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# #CHALLENGE ACCEPTED: ADOLESCENTS' PERCEPTION OF MOTIVATION BEHIND SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGES

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Technological progress and the Internet's growing importance have made social media challenges common among adolescents. Despite their prevalence, research on this topic remains scarce. This study explores how adolescents perceive their peers' motivation for participating in social media challenges. Forty-three students in six focus groups participated. The results highlight themes such as the need for (self-)respect, the need for love and belonging, motives related to emotion regulation and sensation seeking, and the pursuit of online identity development. Adolescents emphasise popularity, fun, and peer pressure as key factors. Raising awareness about the impact of social media challenges on young people's daily lives among students, parents, and educators, is crucial.

Keywords: social media challenges, online challenges, adolescents, social media, motivation



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## INTRODUCTION

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Due to the availability of the Internet and the popularity of online games, Internet usage has dramatically increased among young people. This is supported by the fact that the concept of Internet usage has become pathological in some cases, such as Internet Gaming Disorder (Turan et al., 2021). Technological progress and the significance of the Internet have led to online, social media, challenges becoming a common practice among young individuals (Ortega-Baron et al., 2023). Data suggests that children and adolescents are likely to encounter various types of social media challenges (SMC) in their everyday online lives (Hilton et al., 2021). In general, adolescents often explore new skills, striving for a particular status within their peer group and seeking acceptance from it (Ortega-Baron et al., 2023), which leads to adolescence being a time of vulnerability for engaging in social media challenges as well.

Social media challenges on the Internet involve actions that encourage users to record themselves performing a task and then share that content on one or more online platforms (Tik Tok, YouTube, Instagram, etc.) with the aim of getting as many users as possible to participate. Although the concept of challenges is difficult to conceptualise, they have existed throughout history (Ortega-Baron et al., 2023). "Challenge communities" can be defined as interactive platforms that establish communication with targeted users through social networks (Turan et al., 2021). Social media challenges in their definition could be characterised by 1) their user-generated content, 2) the intention for replication, 3) their viral nature, facilitated by digital platform dynamics and unique identifiers, which increase accessibility to related videos, 4) the underlying intent of the challenge, and 5) their level of danger (Kobilke & Markiewicz, 2024). Young people often perceive most challenges as fun, relaxed, or even risky but safe, without realising that some challenges could have harmful consequences for their health and safety (Hilton et al., 2021). On the other hand, not all social media challenges are dangerous or pose a threat to an individual's health, as some are designed and created with positive intentions (Strilkova et al., 2020).

Social media challenges among young people are an unexplored area as it is a relatively new phenomenon of risky behaviour. In the Republic of Croatia, there are only a few studies on this topic (see Bodrožić Selak et al., 2023). Kobilke and Markiewicz (2024), in their recent review, note a significant lack of theoretical foundation in the existing literature of social media challenges, which they attribute to an emphasis on individual case studies and exploratory research that frequently lacks preceding theoretical rationale.

## The most well-known social media challenges

According to the literature (Kobilke & Markiewitz, 2024; Strilkova et al., 2020) and these authors' unpublished data, social media challenges could be categorised in three levels – harmless (i.e. prank challenges as *Egg smash challenge*, skill challenges as *Bottle flip challenge*, humanitarian as *Ice bucket challenge*, sport and creative like *Plank, Dance or Sing challenge*), potentially dangerous (i.e. challenges involving food products such as *Cinnamon challenge* or *Raw meat challenge*, as well as challenges with consequences of minor body injuries like *Back thumping* and *Kylie Jenner lip challenge*), and dangerous social media challenges (poisoning challenges such as *Tide pod* and *Benadryl challenge*, challenges with consequences of body injuries such as *Hit him in the balls* and *The cutting challenge*, as well as potentially deadly and deadly challenges such as *Backflip from building to building*, *Blue whale* and *Blackout challenge*).

