

Normalization and Desensitization to Death and Injury on Instagram Reels

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Abstract

Instagram, a social media platform owned by Meta, hosts a myriad of content, one of which includes Instagram Reels, a short-form video feature often focused on entertainment or informative content. This paper scrutinizes the disturbing trend of death, injury, and shock content, particularly in the context of car crash videos circulated on Instagram Reels. Through qualitative content analysis, the study examines the top three most liked comments from each Reel to identify trends and understand how people are responding to death and injury, as well as why they interact with such content. This study investigates 36 Instagram Reels of car crashes, analyzing a total of 108 comments. The results reveal trends of comments about death, humor, and blame for crashes, indicating people's attraction to its shocking content. Additionally, there is a notable trend of placing blame on bikers for traffic accidents. The study aims to shed light on how the dissemination of car crash videos online normalize and desensitize people to death and injury.

Introduction

Instagram, a popular social media platform, offers various features, including content such as photos, videos, and stories (Gillard, 2023). Instagram's founder developed an application that enabled users to check in with each other, share plans, and photos. He launched Instagram in 2010 gaining one billion users by the end of that year. Instagram slowly added features such as website profiles, designs, and stories. In April of 2012 Facebook purchased Instagram for \$1 billion (Gillard, 2023). As time passed, Instagram grew in popularity, becoming one of the largest social media platforms, consistently updating their platform with new features. In 2020, Instagram introduced a new feature called Instagram Reels, offering users a short-form video format for uploading content ranging from 5 to 90 seconds in duration.

Literary Review

Social Media

Social media platforms have revolutionized the way individuals share videos and content, facilitating the dissemination of information, social movements, and online content (Gilliard, 2023). However, alongside the benefits of increased accessibility comes the emergence of negative trends and headlines within social media spaces. Additionally, social media algorithms push extreme content to vulnerable youth are linked to an increase in mental health problems for adolescents (Costello, 2023). This literature review aims to cover already explored material, including dangerous trends, attitudes toward death, car crashes, media coverage of traffic accidents, and the normalization of car accidents.

Dangerous Trends

The rise of viral platforms like Instagram Reels and TikTok has brought attention to the risks associated with online trends, particularly among youth (Grillo, 2024). The disturbing trend called the "Blackout Challenge" on TikTok shows the dangers of online trends and the effect it can have on the youth. This challenge, which involved strangulation for pleasure, resulted in tragic deaths among children and teens. Two families, who had children die from participating in the trend, filed lawsuits against TikTok for their children's deaths (Glasper, 2023). This proves online trends can have an impressionable effect on the youth and shows the dangers that video content can have on families.

Attitudes and Perceptions of Death

A significant portion of the population, particularly young adults, actively engage with social media (Gilliard, 2023). It's then essential to understand how individuals respond to death and grief when online when talking about death and injury. People may choose to share news of a death online for various reasons, including online influence, to announce the death, and personal benefit (King, 2022). There's also differences in the way that people will react when someone shares news of a death online. There's a correlation between positive attitudes toward death and factors such as religiosity, level of education, and exposure to non-intimate deaths (Larsan, 1974). This correlation suggests that individuals with less exposure to non-intimate deaths may exhibit more positive attitudes toward death.

Car crashes and Traffic Accidents

Research on the perceptions of car crashes and traffic accidents sheds light on the biases and framing present in media coverage (Connor, 2004). Crashes are presented in media to be part of a larger pattern rather than focusing on the human lives involved. Media coverage largely dehumanizes traffic crashes, presenting them more as glitches in the machine than human tragedies (Te Brömmelstroe, 2020). This presents the idea of normalization in car crashes, wherein social conditions are accepted as inevitable and insurmountable (Vardi, 2012). This normalization of accidents perpetuates a societal attitude of resignation toward traffic-related tragedies (Vardi, 2012). When looking at car crashes, blame for the accident needs to be recognized. Motorcyclists are involved in a disproportionate number of crashes given the distance they travel, but situational details of the impact form the perceptions of crash blame (Robbins, 2018). This means that the situational details of the incident is the dominant factor when assigning responsibility of the crash no matter what the statistics are of motorcycle accidents.

Research Questions

RQ1: How are people responding to death and injury on Instagram Reels?

RQ2: Why are people sharing/interacting with car crash videos on Instagram Reels?

