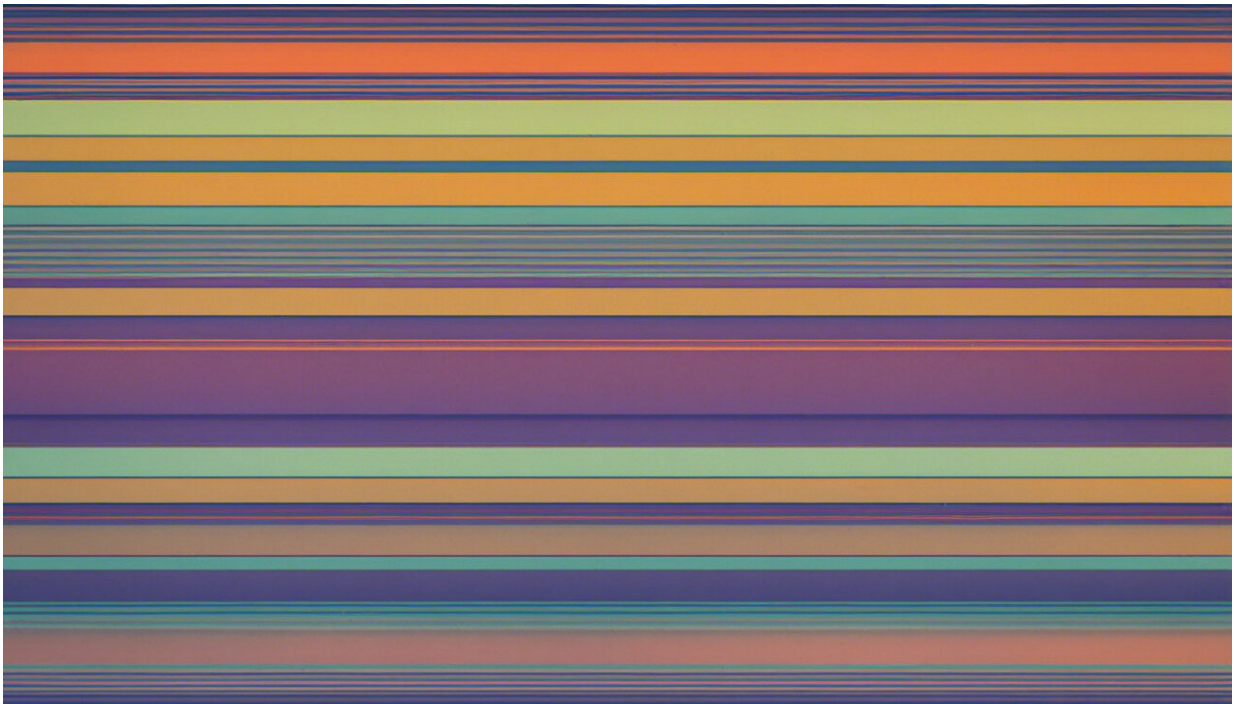


Why comparing technology to drugs isn't simply a question of addiction

July 10 2017, by Greg Wadley



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Some experts say technologies such as social media and video games are like drugs. Others disagree.

This debate is really about whether technologies are *addictive*. But the defining property of a psychoactive drug is not "addictiveness", but the

ability to [change a user's mental and emotional state](#).

This ability - sometimes beneficial, sometimes dangerous - has made drugs [an important influence on the human story](#). Now some technologies [have this ability too](#).

Rather than debate whether or not technologies are addictive ([some can be, for some people](#)), I believe there is value in understanding (and exploiting) their role as mood-regulators.

In this light, [I reviewed drug research](#) to understand the complex roles that "mood-regulating artefacts" can play.

What drugs do

Many people use drugs, for reasons and with consequences that are [broader and more varied than addiction](#).

Research from [anthropological](#) and [historical](#) perspectives shows that drug use is an ancient behaviour, deeply embedded in human societies, and impacting activities as varied as [work, religion and politics](#).

Caffeine, a [very widely used drug](#), powers the working day by [reducing fatigue and increasing motivation](#). Alcohol has been a solace and social lubricant [for millennia](#). Hallucinogenic drugs have been [central to spirituality](#), as was [tobacco](#) before it was domesticated and eventually globalised.

Today, new drugs affect aspects of life as varied as work and study, [moral decision-making](#), and [youth social gatherings](#). And of course, a broad range of prescription drugs change users' [mental states](#) for [therapeutic purposes](#).

While drug addiction is a serious problem, only some drug use represents serious addiction. For this reason, some pharmacologists have proposed that we view [psychoactive drugs](#) as [tools for manipulating mental states](#), allowing us to achieve goals such as adaptation to workplaces and social settings.

In fact, we use drugs *and* technologies for [mood-regulation](#), to shape how we feel and behave, to relate better to others, and to achieve our goals.

Mood-regulating technologies

It is clear that some people engage with some technologies to the point of compulsion and harm, with [phone](#), [Internet](#) and [poker machine](#) abuse included among the "[behavioural addictions](#)".

There are concerns about the impact of excessive [technology](#) use upon attention span, relationships, [work-life balance](#), and [child development](#). It's been suggested that consumer-tech firms [deliberately design addictive products](#), while some users have gone as far as to [seek rehabilitation](#).

But it is problematic to label a technology itself as addictive, since only some users are affected to that extent. If the defining characteristic of a psychoactive [drug](#) is the ability to [alter mood](#), does this suggest a more useful way to compare drugs with technology?

It might, because many recent digital technologies can [change users' mood](#), including games, [phones and social media](#), [online video](#), and [virtual reality](#).

This is also true of "old media" such as [television](#) and [recorded music](#), which new mobile platforms make available [any time and anywhere](#).

Researchers are investigating the use of [web](#) and [virtual reality](#) apps to change mood for therapeutic purposes. Many apps available on the iOS and Android stores claim to help manage issues like anxiety, although users should take professional advice before using one. Other researchers are experimenting with new ways to alter mood, including [smell](#) and [driverless cars](#).

Perhaps the popularity and impact of some technologies come partly from the ability they give us to manipulate our moods.

Thinking past addiction

Mood regulation [shapes human cultures](#). The ability to change one's mental state, and to satisfy this desire in others, has [inspired commerce and innovation](#), [underpinned power relations](#), and [compensated the downtrodden](#).

Mood-regulating technologies might gain a similar significance, helping us adapt emotionally to a challenging and fast-changing world.

But the addiction debate shows we need better ways to understand this aspect of technology use.

Thinking of [technologies as "tools for manipulating mental states"](#) might help us tell a story of technology use – helpful, harmful or ambiguous - which compares in its richness to [the story of drug use](#).

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