

## Psychological Impact of Dangerous Online Challenges on Adolescents: A Case Study

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## Психологическое воздействие опасных онлайн-челленджей на подростков: анализ случая

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**To cite this article:** Iskajyan, A. H. (2024). The Psychological Impact of Dangerous Online Challenges on Adolescents: A Case Study. *Lurian Journal*, 5(2), 59–66. doi: 10.15826/Lurian.2024.5.2.4

**Для цитирования:** Искаджян, А. О. (2024). Психологическое воздействие опасных онлайн-челленджей на подростков: анализ случая. *Lurian Journal*, 5(2), 59–66. doi: 10.15826/Lurian.2024.5.2.4

**Abstract.** In today's digital age, social media has become an integral part of daily life for millions, especially adolescents. Online platforms provide opportunities for connection and self-expression. However, this digital landscape also poses significant threats, including cyberbullying and dangerous online challenges that can lead to self-harming behavior and other negative consequences. The objective of this study is to investigate the psychological impact of dangerous online challenges on adolescents. A particular focus is placed on how social media influences adolescent behavior and their quest for peer validation. We employed a case study method to gain an in-depth understanding of the motivations and experiences

of adolescents participating in dangerous online challenges. The results show that the desire to gain peer approval often leads adolescents to take risks without considering the possible consequences: serious physical injury, psychological stress, anxiety, depression. Low self-esteem and family conflicts exacerbate the situation. This study highlights the urgent need to improve digital literacy and mental health awareness among adolescents. Creating a supportive environment is key to protecting young people from the dangers of online challenges, building healthy coping strategies and resilience to the negative impact of social media.

**Keywords:** *online challenges; adolescents; peer validation; digital literacy; mental health; risk-taking behavior; case study; psychological stress*

**Аннотация.** В современную цифровую эпоху социальные сети стали неотъемлемой частью повседневной жизни миллионов людей, особенно подростков. Интернет-платформы предоставляют возможности для связи и самовыражения. Однако этот цифровой ландшафт также несет значительные угрозы, включая кибербуллинг и опасные онлайн-челленджи, которые могут привести к формированию самоповреждающего поведения и иным негативным последствиям. Цель данного исследования — изучить психологическое воздействие опасных онлайн-челленджей на подростков. Особое внимание уделено тому, как социальные сети влияют на поведение подростков и их стремление к одобрению сверстников. Использован кейс-метод, чтобы глубже понять мотивацию, эмоциональные факторы и опыт подростков, участвующих в опасных онлайн-челленджах. Результаты показывают, что желание получить одобрение сверстников часто заставляет подростков совершать рискованные поступки, не учитывая при этом возможные последствия: серьезные физические повреждения, психологический стресс, тревогу, депрессию. Низкая самооценка и семейные конфликты усугубляют ситуацию. Создание поддерживающей среды и развитие цифровой грамотности у подростков является ключевым для защиты от опасностей онлайн-челленджей, формирует у них здоровые стратегии преодоления трудностей и устойчивость к негативному воздействию социальных сетей.

**Ключевые слова:** *онлайн-челленджи; подростки; одобрение сверстников; цифровая грамотность; психическое здоровье; рискованное поведение; кейс-метод; психологический стресс*

## Introduction

In today's digital age, social media has become an integral part of daily life for millions of people, particularly adolescents. Online platforms allow users to connect with friends, share experiences, and express themselves creatively. The appeal of social media comes from its ability to provide instant access to information and entertainment.

The popularity of social media among teenagers is largely driven by the desire for connection and belonging. In a world where peer relationships are crucial to adolescent development, social media offers a platform for interaction that transcends geographical

boundaries. It enables users to maintain friendships, share experiences, and engage with others who share similar interests. The desire to prove themselves and gain approval during adolescence drives young people to seek validation through likes, comments, views, and follower counts on social media, enhancing its appeal. This aspect of social media taps into their sense of self-determination. Essentially, this captivating feature impacts their emotional state by fostering curiosity about what they might miss out on when they're not online (Greenhow, 2011).

While the benefits of social media are significant, the associated risks cannot be ignored. Adolescents may encounter cyberbullying, inappropriate content, and unrealistic portrayals of life that can negatively affect their self-esteem and mental health. Furthermore, excessive screen time can have serious negative effects on both physical and mental health, leading to issues such as insomnia, anxiety, and depression. It can also weaken social skills and contribute to feelings of isolation, which is reflected in rising rates of teen suicide. Additionally, productivity declines, as multitasking amid distractions reduces attention spans and cognitive focus (George A. S., George A. H., Baskar, & Shahul, 2023).