Methods

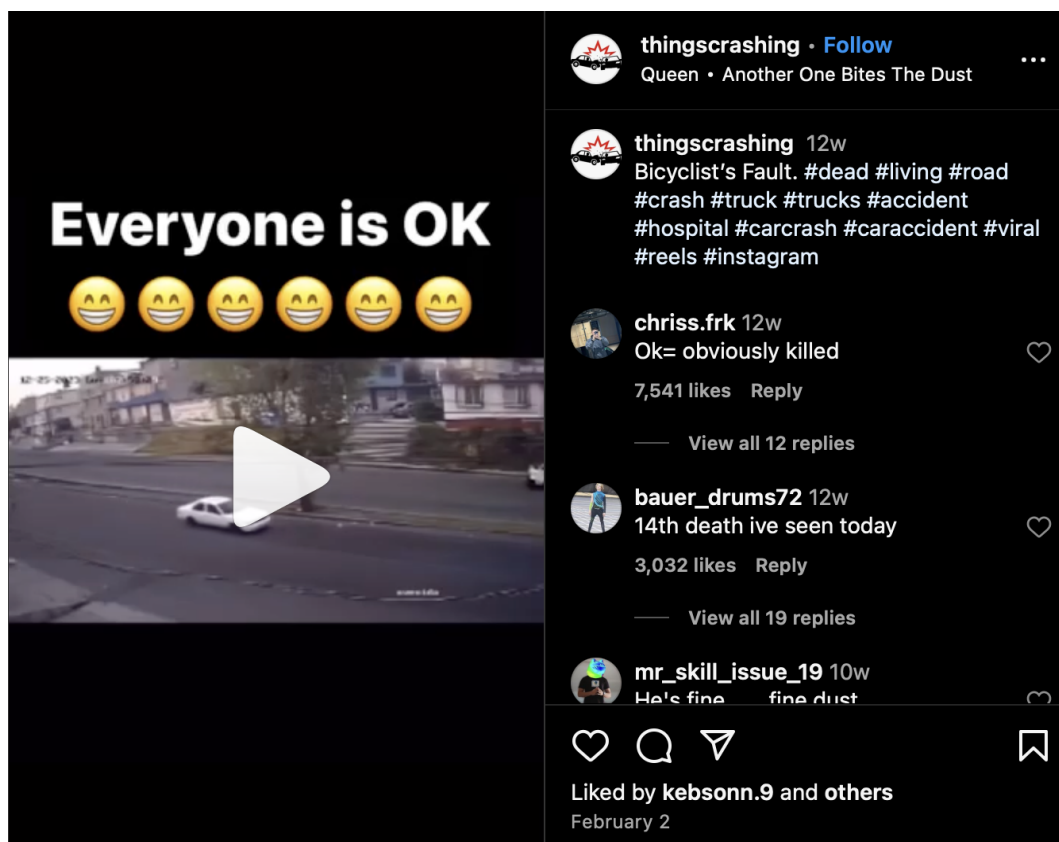
To fully explore how people are responding to death and injury on Instagram Reels, in this study, I selected Instagram Reels of car crashes and conducted a qualitative content analysis looking at the top three liked comments in each comment section. Qualitative analysis was used

for the purposes of identifying trends to understand why people would share and interact with this kind of content.

Results

The results were found by looking at 36 Instagram Reels and 108 comments total. Three Instagram Reels were marked with sensitive content warnings, leaving 33 Reels without a content warning. All of the 36 Reels feature car crashes where you can assume that someone was injured. There was a variety in responses to the death and injury on Instagram Reels. The trends are listed with examples below.

(e.g., **Figure 1**)



Example of an Instagram Reel with text "Everyone is OK"

The first trend is comments on how many times they've seen death on Instagram reels:

- “Day 758# of instagram showing me people die”
- “Day 2: Death count 113”
- “Instagram death count 1,234,567,910”
- “day 2 of tracking insta deaths 31 reels 3,016 deaths”
- “Yet another day of watching people die on Instagram”
- “I've seen so many people die on this app I've become numb to it”
- “14th death ive seen today, I’m averaging 3 deaths a minute now”
- “Day 5. Death count: 395”
- “Day 7 of seeing people die on Instagram”
- “Day 29 of seeing people die on instagram reels”
- “Day 17 of watching people die on reels”
- “There’s my daily death vid”
- “2nd death i've seen today”
- “How many Days i have seen people dying om ig: cant even count that high”

The second trend is comments blaming the crashes on bikes:

- “bikers fault” (x11)
- “Obviously the biker’s fault”
- “Biker’s fault ngl”
- “Cyclist fault” (x2)
- “Cyclist's fault. If you disagree, you need your license revoked”
- “Yet another explosion caused by an electric bike battery”

The third trend is comments creating a parody of “Everyone is OK”, which appears occasionally in the video or caption of a Reel, as shown in Figure 1:

- “ok means ‘obviously killed’”
- “Everyone is ok 👍 except the people that just died in this reel 👍”
- “Everyone is not ok 😞”
- “Ok= obviously killed”
- “Ok ❌ dead ✅”
- “Ok = obviously killed 🔥”
- “Ok (obviously killed)”
- “EVERYONE IS OKAY IN HEAVEN BRO 💀💀”
- “everyone is ok ❌ everyone is ko ✅”
- “I don’t think everyone is okay”
- “nobody is fucking okay here.”
- “Don't worry guys it said they were ok.”
- “I almost had a heart attack until I read that they were ok.”

