

Support 100 years of independent journalism.

Subscribe |

THE NEW STATESMAN

UK Edition

All Sections | Politics World Culture Ideas Long Reads Environment Business State of the Nation Spotlight Magazine

# The dark side of Strava: What happens when users lose control

“When I use Strava I’m doing it for my time, not because I enjoy it.”

By **Siham Ali**



✉ in t f

Jack Collins knew his Strava addiction had got out of hand when he almost crashed into a pedestrian while cycling through Leeds. The 33-year-old marketing executive had downloaded the app – a form of social media for fitness fanatics, allowing users to log their exercise times and follow their friends’ achievements – in order to become fitter and more disciplined. But he found that logging his speed for his friends to see caused him to cycle recklessly.

“I was on a mission to beat my last time to the detriment of everyone around me. It was scary but quite eye-opening as I didn’t think I was that competitive,” he told me. While he didn’t believe Strava should be held responsible for people’s competitive urges, it was clear to him that something about the app was bringing this impulse to the surface.

Jack is not alone. When Susan, a 24-year-old London-based student nurse, downloaded the app, she felt “in control” of her fitness again – until one day she didn’t.

She noticed a concerning new habit: she too was cycling with an urgency that she’d never experienced before. “It wasn’t because I hadn’t cycled for a long time, it was something more insidious and it was bulging from my pocket,” she said.

“I was going so fast because I was very aware that my phone was tracking my time.” She added that once the data went public, she felt as if she was putting herself “in the firing line to be compared”.

**NEW STATESMAN**

## Morning Call Newsletter

View all newsletters >

Quick and essential guide to domestic and global politics

By **Stephen Bush**

Sign up here

*[see also: “Toxic” relationships, “burnout”, “productivity dysmorphia” – why do we medicalise societal problems?]*

### Content from our partners



**“I can start when I want and finish when I want”**

Spotlight



**How to create a responsible form of “buy now, pay later”**

Spotlight



**“Unions are helping improve conditions for drivers like me”**

Spotlight

Strava has amassed more than 80 million users since its inception in 2009. Users are referred to as “athletes”, and more than two million new athletes are joining the app per month. Each week, these users upload 21.5 million runs, cycles or swims, and last year they gave out 7.1 billion “kudos” (the equivalent of a “like” on other social media sites).

During the winter 2021 lockdown, the app saw an unprecedented influx of new users. It released data showing that cycling had increased by 35 per cent in London and 50 per cent in the south-east of England.

Strava is on a trajectory to become one of the most successful fitness tracking apps ever. It isn’t too dissimilar to Garmin Connect or Nike+, which also track a user’s route, elevation, speed, timing, and heart rate. But Strava is especially attractive for its social media features – as well as sending and receiving kudos, you can post comments and upload scenic pictures of your exercise surroundings for your friends’ admiration and approval.

Most people who use the app would describe it as a force for good. It promotes healthy living, with one user describing Strava as “an app that’s helped me to rebuild old friendships based on new interests”. Others are grateful to the app for getting them through “relentless lockdowns and stretches of uncertainty”.

However, the social features that make it so compelling come at a cost: users have described fallouts over rejected friendship requests, and how it fuelled their obsessive tendencies and encouraged unhealthy social comparison.

Safety concerns about Strava have been expressed before. In 2010, William Flint, 41, died cycling down South Park Drive in Berkeley Hills, California. According to his GPS, he was going 10mph over the speed limit. Following his death, his family decided to sue Strava. They said that Flint was “obsessed” with the app, and was trying to break a segment record at the time of his death. They accused Strava of “encouraging dangerous behaviour”.

A Strava spokesperson said at the time: “Based on the facts involved in the accident and the law, there is no merit to this lawsuit.” The judge ruled in favour of Strava and the case was dismissed.

Dr Eoin Whelan of the National University of Ireland, Galway told the *New Statesman*: “Lots of people use [apps like Strava] for what we call social reciprocity, as they want to build a strong like-minded community. But there’s an unintended consequence that makes some people use it in a way that was not intended by the designer – for recognition and social gratification. This can lead to dangerous behaviour and negative well-being in the long run.”

*[see also: The future of work: the problem with millennial productivity books]*

Francesca Baker, 34, from Kent, was diagnosed with anorexia and exercise addiction when she was 18. She gravitated towards Strava because it didn’t count her calories, yet the social comparison aspect made her “panic” after a friend began following her on it. “I didn’t want to perform or compete, it was very much for my own benefit. But suddenly the idea that it was a social media platform dawned on me. I now feel judged so won’t use it,” she said.

Beth Bell, a lecturer in psychology at the University of York, said: “Not everyone is going to compare themselves favourably, and that makes them feel bad. From our qualitative work, we saw it makes these people feel demotivated and stops them from engaging in physical activity.” Bell, who studies the potential misuse of health and fitness apps among young people, says features such as calorie counting and continuous prompts are the most likely to encourage unhealthy habits.

Another user, Caroline Fletcher, 26, a London-based product designer, echoes Baker’s concerns: “When I use Strava I’m doing it for my time, not because I enjoy it,” she said. “I find myself competing with myself for the benefit of other people who don’t give a shit. But I guess I give a shit.”

