

Prevalence of Engagement in Online Challenges Among Children and Youth in Institutional Care Settings

Prevalence zapojení do online výzev mezi dětmi a mládeží v zařízeních ústavní péče

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Abstract:

The study aimed to identify and analyse the prevalence of children and young people engaging in online challenges in institutional care settings. The Viral Internet Challenges Scale "VICH-S", aimed at measuring motivation to engage in online challenges (Ortega-Barón et al., 2022) as well as the scale in the EU Kids Online IV in the Slovak Republic (Izrael et al., 2020) were applied to obtain data. The research population consisted of child clients from institutional care aged 10-18 years from the Žilina and Banská Bystrica regions. The results of the research showed an increased level of risk behaviour in child clients attending primary schools. We also found no statistically significant difference between boys and girls engaging in online challenges. The research results indicated that child clients often engaged in online challenges mainly to fit in with a group or collective or to show their courage.


Keywords:

Institutional care; children; youth; online environment; online challenges

Abstrakt:

Cieľom štúdie bolo zistiť a analyzovať prevalenciu zapájania sa detí a mládeže do online výziev v podmienkach inštitucionálnej starostlivosti. Na získanie údajov bola aplikovaná škála Viral Internet Challenges Scale „VICH-S“ zameraná na meranie motivácie zapájania sa do online výziev (Ortega-Barón et al., 2022) ako aj škála v rámci EU Kids Online IV v Slovenskej republike (Izrael a kol., 2020). Výskumný súbor tvorili detskí klienti z inštitucionálnej starostlivosti vo veku 10–18 rokov zo Žilinského kraja a Banskobystrického kraja. Výsledky výskumu preukázali zvýšenú mieru rizikového správania detských klientov, ktorí navštevujú základné školy. Zistili sme tiež, že neexistuje štatisticky významný rozdiel v zapájaní sa do online výziev medzi chlapcami a dievčatami. Výsledky výskumu naznačili, že detskí klienti sa často zapájali do online výziev hlavne z dôvodu zapadnutia do skupiny alebo kolektívu, prípadne, aby ukázali svoju odvahu.

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Klíčové slová:

Inštitucionálna starostlivosť; deti; mládež; online prostredie; online výzvy

Introduction

In the digital world, we are often confronted with modern ways of speaking and contributing. Because we are social creatures, it is typical and natural for us to need to belong somewhere. Online challenges are based on our sociability and connect with our emotions and needs. Some challenges are innocent, raise the level of fun and awareness and are charitable in nature. On the other hand, others appear to be harmful and dangerous, as they endanger children and young people in particular, both psychologically and physically, and in extreme cases cause fatalities. These appeals aim to act on the emotional side, instilling fear in the individual and, through this, to make him or her do certain things. Fear of missing out, or FOMO, is the fear of missing something. Essentially, this fear encourages children to push and explore their boundaries and have a natural desire to connect, share and embrace experiences with friends and the wider online community. It is one of the most common causes of social media overuse. The risk is also related to likes, as they are invited to challenges by friends and sometimes find it very difficult to say no due to their desire to be accepted among their regular peers (Madro and Juránková, 2022).

Many online challenges are spread on various social media sites and have become a part of many children's and adolescents' lives (Niklová et al., 2022). Online challenges are differentiated depending on the goal, which is primarily thematic and may pose particular risks to the user. An essential part of the given challenges is their uploading and subsequent posting on various social networks (Grant-Alfieri et al., 2013; Kopecký et al., 2020, 2021, among others). In the literature, online appeals are categorised according to different ways, through time duration (long-term or short-term), riskiness (safe, e.g. fun or helpful, or dangerous), or in some cases, they can also bring a positive idea (Bonifazi et al., 2022). Challenges can be categorised into:

- social, which do not pose a danger and have a family or social element, i.e. they represent an interactive challenge,
- solidarity-based, whose primary aim is to draw attention to the issue at hand while encouraging helpful behaviour and helping others,
- non-sociable, which are more likely to be considered rude but should not pose a risk to the user,
- dangerous, which may endanger a person's physical or psychological life while revealing the user's privacy (Ortega et al., 2020).

In most cases, as Kopecký (2019) states, the challenges are harmful, risky and, in some cases, even destructive. The type of these prompts is mainly associated with dangerous activities, behaviour and actions in which children are primarily encouraged to engage.

Střílková (2020) points out that the challenges consist of the distribution of dangerous instructions, recommendations and advice that encourage the imitation of risky behaviour, the subsequent creation of videos, i.e. evidence of the completion of the designated task, and the subsequent sharing through social media.

Risk challenges or risky behaviour have also been outside the virtual world, but through social media and the Internet in general, they are spread en masse to a large number of its users (Kopecký, 2020). Students often engage in risky challenges under the

influence of peer groups and in an attempt to engage them. Further, they may be motivated by a large social media following. The more daring and dangerous the challenge, the more it increases the pupils' popularity among subscribers and followers (Kollárová, Majerčáková, 2024).

