



Motivation behind Risk Taking Behaviour among Adolescents: With Reference to Online Suicidal Games like Blue-whale

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Abstract

Adolescence is a period of biological, emotional transition when they undergo many subtle and apparent changes that influence their thinking, emotion and behaviour. This period bridges childhood to adulthood, and prepares the individual to step into the adult world, in which one faces considerable number of risks. Adolescents are critically indulged and attracted towards the internet world, especially online games. Recently we have come across the risk taking behaviour (suicidal tendency and suicidal attempts) done by teenagers and adolescents who were indulged in different online games like Bluewhale worldwide including India. Risk taking behaviour is a tendency to perform the activities like physical injury, social rejection, emotional detachment, suicidal thoughts and attempts. Risk-taking behaviour is more prevalent among youths with less parental supervision, and peers who also actively engage in risk-taking behaviour. The present study investigates the possible underlying motivations behind online suicidal games among adolescents like increased risk-taking capacity among youths, including greater levels of risk tolerance, sensation seeking and impulsivity. The investigation will focus on different psychological factors like peer pressure, parental pressure, academic stress, depression and anxiety, low self-esteem, frustration, avoidance and type of personality for suicidal behaviour with the help of case studies, data and information provided by different sources in the form of interviews with victims, their parents, and police. It is expected that the study will help us to counsel adolescents properly and prevent them from trying such risky and challenging activities.

Key words: Adolescents, Risk Taking Behaviour, Motivation, Suicide, Bluewhale.

The most dramatic transition phase in the life of a man is the age of adolescence. It is a period of transition when they undergo many subtle and apparent changes that influence their thinking and behaviour. The age brings some drastic physical, physiological, personality, societal and psychological changes. Adolescence is commonly defined as *'the stage of life that begins at the onset of puberty, when sexual maturity or the ability to produce is attained'* (NCERT, 2006). This period bridges childhood to adulthood, and prepares the individual to step into the adult world, in which one faces considerable number of risks.

Developments during Adolescence

Physical Sexual Development: Rapid physical changes occur within the body of adolescents during this age. Some of these changes include appearance, body image, puberty & sexual

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development, changes in physical stamina and weight. Many factors can affect the onset and progress of physical development during adolescence such as genetic & biological factors, stressful life events, socio economic factors, family upbringing, psychological factors etc.

Social Development: Because adolescence is the stage from childhood to adulthood, family members still make them feel dependent while adolescents themselves feel mature enough to deal with all kinds of social emotional problems. Parents seem to place more restrictions on the teenagers. They worry more about their safety in case of sexual activity. Adolescent's peer relationship also affects their smooth development in society. Positive peer relations during adolescence have been linked to positive psychosocial adjustment.

Cognitive Development: Adolescents become mature enough to think more abstractly, logically and idealistically. They become able to examine and reason their own thoughts as well as other's thoughts and behaviours. This ability provides them a cognitive and social awareness and sensitivity. They start having hypothetical thinking, deductive, inductive and reflective thinking. Reflective thinking allows a person to critically analyse or evaluate his own thinking, idea or solution. All these processes make an adolescent an experimenter or problem solver.

Moral development: Moral development in adolescence is a part of cognitive development which refers to the development of a sense of values and ethical behaviour. Cognitive development prepares a ground for morality among adolescents where they learn and analyse right or wrong, good or bad, socially acceptable or unacceptable. They learn helping others and caring for others.

Emotional Development: Adolescents develop a sense of emotional intelligence and emotional maturity; maturity to understand others emotions, his own emotions, to control emotions and how to use emotions on a certain time to cope with stressful situations. Emotional development during adolescence involves establishing a realistic and coherent sense of identity in the context of relating to others and learning to cope with stress and manage emotions (Santrock, 2001).