The emergence of dangerous games amplifies these risks. As trends gain traction online, young people may feel compelled to participate, often without fully understanding the potential consequences. This phenomenon raises critical concerns about the influence of social media on adolescent behavior and decision-making.

The study of dangerous games on social media has become increasingly relevant today, as self-harm is prevalent among adolescents (Doyle, Treacy, & Sheridan, 2015). Adolescence is a critical time for forming new traits and building a mature personality. One key aspect of adolescent behavior is the increased tendency to take risks, often driven by the pursuit of rewards rather than the avoidance of punishment. As they venture into areas of life beyond their families' control, adolescents face challenges that can expose them to physical and psychological harm. Their still-developing decision-making abilities further amplify these risks, which can have lasting negative effects on their lives. The extent of these risks varies based on the challenges they encounter and their ability to navigate them effectively (Del Ciampo & Lopes Del Ciampo, 2020). Furthermore, the nature of social interaction has changed dramatically because of social media. Adolescents often face peer pressure to conform. This pressure can be a key factor in social media addiction among young people, as it reflects the influence they feel to think and behave according to their peers' expectations and norms (Zhou et al., 2019).

"Dangerous games," or online challenges, have become a prominent aspect of digital culture, drawing the attention of thousands of children and adolescents. These activities can lead to serious health risks and potential harm, highlighting the need for increased awareness and intervention. Often presented as forms of play or games, these challenges are typically showcased in videos on online platforms. They may involve bizarre tasks, such as submerging one's head in a bag of charcoal, or unappealing ones like consuming large amounts of cinnamon. Despite the risks, dangerous challenges continue to gain significant attention in the digital landscape (Deslandes & Coutinho, 2022).

Among the most notorious online challenges:

- Blue Whale Challenge is an online game involving self-harm (Khattar, Dabas, Gupta, Chopra, & Kumaraguru, 2018; Mahadevaiah & Nayak, 2018);
- Momo Challenge is an online game that exploits the fear and curiosity of children and adolescents, encouraging self-harm and suicide (Kobilke & Markiewitz, 2021);
- Choking Game is a game aimed at achieving a short-term state of euphoria by reducing the flow of oxygen to the brain. Participation can lead to chronic headaches, short-term memory loss, seizures, concussions, strokes, brain damage, and even death (Defenderfer, Austin, & Davies, 2016);
- Cinnamon Challenge is a viral trend where participants attempt to swallow a spoonful of ground cinnamon in under 60 seconds without drinking any water.

Despite the risks, dangerous challenges continue to gain significant attention in the digital landscape. Young people may be unaware of the severe risks involved and may feel pressure to participate in this high-risk behavior as a way to impress peers or fit in. Each of these challenges has raised significant concern among parents, educators, and mental health professionals regarding their impact on youth behavior and well-being.

By highlighting the dangers associated with specific challenges, we can advocate for educational programs that promote digital literacy and resilience, equipping adolescents with the tools to navigate social media safely. In this modern context, as technology evolves and social media becomes further entrenched in daily life, the challenges will likely continue to emerge. Ongoing research will be vital to adapt to these changes, understand their implications, and develop effective strategies to safeguard the mental health and well-being of young people.

## Methods

In our research, we employed the case study method to investigate dangerous online challenges on social media among adolescents. The case study is a methodological research approach designed to provide an in-depth understanding of a contemporary issue or phenomenon within a defined context. This type of research involves a thorough investigation of an individual, group, or event, aiming to illuminate the complexities of real-life situations. It is particularly effective for exploring nuanced aspects of a subject, allowing researchers to gather rich, detailed insights that can inform broader conclusions (Coombs, 2022).

We chose this method for several reasons. First, it provides detailed and nuanced analyses that are essential for understanding the multifaceted nature of dangerous online challenges. These challenges can vary widely in their impact and context, making it crucial to explore them through a lens that captures their complexity. Additionally, the case study method facilitates the examination of real-life scenarios, helping to uncover the psychological, social, and environmental factors that contribute to self-harm behaviors linked to these challenges.

## Case Study

Mia (a pseudonym), a 14-year-old high school student, was drawn to online challenges as a way to seek validation and connection, particularly due to vulnerabilities in her family life. Growing up in a household marked by frequent conflict and emotional distance, she often felt isolated and undervalued. Her parents' ongoing disagreements created a tense atmosphere, leaving Mia craving attention and support that she rarely received at home.

This conflict not only affected her self-esteem but also fueled her desire for external affirmation. With her parents often preoccupied with their issues, Mia felt disconnected and unseen, which intensified her urge to seek validation from her peers and through social media. In a world where likes and comments felt like tangible affirmations, she found herself increasingly reliant on online validation to fill the emotional void she experienced at home.

