

The Study of Social Media Horror Trends

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# The Virality of Horror Trends on Social Media

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes popular horror challenges that went viral around 2010-2014 and encouraged children to harm themselves and ultimately persuaded them into suicide. By looking at the examples of Slender Man, the Blue Whale challenge and the Momo, this paper will use the theories of virality, parasocial interaction, paranormal phenomenon, and cyberbullying to help understand the reasoning behind the mass hysteria of these trends. This research will attempt to answer the questions: Why did these horror trends, despite the intended consequences for participating, go viral on social media? How are social media influencers responsible for these challenges going viral on social media? How should parents, teachers and children become aware of these challenges on social media and what should they do to avoid them? This paper uses case-study methodology to develop a better understanding of why the Slender Man, Blue Whale and Momo Challenge gained so much attention, regardless of the individuals knowing the horrible intentions of participating in these trends. This essay explores the coverage of the Blue Whale challenge (i.e., popular YouTuber Shane Dawson's, William Salhani's and an anonymous YouTuber's videos) more specifically because of the end goal being so severe, which is to take one's own life.

*Keywords:* horror, trends, social media, Blue Whale, Momo, Slender Man, virality, morbid, paranormal, cyberaggression, cyberbullying, children, media

## The Virality of Horror Trends on Social Media: Understanding the Virality of the Blue Whale Challenge

In the early 2000's, three challenges took over the internet: the Blue Whale, Momo, and Slender Man challenges. Suddenly, children were tormented by these anonymous cryptid-fictional-creatures, Slender Man and Momo. Children found the Blue Whale challenge by seeking these challenges on Twitter using the hashtag *#Bluewhale* to seek an administrator to send these tasks to them through the course of 50 days. The Momo Challenge would show up randomly on children's television shows such as Peppa Pig and Elmo or video games like Fortnite, purposely scaring the children. The motives of the Slender Man creature are still unknown, but this creature was a paranormal phenomenon with a story that would change constantly by word of mouth. These horror challenges were brutal. Slender Man, Momo, or the administrator of the Blue Whale would pressure a participant to do tasks to harm themselves or others and ultimately in the end, kill themselves by suicide.



Figure 1: Sculpture created by Keisuke Aiso in 2016 which became the face of the Momo challenge. Source: (Sakuma, A.,2019)



Figure 3: Blue Whale challenge created by Phillip Budeikin in 2016. Source: (Team, W. I. O. N. W. 2017).



Figure 2: Slender Man. Created by Eric Knudsen in 2009. Source:(Singal, J., 2014)

On May 31, 2014, twelve-year-old Anissa Weier and Morgan Geysler fell victims to the cyberbullying of the paranormal character, Slender Man. Weier and Geysler were sentenced to 20 plus years in a mental institution for stabbing their twelve-year-old friend, Payton Leutner, 19 times to assure that they and their family would not be haunted and killed. This was one of the last tasks in the Slender Man challenge. Other tasks would include: watching horror movies at all hours of the night, carving a whale in their arm, or listening to scary music. The character also scared children into thinking they would be haunted, or their family would be taken away from them. Throughout this paper, the games' characters in these challenges will be identified as administrators, since there was a real-life anonymous person behind these challenges.



*Figure 4:* Pictured in order: Payton Leutner, Morgan Geysler, Anissa Weier  
Source: (ABC news, 2019).

Cyberbullying is defined as “repeatedly and purposefully harming others through electronic mediums and has emerged as an important societal issue across the industrialized world for children and adults alike” (Barlett, Rinker & Roth, 2021, p. 1). It is important to understand that one of the many reasons cyberbullying never goes away is because the internet is

never ending. Scholarship is created to research cyberbullying because of the major implications it projects on younger children. Cyberbullying is becoming more prevalent in children who are fortunate enough to have access to the internet because of the constant access to social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Children who are fortunate enough to have access to the internet and technology are also exposed to more adult content because of the smartphones and tablets they possess at consistently younger age ranges. With the increase in technical features, the parental-control aspect is becoming harder to navigate. This paper looks at the interactions of social media influencers and their subscribers when addressing, promoting, and participating in these horror challenges, but more specifically with children. This paper investigates several aspects behind these horror challenges going viral on social media.

Communication scholars have studied social media, but there is a gap in research when studying the effects of social media on children, specifically regarding horror content. Early media theories such as the Cultivation theory, which was a term coined by George Gerber in the 1960s (Infante, Dominic A., et al, 2003), covers the long-lasting effects of viewers watching horror content. However, the theory misses the effects of horror content online because it was invented before social media.

My research questions are:

1. Why did these horror trends, despite the intended consequences for participating, go viral on social media?
2. How are these social media influencers responsible for these challenges going viral on social media?
3. How should parents, teachers and children become aware of these challenges on social media and what should they do to avoid them?

Research on virality, cyber behavior, paranormal phenomena, social media, and the case study methodology will guide the analysis on three representative YouTube videos related to the Blue Whale challenge on YouTube channels from Shane Dawson, William Salhani, and an anonymous channel. This paper will then focus on the Blue Whale challenge because of the serious implication it has on children's livelihood. The lack of documentation of cases of suicide relating to the Blue Whale challenge is important to note since there is no documentation to bring awareness to the severe consequences these tasks have on their participants. While other challenges, such as Slender Man and Momo, do torment and force harm upon minors, these challenges do not explicitly encourage suicide as the ultimate ending task.

The first chapter of this paper will be the background of the horror challenges Blue Whale, Momo and Slender Man. This chapter will discuss the origin of the challenges and some of the most popular cases of these challenges. The next chapter will be the literature review, where in depth research has been done about the theories connected to these challenges. The following chapter will be covering the methods of this research, which is the case study methodology modeled off Robert Stake. The following chapter, chapter four, is the analysis section, which discusses the connection of theories and research. To conclude, this paper discusses the implications of these challenges in chapter five.

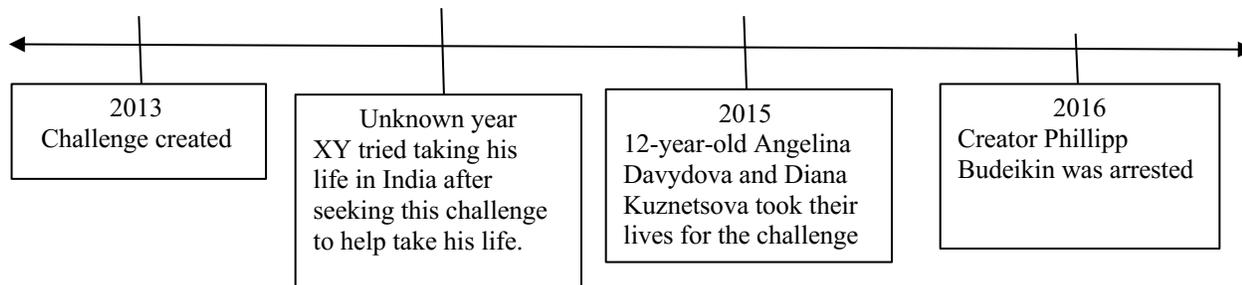
## **Chapter 1: Background**

### **Blue Whale Challenge**

According to Narayan, B. Das, S. Das and Bhandari (2019), the social media game "Blue Whale Challenge" gained a lot of attention very quickly. The game was named after the creator, 21-year-old former Russian psychology student Phillipp Budeikin, who believed that an

individual who felt they had “no value” should commit suicide, such as a whale does when they “strand themselves” (p. 105). When a whale or a group of marine mammals are washed ashore and cannot return, this act is called “stranding.” The whales become disoriented, and they are not able to return into the ocean, which unfortunately causes them to die. Some individuals see this act of “stranding” as a suicidal behavior, which led to the social media game, “Blue Whale Challenge.” According to author Ant Adeane, in November of 2016, Phillip Budeikin was arrested three years after creating this challenge and charged with inciting teenagers to commit suicide. The former psychology student said he developed tactics learned from his classes to manipulate teenagers into killing themselves. He created the game under the name “f57” using the start of his name and the last two digits of his phone number (Adeane, 2019, p. 2).

*Figure 5: Timeline of the Blue Whale challenge and some of the reported cases from when the challenge was created to when Budeikin was arrested. Source: created by writer*



The Blue Whale challenge consisted of challenges that an individual must record and send to an administrator. To participate, an individual will go to their social media accounts and post #bluewhalechallenge, #curatorfindme, #i\_am\_whale, for an administrator of the fifty tasks to signal that they want to participate. The participant will perform the task on camera and must complete the given task in fifty days.

The tasks are as follows:

*Figure 6: 50 tasks of the Blue Whale challenge. Source: reddit*

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 the 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 the 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 the curator.
8. Type “#i\_am\_whale” in your VKontakte status.
9. You must 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 the 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 to make yourself sick.
17. Go to the highest roof you can find and stand on the edge for some time.
18. Go to a bridge and 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) on 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 must accept it.
27. Wake up at 4:20 a.m. and go to the 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 one cut on your body per day, talk “to a whale.”
50. Jump off a high building. Take your life.