Identity: Identity in adolescents includes the following two concepts:

1. **Self-concept** - The set of beliefs one has about oneself. This includes beliefs about one's attributes (e.g., tall, intelligent), roles and goals (e.g., occupation one wants to have when grown), and interests, values, and beliefs e.g., religious, political.
2. **Self-esteem** - This involves evaluating how one feels about one's self-concept. "Global" self-esteem refers to how much we like or approve of our perceived selves as a whole. "Specific" self-esteem refers to how much we feel about certain parts of ourselves e.g., as an athlete or student, how one looks, etc. (APA, 2002).

Many of the factors influence identity development and self-esteem during adolescence. Physical appearance determines global self-esteem, especially for girls (Harter, 1990a). Comments by others, particularly parents and peers, reflect appraisals of the individual that some adolescents may incorporate as part of their identity and feelings about themselves (Robinson, 1995).



Risk Taking Behaviour in Adolescents

Risk taking behaviour includes those activities which can lead to physical or psychological injuries. It is found that adolescents are more likely than children or adults to take risks, as evinced by elevated rates of experimentation with alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, unprotected sexual activity, violent and nonviolent crime, and reckless driving (Steinberg, 2008). These behaviours can be done intentionally or unintentionally. They are being involved in many of these risk taking behaviours and also it has an adverse effect on their behaviour and psyche. Some of the risk taking behaviours include –

1. *Tobacco intake, substance abuse, and smoking.*
2. *Drinking or alcohol intake.*
3. *Rash driving.*
4. *Antisocial activities like theft, robbery, and murder.*
5. *Sexual activities, and rape.*
6. *Suicide or suicidal tendency.*

Motivation behind Risk Taking Behaviour among Adolescents

Teenagers or adolescents are more susceptible to risk taking behaviour for the reason most drastic changes occurs in their life physically, socially, cognitively and emotionally. They step into social and outer world from family and their own comfort zone. Adolescents have lots of stress and so clue how to cope with them. They are increasingly reacting with dissatisfaction to the way they are regulated by society. Young people experience lack of control in their own lives and they might feel unable to cope when faced with uncertainty, even though these uncertainties are presented to them as opportunities. When they do not find a way out, they got distracted and start taking risks. Here we shall discuss the possible factors behind attempting the risk taking behaviour like suicides or self-harm by adolescents which will help us to go through deep inside their mind. Some of the motivations behind risk taking behaviour among adolescents are discussed below-

Boy-Girl Relationship: Boy-girl relationships ranked the highest for the possible reasons for suicide for both the male and female students. This is the time they face hormonal changes and are physically attracted to the opposite sex. They fail to distinguish between lust and love. According to Durkheim's suicide theory, males as always more vulnerable in their risk of suicide due to broken relationship. Women who are more socialized tend to use suicide as 'cry for help' than men" (Durkheim, 1951). It could be explained by the male reluctance to share their personal problems with others when they experience emotional disturbances. Instead, they opt for serious suicide action.

Academic Stress: Burden of study is one of the most important causes of stress among the teens. The school environment is always a place of stress for most students. Parents' highest expectations mostly work as a negative reinforcement and put them under pressure. The stress of studies increases during examination where they have the expectancy to score higher than their peers put them under constant stress. The stress reaches to its extreme when the results are published and they fail to stand true to the expectations of their



parents. This is the time, many of the teens think of ending their lives as they consider themselves as loser.

Family Issues - The society nowadays is getting increasingly competitive, fast-paced, full of uncertainty, rapidly changing, insecure and risk taking. Families are bound to face a lot of changes as a result of social change. Most families are dual income family and parents are busy with work. Hence children are pretty much left on their own. Moreover, the family itself becomes a source of stress for the young people. The values of collectivism are increasingly changing to individualistic ones. Many teens believe that life is self-determined, rather than determined by other people or by a creator of the universe, regardless of ethnic or religious background.

Peer Pressure - Adolescents spend a remarkable amount of time in the company of peers and friends. Peer pressure is the urge among teenagers to conform and do things because all their other friends are doing it. Observational data point to the role of peer influences as a primary contextual factor contributing to adolescents' heightened tendency to make risky decisions. For instance, crime statistics indicate that adolescents typically commit delinquent acts in peer groups, whereas adults more frequently offend alone (Zimring, 1998).

