YouTube Made Me Do It

Kids are attempting dangerous stunts to get famous online. Is it up to social media sites to stop them? By Mackenzie Carro

He picks up what looks like a tiny plastic pillow filled with jelly and places it carefully between his front teeth. Then, CHOMP! He bites down. Immediately, dark-green goo begins to ooze from his mouth. His face twists in disgust and regret. He spits, coughs, and spits again.

The screen goes black.

This, of course, describes a boy attempting the Tide POD challenge, the latest in a series of so-called challenges in which ordinary kids film themselves attempting dangerous stunts and then post the videos on social media sites like YouTube. (Tide has released many warnings urging people not to eat the PODs.)

What could possibly motivate kids to bite into a packet of toxic laundry detergent—or to wrap their bodies in duct tape, swallow spoonfuls of cinnamon, pelt each other with heavy backpacks, or set themselves on fire? (These are all actual challenges.)

That's easy: the chance to become famous.

The hard question is, what should be done to stop kids from doing such dangerous things?

Daredevil Entertainment

For better or worse, watching other people take risks has long been a form of
entertainment. Ancient Romans packed arenas to watch gladiators battle each other to the death. In the 1800s, “human cannonballs”—people launched into the air by powerful rubber springs—were popular circus attractions. In the 1960s and ’70s, the legendary Evel Knievel earned fame for his death-defying motorcycle stunts.

Today, videos of people attempting dangerous stunts can garner thousands of views on YouTube—and anyone with a smartphone has the potential to become famous. But some experts worry that by providing a global audience and a chance to go viral, YouTube and other sites are incentivizing dangerous behavior.

“Teens will do things that are wild and crazy to bring attention to themselves—even if it’s potentially dangerous,” says child and adolescent psychologist Alan Hilfer. “Posting stunt videos [on social media] gives teens a degree of notoriety.”

**laughs and likes**

As Hilfer points out, challenge videos tend to end before showing the consequences of stunts: the choking, the blood, the 911 calls, the visits to emergency rooms, the concussions, and the comas.

(Since January 1, 2018, the American Association of Poison Control Centers has received more than 170 reports of teens poisoned as a result of ingesting laundry detergent packets.) But it’s not as though most teens don’t understand that lighting yourself on fire, for instance, is a really, really bad idea. According to Hilfer, most young people who attempt dangerous stunts do understand the risks. They just do the stunts anyway.

Why?

Their brains tell them to.

During adolescence, the area of your brain that seeks pleasure and reward is well developed. The area of your brain that controls judgment and decision making—the prefrontal cortex—is still developing.

As a result, your brain is wired to think less about future consequences and more about present rewards, like getting laughs and likes. In this way, your brain, combined with surging hormones and a natural desire for new experiences, can lead some kids to try risky stuff.

So if young people are biologically vulnerable to risk-taking, are social media sites showing a sort of negligence in hosting videos that showcase dangerous challenges for young people to try?

Personal injury lawyer Gary Massey says yes.

“People are required to build fences around pools because kids might jump in, even when they are not allowed,” says Massey. “Social media companies, like everyone else, can be held responsible when they encourage dangerous conduct.”

Then again, teens have been taking risks since long before YouTube, Instagram, and smartphones. Seeking out different experiences, trying new things, and making mistakes is a natural and healthy part of growing up.

Can social media sites really be blamed for kids making risky challenge videos?

**not worth it**

Many social media sites do take steps to discourage reckless behavior. According to YouTube’s Community Guidelines, YouTube “draw[s] the line at content that intends to . . . encourage dangerous or illegal activities that have an inherent risk of serious physical harm or death.”
Indeed, over the years, YouTube has removed thousands of clips of dangerous challenges, most recently those involving Tide Pods.

But is that enough?

Despite YouTube’s guidelines, dangerous stunt videos are still being posted. Some believe that YouTube’s rules should be stricter.

