

OUT OF HAND

Though social media challenges started out as fun, experts worry that the trend has taken a turn for the worse.

By ANGELIN YEOH
lifestyletech@thestar.com.my

EATING laundry detergent, driving a car while blindfolded and consuming excessive amounts of allergy medication – these are just some of the reckless social media challenges that have made headlines.

Though doctors and safety officials have pleaded with the public not to participate in such challenges, many ignored the warnings and harmed not just themselves but sometimes others too.

Dr Joanne Lim, deputy dean and associate professor of media, communications and cultural studies at the University of Nottingham Malaysia, said social

media challenges have come a long way since the Internet meme Harlem Shake became a viral YouTube sensation in 2013.

Clips based on the song of the same name swept the Internet because it was easy to replicate and short – only about 30 seconds.

Lim also recalled how the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was memorable because it encouraged people to participate in a good cause.

"The ALS challenge had its objectives set out clearly, which was to raise awareness and funds for further research of the disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis," she said.

The social media challenge, which went viral in 2014, gave participants two options – film and post a video of a bucket of ice water being poured on one's head within 24 hours or donate to an ALS fund.

However, social media challenges have evolved and also become increasingly harmful to the point of causing death, said a concerned Lim.

She cited the skull breaker challenge as an example, which resulted in serious injuries among teenagers in the United States and Britain, as it went viral on social network TikTok, which struggled to take the posts down.

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Dealing with dangerous dares

Another challenge deemed "highly problematic" by Lim is Bird Box which was popularised in 2019.

Notorious YouTube star Jake Paul posted a video of himself driving and crossing a road in Los Angeles while blindfolded. His and other similar videos were eventually yanked out by YouTube.

Dr Nasrudin Subhi, a senior lecturer who specialises in teaching counselling psychology at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), shared Lim's view.

He remembered a controversial social media challenge that surfaced in 2016 that was particularly popular among youngsters.

"The challenge required a person to perform a series of dares. To complete the challenge, the person had to carry out one last task which involves an act of self-harm," he said.

Circle of (virtual) life

The popularity of such challenges is due to how social media has become a platform for expressing oneself, said Lim.

"People are essentially looking for connection and do so by expressing themselves on social media."

"Social media challenges are a 'sure win' at attention-grabbing, often attracting comments, likes, and shares and its format ensures that it remains cyclical, which is to challenge and be challenged," she said.

Once the popularity of a challenge wanes out, Lim said social media users tend to become bored and feel the need for a more exciting task.

This reason alone is a "red flag" because it allows for more dangerous or reckless aspects of challenges to be deemed as acceptable and fun by users, according to Lim.

However, for some it is about stamping the fact that "I exist" rather than having something meaningful to convey, she added.

"You are constantly fed with these videos, and when push notification on your device is enabled, you will be drawn to the platform even when you think you've had enough."

"I feel social media also encourages peer pressure on their platforms, which makes users feel they must submit to a particular challenge because they are seeing a lot of videos of other people doing it," she said.

Impressionable young minds are more inclined to follow a trend or fad on social media because they don't want to feel left out, according to Nasrudin.

"I don't blame them because they are still young and their thinking has not fully matured," he said.

Dr Azlina Mohd Khir, senior lecturer at the Department of Social and Development Sciences in Universiti Putra Malaysia in Serdang agreed, saying that the younger generation often looks to social media as reference for the latest trends.

"Teenagers, for example, are still in the development stage and are looking to form their identity or persona. They may be more inclined to try out a new social media trend as they seek 'digital approval'."

"After performing a challenge, they may feel good about themselves without thinking about how it could affect them or others in the long run," she said.

Lim felt that it's not just young minds that are susceptible to social media challenges.

"In this era of self-glification,

self-gratification and self-expression, people are desperately seeking to be seen, followed, liked, and accepted even by strangers.

"Anyone can fall prey to the excitement and exhilaration of challenging themselves and others," she said.

Do no harm

Last April, Amanah Abdull Kadir, Women's Aid Organisation director of partnerships and development, said the non-profit became aware of the 'mugshot challenge' through a user who alerted it to a post by a social media influencer.

"The lady had posted a photo of her doing the mugshot challenge on Instagram and included WAO's hotline as a reminder to her followers to contact us if they are facing issues related to domestic violence," Amnani said.

The mugshot challenge, purportedly started to raise awareness about domestic violence, dared users to put on makeup that gave them a heavily bruised or battered look and post a picture on social media.

Amnani said WAO viewed the challenge as harmful as it trivialised the trauma or experience of actual domestic violence survivors.

