Why we're all quitting social media

As apps like Instagram and Twitter take a toll on our mental health, many are choosing to walk away altogether

By Marianne Power
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Studies have found that limiting social media use can improve symptoms of depression and anxiety | CREDIT: Ruby Martin

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It's been eight weeks since Selina Barker left the "toxic relationship" that made her feel "agitated, stressed and burdened". She knew for a long time that the situation was not working, but thought she had no choice but to stay because she would feel lost and alone without it.

She was wrong. Just two months after making the radical decision, Barker has not looked back.

She says: "What's surprised me is how easy it was. I thought because it was such a big part of my life I would really miss it. I thought there would be a kind of withdrawal period, but there wasn't. I don't think I fully knew how uncomfortable, drained and unhappy it made me feel.

"Giving myself permission to step away has had a bigger impact on me than even I imagined. It was so liberating. I feel happy and at peace and have so much delicious time to do the things I want to do."

Barker is not talking about a marriage, nor a friendship. She is talking about breaking up with social media. The business coach, who had 20,000 followers online, says: "I've always had a love-hate relationship with social media and it's only got worse over the past few years.

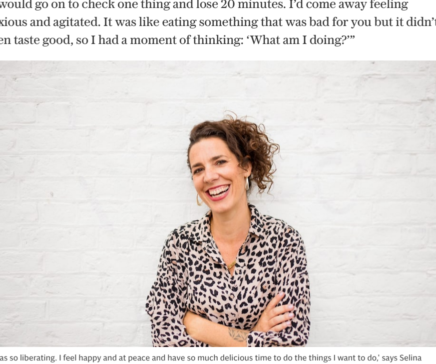
"I never really liked it, but I kept feeling like I had to be there, to stay connected with friends, create community and grow my business.

"I thought that if I wasn't on Instagram then I would be out of the loop, that I would lose relationships and not be informed. Social media makes you feel that you need it – it's a dependency.

"But I got increasingly irritated by it. It used to be interesting posts and suddenly it was middle-aged women pointing into the air, making reels.

"I had unfollowed and muted a lot of people but Instagram kept offering suggestions of who I should follow. I couldn't control what was being pushed on me, and it was making me feel invaded – it was intrusive.

"I would go on to check one thing and lose 20 minutes. I'd come away feeling anxious and agitated. It was like eating something that was bad for you but it didn't even taste good, so I had a moment of thinking: 'What am I doing?'"



'It was so liberating. I feel happy and at peace and have so much delicious time to do the things I want to do,' says Selina Barker | CREDIT: Geoff Pugh/John Lawrence

Barker says that reading Disconnected by Emma Gannon made her see that she didn't need to be on social media. "None of us does. If it works for you great – but if it doesn't, just quit."

And many people are doing just that. In May, bestselling author John Boyne wrote about his decision to delete his Twitter account after the online harassment he suffered following the publication of My Brother's Name is Jessica, his 2019 novel narrated by a boy whose sibling transitions to female.

Since quitting the "toxic blue bird" he says: "My anxiety levels have dropped to zero, my mental health has improved immeasurably and I've read more books than I usually would."

A few weeks ago singer James McMorrow posted on Instagram that even though he had an album to promote, he would "step back" from social media. He said: "I suspect a lot of people feel the same pressure I have to build an aspirational narrative in the hope that maybe it'll become real."

And it's not just sensitive artists who are turning their backs on it. Last year former footballer Thierry Henry came off social, after accusing the platforms of making money from hate and not doing enough to tackle online abuse. England manager Gareth Southgate, who has not been on Twitter since 2014, wants all players to consider following his lead.

Even businesses are stepping away. In January this year luxury fashion brand Bottega Veneta made a surprise exit from social media before launching a quarterly digital magazine.

Earlier this year, singer James McMorrow announced he was stepping back from social media

Meanwhile, a study published in May by the University of Bath found that "taking a one-week break from social media improves wellbeing, depression and anxiety". The researchers gathered 154 volunteers aged 18 to 72 and randomly divided them into an intervention group, which was asked to stop using social media for one week, and a control group, which was given no instructions.

At the end of the week the researchers found "significant between group differences" in wellbeing, depression and anxiety, with the group that went without social media faring better on all counts.

So are we entering the "anti-social media" age? Hilda Burke, a psychotherapist and author of The Phone Addiction Workbook, thinks so. "It's definitely in the zeitgeist," she says. "They say the first step to addressing a problem is acknowledging you have a problem and I think that as a society we are now seeing we have a problem.

"People are increasingly conscious about the time they are spending on social media – and the effect it is having. I have clients who will talk about checking one thing on Instagram and three hours later they are down a rabbit hole – it's a time-suck. People report that it's really affecting their sleep, their anxiety levels; it affects their wellbeing and mental health.

