

Bye social media, hello life



Tired of constant online connectivity, an increasing number of people are logging off social media and logging on to real life. PHOTO: Pixabay

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Over the past year, arts student Ke Weiliang has been gradually deleting his numerous social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Tumblr.

Last month, he announced on Facebook that he had gone on a "social media detox... for the sake of my mental health".

He wanted to delete his Facebook account too, but decided to keep it for its networking opportunities.

At age 24, Mr Ke is the very definition of a millennial and a digital native, someone who grew up with all the conveniences of Google, Wikipedia, Facebook , Youtube and eBay.

His is a generation that takes it for granted that you can have all the information you need on a subject at your fingertips, and you can instantly connect with anyone from anywhere in the world for free.

But Mr Ke started to swim against the tide of his generation, famous for its heavy social media usage, when he felt a growing unease within himself.

He says: "I was developing a tendency to worry about how many likes I was getting for my posts. I kept checking my posts to find out if my close friends had liked or favoured them - or, if they hadn't, why. It was starting to affect my self-esteem."

Starting last year, he decided to simplify his life by deleting his accounts.

Gradually, he found himself becoming "calmer" and "less anxious", he says.

He reckons he's not going back on social media anytime soon - unless work or school demands it of him.

Mr Ke is not alone in choosing to disconnect. Many people are logging off to live differently.

Ironically, many go on Facebook to announce the start of their "digital detox" and ask their friends to call them on the phone instead.

Those older than Mr Ke, especially, have become slightly nostalgic of the slower-paced life before the dawn of high-speed broadband connections.

Writer and poet Christine Chia, 37, recently took time off her social media platforms to reflect.

She says: "What I miss most about pre-Internet life was the downtime you have just to read and daydream. When I was in school, my friends and I used to take long bus rides to no particular destination, just so we could chat and take in the sights.

"These days, every student on the bus is looking down on his or her mobile phone and engaged in some online activity. They barely look up."

Keynes' Utopia

In 1930, John Maynard Keynes forecasted that within a century, economic progress would have us working no more than 15 hours a week - or three hours a workday.

We would then be left with so much leisure time, we wouldn't know what to do with ourselves.

It is 2017, just 13 years short of Keynes' century.

As various surveys have it, the average working hours of Singaporeans today is between 43.5 and 46 hours a week - the longest in the world.

It is not three hours a day so much as three times the 15 hours Keynes projected.

What happened to Keynes' utopian vision?

Well, capitalism came along, promising bigger rewards for greater effort and productivity.

It made us strive higher and work longer hours, in hopes that we can earn and purchase more things than we actually need to survive.

Then, just before the turn of the millennia, the Internet became mainstream, followed some years later by the iPhone.

They brought paradigm-shifting conveniences, distractions and demands.

They made our lives smarter, faster and more convenient than we ever dreamed possible.

They've also intensified our needs for stimulation, entertainment and self-gratification.

Wise men say, only fools rush in. But rush in we did, replacing real human interaction with manic online communication.

We trawl through dozens, if not hundreds of e-mail a day.

We Facebook diligently to check up on friends' lives and bookmark news features to read in our spare time (which never really comes).

We scroll down Twitter and Instagram feed for the most dramatic comments and pictures.

Singaporeans do it more voraciously than almost any other people on the planet.

Government statistics put our mobile device population penetration rate at 148 per cent and wireless broadband population penetration rate at 192 per cent - suggesting that many people actively use more than one mobile phone, and several households have more than one broadband subscription.

We spend so much time online that over half of Singaporeans (52 per cent) say they are not capable of lasting up to 12 hours without internet access, says a 2014 Tata Communications survey.

Outside Singapore, there are around 3.010 billion Internet users. The estimated global Internet penetration is 42 per cent.

But some Singaporeans are taking pause to ask, what is the upshot of all this online interaction?

Will continuous (some say superficial) absorption of words, images and videos make us stronger, faster, smarter, richer?

Do 5,000 Facebook friends indicate how loved we are? Do 100,000 followers on Twitter denote significance?

If our posts go viral, does that count as a notch on the belt?

Highs And Lows

TOUCH Community Services' cyberwellness senior coach Shem Yao says our lives have changed dramatically since the dawn of the Internet age.

And though he emphasises that technology itself is neutral and amoral, we need greater awareness of how we're using it and how it's impacting our day-to-day habits and interactions.

"Take, for instance, our sleep problems," says Mr Yao. "What we found was that the entire family could be sleeping later at night, with parents doing work on their laptops while the children are playing games or interacting on social media. When the parents do it, they're also allowing their kids to do the same.

