

**TOP STORY**

## Clemson University to study how viral online challenges turn fatal

By Thad Moore [tmoore@postandcourier.com](mailto:tmoore@postandcourier.com) Jul 9, 2018 (...)



Clemson University researchers Kapil Ghali Madathil, Laura Whitlock and Heidi Zinzow are studying how dangerous online challenges go viral. Clemson University/Provided

The Internet has drummed up all kinds of challenges — most of them bizarre, usually unpleasant but often innocuous enough. The whims of online culture can make the most offbeat idea seem commonplace, like drenching yourself in ice water or chugging milk.

But those whims have a dark side, one that can transform a joke or a hoax into a dangerous phenomenon. Bad ideas gone viral have convinced young people to eat laundry detergent, and set themselves on fire.

And then there are the really insidious ones — so-called challenges that start with small dares and slowly build their way toward urging teens to commit suicide.

Cases like that are rare, but they're troubling. And **Clemson University** is trying to figure out why they spread.

The university says it's planning to study a pair of viral challenges that push participants to hurt themselves. Researchers are planning to interview former participants in their teens and early 20s and gather data from the social media platforms that spread them.

It's not saying which challenges it's going to study, in an effort not to hasten their spread. The work is being funded by the **National Science Foundation**.

"This will be the first empirical study to descriptively and critically analyze the content and potential harm posed by social media challenges, as well as identifying the characteristics that may contribute to their viral spread," said **Kapil Chalil Madathil**, a Clemson engineering professor who's leading the study, in a statement.

The ultimate goal is to see how would-be participants can be steered away from harmful challenges. But first, the researchers say, they need to find out how they're being encountered. The study will include interviews in the U.S. and India.

Some efforts have already been made along those lines. Search for a self-harm challenge on **Google**, say, and you'll first see a phone number for the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**, 1-800-273-8255.

Clemson's work, which is being joined by researchers at the **University of Central Florida**, **University of South Carolina** and **Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham** in India, aims to hone those efforts.

### Western exposure

**Benefitfocus Inc.** is beefing up its presence out West, with plans to more than double its workforce in Salt Lake City.

The Charleston-based company, which develops software that manages employee benefit plans like health insurance, opened its first outpost in Utah last fall. It's now moving from suburban Salt Lake to a bigger space downtown.

The Utah office primarily handles "customer success" — essentially guiding clients through its software and helping with benefits enrollment. That group's presence in Salt Lake is slated to be doubled to as many as 25 workers, and it will move into a co-working office space in town.

About 1,000 companies use Benefitfocus's software, and the Daniel Island company has recently sought to spread out its workforce to be closer to them. Its offices had been limited to South Carolina and Tulsa, Oklahoma, until it expanded to Utah.

"Salt Lake City has proven to be the right fit for our Western presence, not only because of its central location, but because of the strong local talent pool," Benefitfocus chief executive **Ray August** said in a statement. "Our associates are truly the lifeblood of our company as they directly advise our customers, so we're excited to have the space to accommodate more of them as our customer base grows."