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Exploring Game Mechanisms for Youth and Education

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Abstract. Adolescent mental health issues and self-harm behaviors are serious public health and safety concerns faced globally. With the widespread use of the internet in modern society, the Choking Game has emerged as a new form of enticement, posing a severe threat to the lives of adolescents. This study examines the patterns of such games and finds that they exploit adolescent psychological characteristics, capitalize on mental crises, and employ a step-by-step escalation mechanism combined with the glorification of death imagery, thereby causing significant harm to adolescents' mental and physical health and impacting public safety. Based on this, this paper proposes emphasizing the primary role of schools in the prevention and control of death games, establishing clear criteria for identifying death games, and constructing a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder-participation standardized prevention and control procedure for death games (education and prevention—survey and identification—intervention and protection—post-incident handling and resolution) to achieve the ultimate goal of maintaining campus public safety, protecting the physical and mental health of adolescents, and safeguarding their well-being.

Keywords: Chocking Game, Adolescents, educational warning mechanism, games, death

1. Introduction

Gaming should be an activity that brings people joy and pleasure. Players should have full autonomy and the freedom to act without artificial restrictions. Additionally, games should maintain a certain level of virtuality, with clear boundaries from real life. Healthy games do not endanger property or even life safety. However, as a suicide-inducing game, the Choking Game differs from conventional games by gradually blurring the boundaries between virtual and real life, leading to physical harm or even death in real life. Due to its detailed implementation rules, the death game has even formed a highly playable and widely spread subculture, attracting the admiration of many teenagers and expanding its influence to some teenagers who have no intention of self-harm, resulting in group-based, large-scale suicides and self-harm. According to a U.S. report, nearly 20% of American teenagers have played this game, with over 1,000 teenagers dying annually in the U.S. due to the Choking Game, primarily aged between 6 and 19. China's Ministry of Education has strictly prohibited the spread and proliferation of such games among students and required all Chinese websites to remove related game content [1]. The Choking Game poses a severe threat to the mental health and safety of adolescents, causing extremely detrimental impacts on individual students, school campuses, and public health and safety in society [2]. Currently, China has

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accumulated significant experience and achievements in policy deployment and governance practices related to adolescent suicide prevention. However, there remains a substantial research gap in the specialized prevention of the Choking Game, with a lack of systematic and standardized prevention procedures. Therefore, this paper proposes prevention procedures targeting this type of game based on a literature review and an analysis of its impact on adolescents, aiming to maintain campus public safety and safeguard the physical safety and mental health of the adolescent population.

2. The dangers of chocking game

2.1. Physical and mental health

The Chocking Game poses a serious threat to the mental health and physical safety of individual students, distorting their real-world behavior and ideological beliefs. Participants in the game are subjected to mental control and the imposition of negative information, leading to prolonged exposure to negative and depressive emotions. Over time, this erodes their innate fear of death and desensitizes them to the risks of fatal outcomes. Under such influence, they may engage in self-harming behaviors such as seeking suffocation, overdosing on medication, or self-mutilation and suicide, thereby causing severe mental health and safety issues. Many students who participate in the Choking Game exhibit related issues such as difficulties in self-emotional regulation, negative self-evaluation, interpersonal relationship difficulties, and frequent dropout rates [3].

Additionally, driven by curiosity and a desire for novelty, adolescents are influenced by negative online information and the anonymity of the internet, actively choosing to spread videos related to the Choking Game within schools and inciting others to engage in self-harm or suicide. Furthermore, during the organization and dissemination of the Choking Game, the darker aspects of human nature are amplified, distorting the correct understanding of the concept of life and death, eroding respect for life, and disregarding the value of others' lives, thereby fostering negative psychological traits such as a pursuit of violence, emotional numbness, and antisocial behavior.

2.2. School discipline

The Choking Game has a certain degree of secrecy, making it difficult for school staff to detect and stop it in a timely manner. Typically, it is only when injuries or even deaths occur that forced intervention takes place. This game exacerbates tension and anxiety in the school environment, reduces students' interest in learning and their ability to learn, and makes it difficult for schools to fulfill their educational objectives.

Additionally, once students become involved in the Choking Game, the school's ideological and political education efforts and mental health counseling services are severely impacted. Students and parents may question the school's ability to protect teenagers' mental and psychological well-being, leading them to reflect on whether the school provides comprehensive, in-depth life education for students and whether it has sufficient professional staff for mental health counseling. This lack of security adds challenges to the implementation of related school initiatives [4].

