

Six Easy Steps to Get Us Addicted to Our Phones

What are the most common design tricks used to addict us to our apps? Who's responsible for the way that we interact with our technology? And should we be blaming ourselves for not putting down our phones?

We all know that warm, fuzzy feeling when someone likes your post. Simple design tactics can feed into this sense of being wanted, even if it's just to know that someone is typing a response. What do you feel when you see the typing bubble? The read confirmation? Or that your photo has been liked?

True stories take six times longer to reach people than fake ones. And if the story is worth reading, then who really cares if it's true or not? The point is that emotionally charged content gets clicks. And whether it's a cute cat, gifs, celebrity breakups, or a life hack, the internet is made of these bite-sized chunks of information.

How easily would you follow a meme? Or click bait? Did you know that what you see has been tested on thousands of people to find the best possible image, the most irresistible title to get you to click on it.

Friends or just followers, there's not much of a difference because we're all social creatures. Who doesn't want to be liked? Quantifying friends and interactions means that we will spend more time online so that we can nurture and extend our social circle.

How often do you check how many people follow you? How often do you want to retweet, reblog or forward to all of your followers to increase your own status? Whether hanging out with friends online or in a game, nobody wants to feel left out. Designing apps as social hubs, with all the joys and fears of everyday life, means that you want to stay involved. You don't want to miss out on new trends like stickers, limited releases, offers, and other rewards. Everyone else is there, what are they doing? If you're not there, you might miss out.

Sound and movement create a strong sense of urgency. Being available involves all the senses. Notifications come with movement and sounds and they pop up to distract you through all your interconnected devices. They're good at finding you in those moments when you're just thinking what to do next.

There's no dead end on the internet. Frictionless design combined with bottomless content means that we can stay online for hours without even thinking about it. Autoplay will make it easier to select the next irresistible thing to watch. Infinite scrolling will satisfy your need for rewarding content. Pull to refresh is like a nice surprise waiting for you in every loading of the screen. And there is always the next thing to do, have, get, see or achieve.

The makers of apps, content, and platforms rely on our constant attention. This entire ecosystem depends on keeping us engaged. Value is assessed by how many users services have, what users do on their platform, and how often. Engineers, designers, and psychologists work together to make sure that we are constantly drawn in, designing for addiction.

Does it matter how our data is used to nudge us, provoke us and form our habits? Do we mind that our attention is turned into value? Is the instant reward worth the total sharing of our online likes, dislikes, habits and behaviours? And are we to blame for not putting down our phones? Or have we been hooked?