A study by Strilkova and colleagues (2020), involving 4,952 participants aged 12 to 19, found that the most well-known social media challenges are the Blue whale challenge, the Kylie Jenner lip challenge and the Tide pod challenge, and all of them could be dangerous. Although the Kylie Jenner lip challenge often has no negative consequences, there have been cases of lip injuries or allergic reactions to materials used in objects attempting to create a vacuum (Strilkova et al., 2020). When it comes to the Tide pod challenge, these capsules contain detergent encased in dissolvable plastic for single-use (Murphy, 2019), containing harmful chemicals that can damage the digestive tract of children attempting this challenge (Strilkova et al., 2020). Mukhra et al. (2017) found that more prone to engage in the Blue whale challenge, as the most lethal one because of the progressively more and more dangerous tasks which culminate in suicide, are young individuals who are vulnerable due to loneliness, isolation, life dissatisfaction, and exposure to various depressive symptoms.

On a more positive, harmless and fun note, the Ice bucket challenge gained popularity. This challenge was designed to raise awareness about amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Hilton et al., 2021). In this challenge, individuals have to fill a bucket with very cold water, often including ice, and pour it over themselves (Murphy, 2019). Many celebrities and public figures also participated in this challenge (Sohn, 2017).

While the largest number of studies included young adults (i.e. Abraham et al., 2022; Falgoust et al., 2022; Ward, 2019), there is a limited number of them that have examined the prevalence of adolescents engaging in social media challenges. Hilton et al. (2021) note that young people in early and middle adoles-

cence are the most frequent participants in social media challenges, and such behaviours decrease with age. This decrease may be partly a developmental characteristic, as the younger age group is associated with a greater need for peer approval and social affirmation, along with less developed critical thinking skills and a higher propensity for risk-taking, making them more likely to participate in social media challenges. Ortega et al. (2023) aimed to determine the prevalence of different types of challenges (social, solidarity, and dangerous) among early adolescents. The most common type of challenges, participated in by 80.3% of respondents, were social challenges and 7.7% participated in dangerous challenges. Hilton et al. (2021) found that 73% of young people, parents, and 77% of teachers were aware of social media challenges, although only 21% of respondents participated, with 2% engaging in dangerous challenges and just 0.3% in extremely dangerous ones.

### **Motives for joining social media challenges**

Young people are drawn to social media challenges for a variety of reasons, many of which revolve around (1) group involvement or social relationships and (2) personal goals. Regarding social motives, a motivator could be the desire to fit in and to be accepted (Strilkova et al., 2020). Research indicates that peer validation and the fear of social exclusion drive many young individuals to participate in these challenges (Strilkova et al., 2020; Shroff et al., 2021; Falgoust et al., 2022; Abraham et al., 2022). Additionally, the size and cohesion of peer groups, along with an individual's position within the social hierarchy, play a significant role in motivating participation (Strilkova et al., 2020). Sharing their participation with friends further strengthens friendships and creates a sense of belonging (Hilton et al., 2021). Social pressure as direct encouragement and the desire for peer acceptance motivate young adults to participate in these challenges. Many of them feel more inclined to join if they see similarities with others who have taken the challenge (Abraham et al., 2022). On the other hand, studies show a relationship between perceived norms and the likelihood of participating in specific challenges. Those with low motivation to comply with social norms are more likely to engage in risky challenges like the Cinnamon challenge (Khasawneh et al., 2021a).

Personal goals such as popularity and gaining attention through views, followers, and likes on social media are also prevalent motives. Participating in social media challenges, which often involve elements of risk, helps young people build their online identity (Abraham et al., 2022; Falgoust et al., 2022; Hilton et al., 2021; Strilkova et al., 2020; Coutinho et al., 2020). The

sense of being special and cool, along with a boost in self-confidence, are significant factors (Roth et al., 2021). Many participants feel positive and special during challenges, with enjoyment and a sense of accomplishment being important to them (Roth et al., 2021). Among personal motives, entertainment and excitement are also very important. Young people find social media challenges entertaining and thrilling, especially those that involve risky elements or that are humorous (Hilton et al., 2021; Falgoust et al., 2022; Masciantonio et al., 2021). Curiosity and the desire to try new things also contribute to their appeal (Hilton et al., 2021; Falgoust et al., 2022).

Lastly, some challenges, like humanitarian ones, involve a mix of social pressure and personal choice. Participants often feel a sense of obligation and are motivated by proximity (Burgess et al., 2017).

