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Abstract

TikTok is known for 15 second to 10-minute videos instead of text posts with limited characters, characteristic of Twitter, and users have used the platform to share dangerous challenges or their attempts. Much research has been done on why children and adolescents participate in these challenges with few studies focusing on young adults. Here, a survey was created and advertised on well-known social media sites, seeking TikTok users over 18-years-old who participated in one or more dangerous challenge. The goal was to gain insight into the motivations for participating, so the questions regarded their experience in attempting the challenge(s). While the survey was active and advertised, no responses were submitted, though according to Twitter's analytics, a few people had clicked on the survey link. It was theorized that the target group simply did not see the advertisements or did not want to fill out the survey.

Introduction

It is difficult finding a young smartphone user who does not have at least one social media app, such as Snapchat or Instagram. Social media provides a way of keeping in contact with friends or meeting people online, even finding handmade crafts for sale or quickly bringing attention to a serious situation. Notably, it allows a person to share fun challenges, some of which may raise awareness of diseases similar to the Ice Bucket challenge bringing attention to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. This challenge gets its name from participants dumping a bucket filled with water and ice on themselves, and those who complete this challenge can then challenge others to donate to the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Association (ALSA) or otherwise pour a bucket with the same contents on themselves, though the new participants may choose to do both (Pressgrove et al., 2017). However, there are challenges that may involve risks, which can be

appealing to thrill-seekers, and there are others that have dire consequences. The Tide Pod challenge, for instance, has participants put a Tide Pod in their mouth despite the danger associated with ingesting the chemicals. Some teenage or young adult participants were reported to foam at the mouth or cough during their attempt (Koushik, 2018).

Videos on TikTok may be 15-60 seconds long, but the platform has allowed 10-minute videos so that users do not need to split long content into multiple parts (*Camera tools*; *Creating Longer Videos*). Regardless of length, dangerous challenges are spread with the help of hashtags or could potentially be found in the main feed. Most attempts at the challenges are done by children and adolescents, and research has been done on their motivations. Young adults have also attempted the challenges, but there is little literature on their motivations and their thoughts and emotions before and after completing them. This study seeks to provide this information by surveying TikTok users over 18 years old, such as 18–24-year-old college students, who have participated in dangerous challenges.

Literature Review

TikTok has become one of the most popular social media apps in recent years, containing a wide range of content in various subjects. Of particular interest is users making videos where they do what other users have done before, like dancing to a certain song or using the exact same sounds and effects for a skit. Zulli & Zulli (2020) described TikTok as an "imitation public", which they "broadly define[d] as a collection of people whose digital connectivity is constituted through the ritual of content imitation and replication." In other words, TikTok is an imitation public because it hosts a large number of users who connect through the imitation of certain content generated by other users. The platform is unusual in that content interaction is more important than user-to-

user interaction, but Zulli & Zulli (2020) mentioned that communities, alongside users'
identities, are formed through imitation.

Before TikTok's rise in popularity, people attempted challenges that were shared on
various social media sites. Some were harmless or done to raise awareness, such as the Ice
Bucket Challenge, but others were highly dangerous or life-threatening, such as the Blue Whale
Challenge. The Blue Whale Challenge has the "player," who may be a teenager suffering from
mental health issues, follow fifty tasks of varying degrees of danger, such as poking one's hand
with a needle multiple times or standing on the edge of a bridge. The final task has the "player"
commit suicide. After completing each task, the player would report to a so-called curator, and if
the player tried refusing a task, the curator would threaten the player's family or overall bully the
player (Mukhra et al., 2017).

New challenges have appeared on TikTok, and studies investigated why users participate
in them, whether they are dangerous or not (Ahlse et al., 2020; Falgoust et al., 2022; Omar &
Dequan, 2020; Roth et al., 2021). There are also studies on reasons for participating in
challenges overall (Deslandes et al., 2020; Ortega-Baron et al., 2021). Furthermore, one research
study provided criteria for determining whether a challenge is dangerous based on its lifespan
and characteristics (Bonifazi et al., 2022).

Regarding TikTok users who have participated in a challenge(s), Roth et al. (2021)
interviewed adolescents and young adults in South India and found that they encouraged others
to do the same challenge after posting a video of their own attempt, and that most had no regrets
of attempting it. However, there were some who would have avoided the challenge if they were
made aware of the pain beforehand. In addition, most participants said they would follow what
their peers did and believed that their online actions would be accepted by their peers. Falgoust

et al. (2022) interviewed college students on their challenge participation and learned that entertainment, convenience, socialization, seeking and sharing information, social support, and escapism were motivators, with entertainment being the strongest and escapism being the lowest motivator.

Regarding challenge participants from other social media sites and their motivation, Ortega-Baron et al. (2021) surveyed children and teenagers with a self-designed scale and found that the gender of the challenge participants was not a factor, and that challenge participants were highly satisfied and socially motivated after completing multiple challenges. Deslandes et al. (2020) analyzed YouTube videos of children and teenagers attempting harmful challenges with a focus on sociability. Essentially, it was observed that they risked their health to form an online, attention-grabbing identity and with the expectation that viewers would subscribe to their channel. Both studies seem to suggest that social factors have a role in challenge participation.

Aside from social and personal motivators, there may be biological or behavioral reasons why children and adolescents participate in dangerous challenges. A 1997 study investigated the risk-taking behavior in children using a self-made model, which helped identify certain influencing factors. The authors viewed risk taking as something that can lead to success so long as certain strategies are used, and their model included traits the risk-taker should have for better chances of success. They found that certain situations led to risk taking and that being overconfident, competitive, insensitive to outcomes, and sensation seeking resulted in lower chances of success (Miller & Byrnes, 1997). Furthermore, the authors had the children complete tasks involving risk-taking and compared their risk-taking behavior on whether their friends were present; overall, the friends' presence had no effect (Miller & Byrnes, 1997).

Steinberg (2007) investigated the risky behavior of adolescents and posited that psychological effects were the main reason. The author repeatedly cited research showing that adolescents and adults shared the same level of logical reasoning abilities. The author then described two networks in the brain. One was the socioemotional network, which influences the adolescent in risky behavior, especially when there are peers present, and is more sensitive during puberty. The other network, the cognitive-control network, is key in controlling risky behavior and matures as the adolescent grows older. Thus, adolescents display risky behavior despite having adult-level logical reasoning abilities because their brain's socioemotional network is sensitive, and the cognitive-control network is immature (Steinberg, 2007).