High Parental Expectations: In the time of greater competitions, parents have very high expectations from their children. They even impose their own desired and interests on them. They rarely ask their teen, "What do you want?" This makes them feel cheated or deprived. They mostly feel demotivated to do things they do wish to do. High expectations from parents impose a burden on them compel them to work harder against their will. They start searching for alternates which give them comfort like drugs, smoking and drinking.

Identity Crisis - Teenagers constantly undergo an internal struggle. This is the time they try to evaluate themselves in comparison of the society they live in. They face questions like-

- *Who am I?*
- *What is my goal in life?*
- *Do people like me?*
- *Do my friends find me good enough?*

These teens are the most vulnerable culprits who seek acceptance, acknowledgement and attention from parents, friends and society. They are directionless teens who lack goals. They are distracted adolescents who in order to establish themselves in the society are ready to undergo any challenge or risk.

Attraction towards Social Networking & Internet: Today's world is a world of internet, social media and advanced technology. How can we imagine that a growing adolescent will be away from the charm of internet world where he can achieve advanced education through advanced technology, means and methods? Though playing games and use of internet and android phone is very common among small kids to teens but this attraction towards internet and curiosity to search new things push them to the dangerous step of online suicidal games which bring them away from their actual world.



Depression and Loneliness:The New social setup, higher parental expectations, examination stress, peer pressure, lack of love and affection from parents and other similar issues overburden the teen and put them in depression as well as loneliness. Commenting on the first Blue Whale death in India, Mumbai-based clinical psychologist and author Seema Hingorani says about 16-year-old boy who came with a complaint that he doesn't want to live just because no one likes him. Further she says "I am quite convinced that the kid was suffering from deep underlying loneliness and depression. These are the same kids who are searching 'painless death' on Google and becomes the perfect victim for a virtual game like Blue Whale, which offers thrill and helped him set aside the sorrows of his real life". Developers of games like blue whale are well aware of the vulnerabilities of the teenagers and know that they succumb to peer pressure easily. They are also well aware of the fact that teenagers nowadays are finding themselves unhappy, directionless and lacking goals.

Blue Whale – The Suicidal Game for Teens

Over the past few months, we have witnessed some teenage deaths or suicides under unnatural circumstances and reason was found a deadly online game named 'blue whale challenge.' This challenge has been linked to more than 150 deaths across the world. There have been reported cases of suicides due to the challenge across the world: Three cases from the United States, two from Brazil, two from Argentina, one from Italy, more than 130 cases of suicide in Russia, one in China and at least 90 victims of the challenge are identified in Portugal. Now, it is also being traced in India.

The Blue Whale Challenge - The Blue Whale Challenge is a social media challenge that encourages children, teenagers & other users to perform specific tasks. The name has its origin in the behaviour of some Blue Whales who beach themselves in apparent suicide. Joining the game is initially made through conversations on social networks, where the game is presented and proposed by so called friends.

Targeted players of the age group 10-14 year olds, join the Blue Whale Challenge by posting certain hashtags or joining specific groups on social media, in the hopes of getting selected by a group administrator. Group administrators are typically anonymous adults and older teens. The challenges are sent daily to the victim by a healer/moderator/administrator. The challenge as a whole is meant to harm students and slowly gets them to trust the game. The tasks escalate throughout the 50 days and range from something simple such as producing mere drawings, acts of self-harm, like urging players to cut themselves in the shape of a whale, or crimes against third persons.

Players of the challenge cannot stop playing once they have taken it. They are blackmailed and cyber bullied into completing the game. Players are required to send photo evidence to their group administrator to prove that they have completed each specific task. On the last day of the challenge the only way to win is to die by committing suicide. A complete list of the challenges may be referred to in Appendix-1.