With the completion of each challenge, the tasks become more violent and dangerous with the final challenge being led to commit suicide. Narayan, B. Das, S. Das and Bhandari (2019) reported their first case of a 17-year-old patient in their hospital. The patient, named XY for confidentiality purposes, was admitted into the hospital by his teacher after she noticed a scar on his left forearm in the shape of a whale. XY stated to the doctors that he came across the challenge with the hopes that it would help him commit suicide peacefully, but he was wrong. XY stated that he had to accept and complete fifty tasks in the challenge to lead up to committing suicide. Some of his tasks included watching horror movies all night with no sleep and making shapes on his arms with a sharp instrument of the administrators choosing. XY stated that the administrator was not identifiable (Narayan, Das, Das & Bhandari, 2019, p. 105).

Some of the challenges that the individuals participated in were extremely cruel. An anonymous administrator would tell participants to wake up in the middle of the night and watch scary films such as *Halloween*, *Saw* or *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Then the challenge would progress to more violent acts, such as demanding the individual to cut the shape of a whale in his/her arm to prove his/her loyalty to the administrator, thus leading up to the final act,

demanding the participant to kill himself/herself. Reports of suicide on social media related to the Blue Whale challenge started in 2015, with Russian teenagers Rina Palenkova (age 17), Angelina Davydova (age 12) and Diana Kuznetsova (age 12) all dying by suicide (Adeane, 2019, p.1). Although there have been cases that have implied that the participants who took their lives were related to the Blue Whale challenge, nothing has been confirmed that this challenge was solely the cause. The parents of these teenagers went on to their online accounts and discovered an online group that teenagers Palenkova and Kuznetsova were both active in. This online group showed drawings of Kuznetsoca and Palenkova, posts about suicide and suicidal thoughts, and numerous mentions of blue whales.

### **Momo Challenge**

Another challenge that became viral, just as the Blue Whale challenge was surging in popularity, was the Momo Challenge. This challenge came about in August of 2016, when sculptor Keisuke Aisawa of the Link Factory, a Japanese horror prop film company created a Japanese bird woman with bug-eyes, matted hair, wraithlike limbs and bird-like claws. The sculpture was displayed in a show at the Gen (Vanilla) Gallery in Tokyo Ginza district. In this location, a picture was taken that went viral all-over social media. The picture was posted on Reddit with the subreddit r/creepy and gained thousands of comments and views (Dickson, 2019, p. 1). This sculpture then became the face of the viral Momo Challenge. The origin of the challenge is unclear, but what is clear is how quickly this challenge took over social media.

In July, 2018, the YouTuber, ReignBot, made a video that explained the Momo Challenge. This challenge reached children as young as 8-years-old. The Momo Challenge used messaging services such as WhatsApp. The creature sent messages and commands that asked

children to do violent acts like cutting themselves, hurting others, and taking their own life. The creature started to insert itself into children's programs such as Peppa Pig, video games like Fortnite, popular YouTuber videos and Snapchat accounts. Momo would show up on the screen of children's social media and sing a song saying "Momo's going to kill you. Momo's going to kill you." This song plays purposefully to scare the victims and pressure them into completing the tasks that Momo sends to them.

This is different from the Blue Whale challenge where participants would use a hashtag on Twitter to seek out an administrator who would then allow them to participate in this challenge. In 2019, the Momo Challenge came back into the social media world and took over WhatsApp messages of young students. School administrators such as Morrison school district sent out warnings to parents and students to let them know of the dangerous challenge that came back into the light of social media (News WHBF, 2019).

### **Slender Man Challenge**

In an online forum in 2009, a ghost-like character with tall, spindly fingers and arms named the Slender Man completely faceless took over the internet. This creature stands at an unnatural height of 12-feet-tall, wearing a black suit and tie. He has branch-like arms that stand over a child in the pitch black. According to an article written in the *LA Times* by Jaclyn Cosgrove, a former user of the online forum and the creator of Slender Man, Eric Knudsen, posted a picture of children next to the beast. (2017, p. 1). Regardless, the fascination for the character seemed to grow even more. Knudsen deliberately made the character vague, so the story is very open-ended and can be interpreted in any way a reader wants. The challenge itself is subjective. The background on the challenge is vague because the interpretation of the Slender

Man and his motives change from person to person. This creature's motives are unclear, but the Slender Man became associated with the disappearances and sudden deaths of children all over the world, which led people to think that this creature almost had an appetite for these children.

Through these numerous interpretations, the Slender Man story started to spill into video games, online texts, social media apps and other platforms. On May 31, 2014 in Waukesha, Wisconsin, the most popular and well-known case occurred with two 12-year-old girls Anissa Weier and Morgan Geysler. The girls tricked their friend Payton Leutner into the woods and stabbed her nineteen times in an attempt to become proxies to this creature. The girls said they felt they needed to stab their friend to show their loyalty to this creature.

According to an article in *ABC News*, Morgan Geysler made a statement saying "Anissa told me we had to, because she said that he'd kill our families... a man. I didn't know him. But Anissa knew him" (Robinson, 2019, p. 1). Anissa Weier made a statement in the same article: "We were like, talking on the bus. I look out the window and I see this... thing standing like this, with tendrils— looks exactly like a tree. There and gone like that" (Young, Allie & Dooley, 2019, p. 3). The girls felt that they needed to show the Slender Man that they were worthy and willing to protect their family by killing someone for him. The girls told the police of their six-month plan to kill their friend in the woods and then walk to the mansion to be with Slender Man. The popularity of this trend took over the internet so quickly just like the Momo and Blue Whale, which shows the theory of virality in play.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Communication scholars have studied media for decades. One of the earlier theories that concerned television was the Cultivation theory in the 1960s. In *Introducing Communication*

*Theory (2003)* by Richard West and Lynn H, the authors describe the Cultivation theory, which was a term coined by George Geber in 1969 This theory was created to test the impact of television on viewers, particularly regarding violence. The Cultivation theory argues that the media does not present the world's realities. This theory explains the implications of viewing habits, and it has been a very popular theory in mass communication research.

Regardless of the changes in media and technology, the cultivation theory continues to be prominent today. According to researchers Infante, Rancer and Womack (2003), "We sometimes mistake a real event for a televised one; we probably make the opposite mistake more frequently" (p. 283). The image on the television presents a fantasy of images within men, women, crime, wealth, and violence. Content on television is portrayed in the media with specific values, beliefs, attitudes, personality traits and desires in people, that viewers start to become influenced by. Because of being influenced by the media's values and beliefs, the audience will then begin to reshape their thought processes and behaviors on what they consume. The media has drastically changed since the original research of this theory (Infante, Rancer & Womack, 2003, p. 283). This theory becomes complicated because horror content can now be shown through multiple social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Reddit.

The Cultivation theory has been used to study violence within television and explain how children who watch violent cartoons can become aggressive in real life. One of the criticisms of the Cultivation theory is that "the particular mechanisms that might be responsible for the effect are not well specified or understood" (Sparks & Miller 2001, p. 102). The theory's applications in television are not explained or understood by the researchers, seemingly becoming too vague.

The Cultivation theory could be used to study the Blue Whale, the Slender Man, and the Momo challenges as an anchor to understand if these horror trends on social media can cause participants to become violent themselves. However, while the Cultivation theory explains the way that horror content affects the audience on television, it does not cover the way that horror content, more specifically horror trends, affect an audience on social media.

Using interdisciplinary scholarship, this literature review considers the implications behind these social media horror trends going viral and affecting children all over the world. This paper reviews research on virality, social media, cyber behavior, and paranormal phenomena to develop research that helps parents, teachers, and students with the serious dangers of children participating in these trends and why these fads become so popular despite the consequences. While communication scholars have studied topics on bullying and cyberbullying, few have studied the reasons behind horror trends going viral. By integrating scholarship on virality, cyber behavior, social media, social sharing, parasocial interaction and paranormal phenomena, we as readers can begin to understand the logic of the popularity and virality of the Blue Whale, Momo and Slender Man challenge.

### **Defining Virality**

Interdisciplinary scholars have used the virality and contagion theories to understand the logic of the popularity and virality of the Blue Whale, Momo and Slender Man challenge. Tony D. Sampson (2012), author of *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*, links the terms meme and viral with his research of virality to understand what content spreads on social media. Momo, Slender Man and Blue Whale have been called and fallen under meme culture on social media platforms. There are some requirements to consider for a meme” to become popular.

Sampson (2012) says that “Aa ‘good meme,’ we are told, is in fact simple, provocative and infectious. It will roll off the tongue and stick to the mind so that it is remembered and passed on like a gene” (p.65). Sampson states that marketers have linked the term with “zero cost marketing” when messages via word of mouth or social media go viral.

Sampson (2012) says that virality is no metaphor and that “Virality explores and eludes a prejudiced worldview separating human subjectivity from natural objects and organic and inorganic matter” (p. 4). Since virality is not a metaphor, Sampson says there are two kinds of virality: moral virality, and molecular virality. Sampson (2012) writes, “Moral Virality is, I contend, endemic to new biopolitical strategies of social power, that is, a discursive (and pre-discursive) means of organizing an exerting control” and Molecular Virality is “located in the accidents and spontaneity of desire” (pp. 5-6). These definitions are important for the research to differentiate the various motives when something goes viral. Moral virality would be a person with a higher social status, such as famous YouTubers, or social media influencers, or celebrities, purposefully promoting a product or a company for it to be popular and become viral. An example of this is Mr. Beast who has in total 66.4 million loyal subscribers on YouTube. In 2019, Mr. Beast partnered with a nonprofit organization, Team Trees, posting videos and tweets using #teamtrees to raise over twenty-million dollars to plant twenty-million trees. He used his popularity to act against deforestation. Molecular Virality is when something like a video or a product spontaneously goes viral. An example of molecular virality is the television show *Ridiculousness*. These videos are posted to show t comedic events in everyday lives, and they are created without the intention of being on this television show. People are not allowed to submit videos, so the employees of this show find these videos and post them on their show which makes them popular and spontaneously viral.

