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Social media challenges are causing disruptions in schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show how social media challenges are causing disruptions in school settings. Specifically, the challenges from the social media app known as TikTok. The section about TikTok will show how TikTok got to be a huge sensation in the social media realm in recent years. Then, the section about trends and challenges will highlight how trends and challenges on TikTok work and how they gain popularity. The next section is about injury and risk highlights the different types of dangerous challenges that have been popular in the past and how they have caused serious injuries and unfortunately in some cases death to young children. Lastly, the final section will go over what motivates and influences young adults to participate in dangerous social media challenges. Information about how schools are dealing with these new social media challenges will also be discussed.

Keywords: TikTok, trends, challenges, social media

Introduction

Social media is a goliath in the world today; it is rare for people to not have some form of social media presence. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are only a few of the popular social media sites that have kept the world engaged. In the past several years, the video-platform app TikTok has taken its place on the podium of one of the more popular social media platforms. TikTok has kept its audience engaged with its app through fun dance trends, silly cooking videos, and fun life hacks. However, TikTok has also made the desire for crazy challenges to be tried by their wide range of views. They have made their way into businesses, homes, and even school settings. With TikTok becoming a huge phenomenon in media today, it has gotten everyone from many different demographics to want to partake in the wide range of challenges and trends the platform publishes to its viewers. While some of these challenges are nothing but harmless fun, many others have caused dangerous situations in schools, harm to teachers, and harm to the students experimenting with these challenges. This paper is to address what the social media platform TikTok is, what trends and challenges are, the damages that have appeared in schools due to dangerous challenges and the reasoning and motivation behind why students participate in these challenges.

The Era of TikTok

TikTok also known as Douyin internationally, is one of the newer social media apps that has taken the world by storm. Author Werner Geyser described the app as “a video-sharing app that allows users to create

and share short-form videos on any topic” (Geyser, 2022, p.2). Users can also use filters, stickers, voiceovers, and background music when making their short videos. Before TikTok became what it was, it was originally called Musical.ly. Musical.ly was founded in September 2016 and most of the content on it was lip-syncing videos (Montag, 2021, p.1). Musical.ly was then acquired by ByteDance in 2018 and the name was changed to TikTok. (Geyser, 2022, p.3). Once changed, the app's popularity skyrocketed, and TikTok has received over three billion downloads globally, making it the first ever non-Meta app to attract so many users (Academy Xi, 2022, p.1). The app’s popularity was so massive that last year TikTok had more visits to its website than Google (Harwell, 2021, p. 5). The pandemic was a big factor in the success of TikTok, in 2020, ByteDance was reportedly worth up to \$140 billion by mid-2020, based on the private sale of a small stake in the company (D’Souza, 2022, p. 8).

TikTok’s global fame took the social media world to a whole other level, and competing platforms started taking notice and making changes to match or even “copy”. Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have all undergone disastrous platform changes inspired by the video-sharing service whether that be through Reels, Shorts, or Suggested for You videos (Herrman, 2022, p.1). Blake Chandlee who is the president of TikTok’s global business solutions addressed the competition between TikTok and other social media platforms like Facebook. He said, “Facebook is a social platform. They’ve built all their algorithms based on the social graph...we are an entertainment platform. The difference is significant.” (Newport, 2022, p.1). The difference between these platforms doesn’t just go with the type of content they have but also the age range of their viewers. A majority of TikTok users are around the age of 24 years old and younger (Janes, 2019, p. 7). While their demographic is mostly younger people, it is also broken up by 56% female, and 136 million active users are from the U.S. (D’Souza, 2022, p.7).

Trends and Challenges

The rise of TikTok was a game changer in the social media hierarchy, which begs the question of what keeps this app above the others. That could be answered with TikTok using trends and challenges to its advantage in the social media corporate world. According to TikTok’s Creative Center, trends are described as “ever-changing definitions of what's cool or sales patterns over time.” (TikTok: Creative Center). Basically, trends are just what everyone is looking at or talking about on social media. Trends thrive in pop culture and what is going on in the world. Pop culture is mostly targeted at younger audiences because younger people are quick to respond to trending pop culture events, especially when it is relevant to their brand or image (Marvellous, 2022, p.1). Trends keep people engaged in the day-to-day. Without trending content, people would get bored and stop using the app. Trends are also how challenges get put into the mix as part of the TikTok algorithm.