## Theoretical overview

A number of models and theories are associated with involvement in social media challenges, such as the Integrated behaviour model, the Social-cognitive learning theory, Uses and gratifications theory, Behavioral contagion theory (see Kobilke & Markiewitz, 2024). Engagement in social media challenges can also be explained using two well-known, basic psychological theories – Maslow's theory of motivation, which is often the starting point when researching motivation, and the theory of social norms, that elucidate various risky behaviours in adolescence.

According to the Maslow theory of motivation, needs are hierarchically arranged in a pyramid consisting of five levels (Maslow, 1954). At the bottom of the pyramid is the physiological need (such as food, water, sex), followed by the need for safety (including family, health, work, and property security, and the like). Once these needs are satisfied, an individual moves on to the next level, which is the need for belonging (friendship, family, sexual intimacy), followed by a level that includes the need for esteem (self-esteem, respect from others, achievement). The last and most complex level is the need for self-actualisation (creativity, problem-solving, spontaneity). Maslow's hierarchy of needs can explain motivation behind social media challenges by addressing different levels of human needs. As we have seen, challenges foster belonging and social connection, fulfilling the need for acceptance and recognition. They also offer opportunities for self-expression and personal growth, aligning with the drive for self-actualisation. Thus, participation in these challenges reflects motivations across Maslow's hierarchy.

The theory of social norms (Berkowitz, 2005) describes situations in which individuals inaccurately perceive the beha-

viours of their peers and other community members as different from their own, even though they are not. These misperceptions occur in relation to problematic or risky behaviours, which are typically overestimated, and in relation to healthy or protective behaviours, which are underestimated. The consequence is that individuals change their own behaviour to conform to the falsely perceived norm. This can lead to the expression or rationalisation of problematic behaviour and the suppression of healthy behaviour. On social media, users often observe frequently posted topics and adopt these as social norms, determining appropriate behaviour. For example, if someone first hears about the *Ice bucket challenge*, they might develop a positive view of social media challenges. However, if they first hear about the *Tide pod challenge*, they might assume that individuals participate in such challenges for reasons like popularity on social media (Khasawneh et al., 2021b). As previously mentioned, popularity is one of the most common motivators for young people to engage in social media challenges (Hilton et al., 2021), and this encourages young people to participate if they form a positive initial impression of a particular challenge.

The purpose of research on adolescents engaging in social media challenges is critical due to the limited number of studies focused on this age group. Most research on motivation for social media challenges include young adults, and not adolescents in early adolescence who are at greater risk for negative consequences. Additionally, the importance of qualitative research in this field cannot be overstated, as it provides deeper insights into the motivations and perceptions of adolescents, helping to develop more effective prevention and intervention strategies. Moreover, since in Croatia this research topic is still new and mostly unrecognised by scientists, qualitative methodology is an adequate approach to studying new phenomena. Finally, since most of the presented studies are atheoretical, the scientific contribution of this paper lies in describing and understanding adolescents' motivation for engaging in social media challenges through the lens of important and well-known motivational theories. As previously mentioned, adolescence is a time of vulnerability for engaging in social media challenges. Engagement in risky behaviours most often begins during adolescence (Vannucci et al., 2020) and also, adolescents are at risk of negative consequences from participating in social media challenges. Given that viral challenges have a relatively short lifespan, it is not entirely clear what motivates adolescents to participate in them (Bodrožić Selak et al., 2023). In accordance with all of the above, the aim of this research is to gain insight into young people's perception about what motivates their peers in general to engage in social media challenges.

## METHOD

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### Participants

The study was conducted in three elementary schools and three high schools in Croatia, specifically in Zagreb, Osijek, and Đakovo. These cities were selected based on the authors' place of residence, which ensured easier access to the participants. The research included seventh and eighth-grade elementary school students and first and second-grade high school students, selected using a non-random convenience sampling method. Participants who were officially registered as victims or perpetrators of peer violence were excluded from the study. A total of 43 students, comprising 22 boys and 21 girls aged 13 to 16, participated, with an average age of 15 years.

### Data collection

The research was conducted by female students who are also among the authors of this paper from February to April 2023. After obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law in Zagreb for the research, the authors contacted school professionals or the school principal in selected schools. After the schools approved the research, the school staff selected 6-8 students whom they deemed suitable based on the criterion of communicativeness. Those selected students were given documents containing information for students and parents, as well as consent forms for participation in the research, and school staff distributed them to students and their parents. Consent from parents was sought and obtained for all research participants. The documentation included the same information as the letter to the school, emphasising voluntariness, data anonymity, the option to withdraw from participation at any time, and the confidentiality of data and recording of interviews.

