



**behind the canvas**

**\*the horizons**

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# Editor's Note

There is a tendency to think of art as something separate from life. As something we step into briefly, like a museum or a stage, before returning to what we consider "real." But the more you look at the world closely, the harder it becomes to draw that line at all. We dress ourselves in meaning long before we think of it as art. In the way we choose what to wear in the morning, in the way we style our hair before an important day, in the way we present ourselves differently depending on where we are and who we are becoming. A uniform, a cultural outfit, a school dress code, a costume on a stage, even a hoodie we refuse to take off, all of it says something. Not always loudly. Sometimes not even intentionally. But always meaningfully. This edition of *The Horizons* is built around that idea. Inspired by "The Art of Costume," we are looking at art not as something distant or decorative, but as something that moves through everyday life in ways we often overlook. Art is not only what hangs in galleries or plays on screens. It is also what is carried in identity, in culture, in science, in technology, in language, and in the small, repeated choices that shape how we exist in the world. We underestimate how much of being human is performative in the most natural sense of the word. We learn how to speak differently in different rooms. We learn how to sit, how to listen, how to present ourselves depending on context. Over time, these shifts become so familiar that we stop noticing them. Yet they are all forms of expression. All forms of design. All forms of art. And if that is true, then creativity is not something reserved for a few people with specific talents. It is something that already exists in how we navigate daily life. In how we adapt. In how we interpret ourselves and others. In how we build meaning out of ordinary moments without always naming it as such. This edition is an invitation to consider that art is not only something we make, but something we live through. That identity is not only something we have, but something we construct and reconstruct constantly. And that expression is not limited to the visible or the dramatic, but often lives in quieter, more subtle forms. If we begin to see life itself as a kind of ongoing composition, then everything changes slightly. The ordinary becomes more layered. The familiar becomes more intentional. And the boundaries between art and life begin to soften, until it becomes difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins.

HAPPY READING,  
Saanjh Balpande, Editor-In-Chief

# What If Art Were Our Development Paradigm?

Over the last few years, I've witnessed countless conversations about what kinds of shifts are needed to make global development truly transformational. Whether among policymakers, government officials, civil society leaders, or development practitioners, these discussions often arrive at a similar conclusion: the ways we currently think and work do not match the realities of the challenges we face.

Many of our institutions are built on assumptions of predictability, linearity, and control. Yet the problems confronting us, climate change, inequality, displacement, political polarization, are complex, interconnected, and uncertain. The frameworks we rely on to understand and address them often struggle to accommodate that complexity.

In response, there has been growing openness to approaches that bring more humanity into systems intended to serve humanity. Behavioral science, playfulness, storytelling, and the arts are increasingly finding their way into policy spaces and development initiatives. Yet I often find myself wondering whether we are simply inserting new ideas into old structures. How do we prevent potentially transformative approaches from being absorbed by the very systems they seek to change?

I've thought about this particularly in relation to art.

Art is often used in development as a tool: to communicate information, strengthen social cohesion, support healing, inspire participation, or help people imagine alternative futures. These contributions are valuable. But they also tend to position art as an input toward a predefined outcome.

What if we thought about art differently?

What if art were not merely something we added to development processes, but the lens through which we designed them in the first place?

What if art were our development paradigm?

## What If Art Were Our Development Paradigm?

By this, I don't mean replacing technical expertise with artistic practice. Rather, I mean taking seriously the capacities that artistic ways of seeing cultivate: curiosity, imagination, ambiguity, empathy, experimentation, and the willingness to sit with questions that have no immediate answers.

For the challenges that can be solved through technical fixes alone, art may be supplementary. But for the larger questions, how we redesign economic systems, rebuild trust, imagine just futures, or transform institutions, technical knowledge is necessary but insufficient. These are questions that require imagination.

Artists understand that seeing is an act of responsibility. As poet Ocean Vuong writes, "The vocation of the artist is to see thoroughly."

What would it mean for development institutions to prioritize this kind of seeing? To acknowledge that no dataset, framework, or model can fully capture reality? To recognize that understanding emerges through multiple perspectives, forms of knowledge, and continual learning?

Art also challenges certainty. As James Baldwin observed, "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers."

Development often operates through solutions. Art invites us to return to questions. What assumptions shape our goals? Whose voices remain unheard? What futures have we ruled out because we cannot yet measure or describe them?

Perhaps one of art's greatest gifts is its ability to unsettle. It loosens our attachment to categories, assumptions, and narratives we mistake for permanence. It reminds us that what exists today is neither inevitable nor fixed.

This may be why imagination matters so deeply. As writer Alok Vaid-Menon suggests, the role of the artist is to replenish imagination, to reveal ideas, possibilities, and ways of being that we have not yet encountered.

## What If Art Were Our Development Paradigm?

If transformation requires us to build worlds different from those we inherited, then imagination is not a luxury. It is infrastructure.

We cannot change realities we take to be immutable. We cannot operate differently if we cannot first imagine alternatives. And we cannot dismantle systems that constrain human flourishing if we continue to mistake those systems for stability itself.

Perhaps that is the ultimate gift of art. Not that it provides answers, but that it expands the boundaries of what we believe is possible.

And when the challenges before us demand entirely new ways of thinking, where better to look for wisdom on creating than art?

