

Addictive by Design: How Digital Media Companies are Deploying the Big Tobacco Playbook

Benjamin Laufer and Devan Rosen

Background: After losing a considerable amount of productive time to a phone game I had downloaded a few days prior, I was curious how something so simple could have been so distracting and addictive. I began to pose this question and also looked at how other industries have created addictive products and mislead the public about those products. Through practices such as deceptive marketing and extensive research and development, companies were able to successfully create addictive products and introduce them into daily life. I began to look for similar patterns and correlations. The conversation around addictive design is new and growing. The research around it is not quite as extensive. Research around addictive design is catching up, and my studies examine the borrowed practices of the technology industry from other products. My questions and studies are not questioning if technology is designed to be addictive, but how it is done and where the practices of addiction are borrowed from.

Methods: I consulted with Dr. Devan Rosen, who similarly was asking questions around addictive design and encouraging his students to unplug from their devices for a short period of time. He indicated that the same behavioral tactics used by big tobacco were being deployed by big technology companies to create addicting products. Curious to see if there was more to be uncovered, we began our research process. Much of this information was not available, as it is not public information, so we had to draw correlations between the two industries based on what we could find. We began to produce a research paper around this subject, completing literature reviews.

Results: Our work raised the question of addictive technology being a critical public health issue. We suggested recognizing it as such and working to combat its effects similar to our response to tobacco, through taxation and designated substance free zones. Our work highlights industries accountability, especially when knowledgeable of the effects of its addictive products. The language and concepts we introduce are written to be widely understood. The tobacco industry mastered the art of manipulation and deflection. It followed a strategic playbook: studying the effects of product use and withholding that information to the public, intentionally engineering addictive products, marketing them directly to children, projecting positive product value and motivation through mass advertising, adding new features to products, and pushing its products to emerging markets. Through leaked internal documents and whistleblowers from both the tobacco and technology industries, it has been made known to the public the intentions and troubling motivations of the private sector. We uncover the technology industry's adoption of the tobacco industry's strategy towards manipulating mass populations and creating addictive products.

Conclusion: Our research indicated that individuals are engineered by economists and scientists to behave in conditioned ways that will benefit the economy of organizations in control. We can see examples of corporations actively hiring social, psychological, behavioral, and data scientists to influence how consumers consume goods as well, oftentimes through the creation of products that require constant fixation. The technology industry has developed a field called persuasive technology to look at how individuals interact with technology and build their findings into products. The industry takes advantage of neuroscience to hack our decision making capacity, altering individual and collective well being. Technology organizations are able to exploit a psychological vulnerability, override self control, and view users of the product as guinea pigs. Corporations are successful in and are able to drive sales by marketing the fear of missing out, presenting the opportunity cost of not consuming the product. Organizations exploit individual's short term fixations and the threat of scarcity by offering a temporary solution of pleasure and not happiness. Technology has mastered the art of instant gratification, especially with a culture fixated on it. Consumers buy a pleasure to increase pleasure. Individual behaviors are manifestations of the biochemistry that drives them.

References:

Bates , Clive, and Andy Rowell. “ The Truth about the Tobacco Industry ...in Its Own Words.”

Battelle, John. “Is Social Media The New Tobacco? – NewCo Shift.” *NewCo Shift*, NewCo Shift, 4 Aug. 2017, shift.newco.co/is-social-media-the-new-tobacco-936d28a2bfe2.

Charman-Anderson, Suw. “Seeking Addiction: the Role of Dopamine in Social Media.” *Computer Weekly*, 2009, p. 16.

Crotty, David. “Technology as the New Tobacco.” *The Scholarly Kitchen*, 29 Sept. 2017, scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2017/09/29/technology-new-tobacco/.

“Brain Hacking.” *CBS News*, CBS Interactive, 9 Apr. 2017, www.cbsnews.com/videos/brain-hacking/.

Knorr, Caroline. “How to Resist Technology Addiction.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 9 Nov. 2017, www.cnn.com/2017/11/09/health/science-of-tech-obsession-partner/index.html.

Kodjak, Alison. “In Ads, Tobacco Companies Admit They Made Cigarettes More Addictive.” *NPR*, NPR, 27 Nov. 2017, www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2017/11/27/566014966/in-ads-tobacco-companies-admit-they-made-cigarettes-more-addictive.

Kozlowska, Hanna. “Facebook's Founding President Admitted How It Exploits Human Psychology.” *Quartz*, Quartz, 10 Nov. 2017, qz.com/1126271/facebooks-founding-president-sean-parker-admitted-how-it-exploits-human-psychology/.

Lustig, Robert H. *The Hacking of the American Mind: the Science behind the Corporate Takeover of Our Bodies and Brains*. Avery, 2018.

Maher, Bill. "New Rule: Social Media Is the New Nicotine." *YouTube*, HBO, 12 May 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDqoTDM7tio.

McChesney, Robert Waterman. *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism Is Turning the Internet against Democracy*. The New Press, 2014.

Samton, Julia. "Is Tech the New Tobacco? Why We Should All Pay Attention to Our Newest Addiction." *Inc.com*, Inc., 25 Nov. 2017, www.inc.com/julia-samton/is-tech-new-tobacco-why-we-should-all-pay-attention-to-our-newest-addiction.html.

Scheiber, Noam. "How Uber Uses Psychological Tricks to Push Its Drivers' Buttons." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 2 Apr. 2017, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/04/02/technology/uber-drivers-psychological-tricks.html?_r=2.

"TLV Deep Dive: Outsmarting Our Smartphones«Back." *Leyendecker & Associates*, www.leyendecker.com/blog_detail?nid=31&p=tlv-deep-dive%3A-outsmarting-our-smartphones.