# SUICIDE GAMES, ABANDONED HOUSES, AND THIRST FOR DANGER: THE YOUTH'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES AND THE MEDIA'S MORAL PANICS ABOUT SEMI-SUPERNATURAL CHALLENGES IN ESTONIA

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**Abstract:** The article looks at the dynamics of the media and real life in relation to the so-called dangerous folklore of teenagers, which includes, for example, contacts with aggressive (semi-)supernatural fear creatures, frightening experiences in abandoned houses and notions of so-called suicide games. The authors analyse the interactions between media reality and youth behaviour and related developments in folklore. It is concluded that the presentation of media information in the form of moral panic mainly based on the concept of young people's vulnerability, which focuses on extreme risk examples, does not support safer coping, but focuses only on certain types of risk behaviour, often ignoring other concerns and the complexity of problems but also natural self-protecting mechanisms of the youth.

**Keywords***:* children's folklore, horror folklore, media representations, moral panics

## INTRODUCTION

The presentation of motifs that generate fear and a sense of danger in the media and in media-influenced interpersonal communication is fluctuating – in one period the problem of mysteriously disappearing and missing people comes to the fore, in another child suicide games, in the third the Covid-19 crisis. In this article we discuss the dynamics of the media reflections and teenagers' narratives and opinions in connection with the so-called dangerous folklore, which includes, for example, contacts with aggressive (semi-)supernatural fear creatures, horror experiences in abandoned houses, as well as perceptions related to suicide games. We look at the interactions between media reality and youth behaviour and related developments in folklore, combining folkloristic and sociological research methods (mainly qualitative thematic, context, and discourse analysis) and springing from the research question of how the views and experiences of the youth regarding such folklore differ from its representations in the media and thus, to what extent selective media moral panics – on the example of suicide games – can help to keep children safe from dangers related to such folklore. Folklore material used in the article is represented by topical texts (circa 500, the respondents being mainly 11–19 years old) collected during three school-lore collecting campaigns on the initiative of the Estonian Literary Museum (in 1992, 2007, and 2017–2018), with the focus on the thematic texts of the most recent collecting initiative that contained an explicit question about fears and dangers. The reason why earlier material was also included was the wish to exemplify how some types of dangerous folklore (e.g., conjuring aggressive ghosts, visiting abandoned houses) remain topical in the youth's accounts throughout all periods but suicide games come to the fore during a very limited period and in a very limited number of responses only after explicitly asking about them (mainly in 4 interviews from a total of 10 that the authors conducted with youngsters in 2018–2019). However, in the media material the above-mentioned repetitive motifs and warnings related to these do not occur at all, yet internet suicide games get unproportionally much attention. The main period of the analysed media coverage was 2017–2022. Focus was on the articles in the newspaper *Postimees* and the news portal *Delfi* (as some of the most popular media channels in Estonia) and their online comments, but radio programmes and other media articles (circa 20 in total) and social media – mostly Facebook – posts (circa 30 threads initiated by worried parents) that were found using a thematic keyword search were also observed.

Already in the 1990s, folklorist Linda Dégh (2001) referred to the wave character of "the culture of fear" (cf. also Furedi 2019 [2018]), which at its peak can make people act both ostensively (i.e., live out folklore motifs in real life) and

pseudo-ostensively (i.e., only seemingly live out folklore motifs). Social scientist and cognitivist Dan Sperber (1996) has pointed out that the construction of new ideas, new uses of words, the introduction of new objects and behaviours do not take place in any direction but are based on "attractors" whereby the suggestive repetition of information that contains such attractiveness factors can cumulate to moral panics. Since we are also talking about moral panics in relation to children's suicide games, it is appropriate to first clarify the term, and here we consider the colloquially-sounding but apt definition of sociologist Stanley Cohen (1972: 9) to be appropriate:

> *A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to, the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.*

Investigative journalist Malcolm Gladwell (2004) additionally uses the term "stickiness factor", hinting to the phenomenon that if certain motifs that trigger the reaction of large numbers of people are deliberately emphasized in the transmission of information, the resulting resonance may be expressed in an epidemic-like manner. Obviously, in today's media-influenced world, the media is one of the most important determinants of the dynamics of fear and panic. For example, a focused representation of certain types of threats or violence (e.g., issues related to the endangerment or direct abuse of minors) almost always triggers respective fears and defensive behaviour in society.