Considering the above taxonomy, as stated by Dulovics et al. (2023), it is important to differentiate the goals of the diverse types of online challenges that children and youth may come into contact with. It is also important to highlight the risks of these dangerous challenges that threaten and subsequently impact individuals' physical and mental health.

1 Methodological background and characteristics of the research sample

Given the recognition that several projects are implemented in "ordinary" households, we anticipate that mapping risky online behaviour could also be implemented in institutional care. The research aimed "to identify and analyse what forms of risk behaviour are experienced in the online environment by children in institutional care".

RQ1 - What is the frequency of respondents' involvement in online challenges and their motivation?

The research population consisted of child clients from the Centres for Children and Families of the Žilina Region and the Banská Bystrica Region. We asked the Slovak Statistical Office, Department of Information and Marketing in Bratislava, to provide a list of current centres for children and families in the Slovak Republic. The list consisted of 68 centres for children and families, of which seven were from the Žilina Region and 12 from the Banská Bystrica Region. As a result, 11 centres for children and families participated in our research, of which three were from the Žilina region, and eight were from the Banská Bystrica region. The participating centres signed an informed consent on behalf of their director to participate in the research, as this is a specific research sample. The consent evidenced voluntary participation and informed consent to anonymity and use of the results for research purposes. The research population consisted of 97 intact respondents from Žilina and Banská Bystrica regions, of which 51 were girls (52.6%) and 46 were boys (47.4%). The average age of the respondents was 14.49 years.

The research was conducted using an electronic questionnaire constructed in Google Forms. The scale from the EU Kids Online IV project in the Slovak Republic was used in the research (Izrael et al, 2020), which was conducted on a research sample of the population of children aged 9-17 years in 2018, as well as the Viral Internet Challenges Scale "VICH-S" aimed at measuring motivation to engage in online challenges (Ortega-Barón et al., 2022); closed and open-ended questions of our construction aimed at monitoring pupils' engagement in online challenges. We supplemented the questionnaire with demographic items. The research instrument consisted of 30 items aimed at identifying key variables. We tested the statistical significance of differences at a significance level of $p\text{-value} \leq 0.05$. Before analysing the data through selected tests, we verified the normal distributions of the data variables and used the Mann-Whitney U-test based on the results. We also used the methods of logical analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, comparison, generalisation, and abstraction.

2 Results and discussion

The online environment is one of unlimited possibilities and where risky behaviour, such as online challenges, can occur. Not all online challenges are dangerous. Some are viral, targeting the individual and using different types of motivation to get as many children, young people, and adults to participate. In Table 1, we present ascending ranked statements in the form of arithmetic mean and median regarding the prevalence of engagement in online challenges. Respondents expressed individual responses using a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 1 Prevalence of respondents' involvement in online challenges

Engaging in online challenges	Gender	N	AM	Mdn	MD	SD
I feel good about it when I dare to participate in a challenge.	Girls	51	2.47	2.00	1	1.515
	Boys	46	2.98	3.00	1	1.468
	Total	97	2.71	3.00	1	1.507
I like to hear what others think about my courage and the challenges I participate in.	Girls	51	2.78	3.00	1	1.604
	Boys	46	2.56	2.50	1	1.454
	Total	97	2.69	3.00	1	1.530
I like to show off my courage or participate in a challenge with more people to make me feel part of a group.	Girls	51	2.59	2.00	1	1.663
	Boys	46	2.35	2.00	1	1.449
	Total	97	2.47	2.00	1	1.562
When I show my courage and participate in an online challenge, I am happy for others to emulate me.	Girls	51	2.31	1.00	1	1.543
	Boys	46	2.48	2.00	1	1.602
	Total	97	2.39	2.00	1	1.565
I like to comment on a daring challenge others are participating in.	Girls	51	2.20	1.00	1	1.536
	Boys	46	2.52	2.00	1	1.545
	Total	97	2.35	2.00	1	1.541
I will join a daring challenge that is fashionable without considering whether it is good for me or not.	Girls	51	2.24	2.00	1	1.505
	Boys	46	2.26	2.00	1	1.357
	Total	97	2.25	2.00	1	1.429
I will join a daring challenge because I don't want to feel left out of my group of friends.	Girls	51	2.04	1.00	1	1.483
	Boys	46	2.37	2.00	1	1.540
	Total	97	2.20	1.00	1	1.511
If my friends insist that I should be brave and join a challenge I don't want to, I will eventually do it anyway.	Girls	51	1.96	1.00	1	1.455
	Boys	46	2.33	2.00	1	1.506
	Total	97	2.13	1.00	1	1.483
When asked to participate in a dangerous or other challenge, I am encouraged and will do it.	Girls	51	2.02	1.00	1	1.503
	Boys	46	2.26	2.00	1	1.324
	Total	97	2.13	1.00	1	1.419
I do challenges that my friends or social media contacts ask me to do.	Girls	51	1.98	1.00	1	1.449
	Boys	46	2.13	2.00	1	1.327
	Total	97	2.05	1.00	1	1.387

Source: authors' own

Legend: N-number, %-Percentage, AM-arithmetic mean, Mdn-median, MD-modus, SD-standard deviation. Likert 5-point scale: 5-totally applies to me, 4-somewhat applies to me, 3-don't know, 2-somewhat doesn't apply to me, 1-doesn't apply to me at all.

