

United States Senate

March 1, 2023

Mark Zuckerberg
Chief Executive Officer
Meta
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

We write regarding recent media reporting that Meta is “seeking to draw in more teen and young-adult users” into its metaverse offerings, including by opening its metaverse platform, Horizon Worlds, to users aged 13 to 17.¹ In light of your company’s record of failure to protect children and teens and a growing body of evidence pointing to threats to young users in the metaverse, we urge you to halt this plan immediately.

Horizon Worlds, which your company currently markets for users 18 years or older, is a “virtual universe with thousands of experiences,” including games, live events, and communication capabilities.² The cumulative set of immersive virtual reality experiences a teenager would confront on the socially-driven Horizon Worlds are distinct from their use of a virtual reality headset to, for example, play a specific single-player game. Inviting young teens into this environment, therefore, poses serious risks.

While research into the metaverse’s effects on teens is still in early stages, initial findings are highly concerning. Research suggests that threats to young people in the metaverse include privacy invasion, including collection of data on face and eye movement; manipulation related to the increased ability to persuade users in an inherently immersive environment; and

¹ Salvador Rodriguez, *Meta Pursues Teen Users as Horizon Metaverse App Struggles to Grow*, WSJ (Feb 7, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/meta-to-revamp-horizon-metaverse-app-plans-to-open-for-teen-use-as-soon-as-march-11675749223>.

² Meta Horizon Worlds, <https://www.meta.com/horizon-worlds/> (last visited Feb. 17, 2023).

physiological damage, including nausea and eye strain.³ Other reports point to harms such as harassment and unsafe content in the metaverse.⁴ Researchers have found that users in the metaverse, including minors, are exposed to abusive behavior such as bullying, threats of violence, and sexual content, every seven minutes.⁵ We agree with your company’s findings that, “there are significant research gaps in understanding user interaction and user safety in...social [virtual reality] experiences, as well as how these experiences impact users, especially teens.”⁶ Moving forward with metaverse offerings that could endanger the health of teens is both dangerous and unsupported.

Meta’s plan to target young people with offerings in the metaverse is particularly concerning in light of your consistent failures to protect young users. For example, reports showed that Facebook’s Messenger Kids app, a service for kids between the ages of six and 12, contained a serious design flaw that allowed children to circumvent limits on online interactions and interact with strangers.⁷ Other reports have documented Meta’s failure to stop ads for tobacco, alcohol, and eating disorder content from targeting teens.⁸ Your company’s internal research shows among teen girls, 32 percent reported that “when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram, made them feel worse,” and among teens who had experienced suicidal thoughts, 13 percent of United Kingdom users and six percent of American users traced the problem to Instagram.⁹ With a documented track record of failure to protect children and teens, Meta has lost parents’, pediatricians’, policymakers’, and the public’s trust.

As our constituents grow increasingly concerned about the effects of online platforms and social media apps on teens’ well-being, your plans to imminently pull these young people into an under-researched, potentially dangerous virtual realm with consequences for their physical and mental health is unacceptable. Reporting suggests your company’s push to engage young teens is

³ Nelson Reed and Katie Joseff, *Kids and the Metaverse: What Parents, Policymakers, and Companies Need to Know*, Common Sense Media (Mar. 23, 2022), (<https://www.common Sense Media.org/sites/default/files/featured-content/files/metaverse-white-paper-1.pdf>).

⁴ See Catherine Buni, *If Social Media Can Be Unsafe for Kids, What Happens in VR?*, Slate (Oct. 11, 2021) <https://slate.com/technology/2021/10/facebook-virtual-reality-metaverse-safety-children-jakki-bailey.html>.

⁵ Center for Countering Digital Hate, *Facebook’s Metaverse: One incident of abuse and harassment every 7 minutes* (Dec. 30, 2021), https://counterhate.com/research/facebooks-metaverse/?_ga=2.94172573.1696882739.1676564526-2073363110.1676564526#about.

⁶ Meta, Request for proposals on social experiences in VR environments, <https://research.facebook.com/research-awards/request-for-proposals-on-social-experiences-in-vr-environments/#award-recipients> (last visited Feb. 17, 2023).

⁷ Russell Brandom, *Facebook Design Flaw Let Thousands of Kids Join Chats with Unauthorized Users* (Jul. 22, 2019), <https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/22/20706250/facebook-messenger-kids-bug-chat-app-unauthorized-adults>.

⁸ See, e.g., Facebook’s Repeat Fail on Harmful Teen Ads, Tech Transparency Project, Campaign for Accountability (Oct. 1, 2021), <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/facebooks-repeat-fail-harmful-teen-ads>.

⁹ Georgia Wells et al., *Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show*, WSJ (Sept. 14, 2021), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-instagram-is-toxic-for-teen-girls-company-documents-show-11631620739>.

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part of a larger effort to salvage Meta's struggling metaverse practice.¹⁰ Any strategy to invite young users into a digital space rife with potential harms should not be driven by a goal to maximize profit. We call on you to immediately halt Meta's plan to bring teen users onto Horizon Worlds.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

¹⁰ Salvador Rodriguez, *Meta Pursues Teen Users as Horizon Metaverse App Struggles to Grow*, WSJ (Feb 7. 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/meta-to-revamp-horizon-metaverse-app-plans-to-open-for-teen-use-as-soon-as-march-11675749223>.