However, the regularities of when the topics of danger highlighted in the media cause only an explosive verbal reaction or also its transfer to the level of real-life actions are not always clearly predictable. Therefore, we also agree with the authors (e.g., Rowe 2009: 23) who have called for caution when labelling social or media reactions as moral panics because doing it may, in some cases, pay down levels of threat and negative consequence, and present anxieties, whether justified or not, as automatically exaggerated. Thus, this article does not try to claim that such phenomena as suicide games do not deserve attention at all, but the authors rather attempt to call for a more nuanced and delicate analysis without exclusive labels.

## CHILDREN'S SUICIDE GAMES IN ESTONIA AND ELSEWHERE: BACKGROUND AND OUTPUTS

Alexandra Arkhipova et al. (2017) analysed the wave of horror in Russia that began with a writing published in 2016 in the newspaper *Novaja gazeta* about the youth's so-called death groups – certain virtual communities on a popular social network Vkontakte. Arkhipova et al. describe how the author of this newspaper article from 2016 claimed that an anonymous organized group of criminals was deliberately forcing adolescents to commit suicide using special manipulation techniques (e.g., intimidation, code messages, increasingly severe self-harm) and was already responsible for at least 130 young people's deaths. The alleged criminals behind these manipulations were described as a mafia organization, the activities of which contained, among other things, supernatural elements, to which parallels can be found in earlier children's folklore. As the panic grew, the descriptions became more colourful; for example, the mayor of the town Ulyanovsk compared the activities of the criminals behind the so-called Blue Whale Challenge with those of the Islamic extremist group ISIS.

The content of the newspaper article was also referred to in the Western media, but in the first place it provoked a multi-level reaction in both the Russian-language press and social media, which led, at the level of the authorities, to public calls for introducing strict codes of conduct and control of the youth to prevent the threat. However, already in the same year public comments from researchers followed, stressing that there was no link between these death groups and young people's suicides. Many "real" suicide stories turned out to be urban legends – often produced by the youth themselves. Moreover, it was also proved that the administrators of the death groups were not an organized criminal organization, but some stories of fatal participation turned out to be simply folklore, and the initiators of some of the identified groups were actually teenagers. Snopes.com, a well-known website that debunks fake news and gossip, also declared in 2017 that no causal link was found between teen suicides in Russia and elsewhere in the world, and virtual death games (such as the Blue Whale Challenge) (Evon 2017). Soon various Western media outlets confirmed the same in relation to different geographical contexts.

However, the same moral panic related to the Blue Whale Challenge reached Estonia with some delay, and its crest lasted only for a relatively short time. On 1 March 2017, the state radio station Vikerraadio issued a warning that the well-known suicide challenge from Russia had also started spreading among the Estonian youth (although insofar the information about the game spread mostly among young people with a Russian background living in Estonia). Among other things, the radio broadcast mediated an interview with an 8th-grade girl who

"had been in contact with the game", and with the head of the police serious crime department. The girl explained that she created a fake identity and posted fake videos just to get to know what was going on in the death group; in the end she got scared and left the group. According to her, her Russian friend also neither hurt herself nor put her health in danger in any other way. However, the police representative disregarded the fact that the interviewed girl had in fact deliberately used ways to ensure her own safety, and emphasized that, given the information received from the international media and the interview with the girl, it had to be concluded that the situation was very serious, at the same time still admitting that all the information other than the mentioned interview was based solely on foreign media. The police officer also concluded that when children talk about such a suicide game, they do not understand that it indeed ends with real self-hurting, without specifying that in various age groups the understanding of the game and its impact can vary. In the same year, the same set of motifs appeared in a different media context and genre, when one participant in the TV-show "Ordeal of Clairvoyants" claimed that a young Russian clairvoyant who had fallen or jumped out of a window in an unexplainable manner had actually died as a victim of a similar suicide game.

A bigger wave of perceived danger arrived in Estonia in 2019, when the newspaper *Postimees* published an article on 29 January, titled "A dangerous killing game Momo on social media threatens children: 'You will die in three hours'" (Mõttus-Leppik 2019). This was followed by the description that Momo was the next level of the previous Blue Whale Challenge that was associated with 130 teenager suicides. As a chain reaction, information spread both on social media (e.g., as warnings in mothers' Facebook groups in 2019) and in face-to-face conversations, but in the Estonian context, only examples of children who had felt fear and not children that were injured were cited as evidence of the dangerousness of the game.