The creators of the Blue Whale, Momo and the Slender Man challenges had motives to increase the virality of these challenges, regardless of the violent consequences of participating. When looking at the motives in sharing online content, there are three broad categories that viral trends can fall under: 1) self-serving, 2) social and 3) altruistic motivations (Tellis, et al., 2019, p. 4). When having a motive for sharing content in a self-serving way, an individual will share the content that benefits themselves but does not consider if it would benefit others. When sharing this type of content, the person sharing the content can enhance their social media status by making them look more marketable and knowledgeable in their expertise. Individuals will share the content to gain a community, build friendships and show empathy for others. The individuals will also share this content to show their uniqueness and to learn more information from people with similar interests. Another reason is simply because they enjoy the content with no other categorized motive (Tellis, et al, 2019, p. 4).

The Blue Whale challenge's content creator, Phillip Budeikin, displayed self-serving motives. Budeikin reported that "there are people, and then there is biodegradable waste. I was cleaning our society of such people. Sometimes I start to think that it's wrong, but in the end, I had the feeling I was doing the right thing." In a strange way, Budeikin saw that the way he shared this content was altruistic because he felt that he was doing the world a favor by cleaning people who he considers "biodegradable" (Adeane, 2019, p. 1). Sharing the content from the Momo challenge and the Slender Man challenge can be categorized and seen as sharing for the purposes of social engagement. When sharing these trends, people are becoming a part of an online forum that has a community of people who are curious in morbid topics and who share similar experiences when completing each task. The ways they completed the tasks and a sense of support for those who have progressed further into the challenges are prevalent in these online

forums, which incentivizes new people to participate as it gives them a community. This type of experience that the participants face is unique and participants find commonalities when posting these tasks on social media with people who are depressed, contemplating suicide or want to essentially “beat” the challenges.

## **Social Media**

When applying theories of virality to social media, we can look more in depth to understand why users of social media platforms would share a horror trend with violent and life-threatening consequences. Researchers define social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Ladhair, Massa, Skandrani, 2020, p. 2). Social media includes content online such as social networking, weblogs, social blogs, micro blogging, podcasts, video, pictures, rating, and social bookmarking.

YouTube has become a fundamental way for individuals to share their self-services or products and interact with people of different behaviors. When having a large following on YouTube and on social media, people are called “social media influencers” or “SMIs” (Daniel, Jackson, & Westerman, 2018, p. 99). To gain a following, these SMIs will find a unique niche or follow what is trending: “Social media’s advantages include providing SMIs with the opportunity to post content at their leisure and facilitating responses to comments within seconds of their reply to the video” (p. 99). Viewers feel a bond with their favorite influencers because social media platforms allow for small interactions between them. “Through companionship and PI, PSI can parallel and even supersede social relationships” (Daniel, Jackson, & Westerman, 2018, p. 102). SMIs are also third-party influencers who promote products and places on their

platforms. SMIs will use blogs, tweets, and other social media platforms that will shape the attitudes of their viewers because of them expressing their personal views and beliefs. “SMIs approach very specific needs of their followers and thus become a source of credibility for that specific issue” (Daniel, Jackson, & Westerman, 2018, p. 101).

Youtubers and their relationship with their audience can influence how something goes viral on social media. Homophily is “the degree to which people who interact are similar in beliefs, education, social status and the like. Homophily has been ‘recognized for its ability to increase communication effectiveness’” (Ladhair, Massa, Skandrani, 2020, p. 3). If two people have a lot of similar commonalities, the communication will be stronger between each other. The researchers identified four homophily which include: 1) attitude, 2) background, 3) value-morality, and d) appearance. When viewers have a stronger emotional attachment to a YouTuber, meaning they feel like the YouTuber thinks, feels, and acts the same way, behaves the same way, shares personal values and goals, there is a stronger emotional attachment between the viewers and the YouTubers. “Perceived similarity is vital in creating a meaningful bond between viewers and vloggers” (Ladhair, Massa, Skandrani, 2020, p. 8). When YouTubers glorify, enjoy, and promote these social media trends to their viewers, they are using that emotional attachment to their advantage for viewership. These YouTubers are not realizing the strength of emotional attachment and how sharing these horror trends plays a strong and terrible role on adolescent viewers. YouTubers such as Infinite, Casanova, and SSSniperWolf promoted Momo and tried to participate in these challenges. This publicity showed the audience that their favorite YouTuber SMIs are glorifying these challenges and marketing them as lively entertainment. The SMIs are not talking about the severity of participating in these challenges because they are either

censoring out the strong language and drastically harmful tasks, while only participating in the ones that don't hurt themselves.

Liu, Jayawardhena, Osburg, Yoganathan, Cartwright (2021) discussed the term electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which has changed media consumption patterns. Electronic word of mouth is derived from the term “word of mouth,” and it refers to “any Internet-mediated informal communication about products, services or brands, regardless of the information valence” (p. 208). These researchers found the importance of two elements: motivation and media.

Another concept that relates to virality is social sharing. The idea of social sharing comes from the social comparison theory, which “assumes that individuals constantly confirm their understanding and perceptions with other people, particularly when their emotions have led to confusion or ambiguity.” (Liu, Jayawardhena, Osburg, Yoganathan, Cartwright, 2020, p. 209). With the Blue Whale, Momo, and Slender Man challenges, many of the tasks can lead to confusion and raise anxiety, surprise and or frustration in the participants. This common experience could encourage others to seek each other out to validate their emotions and to confirm they are not alone while participating in the challenges.

As we see in the Blue Whale challenge, the Momo challenge and the Slender Man challenge, participants share strong emotions on social media, such as suicidal thoughts and depression: “More intense emotion could lead to more intense emotion could lead to more frequent sharing of an event and the eliciting of emotion” (Liu, Jayawardhena, Osburg, Yoganathan, Cartwright, 2020, p. 210). An example of this would be the case of participant XY documented in the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*. Participant XY felt depression and reached out

to an administrator of the Blue Whale challenge thinking that this would help him take his own life peacefully (Narayan, Das & Das, Bhandari, 2019).

Studies examined how individuals consider the audience in different ways. Some academic scholarship focuses specifically on characteristics of new content that became termed, news controversiality. Kim and Ihm (2020) investigate how an individual will share controversial content with different audiences and analyze the media environment; “Individuals conceptualize whom their “imagined audience” will be during online communication and present themselves in different ways to match the audience’s expectations and maintain their authenticity” (p. 121). An example of this would be a video that I selected for my analysis titled “Blue Whale Challenge.” The name of the participant of the Blue Whale challenge will remain anonymous since they are a minor. This participant only has close to 200 subscribers and only has a small number of interactions with their subscribers. This participant has an imaginary audience, but acts as though they have a million subscribers. The participant is using typical phrases of a stereotypical YouTuber such as “welcome back to my channel” and “since you guys have been requesting me to do this challenge,” but interactions with her subscribers are slim to none. The comment feature on this video has the comments turned off, which seems to show that she knows the repercussions she will be receiving for participating in this challenge, especially as a minor. The participant presents herself as a stereotypical YouTuber, which I explain more in the analysis portion of this paper.

In the Blue Whale challenge, the creator Phillip Budeikin had an online membership called “F57” in Russia on an online social media platform called VK, which is short for the Russian word VKontakte meaning in contact. On this online membership group, Budeikin found and communicated with his victims. As seen in the case of Davydova and Kuznetsova, pictures

of Daydova and Kuznetsova were drawn and posted in the online group chat and their suicide, and the social media coverage of the suicide, was discussed. Kim and Ihm (2020) found two social media environments and identified them as “closed and symmetrical social media” and (CSS) open asymmetrical social media (OAS).” Closed and symmetrical social media, or CSS “allows communication only among invited users, usually in chat rooms created by one of the users” (p. 122).

### **Cyber Behavior**

With the proliferation of digital and online interaction, behavioral patterns and psychological problems amongst young users of social media platforms and horror trends have changed the way that children interact on social media. Cyberaggression “encompasses intentionally harmful behaviors (e.g., spreading rumors, hacking someone’s accounts, sending degrading messages), which are directed toward others who may believe that these behaviors are offensive, derogatory, and unwanted” (Wright, 2015, p. 654). These behaviors include the non-verbal, face-to-face interactions that occur online. The administrators of these challenges used an extreme form of cyber-aggression when interacting with the participants. Administrators would taunt the participants by weaving themselves into their favorite YouTube, videos and T.V. shows. Cyberbullying and cyber-aggression share similar characteristics as bullying in person. The primary features are “it is an act of aggression; it occurs among individuals among whom there is a power imbalance; and the behavior is often repeated” (Kowalski, Schroder, Giumetti & Lattanner, 2014, p. 35). The nature of cyberbullying is an aggressive action. Traditional bullying takes place in a school setting and ends when the aggressor(s) and victim(s) go home. With cyberbullying, the behavior can be in school and continue into the victims home and personal

lives: “At any time during the day or night, they can create websites, send text messages, or post messages about others on the internet. Additionally, because of the nature of the venues through which cyberbullying occurs, it has much greater potential audience than traditional bullying” (Kowalski, Giumetti & Lattanner, 2014, p. 35).

