

Guidelines needed to protect VR users at risk of harassment, warns academic

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Dr Sarah Jones. Credit: Birmingham City University

Government guidelines should be introduced to protect gamers and those using virtual reality or immersive technologies from an increased risk of sexual harassment or bullying, a leading academic has warned.

Dr. Sarah Jones, Head of Birmingham City University's School of Media, said almost half of female virtual reality users (49 percent) had been sexually harassed, and that the experience was the same as being accosted in the outside world.

However she noted that no guidelines were currently in place to explain how people should behave in virtual environments, or to highlight the increased intensity of the immersive experience and how it impacts users.

Dr. Jones' comments have been published in a new report unveiled by the government's Department for Culture, Sport and Media titled Immersive and addictive technologies.

The report noted the risks of cyber-bullying, harassment and grooming online—and experience

which is heightened for females.

Dr. Sarah Jones said: "It is the same as harassment that you would feel in [everyday life](#).

"If you are reading a book, you have this barrier. If you are watching a film, you have a barrier. When you are talking about an immersive experience, when you are talking about virtual reality, you are talking about jumping into that frame, you are actually part of the environment.

"You might not have active agency so much in the world, but you are really part of it. That means that the whole experience is intensified massively."

The report published this week (Thursday 12 September) looked at the impact developing technology could have on citizens, and called for input from a range of experts and academics.

Dr. Jones, who has previously spent 48 hours living in [virtual reality](#) to experience its impact on her life, highlighted the fact little data currently existed to advise people on how best, and safely to use the technology.

She also noted that no guidelines were in place to detail the dos and don'ts when using [immersive technologies](#).

She said: "As far as I'm aware, there are currently no guidelines associated with VR to help people understand the intensity of the experience, how it can impact them and what kind of length the experience should.

"So it is little surprise we see reports of people experiencing [harassment](#) or bullying, and it is important that we see the introduction of some guidelines or legal parameters in order to stamp this out.

"It is great that so many of us have been invited to

feed in to this report, which can help improve things for everyone making use of immersive technology in the future."

Provided by Birmingham City University

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