Challenges on TikTok are a call to take some sort of action and record it via a TikTok video. These videos usually involve a song, dance move, movie quote, etc (Miles, 2022, p.1). Challenges can range from silly dance videos to reaction challenges, people love to complete a task. Younger demographics are not the only ones that get into challenges, larger brands have also been known to do challenges to promote their new products. These are known as branded challenges, which are challenges made by brands to create online ‘challenges’ around their products, and encourage people to jump on board, often with the help of influencer marketing (Tribe, 2022, p. 2). An example of this would be #GuacDance challenge by Chipotle. The challenge was to have TikTokers create a dance to get free guacamole when they ordered online on July 31, which is also National Avocado Day (WLKR, 2021, p. 8). The challenge was so successful that the hashtag had over a billion views (WLKR, 2021, p. 8).

Businesses have taken advantage of the TikTok platform when it comes to advertisements for their products. Large amounts of advertisement that has caused audiences to be affected by advertisements on TikTok which can be processed in their minds, which causes for different changes in behavior (Darmatama M, Erdiansyah R, 2021, p.1). TikTok producing challenges that engage a younger audience has resulted in businesses also using challenges as a way to reach that demographic. TikTok does provide positive forms of advertisements in the forms of challenges. In terms of advertisement, user-created content is generally viewed as more authentic and trustworthy which then is used as a form of sponsored advertising, like the Chipotle's #GuacDance challenge which had positive marketing impacts for the brand (Chu S, Deng T, Mundel J, 2022, p. 20).

However, the dangerous TikTok challenges that are being performed by young adults are not being published as a marketing stunt by businesses but by other users who are participating in dangerous acts for views with the purpose of going "viral". Brands do not want to make trending challenges that can inflict harm to their customers. A trending challenge can be made by anyone with a camera and a TikTok account. The importance of a challenge is to get engaged. If a challenge begins to trend, millions of people could see it. This is where the danger of TikTok challenges began to surface, and it has caused danger to schools, teachers, and to young kids.

The Dangers of TikTok Challenges

While most TikTok challenges are just harmless fun or simply brand deals, there have also been challenges that are incredibly dangerous. One challenge that had gained popularity in the past was called the "Black-out" challenge. The challenge was to find household items and then choke yourself with them to the point of blackout and then release the binds for an adrenaline rush of gaining consciousness again (Alaniz, 2022, p.7). This challenge resulted in the deaths of countless children including, Joshua Haileyesus, Nate Squires, LaTerius Smith Jr., James Boyd-Gergely, and many more who had been found deceased through different methods of asphyxiation (Carville, 2022, p. 32). There have been other challenges that resulted in serious injuries including the milk crate challenge, the dry scoop challenge, and the Benadryl challenge. This list is not all-inclusive; there has been a long list of dangerous challenges (Cost, Grace, Dellatto, and Hedgedus, 2022, p.11).

Even school personnel have had their own troubles with students doing dangerous or even sometimes illegal challenges at school. The "One Chip Challenge" swept through schools as young children were eating what was known as the "world's hottest chip" during school. In Tyler, Texas, three students were taken to a hospital by their parents after attempting the challenge. The Tyler Independent School District issued a warning which indicated that students and parents need to be aware of the dangers of social media challenges (Russo, 2022, p. 7).

There was also the "Devious Licks" challenge, which required students to steal something from their schools, resulting in empty soap dispensers, missing fire extinguishers, and far worse destruction (Klein, 2022, p. 5). The Devious Licks challenge became such a huge issue for schools that they started having to make students sign in whenever they had to use the restrooms, or students would have to visit one at a time. According to WDSU News, an 18-year-old student in Louisiana was arrested and faces charges of suspicion of battery of a schoolteacher, after she allegedly attacked a 64-year-old disabled teacher as a part of the "Slap a Teacher" challenge (Gilbert, 2021, p. 5).