Others argue that although tougher rules might help keep people safe, such rules would also infringe on the rights of users. YouTube was created as an outlet where ideas, personal opinions, and creativity can flow freely.

Added restrictions on the types of videos people can and cannot post could undermine the very reason YouTube is so popular: it lets people post and watch whatever they want. It should be up to parents, some say—not YouTube—to monitor what kids post and watch online.

The fact is, the popularity of challenge videos isn’t really YouTube’s fault—it’s ours. Just like the ancient Romans cheering on gladiators, we are the ones watching, liking, and sharing. Perhaps it is up to us as a society to band together and refuse to support content that encourages dangerous behavior.

The bottom line is that no number of likes or shares is worth jeopardizing your personal safety. Besides, there are plenty of ways to be a social media star that don’t require putting your life at risk. Mannequin challenge, anyone?

What Do You Think?

Is social media responsible for encouraging dangerous behavior? Find arguments in the article that support each side of this debate. Write the information on the lines below.

YES

- It’s all social media’s fault.

1. Social media incentivizes dangerous behavior.

2. 

3. 

NO

- Don’t blame social media.

1. 

2. 

3. 

Examine points on both sides of the debate—as well as your own beliefs—and decide what you think. State your opinion in one sentence below. This can be your thesis statement for an essay on this topic.

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Write an Argument Essay

Directions: Read “YouTube Made Me Do It.” Complete the essay kit on page 27. Then follow the steps below.

STEP 1: DECIDE WHAT YOU THINK

Is social media responsible for encouraging dangerous behavior?
Consider what you read in the article, as well as your own viewpoints. Check the box next to the point of view you will argue in your essay. Or write your own opinion in the space provided.

☐ Yes! It’s all social media’s fault. ☐ No! Don’t blame social media.

☐

STEP 2: GATHER SUPPORT FOR YOUR OPINION

Look at what you wrote in the “Yes” and “No” columns on page 27. Which points support your opinion? What other information supports your opinion? List at least three supporting details on the lines below.

Here’s an example: If you think social media sites are not to blame for teens’ dangerous behavior, one of your supporting details might be: “Then again, teens have been taking risks since long before YouTube, Instagram, and smartphones.”

1.

2.

3.
STEP 3: ACKNOWLEDGE THE OTHER SIDE
If you think that social media IS responsible for encouraging dangerous behavior, summarize the strongest arguments of those who disagree. If you think that social media IS NOT responsible for encouraging dangerous behavior, summarize the main reasons some people think it is.

STEP 4: CRAFT YOUR THESIS (CENTRAL CLAIM)
The thesis is where you tell readers what your essay is going to be about. The thesis should be a clear, strong statement of the opinion you gave in Step 1. The rest of your essay will support this thesis.

Your thesis:

STEP 5: WRITE YOUR HOOK
The beginning of your essay is called the hook because it "hooks" your readers' attention. The hook should relate to the topic of your essay, but it can take many forms. It can be:

1. An anecdote (a very short story): Describe your experience with challenge videos. Do you watch them? Have you ever put yourself in danger by trying one?

2. A surprising fact: Find a fact that will raise your readers' eyebrows. Several surprising facts are included in the article. You can also do some research to find one that is not included in the article.

3. A rhetorical question (a question to which you don't expect an answer): Ask your readers a question that reflects your point of view. Here's one way you could structure your question: "Is it really social media's fault that _______?"

4. A quote: Find a thought-provoking quote that relates to the topic of your essay.

Choose one of the ideas above, or use your own idea, and write a hook on the lines provided.

Your hook:
STEP 6: SUMMARIZE THE ISSUE

Let readers know a little about the issue you will be writing about. This is not your point of view; it's a brief summary of the issue. Finish the summary of the debate over challenge videos.

Kids are filming themselves doing dangerous stunts to get famous online, and many kids are getting hurt in the process. Some people think that social media sites like YouTube are to blame.

Others think