

## THE ISSUE

# Hooked on digital devices

Rising reliance on gadgets and games since start of pandemic

MORE students are becoming overdependent on their digital devices.

This, said Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) Faculty of Arts and Social Science Department of Psychology and Counselling assistant professor (psychology) Dr Grace T'ng Soo Ting, came in the wake of Covid-19 necessitating greater access to the devices for online learning.

With an increasing number of youths owning devices, it is to be expected that they would use it not just for lessons, but also for socialising and gaming, she said.

Last year, a joint study by researchers from the International Islamic University Malaysia and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) showed that more than half of the Malaysian secondary students who owned mobile phones were at risk of device addiction based on the amount of time they spent on their devices, as well as the types of activities they engaged in.

This increase was also reflected in a Nielsen Games Video Game Tracking (VGT) study, which showed that the number of gamers who said they were playing video games more now due to the pandemic had increased since March 23, 2020, noted T'ng.

The spike was the highest in the United States (46%), followed by France (41%), the United Kingdom (28%) and Germany (23%).

Locally, an online survey by Statista in 2021 reported that 42% of Malaysian youth played mobile games daily while the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission's Internet User Survey 2020 showed that the number of children aged between five and 17 who used the Internet had increased from 28.5% in 2018 to 47% in 2020.

That same year, it was reported that Malaysia esports enthusiasts consisted of more than 9.5 million, a number that was estimated to double in 2020, and contribute US\$587mil (RM2,477mil) in revenue to the global game market.

Esports, or mobile games that single or multi-players can play via online mobile devices, are not harmful, said T'ng, unless the gamer wants to remain in the cyber world instead of the real world.

She said multiplayer online battle arena (Moba) games, which require players to collaborate in a team and combat with another team, are one of the most addictive games for students, be they teenagers or young adults.

"Such intensive social features in Moba games successfully gather players who share the same interests and goals, leading to greater immersion or uncontrollable play.

"Intense involvement in Moba demands great time investment and could potentially lead to negative emotions such as low self-control and satisfaction, as well as high

social anxiety and frustration," T'ng cautioned.

Spending long hours glued to their devices means less time for studying, said Taylor's University senior lecturer Sam Jeng Mun.

"Their grades can be affected and this can range from falling the most important subjects to having a mix of good grades and bad grades," she added.

The Education Ministry has stepped in to curb a digital device and gaming addiction among students.

Its minister Datuk Dr Radzi Jidin said guidance and counselling teachers have embarked on a focused counselling programme as an intervention measure while schools are conducting various co-curricular activities such as leadership courses, sports, games and art projects to encourage a healthy lifestyle among students.

"The involvement of students in these activities will prevent them from engag-

ing in unhealthy activities and from becoming addicted to mobile games and digital devices," he said in a written reply in the Dewan Rakyat on March 10.

Radzi said that the Program Ekspresi Anak Remaja Lestari (PEARL) is also being implemented with the aim of addressing risky behaviours among students through early detection, appropriate intervention methods and integrated monitoring. — By REBECCA RAJAENDRAM

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