

Addictive de-vices: How we can unplug from this 21st century epidemic

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We spend our days looking at them, talking to them, and touching them.

They increasingly consume our time, attention and money. We are addicted to our [digital devices](#)—or, more precisely, the digital experiences they give us.

Now, an article published in the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, by SFU Beedie professor Leyland Pitt and his co-authors, analyzes the growing problem with digital addiction and how marketers as well as app developers contribute to this 21st-century phenomenon. The researchers also made several public policy recommendations to help with this problem.

According to Pitt, digital addiction is linked to promoting obesity, sleeplessness, increased anxiety, decreased productivity, and relationship issues. It is also a factor in physical dangers related to distracted driving, and walking.

"Digital experiences, like [social media](#), are linked to decreased productivity in the workplace and it's already costing the U.S. economy \$997 billion," says Pitt. "Today, texting while driving is now six times more dangerous than drinking and driving, and it's costing the Canadian economy \$25 billion."

He adds, "If you're checking a text for just five seconds while driving at 90 km/h, you've basically travelled the length of a football field blind-folded. That's incredibly dangerous and foolish when you put it into prospective."

The researchers say marketers and [app developers](#) work together to develop experiences that create an insatiable desire for users to keep returning to their apps. Companies achieve this by using various tactics such as the freemium model, gamification and making their app ubiquitous.

"It seems that digital addiction is impacting young adolescents the most, but that's because they've grown up with digital devices," says Pitt. "Addiction doesn't know age. It can happen to anybody."

Leyland sat down with SFU News recently to share his team's recommendations for how we can curtail this growing epidemic through changes to public policy.

Product Design

L: I would like to see mandatory labeling for apps. Although this would not entirely prevent addiction to digital experiences, warning labels would likely prompt more conscious decision-making on the part of consumers, and reduce the automaticity often inherent to addiction.

Another strategy would be to mandate natural "stopping points" in digital offerings. This would mean endless games and infinite scrolls would be punctuated with natural breaks, in the same way that books have chapters.

Advertising and Promotion

L: Disclosures could be included in ads for digital products and services, similar to prescription drug ads in the United States or those on food packaging. This could include explicit information on how much time a user spends using an app or service, as well as how much a company is making from a user's attention and information.

Place and Distribution

L: One prime area for public policy intervention might be in the area of what the World Health Organization calls "distracted walking."

Distracted walking refers to accidents that occur when citizens use their smartphones while walking in public places.

Rather than ban phones in these busy areas, government intervention could shape behavior. For example, in many German cities the street-crossing "walk" and "do not walk" signals are duplicated at ground level so as to be in the line of sight of people looking at their [mobile devices](#).

Price and Cost

L: Digital products could disclose, on average, what in-app purchases typically end up costing and how much time consumers spend using these apps.

In addition, regulators could impose taxes directly on the most addictive offerings, as they have done in the case of tobacco products; alcohol; and, in some cases, prescription drugs.

Fast Facts:

- According to the Canadian Automobile Association (CAA), 80 percent of collisions and 65 percent of near crashes have some form of driver inattention as contributing factors.
- According to the CAA, driver distraction is a factor in about 4 million motor vehicle crashes in North America each year.
- According to CAA, the economic and social consequence of road crashes in Canada is estimated to be \$25 billion per year, including direct and indirect cost, as well as pain and suffering.
- According to the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), similar neurological responses between compulsive social network sites use and addiction to substances.
- The World Health Organization recognizes gaming addiction as a

disease.

- According to National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), texting and driving is six times more dangerous than drinking and driving.
- According to the Overload Research Group, distractions from digital experiences, like social media, in the work place are responsible for the loss of a quarter of each employee and employer's day. This costs the U.S. economy \$997 billion each year.
- In China, mobile phone lanes have been implemented in a number of large cities for pedestrian safety.

More information: Pierre Berthon et al, Addictive De-Vices: A Public Policy Analysis of Sources and Solutions to Digital Addiction, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0743915619859852](https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915619859852)

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