2.3. Public safety management

The World Health Organization (WHO) has pointed out that the third leading cause of death among adolescents worldwide is accidental death resulting from suicide and self-harm, with suicide rates currently showing a trend toward younger ages. In China, approximately 30% of high school

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students exhibit suicidal tendencies, while middle school students account for about 15% of this group. This indicates that the current mental health status of Chinese adolescents is poor, with the proportion of individuals exhibiting suicidal tendencies exceeding normal levels [5]. The Choking Game, as a criminal method that uses game elements to guide adolescents toward self-harm or even suicide, further exacerbates the trend of suicide among younger age groups in China.

Additionally, due to the ease of information dissemination and its wide audience reach online, the Choking Game's influence is expanding through videos and manipulative rhetoric, eventually attracting participants from other age groups and leading to copycat suicides, triggering a larger-scale group suicide crisis. This has a certain impact on China's cybersecurity and government credibility. Criminal elements exploit the Choking Game to distort public opinion, disseminate erroneous statements that devalue life and glorify death online, and induce deviations in societal values, thereby threatening China's cybersecurity. Additionally, when faced with large-scale issues of this nature, the public is prone to erupting in anger and panic. Under the one-sided guidance of online public opinion, this can lead to distrust in government governance and the broader social environment, which in turn significantly weakens the government's image and credibility in the public eye and threatens public safety.

3. Explanation of the game mechanism

The Chocking Game has been revitalized several times, due to its unique operating mechanism and game characteristics that cater to the psychological characteristics of teenagers.

3.1. Game setting

Choking Games are typically designed with intricate complexity, and their operational mechanisms can be broadly divided into three stages.

First, the initial stage primarily aims to stimulate teenagers' curiosity and attract them to participate in the game. The second stage is the implementation phase, whose purpose is to deceive teenagers into underestimating the mortality risks of dangerous behaviors, overcome their fear of death, and ultimately carry out suicidal acts. The final dissemination stage involves using online platforms to spread videos or related texts of the Choking Game to expand its influence and increase the number of participants.

Most teenagers who participate in the Choking Game are initially drawn in by videos or game experiences related to the game circulating online. Under the influence of verbal, textual, or video content, they gradually lower their estimation of the risks of death and ultimately engage in suicidal behavior. Additionally, some games repeatedly reinforce teenagers' self-harm behaviors and suicidal intentions during the implementation phase, using mental and informational control methods to attack their psychological defenses, ultimately causing them to overcome their fear of death.

3.2. The aestheticization of death

Death itself is a relatively abstract concept, and understanding of this concept is gradually constructed through personal life experiences. Due to the age and limited life experiences of adolescents, most teenagers do not have a clear understanding of the concept of death, which provides an opportunity for the Choking Game to infiltrate this demographic.

A common feature of different types of Choking Games is that they all strive to gloss over the terrifying aspects of death, using methods such as reshaping and beautifying the imagery of death to

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alleviate teenagers' instinctive fear of death. Some instigators even promote an aesthetic ideology that glorifies self-harm and suicide, distorting adolescents' healthy understanding of death. For example, they may romanticize the process of losing consciousness due to suffocation and oxygen deprivation, or associate specific objects with death imagery as spiritual totems, guiding adolescents to seek emotional comfort and spiritual solace in death [6]. Minors in their teenage years are often impulsive, rebellious, curious, and eager to express themselves. They have a strong need for self-identity and group identity, making them susceptible to subcultures and resistant to the constraints of mainstream culture. At the same time, their values are not yet fully formed, and their ability to distinguish right from wrong is weak, making them more easily swayed and incited. The Choking Game's glorification of death imagery starkly contrasts with traditional life education content, imparting a sense of mystery to dangerous and suicidal behaviors. This allows adolescents to experience the thrill of seeking stimulation and breaking away from tradition, thereby underestimating the fatal risks associated with such actions.

3.3. Mental health crisis

The widespread mental health crisis among today's youth primarily manifests itself in the following ways: the individualization and self-centeredness that lead to a sense of existential meaninglessness, the long-term suppression of life instincts resulting in the counterproductive awakening of death instincts, and the negative psychological effects triggered by moral misconduct online.