The visual component of information transmission is also telling – in *Postimees*, the information was presented on a black background, illustrated by a large-scale image of Momo. A reportage on the same topic in the TV news broadcast "Reporter" used video clips depicting self-injuring activity and ways of joining the Momo game in a detailed way as illustrative material. The question arises if such a media coverage (e.g., consciously creating a morbid and frightening atmosphere) can serve as objective warning at all or is it rather a way of sensation-mongering that has a great potential of panic-evoking. The World Health Organization and some communication and suicide researchers have made specific recommendations to address the issue of suicide in the media, explicitly recommending to avoid "whipping up" strong emotions and using a sensationalizing and panic-evoking style (WHO 2017; Värnik 2003).

A month later – on 1 March – the newspaper *Postimees* published an article that marked the end of the moral panic. The article had a strongly emotional wording similar to the previous one, but with the opposite message: "Parents, calm down! Momo is an urban legend that has duped millions" (Lamp 2019). The article was again illustrated with a large-scale picture of Momo. The article described the origins of the visual image of Momo and emphasized that the panic surrounding the game was clearly blown out of proportions, yet it reminded that "for children, the internet continues to be a place filled with horror". As is often the case in media coverage on health and safety, the article quotes experts with no photo or name (cf. Hiiemäe & Utriainen 2021 for a longer discussion of this take), who comment on the dangers related to the surge in suicide narratives. Rather than including the already overused image of Momo, it would be far more appropriate and specific to illustrate the article with a photo of some of the quoted experts. Articles on suicide games seem to suggest that some sensational news are released to the media after only a very brief background check and when new and contradictory information happens to emerge later, the resulting contrast can be employed to create a new sensation.

Two recurring features emerge in the contents of the media coverage of the topic – the question of who is to blame (e.g., the internet, inadequate parental supervision, people who struggle to control their emotions), and guidelines for the right and wrong behaviour. However, it is noteworthy that, even after it has been established that a panic had been caused by an international urban legend, these news pieces still call for imposing stricter control over children. It is also worth noting that such approaches usually lack gradation – recommendations by the police are absolutizing in their emphasis that the online activities of minors must always be monitored and devices that young people use must have limited internet access and *only* age-appropriate content (the examples are from the issue of the Estonian daily *Postimees* on 1 March 2019; emphasis by the authors of the current article) or that children must be educated in matters of the digital or online world (Pealinn 2020). This one-size-fits-all approach to both toddlers and late adolescents places an overwhelming responsibility on the parent and instils the belief that the teenagers themselves lack intellect but also analytical and executive functions.

## DANGEROUS, VULNERABLE OR RITUAL YOUTH:
## THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Over time, there have been several changes and shifts in emphasis in the theories that interpret young people's behaviour. In the 1970s theories of deviancy and dangerousness of the youth (see an overview of respective theories in Pearson 1975) gained popularity. In the 1980s, in the then Soviet Estonia, viewpoints related to deviant youth as dangerous hooligans and the need for their re-educating in special schools were in fashion – quite simultaneously with the publishing of the influential critical book titled *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (Pearson 1983), which showed the recurrence of the concept of the dangerous hooligan through time. Soon approaches followed that emphasized the ritual dimension of the youth's risk behaviour, seeing it as an attempt to ritualize a difficult transition to adulthood (Le Breton 2004). In the second decade of the twenty-first century, a new conception of risk is emerging in education and development studies, characterized by the repositioning of the focus from safety objectives in guidelines for adolescents into more flexible goals, emphasizing that individuals must be able to risk because risk is an indispensable condition for development and becoming somebody (Porrovecchio 2013). Some authors, in turn, see the role of risk behaviour in supporting the formation of values; for example, David Le Breton (2004: 1) defined the actual widespread diffusion of risk behaviours among teenagers as "passion for risks" with the quest for finding reference points, meaning, and a system of values, and contrasted it with the – in his eyes – far more insidious risk of depression and the radical collapse of meaning.

