

SECOND STAGE OF PIONEERING IMMERSIVE VR TRIAL TO TREAT SEVERE SOCIAL AVOIDANCE COMMENCES IN ASIA

- *The Chinese University of Hong Kong and AXA Hong Kong in partnership with Oxford VR are beginning a second stage of research following the Covid-19 pandemic*
- *Oxford VR's immersive technology is being tested with Cantonese speakers who are severely anxious in everyday social situations through its cutting-edge VR program*
- *The program is calling on new volunteers to take part in a free trial in using VR to tackle social avoidance issues.*

Wednesday 11th November, London: Oxford VR, the immersive technology company creating VR treatments for mental health conditions, in a first-of-a-kind partnership with The Chinese University of Hong Kong and AXA Hong Kong will commence the second phase of its 'Yes I Can' initiative, a ground-breaking immersive mental health therapy program in Asia.

Following a successful pilot earlier in the year, the program is opening the trial to a wider population where it will continue to examine how VR can treat severe anxious social avoidance in Hong Kongers. With COVID-related lockdowns affecting the mental health of the Hong Kong population, this trial aims to address developments in this space.

Based on a cognitive therapy approach, the intervention includes a virtual coach acting as a therapist and will be delivered through consumer VR Devices. Participants will be guided by a virtual coach through a series of graded tasks in different VR environments that reflect everyday situations they may usually avoid. By completing these exercises, the trial hopes to demonstrate that people start to gain more confidence to cope with these situations in real-life, as the cognitive change learnt during the immersive therapy are transferred to their day-to-day lives.

Early findings from the pilot have been met with encouragement from AXA and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, with those who participated seeing their overall symptoms of depression (PHQ-9) and anxiety (GAD-7) improve.

Individuals who have participated in the program have also reported they felt less anxious when making social interactions and felt less impaired by their social avoidance symptoms, with a participant reporting that the therapy helped reduce their nervousness in real life situations: "I realised that maybe daily life is similar to VR. This somehow reduces my nervousness. I now can plan to buy clothes by myself which I had never done before."

The study is based on Oxford VR's ground-breaking anxious social avoidance product, currently being trialled in the UK's NHS funded project, gameChange, in partnership with the University of Oxford, and designed to treat patients with psychosis. This study was designed specifically for the Hong Kong population.

For the Yes I Can initiative, the product has been tailored for a Cantonese speaking population for use in Hong Kong to treat people that suffer from anxious social avoidance.

The delivery of these large-scale studies is proof of the increasing role emerging technologies play in revolutionising mental health therapy. The positive results from these early findings point to Oxford VR's potential to scale and treat a series of mental health conditions through immersive technology.

In Hong Kong, 1 in 7 adults have common mental disorders, namely anxiety, depression, or a combination of the two, yet, only a quarter of the individuals ever seek help due to stigma, access, and costs (Lam et al., 2015). The use of immersive technology, however, may be an innovative, accessible and destigmatising solution for patients seeking high-quality therapy at a lower cost.

AXA Hong Kong are calling on new participants who are struggling in everyday social situations to take place in the trial. The trial is facilitated by the Chinese University of Hong Kong and with funding from AXA Research Fund. For more information on how to register and eligibility please refer to the website: <https://www.axa.com.hk/en/oxford-vr>

Arvind Tewari, Chief Operating Officer of Oxford VR said: "We are incredibly pleased that the initial stages of the trial have shown the potential for the program to benefit the people of Hong Kong. We've seen the impact that anxious social avoidance can have on people's daily life and wellbeing, and this has clearly been exacerbated by the pandemic. To be a step closer to finding a solution for this is exciting and we hope the second phase of the trial demonstrates the same positive findings. We are proud to be working with AXA Hong Kong and The Chinese University of Hong Kong to potentially deliver life changing outcomes for the trial participants."

Professor Winnie Mak of Department of Psychology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong said: "Using virtual reality (VR) to tackle social avoidance is a new endeavour. We are very excited to see the positive results that the VR intervention has on our users' lives in just 3 sessions during the pilot phase. With the launch of the second phase of our trial, we hope to gather more solid evidence that this new means of treatment delivery can potentially improve people's psychological condition and daily functioning. We are very happy that this partnership with AXA Hong Kong and Oxford VR enables us to deliver state-of-the art interventions to the Hong Kong people."

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Notes to Editors

For more information on 'Yes I Can' initiative, and to register as a participant of the trial: <https://www.axa.com.hk/en/oxford-vr>

About Oxford VR:

- Oxford VR (OVR) is a global pioneer developing automated VR therapy. As a spin-out from Oxford University, OVR's work builds on two decades of ground-breaking clinical research by Daniel Freeman, Professor of Clinical Psychology at Oxford University Department of Psychiatry and Founder of OVR.
- As a Tech for Good enterprise, OVR is committed to developing evidence-based, cost-effective and scalable solutions that build mental healthcare capacity using cutting-edge VR technology.
- OVR's automated VR therapy translates evidence-based cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) through immersive virtual reality environments to provide a powerful new evidence-based psychological treatment. OVR's first clinical trial for fear of heights, which was published in The Lancet Psychiatry, shows how automated VR therapy can produce large clinical benefits. This landmark trial demonstrated automated VR therapy's capacity to transform mental healthcare by helping overloaded providers to expand access and standardize clinical excellence, ensuring adherence to treatment protocols.
- OVR is also known for its cutting-edge anxious social avoidance product currently also being tested in the NHS-funded project, gameChange, in partnership with the University of Oxford. This is the world's first, large-scale NHS trial to treat patients with psychosis.
- In February 2020, OVR secured a \$12.5 million investment - a record for VR therapy investment in Europe to advance its real-world impact in behavioural health.