



IRYNA SURINA

Pomeranian University in Słupsk, Poland

irina.surina@apsl.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-5038-1214

“DEATH GROUPS” – SUICIDAL COMMUNITIES IN THE VIRTUAL SPACE AS A SOCIAL MEDIA PHENOMENON (BASED ON THE ANALYSIS OF INTERNET DISCOURSE)

ABSTRACT

This article concerns the phenomenon of “death groups” – suicidal communities – as a social media phenomenon. It specifies the stages of their development, the characteristics of these groups – with particular emphasis on the “Blue Whale” game. It is indicated that one of the main roles in committing suicidal acts among young people is played by the virtual network in which these groups are organized, managed and coordinated. The purpose of the article is to present “death groups” as destructive communities formed in virtual space and inspired by computer games. The research method used is a qualitative analysis of the discourse on death groups in the Eastern European segment of the Internet – with a particular focus on the discourse in the Polish, Ukrainian and Russian segments. Based on a qualitative analysis of Internet discourse in the Eastern European segment of the Internet, it is highlighted that “death groups” are a social network phenomenon contributing to the formation of suicidal behavior of children and adolescents trying to escape

from problems in reality. Death groups were characterized as a network game and as a suicidal subculture containing techniques for manipulating human behavior. It was shown that playing the theme of committing suicide, inducing another person to commit a suicidal act moves from the virtual world to the real world – where it can be realized. Another finding was the dependence of the popularization of these groups on moral panic. The article emphasizes that “death groups” in the online space and the mechanisms they use are secondary causes of suicidal behavior of adolescents and young people – while the primary causes remain traditional.

KEYWORDS: *death groups, suicidal communities, virtual space, network game, Blue Whale, adolescents, moral panic*

INTRODUCTION

Technological innovations play an increasingly prominent role in the life of modern society and condition the parallel existence of two worlds – the virtual and the real. “In the 21st century, the actual real world and the virtual, digital, electronic one intermingle and complement each other” (Karwatowska, Jarosz, 2013, p.110), which was particularly noticeable during the organization of life under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Modern technology made the transition to a new way of life with the pandemic quite different from the one before pandemic. Such forced actions are determinants of the characteristics of objective social reality – one that really exists: it is both real and virtual.

Today, young people live simultaneously in two realities: real and virtual one – with the predominance of the latter, which determines the environment of postmodern youth’s existence. In such a hybrid reality, the virtual world is the natural dimension of existence, and the line between “being online” and “being offline” becomes practically blurred. These two realities and two worlds overlap. The pandemic situation has resulted in the life of young people being almost entirely organized in virtual space. In this situation, the virtual world becomes the real world. It seemed that such a state of affairs would be something of a periodic, i.e. temporary, nature, but virtuality has become the new reality – a true characteristic of this reality.

Cyberspace tends to attract especially representatives of this generational group. Seeking ways to satisfy their social needs, young people strive to be members of groups or communities, including virtual ones. W. Griswold (2013, p.203) notes that “[...] the Internet contributes to the creation of a virtual community that did not exist in the real world, but arguably enables a pre-existing group of like-minded or interested people to connect”. Virtual communities enable young people to maintain ties with others in new social conditions – a symbiotic reality which generates paradoxes in their consciousness and behavior. In the virtual world, young people frequently look for ways to solve their problems, search for a space which is free from adult surveillance, form communities and build new relationships. The Internet, and especially social networks, conditions changes in relationships in the family and society, reflected in the worldview and everyday behavior (Surina, Chrzanowska-Gancarz, 2022, p.8) including one that is dangerous and risky – and quite often destructive (even suicidal).

The manifestations of destructive behavior are most visible in the real space, but they are conditioned by their actual design in cyberspace. Suicide as a form of destructive behavior is discussed in numerous teenage and adolescent social networks. It is often associated with the functioning of destructive communities – or online “death groups” – in which the cult of suicide is spread.

The purpose of this article is to depict “death groups” as destructive communities created in the virtual space on the basis of computer games in order to manipulate the behavior of adolescents. It is important to emphasize the essential fact that “death groups” are a phenomenon of social media contributing to the formation of suicidal behavior of adolescents and young people trying to escape from problems in reality.

The research method used in this discussion is a qualitative analysis of the discourse on death groups in the Eastern European segment of the Internet – with a particular focus on the discourse in the Polish, Ukrainian and Russian segments. 107 online materials published in 2016-2021, as well as reports and statistical data, were analyzed between December 2022 and January 2023. Additionally, the profiles of these groups, materials published especially in VK and Meta social networks were examined due to the unique coverage of the topic. The analysis covered the publication’s

content, thematic scope as well as tone. The study also included the accompanying components of the materials in the form of hashtags or photos – if they were provided.

“DEATH GROUPS” AS DESTRUCTIVE ONLINE YOUTH GROUPS

Contemporary trends in the development of modern society and statistical data indicate a rising interest among young people in the “death subculture.” The increasing interest in this issue is related, among other things, to sensation-provoking “death groups” as well as the emergence of suicidal computer games (e.g. Blue Whale Challenge, Run or Die, etc.) in the Internet space. The main “consumers” and potential “adepts” of this phenomenon are adolescents and teenagers: the most morally and psychologically vulnerable part of society. The actual objective of “death groups” like suicidal communities is the death of a teenager or young person. This, in turn, means that the very architecture of youth communities is changing – and the “world view” of the modern young person is changing dramatically.

Suicide is not merely a matter of tragic self-destruction, but a sequence of interrelated thoughts and actions that sometimes has been developing for years. The definition of suicide by E. Durkheim is considered to be classic here. He characterized suicide as “any death that is the result of a direct or indirect, negative or positive action performed by the victim himself, who knows what the result of this action will be” (Durkheim, 2006, p. 51). Other authors, however, specify their definitions in a somewhat different fashion. Thus, for example, E. Stengel (1972; after Holyst, 1983, p. 27) defines suicide as “a type of a deliberate act of self-harm that, before committing it, excludes in the consciousness of the perpetrator the certainty of survival”. According to B. Holyst (2002, p.60), “suicide is considered a type of voluntary death. It is treated as a kind of choice”.