"How many people are able to go completely sober and delete the apps, I don't know. I think they are the outliers at the moment, but I know people who take say, two months off. I wonder if we are reaching peak social media."

Katie Brockhurst, a social-media consultant and digital wellbeing coach, and author of Social Media For a New Age, agrees that we are waking up to the dark side of online networks. She has been using social media since it began and was a huge believer in its power until she found herself burnt out and distressed by the tactics social- media companies were using to keep her – and her clients – hooked.

How to break up with social media

by Katie Brockhurst

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"I started to see how damaging it was – not only for our brains, but also for society. Lots of clients were burnt out and they were stressed online, they were suffering from low self-esteem. What was happening on social media was really impacting them emotionally. They constantly questioned themselves and feared being judged and I thought something is not right here.

"Then I started to uncover the addictive design stuff and that blew my mind. I felt like I'd been naive thinking these networks have our best interests at heart and actually they had consulted with gambling houses on how to hook us, so when you refresh your social feed, that's based on slot machines and the 'variable reward' of either getting a like or a comment or a new bit of content. It's affecting our nervous system in ways we don't realise."

She worries that spending a lot of time on social media is reducing our ability to be creative – something that Johann Hari wrote about in his book Stolen Focus, published earlier this year.

She sees that the fear of being "cancelled" is crippling. "We are not designed to be exposed to the judgement of so many people; we were only ever meant to be close to a small group of people; our bodies have not adapted to this kind of exposure," says Brockhurst, likening trolling to a "psychic attack". It's no wonder then that social-media use has been linked to poor mental health, and in some cases, suicides.

It was this news that prompted Lush Cosmetics to make the decision to take its business off Facebook and Instagram in November 2021. Its 10 million followers logged on to Lush accounts only to be met with the notice: "Be somewhere else" (see panel, right).

Brockhurst says that for most people and businesses it is not practical to quit completely – and that we should remember that for many of us there are benefits of social media. "Everyone loves that you can keep in touch with friends and family and connect with people worldwide and be inspired by others.

Thierry Henry is one of a number of high-profile figures to quit social media | CREDIT: John Nguyen/JNVisuals

"Our ability now to create and share is amazing and incredible. But we need to have a much better relationship with it," she says. Brockhurst believes there is a middle ground between using it and letting it use you.

Burke agrees, suggesting that it's possible to come off one site rather than all of them. "There might be a particular channel you find problematic. So seeing all these beautiful people on Instagram might make you feel worse, but LinkedIn might be really useful."

Barker has come off Twitter and Facebook completely, but keeps her Instagram accounts open. She updates followers when she writes a newsletter – her new way of contacting people – but only does that through a scheduling app, which means she does not have to go on to Instagram.

"I am actually going to keep the Instagram accounts open for business because I value the community connections on there, but I can post things and answer people's comments without once opening the app and being exposed to all the noise and nonsense."

She says the difference in her life has been profound. "I suddenly have all this time to read books, newsletters and search for blog posts on the topics I'm most interested in. I know that whatever screen I'm looking at to access that content won't be bombarding me with videos and memes from people I have not asked to see, and that is a great relief."

Lush CEO Mark Constantine thinks that social media is a trend that is waning. "We had a huge wave of an immense fashion and now we are starting to wonder what happened. I just hope that we don't see a generation where we have done some sort of damage."

He sees his grandchildren as already not using social media in the same way that many of us do – they don't want to leave a trace of themselves on the internet. He believes that we all have to take our own stand.

"If society is producing lots of really conscious and careful people who will not stand for this rubbish, then you can get a big sea change."

'Do I miss Facebook? No – which is weird, because I spent a lot of time on it'

Mark Constantine, founder of Lush

Constantine made the decision to remove Lush from social media | CREDIT: John Lawrence

Mark Constantine, founder of cosmetics brand Lush, made the move to leave social media after a Facebook whistle-blower testified that the business knew that its products were making teenagers anxious, depressed and suicidal – and did nothing about it.

Constantine said at that moment he knew the company had to come off. "We know a lot of young women are interested in Lush. I normally worry that a product is going to bring someone out in a rash – and I don't like that – but this..."

He likens it to the equivalent of putting Lush stores down a dark and dangerous alleyway – you wouldn't do it, because you don't want to put people in danger. Facebook and Instagram feel that way to him now.

"We specialise in doing things that are hopefully going to ease anxiety, so why would we be involved in something that does the opposite?

"We like to think that we attract staff who are compassionate. If you visit Lush and you are down in the dumps, it might well give you a bit of a boost. We know that bathing lowers your blood pressure, it improves your mood, it helps with mental anguish, helps you with your sleep – it's pretty much opposite to what social media offers... our purpose does not align with their purpose."