The approach emphasizing the vulnerability of adolescents has been prevalent in sociological research in the past decade. According to the approach, the vulnerability of children as a social group is viewed through markers of the lack of safety, taking into account processes unfavourable to the child's age-appropriate development, unsafe situations, relationships, the living environment, etc. (cf. Andresen 2014), regarding markers of unsafety as relatively static categories defined by researchers. Children's subjective perspectives on their own vulnerability have been insufficiently studied (a study that takes subjectivity into account is, for example, Tins 2019). Indeed, as a criticism of vulnerability studies, researchers have highlighted that an overemphasis on vulnerability can have a stigmatizing effect, as children who meet the vulnerability criteria are automatically perceived either as at risk or as victims, when in reality a child who is vulnerable may simultaneously also be strong (Andresen 2014). While the studies focusing on youth vulnerability often argue that children are unable to judge risk and thus it is necessary to implement prohibitions and

restrictions, the empirical evidence that this article is based on indicates that young people do have a clear perception of risk, and it is precisely the testing of risk perception and challenging its limits that creates the thrilling experience. Moreover, some studies by psychologists have shown that teenagers are not attracted to just any kind of risks – for example, an experiment by Tymula et al. (2012) showed that teenagers are not prone to seek out clearly obvious risks but are particularly attracted to risks with the component of the unknown. At the same time, narrative school lore contains many stories which reveal that, in the course of the experience, young people have found themselves being pushed beyond the limits of tolerable risk, leading them either to withdraw temporarily or permanently from the activity they considered risky, or to adopt special safety measures (e.g., the activity is never practiced alone but always in a group; carrying a phone with them at all times to be able to call for help in a place that is considered risky).

In general, sociological works focusing on the youth's vulnerability do not take sufficient account of resilience and belief- or folklore-related coping mechanisms of young people. In recent years, however, articles criticizing the one-sidedness of the concept of vulnerability have begun to emerge (e.g., Cree & Clapton & Smith 2015, but one of the earliest in this direction was already Cohen 1972), questioning the groundedness of societal moral panics and rethinking the concepts of youth vulnerability in a more multifaceted way. This article tries to offer a contribution in the same vein.


**THE YOUTH'S PERSPECTIVE**

When it comes to issues pertaining to minors, their own views certainly need to be taken into account. The interviews carried out by the authors revealed that, in general, teenagers were much more aware of the subtleties of social media suicide challenges and other risk specifics than their parents. By the time the media started to appeal to parents to talk to their children about the dangers related to the Blue Whale Challenge and Momo, many children had already gone through the stages of belief, fear, and overcoming fear, whereas the response was clearly age-dependent – it was primarily younger children who found the topic scary rather than teenagers, who were seen as the target group. For example, a 13-year-old boy (2018) commented on Momo and similar death games: "I don't know anybody who would know anybody who would be so stupid that he would ever do anything of the things that these death games ask you to do", and an 11-year-old boy (2018) said: "It is a stupid joke, nobody would do it." During this period (mainly in 2019), parents' concerns about their

children not talking to them about serious things like suicide challenges came to the fore on social media, but in many cases (particularly among teenagers) the reason why they were not interested in talking was not that they wished to keep it secret, but that they had already passed through that stage – they were neither no longer interested in nor had feelings about the topic, and it was thus not categorized as "serious". The fact that the respondents of the 2018 school-lore campaign did not raise the topic of suicide games at all – although there was a question about fears and dangers in the questionnaire – also shows that the respondents did not perceive this topic as relevant. At the same time, it became clear from the responses that teenagers generally (irrespective of their rural or urban background which were both represented) tend to use a number of various media channels daily and obtain also certain understandings of risk behaviour from the media; for example, fears related to various horror figures from movies and other media as well as tips for conjuring ghosts were listed. In the interviews, the respondents were asked about things that made them feel vulnerable, but again, suicide games were not mentioned although the respondents described other problems related to internet use (e.g., some female respondents mentioned perverts who approached them on the internet but also that they did not feel frightened because they knew ways how to protect their safety).

The Estonian material even suggests that there has been a certain role reversal in relation to the death games: instead of the expected victim role, the "poor defenceless youth" assumed the position of power by spreading urban legends and visuals on the topic and perceiving these challenges, at least partly, as a form of mockery and humour. By observing behavioural scripts, digital ethnography suggests that the disproportionately strong response from adults was partly due to differences in communication patterns – many adults, but also younger children (especially first- or second-graders), sometimes struggle with understanding the nuances of reality and pseudo-reality in teenagers' online communication. The persuasive display of threats associated with such inherently sensitive issues as cyberbullying, suicide, and even coercion to commit suicide often triggers a fear response in parents and a desire to implement strong countermeasures, although these may bring along yet other deviance mechanisms and counter-community formations (cf., e.g., Waldron 2005). However, the emotionally charged media coverage and responses to that may not necessarily allow us to notice a selective perspective to moral panics.