Sensation seeking, which was mentioned earlier, is described as a trait when a person seeks out unique and intense experiences and is willing to do whatever they can to have those experiences (Zuckerman, 1994). A 2004 literature review went over then-present studies and their findings regarding sensation seeking. Most studies shared the conclusion that people who like stimulating activities would show sensation seeking behavior and that biological factors, like hormones, are involved, although there were studies with opposing results. It was also said that young adults showed more risk-taking behavior than other age groups (Roberti, 2004).

Studies on the motivation behind older TikTok users participating in dangerous challenges are few and there is little information on their thoughts and feelings after completing them; this study will attempt to fill this gap. But first, there should be some insight into what makes TikTok appealing to its users.

TikTok's Appeal

TikTok is owned by ByteDance and was released in 2017 internationally, a year after the

Chinese version of the app, Douyin, was released. It wasn't available in the United States until

2018 after ByteDance merged with lip-syncing app Musical.ly (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Zulli &

Zulli, 2020) and it rose to popularity during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic,

offering a means to escape and providing connection to others (Falgoust et al., 2022;

Schellewalk, 2023). However, it was observed that some users went on the app less often while

others used it more post-pandemic; for one user, he no longer needed to escape from real-life

nuisances and wanted to focus on his studies better while another user, who originally did not

find TikTok appealing, began enjoying its de-stressing aspect (Schellewalk, 2023).

Many popular social media sites like Facebook and Twitter allow users to upload images,

videos, or text posts. While Instagram is like TikTok in that videos and images are the only

format for posts, TikTok is exclusively videos that are 15 seconds to 10 minutes long. As was

observed by Zulli & Zulli (2020), the most unique features of TikTok are its form of connection

between users and memes that act as a tool for gaining popularity. They noted that TikTok was

designed to be an imitation public, which they described as a large group of people connected

through imitating and replicating online content. The imitation public on TikTok takes the form

of people filming themselves attempting challenges and doing dances choreographed by other

users. It is through this imitation of content that users can interact with each other—aside from

leaving comments and "likes"—and which may be an appealing aspect of the app.

Another appealing aspect is the "For You" page, as Schellewalk (2023) learned while

interviewing young adult users in England. The For You page (FYP) is a constant feed of videos

controlled by a recommendation system that provides content based on the user's perceived

interests. TikTok even has a page explaining what it is and how to curate it to better suit one's

tastes (*What is the 'For You' feed?*). The interviewees said that the FYP provided a means for escaping real-life nuisances, taking a break before tackling a task, or de-stressing. As Schellewalk (2023) states, the interviewees were purposefully getting "carried away and distracted." A situation that Schellewalk used as an example was when an interviewee was living with his family in the initial interviews, during the lockdown mandate in the COVID-19 pandemic. He had a little brother who kept interrupting the interview, and it seemed to annoy him. Thus, as he was in a space with little privacy and a source of annoyance, the FYP would have appealed to him for its distracting aspect (Schellewalk, 2023). This escapism aspect was also found in the results of the survey done by Omar & Dequan (2020).

Something else that Schellewalk (2023) learned was that the interviewees were not interested in famous users or popular trends. Bhandari and Bimo (2022) had a similar finding in that many interviewees were apparently indifferent towards the creators of the content they enjoyed and, unless it was to curate the FYP, did not leave comments under the videos. The interviewees were also young adults, so it might be said that this age group is more interested in the content itself rather than the creators behind them, but there is evidence of young adult users who do find appeal and participate in trends (Falgoust et al., 2022) as well as challenges (Ahlse et al., 2020; Roth et al., 2021). A portion of participants in a study by Falgoust et al. (2022) said that doing dances or trends helped with social interactions and feelings of belonging, and the authors suggested that social interactions are lent from dance challenges being done in groups while feelings of belonging are from the miniscule risk of disapproval.

Also, a unique observation by Schellewalk (2023) about TikTok's appeal is that it helps users socially connect with friends and family outside the platform. One of the individuals Schellewalk interviewed said she would share videos with her friends that were related to

something previously said or were related to a common interest. As the interviewee described it, it was a gesture of "thinking of them." Bhandari and Bimo (2022) also had interviewees describe this use of TikTok with one of them saying "'the TikTok is the message.'" From these, it seems that the option of sharing videos of common interest with others is an appealing aspect to young adult users.

TikTok is described as an imitation public from users connecting with each other by imitating certain content (Zulli & Zulli, 2020), which can be seen in its young adult users dancing with friends to a user-created choreography and doing trends (Falgoust et al., 2022). This type of social interaction may be one appealing aspect to young adults; others would be the For You page, for providing a means of escape, letting one take a break before doing a task, and de-stressing (Schellewalk, 2023), and the option to share videos with friends and family as a gesture of thinking of them (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022).

So far, these are TikTok's general appeal to young adults. It was acknowledged that there were those who found trends and challenges appealing enough to participate in them (Falgoust et al., 2022; Roth et al., 2021) and earlier there was mention of a few studies pertaining to motivations behind challenge participation on TikTok. In the following section, these studies will be explored to learn some of the thoughts of challenge participants.

Interviews with TikTok Users on Motivations for Challenge Attempts

Dances choreographed by TikTok users are a type of activity that can be imitated and spread, alongside challenges. They can be referred to as a dance challenge, such as the #OutWestChallenge (Tait, 2020), or the name of the song playing in the background, such as the dance that uses Megan Thee Stallion's song, "Savage". Some popular dances created by users

are the Renegade dance, choreographed by Jalaiah Harmon at 14 years old to the song "Lottery" by K Camp, who later renamed the song to the dance's name (Atkin, 2021; Lang, 2020; Tait, 2020); the "Say So" dance, which gets its name from the song by Doja Cat and which was choreographed by 17-year-old Haley Sharpe (Atkin, 2021; Lang, 2020); and the "Cannibal" dance, done by Briana Hantsch to the song by Ke$ha (Lang, 2020). Interestingly, there is a challenge that combines dancing and an act that one may see in a challenge. This is called the Kiki Challenge, and it was inspired by an internet comedian named Shiggy dancing to "In My Feelings" by Drake. Those who replicated the dance added the dangerous flare of doing it while keeping up with their car as it is moving, which has led to injuries from falling or running into a pole and even a TikTok user's handbag getting stolen (Lyons, 2018).

Still, there are challenges that are not as dangerous but still seen as fun, such as the chili eating challenge and tortilla challenge. The tortilla challenge has participants with a mouthful of water play rock-paper-scissors, and whoever loses must get slapped in the face with an uncooked tortilla by the winner. The challenging aspect is keeping the water in one's mouth. As observed during initial research, challenges and trends seem to overlap because both refer to an activity that has become popular over time. For instance, there is a trend where an adult cracks an egg on a child or toddler's head, dubbed the #eggprank or egg prank challenge, which has garnered 670.7 million views under #eggprank according to a couple 2023 articles as well as negative responses (Lee, 2023; Rosenblatt, 2023; Solé, 2023). The naming scheme could possibly have resulted from many users doing this activity, hence the occasional addition of the word "challenge", and/or the activity being something one wouldn't do usually but is nonetheless entertaining, making it a challenge.