It was not the first time the company had made this decision. In March 2019 Lush announced it was switching off social because it was tired of algorithms that meant that people did not see its content unless they paid for advertising. Then the pandemic hit, and faced with closing 800 stores, it went back on Facebook and Instagram.

"When I read the article about the whistle-blower I thought: what are we doing still here? We came off once – what happened there? Why were we still on it? Was our first attempt some smug little effort that went nowhere? There is no corporate responsibility in that."

So Constantine made the announcement that globally Lush would come off social. Again. It was not a popular decision within the company. "We had big arguments," he says. "When you're on social, it's hard to imagine a world anywhere else. We asked people's opinions, but everyone is addicted to it, so you can't get a sensible point of view.

"It's a drug that has ducked underneath all our defences because it's not something you take – you don't drink it. We all know it: I have 11 grandchildren, let alone my kids and myself, and we're all busy with our phones."

He persevered and says it is hard to know how much it has affected business. "There is so much other stuff happening – we closed our Russian business, our Ukrainian business has been closed for us, we had Brexit, Covid, and the lack of tourism affected us because many of our stores are in tourist places..."

'If you visit Lush and you are down in the dumps, it might well give you a bit of a boost,' says Constantine | CREDIT: NEIL HALL

The brand still uses Twitter as a way of dealing with customer concerns and are exploring new ways to communicate with customers. It also relies on the fact that its products are good enough that people will want them, whether they are reminded to buy them on social media or not.

He really liked his own Facebook account: "On Facebook I always felt like being a bit of a newspaper editor myself, I chose the stories I featured... I liked talking to customers at 3am... but have I missed being off it? No, weirdly, which surprises me because I spent a lot of time on it. I'm concerned I'm losing touch, but I wonder how much I was in touch or how much I was being misled."

But he is finding other ways stay up to date. "I've been in business since I was in my early 20s and I know a lot of people. A lot of ex-employees would come on and chat and that was always a pleasure.

"I do miss that there was a whole set of people I would talk to on there, but I've made more of an effort to keep in touch on text and to make plans to get together. And I quite like just sending pictures to my kids, and that doesn't have be on Facebook."

He does not think that everyone should come off social media: "I think business has been very tough and I think you should weigh it up and do what is appropriate for you; it's a personal choice."

'I can't use Apple Pay on my phone, but there's this thing called cash'

James Buckley, 20, is a trainee journalist who lives in Portsmouth

Over the past few months I've stepped away from my smartphone, with its endless social media, pathetic battery and alarmingly high number of unread emails. I wanted to do this because of the stream of notifications emanating from it.

To replace it, I bought an old Nokia from eBay. It started as a temporary move, to give myself more time to do academic work. But choosing sanity over Snapchat and individuality over Instagram has impacted my life in a way I wouldn't have thought of before. It's a lot easier to fall asleep at night now that there's no chance of doom-scrolling through social media at 3am. And there's a lot more free time (which I mostly spend reading, or seeing friends and family).

There have also been a lot of benefits to my mental health – I feel happier, somehow. And free from celebrities being cancelled, the constant chatter and the beeping.

Some of my friends – all of whom are in their 20s, like me – are not too happy with my decision. One refuses to use texts, another will call me hours after I call them. Another insists that I should get a smartphone again, and that "the 1990s called and it wants its phone back".

My Nokia does have a web browser, which I use for reading the news and sending some emails – though scrolling through Facebook with the keypad is something that leaves much to be desired (something about pushing the "7" key four times for an "S" lands me on the wrong side of early 2000s nostalgia). There's also a camera, which I'll use occasionally (my friends like the "vintage" aesthetic), but you'd be hard pressed to make out any discernible facial features.

I am not one of those people who are constantly on top of the latest trends, so the notion of Fomo is completely alien to me. Sometimes I miss scrolling through social media, but can use my laptop for that. Obviously, it's not as portable, so I leave it at home when I go out – which is a good thing.

Paying for things is easy as well. I can't use Google or Apple Pay, but there's this thing called cash: I can just count out some coins and hand them over. Although things are different in London from Portsmouth, where I live; in London shopkeepers stare at the cash in my hand as if I've just produced a chequebook or a Filofax.

I'm able to put music on to my phone, and it'll play with any headphones. There's no Spotify, YouTube or Netflix, but for a mere £25, I find that the advantages are priceless: measuring battery life in weeks rather than days; the game Snake; and it'll outlast the apocalypse. All of which makes me feel like a "dumb phone" is rather a smart move.

Do you intend to quit or take a break from social media? Let us know in the comments below

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