

Social Media And Its Threat To Our Youth

Edward C. Taylor, PhD

Child and Adolescent Psychologist

edwardctaylorphd.com

ectaylorphd@edwardctaylorphd.com

904-886-9006

Lawsuit Alleges Social Media Giants Buried Their Own Research On Teen Mental Health Harms And Profited By Doing So

[https://www.cnn.com/2025/11/25/tech/social-media-youth-
mental-health-lawsuit-meta-tiktok-snap-
youtube?cid=ios_app](https://www.cnn.com/2025/11/25/tech/social-media-youth-mental-health-lawsuit-meta-tiktok-snap-youtube?cid=ios_app)

The Plaintiffs

- School Districts
- Attorneys General From Across The US
- Hundreds Of Individuals



The Defendants

- Meta
- You Tube
- Tik Tock
- Snapchat



The Allegations

- Social Media Is Addictive
- It Was Designed To Be Addictive
- It Was Designed To Hijack Basic Human Needs To Enhance Its Addictiveness
- It Is Harmful To Our Youth
- Social Media Companies Are Aware Of Its Harmfulness
- Yet, They Continue to Engage In Harmful Practices To Ensure Their Business Survival



The Tobacco – Social Media Addiction Parallel



History Of Tobacco Use

- Use Began 12,000 Years Ago
- Nicotine's Addictive Nature Identified 1920-1930s
- Health Risks Associated with Tobacco Use Published 1954
- Compulsive Tobacco Use Linked To Nicotine Addiction 1971
- Tobacco Use Re-defined As **An Addiction, Not A Habit**, 1988

JUNE 30, 1997 \$2.95

SPECIAL REPORT Hong Kong: The Future of China

TIME



BIG TOBACCO TAKES A HIT

But will the deal
stick, and are
the cigarette giants
getting off easy?

#BXBDJLX*****CARR-RT-SORT**R001
#06384UNDH9084W93#0 TS CT44R**0 NOV98
W K WANDUYN 0002
84 HI TOP HILL RD #04804
VOLUNTOWN P00196
CT 06384-1812

The Allegations

- Tobacco is Addictive and Harmful
- Big Tobacco Was Aware Of This But Kept The Information From The Public
- Instead, It Used Advertising Practices Designed To Hijack Basic Human Needs To Enhance Tobacco Consumption Despite The Harm
- It Engaged In Practices To Ensure Its Business Survival Despite The Harm, Including Recruiting Child Consumers



How Did Big Tobacco Get Them Started ?



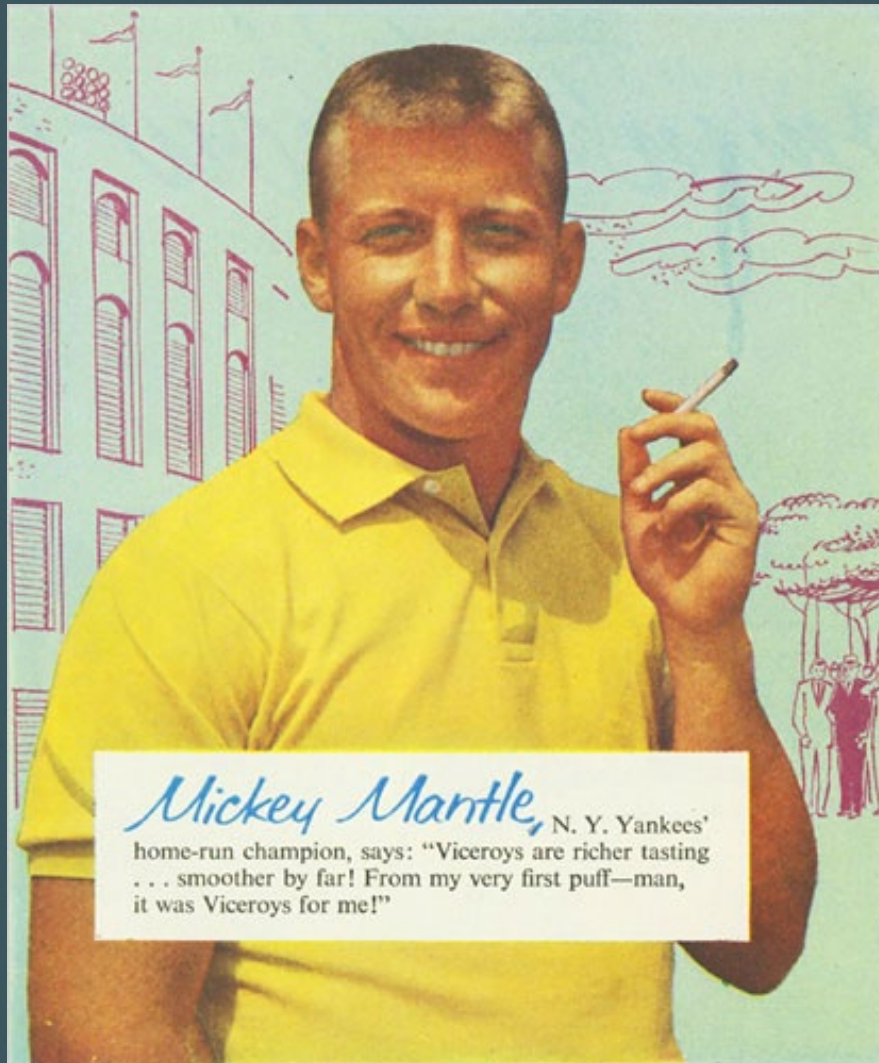
By Hijacking Basic Social Needs

- Conformity Bias
 - Belonging
 - Conforming with group norms
 - Pleasure and positive self esteem through validation by the group
- Prestige Bias
 - Identifying successful people
 - Emulating them to become successful

Hijacking Conformity Bias: Everybody Is Smoking



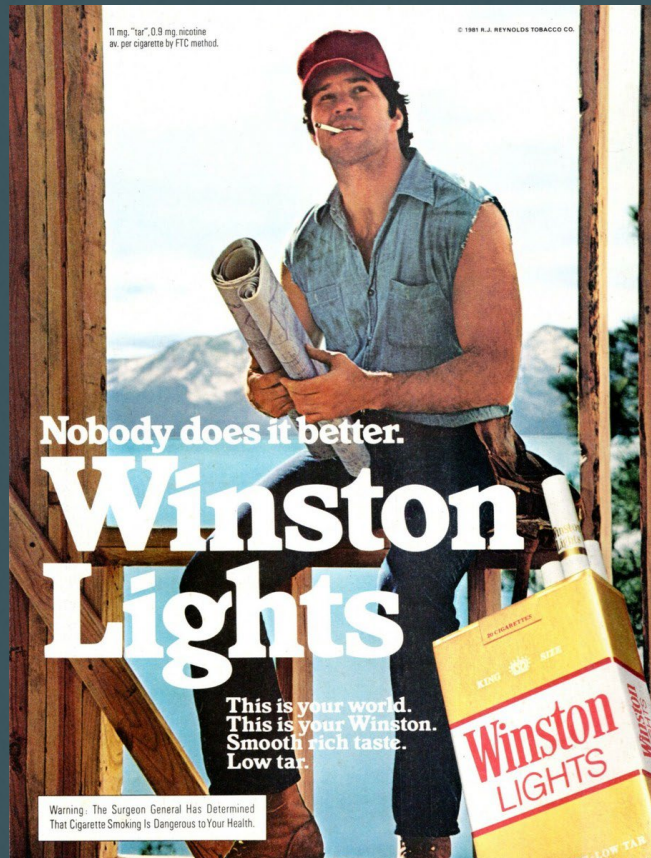
Hijacking Prestige Bias For Men



Hijacking Prestige Bias For Men



Hijacking Prestige Bias For Men



Hijacking Prestige Bias For Men



**"Reach for a Lucky when
you crave something sweet**

*That's the easiest way I know
to keep from getting fat"*

Florenz Ziegfeld
Famous
Producer of
Musical
Comedy

LIGHT a Lucky Strike when you are tempted to eat between meals—they satisfy the craving for sweets and rich pastries. That's why thousands now reducing smoke them constantly.

A year ago 20,679 physicians put themselves on record in confirmation of the fact that Toasting makes Lucky Strike less irritating to the throat than other cigarettes. That's because Toasting removes impurities. Toasting also improves the flavor of the finest tobaccos. That's why the delicious toasted flavor of Luckies makes them a delightful alternative for things that make you fat. Avoid harmful methods to reduce. This way is merely common sense.

Men who keep fit have long employed it. They don't believe in tiresome, expensive ways. They do believe that Luckies do not hurt the wind or impair the physical condition—facts upheld by prominent athletes, who are in a position to know the truth.

When you are offered a sweet . . . when it comes time for pies and pastries . . . pass them by and take a Lucky. Then you'll never miss sweets.



Florenz Ziegfeld,
"Glorifier of the American
Girl," and Jean Ackerman
and Gladys Glad of Mr.
Ziegfeld's new success,
"Whoopie."