There were 6 focus groups, with a total number of 43 children participating. In each focus group there were 6-8 students who mostly knew each other and they formed one focus group. The focus groups were conducted during school hours in school premises and they lasted for an average of 50 minutes, covering themes regarding (1) familiarity with social media challenges, (2) perception of peers' motivation for engaging in challenges, and (3) perceived consequences of engaging in social media challenges (only the second theme is the focus of this paper). Specifically, the main questions asked during the focus groups were: "Which social media challenges have you heard of so far?", "What do young people aim to achieve by participating in social media challenges?", and "How much do young people think about the consequences when taking part in social me-

dia challenges?". To facilitate later transcript creation, the focus group sessions were audio recorded, and participants were initially informed about recording, providing their written consent for it. When transcribing, participants were assigned numbers replacing their names to ensure anonymity during data processing and the reporting of results.

## Data analysis

The collected data were processed using thematic analysis with the application of an inductive approach. Thematic analysis is a method that systematically identifies, organises, and provides insights into the collected data, enabling the researcher to see and make sense of the obtained collective and shared meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Discovering common themes leads to a new understanding of the researched phenomenon.

As an initial step, the audio recordings were transcribed. All researchers read and reviewed the transcripts. Subsequently, thematic qualitative analysis was conducted through six steps, following Braun & Clarke's instructions. Two researchers read the transcripts multiple times, marked content relevant to the research question and separately generated initial codes (using semantic coding, where codes represent a summary of relevant text in the transcript). Afterwards, they compared the codes and agreed upon the final codes. In the third step of the analysis, two other researchers joined and all four researchers searched for potential themes by reviewing coded data to find similarities and overlaps between codes, checked potential themes, named them and defined them, summarising and emphasising the specificity of each theme. Most themes were also presented through subthemes for better data organisation and explanation of each theme. Finally, all of the authors of this paper participated in reporting the results, that is, they analysed the codes and themes in line with the existing knowledge, which is presented in further sections of the manuscript. The analysis presented in this paper considered one research question – How do adolescents perceive what motivates their peers in general to engage in social media challenges?

## RESULTS

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Results for the research question *How do adolescents perceive what motivates their peers, in general, to engage in social media challenges?* are presented in Table 1. The codes could be arranged around four themes and some of the themes are explained through subthemes (see Table 1).



Code	Subtheme	Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Need for self-assertion</li> <li>· Self-confidence</li> </ul>	Better self-image	Need for (self-) respect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Demonstrating bravery</li> <li>· Standing out among peers</li> <li>· Need for validation</li> </ul>	Proving oneself among peers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Reward for participating in challenges/surprise</li> <li>· Earning income through video posting</li> </ul>	External reward	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Desire for popularity</li> <li>· Higher number of views</li> <li>· More followers</li> </ul>	Popularity	Need for love and belonging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Need for social acceptance</li> <li>· Fitting into society</li> <li>· Building friendships</li> </ul>	Good social status	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Persuading peers</li> <li>· Wanting to be like others</li> </ul>	Peer pressure and conformity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Poor family relationships</li> <li>· Insufficient attention from close individuals</li> </ul>	Need for better relationships with significant others	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Adrenalin drive and sensation seeking</li> <li>· Having fun</li> <li>· Reduction of boredom</li> <li>· Emotional instability</li> </ul>		Motives related to emotion regulation and sensation seeking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Curiosity</li> <li>· Openness to experience</li> <li>· Encouraging humanitarianism</li> </ul>		Pursuing online identity development