The Momo, Blue Whale and Slender Man challenge, which take the form of cyberbullying, have haunted these participants twenty-four-hours a day, seven days a week because some of these tasks require the participant to be up at all hours of the night. The cyber-aggression that these participants are experiencing are causing severe psychological problems. Narayan, B. Das, S. Das, Bhandari (2019) stated that patient XY was admitted to the hospital and said that “he was having feelings of ending his life since the result of the last examination, which he failed.” He announced that he was exploring ways online to end his life. XY came across the Blue Whale challenge and happily accepted because he thought that these tasks would help him die peacefully (p. 105). “Ample attention has been given to the psychosocial behavioral consequences, like suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety, and loneliness, associated with cyber aggression involvement” (Wright, 2015, p. 663). Participants are told to call these administrators at 3am, known as the witching hour during school days and on days where the participants did not have enough sleep. This idea relates to cyber-victimization, which “is concurrently linked to lowered academic performance, increased absences, and more instances of truancy.” According to a YouTube video posted on July 12, 2020, by *BayRadio Spain*, a boy named Rocky McLeish was tormented by a Blue Whale challenge administrator with the username, “johnothan.\_267.” This 11-year-old boy was told that the anonymous administrator would kill his mother if he did not complete the tasks. “Cyberbullies and cyber victims only had the highest number of school absences and the lowest grades, while accounting for face-to-face bullying” (Wright, 2015, p.

655). Rocky said that after he was messaged and opened a link that he was sent, the message revealed Rocky's age, school name and phone number. In addition, Rocky was told to wake up at 4am to watch a scary movie on a school night. Now, Rocky is warning other children about the dangers of this challenge. School superintendent, Scott Van from Morrison junior high school in Illinois, is putting out warnings according to Local 4 News WHBF news. Van is warning parents to take this challenge seriously after realizing that it was becoming a popular dare amongst his fifth graders and visibly scaring them.

In the challenges such as the Slender Man, Momo and the Blue Whale challenge, participants are often faced with a task of hurting others and themselves, while posting these tasks on their social media platforms. When the challenge escalates, the participant would post the act of suicide on online, and this act can be defined as cybersuicide. Cybersuicide "is developed to encompass pro-suicide websites and forums, shock websites that contain graphic suicide-related images and footage of past suicides, suicide pacts, suicide 'diaries' or notes, livestreaming of suicides, and suicide 'games' and 'challenges'" (Fratini & Hemer 2020, p. 527). Regardless of whether the suicide was successful or not, these challenges are streamed for an audience. Researchers studying cybersuicide draw upon the dramaturgical concept frameworks of Goffman (1956) and Schieffelin (1996) to provide an analysis of cybersuicide" (p. 528). This paper and the definition of "cybersuicide" helps answer my research question because it provides a definition for the last task in the Blue Whale challenge: to post a video of themselves committing suicide. This research and the definition of cybersuicide can allow us to understand and prevent this from happening to other victims.

Mueller (2017) states that clusters of suicide live-streaming or broadcasting are more likely to happen in social settings such as schools. She states, "a good reason to suspect that

peer-role modeling or shared environmental risk factors may contribute independently to adolescent suicide clusters” (p. 153). Mueller identifies two ways that the media draws on stereotypes and tropes when crafting stories. The first way that Mueller states that the media draws on stereotypes and tropes when crafting a story relating to suicide is that a story will draw on pre-existing beliefs and motives of suicide. In addition, studies have shown that peer modeling will also play a big role in “cybersuicide.” Peer modeling can be shown through the social media influencers, or SMIs, such as the YouTubers Shane Dawson and William Salhani, whose videos have discussed these challenges to their thousands of subscribers.

Secondly, the media does not cover the events equally, but rather they will pick and choose what is considered something that would be newsworthy and popular. According to official guidelines, YouTube states, “Though we are determined to continue reducing exposure to videos that violate our policies and have tasked over 10,000 people with detecting, reviewing, and removing content that violates our guidelines, the YouTube community also plays an important role in flagging content they think inappropriate” (YouTube, 2021). If YouTube is using humans to flag content, there will be human error. YouTube states that once a video is put up online and flagged, it won’t be taken down right away, but it will go to the “YouTube Trusted Flagger program,” which is another group of humans flagging content. Humans have a bias and can flag content based on what they feel is inappropriate and against the guidelines, which is where the media picks and chooses what is newsworthy and popular on YouTube.

### **Paranormal Phenomena**

Scholarship on paranormal phenomena and morbid curiosity may also help explain why young users are interested in these challenges and why they become popular. The origins of the

Blue Whale, Slender Man and Momo Challenge originated from a paranormal phenomenon surfacing on the internet and traumatizing people all over the world. Sparks and Miller (2001) refer to the paranormal as “a belief in one or more extraordinary phenomena that defy explanation according to current scientific understanding of natural law” (p. 218). Cristoffer Tidelius (2020) discusses paranormal phenomena as “those supposedly due to powers of the mind that go beyond the normal, such as extra-sensory perception, or perception by means independent of the normal use of the sense, telepathy, psychokinesis, precognition or powers of prophecy, and survival of bodily death” (p. 223). Paranormal phenomena are seen outside of societal boundaries of conventional or normal science. The Momo and Slender Man characters were a paranormal creature that Sparks and Miller investigate. The paranormal is “a belief in one or more extraordinary phenomena that defy explanation according to current scientific understanding of natural law” (Sparks and Miller, 2001, p. 223).

Parasocial phenomena “describes a one-sided mediated form of social interaction between the audience and media characters” (Liebers & Schramm, 2019, p. 3). These authors divided the study of parasocial phenomena into five categories: “film and television”, “radio and music”, “print media”, “new media”, and “intermedia” (p. 3). The Slender Man, Momo and Blue Whale would be classified under “new media”, which contains studies in contexts of video games, computer games and social media (p. 4). These challenges have gone through all forms of “new media, and therefore, would not be considered “intermedia” interactions because these characters are fictional and do not have a social media presence. These characters use social media platforms to find their participants, but they did not have a social media platform for participants to join and follow. These challenges did have online forums and websites for participants to discuss when they completed tasks, what tasks they were doing, and if the tasks

were completed. Liebers and Schramm said, “Only a few fictional media characters have intermedia parasocial contact with their audience. With most of the fictional characters the contact occurs only in one medium” (Liebers & Schramm, 2019, p. 4).

The parasocial interaction is face-to-face interactions but lacks mutuality between two individuals “while real social interactions feature bidirectional communication” (Liebers & Schramm, 2019, p. 3). For example, when a character on your favorite television show dies, or leaves the show, that would be considered a “parasocial breakup.” In the case of the Momo, Slender Man and Blue Whale, the participants have a parasocial interaction with their administrators of these challenges. These are one-sided relationships from the participants with the administrators because the participants are putting in their full energy, time, and fear into pleasing these administrators by completing these tasks in order for them and their family to not get haunted. Furthermore, “PSI and PSR not only contribute to a better understanding of media content but can also change the attitude of media users and intensify their cognitive and emotional engagement with the content and message conveyed by the media entity” (Liebers & Schramm, 2019, p. 2).

Morbid curiosity plays a prominent role in the virality of horror trends on social media. Curiosity is a part of human nature and ranges from adolescence to adulthood. According to researcher Suzanne Oosterwijk, morbid curiosity is used to specify curiosity of information involving death, violence, or harm, but is it not unhealthy or an abnormal curiosity.

Furthermore, Noordewier and Dijk state that curiosity is shown in an individual when they realize there is a gap in information given to them. Curiosity is driven by two different reasons: the individuals might feel the need to reduce the uncertainty of not completely knowing something, or the need to learn something new and to expand their knowledge. When “curiosity

is specifically directed towards the goal of closing the information gap and will cease when the specific information required to close the gap is obtained” (Donnellan, Aslan, Fastrich, Murayama, 2020, p. 3). The Momo, Slender Man and Blue Whale challenge all encompass a morbid background of participating tasks. People are acting on their feeling of curiosity when coming across this type of content on their social media platforms.

Researcher Coltan Scrivner says that if you are learning about the dangerous and disgusting factors of morbid curiosity, children can avoid the negative outcomes that are related. Scrivner believes that too much avoidance of dangerous or disgusting factors associated specifically with death in the media can lead to ignorance about how to handle real life situations both physically and emotionally. This concept relates to children because at a young age, the media shows violent content in movies that are aimed for children, like superhero movies, cartoons and even Disney movies. Unfortunately, Momo, Slender Man and The Blue Whale challenge recruit young participants who do not understand the real-life consequences of participating in these social media challenges because they are desensitized to violence from watching television.