Respondents most frequently indicated the statement "I feel good about it when I dare to participate in a challenge" (AM=2.71; Mdn=3.00), with Boys indicating this more often than Girls. Further, respondents indicated the statement: "I like to hear what others think about my courage and the challenges I participate in" (AM=2.69; Mdn=3.00), with Girls indicating this more often; "I like to show off my courage or participate in a challenge with more people to make me feel part of a group" (AM=2.47; Mdn=2.00); "When I show my courage and participate in an online challenge, I am happy for others to emulate me" (AM=2.39; Mdn=2.00); and also "I like to comment on a daring challenge others are participating in" (AM=2.35; Mdn=2.00). Less indicated "I will join a daring challenge that is fashionable without considering whether it is good for me or not" (AM=2.25; Mdn=2.00); "I will join a daring challenge because I don't want to feel left out of my group of friends" (AM=2.20; Mdn=1.00); "If my friends insist that I should be brave and join a challenge I don't want to, I will eventually do it anyway" (AM=2.13; Mdn=1.00); "When asked to participate in a dangerous or other challenge, I am encouraged and will do it" (AM=2.13; Mdn=1.00); and "I do challenges that my friends or social media contacts ask me to do" (AM=2.05; Mdn=1.00).

In Table 2, we present the prevalence of participation in risky online challenges when gender differences are found.

Table 2 *The difference between boys and girls when engaging in online challenges*

Motivation for joining the online challenge	Boys (N=46)		Girls (N=51)		Mann-Whitney U-test		
	Mdn	SD	Mdn	SD	U-test	Z	p
I'm happy if others emulate me.	2.00	1.602	1.00	1.543	1109.500	-0.492	0.623
I show courage; I want to be part of the group.	2.00	1.449	2.00	1.663	1077.000	-0.736	0.462
I like commenting on the challenges others participate in.	2.00	1.545	1.00	1.536	1039.000	-1.039	0.299
I like to hear what others think about my courage.	2.50	1.454	3.00	1.604	1097.500	-0.563	0.573
When I participate, I feel good about it.	3.00	1.468	2.00	1.515	946.000	-1.685	0.092
I participate when I am asked via social media.	2.00	1.327	1.00	1.449	1056.000	-0.928	0.354
I don't want to be left out of my group of friends.	2.00	1.540	1.00	1.483	1043.500	-1.017	0.309
I will participate in a fashionable challenge.	2.00	1.357	2.00	1.505	1143.500	-0.227	0.821
I am encouraged when asked, and I do it.	2.00	1.324	1.00	1.503	1013.000	-1.269	0.204
If friends insist on my getting involved, even if I don't want to.	2.00	1.506	1.00	1.455	1002.500	-1.359	0.174

Source: authors' own

Legend: N-number; Mdn-median; SD-standard deviation; U-test and Z-values of Mann-Whitney U test; p-statistical significance.

The Mann-Whitney U-test did not confirm a statistically significant difference, even at the $p \leq 0.05$ significance level between boys and girls in engaging in online challenges

Conclusion

Many children participate in online risk challenges for the adrenaline rush, because of peers, some for adventure, attention, and success, and even some crave social status. Some challenges provide fun and distraction, but some challenges can put children at risk mentally and physically and, in extreme cases, even cause death. It is also dangerous that pupils do not know how to regulate their decisions sufficiently, do not have enough life experience, and therefore often act recklessly and take risks. Many online challenges are harmless and pose no risk to children or adolescents. Developmentally, adolescence is characterised by young people trying to fit in, needing to assert themselves, and the like. The tendency of adolescents to behave in a risky way is characteristic of adolescence, which is determined by the increased influence of emotions that cause distortions in logical reasoning. Adolescents have difficulty regulating their emotions. Many online challenges can lead to severe damage to physical or mental health or even cause death (Dulovics et al., 2023; Zošáková, 2022).

Children also learn by imitation, which is also true for children from the child and family centres who need support from those around them. They need to see positive role models, which they can find in educators, psychologists, social workers, and social pedagogues, whom they can reach in some centres or schools. It is also up to us, as social educators, to be such role models for children and young people, and not only in the centres for children and families, since in their case, the absence of the closest person, the parent, is at stake. For children in ordinary households, in many cases, it is parents or siblings who are the role models. However, even with them, there is a great deal of room for risky behaviour, as several studies have pointed out.

The research's limitations include the fact that many centres for children and families also housed mentally disadvantaged children who would not understand the meaning of the questionnaire items or intact clients who were in the process of resocialisation. Therefore, the representatives of the individual centres did not agree to their participation in the research, thus reducing the research sample. Another limitation we perceive is the distribution of respondents within the two regions, which may lead to bias in some of the questionnaire survey results.

Project affiliation

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