When looking at the trending page provided by TikTok, however, the focus is on popular hashtags, songs, creators, and videos (*Trend Discovery*). There is an option to view the analytics of each topic, letting one see the likeliness of a hashtag to trend in the next however many days, how many followers and likes a creator has, and the interest towards a song over 7, 30, or 120 days (*Trend Discovery*). TikTok has provided a guide for users so that they may understand trends and how to create them (*How do trends start on TikTok?*), but another, more in-depth guide has been written by Lauren Strapagiel (Strapagiel, 2023). Something that has been acknowledged by TikTok is that trends may last for a long or short period of time, and a possible example could be the whipped coffee trend, which gained popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic (Boscamp, 2020). There is potential to use TikTok's trending page to track the popularity of a challenge, though the author of this study has not attempted to do so and it is unknown if it already has been done.

The studies by Ahlse et al. (2020), Falgoust et al. (2022), and Roth et al. (2021) investigated why TikTok users participate in challenges. Ahlse et al. (2020) and Falgoust et al. (2022) had the Uses and Gratification Theory as their framework, which has been used to understand the motives of media consumers (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). The theory provides categories for motives, such as entertainment and information seeking, but Ahlse et al. (2020) and Falgoust et al. (2022) included one or a few categories formed outside the theory, such as structure and representation, respectively. Meanwhile, Roth et al. (2021) used the Integrated Behavior Model as the framework, which contains the lens of attitudes and norms influencing behaviors and how much control an individual believes they have on their behavior.

Ahlse et al. (2020) interviewed 16 Swedish individuals born in the years 1995-2010 and found that entertainment was a major reason behind challenge participation, with the deciding

factor being whether the challenge would be fun to do. Interviewees said that doing a challenge with a friend increased motivation, and one said that the competitiveness that came with it made the challenge fun. In the socializing category, which was the third highest motive category for attempting a challenge, interviewees said that they would be motivated to try a challenge if a friend had done it before, but interestingly, one interviewee said otherwise. In that same category, it was reported that interviewees had contradicting opinions on whether a challenge was trending affected motivation, with one person saying it would while another said it wouldn't unless friends were partaking in it.

The second major reason for challenge participation was convenience or the simpleness of the challenge. Many interviewees found the simplicity appealing while two interviewees liked those that were slightly more difficult. The other motivators for challenge participation were socializing and personal identity, which held the same level of motivation, information seeking, and status. Regarding personal identity, interviewees who hesitated in attempting challenges said that they may participate if it served a greater purpose, such as spreading useful information. They may also participate if they could display any exceptional abilities, if a liked company created the challenge, and if it appealed to their own interests. Status, defined by the authors as recognition by peers, caused many interviewees to hesitate posting content because they viewed it as "cringe." These interviewees seemed to be closer to the age of 25, but they did consider choosing challenges that were specifically trending or ones that let them secretly display their skills. The latter is somewhat similar to interviewees' motivation of displaying competency in an ability, described in the personal identity category.

Falgoust et al. (2022) found that entertainment and having fun were the highest motivators while escapism was the lowest motivator. Focusing on the entertainment category,

humor was a secondary motivator with one participant saying that they did a dance because the dancer had looked funny while another said that she did a challenge to be perceived as funny. Other motivators within the category were avoidance of backlash by producing positive content and finding appeal in one of the challenge's components, such as the topic. As for escapism, it was said that challenges and dances were done to pass the time or cope with the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, there were statements by others of how unproductive escaping through TikTok itself was and that they unintentionally stayed longer on the app than expected.

Convenience was the second motivator in the study by Falgoust et al. (2022) with results similar to those found by Ahlse et al. (2020) in that seeming simplicity was appealing, and the motive categories that followed were socialization, seeking and sharing information, and social support. Bringing attention to socialization, interacting with others and the fear of missing out were high motivators in this category, and regarding the fear of missing out, one interviewee believed that since many people were doing challenges, there was high temptation to join in. Next, regarding information, interviewees expressed interest in learning skills such as brewing a certain coffee recipe and learning trends or dances that may lead to social belonging. Finally, for social support, major motivators in this category were the positive comments from friends and from other users on a completed challenge. Conversely, offering positive comments or showing interest in others' dances were motivators that were also part of the category.

Roth et al. (2021) found that 76% of interviewees felt positive emotions when doing challenges and expressed care towards receiving likes and views, and high numbers of interviewees believed close and online friends would approve of what they did online and that they would participate in a challenge they did. Interviewees also knew of others who had done

the same challenge, and a high number said that previous challenge participants seemed to enjoy what they were doing and did not see anyone getting hurt. Notably, a significant number of interviewees reported that the challenges they did were simple, which apparently confirms what Ahlse et al. (2020) and Falgoust et al. (2022) discovered. It may be said that rewards in the form of completing challenges and likes and views, and the positive effects of peers are influences on challenge participation. It may also be said that perceived enjoyment and safety of the previous challenge participants would be influences.

However, there were a few interviewees who expressed regret over participating in a certain challenge and said that, if they had been aware in the beginning, they would have avoided or done it differently to bypass the pain. The author quoted a participant who had done the Fire Challenge, which seemed to have burned them, to exemplify this. Furthermore, many interviewees cautioned future challenge participants and told them to not hurt themselves or anyone else (Roth et al., 2021). On the other end, there were interviewees who would have produced more content, including challenge attempts, if they had discovered TikTok sooner. Some also encouraged TikTok users to post more, and an interviewee was quoted saying, "These challenges and social media sites are fun filled and it will give us some level of confidence to act out."

Overall, entertainment and convenience were the highest and second highest motivators for doing a challenge. When considering the role of other people in motivation, the study by Ahlse et al. (2020) showed that friends could be deterrents or motivators while in the study by Falgoust et al. (2022), a high number of interviewees believed that they would be supported by close and online friends in what they do online. Status was a low motivator because, for TikTok users seemingly close to 25 years old, posting on the platform was perceived as "cringey".

Escapism was listed as a motivator during the COVID-19 pandemic and in terms of passing the time, but it was also viewed negatively when considering TikTok overall. Regarding the findings of Roth et al. (2021), it seemed that peers, interactions on one's posts through likes and views, and being able to complete the challenge were factors behind the interviewees' challenge participation.