*Written by Len Alexei krstic*

# The Gen Z “Lock In” Phenomenon

There is a heavy air in this generation. A noiseless paralysis that suffocates our notions of future success. We are not loudly broken, not visibly collapsing, but quietly stalled. There is a sense of being held in place, aware of what we should be doing, yet unable to move forward with any real satisfaction. This insatiable hunger to achieve what we cannot has reshaped how young people understand work, ambition, and worth.

In an era of extreme and ever-growing social media use, idealistic and easily obtainable lifestyles are presented as both normal and expected. These images seep into the collective conscience, encouraging the next generation to aim not just for the stars, but somewhere far beyond the galaxy, all without ever acknowledging the distance required to get there.

Once upon a time, those dreaming of affluence could only glimpse this reality through magazines, television, and films; artistically curated depictions of elite life. Now, a quick scroll through TikTok insists that you could have it all if only you worked harder, worked smarter.

The message is everywhere: productivity culture, self-improvement content, and courses claiming to enlighten with unmatched methods of success. And if you are not progressing decisively, you are a failure.

The language surrounding career and its emphasis on becoming “somebody” feels distinctly new. Previous generations were encouraged to survey opportunities, experiment in their career, and gradually settle into adulthood. In contrast, Gen Z is told to “lock in” at every moment in pursuit of any goal they desire, at a time when financial stability is becoming increasingly unattainable. This contradiction is not a coincidence. It is the product of a specific capitalist economic and cultural agenda.

The demand to “lock in” emerges from a system that has lost its tolerance for uncertainty. Periods of not knowing are treated as weakness rather than necessity. Late capitalism thrives on efficiency, acceleration, and the belief that elite wealth is within reach with the right work ethic. Any time spent figuring out your direction, pausing, or even re-evaluating your trajectory is labelled wasteful.

## The Gen Z "Lock In" Phenomenon

As job markets plummet, traditional pathways fracture, and resources continue to shrink, the margin for error narrows. The result is a dangerous culture that promotes burnout, overworking, and a crushing pressure on young people to choose correctly, even when blind to the realities of the world they are choosing within. And this decision must be made now, or you risk falling behind.

The pressure only mounts with the collapse of linear timelines. We no longer live in a world where education reliably leads to employment, or where employment guarantees security. Yet the expectation to perform adulthood in this sequence remains. Thus the measure of success is

now placed almost entirely on individual responsibility. Under these conditions, "locking in" becomes less an expression of confidence and more an act of survival.

Older generations often struggle to recognise this shift. They grew up within a regimented system that, while imperfect, offered clearer economic progression and firmer guarantee of reward. Today, that structure no longer exists. Yet young people are still fed insistent narratives that organisation promises prosperity and that leisure is wasted time. This feels suffocatingly real when you realise your entire generation is chasing the same narrow vision of success, all pursuing the same dream. In such an environment, even a single day of rest can feel like falling irreversibly behind caffeine-fuelled competitors in a relentless race for affluence and meaning.

Technology, although not entirely the scapegoat, acts as both a catalyst and an accelerant. Social media collapses long economic processes into sixty-second videos. It's profiteers abbreviate years of labour into purchasable courses and quick-and-easy tutorials, marketed as shortcuts to overnight prosperity. Careers appear instantaneous, success looks linear, and progress seems constant if one maintains discipline. The labour behind these narratives remains hidden, while comparison is encouraged: teenager versus millionaire. It may appear surprising that we are not met with an uprising of youth entrepreneurs. But rather than producing a generation of widespread success, this illusion leaves many confronting disappointment and despair. Structural unfeasibility is quietly internalised as personal inadequacy.

## The Gen Z “Lock In” Phenomenon

Gen Z's apparent hesitation is often misread as indecision or overthinking. In reality, it reflects situational awareness of the supposed incredible dream of linear achievement. It acknowledges that the promises once attained by hard work no longer delivers the same certainty of reward. To hesitate, then, is not a lack of ambition. It is a recognition that the routes to success have become unstable, convoluted, and increasingly unforgiving.

The danger of the “lock-in” narrative lies in where it places responsibility. It shifts attention away from economic and political structures and onto the inexperienced shoulders of the young. It persists that progress is intrinsically representative of effort alone, while ignoring the fractures beneath the path itself.

If the language shaping a generation is built on this innate urgency to reach for ultimate wealth, while maintaining peak organisation and optimising self-improvement, then it's hardly unforeseen that many of Gen Z feel not motivation, but suffocation.

*Written by Elizabeth*

## Clothes Speak; We Just Interpret

It is curious how little silence there is in the world — at least in the figurative sense. Interpretation hums constantly in the background. We notice who uses their indicators and who does not. We notice who prefers Pepsi to Coke (a position I continue to observe with anthropological interest). And we certainly notice clothing.

Even the simplest outfit invites commentary. Why the snakeskin handbag with the black suit? Why the sudden devotion to Crocs — at considerable financial sacrifice — when alternatives exist? We do not merely see clothes; we infer from them, often with impressive confidence and remarkably little evidence.

Once worn, clothing stops being fabric. It becomes suggestion. A tailored jacket implies control. Athletic wear suggests readiness — for exercise, or at least for being seen as ready. Practical shoes communicate efficiency. High heels communicate something else entirely. Within seconds, a character sketch begins to assemble itself, usually without consulting the wearer.

Press enter or click to view image in full size

The brain prefers speed to certainty. Faced with incomplete information, it fills the gaps automatically. It feels like insight. More often, it is simply efficiency. An outfit becomes a clue. A clue becomes a conclusion. The process is swift and, to our minds, entirely reasonable.

