day for the participant wherein he/she has to commit suicide. During these 50 days the participant is expected to share photos of the challenges/tasks completed by them. It also includes listening to music, watching horror movies, and gradually carving out shapes on one's skin, self-harming and even committing suicide. There is hardly any scope of stopping in between, as the participants of the game are threatened black mailing and cyber bullied to ensure its completion (news18.com 2017).

Although, there is no consensus over how a participant plays the game. Few people are claiming that user has to install some app on his smart phone; some are claiming that it is being played using Instagram etc. whereas it is almost certain that the administrator gets in touch with the participant. Code words are used to reach out to the administrators of the game. These codes are like F57 or F58 and these keep changing. After the contact has been made, the player and the administrator move to a private chatroom. The tasks involved in the challenge also keep changing. It can be like waking up at 4:20 am or self-injury, which is being commonly reported in the blue whale victims cases. These can change to any other life threatening challenge. The players that are playing the game, might not be a part of the old ways anymore. This way it becomes even more difficult for the trackers and police to track down the links to this deadly game (Banerjee 2017). As per reports all over the world, more than 350 participants lost their lives. In India the figure is around 20. However, two participants were able to save their lives.

### **Psychology behind the Blue Whale Challenge**

The participants of this game need to prove that they have completed the tasks by sending proof, pictures and videos to their curator also termed as whale. This curator is the instructor as well. Clearly it is evident that the game's objective is to lead the target to death. It follows a series and the pattern leads the victims to follow the suggestions meticulously. It seems a kind of hypnotism that works on the victims (Thakkar and Lodha 2017, Mprah 2016).

The challenge aims at first creating an emotional bond with the victim. Through arbitrary set of steps that are required to complete the order of the game, the victim is forced to follow a path of self-harm and destruction around them. The final step

is always either jump off a high building or take your life. It works as a manipulation and control scheme that aims vulnerable people who are susceptible to have serious thoughts of suicide, loneliness, and death. Some experts believe that the psychological manipulation takes effect during the skype episodes and chats with the curator. As it becomes easy to convince an impressionable young person to hurt themselves (news18.com 2017).

### **Teenagers-Easy Victims of Blue Whale Challenge**

Teenagers usually indulge into such risk behaviours pertaining to the fact that they are vulnerable and prone to seek validation. It makes them feel of greater worth as they consider themselves as part of something big. Teenagers with low self-esteem, less interactive and communicative lives, willingly become part of any such project with a social appeal without considering its negative consequences (Thakkar and Lodha 2017).

According to experts, teenagers are more vulnerable because the virtual world allows them to act freely -- without the restrictions prevalent in the real world. This seems to give them an adrenaline boost. According to Samir Parikh, director of the Department of Mental Health & Behavioural Sciences at Fortis Healthcare, New Delhi, teenagers are more prone to this as they always seek validation. It seems to help them feel as a part of something bigger, which in a way gives meaning to their lives. It has been observed that some teenagers have very low self-esteem, and rely significantly on peer approval. For them, the external environment becomes a source of inspiration, which is why they are willing to do anything to project a certain socially celebrated image (Indo Asian News Service 2017).

This game has been completely banned and the administrator of this game is in the prison in Russia. Recently the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India (27th Oct 2017) directs the Govt. of India, Ministry of HRD and Ministry of WCD to develop certain video and campaign against this game (www.hindustantimes.com 2017).

### **Measures taken in India**

The government has issued directions to all the internet giants and portals to remove the links of the lethal online blue whale Challenge. The Ministry of Electronics and IT had directed Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Microsoft and Yahoo to immediately remove the links of the Blue Whale Challenge (Indo Asian News Service 2017).

### **Treatment Methods and Corrective Steps for Gaming addiction**

Internet Addiction Disorder has been considered to be a fad illness keeping in concern that there is no specific criteria of its diagnosis and it lacks classification. Many studies have reflected importance of self-corrective behaviours. As it has shown considerable success in some cases. Corrective behaviours may include using specific software's that control the use of internet by an individual (Gregory 2017).

It has been a debatable issue among researchers that medications can also turn out to be effective in the treatment of Internet Addiction Disorder. As by most of the Neuro Psychologists it is considered similar to anxiety and depression problems (Gregory 2017). It is understood in course that if issues like anxiety or depression are treated, the Internet Addiction might resolve in step with this treatment

approach. Studies have also revealed that anti-anxiety and anti-depressant medications have had a profound effect on the amount of time spent on the Internet (Ko, et al. 2009).

Major Psychological treatments of Internet Addiction Disorder include: (Gregory 2017)

- Behaviour modification
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
- Individual, group, or family therapy
- Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT)
- Recreation Therapy
- Art Therapy
- Reality Therapy

### **Intervention and Training program for sensitization of teachers and families on the Blue Whale Addiction**

Importance of sensitizing Teachers and families with adolescents on The Blue whale Challenge and similar addictive games has become of immense value. An intervention or orientation should be made compulsory for all the schools and colleges Developing a sensitization program for Teachers and care takers to impart knowledge and analyse risk factors involved in the game like blue whale challenge has become a prime need after the incidents that are being reported all over the world. There should be ways devise to structure a systematic program that addresses the psychology involved in addictive games like blue whale challenge. A basic understanding of the phenomenon of internet addictiveness should be explained to the teachers at schools and colleges (Banerjee 2017, Khatri 2016, Sharma 2015). Trained counsellors and psychologists should be involved to train the teachers and acquaint them with the reasons that lead the adolescents to play games like that of the blue whale challenge.

- Developing a sensitization approach is the need of hour in order to generate awareness on gaming addictions.

- Parents, school and the health care professionals should be majorly involved. They can act as take holders, since they have a significant role in lives of adolescents. Educating them about the harmful impact of Blue Whale Challenge will eventually help the adolescents indirectly (Thakkar and Lodha 2017).

- Counsellors are required in schools. Parents should observe their kids for suicidal tendencies and game addictions. They should focus on spending a non-gadget quality time with the children (Banerjee 2017).

- Identifying potential victims is the greatest task in preventing harm from this game. Social media profiles of children should be supervised by parents in order to keep an eye on their posts and activities. Through these psychological profile of the adolescents can be identified to a greater extent.

- Teachers should be involved on a wider extent, as children are seen to be more cooperative at schools and are willing to receive suggestions from their teachers rather than from their parents. Hence the schools have a big role in ensuring that the Internet Addictive behaviours may not cause a hindrance in healthy growth of adolescents.

- Interventions based on Life Skills Education Training should be conducted for teachers and students in order to enhance psychosocial abilities.

### **Conclusion**

The emergence and propagation of the addictive Blue Whale Challenge on social media provides a somber reminder that adolescent population all over the world is at greater risk of deteriorating quality of mental and social health. There is a need for Parents, Teachers and society to take steps to reinforce positive interactions for adolescents and youth. It is important to coin such interventions on school and institutional levels that help adolescents in addressing issues like lack of interpersonal communication and coping strategies when the internet has become omnipresent.

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