Special attention should be brought to something else Roth et al. (2021) discovered: a significant portion of interviewees placed enjoyment over wise decisions in terms of importance. Taking it together with some interviewees placing a high value on receiving likes and views, this can be viewed as being risky. The next section will discuss risk-taking behavior that mainly focuses on adolescents but will touch upon adults and the behavior in general.

Risk Taking Behavior

Multiple studies have analyzed why people take risks and pursue thrilling activities during vacation such as sky diving, which are riskier than more mundane activities like simply relaxing on the beach. Kruschwitz et al. (2011) studied the fMRIs of people with high thrill and attention seeking (TAS) tendencies and low TAS tendencies while they did risky gains tasks, which have them select a number that will either increase or decrease the number of cents they may win. One finding was that, after receiving a penalty, those with high TAS tendencies had lower sensitivity towards punishment and took higher risks. When examining brain activity of high TAS and low TAS individuals, those with high TAS had relatively higher reward activation in certain brain areas, some of which were shared with low TAS individuals while considering risks. As for sensation seeking in adolescents, Pace et al. (2015) took on the perspective of it being a personality trait and administered a longitudinal study seeing if temperaments and

attachment styles towards others had roles in its development. It was found that both indeed had roles, and the negative affect in early adolescence, such as sadness and discomfort, and lack of control were associated with thrill seeking in later adolescence. It was also found that having a dismissing attachment, or preferring to be self-sufficient and being indifferent towards having close emotional relationships, in early adolescence may influence the connection between the thrill seeking behavior in later adolescence with the negative affect and lack of control.

Sensation seeking may be indicative of risk-taking behavior for adolescents, but the behavior itself has been extensively studied, extending from the biological standpoint to social lenses. The investigation by Tymula et al. (2012) involved comparing results between adolescent and adult participants after they played a game, with consideration of both age groups' attitudes towards risk and ambiguity. Risk attitude, as they defined it, is "her willingness to accept offers when she knows the precise odds of each possible outcome" while ambiguity attitude is "her willingness to accept offers when the precise odds of each possible outcome are not known." The game had multiple trials and monetary risks, where participants had to reach into a bag and take out a single token that either rewarded them with a certain amount of money or nothing. The results suggested that overall, adolescents were not sensitive towards choices when consequential probabilities were unknown; this means that when there is a choice with an unknown probability of receiving punishment, an adolescent would be insensitive and might select that choice anyway.

Van Hoorn et al. (2016) also had their participants play a guessing game, with and without peers offering advice digitally. In this game, a card would be right-side up while another would be upside down; the participant had to guess whether the upside-down card had a higher or lower value than the right-side up card and place a bet using poker chips. The researchers

observed the guessing and gambling behavior of the participants, and these altogether were used in investigating whether the presence of peers influenced risk-taking behavior, using a social norm lens. For guessing behavior, it was found that guesses on the upside-down card's value depended on its probabilities—for instance, if the right-side up card had a value of 1, there was a great probability that the upside-down card had a higher value. Thus, the presence of peers had no influence on making inferences. As for gambling behavior, it was found that peers indeed have an influence, which was in the form of participants placing higher bets when advised to. The researchers then concluded that "for decisions with a relatively certain outcome, the presence of peers rather than the type of advice is the most important factor influencing decision-making, whereas for decisions with a relatively uncertain outcome, the type of peer advice is the most important factor". In other words, peer presence influenced the participant's decisions when the outcome was known while peer advice influenced decisions when the outcome was unknown. Elaborating on the social norm lens, the researchers said that such norms took the form of peer advice and inferred that the participants followed the advice to be accepted by the peers.

Blankenstein et al. (2020) gathered brain images from participants who were part of a longitudinal study and had them fill out questionnaires to assess their prosocial and risk-taking behavior. The context of their study is that adolescence is a period when risk taking and prosocial behavior, which is associated with consideration towards others, develop. The researchers were interested in whether the behaviors were related, the relation between sensitivity to rewards and the behaviors, and the roles of perspective taking and intention to comfort towards prosocial behavior. They were also interested in predicting the behaviors overall by examining developing brains. The results showed that prosocial and risk-taking behaviors

indeed were positively related, sporadically doing something with a possible reward could lead to either behavior, and perspective taking and intention to comfort predicted prosocial behavior. The results also showed that fun seeking had a major effect on which behavior would be more evident. As well, the maturation of the medial prefrontal cortex of the brain, as seen in older participants, led to less risk-taking behavior.

Harris et al. (2002) investigated the effects of health and education on expectations adolescents had for their future, and how these expectations affected risky behavior. The authors believed that adolescents who have low expectations for their future would have an evident "nothing to lose" attitude, and the expectations would be influenced by familial economic standing and education and school environment. In their investigation, the influences were considered at an individual level and school level. This means that elements at an individual level, like the adolescent's physical characteristics and family structure, and school level, like the social norms among students and the mental health climate, were kept in mind while considering the influences affecting adolescents' expectations towards their future. A questionnaire was filled out by 90,000 students and a randomly selected sample, which came out to be 20% of the 90,000 students, underwent in-home interviews. The questions of interest were whether the adolescents expected to live to the age of 35 and whether they would graduate college; these would be used as indicators of a "nothing to lose" attitude. They found that in a school climate where students feel they would not live beyond age 35, male students may adopt the attitude; another finding was that the school climate had a high influence on risky behavior in general.

Risk taking behavior can be derived from sensation seeking and both are similar in that there is low sensitivity to punishment (Kruschwitz et al., 2011) or the possibility of punishment (Pace et al., 2015). Risk taking in adolescence seems to develop based on school environment

(Harris et al., 2002) and can be predicted in early adolescence from temperament and attachment styles (Pace et al, 2015), from the effects of fun seeking, and brain imagery (Blankenstein et al., 2020). The presence of peers may influence an adolescent in decision making (Van Hoorn et al., 2016), though it has been observed that adolescents are not too cautious towards choices with an unknown probability of receiving punishment (Tymula, 2012).

With the advent of technology, it is quite easy to find videos of adolescents displaying risk-taking behavior, from searching YouTube to random encounters on social media sites. In the past, newspapers and other paper publications were a couple of means of learning about particularly interesting or risky feats, some of which became fads from other people replicating them. The next section will touch upon the history of social fads followed by adolescents and young adults.