The conclusions arrive briskly. Introvert or extrovert. Carefree or calculated. Grounded or theatrical. Status is assessed almost instantly — the circles one likely moves in, the standards one maintains, perhaps even the elasticity of one's budget. Expensive does not always mean superior, but it rarely means nothing. Human beings are remarkably alert to hierarchy. We can detect it in tone, posture, and, apparently, in cotton.

Yet interpretation is rarely neutral. We do not only perceive; we project. An outfit does not enter a vacuum — it collides with our own experiences, preferences, and quiet assumptions. What feels like objective judgement is often pattern recognition wearing a suit of certainty.

## Clothes Speak; We Just Interpret

Consider the woman beside the netball court in heels and red lipstick. The mind supplies explanations at once. She married well. She is excessively appearance-conscious. She enjoys attention. Or perhaps she stepped out of a demanding meeting to watch her child play. Perhaps she simply prefers heels to grass stains. The observable facts remain unchanged. The narrative adjusts obediently.

Clothing offers fragments, not biographies. It gives us outlines and leaves us to complete the shading. Sometimes we are accurate. Sometimes we are imaginative. On occasion, we are confidently wrong.

This is precisely why clothing can function as strategy. In environments where attention is brief and impressions matter, visual signals perform compressed work. A restrained colour palette, a deliberate silhouette, a conspicuous logo — these are not random. Some people deploy them unconsciously. Others do so with care. Both are interpreted.

At the end of the day, clothes remain stitched fabric folded away at night without ceremony. Yet once worn, they participate in quiet social negotiation. They become cues in a system built on speed, assumption, and a collective fondness for neat stories.

So yes, clothes speak. Calmly. Indirectly. Not in full sentences, but in suggestion. It is wise to listen — and wiser still to remember that what we hear may reveal as much about the observer as the observed.

*Written by Marissa Bullard*

# The Story Behind 'Pink'

When someone says "pink," what comes to mind?

Perhaps it's a baby girl's nursery, a Valentine's Day card, or a cotton candy sunset. Today, pink is often associated with femininity, romance, and softness. But what if I told you that, for much of history, pink wasn't considered a "girl color" at all?

The story of pink is not just the story of a color. It's the story of culture, identity, fashion, and how society can completely transform the meaning of something as simple as a shade between red and white.

## A Color Before It Had a Name

For most of human history, pink wasn't recognized as its own distinct color. Ancient civilizations certainly encountered pink flowers, minerals, and sunsets, but they generally viewed pink as simply a lighter version of red.

The word "pink" itself didn't originally describe a color. It came from a type of flower called the "pink," known for its frilled petals. Over time, people began using the flower's color as a reference, and eventually the name stuck.

## When Pink Was for Boys

One of the biggest misconceptions about pink is that it has always been associated with girls.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Western societies actually recommended pink for boys and blue for girls. Why?

Because pink was seen as a lighter version of red, a color linked to strength, passion, power, and military uniforms. Blue, on the other hand, was associated with gentleness, purity, and often with religious depictions of the Virgin Mary.

A 1918 trade publication even advised parents that pink was "more decided and stronger" and therefore more suitable for boys.

It sounds strange today, but at the time it made perfect sense.

## The Story Behind 'Pink'

So how did pink become the ultimate "girl color"?  
The answer isn't as straightforward as many people think.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, there was no universal agreement about which colors belonged to which gender. Different stores, regions, and manufacturers followed different conventions.

After World War II, however, companies increasingly marketed products specifically toward boys or girls. As consumer culture expanded, pink became strongly associated with femininity through advertising, toys, clothing, and popular media.

By the 1950s, pink had become deeply embedded in the public imagination as a symbol of girlhood and traditional femininity.

The color hadn't changed. Society's interpretation of it had.

In the decades that followed, pink gained even more meanings.

During the 1970s and 1980s, some feminist movements challenged the idea that pink represented weakness or limitation. Instead of rejecting the color, many sought to reclaim it.

Pink later became associated with breast cancer awareness campaigns, making it a symbol of solidarity, support, and advocacy.

The color has also played a significant role in LGBTQ+ history. What was once used as a mark of persecution during World War II was later reclaimed as a symbol of pride, resilience, and community.

Over time, pink evolved from a simple color into a powerful cultural symbol carrying many different stories at once.

Today, pink is everywhere.

It appears in fashion, art, branding, technology, architecture, and social media. It can symbolize romance, confidence, rebellion, luxury, nostalgia, creativity, or individuality depending on the context.

Unlike many colors with fixed meanings, pink continues to reinvent itself. Perhaps that's what makes its history so fascinating.

The journey of pink reminds us that colors are not born with meanings attached to them. Society creates those meanings, reshapes them, and sometimes completely reverses them.

The next time you see pink, remember: you're not just looking at a color.

You're looking at centuries of changing ideas about identity, culture, and the stories we choose to tell.

*Written by Abdulla Kharrat*

# Why the Met Gala Matters Beyond Celebrity Fashion

Every year, on the first Monday of May, the internet seems to stop for one event: the Met Gala.

Social media fills with photos of celebrities arriving in extravagant outfits. Some wear towering headpieces. Others arrive draped in feathers, jewels, or garments so dramatic that they look more like sculptures than clothing. Within minutes, people begin ranking their favorites, sharing memes, and debating who understood the theme and who completely missed the mark.

