

Breaking up with Facebook: users confess they're spending less time

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A new AI tool created to help identify certain kinds of substance abuse based on a homeless youth's Facebook posts could provide homeless shelters with vital information to incorporate into each individual's case management plan. Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Mikita Burton has had a Facebook account for nine years, nearly as long

as her youngest child has been alive. And, until arguments about the presidential election spread like a contagion throughout her news feed, she averaged three hours a day chatting with friends on the social network.

Now, she tops out at 20 minutes, has deleted the app from her phone and traded in Facebook for Instagram. The 41-year-old mother of three from Overland, Kan., posts on Facebook once a week, catching up with close [friends](#) by texting, calling or meeting them for coffee or happy hour.

"The less time I spent on Facebook, the better I felt," says Burton, who works for the school district.

More than a dozen U.S. users interviewed by USA TODAY say they are starting to question their always-on relationship with the giant social network. Not only are they liking it less, they say they're scaling back how much time they spend there. And those rumblings of growing Facebook fatigue are starting to show up in tracking data.

Nearly one in five Facebook users—18.4%—say they are using Facebook less than they did a year ago, according to a new poll of 1,000 people by Honest Data, a market research firm run by pollster Tavis McGinn, who used to work at Facebook. That compares to 14% who said they increased their time and 28% who said their use remained the same. Measurements taken by research firm Comscore also show minutes spent on Facebook in the U.S. are declining.

"They had me at hello back in the day," says Michael Brito, a 44-year-old digital marketer from Silicon Valley, who dramatically reduced how much time he spends on Facebook after his [news feed](#) stopped reflecting his interests. "They need to reinvent that."

Facebook used to be one of the happiest places on earth. People checked

in throughout the day, reconnecting with former classmates and far-flung family members to share vacation photos and cat videos, marriage proposals and first steps, the loss of a job or the death of a parent. Along the way to wiring together about a third of humanity, Facebook became an advertising colossus, forging one of the Internet's most successful businesses valued by investors at half-a-trillion dollars.

It's still everyone's favorite online hub, with more than 2 billion members logging in monthly. But some of those users have started to stray.

Arguments over fake news and partisan politics are driving pixelated wedges between friends. Watching highlight reels of other people's lives makes them feel depressed and inadequate. They worry that they've become hooked on dopamine hits from likes and comments on their posts. Even worse, some Facebook users sense that the time they spend on Facebook is distancing friends and family members from one another and making everyone feel lonelier.

For years, Brenda Rivera obsessively checked Facebook for updates from friends and family. She describes the experience like a daily soap opera, and she couldn't bear to miss the latest episode. Then Rivera realized she had developed a full-blown social media addiction. Now she limits herself to 45 minutes a day and tries to stay off Facebook on the weekends.

"I love that I can be connected to friends and family and see events and happenings, interact and laugh or cry. But it also has a dark side," said Rivera, a 52-year-old photographer and fitness instructor from Cedar Park, Texas. "You don't even realize it but you log in just to check your feed and 30 minutes later, you don't realize you have been on that long."

Some who are cutting back still log in to post a bit of family news or a

photo, to take part in a Facebook group or to get recommendations from friends on a roofer or plumber. Others say they continue to see the Facebook memories that pop up or use Facebook as a digital scrapbook to collect memories of their children as they grow. But these users are also being more mindful of how much time they devote to these activities—and that is starting to show up in some tracking data.

Facebook stopped revealing how much time people spend on Facebook in 2016. Last month Facebook's chief executive Mark Zuckerberg told investors that users spent 50 million fewer hours a day on the social network in the fourth quarter. He attributed the decline to changes Facebook is making to show more posts from friends and family that spark "meaningful" social interactions and downgrading links to articles and videos, which encourage people to passively scroll through your news feed. Facebook executive Adam Mosseri said this week at Recode's Code Media conference that Facebook is still trying to understand and measure what's meaningful to people.

This isn't the first time users have vowed to wean themselves from Facebook, only to be reeled back in.

"It's a complicated story because Facebook is that bedrock platform people will still turn to on a weekly or a monthly basis," says eMarketer analyst Debra Aho Williamson.