Brief History of Extreme, Strange, or Risky Social Fads in Adolescence

Social fads are similar to trends in that both refer to activities that a significant number of people follow. As defined by Robert E. Bartholomew, though, fads are "intense, popular enthusiasm on trivial or frivolous matters" that last for a short period of time while trends are long term, being adopted into one's lifestyle (Bartholomew, 2015). The most common example of a trend Bartholomew used in his book was fashion; for a fad, the hula hoop was used. However, according to one article, the term fad may have a flexible meaning, ranging from whether the subject is useful, important, and/or appealing to a wide audience or otherwise (Carson et al., 1999). For this paper, the term will refer to Bartholomew's definition. Looking at the history of social fads, there have been harmless ones and those involving risks or caused

public uproar. This section will touch upon the latter kind in the United States, beginning with the 1920s.

Alvin "Shipwreck" Kelly started flagpole sitting in 1924 in Hollywood, supposedly hired to do so at first (Rose & Rose, 2022), and set multiple records for it. It became a fad after he set a record of 23 days and 7 hours in Baltimore, MD in 1929, when adolescents and children were reported replicating the stunt (Rose & Rose, 2022). Marathon dancing is as the name suggests: participants dance until a couple, or a dancer is left, and some marathons would be contests with cash prizes. Marathon dancing was started as a stunt in 1923 by Alma Cummings, a dance instructor from New York, and it caught on in other parts of the United States. Flagpole sitting and dance marathons are considered endurance contests, which are described as activities done for a long period of time, though provisions and, for dancers, breaks were provided (Landis, 2017; Thornton, 2021). The popularity in endurance contests—in particular, dance marathons— increased during the Great Depression for their cash prizes, food, and shelter (Meaney, 2015; Thornton, 2021), but at the same time, there was concern for the participants' health and growing annoyance that led to bans on them (Landis, 2017; Meaney, 2015; Thornton, 2021).

In the late 1930s, swallowing goldfish became a fad for a few months before strong opposition by the government, universities, and animal rights organizations pushed it out of popularity (Bartholomew, 2015; Clark, 2015). It began in 1939 as a dare between two Harvard University students after one of them, Lothrop Withington Jr., bragged to his friend that he had once eaten a fish alive. This gained the interest of local newspapers and led to reporters witnessing and writing about the attempt on March 3rd. Afterwards, students from other colleges competed to see who could outdo the other. A single goldfish increased into multiple goldfish and some even swallowed other animals such as mice and snake heads (Bartholomew, 2015). It

was reported that closer to the end of the fad, George Krapf, a Massachusetts State Senator, had put up a bill to protect fish (Bartholomew, 2015; Clark, 2015). Despite its fall from fad status, there are still people swallowing goldfish; in fact, there is a Reddit page dedicated to swallowing fish (*Reddit*) and videos of the feat can be found on YouTube (Clark, 2015).

Comparatively tamer is the phone booth stuffing fad of the 1950s-60s in which a phone booth was crammed with as many people as possible (Bartholomew, 2015; Kruse, 2018). It started in 1959 with 25 South African students, and much like the goldfish swallowing fad, college students in the United States picked it up as a challenge. Records were made, and rules for what participants could do, such as whether limbs were allowed to hang out of the booth, varied between colleges (Kruse, 2018). It eventually lost its popularity but did get replaced with a variation where Volkswagens instead of phone booths were used (Bartholomew, 2015).

Also started in the 1950s and entering the 1960s were panty raids, when a group of male students suddenly broke into a female dormitory and took the underwear of the residing students (Brennan, 2022; Nicar, 2011; Nicar, 2014). Different sources reported the first raid happening in 1950 in Harvard University (Brennan, 2022) and University of Michigan in 1952 (Nicar, 2014), but regardless of the date, it spread to other colleges and universities, and there was an instance where female students raided male students instead (Nicar, 2014). There was the risk of property damage (Nicar, 2014)—especially exemplified in 1956 at the University of California, Berkley where forced entry through windows and doors cost several thousand dollars in damage (Nicar, 2011)—but some raids seemed to be encouraged by female students through them unlocking dorm doors for ease of entrance (Nicar, 2014). Universities found the raids ridiculous and discouraged students through threats of confiscation of Blanket Tax cards and probation, among other disciplinary actions, but had little success (Nicar, 2011; Nicar, 2014).

Streaking, which is running through a public place nude, made its appearance in the early 1970s among university students with some done by non-students in public (Bartholomew, 2015; Schwarz, 1999). The fad suddenly dropped after a few months, though in the 1980s-1990s it reappeared accompanying interest in nude Olympics (Schwarz, 1999). A much more dangerous fad in the same decade was glass eating. Tim Rossovich, a football player for the Philadelphia Eagles and known for doing stunts (Didinger, 2018; "Tim Rossovich", 2018), had been noted by the media to eat glass. A sophomore at Harvard University, Jay Bennett, turned the stunt into a fad by eating a light bulb himself with the media covering this event (*Modern Living: The Glass Eaters*, 1973; "What were some of the crazy fads of the 70s?").

Closer to the 21st century, notable fads have been more dangerous or bear similarity to previous absurd ones. In 1992, the Los Angeles Times published an article about trestle jumping, which included interviews with nonchalant male adolescents and frustrated authorities. There was acknowledgment that trestle jumping had been done by previous generations, but the frustration's source was from the adolescents waiting until a train approached to jump (Glionna, 2019). Efforts by authorities to stop this fad had been fruitless, and it continues in the present year, though it seems that the jumpers do not wait for the train (Hudson & Komer, 2023).

In 2014, a fad circulated around Facebook called "NekNominations" where people drank a pint of alcohol but had to make the drink or way of drinking it outrageous (Wilkinson & Soares, 2014; Rawstorne, 2014). These have produced disgusting concoctions like Tabasco sauce, Southern Comfort, and car polish fluid or even alcohol containing a live goldfish (Rawstorne, 2014). The encouragement to be more extreme than the nominator bears some resemblance to the goldfish swallowing fad in that attempts by new participants aimed to be more outrageous than previous participants' attempts. A few people have died from

NekNominations and family members pleaded for others to not do it while calling for Facebook to ban the videos (Wilkinson & Soares, 2014; Rawstorne, 2014).

The risky feat or unique activity done by someone, or a group seemingly does not become a fad until others imitate the feat or activity. There also seems to be an underlying socially competitive nature for some of the fads, especially in the cases of goldfish swallowing and Neknominations. In fact, in the former case, a student at Franklin and Marshall College named Frank Pope had called Withington "'a sissy'" after swallowing three goldfish, beating Withington's original feat (Bartholomew, 2015). A couple of exceptions to the socially competitive nature would be marathon dancing, as people participated in hopes of monetary gain and to receive basic necessities during a low economic period, and panty raids, which appeared to happen randomly. The feats would not have been replicated by other people in the United States without news sources reporting on them. In a way, TikTok—and social media in general—functions like paper publications in that they can make risky activities known to anyone despite distance and inform on who participated in them and what they did.

