

February 28, 2023

Mark Zuckerberg 1 Hacker Way Menlo Park, California 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

According to reports, Meta is considering expanding its metaverse platform, Horizon Worlds, to users as young as 13 years old. Given Meta's history of failing to protect our youth on older services like Instagram and the emerging problems Horizon Worlds raises, this decision is extremely concerning. Meta has a long history of prioritizing profits over user safety, especially the safety of some of the most vulnerable -- our youth. We haven't forgotten that until 2014, when the company was still branded as Facebook, its motto was "move fast and break things." Due to this track record, and the new and alarming harms users have suffered in your virtual platform, we strongly urge the company to institute strong protections for all users and proceed with extreme caution when considering opening the platform to users aged 13 to 17.

Since at least 2019, Instagram's own researchers have known that use of their photo-sharing platform is linked to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and other mental health problems, especially in teenagers. Instead of acting to protect the youth on its platform, Instagram monetized young people's precarious sense of self, breeding insecurity, self-image issues, inadequacy, and materialism in the user population. Meta has facilitated the psychological toxin that fosters the youth mental health crisis we face today.

We are concerned that your virtual reality platform will have similarly harmful effects on users as young as 13 years old. Despite numerous instances of harm that Instagram's own researchers have documented since the product launched in 2010, the company has continued to fail to protect its youngest users or prevent users under the age of 13 from using the platform. The realities of Horizon Worlds mean that children could be exposed to more online harassment, age-inappropriate content, and privacy issues when using your virtual world platform. In addition, the harms presented to young Horizon Worlds users are still emerging and little understood. Finally, any adverse effects of the platform will be more intense for users due to the immersive and three-dimensional nature of the service.

Meta has known for over a year that users as young as nine are accessing Horizon Worlds. Despite this knowledge, the company continues to ineffectively moderate its age restrictions to ensure children

and youth are not on an adult-only platform. Furthermore, the young users that do access Horizon Worlds are subject to incessant data collection via the service itself–information that can be combined with sensitive biometric data through the user's VR headset.

Horizon Worlds presents physical and mental health harms to users in addition to privacy harms. Horizon Worlds has already been implicated in allegations of verbal abuse and sexual harassment since November 2021 when a user reported being groped on the platform. A month later, a researcher was verbally and sexually assaulted by 4 male avatars who also took pictures of her avatar. In May 2022, a 21-year-old woman's avatar was led to a private room on the platform where she was sexually assaulted while other avatars watched, made lewd comments, and shared a bottle of alcohol. These examples of horrifying conduct shows that Horizon Worlds has not only failed to protect its current users but is also incapable of protecting our youth until critical changes are made.

Considering Meta's history of repeatedly ignoring ethical standards and valuing profits over user safety and welfare:

- 1. What actions will be taken to ensure that children under the age of 13 are not accessing the platform?
- 2. How will you verify a user's age?
- 3. What safeguards are you implementing to ensure users aged 13 to 17 are protected in Horizon Worlds?
- 4. How do you verify a user's identity to ensure children aren't interacting with criminal or other harmful entities?
- 5. What steps are being taken to ensure that users of any age are not assaulted on your platform?
- 6. What protections will you implement to protect users aged 13-17 in Horizon Worlds' special spaces like venues and private rooms?

Sincerely,

Ken Buck

Member of Congress

Ken Buck

David N. Cicilline

Member of Congress

Dal N. Cullie