



LIVING THE *dream?*

Is online anxiety dictating your diary? With our lives now documented by device, VIVA examines our quest to impress and our irrational fear of missing out on fun...

As Charlotte McGill* clicks upload on her latest set of Facebook pictures, she proudly surveys the snaps in the album entitled Dubai 2012. There's one of her riding a camel along the beach, one of her cosied up to a visiting celebrity chef at a glam restaurant opening and another of her feet at the end of a sun lounger with a turquoise pool in the background. To all intents and purposes, the album paints the picture of a glam Dubai socialite living the expat dream in the sun.

But the reality couldn't be further from the truth. Contrary to what the pictures portray, Charlotte, a 34-year-old construction lawyer from the UK, is having a tough week. She's working on a huge case at the office involving early starts and late nights. What's more, she's been seriously burning the candle at both ends. She's booked four after work events this week alone – despite the fact that she probably won't leave the office until 10pm and has to be back at her desk by 8am.

In fact, the snap of her with the chef was taken at midnight on a Tuesday night, when she had to be in the office for a 7am breakfast conference. The camel riding picture was taken at a work beach day last weekend when all she really wanted to do was catch up on sleep. And what the poolside snap doesn't show is that she was furiously replying to work emails on her iPad at the other end of the sun lounger. In short, she's exhausted. Why? Because she can't say no.

Charlotte suffers from FOMO – an irrational fear of missing out. "I'm afraid if I pass up an invitation, I'll end up missing out on the best night ever," says Charlotte. "Plus, the friends I've made in Dubai are all relatively new, as I only moved here six months ago. I'm constantly anxious that if I start saying no when they ask me out, I'll eventually be left out of the group."

And in the post-Facebook age, it's harder than ever to swerve social pressure. "I'll promise myself a night in, then I'll check Facebook and see I've been invited to a cool gallery opening that all my friends have RSVP-ed to," says Charlotte. "My resolve instantly weakens and I can't help hitting the 'attend' button."

Dr John M. Grohol, an expert in online psychology, says Facebook perpetuates a 'grass is greener' syndrome. "Social networks like Facebook provide us with a lot more information – sometimes in real-time – about what our social circle is up to. Previously, we were largely in the dark about people's exact plans unless we talked or emailed them. Now we know without even having to lift a finger. This information can reinforce and feed fears that we're not doing enough or could be doing something better."

Social (Networking) Butterfly

There's another reason why Charlotte has over-packed her diary. By taking pictures of her hectic social life, she's now got a Facebook profile that makes it seem as though she's living

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an A-list dream – a common motivator, says clinical psychologist Vinita Mehta PhD. "Studies show that a considerable amount of people have Facebook profiles that present an ideal self – that is, how they would like other people to perceive them." She adds, "Many people also want to appear as though their lives are enviable. The need to feel popular can be very strong for some."

And this phenomenon is particularly relevant to Dubai expats, who have to be seen to be living the dream in the sun for the sake of their friends and family back home. Dr Mehta explains: "Facebook is a wonderful way for expats to keep up with the day-to-day or week-to-week happenings in the lives of the people they care about. But expats may have an unusual connection to the social network given that it is often a primary source of this information as opposed to actual face-to-face conversations."

Therefore, it's not unusual to want to be seen to be having as much fun as possible – even if it is an illusion. "Moving abroad can be exciting, but it can also be overwhelming. Friends and family back home may envision your life as an adventure and it may be that you want to fulfil the expectation that picking up and moving to another country is really exciting. It often is. But it can also be lonely at times," says Dr Mehta.

Expat Pressure

Charlotte admits that a lot of her Facebook updates are for the benefit of her friends and family back in England. "I feel like I have to prove to them that I made the right decision moving out to Dubai," she says. "It's like I have to show them how much fun I'm having all the time – even when I'm not. So I'm constantly uploading pictures to Facebook. And the urge to show-off my 'fabulous' expat life gets stronger when I'm missing out on something back home." And with two big occasions happening at her family home in Devon, she's never felt more compelled to prove what a great time she's having.

"My sister just had a little girl, and my dad's 60th birthday was last week – he had a huge party," says Charlotte. "Pictures of my family and

friends celebrating are all over Facebook. I can't stand the thought of missing all the fun."

Dr Mehta says it's easy to assume that everyone else is partying up a storm, and that your life, by comparison, seems boring. "With a steady stream of mobile updates, check ins and photographs, it's pretty easy to arrive at the conclusion that everyone else is having way more fun than you are."

"It may seem that everyone else's life is going so much better. And when you're on a forum like Facebook, where people tend to share more happy than sad news, that feeling may be exacerbated," says Dr Mehta.

The grass isn't greener

But, the truth is, no one's life is a barrel of laughs all the time. "The reality is your friends aren't having a 'better' life than you are. They are having a different one, one that's unique to them and that can't be replicated. Some nights they are having more fun than you. Other nights, you're having more fun than them," says Dr Grohol.

And, as Charlotte is discovering, FOMO can seriously mess with your head. "I've made a few stupid mistakes at work purely because I am so tired. And the last few times I've been out midweek, I haven't been able to enjoy myself as I'm too busy thinking about work the next day. I'm constantly busy, but I'm not able to give any part of my life my full attention."

To combat FOMO anxiety, Dr Mehta suggests imposing periods of disconnection from Facebook – and if that doesn't help, it might be worth talking to a health professional about your feelings. "If you feel anxious or fearful that you're always missing out on something, it may reflect low self-esteem. Why isn't what you're doing equal or worthy compared to what others are doing? After all, Facebook is about sharing – it isn't intended to be a competition."

"One step would be to disconnect altogether and take a break from Facebook – though of course that is easier said than done. However, if your general functioning is being compromised, then the weighty concern over missing out may be a signal of more deep-seated problems, such as a depressive or anxiety disorder. If your work and/ or professional life is being negatively impacted by this fear, don't underestimate the problem. It may be time to talk to a professional."

Dr Grohol adds, "If you're constantly updating your Facebook page to demonstrate how active you are in your life to try and prove something to others, you're kind of missing the point. Life is for living, not for documenting that you're living. While it's fine to take some time out to take a photo or share a status update once in a while, it's not fine to find yourself engaging in activities just so you have something to say on Facebook. That balance is important."

"Live your life and know that you can be having fun – and so can your friends who aren't with you." ●