

CART 351 REFLECTION 4
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The Machine Always Wins: What Drives Our Addiction to Social Media by Richard Seymour explores the manipulative strategies in design and engagement used by social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc. We often use the term mindless scrolling, but as users, do we understand what mindless scrolling is? Are we doing it consciously? Not really, it too fits in the propaganda of leveraging repetitive physical actions, which earlier started with clicking on things and pressing buttons but nowadays are more about tapping, scrolling, swiping, etc. These are the habits that superimpose upon conscious decision-making abilities, which becomes a vicious cycle of engagement that is more driven by compulsion than choice, where we as users are stuck.

The article compares the different psychological mechanisms involved, like social media's feedback loop, i.e., liking a picture, commenting on it, and sharing it, to that of gambling experiences where we have a reward system for each move the player makes, which keeps them engaged. Similarly, the gaming industry utilizes this logic to make players come back for it. Every game designing class I have been a part of involved how we can make it interesting and dynamic enough for the players to keep coming for it. These intermittent reward systems for engagement stimulate the brain's dopamine-driven happiness, which makes us hooked to these applications for hours.

Seymour's further insights in the article broadly discuss the platforms' designs not only manipulate the mind but also are responsible for physical syncing or habits we have with psychological dependencies. For example, I would spend 1-2 hours on my phone, probably watching reels, videos, etc., but complain about not having time to exercise every day, which takes the same amount of time. Exercising is also supposed to release dopamine, but it's not instant like watching reels; you need to work for it to experience it, and that is what is exploited by the big names in the industry.

I am in complete agreement with the author when he mentions that in this digital ecosystem, we are not just participants but also test subjects. We cannot completely stop looking at social media as most of these platforms are linked with many personal things, like contacting my faraway friends or maintaining a social life itself. What we can do is limit our interaction, and push ourselves to be involved in other real-life activities like communicating with people in person, exercising, and spending time with family instead of mindless scrolling most of the time.