TABLE 1  
Perceived motives of adolescents' engaging in social media challenges

Within the *need for (self-) respect*, we can identify subthemes of Better self-image, Proving oneself among peers and External reward. Through the act of participating in social media challenges, young people aim to cultivate a better self-image. By boosting their self-confidence ("...the more they love themselves, the more they think they are superior and better than everyone else." FG01) and self-assertion ("...and even better if nothing happens to you, then you are very happy with yourself because you managed something dangerous", FG01), they work towards creating a more positive self-perception. Young people often feel the need to prove themselves among their peers too in order to achieve a better self-image, leading them

to engage in risky behaviours such as participating in dangerous online challenges. While doing so, they demonstrate bravery ("...To act like big shots, as if they dare to do it." FG03), stand out among peers ("...to stand out more among peers, to be different." FG02) and pursue their validation ("To prove themselves, hoping others might notice them..." FG01). Within the context of social media, rewards can manifest as receiving a prize just for participating in challenges ("...they often get some reward, or like, for example, a surprise..." FG04) or earning money by posting challenge videos on social media ("There is that content contract that TikTok sends you... when you reach a high number of followers... if so many people view the videos or liked them, they will get a certain amount of money." FG01).

*The need for love and belonging* consists of Popularity, Good social status, Peer pressure and conformity and Need for better relationships with significant others. The most common responses of young people to this research question are indeed related to popularity and the desire to achieve it by engaging in challenges and posting them ("I think the main reason is to be in trend and not to be late because if we're late, then popularity drops." FG05). A higher number of views was also mentioned ("...they want to get more views, for people to see something new and then be interested, go check it out, and by doing that, they get more views..." FG01) as well as a higher number of followers ("To get as many followers as possible..." FG01), which young people see as a proof of achieving popularity on social media and among peers. In addition, young people seek to attain a certain status in society and believe they can achieve it by engaging in social media challenges. They have a need for social acceptance from their peers ("...when the group tells her, 'Go on, do it,' she will do it just to be accepted." FG04), a sense of belonging ("They want to fit in with others... if everyone else is doing it, they will too, no matter how strange it is." FG02), and the formation of friendships. Peer pressure and the need for conformity could be seen in peer persuasion ("Maybe their friends persuaded them to do the challenge, so they agreed because they didn't want to look like cowards", FG06) and wanting to be like others ("...if one person does it, there is a higher chance that others in the group will do the same..." FG05). The final subtheme of the need for better relationships with significant others is recognised through poor family relationships ("Maybe they've been in difficult situations, like with family or something like that." FG01) and insufficient attention from close individuals ("...insufficient attention from parents and friends, so they don't have friends, maybe they seek attention through the Internet..." FG06).

Among the most recognised motives for participating in social media challenges are those *related to emotion regulation and sensation seeking*. A participant did not approve engaging in these challenges and said that adolescents are doing it due to emotional instability ("The only explanation is that they are not well. In the head." FG02), while many others said that they do that just to have fun ("...we're going to greater extremes to keep it interesting..." FG04; "...my friend (female) and my friend (male) did it just for fun." FG01), to reduce boredom ("...because they are bored with their lives." FG04), or that they are looking for an adrenaline drive and sensation seeking ("...they need to do something new and as dangerous as possible, this is the way to be to us more excited and then the challenge involvement starts..." FG01; "...they went to do something dangerous for that adrenaline." FG04).

Finally, young people state that their peers engage in social media challenges out of curiosity ("Well, maybe out of curiosity. To see if I can do it or not", FG02), and because they are open to the new experiences ("...because we want to try something new." FG03), which suggest that they *pursue their online identity development*. While doing so, some of them also participate in social media challenges to inspire humanitarian actions in others ("The Ice bucket challenge, for example, was used to raise money for that disease, so it was meant to inspire humanitarianism in people." FG04).

## DISCUSSION

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In this study, we observed that adolescents identify four predominant groups of motives driving their peers to engage in social media challenges. These are the need for (self-) respect, the need for love and belonging, motives related to emotion regulation and sensation seeking, and the pursuit of online identity development.