The fourth trend is comments creating humor from the Reel:

- “‘Who’s fault’ bruh obviously that tree”
- “Hey guys I’m fine, I’m not the person in the truck but just wanted to tell everyone that I’m fine”
- “Oh I didn't see anyone die in like five minutes. Thank you zuck for such a lovely app. Works as a charm”
- “he good bro i was the pole”

- “Tbf he did win the game of chicken”
- “no need to take away his license now”
- “Bro was like hold on yoga time”
- “Does this damage the vehicle?”
- “The music 🤔 The video 🤖”
- “It just keeps getting worse 🤖”

The fifth trend is comments on death:

- “Did the first car commit suicide?????”
- “We just watched someone die”
- “Yeah that guy committed suicide”
- ”bro is dead 😭”
- “Yeah idk how you can possibly survive that”
- “we just saw someone get killed bro.”
- “Aye a death compilation”
- “Is it me or has Instagram just became some platform where you see accidents where people just die recently? Not saying it happened here but if it wasn’t that’s still pretty darn close no?”
- “is no one gonna notice how that guys in the truck prob died...”
- “Annnnnnnnnnnnd, dead. 🤖”
- “Imagine driving on the freeway on a regular day and you die instantly without ever seeing it coming”

Smaller trends include comments asking for similar reels:

- “Please Instagram more of this”

- “How do I make inst show more of these”

And misogynistic comments:

- “It was a girl driving and she killed her friend which was a guy”
- “Men wouldn't miss that easy turn. Must have been a woman”
- “Girls don't understand the concept of brakes”

RQ1: How are people responding to death and injury on Instagram reels?

There is a variety of ways people responded to death and injury on Instagram Reels, including comments about death, suicide, humor, and crash blaming. For example, there are multiple comments on how many times they've seen people die on Instagram Reels, such as "Day 29 of seeing people die on Instagram reels." Additionally, comments speculate on whether the driver is dead or committed suicide, such as "Yeah, that guy committed suicide." Moreover, people make ironic comments or find humor in car crashes, as evidenced by comments like "Does this damage the vehicle?" There are also comments that blame motorcycles and bikes for crashes, like "Obviously the biker's fault." Furthermore, comments express concern about the well-being of those involved, often parodying the caption or text in the video, as seen in comments like “Ok= obviously killed.”

RQ2: Why are people sharing/interacting with car crash videos on Instagram reels?

People are interacting with this content because it's shocking. It's safe to assume that the car crash content is shocking with comments such as “Did the first car commit suicide?????” or “Everyone is not ok 😞.” From the comments “Please Instagram more of this” and “How do I make Insta show more of these” it can be assumed that some individuals are enjoying this kind of content and want more of it.

Discussion

The Normalization and Desensitization to Death and Injury on Instagram Reels

The prevalence of car crash content on Instagram Reels not only normalizes these incidents but also desensitizes viewers to death and injury. Both creators and viewers are disconnected from the lives affected by the crashes, lacking any personal connection to the victims. This detachment enables creators to share these videos for personal gain, while viewers, shielded from knowing the victims' identities, can distance themselves from the displayed tragedy. The short-form video format of Reels facilitates the consumption of fatal car crashes on a scale unprecedented in traditional media. Unlike conventional news coverage, which often dehumanizes victims and frames crashes as systemic issues, Instagram Reels present deadly crashes as public spectacles. Rather than merely reading headlines about accidents, viewers witness the events themselves. This increase in viewers consuming car crash content normalizes the spread of such content. This poses a danger to viewers, as witnessing others' deaths on Instagram is effortless and readily accessible with no consequences of knowing identities of those injured or killed. Therefore, users become desensitized to the content, evident in the trends tracking the frequency of viewing fatal crashes, such as "14th death I've seen today, I'm averaging 3 deaths a minute now." Moreover, individuals explicitly express their desensitization, with comments like "I've seen so many people die on this app I've become numb to it."

Crash Blame

A noticeable bias is evident in the comments section of Instagram Reels, often attributing blame to bikers for traffic accidents. Though motorcycles are involved in a disproportionate number of crashes given the distance they travel, the situational details of the impact form the perceptions of crash blame, as demonstrated in the study "Comparing Car Drivers' and

Motorcyclists Opinions About Junction Crashes” (Robbins, 2018). This correlation does not match the results when analyzing the comments of car crashes in Instagram Reels. Despite only one of the 36 Instagram Reels involving a motorcycle in a vehicle crash, comments assigning blame to bikers were present in 17 out of 108 top liked comments, whereas no top liked comments blamed car drivers. This consistent tendency to scapegoat bikers appears to be a recurring theme in Instagram Reels featuring car crash content.

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