Law enforcement has also been involved after there were several reports of the “Orbeez Challenge”. This challenge encouraged people to shoot at others, drive-by style, using gel blasters or gel ball guns. School resource officers in Baltimore County told students that participating in challenges like the Orbeez challenge would not be considered a game, it would be considered assault (Ross, 2022, p.5).

As these disruptions in schools continued, school districts and TikTok itself have made some serious changes. After many of the serious injuries and deaths that had happened from these challenges, TikTok started to work on detecting these dangerous challenges on their platform so that additional warnings and informational resources could be provided for more guidance about how to avoid risk (Hutchinson, 2021, p.16). Schools have started educating parents and students on social media safety and cyber-citizenship (Wood, 2022, p.4). The education sector is already facing many challenges since the COVID-19 pandemic with teacher shortages, low wages, and lack of resources for educators. These TikTok challenges are now an added layer of complication in the education sector that teachers now must deal with.

Schools have also advised parents to talk with their children about their social media habits, which allows parents to let their children know the dangerous and serious consequences of these challenges (Systems, A.S.R.A, p.16). Teachers have also been encouraged to not only get familiar with TikTok themselves but also to talk about TikTok challenges during social-emotional learning modules. This would allow teachers to discuss the dangers of these challenges and to teach kids that they have the power to choose what values they want to have (Sagar, 2022, p.5). According to Michele Borba, an educational psychologist and author of *Thrivers: The Surprising Reason Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine*, talks about how this generation is much different to teach due to technology and social media. He states that “we've got to keep in mind that we're teaching digital natives. But we've got to make sure they have the tools to still be moral and empathetic . . . and find other ways that are more acceptable to engage with peers,” (Ingram N, 2021, p.3). Understanding that this generation is consistently attached to social media is the first step in combatting the wave of social media challenges.

Motivation behind Participation

With the rise of TikTok, it has revolutionized the way young adults interact and consume content online. However, this digital world is now exposing young adults to different kinds of dangers in the form of online challenges. This begs the question as to why students participate in these dangerous challenges? What do these students gain from committing these dangerous acts and having to deal with the heavy consequences that follow? One main cause is the large online presence and Internet use young adults are consuming on a day-to-day basis. A study showed that 95% of teenagers have access to smartphones and 45% report they are online on a “near-constant basis” (R Roth, P Ajithkumar, G Natarajanb, K Achuthanb, P Moon, H Zinzow , K Chalil Madathil). Young adolescents are consuming media at an unbelievable fast rate; it is what takes up most of their time and it is what they are constantly exposed to. TikTok is currently one of the most used social media platforms today by young adults. Research done by Yunqing Liu from the Department of Economics at the University of Miami conducted a study on how TikTok has been affecting education. In the study, they asked participants how often they use TikTok. The results from the research showed that 61% of participants used TikTok more than three times per day and 13% of participants use TikTok at least once per day (Liu Y, 2023, p.5).

With the large frequency of TikTok content being consumed, it is a root cause for attempts of TikTok challenges. While many TikTok challenges are mostly harmless like following a dance routine, lip-syncing to music, re-creating a recipe or craft, or following a questionnaire or story template. Those types of

challenges have positive benefits for users like fostering a sense of community, increasing social capital, and decreasing loneliness (Falgoust G, Winterlind E, Moon P, Parker A, Zinzow H, Chalil Madathil K, 2022, p. 1). However, dangerous TikTok challenges have led to much more severe consequences like hospitalizations, pulmonary damage and first-degree burns, or self-harm contagion effects among participants (Falgoust G, Winterlind E, Moon P, Parker A, Zinzow H, Chalil Madathil K, 2022, p. 2). Due to the harsh consequences of these dangerous challenges, more research needs to be conducted for what motives young adolescences to partake in these challenges.