Signs and Symptoms of Involvement in the Game - In order to ensure that your child is safe and is not indulged in any such activity, you should pay attention to any changes in your child's



behaviour, especially if they become reserved, withdrawn, or fearful of social media. Regularly supervise and monitor your child's activities on the internet and social networks. Then, contact your child's school to know if your child has been engaged in unwanted activities, other students might be engaged in it too. Urge your child to report any misbehaviour they encounter online and on social media. It is okay to take your child's phone, search through it to find if they are chatting to or are in contact with any strange person. Parents, teachers, and friends of the adolescents need to be aware of this game and its signs that the teen may be participating in the game. The signs are following:

- Inscriptions in the palms of the hands.
- Signs of self-mutilation on arms, legs and lips.
- A sudden interest in horror films.
- Undertaking unexplained activities late at night or early hours.
- Becoming exposed to danger in areas such as high places.
- Taking an interest in the design of Blue Whales.
- Remaining uncommunicative for excessively long periods.

Preventive Measure and Recommendations for Parents: If any of the above signs are apparent, it is most important to encourage dialogue and discussion in the family about the issues related to security, privacy dangers regarding the internet in order to promote greater knowledge on the part of children and young people. This is how you can prevent your child from falling into the trap-

- Create an open and trusting environment at home. You should provide the teens with the opportunities to talk to you, then listen without judgement.
- Have a healthy dialogue with your child/student about their day and social media.
- Share the dangers of online challenges and encourage the teens not to follow the crowd and not to feel pressurised into doing anything that makes them feel uncomfortable or unsafe.
- Warn your child about the risks of adding strangers on social media. Recommend that only family, friends and school people should be in the friends' list on social media. Make sure they are interacting with people you know (and in a way that's healthy).
- Teach your child to keep private things private, especially on the internet. If they are struggling, encourage your child to confide in you, a family member, or a trusted adult.
- Remember that loving your child means taking actions that may make your child not like you at times.
- Make sure they know that no matter what situation they may find themselves in the virtual or real world, including something you may find inappropriate, you are there to help them through it.
- Discuss the matter with local police and/or a school term supervisor, teacher or school psychologist.
- Seek specialised psychological help from a psychopathologist with clinical supervision.

Be a Friend to Your Child: Working towards strengthening family ties with young people is important in order to be able to offer help when needs arise. All that a depressed child needs is a friend to share his feeling. Friends are the people most relied upon by the young people in times



of need. Hence, developing a friendly relation with your child could be effective way to monitor your child's behaviour. In addition be a friend of your child's friend as well. Mentoring and coaching by peers could be effective in providing positive influences in the areas of academic and non-academic situations. Peers have a greater impact on their fellow pupils in that they serve as guides and role models.

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Appendix -1

The Disturbing Complete List of Blue Whale Challenges

A completed list of tasks which were supposedly posted in a comment on a story about the game on a Russian news website. The list of 50 challenges has been translated from Russian

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.

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7. Carve "f40" on your hand, send a photo to curator.
8. Type "#i_am_whale" in your VKontakte status.
9. You have to overcome your fear.
10. Wake up at 4:20 a.m. and go to a roof (the higher the better)
11. Carve a whale on your hand with a razor, send a photo to curator.
12. Watch psychedelic and horror videos all day.
13. Listen to music that "they" (curators) send you.
14. Cut your lip.
15. Poke your hand with a needle many times
16. Do something painful to yourself, make yourself sick.
17. Go to the highest roof you can find, stand on the edge for some time.
18. Go to a bridge, stand on the edge.
19. Climb up a crane or at least try to do it
20. The curator checks if you are trustworthy.
21. Have a talk "with a whale" (with another player like you or with a curator) in Skype.
22. Go to a roof and sit on the edge with your legs dangling.
23. Another task with a cipher.
24. Secret task.
25. Have a meeting with a "whale."
26. The curator tells you the date of your death and you have to accept it.
27. Wake up at 4:20 a.m. and go to rails (visit any railroad that you can find).
28. Don't talk to anyone all day.
29. Make a vow that "you're a whale."
- 30-49. Every day you wake up at 4:20am, watch horror videos, listen to music that "they" send you, make 1 cut on your body per day, talk "to a whale."
50. Jump off a high building. Take your life.

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