Mind the App: The Psychology of Technology, the Internet, and Social Media

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Course description

Technological innovations in just the last 15 years have catapulted humanity into a digital era that has transformed our everyday lives. Remember how libraries were a thing before Google? Or how there were photo albums before Instagram? Remember phone calls?

In this course we're going to reflect upon how technology has changed the way we think and feel. What's the psychology behind what makes products like Facebook and Instagram so popular? So *addictive*? How can design affect our behavior? And can we fight back?

We'll explore a range of concepts that lie at the intersection of psychology and technology, and see how they're applied to real-world products. Then we'll build products using these concepts. And then we'll learn how to unbuild them.

How does Instagram control our emotions? How does Amazon make us spend that extra dollar? Can your tweets really change the world? Let's find out.

Course objectives

In this course, we will aim to:

- Gain a better understanding of how the products we use shape our lives
- Be aware of general cognitive biases in our daily lives
- Explore several areas where tech interacts with these biases
- Examine the psychological principles behind the design of tech
- Understand the research methods used in design
- Build a healthier relationship with our devices
- Discuss the ethics of design and research in tech

Evaluation

5% class participation

20% quizzes (5 quizzes, n-1)

15% assignments

25% reflection papers (2 papers)

35% final project

Course topics

This is a summary of the topics we'll be covering. They may not be in this particular sequence, and I'll make changes as we go along if needed – some topics might require two sessions to cover, others could take half a session.

I'll send out the readings for each topic the week prior.

No.	Topic	Description
1	Introduction and expectations	We say hello, welcome, good morning, and so on. Actually we probably won't say good morning because our class is in the evening. We go through the course outline and help you decide if you want to keep this course.
2	Where we are and how we got here	We dive into a brief history of communication and technology, and reflect on our relationship with tech today.
3	Heuristics and biases	We take a look at some of the ways our judgment and decision-making is compromised online – and how products can take advantage of this to shape our behavior.
4	The design of addictive technology	We study how habits are formed, and how this process can be used to keep us coming back for more.

5	Virality	Can 'going viral' be engineered? Is it art of science? We take a look at what makes content go viral on the internet…
6	Fake news	…and why fake news spreads the way it does.
7	Advertising	How has going digital changed the psychology of advertising? What is the attention economy?
8	Online shopping	Has online shopping fundamentally changed consumer behavior? How do sites like Amazon excel at selling?
9	Social media and the self	Who are you? And what have you done to the real you? Why does the answer to these questions change depending on which social media platform we're on?
10	Instagram and photo sharing	What's in a photo? How do we decide what photos to upload? How many selfies is too many selfies?
11	Twitter and social media activism	Can your tweets change the world?
12	The problem with WhatsApp	We talk about those WhatsApp forwards.
13	Love in the time of Tinder	We examine close online relationships and their impact on offline-world choices.
14	Netflix and binging	How has the Netflix model sucked us into a vortex of mindless consumption?

15	TikTok	Yes, TikTok. Why is it so damn popular?
16	Design research methods	How do you research for effective design?
17	Big Data and privacy	How do companies learn your secrets? And does it matter?
18	Dark patterns and persuasive design	We venture into the deep, dark world of persuasive design.
19	Digital well-being	How to get unhooked, and what we can do to live more responsible digital lives.
20	Ethics	How to use what we've learned in this course.