At first glance, the Met Gala can seem like little more than a parade of expensive outfits worn by famous people.

But looking only at the dresses and suits misses the bigger picture.

The Met Gala matters because it sits at the intersection of art, history, culture, and storytelling.

The event serves as a fundraiser for the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Each year, the gala is tied to a museum exhibition that explores a specific aspect of fashion history and design.

The red carpet theme is not chosen randomly. It is designed to connect to the exhibition and encourage guests to engage with broader artistic and cultural ideas.

In this way, the Met Gala transforms fashion into something more than clothing. It becomes a form of interpretation.

Just as a painter uses a canvas or a writer uses words, designers use fabric, color, texture, and silhouette to communicate ideas.

One reason the Met Gala attracts so much attention is that it challenges people to rethink what art can be.

Many people picture art as something hanging in a museum or displayed in a gallery. Yet fashion is one of the most personal and accessible forms of artistic expression. It is art that moves, changes, and interacts with the world around it.

A Met Gala look is often designed to tell a story. Some reference historical figures, while others draw inspiration from architecture, literature, nature, or cultural traditions.

The result is a form of wearable art.

## Why the Met Gala Matters Beyond Celebrity Fashion

Even when an outfit sparks controversy or confusion, it often succeeds in starting conversations about creativity, symbolism, and meaning—the same goals many traditional artworks seek to achieve.

Fashion has always reflected society.

Throughout history, clothing has communicated status, identity, beliefs, and values. Looking back at what people wore in different eras can reveal just as much about a society as its books, paintings, or monuments.

The Met Gala often highlights these connections by exploring themes related to heritage, identity, beauty, craftsmanship, and self-expression.

In doing so, it reminds us that clothing is never just clothing. It is part of how people tell the world who they are.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Met Gala is its emphasis on storytelling.

The most memorable looks are rarely the most expensive. Instead, they are the ones that successfully communicate an idea.

Every detail—from the fabric and colors to the accessories and makeup—becomes part of a larger narrative.

This focus on storytelling mirrors the role of art in everyday life. Humans naturally seek meaning through stories, whether those stories are told through novels, films, paintings, music, or fashion.

The Met Gala simply provides a highly visible stage for those stories to unfold.

Of course, it is fair to criticize aspects of the event. The Met Gala is undeniably linked to wealth, exclusivity, and celebrity culture. Yet reducing it to those elements alone overlooks its cultural significance.

At its best, the Met Gala encourages millions of people to engage with art, design, history, and creativity. It sparks conversations about culture and identity. It challenges traditional boundaries between art and fashion.

Most importantly, it reminds us that art is not confined to museums. Sometimes, it walks down a red carpet.

And whether we admire the outfits or not, the conversations they inspire reveal something important: creativity continues to shape how we understand ourselves and the world around us.

*Written by Vasundhara Sardana*

# The Beauty We Miss When We Move Too Fast

In a world of notifications, deadlines, and endless scrolling, it has become surprisingly easy to overlook what is right in front of us.

Most of us move through our days on autopilot. We wake up, check our phones, rush through classes or work, complete assignments, answer messages, and repeat the cycle the next day. While technology has made life more connected in many ways, it has also made it easier to become disconnected from our surroundings. We often focus so much on what is next that we fail to notice what is happening now.

I was reminded of this during a walk through my neighborhood.

What began as an ordinary stroll quickly turned into something more interesting. As I slowed my pace and paid closer attention, I noticed details I had somehow missed despite passing them countless times before. Small gardens flourished between apartment buildings. Flowers spilled over fences. Birds nested in trees that I had never really looked at before. The neighborhood had not changed overnight. What had changed was my willingness to observe it.

This experience made me wonder how much of the world we overlook simply because we are moving too fast to see it.

Modern life rewards efficiency. Productivity is often treated as the ultimate goal, and being busy has become something people almost wear as a badge of honor. Students are especially familiar with this pressure. Between school, extracurricular activities, social commitments, and future planning, many young people spend their days racing from one responsibility to the next.

The problem is that our brains are not designed to maintain constant stimulation.

Research has shown that spending time in nature and engaging in mindful observation can reduce stress levels and improve mental well-being. Studies have found that even brief exposure to green spaces can lower anxiety, improve mood, and help restore attention after periods of intense focus. Yet many of us pass trees, parks, and gardens every day without truly noticing them.

## The Beauty We Miss When We Move Too Fast

In some ways, we have become experts at looking without seeing.

Observation is more than simply noticing what is around us. It is an active process of engagement.

Artists rely on observation to capture details others miss. Scientists use observation to identify patterns and ask questions. Writers build stories from moments that most people would dismiss as ordinary. In every case, observation begins with curiosity.

When we pay attention, familiar places become more interesting. A walk down the same street reveals new details. A conversation becomes richer. A sunset appears more vivid. The world does not become more beautiful because it changes; it becomes more beautiful because we finally notice it.

This ability to observe is becoming increasingly valuable in an age of distraction.

According to research on attention spans and digital media use, constant exposure to notifications and fast-moving content can make sustained focus more difficult. As a result, many people struggle to remain present in a single moment for long periods of time. Slowing down and observing can help counteract this tendency by training our minds to engage more deeply with our surroundings.

One of the most surprising things I noticed during my walk was the sense of community that existed around these small pockets of nature.