*Reach for a Lucky
instead of a sweet.*

**"It's toasted" No Throat Irritation
No Cough.**

Hijacking Prestige Bias For Women



A Different Perspective On Female Expertise



Something For The Kids



Start The Cigarette - Pleasure Association Early



Even The Kids



Once You Got'em Started, How
Do You Keep'em ?



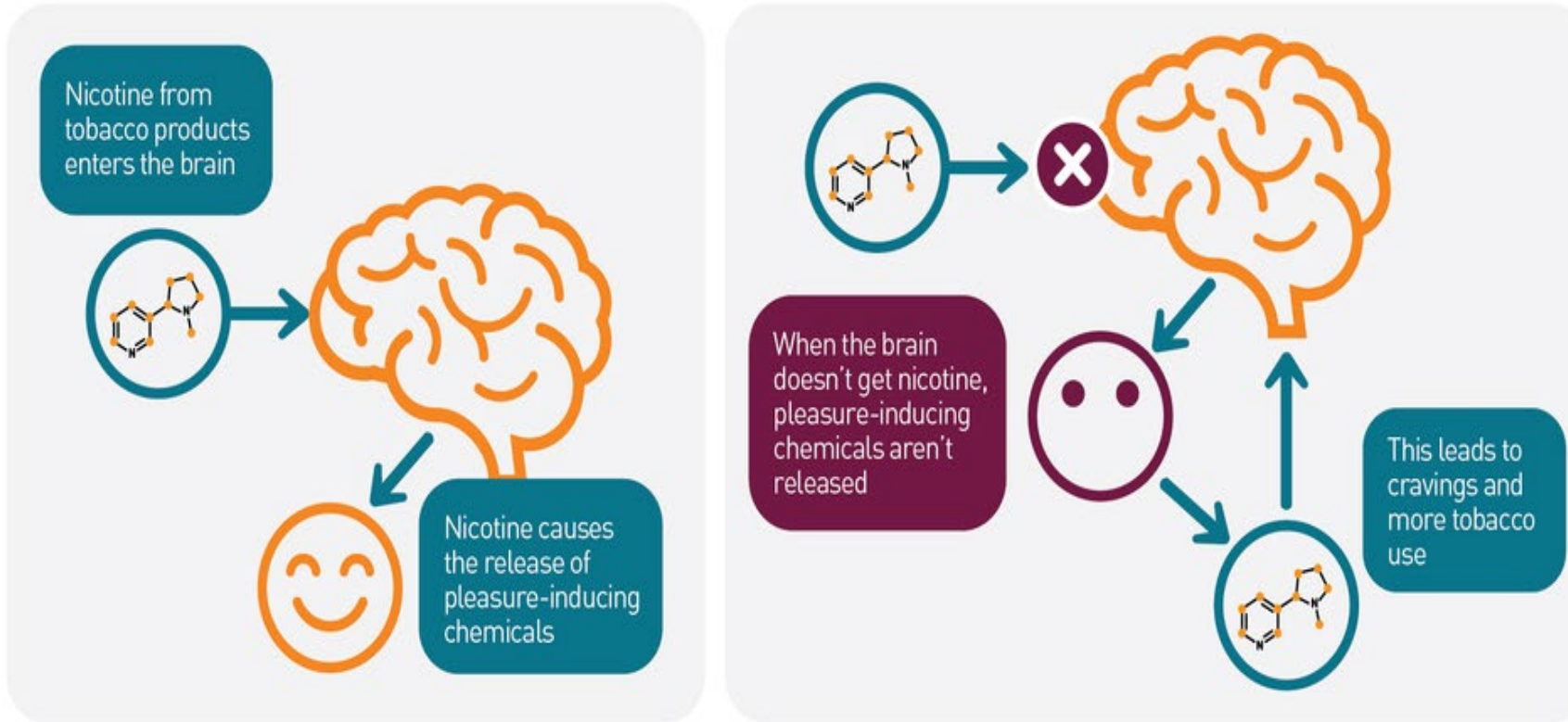
Nicotine Is Addictive

- More Addictive Than Cocaine
- Once You Get them Started, They Are Yours For Life...Or Death

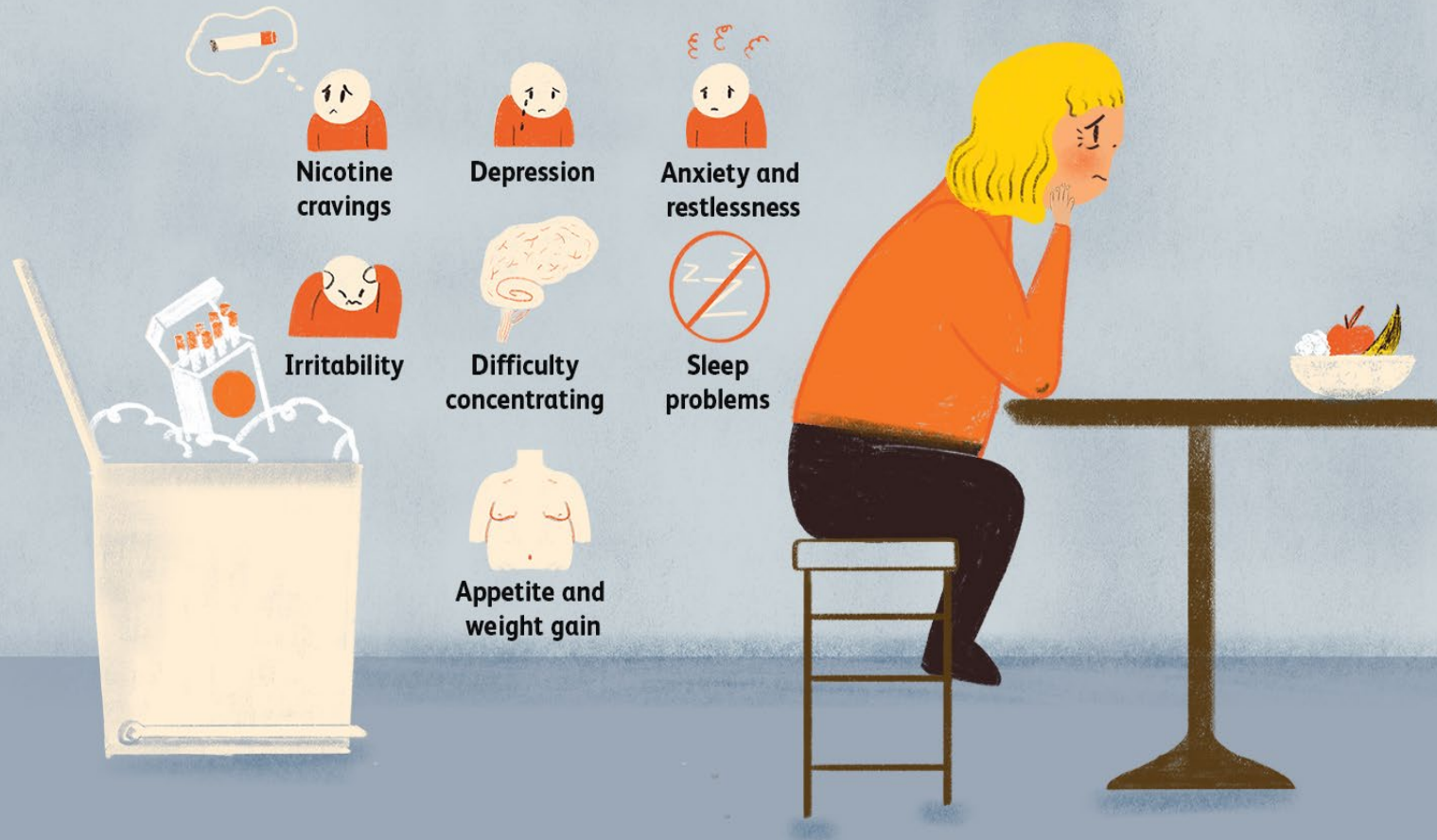


Nicotine Provides Pleasure

The Brain on Nicotine



Common Symptoms of Nicotine Withdrawal



Why ?



