

WHAT IS REALLY GOING ON?



3. Addictive Nature of Digital Media Products

When we consider digital media addiction, we must consider both the risk factors of the individual (e.g., genetic predisposition, early trauma, early childhood exposure, mental health concerns) and also the addictive nature of the digital media product itself. Tech companies' business models rely on maximizing user engagement, so naturally, they employ many strategies to keep people using their digital media products for as long as possible (as a parent/caregiver, you yourself may recognize how difficult it is to put down digital devices).

Several features of digital media products were specifically designed using psychological principles in order to exploit

human vulnerabilities and maximize user engagement and corporate profits. What has been called “persuasive technology” are intentional strategies used by tech companies to influence human behavior by deliberately pushing buttons intended to provoke responses based on our known biological susceptibilities. Persuasive design is the engine that drives Big Tech’s multibillion dollar bottom line.

Repeated participation in this cycle of persuasive technology and engagement can promote compulsive digital media use, often without conscious awareness that it is occurring.¹ Specific aspects of digital media products are designed to be enticing and addictive. These include (but are not limited to) the following:

Feedback on social media

The concept of “likes” was designed to play into individuals’ natural insecurities, need for social validation, sensitivity to personal feedback, and social comparison. It is a way to quantify social rewards (“how many likes did that picture get?”). “Likes” and feedback on social media also encourage compulsive use by using the intermittent or variable ratio reinforcement schedule, which is also used in gambling. This form of reinforcement occurs when a person knows a reward is coming, but does not know when. Therefore, each time a teen checks social media, they do not know whether they will receive a like, a comment, a new friend request, a share, or no response (this is the variable schedule), therefore prompting the urge to continue checking repeatedly.² It is this uncertainty and anticipation of reward that involves dopamine release (a key neurotransmitter involved in the processes of reward and addiction). Similar to tactics used in gambling, feedback on social media utilizes variable ratio reinforcement scheduling, which creates powerful cravings and reinforces behavior.³ Using these known behavior altering methods (e.g., providing feedback on social media), the tech designers foster compulsivity and habit-forming digital media use, often without the user even realizing it.⁴

Infinite scrolling

Unlike books and movies with natural endpoints, digital media is endless. Adolescents can scroll infinitely, game limitlessly, and consume new content online for hours. This feature of a bottomless feed on unending online games is particularly risky to youth since they have less developed impulse control, decreasing their ability to stop scrolling, gaming, or watching in order to attend to other responsibilities and commitments.⁵

Sophisticated algorithms:

Many forms of digital media utilize algorithms (or complex sets of rules), which target users with increasingly personalized content. This personalization of the digital media experience (e.g., showing posts/products that the specific user is likely to enjoy) amplifies the adolescent's desire to scroll longer. Additionally, extreme content (e.g., angering or distressing content) generates more views (which equals more time online), so users are served content intended to elicit emotions like outrage, anger, and shock to increase their engagement.

Push notifications:

Various digital media apps send notifications or messages to users. These notifications create a false sense of urgency (e.g., a message is waiting, you must check the app!) and cause distraction from an adolescent's offline life. The constant updates delivered in attention-grabbing ways (e.g., flashing lights, red font, pop-ups) trick the mind into believing that everything, regardless of actual relevancy, requires our immediate attention. As former tech insiders at the Center for Humane Technology reveal, this design strategy is intended to “make the trivial seem urgent.”¹

Rewards for continued use:

Some digital media apps and online activities have arbitrary rewards to reinforce continued, regular use. For example, Snapchat's “Snapstreaks” is a way to track user engagement and reward those who exchange snaps with another person on a daily basis. The concept of a “Snapstreak” is rooted in human beings' known instinct for social reciprocity and inclusion. Thus, capitalizing on adolescents' natural social desire to be accepted, “Snapstreaks” encourage daily continued contact in order to maintain the “streak,” otherwise, the streak will break and symbolically “end the friendship,” which plays into fears of social rejection (fears that are particularly salient among adolescent girls).⁴

These are just a few examples of how digital media is designed to be addictive and to keep users on their platforms for as long as possible. It is important for parents/caregivers to learn about the nature of whatever digital media activity in which their adolescent is engaged and ask the question, “How was this designed to keep users engaged for as long as possible?” In many instances, the goal of tech companies is to earn a profit, rather than to protect the welfare of the

public. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the public to critically assess digital media products to uncover ways in which they are designed to be enticing and addictive, and advocate when appropriate.

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References

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