Gardens were not just collections of plants. They reflected the people who cared for them. Neighbors exchanged gardening advice, shared produce, and stopped to talk with one another. Children played nearby, learning where food comes from and developing a connection to the natural world.

These interactions may seem small, but they represent something important. Studies have found that access to green spaces and community gardens can strengthen social connections, improve well-being, and encourage a greater sense of belonging. In an era where loneliness is becoming an increasing concern, these simple shared spaces can have a meaningful impact.

## The Beauty We Miss When We Move Too Fast

What fascinated me most was that all of this had been there the entire time. I had simply never stopped long enough to notice.

As we grow older, it can become easy to lose our sense of wonder. The world becomes familiar, and familiarity often leads us to stop paying attention.

Children, however, are naturally observant. They stop to examine insects, collect unusual rocks, and ask endless questions about things adults might consider unimportant. Their curiosity allows them to find excitement in places others overlook.

Perhaps part of slowing down is rediscovering that mindset.

Observation encourages us to ask questions. Why is that tree growing there? Who planted that garden? How many birds live in this neighborhood? What stories exist behind the places we pass every day?

These questions transform ordinary experiences into opportunities for learning and discovery.

My walk reminded me that beauty does not always announce itself. More often, it waits quietly to be noticed.

The fruit trees, gardens, conversations, and small moments of connection I encountered were not hidden. They existed in plain sight. The only thing required to find them was attention.

In a culture that constantly urges us to move faster, there is something powerful about choosing to slow down. Not because productivity is unimportant, but because observation allows us to reconnect with the world we are often too busy to appreciate.

The next time you step outside, take a moment to look around. You may discover that the most interesting things are not somewhere far away, but in the places you thought you already knew.

*Written by Fatma Sultanova*

# People Spend Real Money on Digital Clothes

When most people think of fashion, they think of clothing they can physically wear. Yet for millions of people around the world, fashion exists just as much online as it does offline.

Long before terms like metaverse and digital fashion became mainstream, virtual worlds were already proving that people were willing to spend real money on virtual clothes. One of the best examples is Habbo Hotel.

Launched in 2000, Habbo Hotel was one of the internet's earliest virtual worlds. At its peak, it attracted hundreds of millions of users and became one of the first platforms to demonstrate how valuable digital identity could be. While the game was primarily a social experience, virtual clothing quickly became one of its most important features and one of its biggest sources of revenue.

Inside Habbo, clothing was more than decoration. It was a way for players to express their personalities, display status, join communities, and even build wealth.

## Why Virtual Clothes Matter

The success of virtual fashion comes from a simple idea: people want to express themselves.

Just as people choose clothing in real life to communicate their identity, players in virtual worlds use digital fashion to stand out, fit in, or signal membership in certain groups.

Habbo understood this early on. Players could choose from hundreds of clothing options, ranging from everyday outfits inspired by real-world fashion to imaginative designs that would be impossible to wear in reality.

This combination of realism and creativity gave players freedom to create identities that reflected who they were—or who they wanted to be.

## The Economics of Digital Fashion

One of the most fascinating aspects of Habbo was how it turned virtual clothing into an economy.

The platform introduced several forms of scarcity that made certain items highly desirable.

Some clothing items were released as Limited Editions, often in quantities of only 100, 500, or 1,000 copies. Each item was individually numbered, similar to modern NFTs.

## People Spend Real Money on Digital Clothes

What made these items especially interesting was a mechanic known as "soulbinding." When a player purchased a limited-edition item, it could be traded freely while stored in their inventory. However, once the item was worn, it became permanently attached to that avatar and could no longer be sold.

As a result, every time someone decided to wear a rare item, the available supply became smaller.

Over time, this created genuine scarcity and drove prices higher.

Other clothing items were released as time-limited rares. Their value depended on how many players purchased them during the release window. Some items could also be obtained through crafting systems that required collecting rare materials, introducing an element of chance similar to lottery or gacha mechanics.

These systems transformed clothing from a simple cosmetic feature into a collectible asset. Fashion as Status

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Habbo's virtual fashion scene was how closely it resembled real-world luxury markets.

Certain rare items became status symbols. Some players collected them as investments, hoping they would increase in value. Others built exclusive communities around specific clothing pieces.

One famous example is the Roboboy Face, a rare item that became associated with one of the most exclusive groups in the game. Originally released for around 180 credits, its value eventually exceeded 20,000 credits, representing more than a hundred-fold increase in price.

Ownership of rare items became a way to signal status, wealth, and belonging, much like luxury fashion brands do in the real world.

### Different Types of Digital Consumers

Just like in traditional fashion, not every player interacted with virtual clothing in the same way. Some players bought clothes simply because they liked how they looked.

Others rarely changed their appearance at all.

A smaller group constantly purchased the latest releases to stay fashionable. Some became collectors, while others acted as investors, purchasing items they believed would become more valuable over time.

## People Spend Real Money on Digital Clothes

These behaviors mirror the ways people engage with fashion outside of virtual worlds, suggesting that digital fashion fulfills many of the same social and psychological functions as physical clothing.

### Beyond Habbo

Habbo is not the only platform where virtual fashion has thrived.

Games and social platforms such as Zepeto have built large economies around digital clothing, with both independent creators and major brands designing virtual collections. Companies such as Disney have experimented with creating digital items for these platforms, recognizing that younger generations increasingly spend time expressing themselves online.

