Society

New Technologies

Blue Whale game claims Arab teens' lives

Roufan Nahhas

Amman

The sometime deadly Blue Whale Challenge, one of the latest crazes in virtual world gaming, has reached Jordanian teens. Schools in Karak governorate, south-west of Amman, reported students inflicting injuries on themselves as part of the 50-day, self-harm challenge.

"The Blue Whale Challenge targets teenagers under 15 who are active on social media networks or who possess smartphones, which are largely available among students," said Heyam Qadoumi, a teacher in Amman.

The online challenge, which began in 2016, reportedly consists of 50 daily tasks assigned by an administrator. Many of the tasks involve different forms of self-harm (carving phrases on one's arm, cutting one's lip, making oneself sick, etc.) The final challenge requires the participant to commit suicide.

"The incident in Karak was a close call and that is why we need to have more supervision over our students and their online habits," Qadoumi said. "The supervision should be conducted at home and school but teachers cannot watch everyone all the time and that is why parents should be stricter regarding their children using the internet and their smart devices."

The spread of the internet and smart devices has come with increased risks for younger children and teenagers left without supervision. In Jordan, there are an estimated 8.7 million internet users and more than 42% of the population uses smartphones.

"We were shocked to hear that such behaviour from children is real. All religions forbid people from harming themselves while this Blue Whale Challenge encourages teenagers to kill themselves. As a parent, I have taken several measures to secure my kids' online presence and I think people should do the same," said Manal Shehadah, a mother of three.

"We need to be extra cautious and everything should be controlled and the most important thing is to have a trustful relationship between children and parents."

"There are many challenges online these days and the latest one is the Tide Pod Challenge, in which teenagers film themselves chewing and sometimes swallowing detergents and then posting the videos online as a challenge to others to try," Qadoumi said.

The American Association of Poison Control Centres (AAPCC) said there were approximately 40 cases of detergent ingestion reported in 2018, with almost half of them intentionally ingested, media reports said.

"There are many easily accessible online games which teenagers and children can download for free like the Blue Whale Challenge," said Jordanian IT expert Feras Farhan. "All these games are based on manipulating a person's inner self, usually targeting vulnerable youngsters who are antisocial or solitary."

"Parents should watch closely every step taken by their children on their smart devices. We need to spread awareness about the dangers of online games that are based on violence because they affect children's behaviour at home and in school," Farhan added.

The Blue Whale Challenge has reportedly contributed to teenagers' death in North Africa, as well. Earlier this year in northern Tunisia, a 16-year-old died after falling from the roof of her home. Her friends reportedly testified she had been playing the online game but her father was adamant that her death was an accident.

In 2017, seven Algerian children reportedly killed themselves while following instructions from the Blue Whale Challenge. The game is also said to have led to one teenager's death in Morocco.

The Public Security Department said Jordan recorded 120 cases of suicide for reasons not related to the Blue Whale Challenge in 2016 and 104 during the first nine months of 2017.

Figures show that suicide cases are more common among people between the ages 18 and 27. Amman recorded the country's highest number of suicides and suicide attempts, followed by Irbid and Karak.

Suicides committed by non-Jordanians, many by Syrian refugees, constituted 17% of total cases in the first nine months of 2017.

Roufan Nahhas is a journalist based in Jordan.

At risk. A little boy plays a game on a compuer. (AFP)

● **The spread of the internet and smart devices has come with increased risks for younger children and teenagers.**

Digital Arab Series

Fifth Part

Collaboration is key to getting content right

Khadija Hamouchi
27, is a Belgian-Moroccan entrepreneur in Beirut. She started a social enterprise, SEJAAL Inc, which is working on an educational app to enable Arab millennials' lifelong learning.

The "Arab Knowledge Economy Report 2015-2016" said the number of internet users was expected to rise to about 226 million by 2018. Has this come to pass?

Research has shown that we are in the neighbourhood of 160 million internet users in the Arab world today and that the millennial generation (16-24) is its biggest segment.

It is also the fastest growing demographic in the world.

Yet, McKinsey's "Digital Middle East 2016" report said the Arab region is capturing only a fraction of its digital potential. It takes a whole eco-system to leverage that potential. Here's the question: How can small stakeholders and start-ups amplify the opportunity?