On where she stands with the app now, she admitted: “I don’t use it any more. I’d rather not know my times at all. I know that I’ll constantly want to up myself or beat myself up because I’m being slow. Which isn’t the point. I want to do it because I enjoy it, not because I’m trying to win a non-existent race.”

The gamification of fitness apps like Strava has introduced yet another area of our lives that can be quantified and shared with the world. Between apps that prompt us to track and share how many books we’ve read to those that encourage us to compare our running times with those of our friends, there seems to be little space for a private moment.

Undoubtedly, many people thrive on the sense of competition encouraged by Strava, but as Caroline told me: “Sometimes it feels like the overarching objective is always to be better, do better and show everyone you’re better.”

*Some names have been changed*

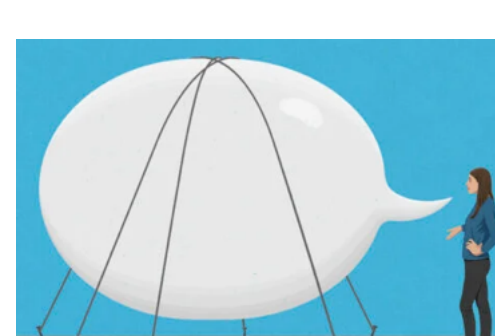
**Topics in this article:** [Health](#), [Social Media](#)

✉ in t f



Siham Ali

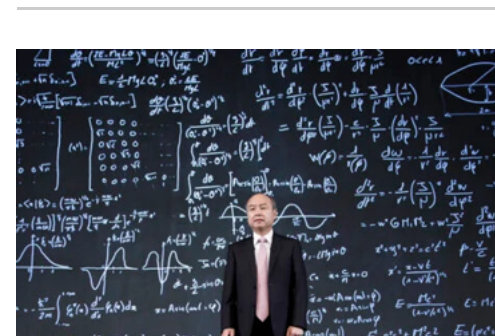
### Related



**Social Media**  
Andrew Tate has been banned from social media. Is this a new era of content moderation?



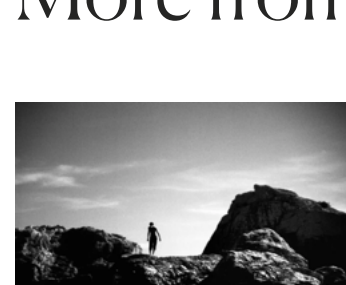
**Business**  
Will subpoenaing Jack Dorsey help Elon Musk win his Twitter trial?



**Business**  
The dangerous approach of SoftBank’s Masayoshi Son

### More from this author

See All



**Siham Ali**  
The dark side of Strava: What happens when users lose control

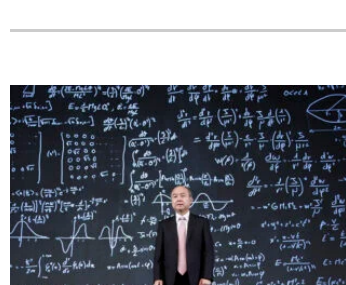


**Siham Ali**  
How policing is being sewn into the fabric of British schools

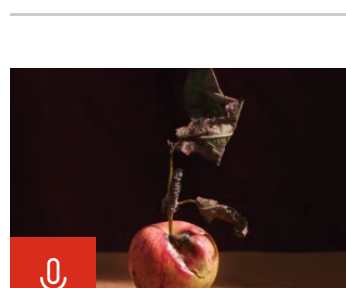
### More of this topic



**Business**  
Will subpoenaing Jack Dorsey help Elon Musk win his Twitter trial?

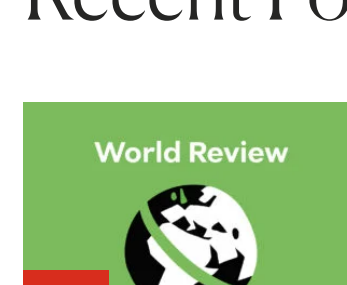


**Business**  
The dangerous approach of SoftBank’s Masayoshi Son

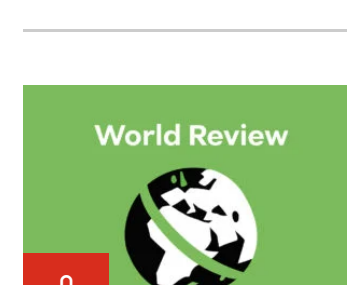


**Long reads**  
Do you want to live forever? Big Tech and the quest for eternal youth

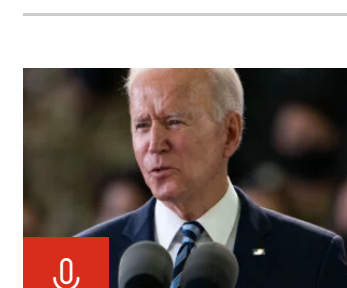
### Recent Podcasts



**World Review**  
After six months of war in Ukraine, what will happen next?



**World Review**  
Afghanistan, one year on – with Bilal Sarwary



**The New Statesman podcast**  
What can Keir Starmer learn from Joe Biden? With Matthew McGregor