"We reached out to the influencer about our concerns and she deleted the post after receiving our message," she said.

The mugshot challenge was undertaken by popular social media influencers such as James Charles who has over 20 million followers on Instagram and 6.9 million on Twitter.

He was heavily criticised for it, with one commenter saying it was "triggering and offensive" as she has to endure surgeries to fix her broken nose due to domestic violence, according to a report by Paper magazine.

Charles eventually removed the post.

Amnani was also concerned that a local actress with six million Instagram followers had taken part in the challenge.

The actress posted a video with her face bruised and bloody, saying she will never forgive the person who injured her.

After being inundated with messages from followers who were concerned for her, she clarified a day later she was not physically harmed, as the video was done in response to the mugshot challenge.

"I felt that she was not informed on how the challenge could be problematic and was caught up in the hype of 'normalising' domestic violence. She garnered genuine concern from followers due to her postings and 'drama' that she had created," she said.

On April 16, WAO posted an official statement urging others not to attempt the mugshot challenge.

"Participating in this challenge is insensitive and ignorant, as marginalised communities are

already subjected to racial profiling and police brutality.

"Glamorising injustice even if others are doing it, is wrong," WAO said.

Lim said it's important that people consider the psychological effects that some social media challenges may have on others.

"In the case of the mugshot challenge, people used makeup to fake tear stains, blood and bruises to look like they have been beaten up - it could trigger painful memories for those who have been in such situations," she said.

Azlina agreed, saying social media users shouldn't follow trends blindly. "In the case of the mugshot challenge, it shows that they were not sensitive to issues like domestic violence, which really affects people in society."

Think twice

Social media challenges with punishing tasks or harmful elements can also lead to serious internal conflicts within a person, said Lim.

"We are looking at the possibility of a rapid increase in the number of depression and suicide cases based on such seemingly fun, entertaining and harmless challenges."

"The very idea of a 'challenge' poses a situation that would inevitably push someone out of their comfort zone. Therefore, participating in a challenge would almost always be counterproductive," she said.

This could even cause some people to be caught in a downward spiral of self-punishment or self-degradation as a form of escapism, she added.

Nasrudin, who works with

at-risk teenagers as the head of Perkasa, a centre for youth empowerment at UKM, has seen the effect of social media on teenage mental health.

"We offer counselling to teenagers who feel sad because of what they see on social media. It could just be a post of someone showing off something or trying out experiences that they can't afford, which makes them feel they are missing out."

"We talk to them and advise them to use social media for good such as connecting with others for school work or collaborating for a meaningful project," he said.

Nasrudin also felt that parents

have to rethink the idea of safety when it comes to providing their children with smartphones and internet access.

"I think most parents believe as long as the child is at home, he or she is safe from harmful elements outside the house. But social media exposes them to all kinds of information," he said.

He explained that when parents don't clearly explain the difference between what's right and wrong, and limit what the kids are viewing on social media, they are more likely to attempt harmful social media challenges.

The experts also urged content creators and influencers to be more mindful when posting challenges on social media, especially if they have a huge following among youths.

Amnani said influencers have to acknowledge that they could create a ripple effect in society through their posts.

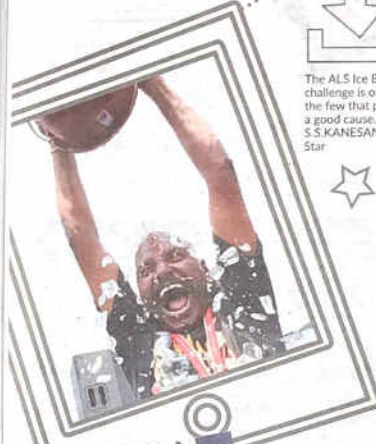
"If you have millions of followers, you have to know that people are going to be impacted by what you do on social media. So think about the end goal if you want to participate in a social media challenge. What is the cause for it? Be clear about your objective," she said.

Social media users should avoid challenges with elements that are insensitive to others, says Azlina. — AZLINA MOHD KHIR



The ALS Ice Bucket challenge is one of the few that promotes a good cause. — S.S.KANESAN/The Star

Social media



Lim says challenges with punishing tasks could lead to serious internal conflicts within a person. — JOANNE LIM

Paul was criticised for participating in the Bird Box challenge and his video was eventually removed. — YouTube screenshots



Amnani was disappointed to see a local actress with millions of followers perform the mugshot challenge, as it trivialised a serious issue. — AMANANI ABDULL KADIR