According to O. Stepantseva, teenage and adolescent suicide, the Internet and computer games are all interrelated – and the connection here is quite obvious. “An individual – if he or she is not a sociopath, tends to form social

ties, the phenomenon facilitated by the virtual space, which quickly, conveniently and effortlessly allows to create any community of interest through the same “social networks”, quickly transfer information and organize through computer network games, for example, any social action” (Stepantseva, 2019, p. 64). One example of this is the “death groups” that are formed online and in which users share thoughts and plans for suicide or promote suicide as a solution to problems. Some of these groups may also be linked to pro-choice movements that promote suicide as a form of freedom of choice.

The increasing number of suicides in recent years is evidence of “progressive anomie” breaking down the social ties keeping people together and giving meaning to their actions, as well as a growing inability to cope with the loneliness resulting from the disappearance of a person’s inner life (Migała, 2011, p.109). According to statistics from the World Health Organization (WHO), every forty seconds someone in the world commits suicide – meaning: nearly 800,000 people every year – and almost 10 percent are Europeans. For every suicide death of a young person recorded in official records, there are between 100 and 200 attempts (Kicinska, Palma, 2022; WP, 2014). 15 per 100,000 people in Europe die by suicide, compared to a global average of 11 per 100,000 (Erling, 2019).

For the past five years, the highest number of suicide attempts in Poland was documented in 2022 with a total of 2031 suicide attempts by children and adolescents under the age of 18 – of which 150 died (Starzyńska-Rosiecka, 2023). In 2021, 1,496 children and adolescents under 18 attempted suicide, accounting for 10.8% of the total number of suicide attempts, and 127 of these attempts ended in death – which constitutes 2.4% (Suicide Attempts..., 2022). This indicates that the number of suicide attempts among children and adolescents under the age of 18 is nearly 12 times higher in 2021 and 14 times higher in 2022 than suicides that ended in death.

One of the predominant roles in committing suicidal acts among young people is played by the virtual network in which these groups are organized, managed and coordinated. We can argue that “death groups” are a characteristic phenomenon of social networks. The promotion of teen suicides was initiated in Russia. In 2015, the Russian social network called VK¹ began “enlisting” teenagers into the “Blue Whale Challenge” game, and as of 2017, the game was implemented for the same purpose on Instagram – and later also

on Meta (Facebook), Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Yahoo, Tumblr, TikTok, gaining popularity.

The story of “death groups” became well-known in Russia after an article by Galina Mursalieva titled “Death Groups” published in *Novaya Gazeta* on May 16, 2016 and widely circulated in the media. The article stated that from November 2015 to April 2016, 130 teenagers committed suicide as a result of the activities of various so-called death groups (particularly with ties to the “Blue Whale”) operating on the Internet. Certain media outlets report that up to about 200 deaths were believed to have occurred among teenagers as a result of participation in this game.

BLUE WHALE – A SUICIDE “GAME” IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

Among the ‘death groups’, the most well-known is the Blue Whale ‘game’¹¹. According to E. Berg (2017), the image of the whale is said to have been taken from the song “Burn” by the Lumen group – and signifies loneliness and alienation. This game is a phenomenon of social media, a youth subculture of sorts – especially one of teenagers. The ultimate goal of this “game” is for participants to commit suicide. According to *Novaya Gazeta*, in order to start the ‘game’, participants (mostly teenagers) – a group which is closed to the uninitiated on the social network VK – have to write hashtags on their pages, such as #bluewhale, #iaminthegame, #quiethouse. Participants in the game perform specific tasks over 50 days (e.g., self-harming, cutting symbols on their skin, stabbing themselves with a needle, watching horror movies, as well as visiting designated locations, such as skyscrapers), which are assigned to them by an anonymous “group administrator,” a so-called “guardian,” and many of those tasks have a specific set time of 4:20 a.m. (Mursalieva, 2016; Berg, 2017). Such a morning hour induces fatigue and impaired concentration in adolescents, making it far easier to manipulate them. On the last day, the guardian orders them to commit suicide.

In 2016, in the VK social network there appeared many copycat groups whose names contained the word “whale”: “Whales Swim Up”, “Space Whale”,

“White Whale”, “Sea of Whales”, “Ocean of Whales”, “Flying Whale”, as well as those with other names: “Quiet House”, “Wake Me Up At 4:20”, “Milky Way”, “U19”, “F57”, “Disappear for 24 hours” and others. The result was always the same: the committing of suicide by those groups’ participants. The guardians of most of these groups turned out to be teenagers who were residents of Russia – as well as Ukraine. As soon as information about teen suicides caused by the activities of the first Blue Whale groups emerged in 2016, 21-year-old Filip Budeikin, who operated online under the nickname Filip Lis (Fox)^{III} and was the guardian of one of the “death groups” and the creator of the “F57” hashtag, where “F” stood for the first letter of his name, and “57” were the last digits of his phone number, was arrested. The Investigative Committee accused him of encouraging minors to suicide via the social network VK. The young man was suspected in the deaths of 15 teenagers, but he himself admitted that because of his direct involvement, 17 children committed suicide within a year. Budeikin was released in March 2019.

In 2017, more than 500 online communities – in one way or another associated with suicide ideology – were identified in Russia. According to experts, the approximate number of subscribers to “death groups” was more than 500,000 people. For example, in the VK social network there were “audiences” with 50 thousand subscribers and small groups – up to 50 people – which were often created by minors for their peers. These groups popularized the topic of suicide, providing descriptions of ways to commit suicide and sending invitations to the game (Izvestiia, 2017). According to Russia’s Children’s Ombudsman, the increase in juvenile suicides recorded in 2016 – 720 children and adolescents committed suicide – was linked precisely to suicidal communities (BBC, 2017). The popularity of the “game” is believed to have peaked in February 2017, when more than 800 social media users posted the hashtag #bluewhale – waiting for instructions. “Death groups” mostly focused on young people aged 12-16.

“The game” also proved popular in Ukraine. In 2016, the first death of a child in Mariupol was reported in Ukraine precisely because of the participation in the Blue Whale game. In 2017, Ukrainian police detected 926 suspicious groups on social networks, blocked 600 groups and more than 200 accounts of organizers and guardians. At the same time, it is noted that fake “death groups” have also been created – the organizers of which are scammers

pursuing a different goal: enriching themselves. First, they followed a similar pattern as “death groups” – and then requested the players’ parents’ personal data including identification codes and bank card numbers (Kievvlavst, 2017).