Movies such as *Saw* show an anonymous masked killer behind a television screen playing an administrator role and demanding the victims to participate in challenges that harm themselves and others. This idea is shown in the challenges when the administrator either has a face like Momo or Slender Man or does not have a face that is attached to the challenge, like The Blue Whale challenge, which is based on an actual act of a Blue Whale. If participants were learning from this type of movie, they would learn that these “challenges” could never lead to anything good, and that they should avoid it at all costs.

Noordewier and Dijk (2020) say that although curiosity about positive outcomes in scenarios makes individuals happy and excited, negative outcomes might not always make an individual feel guilty or bad. This process can be defined as “transmissional perspective” (p. 4). Transmissional perspective sees media as senders of message-discrete bits of information across space. If all the media transmits information, we as the viewers can choose whether we want to use that information. Famous participants of the Slender Man challenge, Anissa Weier and Morgan Geyser, were sent to a mental institution for more than twenty years when they were found not guilty by mental disease. The perpetrators admitted to not feeling guilty for stabbing their friend, but they were fear-ridden that this fictional character was going to kill them and their family.

Floresco suggests that reward circuitry engagement within the brain is highly activated when actions or decisions are ambiguous or unclear (Floresco, 2015). It is believed that the reward circuitry is activated when watching morbid topics and negative images in horror films and media. Researchers Oosterwijk, Snoek, Tekoppele, Englebet and Scholte (2020) state that morbid curiosity is expressed by a choice to view negative information and topics, while engaging in similar neural regions as regular curiosity, “In this sense, choosing negativity (or morbid curiosity) is a conflict state; people want information, without predicting that they will like the information” (p. 4). With these challenges, individuals are feeding into their morbid curiosity to feel a sense of community with other individuals participating in these challenges.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

In this paper, the focus is solely on researching the Blue Whale challenge rather than all three of these challenges. The Slender Man and Momo challenge are mentioned to show how the

challenges became more violent. The challenges started off with Momo and Slender Man characters themselves threatening the participants by saying they will haunt them or abduct them and kill them in the early 2000s. The Blue Whale challenge showed up on the internet in 2016 after Momo was debunked that this character was not going to haunt children. This challenge came to the internet with the purpose of having someone commit suicide.

This study uses a case study approach to examine the 2016 Blue Whale challenge through three responses by social media influencers. This research explores a rich source of data to examine this phenomenon and its lasting effects (Stake, 1998; Stake, 2000; Yin, 2003). The intent of this study is not to generalize these findings, but to better understand and then suggest areas that may need further exploration. Stake (1998) defines the case study methodology implemented in this research as an instrumental case study, which is when “a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (p. 137). The instrumental case study requires investigating the Blue Whale challenge and annotating the “ordinary activities detailed” (Stake, 1998, p. 137). As previously stated, my research questions included:

1. Why did these horror trends, despite the intended consequences for participating, go viral on social media?
2. How are these social media influencers responsible for these challenges going viral on social media?
3. How should parents, teachers and kids become aware of these challenges on social media and what should they do to avoid them?

This paper analyzes three YouTube videos about the Blue Whale challenge with an anonymous YouTuber, Shane Dawson, and William Salhani. Because they are social media

influencers, and YouTuber X is an aspiring social media influencer, it is important for my research to analyze these three different people and the three different ways they are covering the Blue Whale challenge. When initially searching for Blue Whale challenge videos on YouTube, the types of videos were news coverage videos. The media coverage would not work because my focus was to look at how these videos were promoting these challenges for views and likes on their channel. The first video is Shane Dawson's video titled, "Scariest Internet Challenges SCARIEST INTERNET CHALLENGES." This video not only covers the Blue Whale challenge, but other challenges as well. This video has 8,952,654 views and was posted on May 15, 2017 amid the challenge's highest popularity. This video is chosen because Shane Dawson is a popular YouTuber with over 20 million subscribers and a loyal fan base across multiple social media platforms.

The next video that was chosen was a video called, "Blue Whale Challenge!!!" was posted in June of 2017. The name of this YouTuber will not be mentioned because of their age. This paper will refer to this YouTuber as X for anonymity. This video was chosen because X has a small number of subscribers (186), especially in comparison to Shane Dawson. It was beneficial to look at the comparison between how these two YouTubers promote the challenge; Shane promotes the challenge in an informative way, but also in a teasing and challenging the audience type of manner.

The last video analyzed is a William Salhani video titled, "I was messaged by Johnathan Galindo....(the Blue Whale Challenge is back)." This video was posted on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and was filmed in Salhani's bedroom. Jonathan Galindo is called the "Cursed Goofy" because he is a man in a dog mask who launched a new wave of tasks for the Blue Whale challenge. This YouTuber has 10,500 subscribers, mid-way between the number of subscribers Shane Dawson

and X YouTuber. Shane Dawson and William Salhani are considered social media influencers or SMIs because of their high number of subscribers and the “influence” that they have on their audience.

These videos are chosen because of the different approaches these YouTubers take to address this challenge. It is important to look at different perspectives on these challenges to demonstrate common themes among different representations of these challenges. Shane Dawson is taking a more formal and informative approach to this challenge by sharing knowledge about this challenge, and other horror challenges, that surfaced on the internet. William Salhani took a narrative approach by saying he was a victim to this game because he was approached by an administrator. Salhani continued this challenge in a series, walking his audience through his experience with the challenge by showing his messages and the tasks the administrator gave him. The last video chosen for the purposes of this research is from an anonymous YouTuber who participated in the challenge for the sole purpose of gaining views.

The theories of virality, social media and cyber behavior are applied to analyze why these videos are created and become popular. Each person’s description of their video is looked at to see what social media platform each YouTuber promoted this video on. On Shane Dawson’s wall, he promoted other “creepy” videos with a link to playlists on his YouTube channel. William Salhani and the anonymous YouTuber did not promote any social media platforms or other videos in their description. It’s interesting to note that the largest YouTuber was the only person to promote other social media platforms and other “creepy” videos in his video description, but the smallest YouTubers do not. To gain more of a following, an SMI feels the need to promote their social media platforms, but the two lesser-known YouTubers did not.

## Procedure

Figure 6: Findings

|                      | <b>Time Stamp</b> | <b>Description</b>  | <b>Keywords/moods</b>   | <b>Audio</b>  |
|----------------------|-------------------|---|---|---|
| <b>Participant X</b> | 0:24              | “This is one of my highly requested videos. So those that wanted me to do this challenge, here it is.”  | Pressure.   | No music being played. The normal life is continuing to go on as they play a dangerous and violent game. Doorbells going off, people talking in the background. |
|                      | 1:18              | “You have to carve f57 in your hand. I’m not really gonna do that.”   | Morbid.   |   |
|                      | 4:57              | “Number 10 says go to the roof, jump off and take your life.”   | Morbid. Facial expression of fear and shock to accompany them saying this.  |   |
| <b>Shane Dawson</b>  | 3:21              | “And you can screenshot it if you want and read it out loud, if you dare.”  | Pressure, Morbid and Fear. Although this isn’t about the Blue Whale challenge, he is still saying this about a dangerous and scary challenge. | Audio playing is a humming noise accompanied by scary music. This sound goes even through the audio of other videos.  |
|                      | 6:56              | “The game is made up of 50 challenges that are given to you by your game master. Every day is a new challenge. They can be very easy from watching horror movies to self-mutilation.” | Fear, morbid  |   |
|                      | 7:05              | “The last challenge is always the same suicide. Now if the game player tries to get out of the game, the game master threatens them to release all of your personal information...”   | Fear, pressure  |   |

|                        |      |  |  |   |
|------------------------|------|--|--|---|
|                        | 7:20 | Compares the Blue Whale challenge to the movie Nerve. Talking about how this movie pressured the characters into doing harmful things  | Fear   |   |
|                        | 7:38 | “Thank god it was just a movie. It’s not...”   | Fear   |   |
|                        | 8:13 | “Literally proof that this game is real”   | Fear   |   |
| <b>William Salhani</b> | 1:01 | “So quickly, if you are ever needing help or ever feel like you are going to commit suicide or on depression, please call this number that is on the screen...”  | Morbid. Number is on the bottom right corner on the screen. Only stays up for about 24 seconds before it disappears and does not show up again. William mentions going back to this number in the end of the video to remind viewers but doesn’t put it back up on the screen. | Initial thud of a scary sound to open the video. A deep humming celestial sound being played loudly in the background. Giving a very dark and creepy tone. Very different compared to his visual background of the video, which is very innocent, sweet and pure. |
|                        | 1:27 | Shows Instagram and how it’s private and that there is no information that can be taken from his profile even though he was contacted through Instagram. Providing context to how the administrator got his number, name and address and other personal information. | Pressure, fear   |   |
|                        | 2:26 | “I will not be putting all the screenshots because there is some swearing in this. I’m just saying, and my channel is PG.”   | Fear. Stating that these messages were even too intense to show on camera, and that it contradicts his channel’s motives. Interesting to see how he says that but then is also covering a very violent and mature content with this challenge.                                 |   |

When watching the videos, I looked for how recording, visual, and auditory aspects of each one supported the promotion and the informative coverage of the Blue Whale challenge. The type of music (if any) that is being played was looked at, the type of background each YouTuber is sitting in front of, what they are wearing, and identifying if there are any common words that paralleled across the videos.