Methods

<u>Survey questions</u>

A multiple-choice online survey with one open-ended question was created that asked TikTok users about their participation in dangerous TikTok challenges. Consent was acquired through the survey as the very first question, which contained information about the study, the rights of participants, and other pieces needed for informed consent. After providing consent, the next question asked whether the person was 18-years-old or older. The main questions were

unviewable unless the survey taker provided consent and confirmed being 18-years-old or older; those who did not consent or were under the age were thanked and let go.

The questions inquired what motivated the TikTok user to participate in the challenge, which involved influences from friends, viewing the challenge as fun, and the participant seeking attention; how they felt 24 hours after completing the challenge; and whether they would attempt the challenge again and why. Each question had an "Other" option that allowed the participant to input their own answer, should it be absent from the existing choices. There was also a "I don't remember / prefer not to answer" option in case the participant could not recall their emotions or reactions at the time or did not feel comfortable answering.

Advertising the Survey

The survey was advertised on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook and asked TikTok users 18-years-old or older who have participated in dangerous TikTok challenges to fill it out, if interested. A link to the survey was provided in the description or in the main text box for all three sites, depending on the format and limitations. For Facebook, the entire advertisement message was able to fit on one post along with the link (Figure 1a); for Instagram, the message had to be in an image format and the link available in the description (Figure 1b); and for Twitter, the first portion of the message—the hook—was the only one in text while the rest of the message was an image so that the survey link and tags could fit within the character limit (Figure 1c). The hashtags used to reach as many users as possible were #tiktokchallenge, #socialmediaresearcher, #socialmediaresearch, and #dangeroustiktokchallenges and select words from the post itself, namely #TikTok and #survey, as well as the names of dangerous challenges like #tidepodchallenge or #deviouslicks.
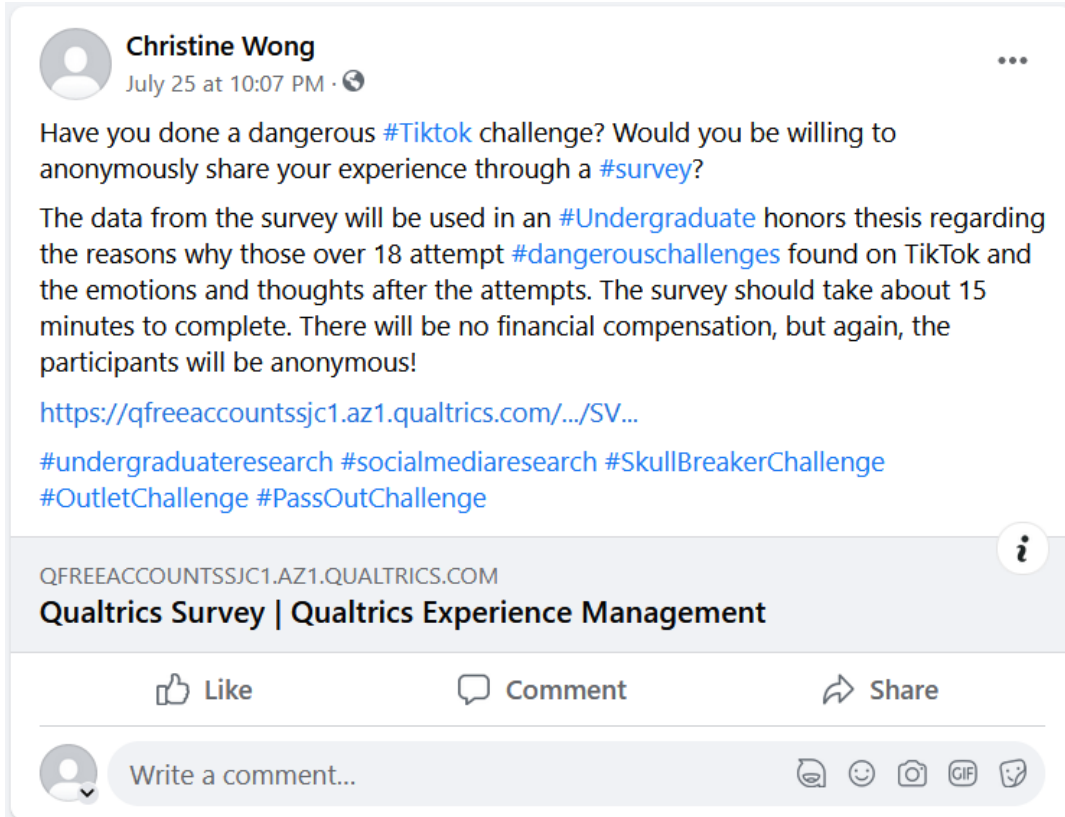
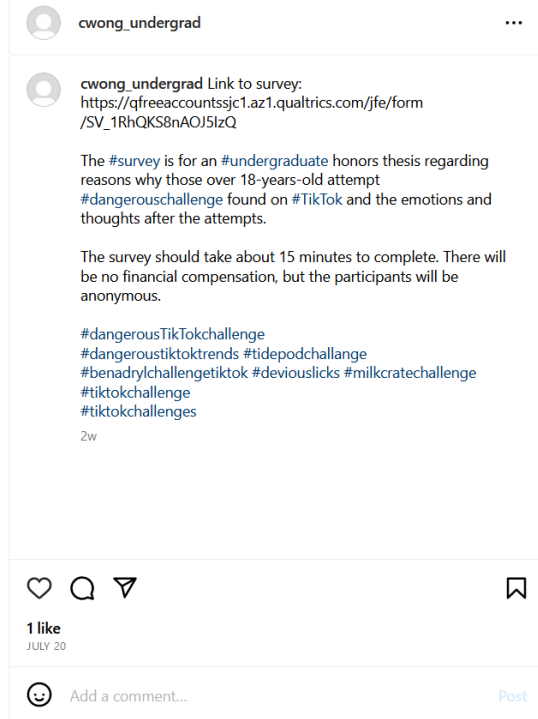Figure 1a: Example of Facebook post advertising the survey