In 2018-2019, social networks have witnessed a new surge of interest in suicidal themes. To participate in the new wave of the Blue Whale game, it was required to put a specific image on an avatar, post a hashtag on a “wall”, invite five friends to play, and then wait for a mentor to write and send tasks. It was a slightly modified form of the Blue Whale game. There was a new name – “New Journey” – and it was no longer hosted in VK, but in Telegram, in which guardians find it easier to remain anonymous. The symbols of this game were specific hashtags and a red pentagram on a black field with mysterious symbols. Even if the content was blocked by the network, new tags appeared, as well as chat rooms in which teens communicated about the topic and they all waited together for messages.

In 2018, researchers discovered approximately 30 “New Wave” communities. Instead of the once-popular #F15 hashtag, new ones appeared, such as #L13 and #YG4 (which had already been blocked by VK), as well as #quiet-forest and #owlneversleeps, which indicated to the guardian the willingness of teens and young adults to perform tasks. Teens who had already been accepted into such communities were presented with the guardians’ first task to decipher a certain code (Grigorian, Zykov, 2018). In fact, however, without realizing it, teenagers were integrated into the online culture of net-stalking (solving hidden ciphers and finding hidden meanings), which was widely known. This is accompanied by so-called “alternate reality games” (ARGs – alternate reality games), which simply entail creating and maintaining a misunderstanding: the player doesn’t fully understand whether the performed actions are a part of a game or not. Between 2017 and 2019, Roskomnadzor^{IV} restricted access to 168,000 pages with suicidal content on social networks VK, Moj Mir, Odnoklassniki (OK), Instagram and Viber messenger. In 2017-2018, the efforts of volunteers succeeded in neutralizing at least 30 guardians, and in 2019 – another six. Dozens of guardians of such games are known to have been arrested in 2020 (RIA Novosti, 2020).

Another surge occurred in January-February 2021 not only in Russia, but also in other European countries, including Ukraine^V. In Russia, Roskomnadzor

has removed 500 websites or blocked related content since January 2021, and about 5,000 sites in 2020 (TASS, 2021). In Ukraine, in the first three months of 2021, the number of suicide attempts among teenagers was 101, some of which were associated by parents with “death groups,” and a 15-year-old resident of Kryvyi Rih, Ukraine, was a guardian of a group of more than 500 participants on Telegram (Kalashnik, 2021). The year 2021 in Ukraine began with 18 suicide attempts of children and teenagers aged between 10 and 16 (Fakty, 2022). In just two weeks of 2021 (January 19 to February 2, 2021), 5 cases of suicide by children and adolescents were reported in Ukraine (Den, 2021). According to Ukrainian media, the reason for this increase in the number of suicides is the rise of so-called “death groups,” the rules of which closely resemble the game of “Blue Whale”. This year, another high-profile suicidal online game was Red Owl, whose tasks consisted of: being constantly online, responding instantly 24/7 to messages sent by guardians, watching psychedelic videos in the middle of the night, and listening to sound recordings from another “unearthly dimension.” If a child refuses to complete tasks, he or she is blackmailed and intimidated (Golos Karpat, 2021). What is more, one of the conditions of such a destructive game: a suicide had to be recorded. A new trend emerged: children and teenagers were persuaded to jump from the balconies of high-rise buildings and swallow pills. One example was the story of 13-year-old Nika, who died in Kiev on February 2, 2021, taking her fatal step from the 16th floor into eternity (Shevchenko, 2021). The girl’s relatives are certain that a game not unlike “Blue Whale” was the cause of her suicide. They maintained that she was raised in a wonderful family, was a good student, learned foreign languages and adored her younger brother very much. She was an open, kind and cheerful girl – with great plans for the future. According to the girl’s family (Surina, Chrzanowska-Gancarz, 2022, p. 215):

It is hard to say when Nika joined this group. At first glance, nothing has changed in her behavior. The first changes showed up after the winter quarantine. Nika lost the desire to do her homework. The girl never let go of the phone, even during meals and lessons. Once, when her grandmother asked her: “How are you?”, she answered: “I’m not dead yet.” She often drew people without eyes with a black pen. Once, while leaving home with her grandmother, she looked at a skyscraper and asked: “How does

a person fall from a balcony?”. She had been prepared weeks before... Nika photographed and sent back a photo of the 16th floor balcony. The photo of that particular balcony. For several nights before the tragedy, Nika had not slept. She was simply not allowed to sleep. As it turned out, every night at exactly 4:20 in the morning the guardians assigned her tasks. Because of insomnia, her blood pressure rose and her head hurt a lot. When the girl returned from school, she told her family about all the news, but she failed to mention the fact that she was accepted into the “death group”. After the tragedy, it turned out that before jumping, the girl sent a voicemail message to the group: “Finally, I will die.” Unfortunately, much of the information has been deleted, as guardians demand the removal of correspondence, diaries or drawings. A few drawings have survived, though. One bears the inscription “Flight to Nowhere.” On another there is a map of the area, and in the corner: a door with the inscription “Hell” has been drawn. On another piece of paper are drawn eyes, mouth and the date of 02.02.

Some teenagers join suicide groups simply because “everyone is in them”. The president of the Association of Independent Television Experts of Ukraine, N. Bugaieva, stated that “sometimes almost the entire class joins ‘death groups,’ and a student, even if he or she doesn’t want to, does so in order not to become an outcast” (Facts, 2022).

SUICIDAL COMMUNITIES IN POLAND

According to mass media reports, several cases of self-harm have been reported in Poland, with children admitting that the injuries occurred while they were performing tasks. In 2017, in mid-March in Szczecin, three schoolchildren self-harmed in the area of their shoulders by cutting the “f5” symbol with a sharp tool under the influence of the Blue Whale game. In Poland, the 2017 investigation into the game involved more than 20 children between 11 and 14 (E-Stargard, 2017). As reported in the media, the game reached teenagers in Gliwice, Łódź, Świątniki Górne (Lesser Poland), Łęborg, Kraśnik, Zabrze, Kraków, Milanówka (West Pomeranian Voivodeship),

and Piła (cf. Domagała-Szymonek, Kapusta, 2017; Gębuś, 2017; Piotrowska, 2017; et al.).