I watched each video 10 times. The anonymous participant had a video of six minutes and seven seconds long. William Salhani's video is 15 minutes and 20 seconds long; To compare, Shane Dawson's video is 11 minutes and 12 seconds long. The first time, the full video is watched solely for entertainment purposes. The second time, the videos were watched with focus on the music and the background, which included items like wall color, pictures, plants, chairs, pillows, and clothes. Anything else the YouTubers had in the frame to set the tone of the video was noted. An example of this would be in Shane Dawson's video where he had a pillow of a scary mask with it being filled with what looks like blood. After comparing his other creepy challenge videos to his other more lighthearted videos, this pillow only appears in his videos relating to anything horror or creepy.

The third time closed captions on each video were turned on. Closed captions were used to make sure nothing the YouTubers said was missed. The similarities that were identified were categorized as pressure, morbid and fear. The video was paused for words such as "dare", "requested", "good luck", "do not watch", "danger" or "scared" which fell under the category of pressure and fear. An example of this would be when Shane challenged his viewers, which is spoken about early in this analysis. Shane is aware of the pressure that these participants face when acting on these tasks, yet Shane will take part in pressuring his viewers to participate in these challenges. William Salhani discussed the pressure the administrator Johnathan Galindo

put on him to act on these tasks; this pressure included constantly messaging him and threatening to go to his house after finding his address and his parent's name. The anonymous YouTuber discusses the pressure felt because of the number of requests they were receiving to participate in this challenge, so they felt they needed to make a video participating in a safe way, which involved taking out the physically harmful tasks and substituting them with drawing on herself. With the pressure comes fear. The YouTubers discuss victims or themselves as being fearful if they do not participate.

The last similarity identified with these three videos fell under the theme of morbidity because the YouTubers were discussing a challenge that had the end goal of committing suicide. Words relating to morbid, such as "cutting", "suicide" or "death" were paused on and written down. The requirement of these tasks is to take pictures or videos acting on these tasks and send them to the administrator, who will then post them on social media platforms.

The fourth time, the video was watched combining the findings of the words used with body language, gestures or visuals that accompanied these words before, after or while these words are said. An example of this would be when Shane Dawson does his signature opener when he does sit down talking videos. Shane says "Hey, what's up you guys." In a few videos he will say, "Welcome back to another video." During his opener covering the scariest challenges on the internet, Shane says, "Hey, what's up you guys. Yes. Welcome back to another creepy video." During the word creepy, which would fall under the category of paranormal, Shane moves his fingers in front of the camera in a 'creepy' motion of tapping each of his fingers together quickly. His eyes widened to emphasize the word creepy.

The last time this video was watched, the analysis ensured no details were missed. This time, the closed captions were left on. The first video I watched was the anonymous video from

an actual participant of this challenge, then Shane Dawson's video, and last was William Salhani's video. I watched the videos in this order five times each for two rounds. I watched the video ten times in total because this allowed me to do an in-depth analysis of these videos and not leaving room to miss anything.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis**

### **YouTube**

“The following content has been identified by the YouTube community as inappropriate or offensive to some audiences. Viewer discretion is advised. I understand and wish to proceed.” These are the first words you see before you watch a video of the “Blue Whale Challenge”.

YouTube has video warnings in place to follow the YouTube guidelines in order to protect their viewers, yet this type of suicide content is being posted online. YouTube community guidelines state, “We take the mental health and well-being of all our creators and viewers seriously.

Awareness and understanding of mental health are important and we support creators sharing their stories, such as posting content discussing their experiences with depression, self-harm, or other mental health issue. We do not, however, allow content on YouTube that promotes suicide, self-harm, or is intended to shock or disgust users” (YouTube community guidelines, see Suicide & Self-injury policy). Although I have done research on the other challenges, such as Momo and Slender Man, my textual analysis will be focusing on the Blue Whale challenge. My interest in this challenge comes from the fact that participants need to seek out this challenge for themselves by using the #i\_am\_a\_blue\_whale, or #bluewhale to signal an administrator to give them the tasks for the Blue Whale. In comparison, the Slender Man and Momo characters seek out participants in children's regular television shows and YouTube videos.

It is interesting looking at the videos that cover the content of the Blue Whale challenge. Creators are playing ominous and creepy music in the background, which is similar to a horror movie or a haunted house to make the content of the video scarier. This analysis looks at three videos from three different creators. The first video that was examined is a small-scale video titled, e “Blue Whale Challenge!!” To keep the minor’s identity intact, the video refers to them by the name, X. The next video that is analyzed is the big YouTuber Shane Dawson, and the video title is “Scariest Internet Challenges.”

Lastly, the YouTuber, William Salhani, is analyzed and considered for this paper as a medium YouTuber. This paper will be analyzing the first video in his Blue Whale Challenge series titled, “I was messaged by Johnathan Galindo... (he Blue Whale challenge is back).” The first YouTuber is considered a small YouTuber because they have 186 subscribers. Shane Dawson is considered a big YouTuber because he has 20.3 million subscribers, and William Salhani is considered a medium YouTuber because he has 10.5 thousand subscribers. These three YouTubers are chosen because they all have different ways of promoting the Blue Whale challenge on YouTube. The parasocial phenomenon of this YouTube category falls under “intermedia” and “new media” categories because of the challenge’s platform.. The parasocial phenomenon starts off with “new media” because it falls under the context of video games, computer games (Slender Man is a video game), and social media. It then falls under the “intermedia” interactions because the characters Slender Man, Momo and Blue Whale do not have social media accounts like a Facebook or a Twitter or a Tik Tok.

### **Blue Whale Challenge Participant**

The first video that is analyzed is a video of a child around the age of eight-years-old (we will not mention their name for safety) doing the tasks that make up the Blue Whale Challenge.

This essay will refer to this child as participant “X.” The video is six minutes and seven seconds long. Tasks in this challenge must be completed over the course of ten days because the anonymous administrator sends participants these challenges through social media. My initial thought was that X was going to be cutting a few of the videos of the tasks into a six-minute video. This participant decided to do the challenges at once. X is sitting in a room, seemingly a bedroom, where here’s low lighting. Their face is being lit by the computer screen and their shirt reads, “Be awesome today.” Their logo flashes in front of the screen with a red heart and a fireball goes around the heart, showing their name flashing. A big smile is across their face. The sense of normalcy confuses me, considering this challenge is not normal. This normality is even more horrifying when understanding the data: “This challenge has led to 1,200 deaths,” participant X states. X also recalls that they got their information from YouTube videos. Furthermore, this challenge was the most requested challenge from all of X’s 188 subscribers. Although X only has 188 followers, X is acting like the stereotypical YouTuber with a thousand if not millions of subscribers. X is saying things like “Hello everyone, welcome back to my channel,” a popular saying that most YouTubers with millions of subscribers have. X is also saying things such as “since all of you guys requested me to do this challenge.” X’s reasoning for posting this video falls under the broad category of social motivation (Tellis, et al, 2019, p. 4). The motives are defined as molecular virality which is “located in the accidents and spontaneity of desire” (Sampson, 2012, pp. 5-6). Although X has been requested to participate in this challenge, there is a sense of spontaneity with participating in this challenge.

Participant X acknowledges the fact that these challenges are supposed to be covered throughout a ten-day period but that participant X “does not have time for that.” The noises in

the background of the doorbell ringing dramatically and the people in the house talking loudly display ignorance to the fact that X is participating in a dangerous challenge.

Participant X holds up a semi crumpled piece of paper and writes the tasks in red ink. Only 10 tasks were written, but when researching, there is a complete list posted on the Education Care website, which is composed of fifty tasks (refer to *Figure 6* on page eight and nine for more information). Participant X reads over the first challenge and decides to do the tasks by writing “f57” on her hand but with the modification of using a brown marker instead of a razor. This is important to note that this mentality of modifying the tasks to make it less dangerous. Participant X realizes that they are participating in harmful, life-threatening tasks, but they do not actually have a desire to self-harm. After reading the task, the participant makes a face of shock or disgust after reading one of the violent tasks. They also say, “yeah, no” or “nope” and then modify the challenge. The video gives off a very casual tone but also a forced sense of having to participate to be relevant. X states, “For those of you who wanted me to do the challenge, here it is now” right in the beginning of the video. Through this statement, they are showing that they feel a sense of obligation to do this video because it is highly requested. . After they say this, they reach for the corner of their eye and rub it, which gives off a stressed and forced expression. The subscribers who requested X to participate in the tasks are tapping into their morbid curiosity to watch someone participate in these tasks. Since the administrator is anonymous, this falls under what would be considered a paranormal phenomenon, which is defined by Sparks and Miller (2001) as “a belief in one or more extraordinary phenomena that defy explanation according to current scientific understanding of natural law” (p. 218). Participants are unaware of the administrator’s identity. It could be just a regular person behind the screen, or according to some children participants it could be the Slender Man or Momo

creature. Although the challenge is called Blue Whale there is no face to this challenge like the Momo character or the Slender Man character. The administrators are not sending out pictures of a Blue Whale or haunting them with a demon whale. The term comes from when a whale is beached at the shore in what seems to biologists as an act of suicide.