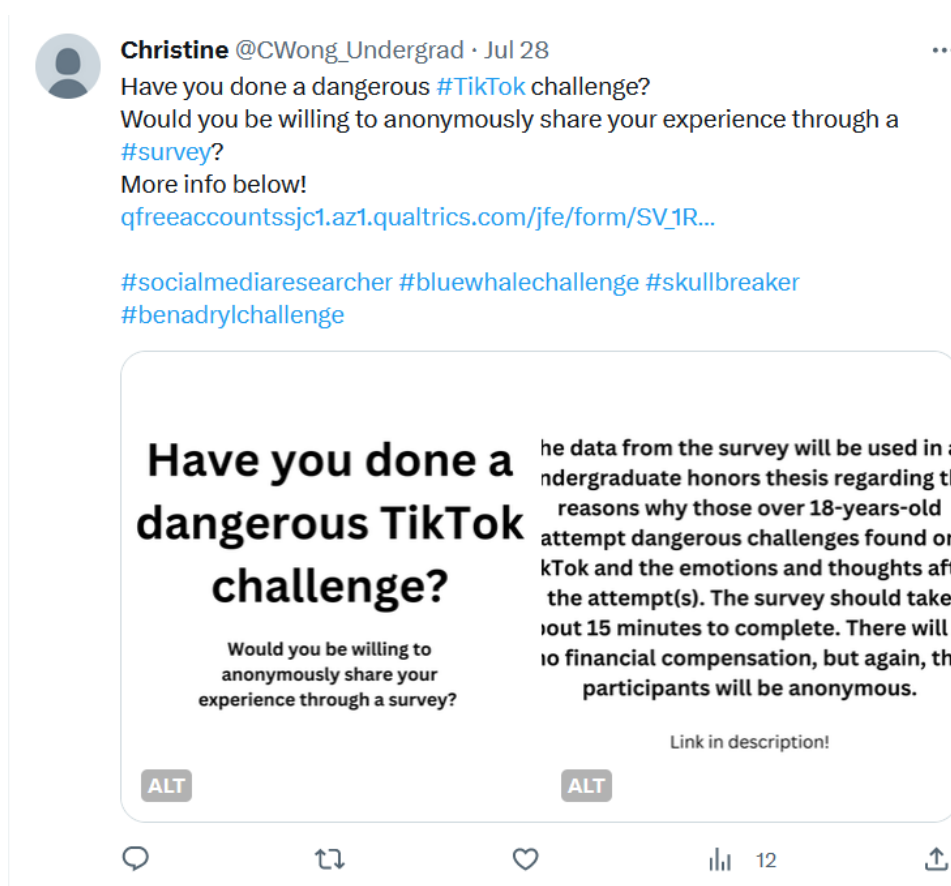Figure 1b: Example of Instagram post advertising the survey

Figure 1c: Example of Twitter post advertising the survey

Results

For three weeks, the survey was advertised on the three social media sites. Twitter allows users

to see analytical data of a post, including how many people clicked on a link and how many

expanded the post to see any replies. As of August 8th, the very first post advertising the survey

had a collective 150 impressions, which is the number of times it was seen, and 1 link click

(Figure 2). The other posts, also as of August 8th, had less than 55 impressions and 3 or fewer

link clicks, but no responses were made on the survey.

While creating posts on Instagram, hashtags were suggested that were meant to bring attention to the dangers of certain challenges, such as #bluewhalechallengeawareness or #outletchallengeawareness. For Facebook and Twitter, those hashtags had to be typed out.

#passoutchallenge was discovered to be hidden by Instagram due to users reporting that the content went against Instagram's Community Guidelines even though its other name, #BlackoutChallenge, was not hidden. The researcher would like to note that a small window appeared offering mental health resources after searching a few hashtags of dangerous TikTok challenges. Also, #EyeChallenge was discovered to be used by artists, makeup artists, and, on Instagram, some users following a creepy trend of moving their eyes to a certain song until only the whites of their eyes showed.
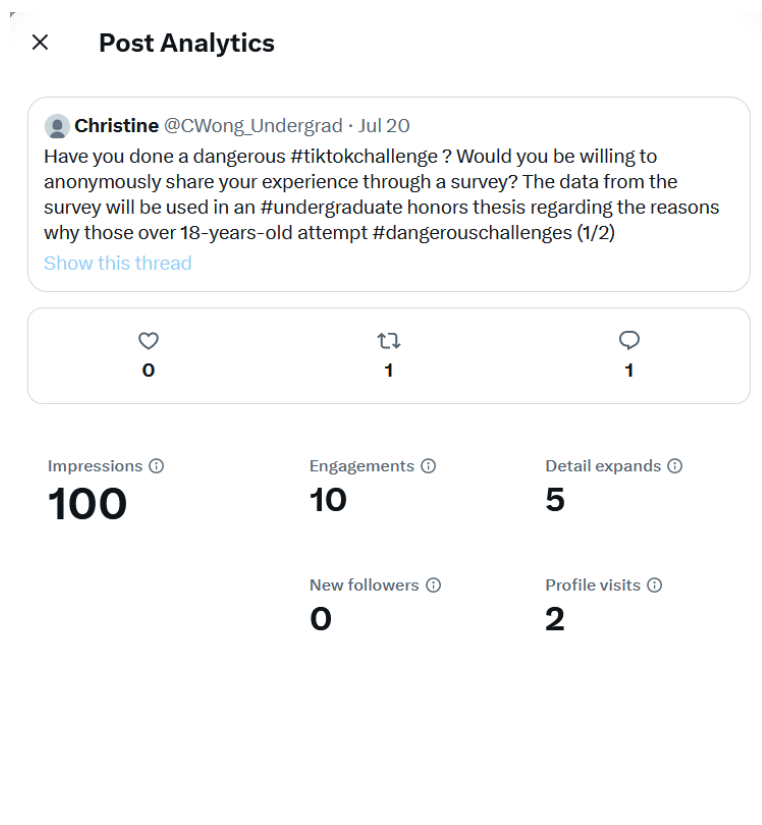
First portion of advertisement; data analytics shown

