

Teens Feel Silicon Valley Social Media Is Manipulating Them And Raping Their Minds

Generation Z has grown up online – so why are a surprising number suddenly turning their backs on Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat?

▲ Mary Amanuel, who does not use social media. Photograph: Alecsandra Raluca Drăgoi for the Guardian

Sirin Kale

@thedalstoneyears

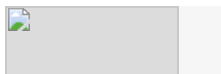


7,052

For 17-year-old Mary Amanuel, from London, it happened in Tesco. “We were in year 7,” she remembers, “and my friend had made an [Instagram](#) account. As we were buying stuff, she was counting the amounts of likes she’d got on a post. ‘Oooh, 40 likes. 42 likes.’ I just thought: ‘This is ridiculous.’”

Isabelle, an 18-year-old student from Bedfordshire who doesn’t want to disclose her surname, turned against social media when her classmates became zombified. “Everyone switched off from conversation. It became: ‘Can I have your number to text you?’ Something got lost in terms of speaking face to face. And I thought: ‘I don’t really want to be swept up in that.’” For 15-year-old Emily Sharp, from Staines in Surrey, watching bullying online was the final straw. “It wasn’t nice. That deterred me from using it.”

It is widely believed that young people are hopelessly devoted to social media. Teenagers, according to this stereotype, tweet, gram, Snap and scroll. But for every young person hunched over a screen, there are others for whom social media no longer holds such an allure. These teens are turning their backs on the technology – and there are more of them than you might think.



While many of us have been engrossed in the Instagram lives of our co-workers and peers, a backlash among young people has been quietly boiling. One 2017

survey of British schoolchildren found that 63% would be happy if social media had never been invented. Another survey of 9,000 internet users from the research firm [Ampere Analysis](#) found that people aged 18-24 had significantly changed their attitudes towards social media in the past two years. Whereas 66% of this demographic agreed with the statement “social media is important to me” in 2016, only 57% make this claim in 2018. As young people increasingly reject social media, older generations increasingly embrace it: among the 45-plus age bracket, the proportion who value social media has increased from 23% to 28% in the past year, according to Ampere’s data.

This is part of a wider trend. According to a study by US marketing firm Hill Holliday of Generation Z – people born after 1995 – half of those surveyed stated they had quit or were considering quitting at least one social media platform. When it comes to Gen Z’s relationship to social media, “significant cracks are beginning to show”, says the firm’s Lesley Bielby.

She believes we will definitely see an increase in younger people quitting or substantially reducing their use. “And as younger Gen Zers notice this behaviour among their older siblings and friends, they too will start to dial down their use of social media.”

As the first generation to grow up online, Gen Z never had to learn social media, or at least not exactly. They glided through every iteration: Facebook (2004), Twitter (2006), Instagram (2010) [Snapchat](#) (2011) in real time, effortlessly adopting each one. But a life lived in pixels from your earliest age is no easy thing.

“You start doing things that are dishonest,” says Amanuel, who quit social media aged 16. “Like Instagram: I was presenting this dishonest version of myself, on a platform where most people were presenting dishonest versions of themselves.”

Like Amanuel, Jeremiah Johnson, 18, from Luton, grew weary of the pressures of sustaining an online persona. “It’s a competition for who can appear the happiest,” he says. “And if you’re not happy and want to vent about it on social media, you’re attention-seeking.”

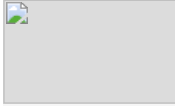
After being “bugged” by his friends to get Instagram (he had stopped using [Facebook](#) aged 16), Johnson joined. He lasted six months. “If you’re having a bad day and scrolling through it, you’re constantly bombarded with pictures of people going to parties. Even if that’s not an accurate portrayal of their lives, that’s what you see. So I stopped using it. It became depressing. It was this competition of who’s the happiest.” He pauses. “Participating in that is not something I’m interested in.”

Hyper-connected teens have been faced with a surfeit of clicks, retweets and likes – and the dopamine rush of online validation – since the neural pathways in their

Quarter of 14-year-old girls in UK have self-harmed, report finds



[Read more](#)



brains were formed.

“They’re becoming overwhelmed with the responsibility of maintaining their social sites and with upholding the somewhat inflated persona many have created on these sites, where they are constantly seeking approval via the amount of likes they get for any given post,” Bielby says.

▲ Young people are breaking stereotypes by leaving social networks.
Photograph: oneinchpunch/Getty



“The people who are the most honest about themselves do not play the game of Instagram,” Amanuel says. “The game of Instagram is who can maximise their likes by being the most risqué, outrageous or conformist as possible. I didn’t want to play that game.”

At school, social media can be a brutal barometer of popularity. “If you meet someone new and they ask for your Instagram and you only have 80 followers,” says Sharp, “they’re going to think: ‘You’re not that popular’, but if you have 2,000 followers they’re going to be like: ‘You’re the most popular person in school.’” Sharp quit social media at 13. “I’d rather not know what other people think of me.”

A desire to build authentic, offline friendships motivated some to quit. “I’m so much better at real-life socialising now,” says Amanuel. “Not just those people you accept on a friend request who are friends of a friend.”

For Tyreke Morgan, 18, from Bristol, being a hard man to get hold of – he has no social media presence at all – has its advantages. “Everyone goes through other people to find me,” Morgan laughs, “and when I hear that they’ve been trying to get hold of me I say: ‘Great!’ Why would I need 500 flakey friends?”

