## In our anxiety about the Blue Whale Challenge, are we missing the elephant in the room?

While discussing the dangers of an unregulated cyberspace, shouldn't we also be speaking about depression and mental health?

by Karishma Attari

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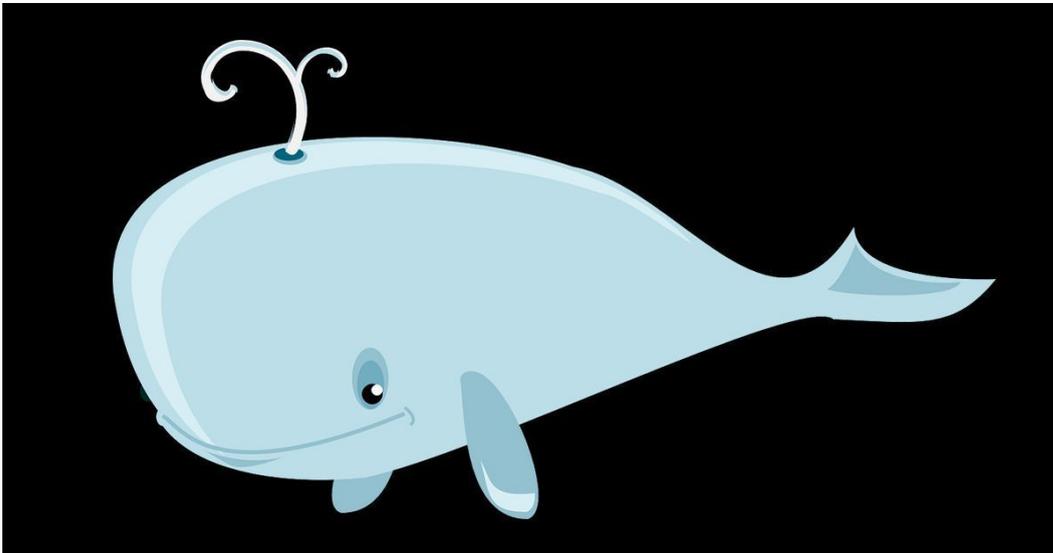
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In the beginning, the Blue Whale Challenge seemed like it had all the hallmarks of an urban legend: an online self-harm game that instructed victims to commit increasing degrees of violence upon themselves, finally convincing them to commit suicide. While it was whispered about in schools, college corridors and Reddit forums, reporters found it difficult to trace.

But since then, it appears to be accruing a body count: multiple suicides and suicide attempts in Russia, Kenya, Brazil, China, Spain, Italy, Chile and India have been attributed to people signing up for the challenge. The stories are often accompanied by images of a blue whale carved onto the victim's skin or a last selfie taken before committing suicide.

The latest incident in India involves the last-minute rescue of a teenager in Jodhpur who attempted suicide twice – first by jumping into Kalina Lake on September 4, and then by overdosing on sleeping pills – within the same week. The teenager had carved the shape of a whale on her arm, and when interviewed, revealed that unless she completed the last task of the challenge, she believed that her mother would die.

Most victims of the Blue Whale Challenge across the world appear to have a few things in common – they are young and vulnerable to abuse online, and their connection with the game is hard to substantiate. While the stories speak to our wariness of technology-dependence, and send our parenting instincts into nervous overdrive, there is very little evidence on ground that the game even exists.

Ever since the challenge was first reported on a Russian news portal, news reports have debunked its existence, raising questions about the media's responsibility in spreading unsubstantiated rumours and the manner in which the issue is being used to argue against the influence of the internet and promote panic. Much of the coverage regarding the challenge's possible influence, begs the question: how can teens be raised in a way that makes them safe from the internet?

Photo credit: Public Domain Pictures

The Blue Whale Challenge in India

Cyber-lawyer Karnika Seth, who authored the book *Protection of Children on Internet,* admits that it is impossible to generate the kind of surveillance required to nip perceived online threats – both on account of privacy laws and the sheer scale of effort such an exercise would require. She calls the unregulated internet in India a "mammoth problem that cannot be overlooked anymore".

While there is no specific law to be applied to a situation like the alleged Blue Whale Challenge, Seth pointed to acts relating to the cyber space like the IT Act and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, along with inbuilt provisions within the Indian Penal Code, such as Act 305, that could be applied.

There have been approximately 10 reported cases of suicide in India, which are believed to be related to the Blue Whale Challenge. Google Trends show that Indian interest in the phenomenon has been overwhelming – the most common searched phrases have been "Download Blue Whale Game", which might suggest that people are keen to inflict self-harm, or just morbidly curious (particularly in Kochi and Calcutta).

Timely intervention appears to have saved at least a few lives, such as the case of an engineering student in Kolkata who claimed that having completed several levels of the game, he was pulled back from the brink of suicide by his teacher, parents and a CID officer who counselled him. He was quoted as saying: "My message to whoever is in this game is stop before it is too late. It is not a game…they give you challenges and they take you to places you cannot come back from. They drive you to suicide."

But despite this, the police in India have found no direct link between the suicides and the existence of any virtual moderator, who according to the Blue Whale legend, instructs victims to inflict self-harm. A lot of the so-called links have been proved to be hearsay and hysteria as seen in the case of a 12-year-old from Indore, whose mother clarified that while he had admitted to "playing games", he had never heard of Blue Whale.