The tipping point for those who have cut back on Facebook this time: The personal mudslinging that has continued in the tense political climate following the presidential election. One Facebook user says her father-in-law unfriended his son—her husband—because they clashed politically.

Lisa Brown, the 53-year-old caretaker to her elderly mother and a Trump supporter from Pekin, Ill., says she logs in to Facebook to catch

up on news of her two adult daughters and videos of her 18-month-old granddaughter. But her use of Facebook dwindled as partisan fireworks raged.

"There's a lot of the political stuff on there right now with Trump in office," says Brown, who has unfriended a few people and been unfriended by a few. "It's a toxic mess."

Libby Pelham, a 54-year-old Web developer and business analyst from Lakeland, Tenn., says she took refuge in Facebook groups that ban political talk in favor of lighter fare such as sharing recipes.

"I had crazy Democrat friends ranting and crazy Republican friends ranting," Pelham said in an email. "I felt like it was affecting my mental health just being bombarded with all this information."

Breaking up with Facebook isn't easy by design. It taps into people's complex emotional and psychological needs and surfaces status updates that keep them boomeranging for more. And, if people spend long stretches away from Facebook, reminder emails alerting users to friends' photos and comments are one way Facebook tries to coax them back.

Facebook, which owns a family of apps, also knows how to adapt when people's time and attention wanders elsewhere. When the growing popularity of photo-sharing service Instagram became digital catnip for Facebook users, Facebook bought it. Same with messaging app WhatsApp.

Teen messaging favorite Snapchat rejected Facebook's buyout offers, so Facebook and its other apps have instead copied Snapchat features in hopes of luring young people. That didn't work with Finnegan Smith, a 17-year-old high school junior who recently deleted the Facebook account he rarely used.

New research from eMarketer predicts that, for the first time, less than half of U.S. Internet users ages 12 to 17 will use Facebook this year.

"It was not the site for me," says Smith, a Snapchat user who logged into Facebook every couple months to accept friend requests, but hardly ever checked his news feed.

Some say they have withdrawn from Facebook after realizing it had become a habit they were having trouble kicking. One user described getting the shakes when she hadn't peeked at her news feed for a few hours.

Alarm bells about the addictive properties of Facebook have been sounded by researchers and even by executives who helped build the company. A new campaign from Common Sense Media is putting pressure on tech giants to make their products less addictive, particularly for kids. One tech CEO, Salesforce.com's Marc Benioff, recently suggested Facebook should be regulated like the tobacco industry.

Others complain that Facebook has turned into "Fakebook" or "Bragbook" where friends project an image, not their authentic selves. Pals showing off vacation photos from exotic destinations or bragging about their children's educational accomplishments ends up making them feel badly about their own lives.

"The wives that post how much they love their husbands, yet I know they are on the verge of divorce. Or the ones that post a photo of their brand new Porsche in the driveway yet they are about to lose their home," says Jennifer Banks Levinson, a 47-year-old middle school teacher with five kids from Calabasas, Calif. "It used to be all real-life happy pictures of the kids or even a bitch session here and there."

But it was only when her news feed was consumed with the sad news of

two teen suicides that Levinson deactivated her Facebook account the Friday of Super Bowl weekend.

"I was so heartbroken, I decided that I need to focus on happy stuff. My family," she says. "It was an amazing weekend. I wasn't glued to my phone and I didn't feel pressure to post or see what others were doing."

A similar moment of self-reflection prompted Stacey Heifetz to question how much of her life she was devoting to Facebook. Every few minutes, she felt compelled to check her news feed. "It was like breathing," says Heifetz, a 51-year-old mother of three from Woodland Hills, Calif., who owns and manages apartment buildings.

Then last summer she surprised her husband with a plane ticket to Greece and rushed to Facebook to tell all her friends. "My husband said something to me that night that really clicked," she recalled. "Why did I need everyone to see it and like it to make me feel better about me?"

Heifetz says she tried to swear off Facebook in September but relapsed to chat with friends about Game 7 of the World Series. Then two months ago, she signed off and has mostly stayed off. Since then, she estimates she's spent a grand total of 30 minutes on Facebook.

"I was constantly looking to see what everybody was doing. When I say it out loud, it's horrible," she says. "I'm so glad I am not on it anymore."

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