If we start with the subthemes confirmed in other studies, we can mark popularity, good peer status, peer pressure and conformity, as well as the need for better relationships with significant others that motivate young people to engage in social media challenges, thus satisfying their *need for love and belonging*. This is one of the major needs according to Maslow's theory of motivation (Maslow, 1954), which is probably one of the most known psychological theories and a starting point in studying motivation of human behaviour. The review of articles by Kobilke and Markiewitz (2024) highlights the need for belonging as one of the motives that can encourage participating in negative challenges (Khasawneh et al., 2021a; Roth et al., 2021, according to Kobilke & Markiewitz, 2024). During early

adolescence, which lasts from 11 to 14 years old, the desire for popularity is most pronounced (LaFontana & Cillessen, 1999; according to Putarek & Keresteš, 2012). Popularity is used to mark measures that indicate how much a person is liked/disliked by peers and the extent of a person's status or notoriety within a group. The desire for popularity and recognition can encourage risky behaviours, like participating in social media challenges (Burgess et al., 2017; Hilton et al., 2021). Regarding social status, in a study by Burgess et al. (2017) participants recognised the potential impact of participating in social media challenges on their reputation and social status. According to the findings of Juárez-Escribano (2019, cited in Ortega et al., 2023), adolescents most inclined to participate in viral challenges are those with the greatest need for acceptance, respect, or recognition from their peers. Bodrožić Selak et al. (2022) also highlight the motives of maintaining relationships with others and conformism as significant positive predictors of participation in viral challenges. Although Fear of missing out (FOMO) is not recognised as a motivator for involvement in social media challenges in this study, it can play a significant role in the performance of challenges, as it relates to fears and concerns that a person may experience when excluded from their social environment (Ortega et al., 2023, Kobilke & Markiewitz, 2024). Furthermore, peer pressure and conformity is defined through peer persuasion and the desire to be like others. Peer pressure is a peer influence in which peers directly impose their attitudes or behaviours, which can be either positive or negative (Dodge & Gonzales, 2009). Hilton et al. (2021) state that participating in challenges is a common practice among young people associated with peer pressure and seeking affirmation from them. Sometimes peer pressure is neither direct nor real but rather perceived by the individual, which still influences their behaviour. If an adolescent believes that most of their friends are participating in social media challenges (as we observed in the participants' quotes in this study), they are more likely to join as well, which is in accordance with Berkowitz's (2005) theory of social norms, described earlier. According to this theory, individuals engage in behaviours because they see others doing the same (descriptive norms) and believe that society will praise them for it (injunctive norms). The fear of exclusion and the desire to fit in further drive this behaviour, even when the challenges may involve risks (Berkowitz, 2005).

The next theme, *motive for engaging in social media challenges*, is the *need for (self-) respect*, where self-respect grows due to a better self-image, while the feeling of being respected by others comes after proving oneself among peers and through

some external rewards. Maslow (1954) states that the need for esteem (self-esteem, respect from others, achievement) comes when the need for belonging is satisfied. Self-image constitutes the overall perception of oneself and their own identity. It reflects how young individuals will think about themselves in various aspects, their interpretation of different elements of life and the environment, and their perception of their self-worth (Majdak & Kamenov, 2009). The motivation for young people to participate in social media challenges is often extrinsic, in the form of external rewards, which could raise the feeling of achievement. Moreover, extrinsic motivation refers to incentives resulting from external influences coming from the social environment, relating to some form of reward and/or praise (Krstinić & Pauković, 2020), which can also represent the respect of others. By achieving a higher number of views and followers, young people create the impression that they have greater respect from others, directly impacting their self-esteem. In addition, earning money from participating in challenges and sharing them on their TikTok profiles can motivate young people to continue engaging in other challenges on social media, including more dangerous challenges, to maximise their income. Proving oneself among peers is described through showing bravery, standing out among peers, and the need for validation. Young people are prone to risky and delinquent behaviour, which can be a reflection of the need for validation among peers and the expression of belonging to a specific peer group (Forko & Lotar, 2012). Most young individuals engage in risky behaviours, including participating in dangerous social media challenges, precisely because they represent a way of proving themselves within their peer group (Forko & Lotar, 2012). The results of this study confirm this phenomenon.

