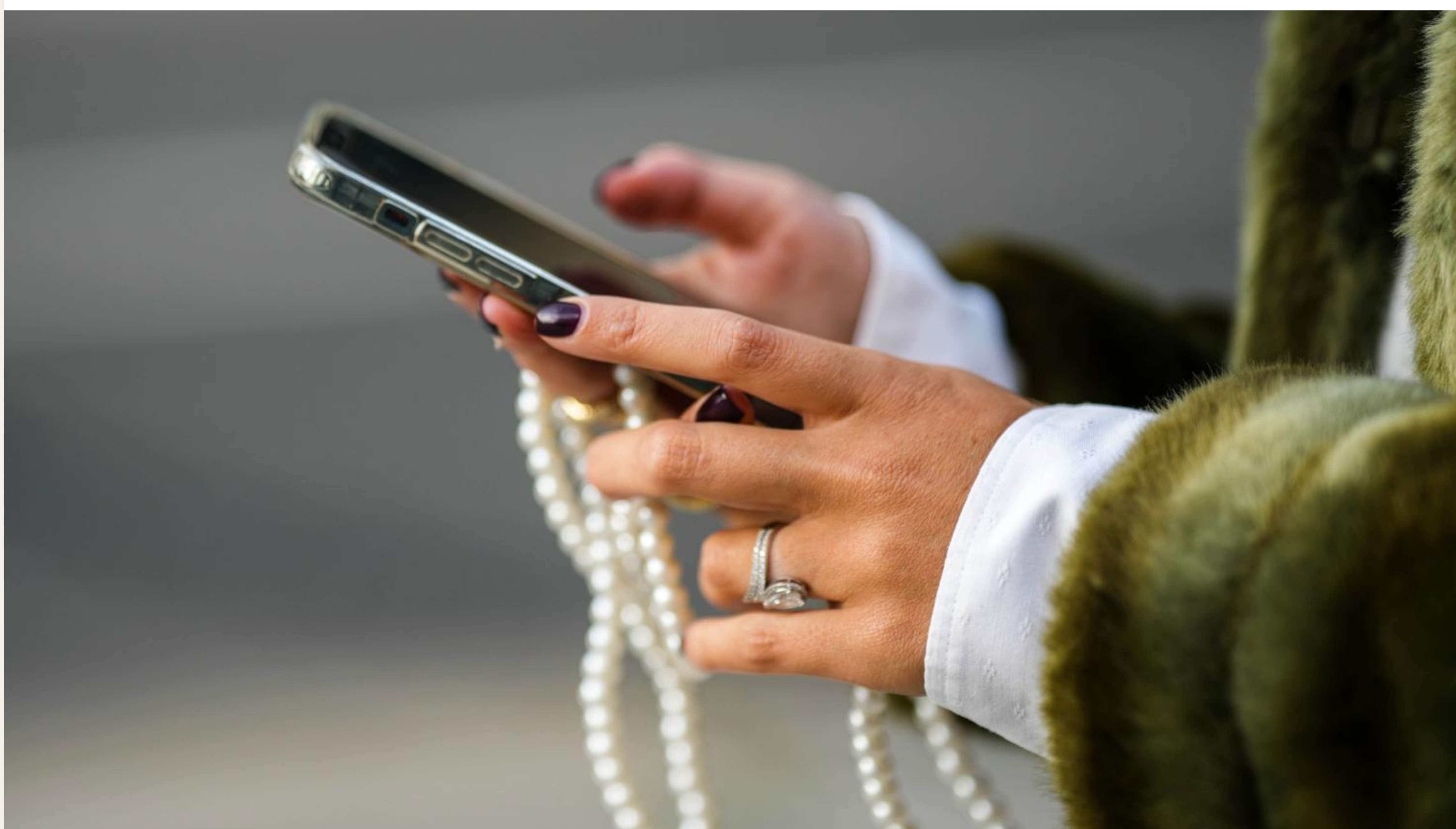




TREND

TOTAL SWIPE-OUT: WHY DATING IS BETTER IN REAL LIFE

Huge numbers of twentysomethings are heading off the apps and instead seeking love IRL. We find out why



Online dating: "a disorientating fever dream, a never-ending loop of profiles"
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Megan Agnew | Sunday December 11 2022, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

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You are on a dating app and this is how it goes: a man with a face, another man with a face, one with a dog, with his mum, without a shirt. A man playing tennis, holding a child ("My niece!"), out walking, out clubbing, at the pub. He's 6ft 2in, 5ft 6in, Buddhist, spiritual, liberal, reads books, sells books, wants book recommendations; he's a banker, a builder, an "account manager"; he's 27, 40, open to children, in an open relationship and you should only go out with him if that's OK with you, OK?

It is a disorientating fever dream, a never-ending loop of profiles, filtered only by age and location. It means you are left to invent your own strange rules — based on jobs or spelling errors or what their friends look like — to narrow them down. You become judgmental, detached, ruthless — and so do they, the people you are swiping past, while they swipe from their own sofa at home.