Another destructive game that has reached Poland is one called “Become a fire fairy.” The task in it consists in telling the child to turn off the gas in the kitchen. This is to be done at night, when the other family members have gone to bed. The instruction, which can lead to tragedy, reads (excerpt): “The magic of gas will come to you right away. You will breathe it throughout the night. In the morning, when you wake up, say the words: Thank you sorceresses of Alfea. I have become a fairy. From now on you will be a true fire fairy” (Gontarczyk, 2017).

In 2020, “the Whale” returned to Poland. Greater Poland police in May 2020 detained a 24-year-old Ukrainian citizen who had set up a closed group on the social network VK called “Beginnings 57” resembling the Blue Whale. He was the guardian and, through various online forums and newsgroups, made contact with Russian-speaking teenagers and offered them to join the game. It was established that his victims were three teenagers (14 and 15 years old) also residing in Poland. One of the girls – of Ukrainian descent – had almost all of her body slashed with a razor blade (TVP Info, 2020).

As the analysis indicates, in a relatively short period of time the phenomenon of death groups in the virtual space has spread widely – leading to the creation of new suicide-themed games.

THE SPREAD OF THE BLUE WHALE AROUND THE WORLD

2017 was a milestone year – when games introducing destructive virtual worlds in many guises took over almost the entire world: teenagers “playing” these games were reported in the United States, Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa. Media around the world covered cases of suicide and self-harm by children and adolescents. Mass hysteria quickly went beyond mere discussion topics in the Russian Federation – the so-called “game” became known in Spain, the United Kingdom, France and many other countries (RT en Español, 2017; Todo Noticias, 2017). In 2017, in Central Asia, in countries such

as Kazakhstan, police officials reported 63 cases of children being involved in the game (Tengrinews.kz, 2017). Kyrgyz media claim that the “game” has also appeared there (Zanoza, 2017). English and American newspapers also reported on the popularity of the game and its rules, and the number of queries in English about it increased hundred-fold in February 2017 (Kochegarov, Raskin, Zaripova, 2017).

The Blue Whale was mentioned by media in Poland, Bulgaria and Latvia. “Death groups” preyed on troubled teenagers in Romania, Hungary, Italy, Germany, Egypt, India, Uruguay, the US, Tunisia, Venezuela, Portugal, the UK – and even China, where the facts of teenage and youth suicides caused by “death groups” have been officially recognized. A number of communities have also sprung up in the Spanish-speaking segment of the Internet – the members of which were invited to play Blue Whale. One of these groups hosted more than 15,000 participants. Police in Mexico, Colombia and Brazil, as well as Peru, reported investigations into suicides among teenagers influenced by playing Blue Whale on Meta (Facebook). The management of one educational institution in the Peruvian department of Lima reported that five students attempted to injure themselves in line with the terms of the suicidal online game (BBC News, 2017). After the suicide deaths of two minors in Saudi Arabia inspired by the Blue Whale game, 47 computer games were banned – including Grand Theft Auto V, Assassin’s Creed 2, Life is Strange and The Witcher 3: Wild Gon (AP News, 2018).

Typically, suicidal groups are closed and information about would-be victims is gathered through friends, classmates and social networks. One of the first tasks in such groups is to report as many details as possible about friends and classmates, as well as their relatives – and to bring in friends as new participants in these groups.

OTHER TYPES OF NETWORK-BASED “DEATH GROUPS”

“Death groups” are constantly undergoing evolution. It should be noted that since 2017, both through online social media, e.g. VK, Telegram as well as other social networks – but also through instant messaging – highly dangerous and destructive games are increasingly being distributed to children and young people of different ages. In February 2017, viral messages appeared on social networks about the game “Run or Die”, in which children must cross the street in front of a moving vehicle and record a video of this on a smartphone, and later the game “How to be a Winx Fairy” – the Italian animated series Winx is very popular among children, who are mostly aged 6-9. It is at this age that children become influenced, making it possible to manipulate them.

Later, there appeared a new instant messaging threat targeting children and teens – the “Momo Challenge”. This is a form of game originating in Japan that spread in 2018 thanks to social media and instant messaging installed on cell phones (MacDonald, 2018). It entails accepting a friend invitation from “Momo”^{VI} using WhatsApp messenger. Momo is a doll with a scary hen-woman face encouraging various extreme tasks that involve threats to the psyche and lives of children and adolescents, including self-harm and suicide (Kurchuk, 2019). Most sources claim that the phantom only responds to those who attempt to contact her. According to several sources, the number belonging to Momo was first circulated on Facebook (Meta) and other social networks, including Reddit. The game quickly spread to Europe, as well as Latin and North America. Phone numbers associated with “Momo” come from Japan, Mexico and Colombia. “Momo challenge” is nothing more than another offshoot of Blue Whale, which has claimed the health and lives of numerous young people.

In 2020, another new version of the dangerous game (reminiscent of Blue Whale or Momo’s Dolls) – “Scary Goofy” – appeared on WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok. It “called on children and teenagers to perform various tasks that start out quite trivial and harmless, but in the end can lead to the player’s suicide” (Wprost, 2020). It is notable that there is a growing number of new games, animated series that encourage children and teenagers to commit suicide. In addition to the Momo game, Death Note^{VII} and “Inuyashik” anime^{VIII},

which do not set an age limit, are spreading online. These animated films show violence, blurring gender roles, good and evil – encouraging teenagers to commit suicide, etc.

It can be said that youth suicide is a major problem in postmodern society today. “Death groups” can be referred to as suicide communities: closed groups in virtual space, primarily in social networks, forming a wide network into which children and adolescents find their way in a period of intense disillusionment. At the same time, an increasingly important role in the etiology of juvenile suicidal behavior is played by the posting of information on social networks that popularizes suicide – provoking children and adolescents to take their own lives. There are many sites on the Internet where the topic of death is clearly cultivated, and those who have already attempted suicide share their experiences, screenshots of correspondence in which guardians give them tasks – as well as photographs confirming their completion of tasks including incisions on various parts of the body.

