



Social Media; Blessing or Curse Ojas Patil

Introduction :

These days, smart devices with access to the internet are so common that even many children have them. With children now having such easy access to the internet, people naturally have concerns about safety online. A popular app called TikTok, has more than 32% of its users in the age group 10-19 (Doyle, 2023). The young and inexperienced users on TikTok may be unaware that there are dangerous people and content on the internet. Younger users do not always seem to understand that messages sent out by their favorite celebrity or content creator, or even trends being followed by other TikTok users, can be harmful. Content creators, or anyone for that matter, can post content that does not consider what the people watching will take away from it. Through these posts, influencers — famous people who create content through online social media platforms — are able to set trends, some of which are very dangerous. Although, with the way these apps work, almost anyone can start a trend which can drastically increase into something bigger. In the first section, we will highlight some of these dangerous trends that have popped up over the last couple of years. During the second section of this paper, we are going to go over how stories can go viral. We will discuss how, it is not just about the creator, but the readers/viewers as well that contribute to the virality of stories. Finally, I will summarize my thoughts on why users participate in viral trends, both safe and dangerous, and discuss strategies being used to promote safety among TikTok users.

[Online Challenges] :

There are many viral trends on TikTok. Some are harmless compared to others. Take for instance, the “Try not to laugh challenge”, which is where a person must watch a series of funny videos without laughing or smiling. This is a harmless challenge that helps lift the spirits of most people. Another popular one that took the world by storm in 2016-17 is the bottle flip challenge. This is a challenge where a person must flip a bottle so that it lands on its base. This is an example of another perfectly harmless challenge that many people grew fond of. However, in addition to these fun, harmless challenges, there are many more dangerous ones. Most challenges range on a scale of hazard. Take the cinnamon challenge for example, in which a person must eat a spoonful of cinnamon. It usually just leads to temporary discomfort, and very few kids have been hurt by it. The hot-pepper challenge, on the other hand, is a challenge in which a person must consume a hot pepper. This can cause extreme discomfort and temporary pain. People often quickly consume some food or liquid to help stop the pain. However, there have been a few cases of people being sent to hospitals from the hot-pepper challenge. Finally, there are the really dangerous challenges. For example, in the Benadryl challenge a person must consume large amounts of benadryl, often leading to overdoses. It is difficult to understand why people are promoting this kind of behavior, or even why people are trying it out. Perhaps an even more dangerous challenge is the Blackout challenge. This challenge involves a person choking themselves until they pass out. It is difficult to understand why people would forgo common sense and participate in this challenge. One explanation may be the influential power



of TikTok users on impressionable, young minds. To fully understand their influence though, we have to understand how the message spreads and is accessible to everyone.

[Exploring Virality] :

When talking about virality, it is not just about the content being uploaded and the creators behind it. It is also about the people who consume the media being shared. According to research done by Wadbring and Ödmark (2016), there are two classes of people when consuming media. The media leaders, and the followers. The leaders are the people who basically give a story fuel to run on. They are the first ones who believe in the piece. According to the researchers, these leaders are often smarter, have a high degree of involvement with society, and have a positive mindset towards change. The followers join once the piece has picked up steam. There is also a criteria about when a piece of media should get famous. Time and place, feelings given from it, who it represents, and whether or not it is understandable are all important. According to data collected by Wadbring and Ödmark (2016), many people start clinging to the media when they can talk about it. Like gossip by the watercooler, social media challenges that are intended to go viral should be able to be easily picked up and talked around the workplace. Usually stuff that is controversial and relatable are easy to pick up, which may explain the virality and popularity of some extremely dangerous challenges discussed above. However stories can also be shared if they contain useful information (i.e., stock market, disasters, inventions, companies). In truth, virality comes in many forms of content. However, usually either relatable or original, never before seen content are what sticks out. In the next section, I will give my own input on how social media is being treated, how the people are using their influence, and why people still do risky behavior they see online. I will also describe a few anecdotes from people who were able to use social media for the better.

[Protecting the Next Generation] :

Even after considering the thrill of participating in challenges that are novel and controversial, it can be challenging to understand why so many people put themselves at risk. I suspect that people often use TikTok and do challenges in order to seek a sense of fulfillment. Most challenges usually seem harmless and often people engage in these challenges because they enjoy being part of a social group. However, as explained above, many challenges are very dangerous and consequences of participating can be severe. It may therefore be best to avoid any challenges that look even remotely dangerous, despite the desire to be a part of the social group. However, one thing about TikTok itself as a platform is that most of its users are from the ages 16-24. This is also considered the time of life where most people are vulnerable and are willing for pretty much anything (PBS, pbs.org, PBS, 31 January, 2002). People often are tempted to do unsafe stuff either for the fun of it, or they seem pressured by their peers. Peer pressure is a serious thing that can lead to negative consequences. I have seen many people in my life do things that put them in horrible situations just because some of their friends thought it would be funny or cool. This is often seen a lot in modern media as well. Encouragingly, people have begun to combat these dangerous challenges by releasing safer, alternative challenges. One such example originates from the Kiki challenge where a person would jump out of a moving vehicle. Unsurprisingly, this challenge is dangerous and results in many injuries. In order to publicize a safer alternative, Ty Dolla \$ign and Jimmy Kimmel released their own version of this challenge called the Light Challenge. In this version of the challenge a person does a little



dance in a car while holding up the “L” shape over their forehead. This example highlights the fact that not all celebrities are promoting dangerous content and, in fact, many are using their reputation and influence in order to encourage more responsible social media behavior. A second way to help users stay away from dangerous trends is to moderate what they can see online. This is already happening with users stopping to upload, and rules becoming much more strict. In my opinion, I think that these quality of life changes are super beneficial and welcome additions.

Conclusion :

In conclusion, many children and teens now have access to the internet which has led to concern about dangerous content such as some viral trends on TikTok (e.g., the Benadryl challenge). The reason behind the virality of these trends may be the novel, controversial nature of them. Even with all the issues with social media, many celebrities and other individuals are attempting to mitigate harm through limiting what can be shared and providing alternative, safe content and challenges. So while social media influence is considered a double edged sword and opinions about it heavily differ depending on who you talk to, the truth is that social media influence can be a power used for positive or negative things. It just depends upon what is being uploaded and shared by the creators to the people.

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