After a decade of swiping, however, people have had enough. "The tide is turning against the apps," says Jo Hemmings, a behavioural psychologist known as the UK's first dating coach. "We thought they were our salvation — there was this great hope, but today there is a real sense of disappointment at the results."

I have certainly felt a "vibe shift" among my friends and peers. They are bored and exhausted by dating apps, suspicious about the mysterious algorithms that control our love lives and cynical about the results. We hate being on them, we hate what they have done to relationships, we hate what they have done to dating.

According to the information services company Business of Apps, the number of global dating-app downloads decreased by 9 per cent between 2020 and 2022. Meanwhile, face-to-face singles events are busier than ever and people, it seems, are asking each other out again. Inner Circle, a dating app that throws parties around the world, says that tickets to its events are selling two and a half times quicker than they did pre-pandemic.

So how did we get here — a generation hooked on finding love on their phones but annoyed about it? What has it done to our brains, our relationships, our communities? And how do we get back to the real world?

The first online dating site — [match.com](https://www.match.com) — which launched in 1995, made members fill out long questionnaires to match you with like-minded people. It was detailed, considered and time-consuming. Then came social media, followed by smartphones and then, in 2012, Tinder — a perfect combination of the two. Tinder put everyone in the palm of your hand and turned dating into a game. Prospects were narrowed down by age and location, but otherwise you just swiped. What a thrill! Soon, though, it became known as the app to go to for hook-ups — and for being shallow and superficial. In the past five years, dating apps have been trying to recover some intellectual gravitas. Hinge markets itself as the dating app that is “designed to be deleted”, though it looks and functions largely like Tinder. Bumble makes women send the first message. Victoria has been described as the Soho House of dating apps.

Looking at the data, though, it doesn't seem like they are working as well as we think. In the most recent YouGov survey of dating, published in 2020, most people met their current partner through work (18 per cent) or mutual friends (18 per cent), with dating apps coming in at just 6 per cent. Most people still meet their partner offline, even 25 to 34-year-olds (66 per cent).



Megan Agnew, 27: How do we find love when we're so picky? We are fully expecting to meet someone perfect. The apps have hacked our brains
LUCY YOUNG FOR THE TIMES

Anna, 26, works in fashion and says that even setting a date up is “almost impossible” now because everyone on the apps seems so fatigued to be there. “We've been on it so long the excitement has worn off. There's no thrill any more. It feels lame.” It has given us the chance to define our “type”. “But,” Anna continues, “how do we go about finding love when we've made ourselves so picky? We are fully expecting to meet someone perfect. The apps have hacked our brains.”

Fundamentally, I don't think we should be allowed to choose our romantic partners by enforcing our own strict rules and requirements because I don't think we are very good at it. I'm certainly not. Why do I pick the one who looks wild and useless and leaves his phone in Ubers when I leave for the office at the same time every morning and all my socks are the same? My most successful relationships have been with people I probably would have swiped straight past.

• [How to decode the world of online dating, by a facebook psychiatrist](#)

The algorithms don't match you with the perfect partner because the perfect partner doesn't exist, says Viren Swami, professor of social psychology at Anglia Ruskin University, who specialises in modern romantic relationships. "As researchers we have asked people for personality, values, what they want in a partner and tried to match them," he says. "What we find is that the information people give us is useless in trying to predict whether or not two people will have a relationship. The qualities we say we want end up being very bad predictors of long-term romantic success."

More sinisterly, dating-app algorithms have been thought to repeat, and sometimes amplify, racial biases. In 2020 Grindr removed the ability for users to filter people by ethnicity. On other apps it is more implicit, with reports of people getting fewer likes and receiving racist messages. "The platforms know that racism is rife on dating apps," Swami says. "And yet they place the responsibility on the consumer. You have to police it. That is a dereliction of responsibility, when the parent company actually has the power to do something about it."

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The problem is that no one really knows how the algorithms work. They are valuable intellectual property kept secret by the companies. When I have used Hinge, for instance, I have got stuck in weird loops. One day I only got men shorter than 5ft 5in. A friend got a day of goths.

Often, relationships that begin online seem more riddled with anxiety. After all, a whole new language has been invented: ghosting, breadcrumbing, orbiting. "Self-disclosure is greater online — you feel somehow protected so you fall for one another more quickly," says Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, a philosopher specialising in the study of romance. Once you are beyond the initial throes, it is difficult to resist the option to change. "There is a risk that we are addicted to the superficial excitement of the apps, at the expense of the more profound, and potentially more boring, parts of a relationship," he says. Dating apps, then, have affected the speed with which we fall in love — and the speed with which we leave.

I have seen it often — romances that burn twice as bright for half as long when you meet someone on an app. Last year I had one myself — brilliant, huge, life-affirming. All the good stuff. Then he went on holiday and I never saw him again. We still, I think, live in the same city. But I have never walked past him on my way to work or bumped into him on the Tube. With no social ties or overlaps, how quickly someone can exit your life is shattering. It feels as if they never existed. The only thing left is the spooky, perfectly preserved relationship in your phone, the messages and the photos and the conversations that you can spend time inside. What a strange part of modern love.