Firstly, adolescents are at a critical stage of personality development and socialization, with a strong need for care and a sense of belonging. However, in the era of individualization, influenced by the strengthening of self-awareness and self-centeredness, adolescents' sense of social security is weakening. Issues such as the lack of close relationships due to insufficient adult care and the neglect of interpersonal relationships caused by excessive self-focus can lead to adolescents becoming inwardly closed off. This can lead to the erroneous belief that life has no value or meaning, resulting in the concept of existential nihilism.

Second, humans possess both life instincts and death instincts. Life instincts represent love and constructive forces, while death instincts represent hatred and destructive forces [7]. During their growth process, adolescents are subjected to prolonged external influences, such as family education, school education, and social conditioning, as well as inappropriate educational methods, including persuasion and behavioral control, which suppress the life instinct. Under prolonged suppression of the life instinct, adolescents may develop an intense desire for individual freedom, which could lead to a rebellious awakening of the death instinct, resulting in external aggression and destruction, as well as internal self-destruction and suicide.

Finally, in the internet age, adolescents are more easily exposed to a large amount of unfiltered information. Due to the current inadequacy of online moral regulations, there is a significant amount of negative information that conveys pessimistic and resentful emotions to adolescents. This information incites and induces adolescents to engage in self-destructive behavior and suicide, thereby causing mental health issues among adolescents. Additionally, under the anonymity of online identities, the darker aspects of human nature are amplified, making it easier for criminal behavior to thrive. This allows the instigators of the Choking Game to freely induce teenagers to commit suicide, while also turning some teenagers into numb bystanders or even cruel instigators.

The Choking Game exploits and amplifies teenagers' mental crises, making them unable to tolerate their current living conditions, and leading them to engage in self-harm or suicide as part of their quest for self-redemption.

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4. Educational identification and guidance

Given that the Choking Game primarily targets adolescents, it is essential to recognize the central role and significant influence of schools as a key educational tool in the prevention and control of the Choking Game. To effectively prevent and eliminate the Choking Game within school settings, schools must serve as the primary focal point. This involves establishing clear criteria for identifying the Choking Game and developing a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach to establish standardized prevention and control procedures.

4.1. Clarify identification criteria

The identification of Choking Games is a prerequisite for implementing prevention and control measures. Currently, China lacks a clear set of standards for identifying Choking Games, which also results in schools lacking clear entry points and directional guidance when conducting Choking Game prevention and control work. Based on the three-stage operational mechanism of Choking Games, the four key factors contributing to their formation and adverse impact within school campuses are: potential mental health crises, malicious induction of risky behaviors, externalization of mental health crises, and the continued escalation of harmful behaviors.

4.1.1. The potential mental health crises

The potential mental health crisis is a prerequisite for the Choking Game to take hold among students, meaning that most students who participate in the Choking Game already exhibit underlying mental health issues in their daily lives, such as feelings of existential meaninglessness, a disregard for the value of life, prolonged negative emotions and depression, tendencies toward self-harm and suicide, abnormal curiosity, and potential antisocial personality traits. As internal mental health issues among students, these factors are difficult to directly identify, posing challenges in their detection. Therefore, schools need to conduct regular mental health screenings and use professional mental health assessment tools to identify individual students with such issues.

4.1.2. Malicious induction of risky behaviors

During the initial stages of the Choking Game, criminals maliciously disseminate related game content online, including narratives that glorify suicide, game process steps, and bloody or exciting images or videos. When exposed to such harmful information, students are highly susceptible to being lured into participating in the activity or game, driven by depressive emotions or curiosity. In this process, the harmful information elements of malicious enticement are greatly influenced by external environmental factors, making it difficult for schools to identify them promptly. Schools need to actively collaborate with students and their parents to closely monitor students' behavior and speech, such as their use of common online slang, interpersonal relationships, daily routines, and attire, to indirectly assess whether students exhibit tendencies toward participating in the Choking Game.

