

Protecting youth from online suicide game

Chinese police have extended surveillance of social media, after the recent spread of the "Blue Whale" suicide game targeting the country's youth.

Drawing a blue whale on a piece of paper, or carving it onto your body, and watching horror movies are just part of the game, which began in Russia. It demands players complete 50 tasks in 50 days, with the last task to commit suicide.

"If I carve a blue whale on my arm, will it leave a scar? Can I still become a police officer with that scar?" a primary school student in Wenzhou, east China's Zhejiang Province, asked his mother.

He told her his classmates were talking about a game called Blue Whale, which "sounded cool."

The alarmed mother contacted police. Their investigations into the game found a group on instant messaging service Tencent QQ inviting people to take part.

"Those who would like to join in the game must get up 4:20 a.m. tomorrow. I will send you a horror movie and you must watch it alone, or face the consequences," wrote the group's founder Xiao Yang (pseudonym).

Xiao, who called himself vice president of Blue Whale's China bureau, listed 50 tasks, including "cut your arm along the vein with a razor," "stab your hand with a needle repeatedly," "go to the roof and sit on the edge dangling your legs," "don't talk to anyone all day" and "accept the date of your death."

In Ningbo, also Zhejiang Province, 12-year-old Han Jing (pseudonym) founded a similar group last Saturday, and uploaded three photos of her self-harming.

When asked why, she replied: "I am not good at school, and don't have friends. I feel frustrated."

Chen Long from Zhejiang police's cyber security team told Xinhua that the spread of the game has been unprecedented, "in some ways like a cult." There are currently no legal means for direct conviction and punishment of game organizers and players, he said.

Police shut down Xiao's QQ group, and made him sign a declaration that he would not reopen it.

Han Jing and her parents have been receiving psychological counseling.

Zhang Zhihua from China Communications University, said prior to the spread of the game, at risk youth could meet others via the Internet and encourage or assist each other to commit suicide.

"But the game adds a level of sensory experience. Players gain attention by posting evidence of self-harming. In a sense, Blue Whale is like a step-by-step suicide guide for teenagers," said Zhang.

"Teenagers need psychological support, especially when faced with the pressures of study, society and family obligations. Otherwise, they can feel life is overwhelming and meaningless," he said.

The Beijing office of the Cyberspace Administration of China has confirmed that while Blue Whale is spread online, it is effectively an offline game.

Zhu Wei from China University of Political Science and Law has attended the office's briefing on the game as a legal consultant.

"I don't think it is a game. It is organized like a cult. It gives adolescents an excuse to do extreme things and show off," he said.

Zhu said measures have been taken on to stop its spread. Police are monitoring any mention of the game of live-streaming sites and message boards. Once messages or discussions concerning the game are detected they are immediately removed.

"Websites have been very cooperative as it concerns the lives and mental health of Chinese youth," he said.

In Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang, the education authority has issued a notice to all primary and middle schools asking them to inform parents about the game.

If schools find their students are taking part they must report this to local police. They should also open a hotline to provide psychological counseling for both students and parents, the authority said.

Zhu said that authorities should be aware of what games and activities are popular among teenagers as the Internet allows these things to spread rapidly. "Measures must be taken as soon as harmful messages appear," he said.