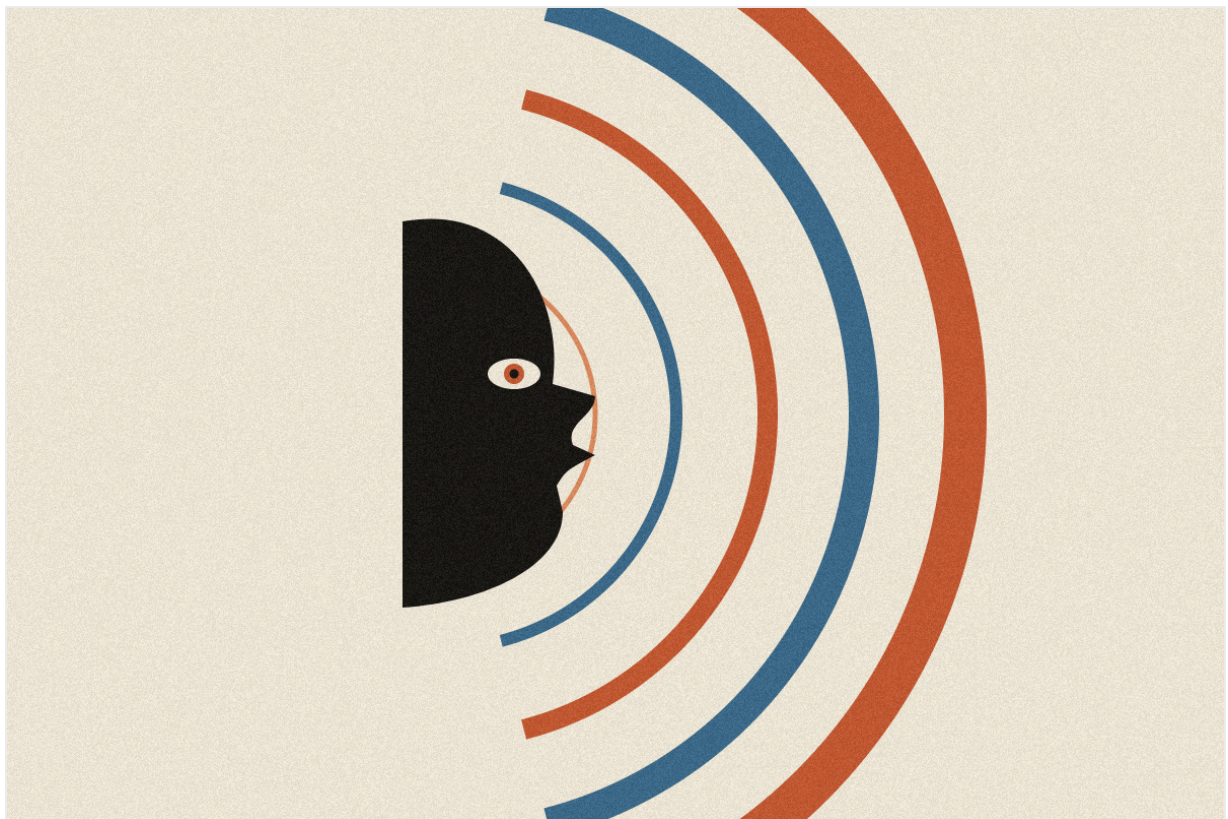


Culture

The Phones Aren't Doing It to You

Envy, narcissism, and loneliness are things technology amplifies, not things it creates. The fentanyl analogy for social media is worse than useless.

By Emmanuel Awosika ■ December 5, 2025 ■



A certain analogy has hardened into common sense: social media is like a drug, the feed is engineered to be as addictive as fentanyl, and the users are victims of a chemical assault they never consented to. It is an emotionally satisfying frame, especially for a worried parent, and

it gets one important thing badly wrong. It treats the phone as the origin of the harm rather than as an amplifier of tendencies that were already there.

Consider what social media is actually accused of doing to people. It makes them envious, comparing their ordinary lives to everyone else's curated highlights. It feeds narcissism, rewarding performance and the management of a public self. It deepens loneliness, substituting thin digital contact for the real thing. Every one of these is a permanent feature of human nature, documented for as long as we have records. Envy is in the oldest scriptures. The performance of the self predates the camera by millennia. Loneliness did not wait for wifi. The phone did not invent any of them.

What the phone does is turn up the volume. Comparison used to be bounded by the size of your village. Now it runs against a filtered planet. The audience for self-performance used to be the people in the room. Now it is potentially everyone, scored in public with a number. These are real intensifications and they matter. But amplification is a different mechanism from creation, and confusing the two leads to the wrong response. You do not treat an amplified problem by pretending the underlying thing did not exist before someone plugged in the speaker.

The drug analogy fails precisely here. Fentanyl introduces something the body did not contain and could not produce on its own. Social media introduces nothing new. It takes the ordinary human susceptibility to envy, vanity, and the fear of being alone, and it exposes those susceptibilities to an environment engineered to exploit them. That is a serious charge and worth pressing. But the vocabulary of chemical

addiction smuggles in a claim of total helplessness that the situation does not support, and helplessness is a bad foundation for doing anything about it.

The reason the distinction is worth defending is that it changes who has agency. If the phone is a needle, the only cure is abstinence, and the user is a patient. If the phone is an amplifier of durable human weaknesses, then the old, unglamorous responses come back into play: attention, discipline, the deliberate cultivation of the counter-habits that every previous generation used to manage the same temptations without the volume turned up. That is harder to package as a policy and harder to sell as a headline. It also happens to be true, and it treats people as something more than chemically captured victims of a device.