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Logged off: meet the teens who refuse to use social media

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

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.’”

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.

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.. 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. [...]

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.”

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.”

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