ONLINE DESTRUCTIVE GAMES AND MANIPULATION

On the one hand, “Blue Whale” and other similar games in social networks are games that qualify under J.F.Jacko’s definition, according to which a game – in the structural sense – is “a system of rules defining the following: the set of possible actions and objects belonging to it (a), their functions (meaning) in it (b) and its purpose (c) [...]”. A game in the functional sense consists in the fact that the subject engages in it in a manner consistent with its rules” (Jacko, 2016, pp.68-70).

Applying the concept of E.Berne, a suicidal game can be described as human behavior that might seem innocent and enjoyable, but in reality is a way to hide or satisfy emotional or psychological needs. Keeping in mind that every game is a particular expression of interpersonal relations, we can state that online destructive games fit into E.Berne’s concept in which “a game is called a series of complementary hidden transactions leading to a well-defined, predictable outcome. [...] The fact is that such games are serious and can have serious consequences. Every game, on the other hand, is unfair in

its assumption, and the outcome has dramatic overtones rather than merely exciting ones” (Berne, 2004, pp.37-38). Since in games “the last act of the script calls for a miracle or a catastrophe, depending on whether it is constructive or destructive, the corresponding games are also constructive or destructive” (Berne, 2004, p.48). Let us remember that in destructive games, the main target group is impressionable teenagers who are contacted online. Once they are included in the game, the group’s creators – using a variety of means – prevent the participants from leaving the game.

Let us point out that, according to Cz. Cekiera (2003, p. 8), the emotional state of adolescents before and during a suicide attempt is characterized, among other things, by strong excitement, nervousness, a state of embitterment, a sense of harm suffered, discouragement, depression, a feeling of meaninglessness of life, strong states of aggression and self-aggression. The dominant attitude of the suicidal person is a “tunnel vision” of his situation, from which there is one – and only one – way out: death. According to M. Przybysz-Zaręba (2019, p.362), these are “risk factors that influence the rise of suicidal tendencies. In the absence of the possibility of solving the problem, an individual makes a suicide attempt as an escape from the problem(s)”. Hence, suicidal network games contain techniques for manipulating human behavior.

In another view, “death groups” constitute a subculture – especially of teenagers and young people. A subculture is a natural environment for adolescents to grow up and develop, and the daily life of young people is characterized by two properties “real here and now” and “virtual here and now”. It is in these aspects that the destructive behavior of youth manifests itself. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the media, especially virtual communities, promote the emergence and development of destructive subcultures. A more significant characteristic trait of the destructive behavior of teenagers belonging to socially recognized destructive youth subcultures is the adoption of the style of a particular subculture. At the same time, present adolescents find particular value in freedom and freedom of choice with accompanying disregard for social responsibility, including one in the network community, which exposes adolescents to risks and conditions risky behavior. Such danger is caused by adolescents’ participation in youth subculture-based destructive groups.

These subcultures move to the online dimension, creating a closed or semi-open virtual community with specific ways of transmitting information and communicating through information technology. Virtuality provides the opportunity to create a networked copy of a “real life” group with continuous recruitment – or fosters the development of such groups. It also conditions characteristics similar to post-subcultures, namely fragmentation in time and identification, clear boundaries of group membership, non-permanent membership, flexible approach to the values forming the community, sharing interests and views on life.

Youth-organized destruction has existed almost forever. Just as other youth communities of destructive subcultures serve the function of adapting youth to a new reality, the “death groups” offer a way out of reality. The virtual destructive subcultural community – just like the traditional one – has consistent features such as: specific rules for the admission of new members, attitudes that express respect for symbols, confirmation of allegiance to the subculture primarily through illustration and media visualization on social networks. As a rule, these subcultural groups are formed by representatives of teenagers and young people who are active users of social media, always connected to the Web, most of them are “smombies” (Motyka, 2018, pp.168-200) affected by FOMO (Fear of missing out) syndromes^{IX}.

“Death groups” constitute a specific subculture in which the adopted way of life and thinking provokes young people to commit suicides. This subculture, as a rule, is based on a certain age category of youth, and its inherent characteristics are: scale – individuals are not limited by actual distances, countries, language, etc – and universality: only common values shared by many are important here. At the same time, the values should be loudly declared and potentially needed and applied to everyone; there is an established model of communication that is not understood by “outsiders”. Another important characteristic is “their own” symbols, which depend not so much on the virtual or real environment in which this subculture is implemented, but on the thematic reference of the subculture as a kind of game. There is also a specific language and symbols that allow the subculture to maintain its identity, develop on the basis of common interest and evolve alternative ways of functioning.

“Death groups” can be viewed as subcultural deviant groups. Participants of these groups consider themselves excluded from normal society and forced to develop alternative life activities. Generally, the attitude to society on the part of members of destructive groups is cautious or negative. As for the image of the world, it directly reflects the themes of these groups and largely depends on the role that the “player” assumes. In fact, for members of this subculture, the presence of symbolism expressed outwardly is not so important. On the contrary, it is vital not to be overly different from others – especially the peers.

Virtual representations of the world view of the members of these groups materialize in reality. It is possible that this is due to the fact that the action taking place in the real space is perceived by the participants as virtual action, since they are “playing” their virtual selves and not the real ones. In this worldview, there occurs a narrowing of the world of values, which is a particularly dangerous form of increasing the weight of subjective judgments that no longer coincide with universally accepted values. The behavior of members of the suicide subculture is characterized by heterogeneity. In other words, it can be said that we are dealing with psychological manipulation in the virtual space, aimed at imitating specific life activities and forming predispositions to suicidal behavior in reality “by which we should understand the sequence of reactions that are triggered in a person as soon as suicide appears in his consciousness as an anticipated, desired state of affairs – and therefore as a goal” (Migała, 2011, p.95).

