

ACTIVITY: Harmful online challenges & hoaxesThe 'Digital Ghost Story' (SWGfL)

Every so often, society experiences episodes of self-fuelled collective worry. These phenomena are not new. Chain letters were traditionally propagated at a peer level, the change in practice for the digital age is that there are so many outlets who might see this as an opportunity for online notoriety or being seen as a “thought leader” on social media. Each episode begins with individuals sharing concern about a perceived threat, substantiated or otherwise, which then grows to create a moral panic amongst people. This has the effect of exacerbating the initial harm or creating harm where none existed to begin with.

It is only natural for people to want to spread awareness of a perceived threat; however, in the digital world in which we all live, it is easier than ever for panic to be spread quickly amongst a populace, with inevitable media attention and unscrupulous purveyors of “advice” adding fuel to the fire.

Momo Week - A Perfect Storm

In February 2019 the “Momo Suicide Challenge” caused worry in homes and schools across the UK. Fuelled by sensationalist headlines and misinformation on social media, the hoax quickly escalated into a moral panic with parents fearing for the safety of their children.

The “Momo challenge” placed a disturbing image (actually a photograph of a sculpture of an ‘ubume’¹ produced by the artist Keisuke Aisawa in 2016) that appeared in innocuous videos watched

The story was that the image would “speak” to the viewer, giving them a mobile phone number for them to contact, which would then set up a series of “challenges” for the victim, which involved challenges to self-harm or instructions to commit suicide. News reports claimed the challenge had been linked to the suicides of children in Argentina, Mexico and India. However, most of the tale was entirely fake. While there was plenty of evidence of people placing the Momo image into these videos alongside “instructions” to contact numbers, there was no evidence of a challenge, working mobile numbers, or messaging to a personal device instructing the individual to self-harm.

In the week of the Momo-hype wave there was a near perfect storm of news coverage, celebrity social media commentary and “online safety” organisations all wishing to become the main player in “solving” this crisis (which in reality didn’t exist). Perhaps the biggest trigger for the spike in interest that week came the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), who produced a press release that raised serious concerns about the potential harm of the Momo challenge.

This release, in coming from a source of authority, legitimised the reporting from the more tabloid end of news outlets, and other stakeholders in child safeguarding and then triggered a social media storm where parents, concerned about their children’s safety, then propagated further.

Awareness raising resources were provided by some “online safety” organisations talking about how to tackle the Momo challenge (which, we need to bear in mind, didn’t exist); and these resources were shared by concerned individuals on social media as well as school and informal education settings (for example, sports clubs), therefore driving the Momo challenge further into the public

¹ A supernatural entity from Japanese folklore



consciousness (while still not actually existing). All of this resulted in many children being made aware of “Momo”, and of course they then went off to search for it online (during Momo Week, Momo related searches increased 45,000%, with at least 23% of searches carried out in Primary schools) Then, one would hope not simply to drive likes and traffic to their profiles, celebrities started to comment on social media about the (non-existent) challenge.

The timeline of Momo Week went something like:

- 25th February 2019: PSNI send press release about their concerns around Momo
- 26th February 2019: An organisation who sell online safety services to schools tweets a “guide to Momo” to help “thousands of concerns schools and parents”
- 27th February 2019: Celebrities (including Kim Kardashian West) start commenting regarding their concerns about Momo on social media.

Toward the end of Momo Week (28th February 2019 – 2nd March 2019), thankfully more responsible media reporting caused the hype to die down and interest in Momo soon died down.

The ‘Blue Whale Challenge’ a few years ago, had a near identical modus operandi as did the Doki Doki Literature Club. In each case alerts were issued; alerts that were then sent to schools and, via social media, to parents. In all three of these cases it is difficult to show any clear evidence on impact of child behaviour. However the spread of “awareness” was virtually identical – reporting, comment from “responsible” bodies, social media spread, public outcry, then, finally, more rational comment in order to calm the hysteria.

Conclusion

The Momo event raises the need for:

- i. more effective critical digital literacy training for those in the children’s workforce, (Children and young people tell us they want adults to be able to help them, and to be better informed of online risk.);
- ii. an appreciation that some media individuals are looking for broadcast popularity and social media recognition, rather than putting children’s safeguarding as their number one priority.
- iii. an understanding that children who are already vulnerable will be less resilient to this content and may be more susceptible;
- iv. leadership of children’s workforce to assess the validity of the threat and risk of harm before they add to the social hysteria;
- v. reinforce the fundamental message to children and young people about any piece of harmful content – *“if you see something that has upset you, tell someone about it and they can help you”*. (That is all that is needed).

ACTIONS:

- i. All school staff, governors and Trustees to watch the Professionals Online Safety Helpline video [here](#)
- ii. All ICT Leads, DSLs and safeguarding governors/Trustees to:
 - a. read the SWGfL Momo Challenge Report [here](#)
 - b. read the DfE guidance on Harmful online challenges and online hoaxes [here](#)
- iii. Senior Leaders to be clear, in advance, what they are likely to do when a harmful online challenge or online hoax begins to circulate.
- iv. Understand the limitations of filtering with regard to harmful online challenges and online hoaxes.