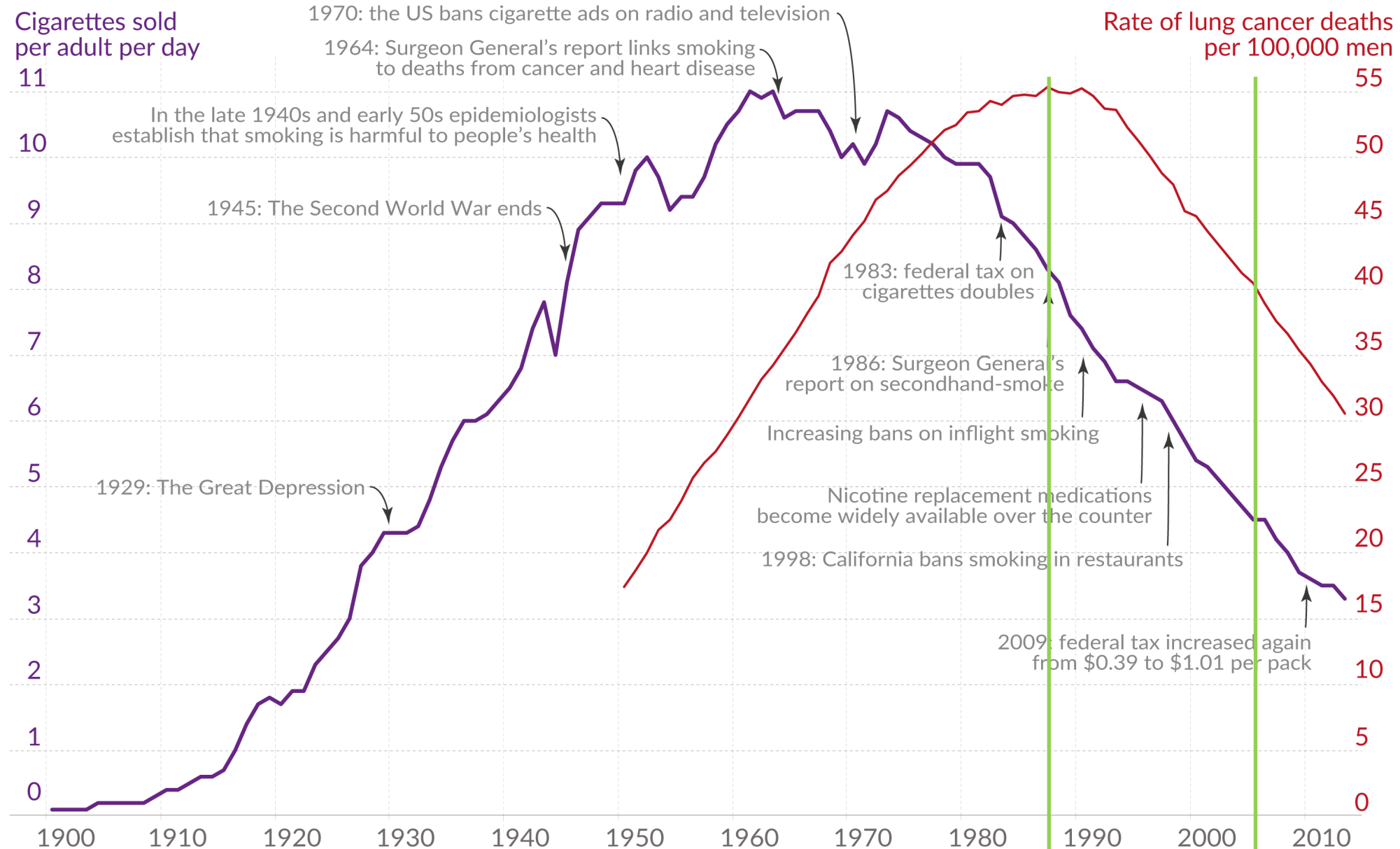
Resolution 4000 x 3200 px - free download - www.psdgraphics.com

Treating A Systemic Problem Systemically

- Research
 - Nicotine's Addictive Nature Identified 1920-1930s
 - Health Risks Associated with Tobacco Use Published 1954
 - Compulsive Tobacco Use Linked To Nicotine Addiction 1971
- Public Policy
 - Surgeon General Links Smoking to Lung Cancer
 - Tobacco Use Re-defined As **An Addiction, Not A Habit** in 1988 By Surgeon General
- Lawsuits
 - Big Tobacco Sued By Mississippi and Other States in 1988
 - Big Tobacco Continued To Promote Tobacco Use Until Federal Racketeering Case in 2006
- Legislation
 - Public Pressure Leads to State and Federal Legislation



Cigarette sales and lung cancer mortality in the US



Data sources: International Smoking Statistics (2017); WHO Cancer Mortality Database (IARC). The death rate from lung-cancer is age-standardized.

OurWorldinData.org – Research and data to make progress against the world's largest problems

Licensed under CC-BY by the author Max Roser

It Worked !



The Tobacco – Social Media Addiction Parallel



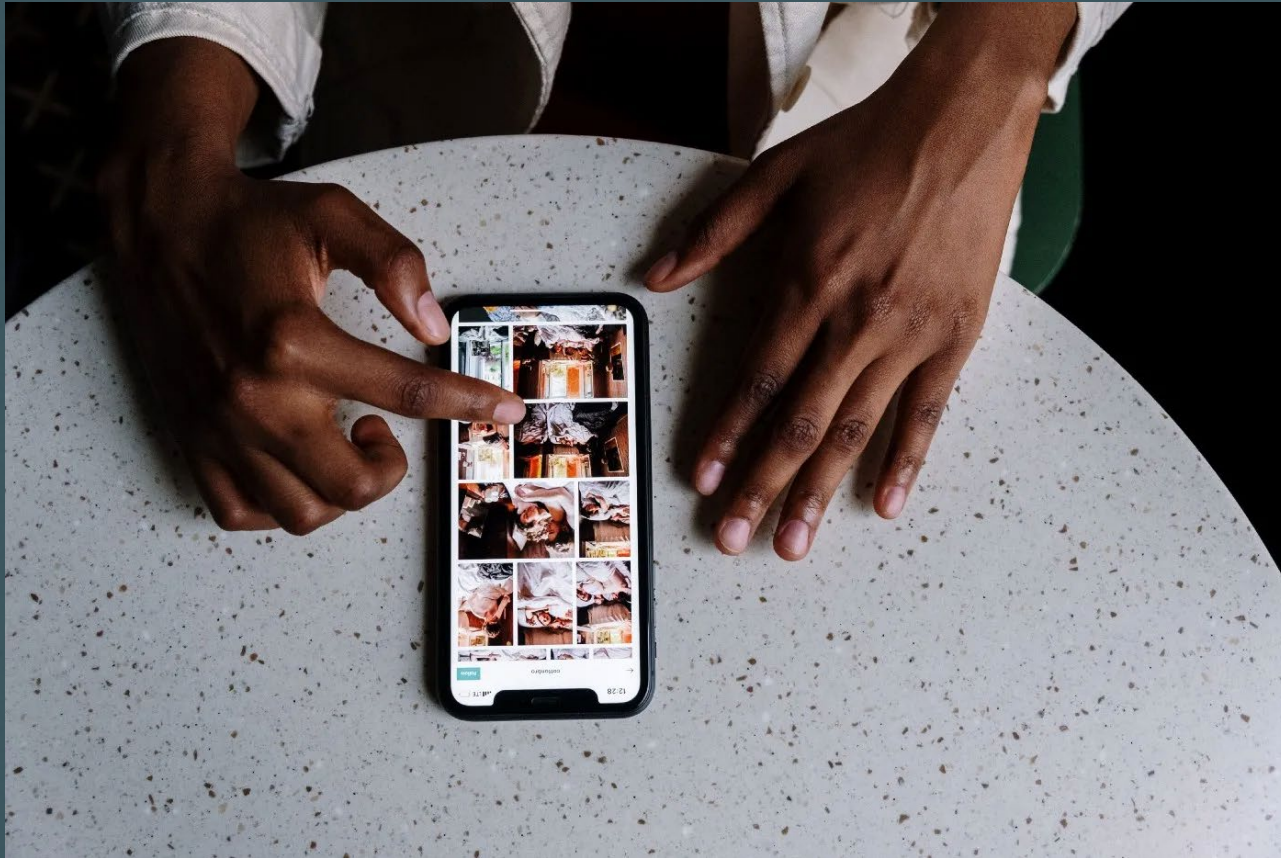
How Does Social Media Get'em Started ?:



Hijacking Basic Social Needs

- The Need To Seek and Search And Experience Novelty
- Conformity Bias
 - Belonging
 - Conforming with group norms
 - Pleasure and positive self esteem through validation by the group
- Prestige Bias
 - Identifying successful people
 - Emulating them to become successful