The existence of such a subculture is characteristic of large, complex societies. The specificity of death groups is that they are confined, created in the virtual world of children and adolescents, in which the suicidal behavior of their members is formed and realized in the real world. “The danger, then, is that the contrast of the two worlds – the imaginary and the real – is too great, and triggers internal dynamics that further strengthen suicidal tendencies. Because over time, a person falls prey to his own thoughts, and the notion of ending their life begins to haunt them” (Kaczkowiak, 2017, pp.167-178) – as a future suicide victim is a person with a fragile psyche, i.e. susceptible to manipulation. They are usually at-risk adolescents, who are “characterized, among other things, by a high level of self-destructive tendencies. A person who engages in indirect self-destructive behaviors that shorten their life, more

quickly and easily, compared to others, undertakes self-destructive activities aimed at ending their life. [...] The same is true of thoughts of suicide; their mere occurrence will not cause someone to perform a suicide attempt. [...] Death by suicide occurs only when the individual's character and personality breaks down. Seeing nothing positive in their life, such an individual falls victim to his distorted image of life – one confirming their pessimism” (Migała, 2011, p.102).

Most importantly, “death groups” constitute one of the forms of manipulation – as these communities manifest all its signs. The first is a minimum of information. The second is minimal time to make a decision. The third is the person who manipulates saying they are ready to help. The fourth: manipulative activities take place in the virtual space, characterized by a high degree of anonymity on the part of the person who exerts manipulative influence. “Influencing is nothing more than behavior by which we influence the thoughts, emotions and behavior of another person or group of people” (Haracz, 2021). Although exerting influence does not have to be intentional – the opposite is always the case with death groups. Guardians of the groups watch over the details of the world presented, the non-trivial story that forms the game's universe and the challenges players face. Manipulation in destructive groups is thus about getting children and young people to think in a certain way, to provoke certain emotions, to form beliefs and to take suicidal actions.

N. Molchanov (2017) in his article “Blue Whale and Blade Candy. How Urban Legends Live and Spread” argues that the Blue Whale game – and one might add: any other of its kind – spread because of its “stickiness”. “Sticky” is conventionally referred to events, ideas or views that sink in and remain in people's memories for a long time. The game should have six characteristics, and they can all be applied to “Blue Whale” and similar phenomena: a) simplicity – strangers use social media to drive children to suicide; b) curiosity – the basic mechanism of spreading; c) specificity – ideas are full of specific images and sensory information, for example: the time of 04:20 am and tasks like “cut the skin with a knife”; d) trust – inner confidence is important; new information serves to reinforce an already existing belief and begins to inspire confidence; e) emotionality – taking care of the participant is one of the most exciting topics for humans; f) story – it is presented not as a scattering of facts, but a coherent narrative. The story acts as an imagination simulator.

All computer online games contain some sort of “bait” – according to the slang of gamers: false information that the other person will perceive as true and start believing it – providing opportunity to manipulate their consciousness and behavior. It is precisely the manipulation that causes danger to the existence of children and adolescents, provoking them to exhibit suicidal behavior, when in their consciousness “suicide appears as an anticipated, desired state of affairs, and therefore as a goal” (Migała, 2011, p.95).

Therefore, “death groups” in virtual space are destructive groups based on a suicidal network game – one containing techniques for manipulating the behavior of adolescents and young people in the physical space.

SUICIDAL COMMUNITIES AND MORAL PANIC

Suicidal online communities are created based on the mechanism of the game, in which teens and adolescents are involved, joining “secret chat rooms” (Krishnan, 2017). “Death groups” such as Blue Whale resurface under different names, with different tasks and on different social networks – but they have one goal: to drive teens to suicide. It is not clear why such games were originally created or what their purpose was. Some speculate that Blue Whale may have been a way to blackmail or manipulate participants. Others claim that the whole Blue Whale story is a hoax or mystification. Some experts believe that the suicides allegedly linked to the game may in fact have been caused by other factors – and that the Blue Whale stories were merely used as an explanation. At present, it is difficult to objectively and realistically assess how much of an impact such “death groups”, including Blue Whale, have on teen and youth suicides worldwide. The game does have real victims, but the scale of the phenomenon in European countries has not been conclusively defined.

Studying search trends of individual search terms in the popular Google search engine, one can observe the multiplicity of websites containing a given search term in their content. For example, as of 13 February, 2023, typing the phrase “suicide”, we can find 6, 91 million references. On the other hand, the keyword of “suicide” expands our field of sites that capture this term in more than 1.07 billion references. Search results for the keyword

“Blue Whale” (Russian: синий кит, Ukrainian: синій кит) in the Russian-language segment of Google account for 17.3 million, in Ukrainian – 20.3 million, and in Polish: 283 thousand – although the last publication we were able to find was published on 11 January, 2023 on <https://www.rodzice.pl/niebieski-wieloryb-2022/>.

The media play a significant role in the popularization of death groups. The matter gained global publicity in Russia – and therefore in other European countries – creating a whole media storm. The information was copied by numerous portals, and, subsequently, facts mixed with fiction were reported by almost all major media in many European countries. The coverage of the real tragedy – several teenage suicides – was reduced not to a search for the social and psychological causes of this phenomenon, but to the construction of an image of some mythological evil (those awful “death groups”), as if responsible for all teenage suicides in the country. This “image” was formed gradually, over the course of months of discussions concerning the subject in social networks and the media, acquiring increasingly new and mythological details – and following the logic of the development of moral panic. In this case, the media – which are generally supposed to portray only favorable things – are a tool for manipulating the public consciousness. A. Januszko-Szakiel (2010) believes that “by appropriate selection of information, its distortion and all other possible treatments on information, the media practice the so-called persuasive communication and attempt to influence the state of social consciousness.” The media manipulate consciousness – positioning disinformation between misleading and influencing. According to B. Bakowicz (2020, pp.37-38), news is hardly a neutral description of reality. In the case of death groups, the media irresponsibly reported events related to them, which led to moral panic^x.

According to S. Cohen (2011), the subject of a moral panic can be a new phenomenon – or sometimes something that has existed for a long time, but suddenly came into the spotlight. Numerous moral panics are quickly forgotten and replaced by new ones, but some of them sometimes have significant consequences for society that can be attributed to death groups.