## HAUNTED HOUSES AND DANGEROUS GHOSTS: THE SELECTIVE NATURE OF MORAL PANICS

There is a plethora of other forms of risk behaviour, often involving (quasi) supernatural folkloric motifs and core characters, which tend to be much more popular and lasting among teenagers but never reach the media or the parent's scrutinizing eye. Some of these existed already before the digital age; for example, almost every family can recall how children were playing with munitions in the post-war period in Estonia (cf. Tuisk 2018). Some folklorists have referred to the youth's dare challenges related to supernatural lore in certain types of places as "legend trips", and have described such behaviour already in their studies carried out in the 1980s–1990s (e.g., Ellis 1983; Bird 1994). The viral spread of information on the topic, and the curiosity that it evokes, inspires teenagers to experiment – to visit haunted houses, wander in cemeteries or ruins in the dark, experiment with contacting spirits, whereas instructions for that and self-defence techniques are again often derived from the social media or other online sites (e.g., apps for talking with spirits), and may be based on international legend plots or horror films, thus embedding both the story and the action triggered by the narrative. Elizabeth Bird (1994: 192) regards this kind of legend tripping as a type of play, calling it "playing with fear".

When talking about exploring abandoned houses, a 14-year-old boy (2018) mentioned in an absolutizing tone that "everyone" was doing it. According to a girl in her early teens, "everyone" also practises summoning spirits (e.g., Bloody Mary). In school lore, abandoned houses are associated with danger, crime, meeting strange and dangerous people (such as drug addicts), ghosts, and simply being involved in something that is forbidden. As the following account reveals, the media has also contributed to these connotations.

> *Once on a class excursion we found an abandoned house in the forest – it was really terrible, but we went in and looked around. In horror movies you always tell the main character: don't be so stupid and don't go into the abandoned house but when you see one, you still want to see what is going on in there.* (ID382, girl, born 2001, Tartu, 2018)

Also in the following example text, influences from the media come to the fore and the wish to get excitement and at the same time preserve the safe observer status is expressed.

> *When you see an abandoned house in a TV-series, you can be sure that in the following scenes it will be the stage for a terrible crime or for the*

*appearance of a supernatural being. When you visit abandoned houses, you actually don't want any of these consequences, but you still want to get a similar thrill that you have when watching the series.* (Boy, 14, 2018)

In endeavours of visiting ghost houses and trying to get in contact with ghosts, the participants are most often teenagers, but younger siblings may also be involved. Almost no narratives describe doing these activities alone, thus it can be defined as a collective self-test. Some authors describe the excitement of risk-taking, testing one's courage and mental limits with the term "initiation through fear" (e.g., Le Breton 2004). The personal experience stories of schoolchildren also describe the practice as a form of challenging themselves but also as a way of learning to establish and perceive boundaries; sometimes it also develops phobias, which, however, usually alleviate over time, indicating that there is a strong autobiographical reflection in these stories. In the following description, which combines an abandoned house and a séance for summoning spirits, the respondent is so frightened by the experience that she never wants to return to the place.

*I have my own experiences with conjuring ghosts. Once we thought with girls that it's so boring, what we could do. Then one girl had the idea – let's conjure ghosts. In the beginning everybody was hesitant but then we agreed. First, we had the question about where to do it. But one of the girls knew that there was an old house nearby. We looked on the internet for what we would need and then we started our adventure. We had white paper, a plate, a pen and two ordinary tea candles with us. When we reached the house, we chose a suitable room in it. We wrote "yes" and "no" and also numbers from one to ten on the paper. We put the paper on the floor, put the plate in the middle and lit the candles. We found the sentences that were needed for conjuring a ghost and the bravest of us said these words. We waited, nothing happened. She said them once again. Then the candles went out, but it was silent. We thought that it was probably because of the wind and lit the candles again. This friend said these words the third time, and then the door slammed loudly and the candles went out again. We ran away as quickly as we could without looking back and I don't want to go there ever again.* (ID2816, girl, born 2001, Karksi-Nuia, 2018)

Thus, so-called dangerous folklore and related behaviour have a role to play in socialization, where the ability of participants to assess the situation may be quite different, but some precautions are typically mentioned; for example,

a girl narrated about a female friend-of-a-friend who saw a killer clown with an axe standing by her house and looking into her window – the reaction of the girl was to call the police but allegedly the killer clown left before the police arrived (ID1185, girl, b. 2003, Aegviidu, 2018). The emphases are also different in the following two personal experience stories about the Bloody Mary challenge: in the first one, the respondent believes that the ritual definitely influenced his fate, while the respondent in the second example clearly categorizes it as fiction, even though she is aware of the details of the story.