*Pursuing online identity development* is not directly presented in Maslow's theory, yet it could be connected with some aspect of self-actualisation, which is at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It represents the realisation of one's full potential and the pursuit of personal growth, creativity, and fulfilment (Maslow, 1954). Maslow identified several characteristics and components of self-actualisation: problem-solving and creativity, autonomy and independence, spontaneity, peak experiences, ethical and moral integrity, capacity for intimate relationships and continued growth and self-improvement. Among these determinants, spontaneity is well related with the curiosity and openness to new experiences, as some of the important aspects that adolescents see as motives for engaging in social media challenges, while ethical and moral inte-

grity is associated with humanitarianism. Furthermore, identity development and self-actualisation are closely connected concepts, particularly during adolescence, a period often characterised by significant identity exploration and growth. Both concepts share common themes of self-exploration, authenticity, personal growth, and fulfilment (Kroger, 2007). During adolescence, these processes are particularly prominent and intertwined as adolescents explore, question, and shape their identity while striving to realise their full potential and achieve self-actualisation (Erikson, 1968). Wängqvist and Frisé (2016) highlight that online environments present unique opportunities for adolescents to develop autonomy and establish a private space. The internet offers a combination of greater anonymity and increased exposure to diverse opinions and interactions, making it an important arena for identity exploration. According to the authors, for some adolescents, it may be one of the rare spaces where they can freely explore different aspects of their identity and connect with peers who have similar experiences. Finally, encouraging humanitarianism is also cited as an important motivator for participating in social media challenges by young people. Social media have become particularly popular in humanitarian campaigns (Madianou, 2013). As an example of a challenge in which young people participated out of humanitarianism, the Ice bucket challenge is highlighted, aimed at raising awareness about amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Through working on humanitarianism and working for the well-being of others, young people could be on the way of the self-actualisation.

Lastly, motives related to emotion regulation and sensation seeking as drivers for engaging in social media challenges were mentioned in all adolescent focus groups. In adolescence, there emerges a need for exploration and pushing boundaries, so it is expected that the need for excitement is also more prominent (Stefanović Stanojević et al., 2009). The need for excitement (adrenalin drive and sensation seeking) refers to a readiness to take on high risks, such as participating in risky sports, seeking new and thrilling experiences, or avoiding situations with predictable outcomes (Zuckerman, 1984; cited in Stefanović Stanojević et al., 2010). Moreover, Labaš and Marinčić's (2018) research showed that young people primarily use social media for entertainment. Given that social media challenges themselves are a product of social media, it is expected that entertainment (having fun) is one of the most common motives for engaging in them. At the same time, an increasing body of research supports the notion that using social media to alleviate boredom can lead young people to

develop pathological tendencies and maladaptive behavioural patterns on these platforms (Stockdale & Coyne, 2020). Both intolerance of boredom and emotional instability can drive adolescents towards risky behaviours (Iannattone et al., 2024; Kılıç et al., 2020), such as participating in (dangerous) social media challenges. According to a meta-analysis conducted by Helland et al. (2022), maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, often triggered by boredom and indicative of emotional instability, have been linked to both internalising and externalising problems in various adolescent groups, including risky behaviour. Giordano et al. (2022) found that social media addiction and internet gaming disorder are associated with lower emotion regulation, which may also be relevant for understanding engagement in social media challenges. This relationship warrants further exploration.

## Limitations

Though this research gave us important insights in the youth's perception of social media challenges, it has some limitations. Regarding the sample, participants were selected by professional school employees based on criteria such as their communicativeness, openness, and activity on social media. One of the conditions was that participants were neither perpetrators nor victims of peer violence. The issue with the participant selection method manifested itself in the fact that one of the criteria did not include awareness of social media challenges. Also, using the non-random convenience sampling method limits the representativeness of the sample, making it difficult to generalise the findings to the broader population of adolescents. Additionally, this method may introduce selection bias, as participants are chosen based on their accessibility and willingness to participate in the study. Consequently, some participants, despite their social media activity, were insufficiently informed about the theme. During the focus group sessions, there was also the possibility of encountering untrue responses. The responses could be untrue due to misinterpretation, exaggeration, or incomplete knowledge of the situations they are describing. Additionally, second-hand accounts may be influenced by biases, rumours, or an attempt to present a certain narrative that aligns with social expectations or the perceived dynamics of the group.

Regarding the conditions of conducting interviews, some schools did not provide adequate space, and it was not emphasised that the research was in process. This could have an impact on the results because entering and leaving the classroom could reduce the concentration of the focus group participants, which might affect the dynamics of the group itself.

Finally, since we did not ask participants about their own motivation for engaging in social media challenges, true motivation could be different to this perceived one. Future studies should focus on participants with their own experience in different types of social media challenges because it is to be expected that engaging in harmless and dangerous challenges is driven by different motives and needs.