The Novaya Gazeta article had a strong toxic effect due to its emotionality. Given that the threat should be clear, the myth is made here as bleak as

possible and takes on new details – not unlike in a game of “deaf telephone”. Thus, a moral panic is one way of constructing the image of “death groups” in colloquial and media discourse: a mechanism for the formation and spread of gossip, and one example of the triumph of emotions over facts. J. Pyżalski (2017, pp.289), referring to the theory of moral panic, stated that the whole phenomenon of “Blue Whale” was publicized by the media – and they were the main reason for the sudden popularity of this game. “In reality, however, this phenomenon turned out to be marginal and was largely created by the media. [...] The cumulative effect of media publicity of individual niche events causes them to begin to be imitated”. A. Arkhipova et al. (2017, p.12) stresses that moral panic is the search for real or fictional enemies that are a threat to the normal life of the community. As a result, information about dangerous “death groups” spreads quickly, and anything that is extremely dangerous is also extremely prestigious among teenagers.

The moral panic over “death groups” did not arise spontaneously and from scratch. The average number of media publications on the subject had been increasing day by day. The reaction was growing, as well, which was conditioned by two factors: 1) statements by politicians and officials, which created additional news and additional nervousness; 2) the “recoding” of this news by bloggers for the teenage audience – thus bringing the subject to their attention. Panic with the active participation of the media appeared almost everywhere – in schools, among parents, in local communities, etc. The primary reason for the moral panic has been a change in the nature of children and young people’s interaction with the Internet – although this was initially due to the fear of losing control because of the Internet. According to Eurostat, in 2022, the percentage of households in EU countries with Internet access reached 93% (Digital economy..., 2021), and in Poland – 90.4%. The highest percentage of regular users was observed among pupils and students (99.8%) (Społeczeństwo informacyjne, 2020). It is worth noting that, globally, in 2021, the share of mobile users accessing social networks on smartphones is 98.8% (Digital, 2021), and in Poland, nearly 96% of teenagers and young people in education use the Internet daily (Lange, 2021). Not only are teens and young adults accustomed to interacting with this environment since childhood – many were born during the period of rapid development of social networks

(mid-2000s – early 2010s) – but they are also better versed in them than their parents. This is why this generation is called “digital natives”.

A different interaction occurs when the desktop generation and the generation of digital natives collide – the latter of which are also called the “smartphone generation” or smombies (Motyka, 2018; Morbitzer, 2017)^{XI} – unlike the situation parents are accustomed to, when they can control and manage the websites visited by their children (set passwords and parental control system, review browsing history, limit and control internet time, etc.), in the case of the mobile internet, teenagers’ access is not restricted. What’s more, teens can interact online with others when they are not under parental supervision. The high publicity profile of Web 2.0^{XII} also worries parents: given the youth’s interest in demonstrative behavior as a way to raise their status in their peer group, and their tendency to design their behavior as acceptable in their group, “adults” are concerned that the Internet is becoming a platform for demonstrative suicide. For young people, the social networking segment is proving to be an unsupervised “space of freedom.” “Dangerous” groups – including “death groups” on social networks – are in fact the same unattended spaces where teens can “play” both with representatives of the adult world who try to establish control over this space, and with alleged “agents of the terrible” – guardians, etc.

A. Arkhipova et al. (2017, p.23) believe that we are dealing with a situation in which one side is undertaking an attempt to break out of the control of “authority” in order to organize a “space of freedom,” and the other seeks to restore this control or at least the illusion of it. The solution to the problem through prohibitive means leads to young people merely trying to master paths that bypass access to information, to make the “free space” invisible to the older generation and supervisory institutions. The solution to the problem is in offline, family education and the ability to work with a new type of awareness. However, the desire to seek freedom online makes all teenagers rush to social networks en masse. At the same time, the popularity of platforms such as TikTok, Meta and Instagram means that Blue Whale can soon gain popularity again – and a new dangerous challenge can emerge.

The moral panic regarding death groups has also had its positive side. This is because a serious discussion about the safety of children and young people

on the Internet has finally begun – and parents started to check more carefully their children’s online activity. It is notable that in order to eliminate suicidal content, social networks are cooperating with law enforcement: Instagram removes photos with relevant hashtags, and the administration of VK has introduced a special complaint form and started blocking users.

The status of research on the determinants of suicidal behavior among adolescents points to a variety of factors that have a substantial impact on a young person engaging in suicidal behavior. Due to the increasing pace of life, the problem of loneliness and solitude is becoming more prevalent. For numerous young people, such a state becomes difficult to bear, the fear of loneliness leads them into pathological structures, seeking solace in destructive groups. Vulnerability to getting caught up in such a dangerous destructive game (like Blue Whale), does not just come out of nowhere. No child living in an environment that is good for him or her would fall for that – this requires a fertile ground of sorts and suddenly coming across someone who either understands their problems or shows methods of solving them. Of course, many teens will play such a resonating game as Blue Whale – and among them will be those with problems. Psychologists warn that those with low self-esteem and low self-worth are particularly vulnerable to participating in the game. P. Migala (2011, p.102) believes that “the reason should be seen in the fact that the act of suicide requires a tremendous dynamic – formed as a result of a pessimistic view of the world. Death by suicide occurs only when the character and personality of the individual breaks down. Seeing nothing positive in their life, the individual falls victim to his distorted image confirming his pessimism.” Police statistics and scientific studies show that the cause of suicide in children and adolescents is almost always caused by problems that the young person is unable to solve – to the point that he or she believes that death is better than life, which is in line with A. Mitchel’s (1994; Otto, 2002) definition that “suicide is not so much the desire to die as the fear of life”.

CONCLUSION

In light of the considerations outlined above, it should be noted that “death groups” – suicidal communities in virtual space are groups of a destructive nature, ones built on the basis of online games, incorporating techniques for manipulating the behavior of young people, manifested in reality, i.e. devirtualized in the physical space.

Among death groups, the best-known game is Blue Whale – a destructive psycho-manipulative group, the guardians of which control the actions of members, assume absolute authority and the right to interfere in the lives of their members. This is a social media phenomenon that has already taken root, a kind of youth subculture, especially of teenagers, which, through the existence of a certain game in social networks, takes away the meaning of life and leads them by means of manipulation to suicidal death. New and increasingly sophisticated ways are emerging to persuade children and adolescents to commit suicide.