As virtual spaces become more immersive, the importance of digital fashion is likely to grow. *The Future of Fashion*

After recently trying virtual reality through the Meta Quest 2, I was struck by how much more natural virtual environments feel compared to earlier generations of VR technology.

It is not difficult to imagine a future where virtual worlds become a major part of everyday life. In those spaces, clothing may be just as important as it is in the physical world.

A platform that combines the social elements of Habbo Hotel, the user-generated creativity of Roblox, and the immersive environments of VRChat could become the next major virtual world—a digital society where fashion, identity, and community are expressed through entirely virtual means.

If that future arrives, virtual fashion will no longer be viewed as a novelty. Instead, it may simply become fashion.

*Written by Hari Rathan*

# MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS SECTION

## NOTE FROM THE HORIZONS TEAM

Mental health is something that affects people everywhere, across all ages, backgrounds, and countries, but it is especially significant during adolescence, a time when emotions, identity, and pressure often feel intensified all at once. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 1 in 7 adolescents globally experiences a mental health disorder, yet many of these conditions go undiagnosed or untreated.

Depression and anxiety are among the most common, and suicide remains one of the leading causes of death for young people worldwide.

These numbers are not just statistics. They represent students in classrooms, friends in group chats, and people who often seem “fine” on the outside while struggling on the inside.

Since May is Mental Health Awareness Month, we have decided to include a small dedicated section in this edition to highlight the importance of mental health, reduce stigma around conversations on emotional well-being, and encourage greater understanding of what people may be experiencing beyond what is visible.

This is about making space for something that is often left unspoken, because sometimes simply understanding that you are not alone can make a meaningful difference.

Happy reading,  
The Horizons Team

# Social Media's Impact on Teen Mental Health

Social media is now one of the most widely used technologies among teenagers globally. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube are not only tools for communication and entertainment but also spaces where identity, relationships, and self-image are actively shaped.

Research on adolescent mental health suggests that social media has both positive and negative effects, depending on patterns of use, content exposure, and individual vulnerability.

Studies from organizations such as Pew Research Center indicate that a majority of teenagers use at least one social media platform daily, with many reporting near-constant engagement throughout the day. Smartphones have made access continuous, meaning social media use is often integrated into waking hours, school breaks, and nighttime routines.

This level of exposure has made social media a significant environmental factor in adolescent development.

Research identifies several potential benefits of social media use for teenagers:

## 1. Social connection

Social media enables communication with peers beyond school or geographic boundaries. It can support friendships and reduce feelings of isolation, particularly for individuals in marginalized or minority groups.

## 2. Identity exploration

Adolescents often use online platforms to explore interests, beliefs, and aspects of identity in a relatively low-risk environment.

## 3. Access to information

Social media provides exposure to educational content, mental health resources, and awareness campaigns that may not be available through traditional channels.

## 4. Creative expression

Platforms allow users to share writing, art, music, photography, and video content with wide audiences, supporting skill development and self-expression.

Alongside these benefits, multiple studies have identified risks associated with high or unregulated use.

## Social Media's Impact on Teen Mental Health

### 1. Social comparison

Exposure to curated and edited content can lead to upward social comparison. Research has linked this pattern to lower self-esteem and increased dissatisfaction with appearance, lifestyle, or achievements.

### 2. Anxiety and depressive symptoms

Some studies have found correlations between heavy social media use and increased reports of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and emotional distress. However, findings vary depending on the type of use and individual differences.

### 3. Sleep disruption

Night-time social media use is associated with reduced sleep duration and poorer sleep quality. Sleep deprivation is a known risk factor for mood instability, reduced cognitive performance, and increased stress.

### 4. Attention fragmentation

Frequent notifications and short-form content consumption may contribute to reduced sustained attention and increased distractibility over time.

Several mechanisms explain these effects:

**Reward systems:** Likes, comments, and notifications activate dopamine-driven reward pathways, reinforcing repeated engagement.

**Algorithmic content delivery:** Personalized feeds may increase exposure to emotionally charged or highly engaging content.

**Peer validation:** Adolescents are particularly sensitive to social approval, making online feedback more impactful during developmental years.

The impact of social media is not uniform. Key factors that influence outcomes include:

- Type of content consumed (supportive vs. appearance-focused content)
- Active use (communication, creation) vs. passive scrolling
- Duration and timing of use
- Individual mental health history and resilience
- Offline support systems

Current research does not classify social media as inherently harmful or beneficial to teen mental health. Instead, its impact depends on patterns of use and context.

While it offers meaningful opportunities for connection, learning, and expression, it also introduces risks related to comparison, sleep disruption, and emotional well-being.

Understanding these mechanisms is essential for developing healthier digital habits and informing future policy, education, and platform design.

*Written by an Anonymous Student*

# Why Student Burnout Is More Common Than Ever

Student burnout has become increasingly common among adolescents and young adults, particularly in highly academic environments where performance pressure, constant evaluation, and competitive expectations are part of everyday life. While burnout is often discussed in informal terms such as “being tired” or “overwhelmed,” it is recognized in research as a state of emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and decreased ability to meet academic demands over time. Its growing prevalence reflects broader changes in education systems, technology use, and social expectations placed on students.

One of the main factors contributing to burnout is the rise in academic pressure. Studies from the American Psychological Association have found that school-related stress is one of the top sources of stress reported by teenagers in the United States, often exceeding concerns about family conflict or social relationships. In many education systems, students face continuous assessment through exams, coursework, and standardized testing, creating sustained pressure rather than isolated periods of academic demand. Research has shown that prolonged exposure to high stress without adequate recovery time increases the likelihood of emotional exhaustion and disengagement from learning.