## Impact and implications

Despite the rapid growth of viral challenges on the Internet in recent years, various authors have warned about the lack of research on this topic (Jacquier, 2019; Ortega et al., 2023; Kobilke & Markiewitz, 2024). The social media challenge phenomenon is ubiquitous among children and adolescents, yet adults (parents and teachers, and often other professionals working with youth) are often unaware of both the existence and the dangers posed by these challenges. Additionally, social media challenges that are present and popular on the Internet are constantly evolving, requiring continuous monitoring of trends and their implications. This is why it is important to regularly research this topic.

In order to adequately address young people engaging in various risky behaviours and prevent the possible tragic consequences of engaging in them, it is important to understand why young people are attracted to such (potentially) risky activities and why they engage in them.

Since most of the previous studies on this topic were un-theoretically driven, this study has its scientific impact in linking young people's motivation for engaging in social media challenges with one of the most well-known and confirmed psychological theories – Maslow's hierarchy of needs. If an adult speaking with an adolescent involved in a particular challenge understands the need underlying that behaviour (the reason why they engage in it), they can explore with them how to satisfy that need in a more socially acceptable and safer way, thus preventing possible negative consequences.

Finally, based on the presented needs in Table 1, which emerged from this qualitative research, it is possible to construct a questionnaire on motivations for engaging in social media challenges and verify its validity in a larger quantitative study.

Such a study would be particularly relevant in the Croatian context, where the issue of children's and youth's involvement in social media challenges remains under-researched, despite its noticeable presence in Croatian news articles, media reports, and online videos.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, this research only scratches the surface of the complex topic of social media challenges, and future research



should focus on exploring the prevalence of engagement in specific types of social media challenges, how such behaviours are associated with the psychosocial functioning of young people, and which risk and protective factors are associated with engaging in social media challenges.

## CONCLUSION

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The aim of this research is to gain insight into young people's perceptions of what motivates their peers to engage in social media challenges. The results have shown that perceived motivation varies depending on the different needs young people seek to fulfil by participating in these challenges. These needs largely correspond to Maslow's hierarchy of human motivation, emphasising the need for love and belonging, as well as the need for (self-) respect. The research also highlights that adolescents perceive their peers as being driven to engage in social media challenges by motives related to emotion regulation and sensation seeking, with some adolescents pursuing their online identity development through participation in these activities. Because the topic of social media challenges is understudied in Croatia, further research is needed.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the articles: <https://n1info.hr/magazin/tehnologija/sve-opasniji-izazovi-na-drustvenim-mrezama-djeca-istrcajavu-pred-kamione/> (visited: 6. 2. 2025.); <https://www.nacional.hr/mlado-ludo-splitskim-skolama-hara-opasni-tiktok-izazov-sve-vise-ucenika-na-hitnoj/> (visited: 13. 1. 2025.); <https://net.hr/danas/rtl-danas/sve-brutalniji-tiktok-izazovi-koji-su-izazovi-a-koji-savjeti-kada-je-90-posto-mladih-online-1ed79912-765d-11ed-997e-2e0946dff87> (visited: 10. 10. 2024.)

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## #Izazov prihvaćen: percepcija adolescenata o motivaciji koja stoji iza izazova na društvenim mrežama

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Tehnološki napredak i sve veća važnost interneta učinili su izazove na društvenim mrežama uobičajenom praksom među adolescentima. Unatoč njihovoj raširenosti, rijetka su istraživanja na ovu temu. Ovo istraživanje proučava kako adolescenti doživljavaju motive svojih vršnjaka za uključivanje u online izazove. Sudjelovala su 43 učenika u šest fokusnih grupa. Rezultati ističu teme poput (samo)poštovanja, potrebe za pripadanjem, motive vezane za regulaciju emocija, traženja uzbuđenja i razvoj online identiteta. Adolescenti kao ključne čimbenike izdvajaju popularnost, zabavu i vršnjački pritisak. Od izvanredne je važnosti podizanje svijesti učenika, roditelja i nastavnika o učinku izazova na društvenim mrežama na svakodnevni život mladih.

Ključne riječi: izazovi na društvenim mrežama, online izazovi, adolescenti, društvene mreže, motivacija



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