Hijacking The Need To Seek And Search



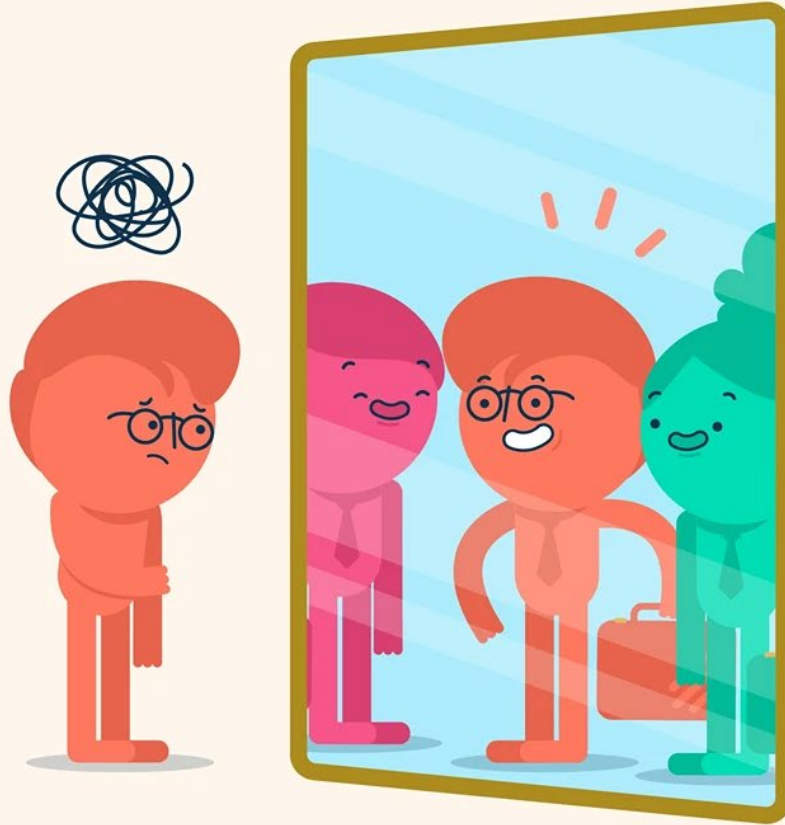
AI Filter Bubble



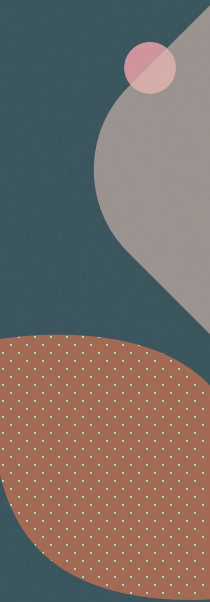
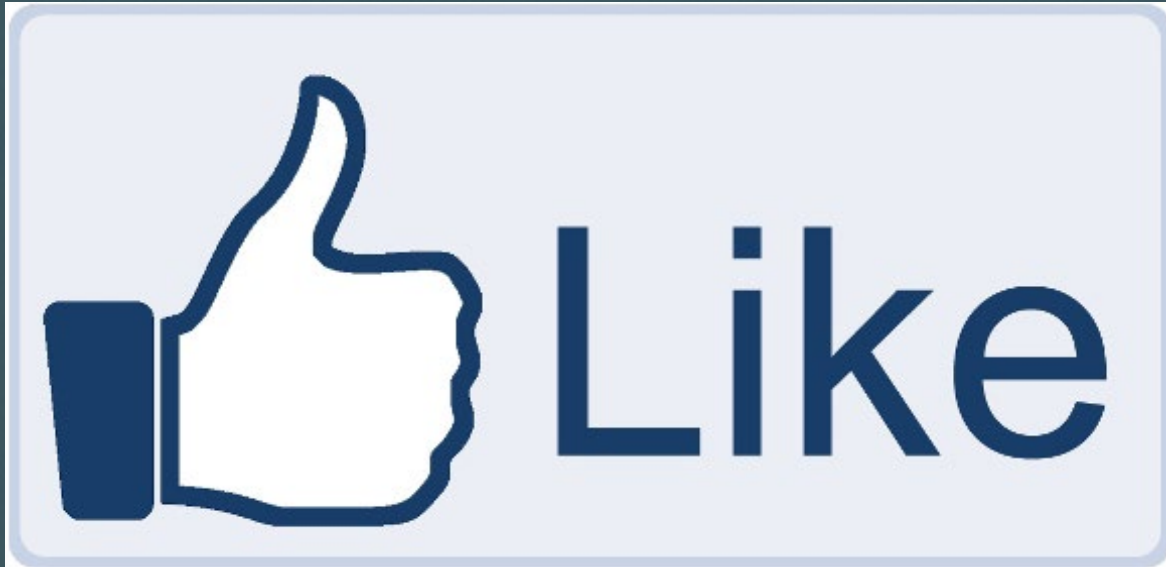
Hijacking Conformity Bias: All My Friends Have Phones !



Hijacking Conformity Bias: FOMO



Hijacking Conformity Bias

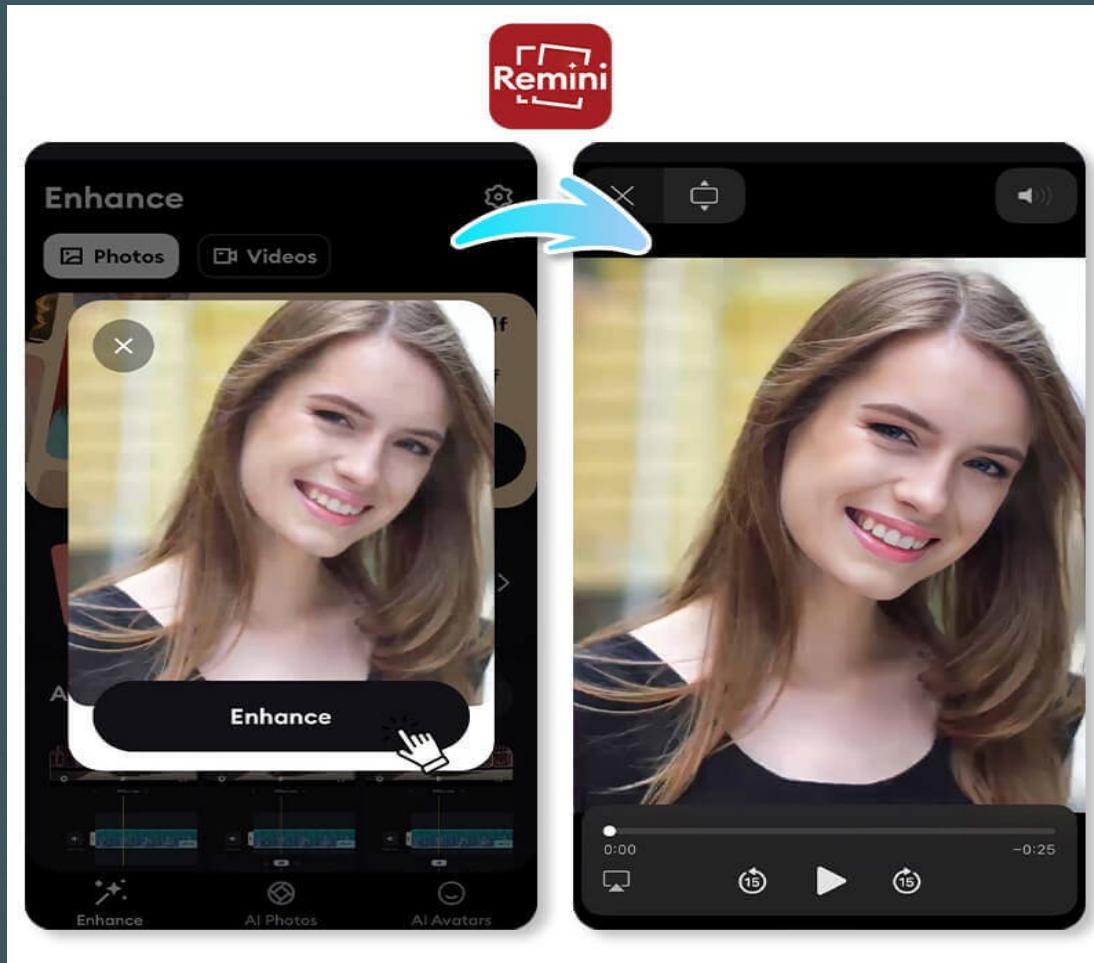


Hijacking Prestige Bias

Create “Perfect” Role Models For Success



For The Girls: The Enhancement Button



Perfect Influencers Hijack Prestige Bias

The More Outrageous They Are, The More Likes And Retweets The Influencers Get And The More “Successful” They Seem.

If I Do What They Do, I Can Get More Likes And Retweets.

But, I Never Can Equal Them And Be Good Enough



For The Boys: Gamification

PROS AND CONS OF GAMIFICATION



PRO:

WHEN USED IN MARKETING, GAMIFICATION CAN INCREASE SALES AND REWARDS SYSTEMS CAN RESULT IN RETURNING CUSTOMERS/ CUSTOMER LOYALTY



CON:

LIMITED ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY CAN LEAD TO DIGITAL DIVIDES IN SOCIAL GROUPS.



PRO:

GAMIFICATION CAN HELP TO MAKE LEARNING APPEAR MORE FUN AND ENJOYABLE.



CON:

ELEMENTS OF COMPETITION CAN INCUR PROBLEMS OF EXCLUSION AND FEELINGS OF DEFEAT ESPECIALLY IN YOUNGER AUDIENCES.

The Rabbit Hole



Down
the
Rabbit
Hole

Once You Got'em Started, How
Do You Keep'em ?



