



# Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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**Letter to the Editor**

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## **LET SANITY PREVAIL IN POKÉCRAZE**

Pokémon Go, a location-based augmented reality game, does not need much introduction as the game has been downloaded more than 130 million times worldwide since its initial launch on 6 July 2016.

However, Ars Technica reported that the game which had almost 45 million daily users in July, declined to just over 30 million since the start of August. The technical on-line magazine said that the latest tracking data seem “to suggest the game is simply a fad”.

The game was described as a “dumb video game accomplishing the unthinkable” in Everyday Money article *10 Unimaginable Things Happening Because of ‘Pokémon Go’*.

It does not matter if it is a fad or a ‘dumb video game’, the Consumers’ Association of Penang (CAP) is concerned about the negative impacts that it brings, as has been reported worldwide. The fad has a potential to cause problems that are hard to curb.

After its launch in July, there were incidents such as:

- People being killed for trespassing into private property to hunt for Pokémon. In July 2016, a youth was shot dead in Guatemala, Central America, and he is likely to be the first shooting victim after the game was launched.
- A Bosnian non-governmental group warned gamers from wandering into areas littered with unexploded landmines left over from the 1992 – 1995 regional conflict.
- Authorities worldwide warned about driving while playing the game. News on 24 August 2016 reported about a Japanese farmer who knocked down and killed a woman. He was playing the game while driving a truck.

Malaysia has experienced its fair share of problems too. It was reported that people get too into the game “that they are not aware of their surroundings, including crossing the street blindly”. This poses a safety hazard as there are gamers who have exposed themselves to traffic accidents and have fallen prey to robbers.

There have been numerous complaints about gamers littering the places they visited with rubbish and turning public places into toilets. The gamers have also disturbed public peace and trespassed into restricted or private properties. Many gamers have made a nuisance of themselves in residential areas and this has to stop.

There is also the possibility that the privacy and security of a person’s home might be compromised when strangers hunt for the augmented reality creatures there.

Although the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) has issued general guidelines for the public, CAP urges the Commission to be proactive in regulating the Pokécraze.

CAP wonders on what grounds has MCMC based their decision to permit the game in Malaysia. Have they not considered its numerous negative impacts? Popular Egyptian Islamic theologian Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi's fatwa prohibited the Japanese pokemon series in 2001 stating that "in order to protect the minds, beliefs and character of our children as well as their money: these people have perfected the art of looting it from them by consent, and gradually drawing their fathers and mothers into agreement also". The fatwa makes good sense till today.

Just because MCMC permitted a free-for-all, with a mere list of guidelines for the gamers, residents have to put up with the rowdy crowd and whoever raises objection might be intimidated by the gamers as well as the commercial outlets that benefit from the game.

MCMC should take the initiative to ensure that Pokéstops and Pokégyms are located away from places of worship, residential area, schools, universities, security-sensitive areas (e.g. government departments, airfields, and military installations), dangerous spots (e.g. rivers and high voltage installations), private properties and fire stations.

It is baffling why MCMC expects individuals to visit the game developer Niantic's website to remove a Pokéstop or Pokégym on their own. The onus lies with the MCMC to remove these, not the victims of circumstance. Moreover, MCMC has opened the Pandora Box for future versions of the game and other similar augmented reality games to create greater problems and conflict in the community.

The gamers are also dangerously congesting traffic and causing a din in residential areas. It is just a matter of time before fights break out because gamers have trespassed into private properties, making a nuisance of themselves.

CAP is concerned about this Pokécraze because it is affecting the productivity of the country. Would an employee be as productive now compared to before the game was introduced? Would parents be distracted from their roles and that their children's studies and needs be affected? How are they going to prevent an unbridled expenditure on their children's smartphone data plan? These are just a few questions to fuel our thoughts.

MCMC has just "advised" gamers to be mindful of their expenditure while playing the game as there are incentives to encourage players to spend up to RM429.99 in buying an equivalent of 14,500 PokeCoins.

Besides wasting money on a pursuit of fantasy, many gamers are too engrossed to realise that the game gives Niantic access to data on their smartphones, including e-mail contacts and social media profiles.

According to Kurt Iveson, an Associate Professor of Urban Geography at the University of Sydney, this data could potentially be sold to third parties with an interest in targeted advertising.

Therefore, CAP urges MCMC to consider what the steps are to be taken to restrict data harvesting by Niantic and a possibility of getting into the hands of third parties. In the meantime, CAP calls on MCMC to completely ban the game since the negative impacts clearly outweigh the positive ones.

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