> *One day I was at a friend's home and he suggested that we do Bloody Mary (I mean the ghost, not the alcoholic drink). I agreed and he explained how to conjure this ghost. Soon we conjured her so that we crossed our hands on the chest and turned around three times, saying Bloody Mary every time. I don't remember very well how it happened but I believe that I insulted her. During the following weeks I had very bad luck.* (Boy, born 2003, Märjamaa, 2018)

> *Ghosts don't exist. There are just fictional rituals for conjuring them. I have tried to conjure Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary is such a woman that when you conjure her, she appears in the mirror instead of your own reflection and she will come out somehow and kill you immediately. There is also Baby Blue who should be her child, but she killed her child.* (Girl, b. 2002, Tallinn, 2018)

Personal experience narratives contain much fear but among hundreds of texts there were none describing really fatal consequences (except a few clearly fabricated stories that blurred the borders of films and personal experiences). The question arises, why so? Are the youth clever enough not to come into real danger or do young people who face really horrible experiences remain silent about them? We tend to think that in most cases the youth have at least some self-protection mechanisms and these are also shared and negotiated amongst the peer community.

## CONCLUSIONS

The societal moral panics related to various dangers have a cyclical character. In 2020, the topic of death games was newsworthy for only a brief period of time, when people were warned on social media about instigators of suicide challenges, who disguised themselves behind the image of the famous cartoon character,

Goofy the dog (e.g., newspaper *Pealinn* 2020). In 2021, neither reports of suicide games nor thematic moral panics reached the media. However, children's real suicide rates made the media (and people) worry but were in this context explained with the impact of Covid-19 which is in the time of writing this article (March 2022) the current major attractor motif in societal communication and the media. On the background, abandoned houses and dark bathrooms have been attractors for the youth already for decades and are visited also during the Covid-19 crisis (even more so because no public restrictions that are implemented elsewhere apply there). With the crisis in Ukraine, which started with the military invasion of Russia on 24 February 2022, the societal emphasis shifted to the sufferings of Ukrainian children, and the Estonian media channels but also school psychologists started sharing instructions for the Estonian youth of how to avoid getting depressed because of war news. At the same time, traditional legend tripping of teenagers continues, being sometimes partly used as a remedy against societal frustration related to major crises.

The perception of risk among children and teenagers as well as trends in risk-seeking behaviour are heavily influenced by the media, but this age group may pick up different emphases and receive some of their information from other channels than their parents. Paradoxically, in some cases, minors obtain information about folklore-related risk-seeking behaviour precisely through the moral panics in the media, which are intended to warn them of the risk, but which at the same time may arouse their interest and lead them to learn more about it. Empirical evidence suggests that media coverage plays heavily on emotions and portrays teenagers as predominantly vulnerable and irresponsible and increased prohibitions do not have the desired effect on young people. At the same time, the media focus on limited signal motifs gives a simplified portrayal of the dangers, as a result of which the risks that emerge in the forms or places that happen to remain outside the media-driven risk maps may go unnoticed.

There is no doubt that adolescent suicides are a serious problem, but linking them to one particular virtual game is a simplistic reduction of complex and multi-faceted psychosocial processes to a single cause, as if the latter could instantly explain away all the aspects of mental health issues among the youth which may be intertwined with family, school, and societal factors, personal life history and character traits. There is a huge gap between the risk-seeking and self-challenging behaviour, which teenagers often display, and the wish to die. The former is often driven by a healthy need to learn and a thirst for life, which is not easily deterred by intimidation and bans, and is counterbalanced by partly belief-based coping agency and self-protecting mechanisms, which may differ from person to person. Fortunately, or unfortunately, parents will never know about some of the potentially dangerous actions their children may take (e.g.,

entering collapsing buildings or running across the road in front of moving cars without any pressure coming from virtual horror characters scrutinised in the media), as they are more likely to be looking at the selective dangers induced by the media in the form of moral panic.

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