Dopamine Is Social Media's Nicotine

- Dopamine Stimulates The Pleasure Centers Of The Brain
- We Are Hardwired To Seek
 - Novelty Through Seeking And Searching
 - Social Connections
 - Social Affirmation
 - Expert Models
- Each Causes Dopamine To Be Released Which Provides The Experience Of Pleasure.



Social Media Is Designed To Create
Addiction By Increasing The
Frequency of Seeking Dopamine
Release



BY

**Variable Ratio
Reinforcement
Schedule**





How Does Social Media Create Addiction?: Better Living Through Chemistry

- Provide Pleasure Through Dopamine Release
- On A Variable Ratio Reinforcement Schedule
- Ad Nauseum
- Creating Dopamine Depletion
- Creating Withdrawal Symptoms of Irritability, Cravings, Mood Disturbance, And A Drive To Re-Engage.



Addiction By Design

Snapchat executives once acknowledged that users who “have the Snapchat addiction have no room for anything else. Snap dominates their life.”



Addiction By Design

The goal of Facebook's and Instagram's founders was to create a social-validation loop....because you are exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology.

Sean Parker

An Early Leader at Facebook



Addiction By Design

“IG (Instagram) is a drug ... we’re basically pushers,” Meta researchers said in an internal chat, according to the filing



Addiction By Design

An internal TikTok report noted that “minors do not have executive mental function to control their screen time.”



Is Social Media Harming Our Youth ?



Major Depression Among Teens

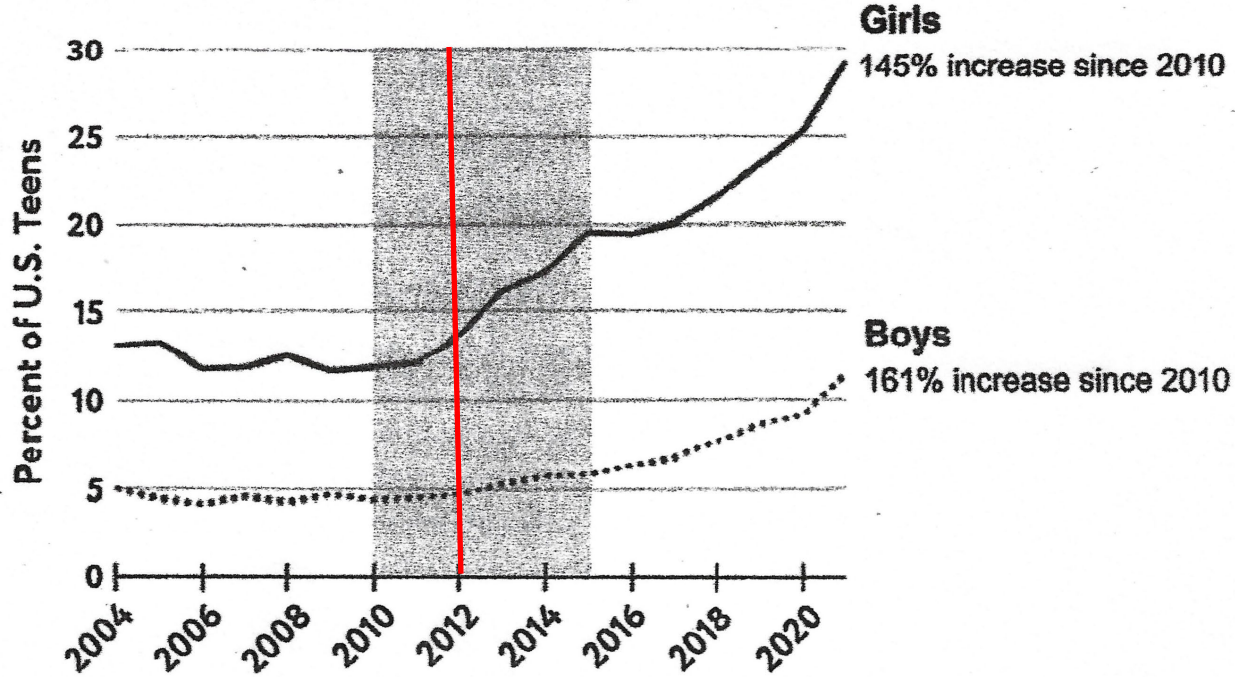


Figure 1.1. Percent of U.S. teens (ages 12–17) who had at least one major depressive episode in the past year, by self-report based on a symptom checklist. This was figure 7.1 in *The Coddling of the American Mind*, now updated with data beyond 2016. (Source: U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health.)³

ER Visits For Self Harm

Emergency Room Visits for Self-Harm

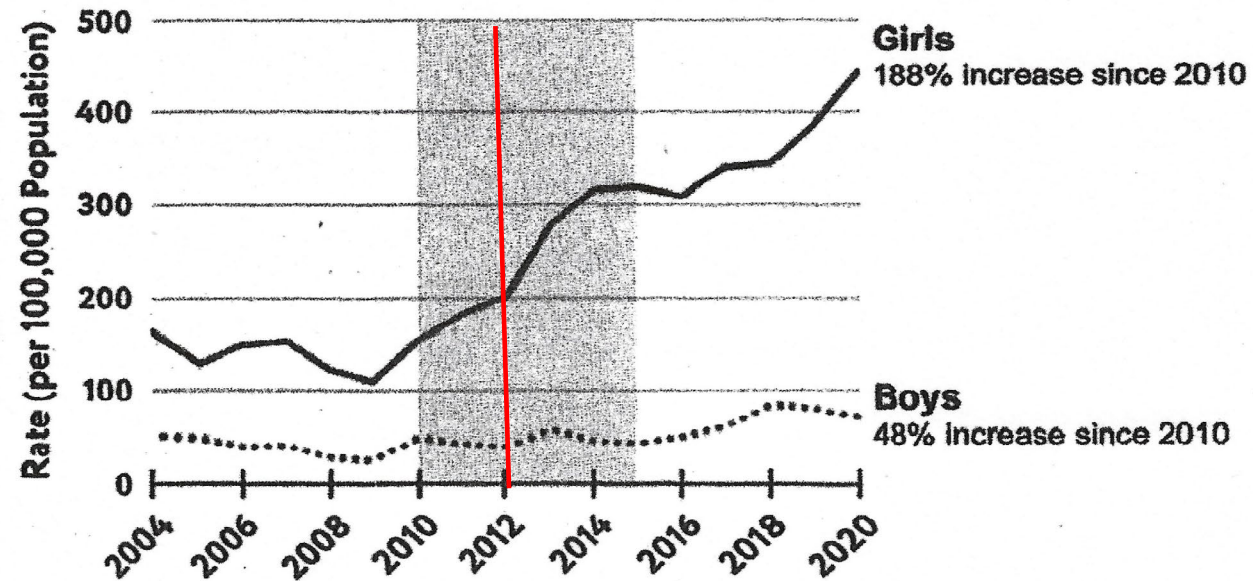


Figure 1.4. The rate per 100,000 in the U.S. population at which adolescents (ages 10–14) are treated in hospital emergency rooms for nonfatal self-injury. (Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.)²⁰