The digital world has become so competitive that it makes sense for companies to form alliances thrive. Not everyone agrees on this point, however. In a lecture at Stanford, Silicon Valley venture capitalist Guy Kawasaki deemed partnerships irrelevant.

In the literature on entrepreneurship, there are contradictory theories. Should one seek to solve problems for oneself or for others? I believe that problems need to be solved vertically because a chain of small problems is linked to a bigger one. In the Arab world, companies need to leverage each other's assets. We must collaborate or perish.

Digital platforms in the Arab world are still in experimental mode, especially in terms of user experience, user interface and back-end Arabic programming. The potential of back-end programming — lines of code that transform into algorithms and artificial intelligence systems that magically know what you like — is yet to be explored for Arabic. Digital publishers can accelerate learning by sharing the process of trial and error and writing up the results — in Arabic.

For some time, the investment in Arabic language technology has come from major universities in the West and in the Middle East. These include Stanford's Natural Language Processing group, the American University of Beirut's Engineering Department, New York University Abu Dhabi and the Qatar Computing Research Institute at Hamad bin Khalifa University.

More is needed. "The ArabNet App Trends" report stated that 62% of respondents said they readily download Arabic apps. That figure would be much higher if there were more Arabic apps and if consumers trusted them more. The ArabNet report also said that 12% of respondents said they don't trust Arabic mobile apps, 16% had a bad experience with them and 30% did not find them of good quality. As a result, they resort to international mobile apps.

In the start-up world, one often hears that a product does not have to be perfect for customers but this does not reflect the opinions of the young Arabs I met. Perhaps a better approach may be that of a practical perfectionist. A product does not have to be the right one for the customer from day one but it does need to be well-presented and function well. It needs to be bug-free, have great design and offer as frictionless a user experience as possible.

Publishers of digital Arabic content need to work towards collaboration to deliver products that start out right. In 2016, Haykal Media launched the Renaissance Partners programme with strategic partners, including GE Capital, for the widely read Harvard Business Review Arabia. This is a good example of collaboration that will empower young Arabs who want to make it in the world of business.

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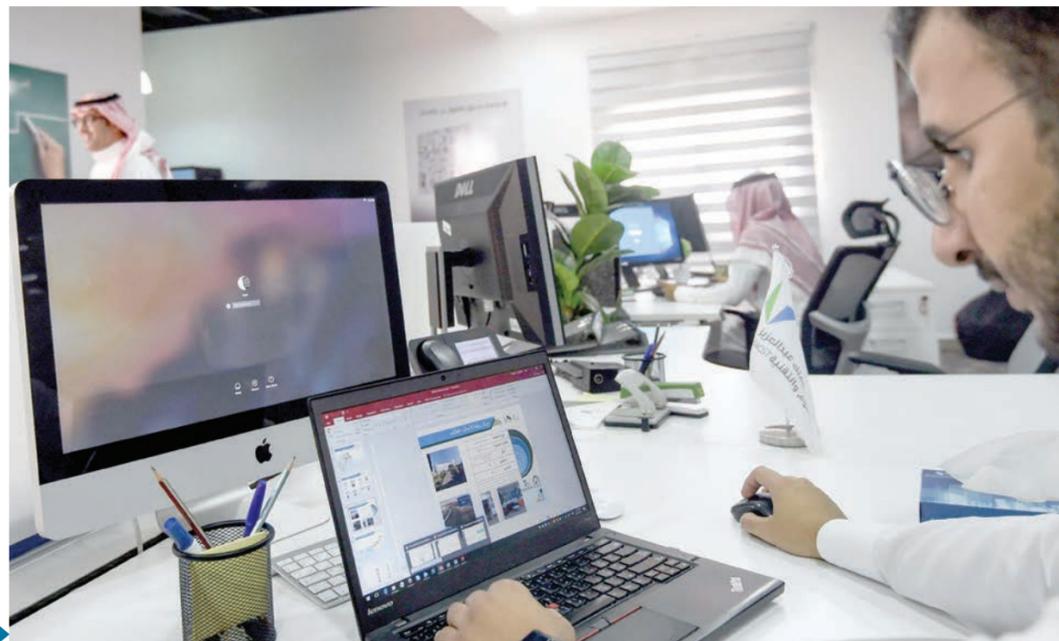
Reaching out. A Saudi employee prepares a slideshow at his office in Riyadh. (Reuters)