A disturbing trend

Pranesh Prakash, Policy Director at the Centre for Internet and Society, concluded: "All the available evidence points to this being a hoax, including those situations where teenagers have actually engaged in self-harm by carving a whale on their arm and have blamed the 'Blue Whale app' and a stranger threatening them. The children have subsequently been found to be lying through hard evidence, for instance the mobile operator finds no records of any messages or calls at those timings to the child's number."

While the first suicide linked to the alleged challenge emerged in Russia in 2015, Prakash added: "[E]ven the Russian police haven't revealed any evidence in their possession in the arrests they have made related to the Blue Whale Challenge, nor have those cases gone to trial. How else can one explain the fact that there hasn't been evidence of a 'tutor' in even a single one of the cases reported in India?"

There is, however, a huge problem regardless of whether the game exists: "The harm caused by the media sensationalism is quite real thanks to what is known as the Werther effect, leading to copycat suicides," Prakash said.

Authorities in most countries where victims have appeared have treated these claims seriously. In May, the Russian Duma or parliament made it an act of criminal responsibility to create a pro-suicide group on social media. Authorities in China and other countries are monitoring mentions of the game on forums and live broadcasts. The Delhi Police have issued an advisory after a cyber cell spotted related hashtags and messages on social networking sites. In India, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology directed several internet companies such as Google, Facebook, Instagram, WhatApp, Microsoft and Yahoo to remove all links which direct users to the Blue Whale Challenge.

The real problem

Teenage suicide is a growing concern worldwide and India has one of the world's highest suicide rates for youth aged between 15 and 29. In the US, suicide is documented as the second leading cause of death for young people. The Netflix original series *13 Reasons Why*was banned in several countries over accusations that it glamourised teen depressives and suicides.

The real conversation we need to be having with the youth is about their reasons for choosing self-harm – about mental health and depression. Dr Depeak Raheja, a senior psychiatrist and vice-president of the Delhi Psychiatric Society, suggested that parents who suspect their child might have suicidal urges should address not just the issue of the game, "but also the underlying causative factors – isolation, low self-worth, hopelessness and underlying or active depression".
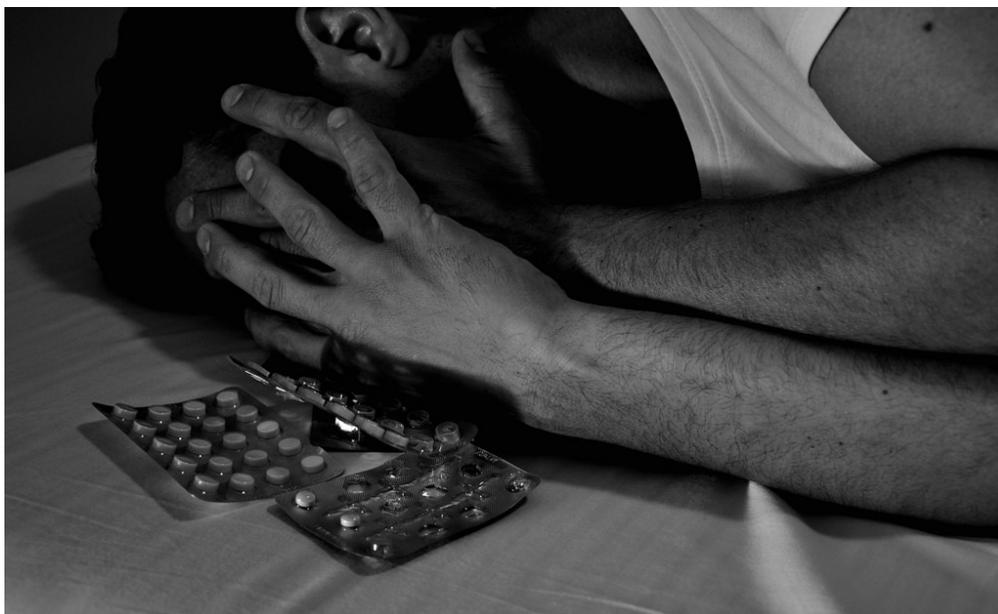
Photo credit: Victor/Flickr

One way in which this is already happening is through online mental health support groups which are promoted as alternatives to the Blue Whale Challenge. In Brazil, a designer has created a viral counter movement called the Pink Whale (Baleia Rosa), which relies on the collaboration of hundreds of volunteers and is based on positive tasks that combat depression. The British YouTuber HiggyPop has also set up an email service that sends daily Pink Whale challenges to participants. In the United States, a site called Blue Whale Challenge uses fifty days of tasks to promote mental health and well-being, while the Green Whale Challenge is a humorous version of the game in Argentina.

The fear and anxiety around the Blue Whale Challenge shows our willingness to project our fears of an unregulated internet onto anything that fits the profile, even as we override all evidence to the contrary. Instead, parents in particular must treat the tragic aftermath of popular suicide games as an opportunity to have a necessary, if belated, conversation about depression and mental health. The Blue Whale challenge may well turn out to be a hoax, but the challenge of keeping teenagers safe and healthy is a very real one.

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