Suicide Rates for Younger Adolescents

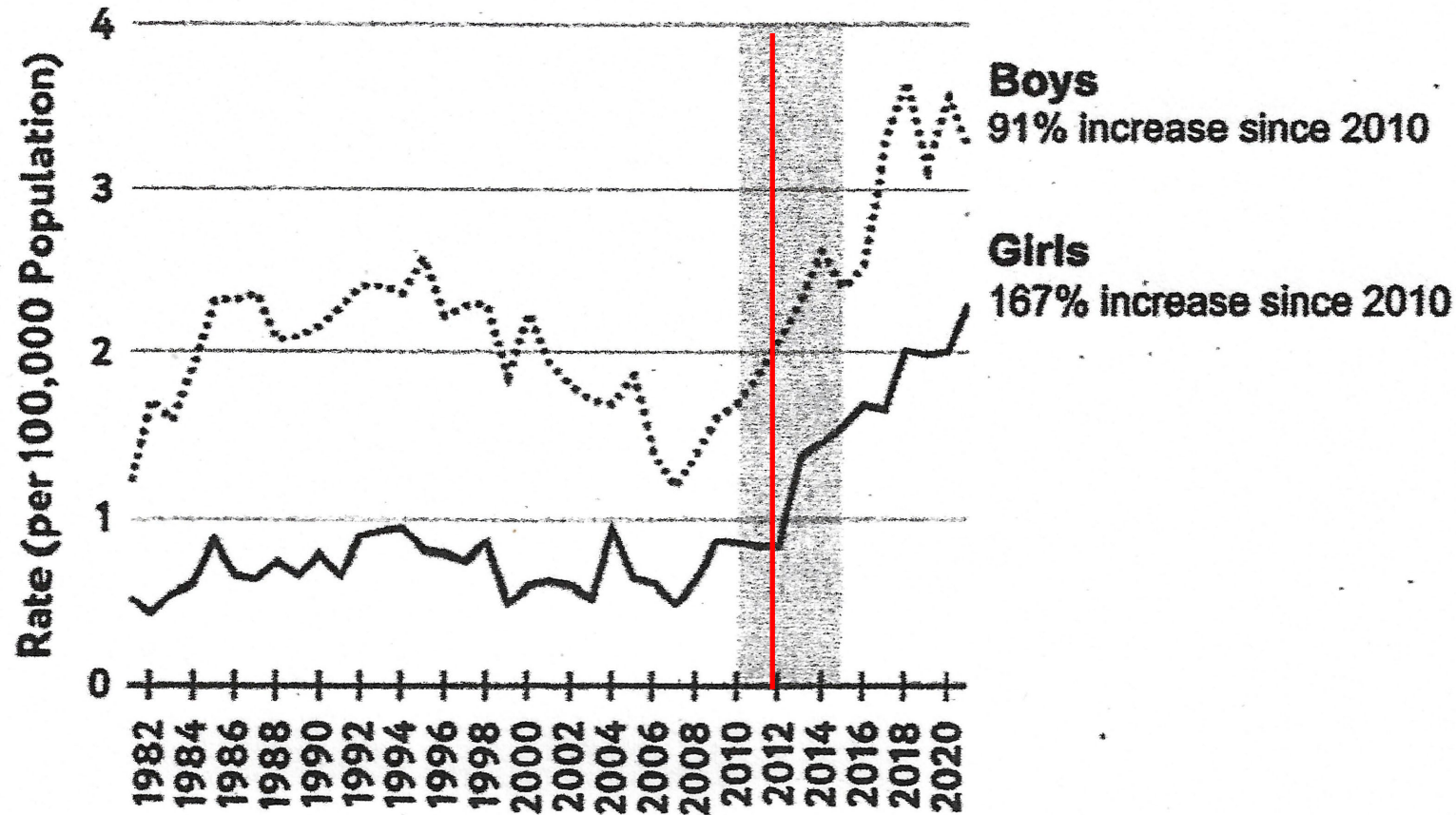


Figure 1.5. Suicide rates for U.S. adolescents, ages 10–14. (Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.)²²

Mental Illness Among College Students

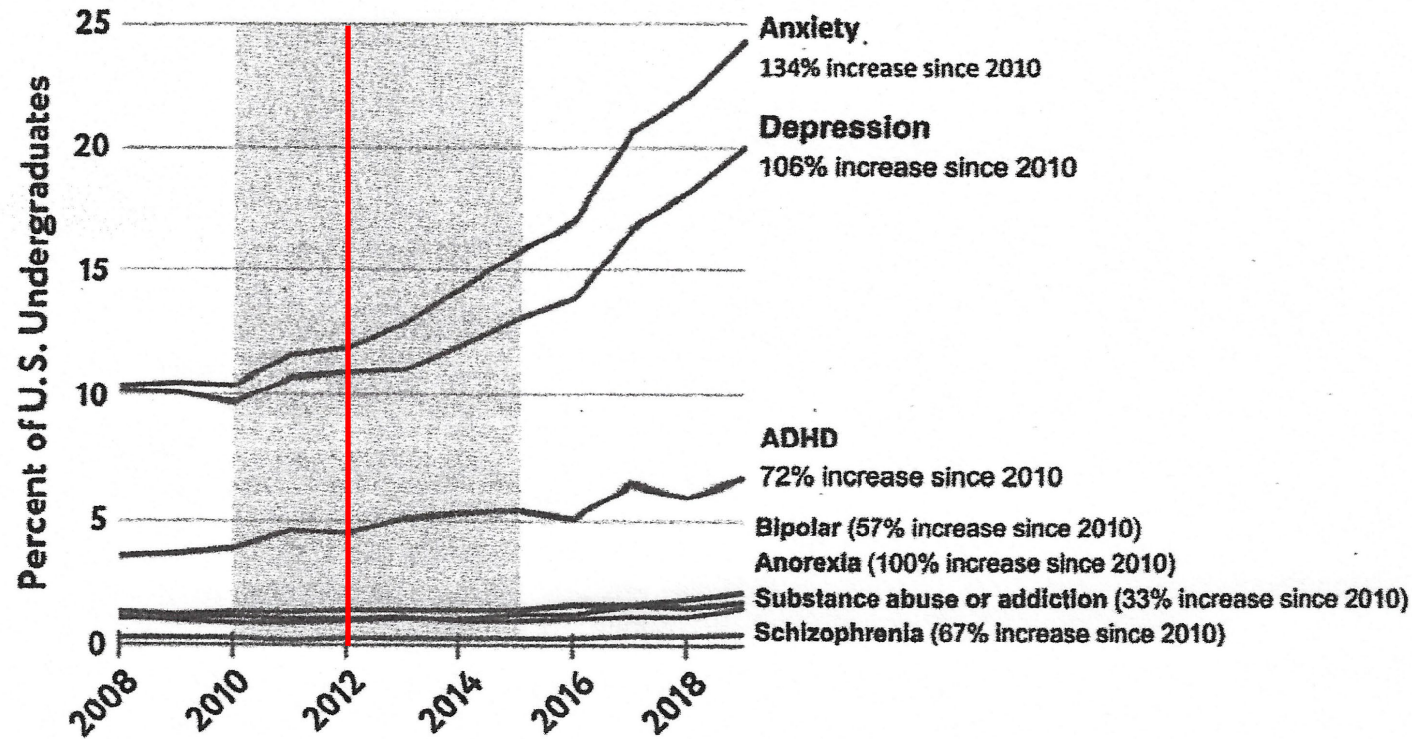


Figure 1.2. Percent of U.S. undergraduates with each of several mental illnesses. Rates of diagnosis of various mental illnesses increased in the 2010s among college students, especially for anxiety and depression. (Source: American College Health Association.)⁹

And The Outcome

Satisfied with Oneself

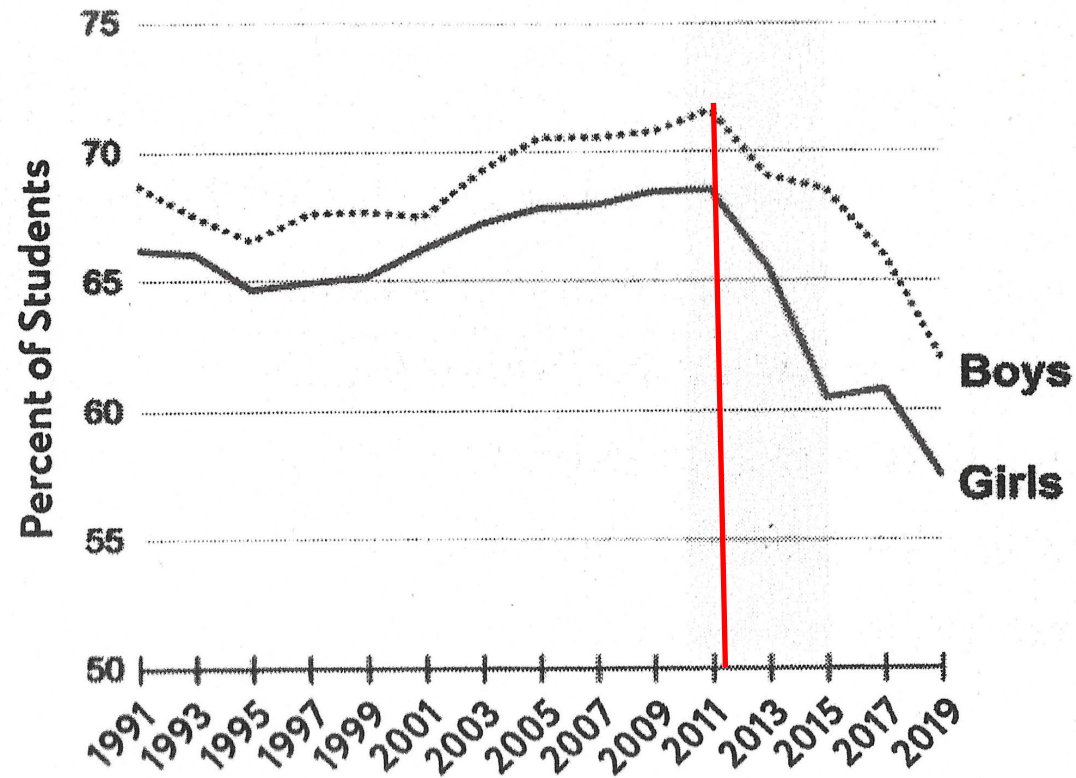


Figure 6.5. The sociometer plunge of 2012. Percent of U.S. students (8th, 10th, and 12th grade) who said they were satisfied with themselves. (Source: Monitoring the Future.)

What Happened ?

The Marriage of the Smart Phone and Social
Media Around 2010



How Is That Marriage Harmful ?

- Shift From Real to Virtual Living
 - Social Deprivation
 - Experience Deprivation
 - Around The Clock
 - Anywhere and Everywhere
 - Down The Rabbit Hole
- Sleep Deprivation
- Attention Fragmentation



What Do Kids Need ?