*Figure 7*

| <b>Participant X Visual Observations</b><br>Time: 6:07  |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shirt that says, “Be awesome today.”</li> <li>● Pink and grey shirt (light and innocent colors)</li> <li>● Logo with red heart and fire ball with name</li> <li>● Low lighting</li> <li>● Doorbell ringing erratically</li> <li>● People in the house talking loudly</li> <li>● Crumpled up piece of paper with red ink</li> <li>● Brown marker to substitute cutting her arm</li> </ul> |

### **Shane Dawson**

On May 15, 2017, the popular YouTuber Shane Dawson posted a video with 8,945,625 views titled, “Scariest Internet Challenges” on his most popular channel with 20.3 million subscribers. As previously stated, when having a following on social media, researchers call this person a Social Media Influencer, or SMI. Shane is sitting on a brown sofa with a red shirt on, which can represent blood. In the background on the left side of him is a black pillow with the words scream at the top, and a mask filled with red blood. In the right corner on the end table is a

dark silver skull. After watching his other creepy challenge videos, I realized that these pieces only show up during his scary challenge videos.

Shane opens saying, “Hey, what’s up you guys. Yes. And welcome back to another creepy video” tilting his head up and making a “creepy” hand gesture. His eyebrows are furrowed downwards, and his blue eyes are squinted slightly to show the emotion of concern and seriousness. Shane goes on to give a warning about the content of this video; he states that this video has intense content that includes self-harm and teen suicide, known as Cybersuicide, which is “developed to encompass pro-suicide websites and forums, shock websites that contain graphic suicide-related images and footage of past suicides, suicide pacts, suicide ‘diaries’ or notes, livestreaming of suicides, and suicide ‘games’ and ‘challenges.” (Frantini & Hemer 2020, p. 528). This video does not just contain information on the Blue Whale Challenge. Shane covers choking games and challenges such as The Tamino Challenge, The Hitori Kakurenbo challenge and The Cinnamon Challenge. Shane admitted to participating in The Cinnamon Challenge and flashing a clip of him when he participated on the screen. This is what Ladhair, Massa and Skandrani state as “Perceived similarity is vital in creating a meaningful bond between viewers and vloggers” (p. 529).

During one of these horror games that Shane covers, he discusses how the participant needs to read a poem out loud to complete the challenge; once they are finished reading the poem, misfortune will happen to them. Shane states, “Now that was obviously a small part of the poem. I am going to flash the poem up on the screen, and you can freeze it and screenshot it if you want and read it out loud. If you dare. Good Luck.” This type of taunting is seen as a form of cyber-aggression, which is defined as “intentionally harmful behaviors (e.g., spreading rumors, hacking someone’s accounts, degrading messages), which are directed toward others who may believe

that these behaviors are offensive, derogatory, and unwanted” (Wright, 2015, p. 1). Shane is aware of the 20.4 million subscribers; he is aware of the age demographic of his subscribers ranging from children to teens and adults, and yet there is an age content warning that is required to be before his video.

As Shane goes through the challenge’s tasks, a visual of the task shows up on the screen. A video of a girl in the dark getting out of a car is shown to represent “watching a horror movie” and a clock with the time 4:20 flashes on the screen when the participant is supposed to wake up and watch the horror movie. A vinyl track with a black and white swirl flashes on the screen to give a visual aid to the task “listening to music that ‘they’ provide for you.” Lastly, and the most impactful visual, is an image of a sharp knife. The red background looks blotchy, like blood. Both sides of the knife seem sharpened, and Shane says, “and make one cut on your body everyday”, with the camera zooming slightly into the knife. As a SMI, Shane is normalizing this act and although his technical message is to inform and “warn” his viewers, Shane still promotes this dangerous content when he makes these videos. Shane will also put the tasks on the screen, allowing for his viewers to get easy access to these challenges.

Afterwards, Shane makes a statement about the type of children who are participating in this challenge saying, “The craziest part of all of this is that a lot of kids who play the Blue Whale game come from normal childhoods and normal homes, and they don’t seem like the type to play a game like this.” It’s interesting to note that Shane is putting a ‘mentally-distressed’ stereotype on a child participating in this challenge. The first video analyzed is a child participating in this challenge for entertainment and for views. Nowhere did this child show that they were doing this challenge to harm themselves or because they were upset with their life. X

clearly states that they were doing this challenge because of their subscriber's requests. This goes to show that not every participant is the way that Shane Dawson described.

*Figure 8*

| <b>Shane Dawson Visual Observations</b><br>Time: 11:12   |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pillow with mask saying scream, filled with blood</li> <li>● Red shirt (dark, blood like color)</li> <li>● Brown sofa</li> <li>● Skull in the right corner of the screen on end table</li> <li>● Knife visual to accompany the words "cutting themselves."</li> </ul> |

### **William Salhani**

William Salhani, a YouTuber with 10.2 thousand subscribers, sat in front of the camera to say, "Today I am talking about more of a serious topic. Even if it's not for you, I advise that you do watch from start to finish of this video because it is important for your safety and all of kids safety around the world right now." In comparison to the Shane Dawson video, Salhani uses a more of a narrative tone rather than informative. His thumbnail on his video is a picture of a dog-face creature Johnathan Galindo and a screenshot, which is assumed to be a screenshot Johnathan Galindo messaging him. The picture is too small to see, which is important to note because it forces the viewers to watch the video for at least four minutes to see the screenshots of the messages. The thumbnail also has William posing dramatically in front of the camera with a dramatically sad look on his face. In this video, the Blue Whale challenge has an actual character attached to the dare, which is Johnathan Galindo, the dog face administrator. Johnathan Galindo was not in the first wave of the Blue Whale challenge as the videos about this man first posted a year ago in 2020, and the first wave of this challenge had only an anonymous administrator.

William posted a full series of this challenge as a playlist titled, “Blue Whale Challenge Series.” This full series is elevating the challenge further and going into different aspects of the challenge and how it is administered by Galindo. The first video is just explaining that Johnathan Galindo messaged him, then it goes into Galindo pressuring William in the next video of him messaging him again about the challenge. The third video in the series showcases Galindo giving William a USB of the tasks. In this video, Johnathan has supposedly entered William’s house, and William is acting scared. The final video is titled, “William Salhani is in danger.... (help).”

For the purpose of this paper, the first video of the series, “I was messaged by Johnathan Galindo... (the blue whale challenge is back),” is being analyzed. This video is chosen because it is the first video of the collection that sets the tone of how he approaches this challenge and this series. We can see William in the video sitting in front of a white wall with what looks like a cloud print on the walls. Two pictures of lambs are in the frame on the right side of him, and a green plant on the left side behind him. White represents innocence and purity, so the cloud-like print and the sweet lambs are showing a calming and sweet environment, which is completely different from the topic of the video. William wears a light pink shirt, in comparison to Shane Dawson who was wearing a dark red colored shirt, which could represent blood. Shane also had a darker setting for his background, which included a pillow of a scary scream-mask filled with red blood prominent in the background. Shane was purposefully setting the tone that the video is going to be scary. The tone of this video with William Salhani is ominous and daunting, yet the background of his video symbolizes purity, innocence, and safety. William takes the time to read through the fifty tasks of the challenges and makes sure to include a comment about the most violent ones: “cut a shape of a whale in your arm” or “jump off a bridge to commit suicide.”

William then goes on to say that this administrator Johnathan Galindo recite his address with his exact street name, and then named William's father's name and sent him a screenshot of his address. As William is denying that this was his address and his father, Galindo acts in a form of cyberbullying by telling William, "I'm not stupid, play the game, I have your IP address I can boot you offline." Galindo pressures William to participate in this challenge and mocks him if he doesn't comply. William argues with Galindo in the messages, which uncovers more of the theatrics and dramatization of these messages and William being stressed out about this interaction. William fights back by saying, "if you're supposed to be scarring me I'm not 6" to Galindo. William then shows that Galindo found his address through a screenshot of a map with his address blurred out.

This aspect of the challenge, which involves the administrator finding the participant's address, was spread through the electronic word of mouth (eWOM). This is defined as "any internet-mediated informal communication about products, services or brands, regardless of the information valence" (Liu, Jayawardhena, Osburg, Yoganathan, Cartwright, 2020, p. 208). This part of the challenge is not included on the tasks list or told online through the tweets when finding an administrator. The Blue Whale challenge has also been spread through eWOM. The tasks of this challenge are not asking the participants to interact with anyone other than the 'whales' as the game calls other participants. Logically, if participants are only interacting with themselves and with other 'whale' participants, the challenge should not have become so viral and taken over social media. Electronic word of mouth became the way for this challenge to become viral. The participants of this challenge who do not complete the challenge have a sense of comradery and share their experiences with completing some of these tasks. They also relay the pain and struggles of being a participant, which is where the electronic word of mouth comes

into play. William states in his video that he searched the Blue Whale challenge Instagram page, which is where he found an account that specifically talks about the challenge. The video ends with William saying that he plans to not message back to Galindo, and that he is going to delete the chat and conversation.

William makes it known that he will not be cursing in his videos. YouTubers censor their curse words when they want to be known as family-friendly and age-appropriate for a younger audience. In doing this, William is contradicting his channel because he is covering content of this challenge through a series of videos, while fully knowing that the content of the video is not family friendly and age appropriate for a younger audience since the end goal of this challenge is to commit suicide.

