

# THE SCREEN TEST

In celebration of World Mental Health Day, a balanced approach to social media and virtual reality is of extreme importance. MOJEH investigates the dark side of emerging virtual technologies and the caution it should beg from a responsible society

WORDS BY ODELIA MATHEWS

You may have heard that you are what you eat. But as we face what the World Economic Forum is calling the 'fourth industrial revolution' in its *Future of Jobs* report, we are becoming a product of not only what we eat, but also what we think and do under the influence of the latest tech. With the launch of Dubai's Metaverse Strategy to make it one of the world's top 10 metaverse economies and a global hub for the metaverse community, alongside launching the world's first Virtual Assets Regulatory Authority (VARA) earlier this year, we are currently riding a new wave of growth that is as unprecedented as it is unpredictable. The impact of virtual reality on human behaviour remains unexplored to a large extent, with social media addiction, depression, Snapchat dysmorphia, desensitization and the ethics of business and socializing in the metaverse becoming topics of interest to our mental health and wellbeing. While there are many positives to progress and modernization, there is also a dark side that needs to be considered. It's important not only for adults but also adolescents and their parents.

"Young adults and Gen Z are at the crossroads of a changing world and since the metaverse is still in its infancy, I find that young adults have the experience of being neither here nor there," comments Dr Clarice Mendonca-King, clinical neuropsychologist at the Brain Matters Center in Dubai.

As the use of avatars in virtual realms increases and online universes like Decentraland, Fortnite, Roblox and Sandbox continue to attract over 400 million users, with fashion brands like Prada and Gucci creating their own virtual worlds, users are increasingly flocking toward an immersive experience. This is not just in terms of working, socializing, shopping and gaming, but also in terms of themed experiences, private parties, and exclusive invite-only celebrity events that entice a broader digital presence, and longer times spent exploring, engaging, and living within these realms.

"A lot of mental effort is required to keep up with various avatars and move in and out of different worlds, depriving us of the space, energy and time to engage in other experiences like physical activity, reciprocal social interactions or authentic relaxation," explains Dr Mendonca-King. "This in turn leads to mood problems, dissociation, disordered behaviours, poor decision-making and addictions."

A recent study of 298 college-going students in the UAE showed that excessive use of social media can lead to potential attachment and addiction issues, and ultimately cause a reduction in the self-esteem of emerging adults. The study, conducted by Dr Nishtha Lamba, senior lecturer at the Department of Psychology and head of Social Psychology [▶](#)



Research Lab at Middlesex University Dubai found that a large majority of young adults spend at least an hour on social media every day, specifically Instagram.

"This is concerning as research has shown that there is a constant need to be online, and to connect, which could be distracting and anxiety-provoking," she says.

The problem isn't limited to young adults and adolescents, either. Adults also need to regulate their emotions, time and relationships when it comes to exploring and engaging in virtual realms. Even though there are numerous positive outcomes, with some reporting improved mental health related to recognition, social support and motivating community engagement, the impact on our time and how it is spent rests largely on how we ensure a balanced approach in the post-pandemic era.

Over the last three years digital technology has connected us in ways that we never imagined, with filmmakers, researchers, businesses, human rights workers and even law enforcement officials resorting to virtual and augmented technology to serve a broader societal purpose, enabling people to 'feel' an event firsthand and contribute to meaningful exchanges. In an article published by *The Washington Post*, Stephen Smith, executive director of the Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California, which is creating war-like simulations in partnership with virtual reality startups, says that the danger of an immersive virtual experience is that it can traumatize users. He points out that with extreme experiences, one can become desensitized. These unintended consequences, along with that of cyberbullying, racial or sexual harassment, assaults, hate speech, body shaming, misbehaviour and violation of personal space, privacy and personal dignity, which are already rampant in virtual reality games and social platforms; need to be carefully

MENTAL HEALTH TIPS BY MELEK HASSAIRI:

1. **Communicate:** Parents and trusted adults are essential in helping teens set healthy limits for online interactions. To this end, communication is paramount. The best time to start these conversations in when a child starts using the internet.
2. **Enable:** Just as we teach our kids how to walk safely, then cross the street holding our hands, then ride bikes, walk places without us, and eventually drive, we should gradually give more trust and independence depending on the maturity of the child, teen and young adult.

approached by adults and parents for the health and wellbeing of themselves, and their children. With all schools in the UAE and the KHDA announcing a zero tolerance policy toward cyberbullying, the usage of these experiences in the virtual realms and social platforms spaces begs for deeper introspection.

"I have noticed that almost every parent who brings their child to therapy complains of issues because of excessive and unsupervised use of technology. This has become such a pervasive issue even among adults, that it feels normal and people are less inclined to seek help for this," says Dr Mendonca-King, and Dr Lamba, a behavioral scientist specializing in psychological health and social policy, agrees.

"Studies have shown that a large proportion of adolescents are spending more than three hours daily on social media and are at an increased risk for developing mental health issues," she warns, explaining that it is imperative to self-monitor social media consumption and develop a clear digital use of guidance and netiquette, especially for young adults. As part of her research work which also focuses on trauma and marginalized communities at the Institute of Social Justice and Crime at the University of Sussex, Dr Lamba notes that reduced access may also lead to irritability and distraction, contributing to dysfunctionality in both personal and professional lives.

3. **Guide:** Once they are teens, the best advice is to have conversations with them about the virtual world they are exploring, who their online friends are, what games they play, and what platforms they use for communication and socialization. We can help them identify bullying and talk about how to get help.
4. **Protect:** The safety concept is the same for online and in-person. We wouldn't ask a teen to roam the streets at night on their own. The same holds true for online surfing. It is hard to know the character of the person on the other side.

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MELEK HASSAIRI

'Social' media can often have the opposite effect, leaving us feeling distant from the world and loved ones



In comparison to social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram or Snapchat, virtual reality worlds of gaming and socializing pose a far greater threat to adults and teenagers due to the issue of identity crises, exacerbated by anonymity and the use of avatars.

"When connected, the teenager is exposed to millions of people, in a world where there's no intimacy, and they become subject to influence, intrusion and even control of others," cautions Melek Hassairi, clinical psychologist at the Monarch Medical Centers. "They can infinitely, and without risk, find a new body envelope, change appearance with filters, and all this is contributing to a disturbed identity construction."

Considering what digital environments can offer in immersive experiences with the use of full-body haptic vests to enhance every sensation, one can't ignore the dangers of teenagers spending unsupervised time exploring the metaverse.

"Faced with a multiplication of avatars and self-representations, the adolescent can no longer distinguish between what's real and what's not," explains Hassairi, who works with children and adolescents aged four to 18 years, and with parents covering depression, anxiety, panic attacks, abuse and emotional and behavioural issues in school and at home. "A multiplication of self-representations also leads to a loss of identity, as they won't feel the need to find themselves, be themselves and build a strong personality on strong bases."

As abusive behaviour in the metaverse is more serious than online harassment, and it can't possibly be monitored or recorded in real time owing to the anonymity of users living out their fantasies in a virtual world that isn't regulated, it is of the utmost importance that responsible consumption, supervised usage and a balanced approach is adopted to ensure healthy progress. <sup>(9)</sup>