Time, Space, and Experiences To Become

Masterful

Resilient

Self-Regulated

Socially Skilled



Life Experiences Develop The Executive System

**FOR THE THINGS WE HAVE TO LEARN
BEFORE WE CAN DO THEM, WE LEARN BY
DOING THEM.**

- ARISTOTLE -

Decrease in Discovery Behavior

Teens Engaging in Adult Activities

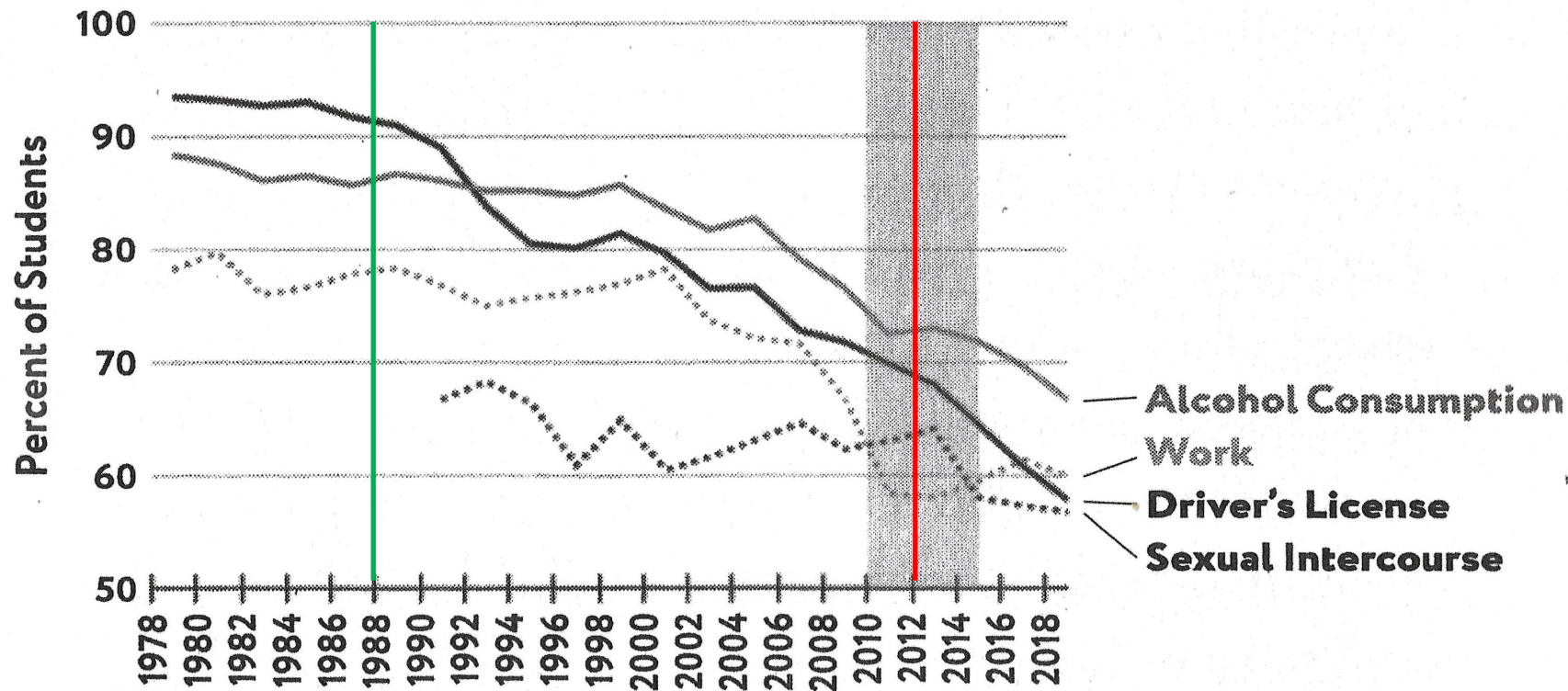


Figure 4.1. The percentage of U.S. high school seniors who have engaged in four adult activities has been declining since the 1990s or early 2000s, prior to the Great Rewiring of 2010 to 2015. (Source: Monitoring the Future and CDC Youth Risk Be-

Child Directed Social Interaction Develops Social Skills

- Appreciation for nonverbal communication
- Ability to repair a relationship
- Joint decision making
- Losing well
- Accepting group leveling
- One (wo)man is no (wo)man



Characteristics of Effective Social Interaction

Real time

Synchronous

Embodied



Not Real Time, Synchronous, Embodied



Decrease in Socializing

Daily Time with Friends, by Age Group

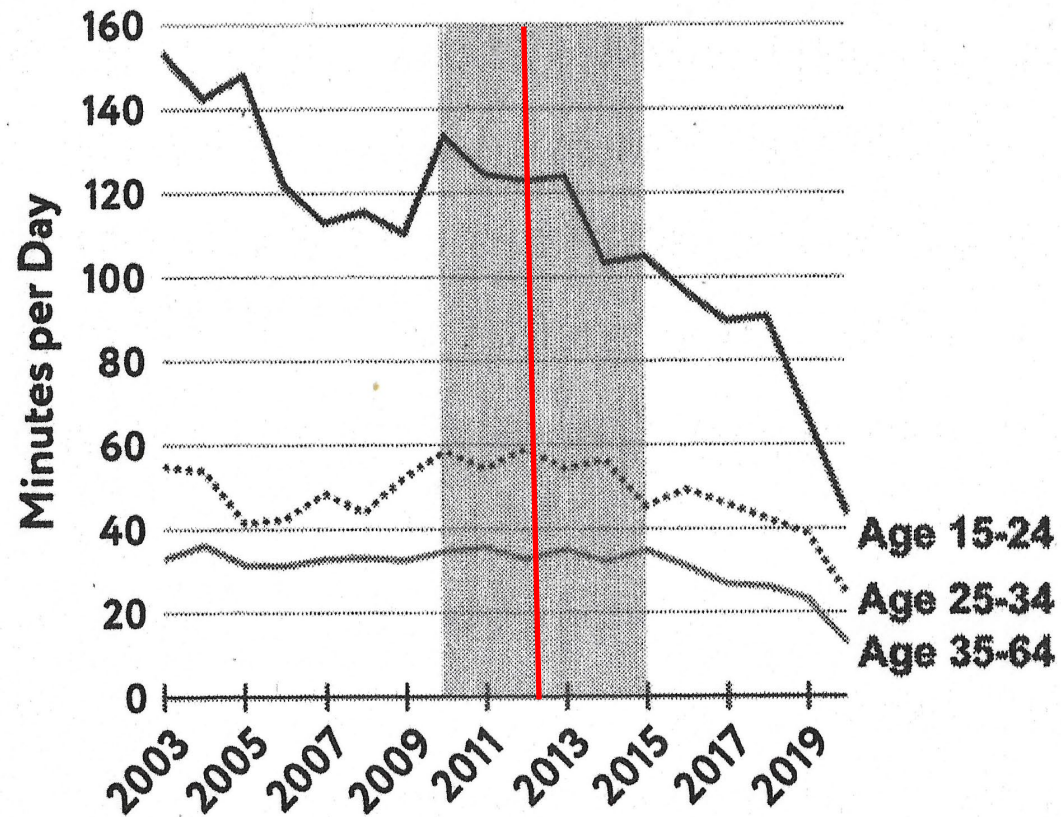


Figure 5.1. Daily average time spent with friends in minutes. Only the youngest age group shows a sharp drop before the 2020 data collection, which was performed