As a follower of internet trends, Mia often engaged in viral challenges to connect with her friends and gain popularity. She believed that participating in these challenges would help her solidify her social identity, making her feel more accepted and valued among her peers. The prospect of sharing exciting experiences online excited her; she envisioned the approval and admiration she would receive, thinking it would bolster her standing in her social circle.

After learning about the Cinnamon Challenge, Mia felt an overwhelming desire to take part. It seemed like the perfect opportunity to showcase her boldness and creativity, reinforcing her image as someone who could tackle any challenge. This desire to impress her friends overshadowed her awareness of the potential physical dangers involved.

Confident and eager to impress, Mia decided to take on the challenge in front of a group of friends. Almost immediately after swallowing the cinnamon, she began to cough and sputter, struggling to breathe as the spice coated her throat. The situation escalated quickly; her friends laughed at first, but their expressions shifted to concern as Mia continued to choke. Despite their attempts to help her, she felt a rush of embarrassment and fear. The video of her struggle was shared on social media, where it garnered both laughter and harsh criticism.

After the incident, Mia faced significant psychological distress. The initial embarrassment evolved into anxiety about her social standing and a fear of being ridiculed. As the video circulated, she felt increasingly isolated, leading to a loss of confidence. Instead of the validation she sought, Mia experienced overwhelming feelings of shame and inadequacy. She later realized how lucky she was that the challenge didn't have worse physical consequences, but at the time, her focus was solely on the emotional fallout.

In the following weeks, Mia withdrew from social activities and spent less time with friends. The fear of being the center of attention became debilitating, impacting her ability to engage in class discussions and participate in group projects. She developed obsessive thoughts about her social media presence, constantly worrying about how she was perceived by others.

Eventually, Mia sought professional help to overcome her feelings of anxiety and the impact of her experiences with online challenges. In therapy, she was able to discuss her vulnerabilities and the pressures she faced, learning effective coping strategies and gaining valuable insights into her emotions.

## Discussion

The phenomenon of dangerous online challenges, particularly among adolescents, poses significant psychological risks that can lead to harmful behaviors. This discussion analyzes the case of Mia, a teenager who participated in the online challenge, highlighting the interplay between social media, peer validation, and emotional vulnerabilities.

*Forms of Risk-Taking Behavior:* Mia's engagement in the online challenge reflects a broader trend where adolescents undertake risky activities to gain peer approval. While the challenge seemed like a harmless way to connect with friends, it quickly escalated into a distressing situation. Mia's attempt to showcase her bravery and creativity resulted in physical choking and severe embarrassment, showcasing the immediate consequences of seeking validation through dangerous behaviors.

*Desire for Connection:* for Mia, participating in the challenge was driven by a deep-seated need for belonging and validation. In a family environment marked by conflict and emotional distance, Mia sought affirmation from her peers through social media interactions. The thrill of participating in trending challenges seemed like a pathway to enhancing her social status, overshadowing her awareness of the potential dangers involved.

Mia's case underscores the urgent need for effective therapeutic interventions aimed at addressing the complex interplay of social media pressures and mental health. In therapy, Mia was able to explore her vulnerabilities and the intense pressures she faced from her peers. The therapeutic focus was on rebuilding her self-esteem, developing healthier coping strategies, and fostering a more positive self-image.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the impact of social media on adolescent behavior is profound and multifaceted. While these platforms offer opportunities for connection and self-expression, they also expose young users to significant risks, particularly through dangerous online challenges. The case of Mia illustrates how the quest for peer validation can lead adolescents to engage in risky behaviors that compromise their physical and mental well-being. The interplay between emotional vulnerabilities, familial dynamics, and social pressures creates a perfect storm for adverse outcomes, emphasizing the urgent need for awareness and intervention.

Our findings reveal several critical insights:

1. Peer validation and risk-taking: adolescents often engage in risky behaviors to seek peer approval, leading to potentially life-threatening situations. The desire for acceptance can overshadow their awareness of consequences.
2. Psychological vulnerabilities: Mia's case underscores how emotional factors, such as familial conflict and low self-esteem, drive young people to seek validation through dangerous activities, reflecting deeper psychological needs.
3. The role of social media: the viral nature of social media amplifies these risks by normalizing extreme behaviors in pursuit of likes and shares, creating a competitive culture that encourages participation in harmful challenges.

Ultimately, prioritizing mental health and fostering supportive environments can help safeguard young people against the dangers of online challenges, promoting well-being over superficial validation.

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*Original manuscript received September 18, 2024*

*Revised manuscript accepted October 15, 2024*

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