4.1.3. Externalization of mental health crises

The externalizing factors of psychological crisis behavior correspond to the implementation stage of the Choking Game, where students have already begun to exhibit dangerous behaviors such as self-harm and seeking suffocation under the malicious influence of criminals and harmful online

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information, and have started to manifest the externalization of potential psychological crises in actual actions. This factor, as an outwardly abnormal behavior of students, becomes increasingly evident in identification and is easily exposed in daily learning and life. This requires school teachers to identify students engaging in dangerous behaviors while using observation and conversation to clarify indicators such as the methods, frequency, and severity of such behaviors, thereby determining whether students are participating in the Choking Game and the extent of their involvement [8]. It also necessitates that the academic community establish specific quantitative standards for identifying the Choking Game to assist educators in assessing students' situations when further exploring specialized prevention measures for the Choking Game.

4.1.4. The continued escalation of harmful behaviors

Under the control of the Choking Game organizers, students become increasingly immersed in the game, continuously reinforcing self-harming behaviors until ultimately leading to suicide. This process is further exacerbated by the widespread dissemination of videos and texts documenting the game experience, thereby amplifying the Choking Game's influence and impact within the school environment. This element emphasizes the persistent repetition and escalation of self-harming behaviors, which are more evident and easier to identify compared to the initial externalization of psychological crises. The dangers of the Choking Game have been concretely manifested, and the focus of identification now shifts to identifying the origins and implementation methods of the Choking Game, among other specific details, to assist in analyzing specific measures to address Choking Game incidents.

4.2. Standardize prevention and control procedures

Based on China's standard psychological survey procedure of “survey-interview-intervention-education” [9], and combining the unique operating mechanisms and formative elements of the Choking Game, this paper constructs a standardized prevention and control procedure for the Choking Game consisting of four lines of defense: education and prevention-survey and identification-intervention and protection-follow-up and handling.

4.2.1. Education and prevention

Education and prevention refer to the need for schools to prioritize life education for students, with a particular focus on enhancing students' understanding of the Choking Game to prevent its occurrence.

Life is the cornerstone of education and the starting point for educational reflection, making life education crucial in school education [10]. China is increasingly emphasizing the importance of life education, requiring schools to incorporate strengthened life safety education into their teaching and learning activities. It has also explicitly outlined educational objectives aimed at 'strengthening physical health, fostering awareness of life safety and health, and cultivating positive psychological qualities’ [11]. The fundamental reason why the Choking Game has caused such widespread negative impacts on adolescents is that it exploits the issue of life's meaninglessness arising from a disenchanted world, and adolescents, whose minds and bodies are inherently vulnerable, are more susceptible to the shock of this meaningless reality [12]. Therefore, schools must, in the process of implementing life education, use diverse teaching methods and comprehensive educational content to enable students to gain profound insights into the value of life and the meaning of death through

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hands-on experiences. Additionally, schools should deepen and enrich students' understanding of the essence of life to reconstruct adolescents' sense of meaning and assist in addressing mental health issues caused by the void of life's meaning. Furthermore, schools should conduct targeted science education on the Choking Game, such as themed lectures or collaborating with law enforcement to offer cybersecurity courses, to enhance students' awareness of potential dangers.

4.2.2. Survey and identification

Screening and identification refer to the need for schools to conduct regular screenings of students' mental and behavioral health, promptly and accurately identifying and characterizing any abnormal mental or behavioral issues, so that they can intervene quickly when the Choking Game emerges on campus. When conducting regular surveys of students' mental and behavioral health, schools can flexibly utilize various scientific mental health assessment tools such as the Self-Rating Health Questionnaire (SCL-90), the Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS), the Self-Rating Anxiety Scale (SAS), and the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) for psychological testing. Additionally, in daily student management, drawing-based psychological tests—which are highly discreet, allow test subjects to express themselves freely without suggestion, and yield accurate results—can serve as a valuable supplement to standard psychological assessments [13]. When issues related to the Choking Game arise, most schools adopt face-to-face interviews with students to identify high-risk individuals. However, students who have actually participated in the Choking Game often refuse to disclose their true thoughts and behaviors regarding the game. Therefore, assessments of the Choking Game should collect information from multiple sources, including peers, parents, teachers, and other relevant parties. Relying on a single information source may overlook students who are genuinely at risk from the Choking Game [14]. These scientific identification methods not only help schools screen for individuals with psychological and behavioral issues within the student population but also enable more accurate and rapid identification and classification of the Choking Game at its inception, determining whether it has occurred and assessing the extent of participation and victimization.