Second portion of advertisement, connected to the first portion as a reply; data analytics
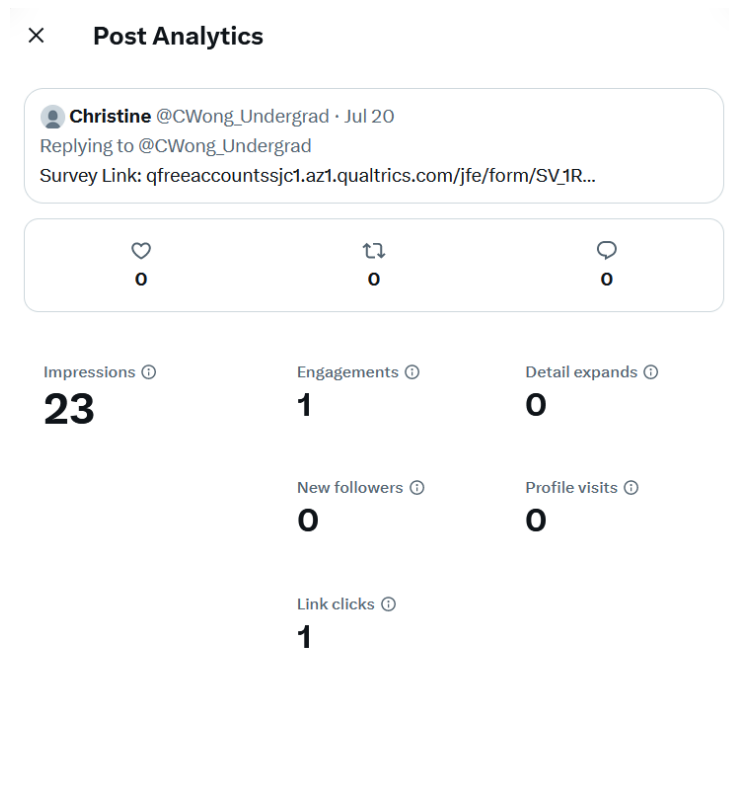
shown

Link for the survey, connected to other portions as a reply; data analytics shown

Figure 2: Analytical data of the Twitter posts on July 20th, 2023, advertising the survey. Impressions are the number of times the post was seen by other users, and altogether for this post, there was 150. The link to the survey was clicked once.

Limitations

The survey was available for about three weeks, so there may not have been enough time for potential participants to find the advertising posts and fill out the survey. The posts advertising the survey were on three popular social media sites except TikTok, so finding the target participants had been indirect despite there being communities of TikTok users on sites like Twitter.

The researcher learned that posts from new Twitter users would only be seen by a larger audience if there were high enough interactions on the timeline and connections were made with other users. This was to prove that the new users were not bots. From the researcher's understanding, having more time to interact with the timeline and to connect would have allowed the advertisements to reach more users and potential participants.

Discussion

A possibility for the lack of survey responses is that the target participants simply did not see the posts advertising the survey. Accounts were created on three social media sites for this study, and in the case of Twitter, a new user had to interact with the main feed and with other users so that the site understood that the account was not run by a bot. In turn, the posts from the new user could be seen by a wider audience. Continuing with the experience on Twitter, the survey was advertised for about three weeks immediately after the account's creation, and during that time, the author liked various posts and followed a few scientific accounts. Given the short time frame, it is possible that the advertisement could not reach as many people compared to if the account had been around longer and there was more interaction.

Another possibility is that older users who have done dangerous TikTok challenges avoid or block the corresponding hashtags. They may not want to remember their attempts or hold regrets for doing them in the first place, like how young adults in South India would have avoided certain challenges if they had been aware of the pain beforehand (Roth et al., 2021). As a result, advertising posts would not have been able to reach them.

A third possibility surrounds how some harmless activities may share the same hashtag as dangerous challenges. For instance, #EyeChallenge on Instagram appears to be used by artists

and makeup artists to show their work or by users doing a rather creepy trend where they move their eyeballs to a song until only the white part shows. Art and photos of people have also been seen on Facebook and Twitter when searching the hashtag. On the other hand, #EyeChallenge may also refer to participants putting a plastic bag containing a mix of jelly, hand sanitizer, bleach, and shaving cream on or near an eye to supposedly the change the iris's color, despite the dire consequence of damaging the eye if the bag gets a hole (Asarch, 2019). In context of this study, if a target participant had only done the Eye Challenge, the advertising post might get lost among other unrelated posts and be unable to reach them.

And finally, the maturity of TikTok users over the age of 18 may prevent a significant number from attempting a challenge in the first place, making the target participants too few and highly difficult to find. It is likely that the age group does not find the risk potential worth the attempt or are sensitive to potential risks in the face of uncertainty (Tymula et al., 2012). There have been findings that newly turned adults recognize that the consequences of delinquent behavior outweigh the benefits and thus abandon the behavior (Harris et al., 2002). Alternatively, it is possible that many older users are simply not interested in participating in popular dangerous challenges and just observe, similar to how college-aged TikTok users interviewed by Bhandari and Bimo (2022) and Schellewalk (2023) were not quite interested in the platform's popular trends or content creators. However, it should be acknowledged that there are young adults who enjoy thrilling activities such as trestle jumping (Glionna, 1992) and who display risk taking behavior (Roberti, 2004). Also, it might be possible that a challenge would not apply to those outside a typical context; the Devious Licks Challenge, for instance, is mainly adolescents and college students stealing or damaging pieces of school property, but there is no mention of an older age group (Marples, 2021). Another way of looking at this is that those over 18-years-old

may view themselves as outside of the app's target age group and as a result, are reluctant to participate in a challenge (Ahlse et al., 2020).

Despite receiving no responses to the survey, the paper offers a discussion of why that is and a view of the use of hashtags. Future studies on this paper's subject could be done on TikTok itself or could utilize other methods of finding target participants, such as posting a flyer with a QR code on community bulletin boards. If the survey is to be advertised on TikTok, however, future researchers should be aware that hashtags of certain dangerous challenges have been banned by the platform (Marples, 2021), but users continue to post their attempts through alternate spelling or misspells of the original names (Bonifazi et al., 2022). Altogether, trying to find participants using those hashtags on the platform would be impossible and figuring out the alternate spelling of certain challenges could possibly be tricky if the platform realizes this and bans certain alternate names.

Other methods of gathering participants could be advertising on Reddit and in colleges and universities. Reddit hosts countless subpages—or subreddits—on a wide range of topics that include other social media sites. It may be possible, then, to advertise on the TikTok subreddit alongside those dedicated to dangerous challenges and perhaps those raising awareness of the challenges' consequences. For colleges and universities, permission could be obtained and flyers advertising the survey may be placed on walls, or emails could be sent out instead to the students. There may also be the opportunity to hold interviews similar to what previous studies have done, which may provide deeper answers to why young adults and older participate in dangerous challenges, but that may require revisions of the questions.

Conclusion

The present study's focus was providing insight on why TikTok users 18-years-old and older participated in dangerous challenges found on the platform. An online survey was created and advertised on three popular social media sites for three weeks, but no responses were given despite evidence on Twitter that the survey link had been clicked. There was a discussion on why this happened, including the target participants simply not seeing the posts or did not want to respond and older users being mature enough to avoid or were uninterested in participating in the first place. Suggested methods for future studies on this paper's subject included placing flyers containing a QR code for the survey on public bulletin boards or in universities and advertising the survey on Reddit and TikTok, with awareness of certain hashtags being banned.

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