The much-publicized coverage and propaganda of the topic of suicidal behavior in the media, both in the context of the acts committed (Werther effect, copycat effect) and the mythologization of those problems – the topic of “death groups” in social media, etc. – provoked the emergence of the so-called “culture of death” among adolescents and young people. According to E. Shchitinina (2018), the promotion of suicidal behavior has led to the practice of self-harm among adolescents, as well as to the appearance of this topic in literature and youth series. Suicidal communities as virtual communities employ various mechanisms – primarily games – to attract children and adolescents to the topic of suicides. Frequently, this mechanism is a typical mechanic of ARG games (Arkhipova et al., 2017). Moral panic and the functioning of youth in a symbiotic society create a suicidogenic virtual environment in which there exist organized “death groups”.

It can be assumed that suicidal groups in the virtual space – as a social phenomenon – actually exist. It is worth noting that playing out the theme of committing suicide, getting another person to commit a suicidal act is moving from the virtual world to the real one, where it can be realized. This once again confirms that the virtual world is the natural side of the youth's existence, and the difference between the real and virtual dimensions is practically

imperceptible. The symbiosis of reality means that actions and behaviors designed in the virtual space are transferred and become a fact in reality, and the spread of suicidal tendencies by idealizing this behavior becomes a kind of norm in solving life problems. In such a situation, we can talk about the phenomenon of “cybersuicide”, which researchers refer to in the situation of using the Internet, social networks in matters related to suicidal acts and ideas. Teens and adolescents thus adopt various ways of intentionally harming themselves (Birbal et al., 2009; Narayan et al., 2019), and the Blue Whale Challenge is merely one of them.

There can be numerous motives behind attempts to end one’s own life among adolescents and young people. Quite often they are closely related to the involvement of third parties. Today, one of the tools used to persuade a person to commit suicide is the Internet – which “is also becoming a medium that even encourages, especially among young people, suicides” (Hernacka-Janikowska, 2022, p.154). Equally important is the fact that “death groups” in the Internet space and the mechanisms they use are secondary causes of suicidal behavior by adolescents and young people – while the primary causes remain traditional: problems and difficulties in relationships with others, depression, economic and psychological factors, etc. “Death groups” created on the basis of the game of alternative reality, can become a way out of “uncontrollable reality” for troubled adolescents. Quoting S. Hall (1974), it can be said that destructive virtual communities such as death groups are “at once dramatic and meaningless within the framework of generally accepted norms – they challenge the normative world. They make problematic not only how the world is defined, but also what it should be in the first place”.

“Death groups” – the suicidal communities in the virtual space – are a product of society and, at the same time: a “substitute reality” for children and adolescents with difficulties and problems in life, depression, feelings of loneliness and solitude as well as pessimistic views of the world. Therefore, modern society should not become a “suicidogenic society” (in the sense of E. Durkheim’s definition), leading to insecurity and human loss, creating favorable conditions which are conducive to the implementation of self-destructive aspirations of the younger generation.

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ENDNOTES

- [^I] VK (VKontakte – the Russian equivalent of Meta/Facebook) – the most popular and largest social network in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union, especially in Ukraine until May 2017. The service is available in 86 language versions. It had 100 million monthly active users by 2022.
- [^{II}] Blue Whale’s popularity is believed to be linked to certain death on November 23, 2015. 16-year-old Renata Kambolina (Rina Palenkova), who took a selfie before throwing herself under a train. On the wave of Rina’s growing popularity, the idea was born that the game could drive a person to suicide.
- [^{III}] Filip Budeikin (Fox) and the „Sea of Whales” group claimed that Rina Palenkova committed suicide through a quest in one of the suicidal social networks. Perhaps it was out of this desire to „rise” on the wave of Rina’s popularity that the very idea that a young person could be driven to suicide through a „game” emerged.
- [^{IV}] The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, abbreviated as Roskomnadzor (Russian: Роскомнадзор), is the Russian federal executive agency responsible for monitoring, controlling and censoring Russian mass media.
- [^V] Numerous Russian and Ukrainian adolescents had used the social networks of both countries until 24/02/2022 due to the good degree of knowledge of both languages.
- [^{VI}] The Momo avatar is a painting that refers to a sculpture by Japanese artist Keisuke Aisawa (the authorship was previously attributed to Midori Hayashi) (Kurczuk, 2019), depicting his vision of a spirit who in Japanese folklore is named Ubume – inspired by the name of a traditional Japanese character corresponding to the spirit of a mother who died in childbirth. It owes its appeal to the play on the three ideograms of its name, 姑獲鳥 – literally „mother,” „catch” and „bird” (Audureau, 2018). The sculpture itself is quite suggestive, and the graphic depicting it has made a huge impression on Internet users, who have created scary stories around it.
- [^{VII}] The „Death Notebook” anime (2006) has 37 episodes, directed by Tetsuro Araki, aired on Japanese TV channel NTV between October 3, 2006 and June 26, 2007. The notebook has amazing properties: its user, by writing the name and surname of a person into it, causes the death of that person under certain circumstances. It is available for free, e.g. <https://jut.su/bookofd/>.
- [^{VIII}] The 11-episode anime series that aired on Japanese TV channel Fuji TV between October 12 and December 29, 2017, in which one of the characters – cyborg Hiro Sishigami – kills people for personal pleasure, wreaks general havoc, and then decides to destroy the entire population of Japan.

- [IX] FOMO (fear of missing out) syndrome is the situation in which a person feels a terrifying fear of missing important information coming from the Internet. The fear disappears when a person with FOMO syndrome checks notifications on his phone or on the computer.
- [X] The concept of „moral panic” was first described by sociologist Howard S. Becker in his book „Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance” (1963) as society’s reaction to behavior it considers harmful or inappropriate. The concept of moral panic was subsequently developed by other researchers (e.g., J. Young, 1971; S. Cohen, 1972) and has become an important tool in the analysis of various social phenomena.
- [XI] M.A. Motyka (2018) uses the term of „smombie” to describe people who lose contact with their surroundings as a result of staring at their smartphone monitor or reach for their smartphone to avoid interaction with others. According to J. Morbitcer (2017), smombies are characterized by extreme passivity towards events taking place in their close environment, which is most often due to the difficulty of separating the overlapping virtual and real worlds.
- [XII] Web 2.0 is the Internet we have been using since 2004 until today. Today’s web is sometimes called the „social web” because of the strong role of social media. The second-generation Internet is focused on the user.