A study was conducted in 2022 that focused on the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory to explain the motivation for media use on TikTok (Falgoust G, Winterlind E, Moon P, Parker A, Zinzow H, Chalil Madathil K, 2022, p. 4). The U&G Theory is attributed to Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz, they described the theory as “media consumers are passive consumers of mass communications; rather, they play an active role in media consumption” (Gordon J, 2022, p.2). The study’s procedure was a semi-structured interview given to each eligible participant. The participants were asked to provide informed about the approximate amount of time they spent on TikTok per week, their experiences regarding participation in viral TikTok challenges, which challenges they completed, the motivating factors for participation in them, how they performed the challenges, and reflections regarding their participation (Falgoust G, Winterlind E, Moon P, Parker A, Zinzow H, Chalil Madathil K, 2022, p. 5). The results from the interviews influenced by the U&G were broken into 6 categories: entertainment, social support, seeking or spreading information, escape, socialization, and convenience. Entertainment was ranked the highest with a 24.4% and the lowest being escape with 6.0% of participants (Falgoust G, Winterlind E, Moon P, Parker A, Zinzow H, Chalil Madathil K, 2022, p. 5). However, motivations identified outside of the U&G framework included gaining fame or virality, self-presentation, preserving the memory of a time and or place, and representation. Gaining fame and virality was the highest-ranking motivation factor as to why they participated in the challenges (Falgoust G, Winterlind E, Moon P, Parker A, Zinzow H, Chalil Madathil K, 2022, p. 54).

Another study conducted focused on how many “dangerous” challenges were being upload onto TikTok. The study proposed a Viral Internet Challenge Scale (VICH-S) to assess in the understanding of these types of behaviors. The study analyzed some psychometric properties of this scale, such as the types of challenges and their performance. They found that 7.7% of these challenges were dangerous (Bonifazi G, Cecchini S, Corradini E, Giuliani L, Ursino D, Virgili L, 2022, p.15). The reason why adolescences participated in these dangerous challenges were also analyzed within the study. The results showed that the participation in these challenges made adolescents feel confident thanks to the obtained views and likes (Bonifazi G, Cecchini S, Corradini E, Giuliani L, Ursino D, Virgili L, 2022, p.17). This type of influence for fame and virality has caused for students to not fully consider the consequences of their actions when committing some of these challenges specific in school settings.

Young adults that are willingly participating in these dangerous challenges have many different reasons for risking their physical well-being. Young adolescences are highly motivated by social validation, viral recognition, and popularity. These TikTok challenges give these young adults the opportunity to be in the limelight and gain a mass following on the TikTok’s platform. By participating in these dangerous challenges, it gives these participants a temporary sense of validation and admiration from the online world. Adolescents also experiences a pervasive psychological phenomenon called FOMO, (Fear Of Missing Out) that can be attributed to why they participate in these challenges. FOMO is described as “a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent, typically seen with social media use” (Gupta M Sharma A, 2021, p.1). When young adults see their peers participating in these dangerous TikTok challenges and trends, and gaining attention for them, they may fall into peer pressure and are more compelled to join in to avoid feeling left out. For these students, the desire and need to fit in and be part of these trending challenges outweighs the consequences of potentially harmful and dangerous risks that may occur.

Summary

Social media has become a focal point in people's day-to-day life, especially the younger generation. The rise of TikTok sparked a revolution in video shorts for other social media platforms. It also made trends and challenges a hot topic which resulted in many people wanting to participate. While most challenges can be harmless and silly fun, there have been some that have caused serious damage, harm, and even death. Dangerous challenges have caused risks for students and teachers and major disruptions in school settings. Even with TikTok being a younger social media platform compared to other sites like Facebook or Twitter, many studies have already been conducted on a wide variety on research ranging from advertisement to mental health of the user.

There have been studies done to understand what motivates certain individuals to participate in these online challenges. Young adults participate in these challenges for a few mere moments of fame online or they wish to not miss out on these viral trends that they witness their peers are attempting. These social pressures have caused students to not care about the legal or dangerous consequences they may endure if they commit to these dangerous challenges. Both students and teachers need to be educated about what the current challenges are and to continue to be informed about the consequences of those actions. Being informed about what challenges are out there can help reduce the dangerous consequences young adults may face. Having an open conversation in classrooms and at home can lead to more opportunities to address different ethical responsible students have when deciding to participate in these online challenges. Understanding what motivates students to do these challenges is another potential way to reduce the harmful risks of these challenges being committed in schools.

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