And The Effect

Have a Few Close Friends

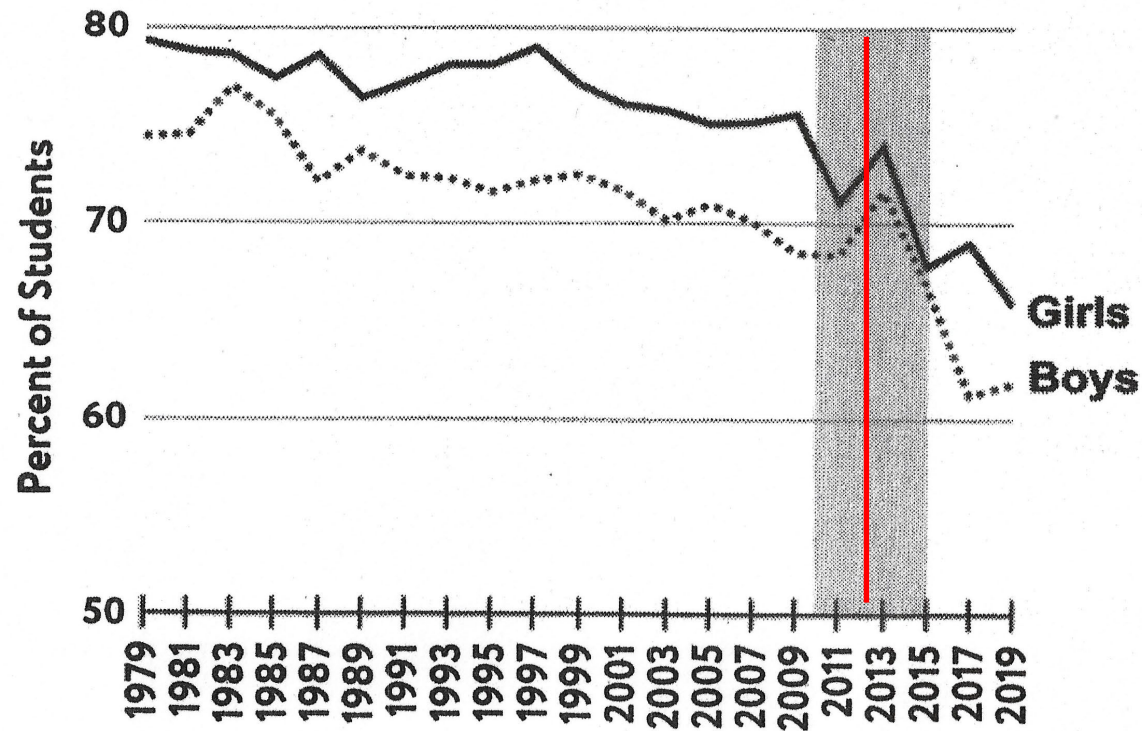
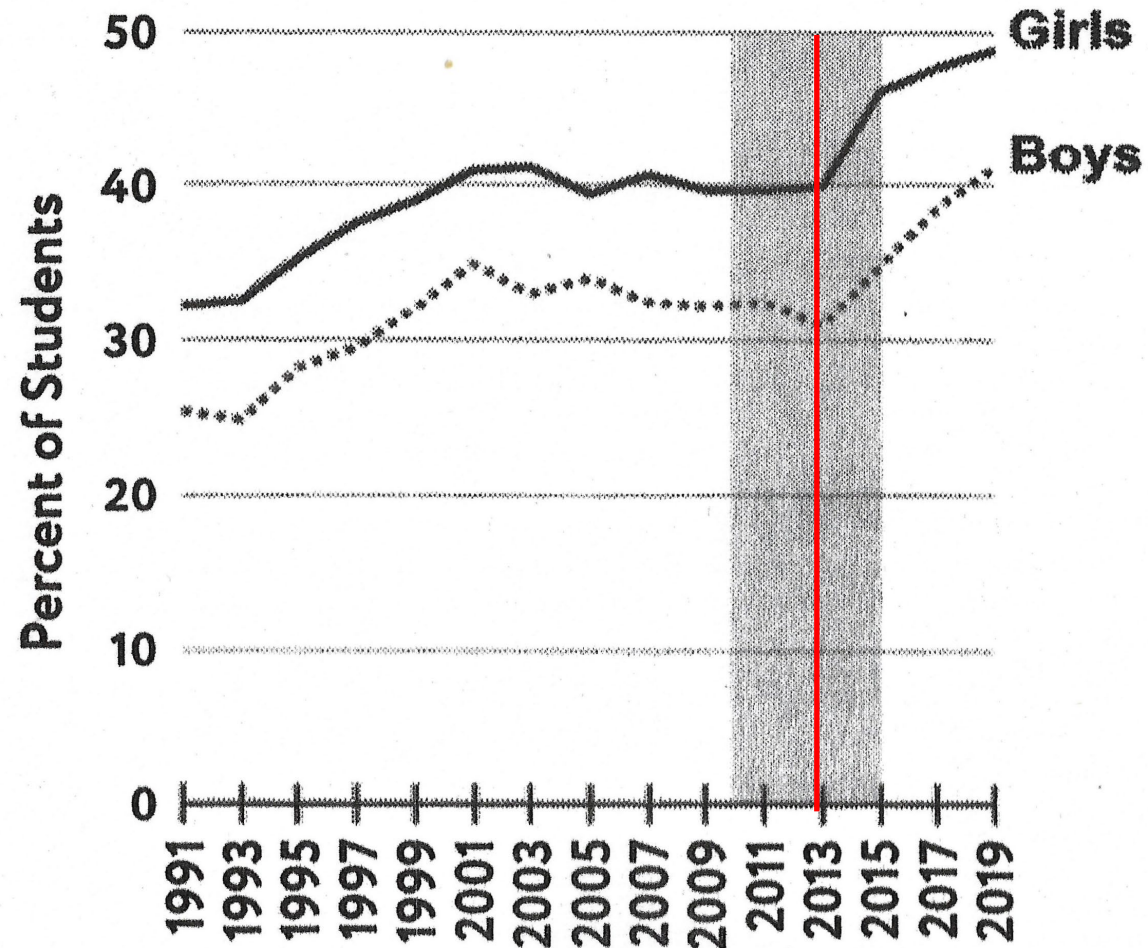


Figure 6.6. The percentage of U.S. high school seniors who agreed or mostly agreed with the statement "I usually have a few friends around that I can get together with." Rates dropped slowly before 2012, and more quickly afterward. (Source: Monitoring the Future.)⁸³

Sleep Deprivation in Teens

Teens Who Get Less Than 7 Hours of Sleep



Not Fully In The Moment

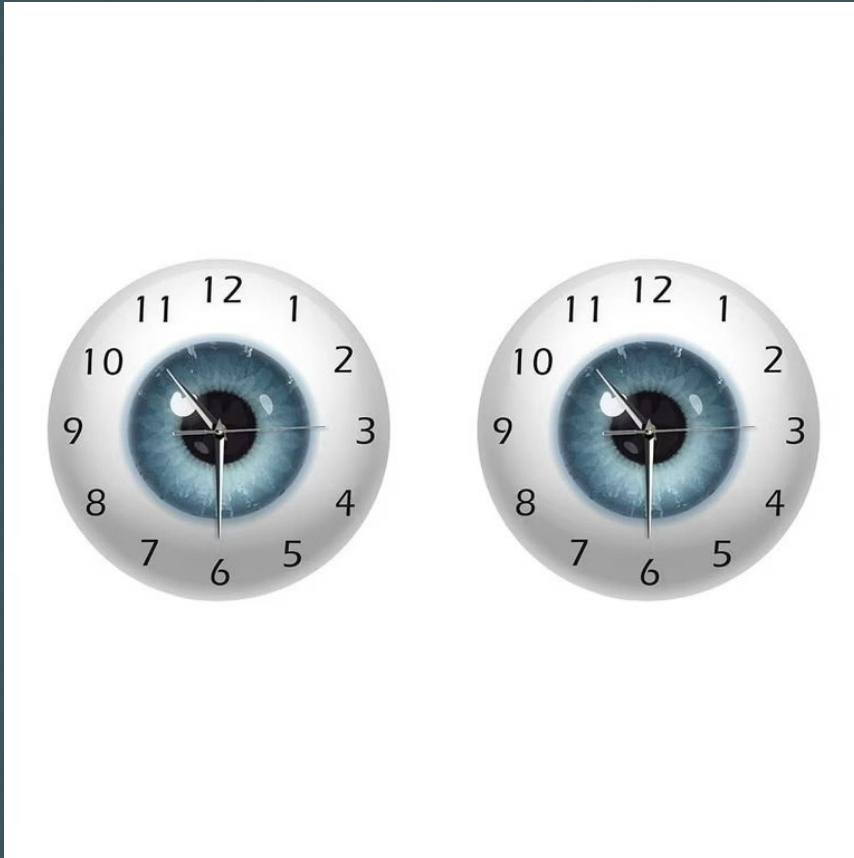


Addictive By Design

- Hijack Need To Seek, Search, and Experience
- Hijack Conformity Bias
- Hijack Prestige Bias
- Provide Pleasure Via Dopamine
- On A Variable Ratio Reward Schedule
- A Slot Machine



To Increase Eyeball Time



To Gather More Information About You and Sell It



Resolution 4000 x 3200 px - free download - www.psdgraphics.com

How Do You Treat a Systemic Problem ?

- Treat the system
- Provide support for the individual



You Become A Community Activist

- Your parent community
- Your school community
- Your local community
- Your national community



Community Activist Activities

- Organize
- Collaborate
- Communicate
- Educate
- Legislate
- Litigate



What Should You Seek ?

- Voluntary Coordination And Contracting Among Parents
 - Regarding Age Of Providing Devices
 - Regarding Social Media Sites Allowed
- Government
 - Assume A Duty Of Care Posture Over Social Media Design
 - Age Restrictions
 - Age Verification
 - Fund Research Into Harm And How To Mitigate It
- Schools
 - Phone Free Schools
 - Real Life Educational Opportunities
 - Follow The Research On What Works And What Doesn't



Anyone You Know ?



The Breakfast Club



My Sources

- *The Anxious Generation* by Jonathan Haidt
- *Technology's Child* by Katie Davis
- *Dopamine Nation* by Anne Lembke
- Dr. Google
- Watching my grandkids play, until they didn't

