Solidarity for Social Media Based Epidemic: Case Study of the Blue Whale Challenge

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Abstract

The Blue Whale Challenge has claimed many lives across the globe [4]. It is a challenge propagating on social media which requires the individual to indulge in a series of self-mutilating tasks for a duration of 50 days and ultimately commit suicide. "Administrators" or "curators" of the challenge contact users - who express their willingness to take part on social networking websites - via direct messages. I contributed (as one of the five researchers) to conduct a study to understand the spread of the challenge on social media websites such as VKontakte, Twitter, and Instagram and, identify different types of users involved in the challenge. Through this position paper, I pose a question – How can we leverage Solidarity to succumb social media epidemic like Blue Whale Challenge which lures, engages and victimizes a spectrum of populations (with different contexts). I express my interest in fostering solidarity in such research and explain my positionality with respect to the same.

Author Keywords

Blue Whale Challenge, social media analysis, solidarity, death, marginalized population

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous

Introduction

The Blue Whale Challenge has witnessed numerous cases (including suicide attempts and deaths) around the world [4], with the maximum number of reported cases in Russia, the birthplace of the challenge. This draws attention to the widespread effects of the challenge spread through social networking sites.

The Blue Whale Challenge consists of a series of deadly tasks that one must complete within 50 days [1]. These tasks, which include waking up at odd hours, self-mutilation, listening to psychedelic music, and watching scary videos among others, are structured in such a way so as to brain-wash the participants [5]. "Curators" or "administrators" [7] of the challenge contact users who express their willingness to take part in the challenge by posting on social media using blue whale-related hashtags such as #i_am_whale, #curatorfindme, #wakemeupat420, and #f57.

The fact that instead of the "administrator" or "curator" of these tasks, it's usually other users who are interested in taking up the challenge and try to contact the "administrators" and hence become visible. This adds to the difficulty of the curbing the challenge as banning a few accounts no longer remains a successful technique.

In this position paper, I elucidate the findings of the study I contributed to and express my views on fostering solidarity in similar research.

Our Work

As a part of a team, I contributed in social media analysis to study the spread of the Blue Whale Challenge on social networks including VKontakte, Twitter, and Instagram [4]. The study is an exploratory work which aims to set the foundation for research on the topic. Working towards our goal, we conducted three types of preliminary analysis: Network, Content and User analysis. We observed no follower-following link between users posting about the challenge on Instagram, whereas on VKontakte, though sparse, a friends network existed among users posting about the challenge. Moreover, blue whale-related users tend to reveal personally identifiable information like phone number and email addresses so that possible "curators" or "administrators" of the challenge can contact them. This is a major privacy concern. Images of users performing self-mutilating tasks were, too, found in numerous posts as were a few links to psychedelic music and scary videos.

We also witnessed that a major proportion of blue whale-related posts on Twitter were made in Indian languages such as Hindi and Tamil, whereas Welsh and Romanian, Moldavan languages were used in around 35% of the posts on VKontakte; this showed the involvement of the users from different linguistic backgrounds in the challenge.

From this preliminary study, we were able to glean information about user behavior with respect to this first-of-its-kind challenge that spreads in different parts of the world via popular social media.

Solidarity to Fight Social Media Based Epidemic

The research on ill-effects of gamification [2, 3] and dangerous online social media challenges such as the Blue Whale Challenge [5] is rather circumscribed. It would be interesting to explore how solidarity can be fostered and leveraged to study the ill-effects of game-based challenges which have a global impact. Applying the lens of solidarity might bring out visible patterns among users who are spread throughout the world, separated through contexts and still getting engaged in and victimized by game targeted/designed for a specific population.

Self-Disclosure

Being a woman of Indian origin, my background and personal experiences of being raised in India have shaped my motivation to work in the field of HCI4D and ICT for Devel-

opment (ICTD). I have conducted research in HCI and social networks across multiple domains including health and social awareness. Also familiar with ICT and social media usage in India, I have an understanding of the "curiosity" driven behavior of users in light of such social media challenges.

Benefit from the Workshop

Besides the above mentioned social media research about the Blue Whale Challenge, I have also contributed to a study on Menstrual Health Education in India [8] which will be presented at CSCW 2018. This study gave me an opportunity to engage with young adults, both male and female, on a sensitive topic like menstrual health to fathom their understanding and experiences associated with menstrual health. Moreover, I have experience of working with 9 to 15-year-olds belonging to the lower economic background; this study aimed at understanding their selfie-taking behavior and view on dangerous selfies as India boasts the maximum selfie deaths across the world [6].

Furthermore, as a part of a student design competition, I conducted user studies with elderly people, 60 years and above, in New Delhi with the aim of ameliorating their social interactions and fitness with a design-based solution, called Club60. This gave me an opportunity to work with yet another marginalized segment of the population and design solutions for them.

Attending this workshop and participating in a healthy discussion would help me develop a deeper understanding of solidarity. I look forward to interacting with elite researchers in the domain and hearing out their experiences of working with marginalized population. Moving forward with the learnings from this workshop, I would be able to explore and foster solidarity in my research and broaden my horizons. Being an undergraduate student who is yet to get a complete taste of the domain, this workshop would be an unmissable opportunity.

Author

Shaan Chopra is a fourth-year undergraduate student at IIIT Delhi. Though still exploring, her research interests lie in HCI for Health and Education, ICT for Development and Social Computing. She is currently working on multiple projects ranging from Designing for Menstrual Health Education in India to the analyzing the social media spread of the Blue Whale Challenge.

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