"For young Singaporeans who are surrounded by all this attractive technology, the virtual world is as real as the real world. It's where they express

themselves freely and naturally. In fact, when their parents bring them to TOUCH Cyberwellness to be counselled, the children might tell us that their parents themselves are glued to their digital devices. So the children are getting their behavioural cues from their parents too."

Dr Suresh Joseph of The Cabin Singapore, a specialist addiction treatment centre, has treated many young patients addicted to online gaming.

He says: "Gaming activates the same brain reward circuits as sex, alcohol, gambling and drugs. It's readily available, very interactive and highly rewarding psychologically."

And though Dr Joseph has never met a patient addicted to social media, he says it does have components that would encourage its frequent usage.

After all, they are designed to be colourful, fun, friendly, easy-to-use and highly rewarding.

Each time you see "likes" on your post, your body releases dopamine, also known as "reward molecule", into your brain's pleasure centres to make you proud and happy.

That can become addictive.

Tech companies know this well. Google, for instance, famously tested 41 shades of blue to see which got users clicking more.

Google claims changing the shade of blue used on its advertising links earned the company an extra US\$200m a year in revenue.

Meanwhile, attention spans have also taken a hit.

In 2015, Microsoft surveyed 2,000 participants and studied the brain activity of 112 others using electroencephalograms (EEGs).

It found that since 2000, people's average attention span dropped from 12 seconds to eight seconds - meaning they generally lose concentration after a mere eight seconds.

Goldfish are often ridiculed for their short attention spans - just check out the goldfish memes online - but they have an attention span of 9 seconds.

That's one second more than humans.

Long-suffering schoolteachers are also grumbling about their students' inability to pay attention or complete assignments that require intensive reading.

Literature and General Paper teacher RT, who could not reveal his real name, has been teaching at the secondary and junior college level since 1993.

He says: "The reading abilities of my students today are pretty atrocious compared to their peers just a decade ago.

Their peers had no trouble reading 500 to 700 pages of Dickens or Hardy. But the Lit students today are struggling.

They tell me they can't finish one chapter without checking their phones several times."

Are their grades dropping? Surprisingly, no.

"They're getting their homework done," says RT. "Just that, it's a chore to them. Unlike their predecessors, they can't just sit down and get lost in a book for hours because there are so many distractions."

In a recent study by the National Arts Council of 1,015 Singaporeans and Permanent Residents, 54 per cent of respondents believed that books would be replaced by computers and the Internet in the next 20 years.

And two out of every five respondents preferred to engage in social media than to read.

Disconnect, Re-connect

If most Singaporeans find it hard to disconnect from their laptops, a few have maintained strict rules of online engagement.

Kelvin Khoo, a globe-trotting 39-year-old engineering consultant, has long been wary of the charms of social media.

"When people started asking me how many friends I had on Facebook, I knew there's something pointless about it all. So I stopped logging into my account altogether, and returned my focus to more important things in life like family and career."

Mr Khoo has strict discipline about checking e-mail as well: "I do it the first thing in the morning and then once more after lunch. If anyone needs to get in touch with me urgently, they can always do it the old-fashioned way - call."

He uses the Internet for specific activities such as "checking gold prices, new properties and exchange rates."

He prefers to chart his thoughts with pen and paper.

Other people started to restrict their online activities because of specific turning points in their lives.

Ms Chia, for instance, cut off all Facebook engagement for a month because of the indignation she felt towards then-Presidential candidate Donald Trump.

"As a liberal person who believes in diversity and acceptance, I got upset over his policy promises, so I just had to stop going to Facebook, because my pages were awash with stories of him."

She is now back on Facebook, but chooses carefully what she clicks on.

Meanwhile, Theresa Wong, an environmental sustainability expert, has also chosen to limit her social media engagement.

Like Mr Ke, she wondered what impact sites like Instagram and Facebook might have had on her behaviour.

She says: "I do think being on social media shapes your habits. You start to tailor your behaviour around what you want to post. Even when you're vacationing, you sometimes wonder if you should snap something and post it. So limiting my social media engagement was my way of taking back control."

She recently wrote on Facebook that she wanted find a balance between "privacy and sharing" and was restricting her Instagram account to a smaller group of friends.

She ended her post with: "So please don't be offended, ask me out to tea instead."

And, perhaps, it's Ms Wong final words that remind us of what we need more of - not Facebook likes, Instagram hearts or Twitter favourites - but tea with friends.

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