*Figure 9*

| <b>William Salhani Video observations</b><br>Time: 15:20   |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● White wall with cloud like print</li> <li>● Two pictures of lambs in frame</li> <li>● Green plant on the left side behind him</li> <li>● Light pink shirt (sweet, happy, and pure color)</li> </ul> |

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion & Implications**

### **Implications**

This study can be used to look at new challenges that will surface on the internet. My interdisciplinary approach is valuable to understand the different aspects that come into play with these viral challenges. Where research has been done on these challenges, the gap in scholarship is since communication scholars have not used other interdisciplinary research such as

parapsychology, psychology, sociology, and media studies to understand the communication aspect of these challenges going viral.

This paper focuses on the Blue Whale challenge to understand the severity of this challenge. This research was conducted to understand the aspects of these horror trends and how these challenges go viral. According to Swist et. al, “Children and young people build large and diverse online networks across platforms, comprising friends and family, as well as friends of friends and people they have only met online” (p. 17). Children of all ages experience cyberbullying. Research in the United Kingdom suggested that 15% of 9- to 16-year-olds have been disturbed by online content, with 28% of 11- to 16-year-olds reporting having specifically experienced an upsetting experience on social media” (O’Reilly, et. al., 2018, p. 602).

As an elementary and middle school teacher, I have first-hand experience with these challenges affecting my students. I have seen children come to me clearly terrified from the Momo creature who supposedly haunted them at night, or someone texting them from a random number saying they were going to hurt them if they did not hurt themselves first. Some of my students have had to go to counseling to talk to someone to get them through being attacked by these creatures and people online. I hope that teachers can use this research to help them understand and empathize with what their students are going through. Empathy from teachers can help a student open up to them and express their concerns. It is important for these challenges to be brought to the forefront and not ignored. If this challenge is being talked about, teachers and administrators can see the physical signs of a child going through these challenges. Some of these physical signs can include cuts on a child’s arm, being more tired than normal, fear of being on their phone and consistent and obsessive use of social media sites. This research can be used to help bridge the gap with the knowledge of horror trends on social media. This

could be used to understand and to stop when another challenge like the Blue Whale, Momo and Slender Man goes viral again.

Parents can use this research to become more aware of the dangers of social media. Parents should realize and monitor their children on their social media websites. According to Caitlin Abar et. al, “Approximately 71% of youth aged 13- to 17-years-old use Facebook, 52% use Instagram, 41% use Snapchat, and 33% use Twitter. More than 70% of teenagers use more than one social media platform, while 83% of internet-using parents are engaged in at least one social media platform” (p. 335).” With 71% of teenagers using different social media platforms, parents are only engaged in one social media platform; it should be a higher number. There are social media platforms now such as Tik Tok, WhatsApp (a text app, how Momo interacted with their victims) and even YouTube. Parents need to be aware of all the apps their child is using to ensure they are not watching and interacting with content that is not appropriate for their age. These challenges show that social media is significant, and children cannot handle these platforms alone and navigate what is safe and what is harmful to them.

This research now highlights terminology for the interactions between the administrators of the challenges, the victims, and the social media influencers because of the complexities of this circumstance. Gathering some elements of the terminology of this phenomenon of other researchers can use this terminology to help with their research on this phenomenon and provide other insight into understanding the virality of these challenges. For this research, I intend to help reach YouTubers and social media influencers to help them understand the severity of covering these challenges in a dramatic, entertaining, or facetious manner just to gain more subscribers. I also intend for this research to reach management in corporate social media to help with the guidelines and censorship for these videos. With this research, we can now understand how these

challenges go viral and why, which can help make social media safer for children when another challenge like this goes viral on social media platforms.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I looked specifically at the interactions of social media influencers with children regarding the Blue Whale challenge. I looked at the research behind the origins of the Slender Man and Momo challenge. The difference between these challenges is that The Slender Man and Momo challenge characters to seek out participants on social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. The Momo character would insert themselves into children's television shows or video games randomly, such as Peppa Pig and Fortnite. For there to be participants in the Blue Whale challenge, individuals need to seek out an anonymous administrator using some of the hashtags like #bluewhale and "#i\_am\_whale. This signals an administrator to dispense the Blue Whale challenge tasks. The ultimate goal of this challenge is for the participants to kill themselves by the act of suicide by jumping to their death from a tall building. This challenge is more violent, with the sole intent of having someone ultimately end their life. I chose to analyze this challenge to show the progression of violence.

I defined the word, virality, which explains what happened to these challenges after they went viral on social media. Sampson (2012) says that "virality explores and eludes a prejudiced worldview separating human subjectivity from natural objects and organic and inorganic matter" (p. 4).

Next, I investigated the term, social media, which is defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (Ladhair, Massa, Skandrani, 2020, p. 2). Then,

I investigated what I categorized as cyber behavior, which is composed of cyberbullying and cyber-aggression, which is “an act of aggression; it occurs among individuals among power imbalance; and the behavior is often repeated” (Kowalski, Schroder, Giumetti & Lattanner, 2014, p. 35). The nature of cyberbullying is an aggressive action and follows an individual everywhere. “At any time during the day or night, they can create websites, send text messages, or post messages about others on the Internet. Additionally, because of the nature of the venues through which cyberbullying occurs, it has much greater potential audience than traditional bullying” (Kowalski, Giumetti & Lattanner, 2014, p. 35).

I explored scholarship on the paranormal phenomena and morbid curiosity, which can help explain why children are interested in these challenges and why they become popular. Parasocial phenomena “describes a one-sided mediated form of social interaction between the audience and media characters” (Liebers & Schramm, 2019, p. 3). According to researcher Suzanne Oosterwijk, morbid curiosity is used to specify curiosity of information involving death, violence, or harm, but is it not unhealthy or an abnormal curiosity. When “curiosity is specifically directed towards the goal of closing the information gap and will cease when the specific information required to close the gap is obtained” (Donnellan, Aslan, Fastrich, Murayama, 2020, p.3).

To obtain research, I analyzed three YouTube videos about the Blue Whale challenge with an anonymous YouTuber, Shane Dawson, and William Salhani. I watched the videos ten times each. When watching these videos, I looked for how recording, visual, and auditory aspects of each video supported the promotion and the informative coverage of the Blue Whale challenge. I look at the type of music (if any) that is being played, the type of background each YouTuber sat in front of, what they wore, and any common words that came across the videos.

The similarities that I found in each video I categorized as fear, morbid and pressure. I paused on words or phrases that fit under the categories of fear, morbid and pressure and wrote them in the tables to clearly show my analysis and findings.

I used the case study methodology modeled by Stake, (1998), who defines the case study methodology I implemented as instrumental case study which is when “a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (p. 137). The instrumental case study requires that I investigate the Blue Whale challenge and annotate the “ordinary activities detailed” (Stake, 19, p. 137).

My research questions included:

1. Why did these horror trends, despite the intended consequences for participating, go viral on social media?
2. How are these social media influencers responsible for these challenges going viral on social media?
3. How should parents, teachers and kids become aware of these challenges on social media and what should they do to avoid them?

Morbid curiosity stems from the paranormal phenomenon behind these challenges. The administrators of these challenges are considered paranormal because of a “belief in one more extraordinary phenomena that defy explanation according to current scientific understanding of natural law” (Sparks and Miller, 2001). When people are missing information, they become curious. In this case, YouTubers are missing information and an understanding of what these horror trends are, so they are participating in them and covering them on their channel to show their audience that the challenge is doable and livable. There is a parasocial interaction with the

administrators of these challenges and the participants. They are one-sided relationships, which involve the participants putting in time, energy, and fear to keep their administrators happy.

The forced cyber-aggression these administrators put on the participants cause both physical and mental damage. YouTubers need to tread carefully when covering these challenges to make sure that they are not giving off the sense of cyberbullying their audience into participating in these challenges, regardless of their views on if the challenge is real or not. YouTubers have a responsibility to censor and understand what event or brand they are promoting to an intended audience, which is called moral virality. An example of this would be when Shane Dawson says in his video, “Now that was obviously a small part of the poem. I am going to flash the poem up on the screen, and you can freeze it and screenshot it if you want and read it out loud. If you dare. Good Luck.” This is a form of cyber-aggression, which “encompasses intentionally harmful behaviors (e.g., spreading rumors, hacking someone’s accounts, sending degrading messages), and are directed toward others who may believe that these behaviors are offensive, derogatory, and unwanted” (Wright, 2015).

The Blue Whale challenge went viral for many reasons, yet there doesn’t seem to be just one solid answer why. This phenomenon is so complex and there needs to be more research on this phenomenon. There is no concrete answer as to why these challenges go viral because communication research is not incorporating other interdisciplinary scholarship. As communication scholars, we need to be able to approach this event with different interdisciplinary research to gain more knowledge of all the different aspects of this event because of the complexities of this scenario. Different interdisciplinary scholarship should include psychology, sociology, parapsychology and virality under the subset of media studies. The media is constantly changing, so it is important to study this type of phenomenon for us to

understand not only the mental and physical harm that the media could have on a child, but also understanding the restrictions and guidelines on social media platforms.

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