

DESIGNED FOR ADDICTION?

This past summer, at a family reunion, I met a third cousin twice removed. While we were trying to figure out how on earth we were related, he shared with me he is attending university taking cell phone app design and development. Interestingly, he said because of what he is studying, he rarely uses his cell phone now and if he does it is for phone calls and texting. He does not use social media. Curious, I inquired as to why that is. He shared with me an alarming insight about phone apps: "they are *purposely* designed to be addicting". Like most parents, I am concerned about my kids' cell phone use (and my own, to be honest). Daily, I am surprised and irritated with how difficult it is for them (and me) to put it down. Why is it a struggle to stop and put the phone away? Are apps seriously designed to be purposely addictive to users? Upon further investigation, I found several articles that confirmed these fears. I have summarized one below, for the parents of Northern Gateway Public Schools, by Hilary Andersson which was published on BBC Panorama on July 4, 2018.

Social media companies are deliberately addicting users to their products for financial gain, Silicon Valley insiders have told the BBC's Panorama programme. "It's as if they're taking behavioural cocaine and just sprinkling it all over your interface and that's the thing that keeps you coming back and back and back", said former Mozilla and Jawbone employee Aza Raskin. "Behind every screen on your phone, there are like a thousand engineers that have worked on this thing to try to make it maximally addicting" he added.

In 2006 Mr. Raskin, a leading technology engineer himself, designed "infinite scroll", one of the features of many apps that is now seen as highly habit forming. At the time, he was working for *Humanized* - a computer user-interface consultancy. Infinite scroll allows users to endlessly swipe down through content without clicking. "If you don't give your brain time to catch up with your impulses," Mr Raskin said, "you just keep scrolling." He said the innovation kept users looking at their phones far longer than necessary.

But, he said, many designers were driven to create addictive app features by the business models of the big companies that employed them. "In order to get the next round of funding, in order to get your stock price up, the amount of time that people spend on your app has to go up," he said.

"So, when you put that much pressure on that one number, you're going to start trying to invent new ways of getting people to stay hooked."

A former Facebook employee made a related point. ***"Social media is very similar to a slot machine," said Sandy Parakilas, who tried to stop using the service after he left the company in 2012. "It literally felt like I was quitting cigarettes."***

One of the most alluring aspects of social media for users is "likes", which can come in the form of the thumbs-up sign, hearts, or retweets.

Leah Pearlman, co-inventor of Facebook's "Like" button, said she had become hooked on Facebook because she had begun basing her sense of self-worth on the number of "likes" she had.

"When I need validation - I go to check Facebook or Instagram," she said. "I'm feeling lonely, 'Let me check my phone.' I'm feeling insecure, 'Let me check my phone.' Suddenly, I thought I'm actually also kind of addicted to the feedback."

VULNERABLE YOUTH

Studies indicate there are *links between overusing social media and depression, loneliness and a host of other mental problems.*

Last year Facebook and Instagram founding president, Sean Parker, said publicly that the company set out to consume as much user time as possible. He claimed it was "**exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology**".

"The inventors," he said, "understood this consciously and we did it anyway."

When confronted with Mr. Parker's allegation that the company had effectively sought to hook people from the outset, senior Facebook official Ime Archibong told the BBC it was still looking into the issue.

Recent reports indicate Facebook is working on features to let users see how much time they have spent on its app over the previous seven days and to set daily time limits.

Twitter declined to comment.

Snapchat said it was happy to support frequent creative use of its app, but it denied using visual tricks to achieve this and added that it had no desire to increase empty engagement of the product.

Clearly, there are many benefits to social media such as entertainment, information, news, community events and staying in contact with friends and family. But as more research comes to light, we must to be discerning, cautious and informed to the risks of over-use and the marketing ploys that are designed to influence us and our children.

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. She is a support for schools, students, parents and caregivers to encourage success in school. Tammy advocates for students and provides a link between the student and other supports within the community. Tammy has been a social worker for nearly 20 years and is a mother to 4 children, 3 of which are teenagers.