Sleep deprivation is another significant contributing factor. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that more than 70% of high school students in the United States do not get the recommended 8–10 hours of sleep per night. Sleep plays a critical role in cognitive function, memory consolidation, and emotional regulation. When students consistently sleep less than recommended levels, they are more likely to experience irritability, reduced concentration, and higher levels of stress, all of which are associated with burnout symptoms.

The structure of modern student life has also changed due to digital technology. A large proportion of students now engage with schoolwork, social media, and extracurricular communication through the same devices, leading to a lack of separation between academic responsibilities and personal time. Research from multiple educational psychology studies suggests that constant connectivity can reduce psychological recovery time, as students remain mentally engaged with school-related tasks even outside formal study hours.

## Why Student Burnout Is More Common Than Ever

Another contributing factor is the increased emphasis on extracurricular achievement and long-term career planning. University admissions processes in many countries now evaluate students based on a combination of academic performance, leadership roles, volunteering, and personal projects. While this approach aims to create well-rounded applicants, it can also lead students to overextend themselves by participating in multiple activities simultaneously. Studies have shown that excessive workload combined with limited downtime is strongly correlated with higher levels of stress and burnout symptoms.

Mental health data reinforces the seriousness of the issue. The World Health Organization estimates that one in seven adolescents globally experiences a mental health condition, with anxiety and depression among the most common. While not all cases are directly caused by academic stress, research consistently shows that school-related pressures can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. In severe cases, chronic burnout has been linked to increased risk of depressive symptoms and disengagement from education altogether.

Despite these challenges, awareness of student burnout has increased in recent years, and some schools and institutions have begun to implement changes such as reduced homework loads, mental health programs, and extended deadlines. However, research suggests that systemic factors such as competitive academic environments and cultural expectations of constant productivity continue to drive high levels of stress.

Student burnout is not the result of a single cause but rather a combination of academic pressure, sleep deprivation, digital overconnectivity, and increasing performance expectations. As these factors have intensified over time, burnout has become a more widespread issue among students worldwide.

*Written by Jad Alkareem*

# What Mental Health Awareness Means

Mental health awareness is often talked about like it is something big and formal, but at its core, it is actually very simple. It is about noticing what is usually unseen. It is about understanding that people can be struggling even when they look completely fine, even when they are sitting right next to you in class, laughing with friends, or replying “I’m okay” without hesitation.

Globally, mental health conditions affect hundreds of millions of people. The World Health Organization estimates that around 1 in 8 people are living with a mental health condition, but numbers alone don’t really capture what that means. It means that in almost every classroom, every friend group, and every family, there is likely someone dealing with anxiety, depression, burnout, or something they don’t yet have words for. And more often than not, it goes unnoticed.

Part of what makes mental health awareness so important is how invisible it is. Unlike physical illness, there is rarely anything obvious to point to. There is no clear sign that someone is struggling internally. Because of that, mental health can be easy to dismiss, even unintentionally. A person might seem “quiet,” “lazy,” “irritated,” or “unmotivated,” when in reality they may be dealing with something far more complex underneath.

Awareness, in that sense, is not just about knowing facts or definitions. It is about changing how we interpret people. It is about slowing down enough to understand that behavior is often connected to something deeper. It is also about recognizing that mental health is not rare or unusual. Conditions like anxiety and depression are among the most common health issues worldwide, especially among teenagers and young adults, where pressure, identity, and change all collide at once.

But mental health awareness is not only about illness. It is also about everyday experience. Everyone has mental health, just like everyone has physical health. It shifts depending on sleep, stress, relationships, environment, and life events. Some days it feels manageable, and other days it doesn’t. Awareness includes accepting that this fluctuation is normal, and that struggling does not automatically mean something is “wrong” with a person.

## What Mental Health Awareness Means

There is also something deeply human about what awareness tries to do. It quietly challenges the idea that people should deal with everything alone. Research consistently shows that social support is one of the strongest protective factors for mental well-being. In other words, having someone who listens, checks in, or simply stays present can genuinely make a difference, even if it feels small.

At the same time, mental health awareness also means recognizing what gets in the way of people speaking up. Stigma is still one of the biggest barriers to seeking help. Many people avoid talking about how they feel because they are afraid of being judged, misunderstood, or seen differently. This silence is often what allows struggles to grow quietly over time.

So, when we talk about mental health awareness, it is really about shifting the environment around these experiences. It is about making it more normal to say "I'm not okay," and less normal to pretend that everyone always is. It is about creating a space where emotional experiences are not dismissed or minimized, but acknowledged as part of being human.

In the end, mental health awareness is not a single action or a single month. It is a way of paying attention to people differently. It is learning to see what is not immediately visible, and remembering that behind every face, there is always a world we cannot fully see.

*Written by Sam Fabad*

# Why Humans Create During Difficult Times

We tend to think of creativity as something that belongs to calm moments. As if art, writing, music, or invention requires the right lighting, the right mindset, the right kind of peace. As if creativity waits patiently for stability before it shows up.

But history rarely agrees with that idea.

Some of the most enduring creative work has come from periods of instability, loss, uncertainty, and grief. Not because suffering is romantic or necessary, but because humans, when pushed into difficult emotional or social conditions, often turn to creation as a way of staying oriented in a world that feels unsteady.