4.2.3. Intervention and protection

Intervention and protection refer to the measures schools should take after identifying the Choking Game. Schools must promptly intervene, collaborate with various stakeholders, and employ various methods to prevent the spread of the Choking Game, ensuring the physical safety and mental well-being of students. The most direct and effective intervention by schools regarding the Choking Game is to directly curb students' participation in it. When students show signs of potentially participating in the Choking Game, school teachers should adopt an objective and neutral attitude to create a safe environment for discussion, enabling students to recognize the dangers of the Choking Game through rational conversation and withdraw from it promptly. Additionally, teachers should convey and assist students in understanding that mental health issues are not a crime and that they can express their genuine willingness to seek help at any time. For students with mental health issues, schools should establish student mental health records, maintain follow-up conversation records, and promptly refer them to professional mental health workers when the crisis becomes severe [15]. If there are issues related to personal safety, schools should provide basic first aid and promptly send the student to the hospital.

Furthermore, schools should maintain effective communication with parents. When students are threatened with physical safety or mental health risks due to participating in the Choking Game,

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schools should promptly notify parents, accurately describe the facts, inform them of the severity of the situation, and seek additional information about the student from parents to explore feasible solutions.

4.2.4. Follow-up and handling

Post-incident follow-up and cleanup refer to the psychological counseling and support that schools should promptly provide to all faculty and students following the occurrence of a Choking Game incident. Currently, most schools prioritize early prevention and intervention during the incident itself, neglecting the post-incident follow-up and cleanup work that follows a Choking Game incident. This includes providing psychological counseling to students who attempted self-harm or suicide through the Choking Game, as well as properly reporting and guiding public opinion regarding the incident [16]. In terms of psychological counseling, schools need to provide psychological counseling and treatment services for the Choking Game, helping participants re-evaluate the value of their own lives. On the other hand, schools need to establish a post-event monitoring and early warning system to constantly monitor and remain vigilant against the resurgence of the Choking Game within the campus. In terms of event reporting and public opinion guidance, schools need to balance 'external containment' with 'internal resolution'. Externally, schools should promptly release accurate reports on the incident through channels such as official WeChat accounts and news reports, and collaborate with police authorities to investigate and remove unauthorized online content related to the Choking Game, including videos, images, and personal information of participating students. Internally, schools must require teachers to conduct relevant educational activities in the classroom to guide students in rationally understanding the Choking Game incident, respecting participants, and refraining from spreading rumors.

4.3. Collaborative prevention and controlling measures

Preventing and controlling the Choking Game in schools is a task that requires both systematic and complex approaches. Traditional methods of prevention and control, which focus on isolating the issue, are clearly no longer sustainable in the current context. When implementing measures to prevent and control the Choking Game in schools, it is essential to prioritize the school as the central entity while seeking collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders, including families, communities, and even the government. This approach will better address the harmful impact that the Choking Game, which tends to resurface periodically, has on adolescent populations.

In addition to schools, other stakeholders must also clarify their responsibilities in addressing the Choking Game. Parents should incorporate life education and death education into family education, guiding students to correctly understand the meaning of death and deepen their appreciation of the value of life. Communities can establish Choking Game prevention hotlines, organizing professionals such as mental health practitioners and volunteers from suicide prevention organizations to provide psychological counseling for students with poor mental health who may be involved in the Choking Game. The government should strengthen cybersecurity measures to curb the spread of harmful information related to the Choking Game online and use its influence to eliminate negative trends that devalue life and promote suicidal tendencies. Only through the active participation of all sectors of society, the integration of resources, and the pursuit of information sharing can the comprehensive coordination capabilities and operational efficiency of campus Choking Game prevention and control efforts be enhanced, thereby effectively addressing and resolving the issue of the Choking Game in schools.

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5. Conclusion

Choking Game, as a new type of malicious online trend that emerged in the digital age, poses a serious threat to the mental health and safety of adolescents. Due to its unique operational mechanisms and game characteristics that cater to the psychological traits of adolescents, Choking Game has the ability to resurface repeatedly, achieving a cyclical return within school environments. Although Chinese adolescents and school environments continue to be severely affected by the Choking Game, as long as we persist in exploring its mechanisms and conducting preventive research, continuously clarify the criteria for identifying the Choking Game, and continuously improve standardized preventive procedures, while fostering collaborative efforts across all sectors of society on this issue, we will certainly be able to put an end to its cyclical resurgence, safeguard campus public safety in China, and ensure the physical safety and mental health of adolescents.

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