But when you are from a digitally native generation, quitting social media can feel like joining a monastery. Amanuel was recently asked by co-workers if she had Snapchat. “I said no,” Amanuel remembers, “and I instantly heard, like, gasps. It

Sign up to the Media Briefing: news for the news-makers



[Read more](#)

was like I'd revealed something disgusting." She explained that she did have a Snapchat handle, but never used it. "Relief came out of their eyes! It was really weird."

Teenagers not ready to quit entirely are stepping back for a while. Dr Amanda Lenhart, who researches young people's online lives, conducted a survey of US teenagers, asking them about taking time off social media. "We found that 58% of teenagers said they had taken at least one break from at least one social media platform. The most common reason? It was getting in the way of schoolwork or jobs, with more than a third of respondents citing this as their primary reason for leaving social media. Other reasons included feeling tired of the conflict or drama they could see unfolding among their peer group online, and feeling oppressed too by the constant firehose of information."

Bielby agrees that young people are becoming more aware of the amount of time they waste online. Of the young people Hill Holliday surveyed who had quit or considered quitting social media, 44% did so, she says, in order to "use time in more valuable ways".

"I don't know how people doing their A-levels or GCSEs have the time for it," says Isabelle. "They're constantly studying, but their only distraction is social media." Rather than get sucked into a "mindless vortex of never-ending scrolling," as she puts it, when Isabelle isn't studying she prefers to be outdoors.

The fact that Gen Z have had their every move documented online since before they could walk, talk, or even control their bowels helps explain their antipathy to social media: it makes sense for them to strive for privacy, as soon as they reach the age when they have a choice over their online image.

"I've seen parents post pictures of their child's first potty online," says Amy Binns of the University of Central Lancashire. "You think: 'Why are you doing this to your child? They wouldn't want this to be public.'"

Gen Z has an interest in privacy that subtly sets them apart. "Young people want to get away from the curtain-twitching village, where everyone knows everything about you," Binns says. So while today's teens spend a lot of time online, they don't actually share that much personal information. And when they do share, it's strategic. "You're painting a picture of who you are and your image," says Binns. "It's your own shop window or brand."

"Framing a picture and posting it on there is not a five-minute thing," says Amanuel, explaining that any post will be well-thought-out in order to project a certain image and maximise likes. "It takes hours of deliberation."

“When social media started, we didn’t really know what it was going to mean,” says Binns. “Young people are more aware of the value of privacy than we were 10 years ago.”

Amanuel says that the Cambridge Analytica story, with its exposure of widespread data harvesting, helped prompt her to get off social media, and many more young people seem to be turning against Facebook; on Tuesday, it was reported that the number of Facebook users aged 18 to 24 in Britain is expected to fall 1.8% this year.

Some of the teens I spoke to were concerned about how technologies such as Snap Map – a Snapchat feature that tracks your friends geographically, in real time – were spreading through their schools, and mistrustful of the privacy consequences of being surveilled by your followers wherever you go. “Snap Map is this big thing with a lot of my friends, but there is a sense of privacy that is being breached as well,” Isabelle says.

Teenagers are also educated about the ramifications of an offensive tweet, or explicit picture, as well as the health consequences of too much screen time. “Young people are being taught in schools about sharing nudes and how tweets can travel around. They’ve seen the horror stories,” says Binns.

Isabelle agrees. “Constant screen time damages your ability to see, and it also causes internal damage, such as anxiety.” Studies have shown that social media use can negatively affect mental wellbeing, and adolescents are particularly susceptible: one nationally representative survey of US 13- to 18-year-olds linked heavier social media use to depression and suicide, particularly in girls. And 41% of the Gen Z teens surveyed by Hill Holliday reported that social media made them feel anxious, sad or depressed.

▲ Jeremiah Johnson. Photograph: Anna Gordon for the Guardian



But quitting social media can create new anxieties. “Our research shows that the biggest fear of quitting or pausing social media is missing out,” Bielby says. Some are more sanguine than others. “Do I miss out on stuff?” Morgan asks. “Yeah, of course. People find it hard to keep in contact with me. They say: ‘It would be easier if you had this or that.’ But I don’t think it’s that hard to type in my number and send a text. You’re just not willing to do it.”

Others struggle with the fear of missing out. “It’s like everyone in your friend group has gone to a party without telling you,” Johnson says. At times, he questions himself. “I second-guess myself a lot. There are some days I’m really convinced I want to reinstall it, not for myself, but because I want to appear normal.”

Still, refuseniks such as Johnson may not be outliers for ever. In a world in which everyone is online, renouncing social media is a renegade, countercultural move: as quietly punk as shaving your head or fastening your clothes with safety-pins. Morgan has become a svengali for classmates wanting to escape. “My friends come to me and say: ‘Tyreke, I don’t have social media any more,’ and I go: ‘Why? I thought that’s what you guys do.’ And they say: ‘Thanks to you, because of the things you said and the stuff you’re doing.’ It’s quite cool.”

Quitting social media is a determined move: apps including Facebook and Instagram are designed to be addictive. “Social media is so ingrained in teenage culture that it’s hard to take it out. But when you do, it’s such a relief,” Amanuel says. She has received a lot of “admiration” from her peers for quitting. “They wish they were able to log off. People feel like social media is a part of them and their identities as teenagers and something you need to do,” she says. “But I’m no less of a teenager because I don’t use it.”