We don't always create because we are inspired. Sometimes we create because we are trying to survive what we are feeling.

There is something almost instinctive about it. When language fails us in conversation, when emotions feel too large to hold internally, when time becomes stretched or distorted by stress, we reach for forms that allow expression without needing complete explanation. Writing becomes a place where thoughts can exist without being fully understood. Music becomes a structure for emotions that don't have names yet. Drawing becomes a way of externalizing what cannot be said out loud.

Creation, in these moments, is not decoration. It is processing.

Psychologists often describe this as meaning-making. When humans experience difficulty, the brain actively searches for patterns, narratives, and structures that can help make sense of what is happening. Creativity becomes one of the tools through which this happens. It allows fragmented experiences to be reorganized into something that feels, if not resolved, then at least contained.

This is why periods of crisis, whether personal or collective, so often produce surges in artistic output. Not because suffering automatically produces art, but because uncertainty increases the need for expression. During times of war, displacement, illness, or emotional upheaval, creative work often becomes one of the only available forms of control. Even when everything else feels unstable, a sentence can be rewritten. A melody can be repeated. A brushstroke can be adjusted.

## Why Humans Create During Difficult Times

There is also something about difficulty that sharpens attention. In ordinary conditions, we overlook much of what we feel. But in moments of distress, internal states become louder. Emotions that were once background noise move to the foreground. Creativity, then, becomes a way of translating intensity into something outside the body, something that can be seen, heard, or revisited from a slight distance.

This does not mean that difficult experiences are required for creativity, or that pain produces better art. That idea is both inaccurate and harmful. Many people create from joy, curiosity, and play. But it is also true that when life becomes heavy, creation often becomes more urgent.

Not because it is glamorous, but because it is functional.

A journal filled during a period of grief is not necessarily written with the intention of being read. A sketch made during anxiety is not necessarily made to be shared. A song written during uncertainty is not necessarily meant for an audience. In many cases, the act itself is the point. The process becomes a way of holding what cannot otherwise be held.

And yet, even in these private acts, something larger is happening. Over time, repeated acts of creation during difficulty begin to form structure around chaos. They turn experience into something that can be reflected on rather than only endured. They create continuity in moments that feel fragmented.

We often underestimate how much of human creativity is built in this space between control and collapse, between what is felt and what can be expressed. We tend to celebrate the final product, the painting, the book, the performance, without fully acknowledging the conditions that shaped its making. The hours of uncertainty. The repetition done without certainty of outcome. The decision to keep making something even when nothing feels resolved.

In that sense, creation during difficult times is not an escape from reality. It is a way of staying inside it long enough to understand it.

And maybe that is what makes it so quietly powerful.

*Written by Saanjh Balpande*

# Closing Note

If we are entirely honest with ourselves, we are all currently participating in a rather exhausting piece of modern theater. We spend our mornings frantically analyzing whether a tailored jacket implies structural control, watch sixty-second clips of teenagers becoming overnight millionaires, and trade real currency for digital garments that exist purely as pixelated projections in the metaverse. This edition of The Horizons set out to peel back that shiny veneer, heavily inspired by the ethos that "fashion is art" as explored in the student article on why the Met Gala matters beyond celebrity fashion. As the legendary Coco Chanel famously observed, "Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only. Fashion is in the sky, in the street; fashion has to do with ideas, the way we live, what is happening." That universal truth is precisely the point. This perspective mirrors the Aristotelian definition of creative expression: that the aim of art is not to merely replicate the exact physical surface of the world, but to reveal its deeper, inward significance and universal truths. He viewed art as a completion of nature, an active process of expression that helps humans understand reality and experience emotional release. To see the world through this lens, we must acknowledge that the boundary between art and existence is a polite fiction. Art is entirely in the perspective of the viewer, a truth vividly illustrated in the student piece tracing the history of the color pink, which proves that a shade once linked to military strength can completely reverse its meaning when society's interpretation shifts. The color didn't change; the perspective did. Yet, as the student article on the Gen Z "lock in" phenomenon brilliantly exposes, a noiseless paralysis suffocates us when we focus solely on the superficial surface of success. Late capitalism demands we constantly optimize our lives, treating a single day of rest as an irreversible failure. We become, as noted in the student essay on the beauty we miss when we move too fast, tragic experts at looking without seeing, racing through algorithms that profit off our distraction while completely bypassing the ordinary masterpiece unfolding right in front of us. The true inward significance of our lives is discovered in the messy, unseen spaces behind the canvas. This becomes profoundly clear in our dedicated mental health awareness section and the student article on social media's impact, which notes that approximately one in seven adolescents globally experiences a mental health disorder, walking through corridors looking completely fine while navigating intense internal friction. When the external world offers nothing but systemic pressure, the human instinct to create becomes an act of psychological survival. As the closing student article on why humans create during difficult times demonstrates, we do not always create from a position of calm inspiration; we do it to hold what cannot otherwise be held, achieving that very emotional release Aristotle spoke of. To view life as an ongoing composition is to realize that stepping off the relentless treadmill to live intentionally is, in itself, a quiet act of defiance. So, as you close this final page, ask yourself: when you strip away the curated surface you present to the world, what universal truth are you actively painting on the canvas underneath?

Until next month!

Shreya Maharaj Chettiar, Managing Editor



behind the canvas  
\* the horizons

thank you  
for reading!

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