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Finally, though, after years of discontent about dating apps, it now feels as if people are ditching them and moving back into the real world. Particularly post-Covid lockdowns, people want face-to-face interactions more than ever. A recent survey by Eventbrite among UK singles found that 64 per cent of people would prefer to meet their partner in person, compared with 36 per cent in 2019.

Lydia, 33, from Newcastle, deleted the apps and met someone "in the wild". "The vibe is totally different in the beginning, because you're meeting someone where you're being more your genuine self. You're not trying to put the best version of yourself out there," she says. "There's no pressure — you can feel like, 'Oh, is there actually a spark with this person?' It's so much more straightforward."

I have had a glorious year (mostly) offline, meeting people at pubs, through friends or where I go swimming. There was a skater with a tattoo on his thigh of his cat, its face stuck through a slice of white bread; a Camden party boy who swaggered down the street like Liam Gallagher; a real laugh who loved gossiping about Dominic Cummings; and an Irishman who, in hindsight, was probably too into Leonard Cohen. They were silly and fun and hot and we flirted and went out and then each one just ended — fizzled — and it was fine.

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App dates, on the other hand, can feel so binary. You meet someone specifically to decide whether you like them or not. It is a pass or a fail, a yes or a no. When you meet someone at a party or at the lido, it is much less defined, more free flowing. So if something stops working it can be sad or disappointing, but it does not have the same brutal whack of a “no” that you get from an app.

Hattie MacAndrews, a confidence and mindset coach, says that dating apps “are not working”. “The clients I work with are driven, smart, kind, intelligent women and it’s leaving them feeling crumbled, lacking in self-worth, dragged through the mud and questioning themselves.”

She encourages them instead to apply the same energy to offline dating as they do to online, the same hours to going to birthday parties or swimming clubs or blind dates, and has even started taking them out on the town. “If you think there’s no way to meet someone, you’ll get the apps because it feels like it’s the only option. But that is just not true. There is life out there!”

Indeed, there is a new, popular group of dating apps that function somewhere between the online world and the real one. Inner Circle has had to increase the number of events it hosts to meet demand; meanwhile the dating app Thursday’s tagline is “F*** dating apps. 6 days a week” — it is only open for people to chat on a Thursday, the same day they are encouraged to go on a date. It also throws singles parties in London and is scheduled to arrive in Manchester, Birmingham, Cardiff, Liverpool and Glasgow soon.

Tristan, 27, who lives in Manchester, is free of the apps. “It’s bad for your brain,” he says. Instead he is saying yes to friends’ birthday parties and to work events and he has joined a running club. “I miss opportunities in front of my eyes when I’m a member of an app, and it feels like everyone is so chatty and flirty at the moment, open to meeting organically. I feel so much happier, so much more free when I’m just out and about. It doesn’t feel like ‘single’ is an identity, it just feels like normal life.”

The very act of swiping reminds you of your singledom and your failure to “match” — and it’s not making people very happy. But the pessimism about the apps is slowly being replaced by positivity about the “real world” — where it is about people rather than profiles, about character rather than credentials, about not knowing why you fancy someone but that you do, which, really, is the best feeling of all.

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B **Barry Boothe** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
Indeed.
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V **vj howard** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
Great article - it's about character not credentials! Get out there and mingle. We all need to break out from online culture in its many guises and go live this one life we have! Another thought that stuck with me that I read this week - 'it's not the amount of time we have in this life it's about the quality of that time.' It really resonated! Mm I need to get off line now..😄
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B **Barry Boothe** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
Had I come across my wife on a dating app I would have swiped past because she wasn't my type at all. However we met in 1982, got on, fell in love and now, 4 kids later we've been together for forty years.

We're not a perfect match, still argue and have very different interests but it's worked out well, despite numerous friends telling us we weren't suited.

They're all divorced by the way.

And sometimes we're not suited and we drive each other up the wall.

But we love each other.

So there you go. No such thing as perfection.
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G **Guy Broadfoot** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
Do you really think the dating apps made you fill out detailed questionnaires to improve their matching success? How naive can you get. All that extra data is worth a lot of Money and is sold on. You don't really think your data is carefully kept private, do you?
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B **Barry Boothe** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
Not so sure it was that advanced in 1995 but you may be correct.
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M **MK** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
The problem with dating apps is the same as with all online conversations. They are too anonymous, and as a result people behave worse than they would in real life. If the apps made you give your full name and surname, and passport details - and rated people on the basis of how considerate they were in communication and on a date - then they would perhaps had more of a chance. The way these dating apps are now doesn't work. Offline is better. Men, don't be afraid to chat women up! If you do it with respect, women are not going to be offended by it. Many would love it!
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O **ono** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
What ever happened to going out and talking to someone.
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M **Mr William Hill** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
In many of our major cities you run the risk of assault or worse if you converse with someone incorrectly
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R **Roger Dutton** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
I remember the old days, you go out, get smashed, woke up somewhere and maybe got the clap.
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M **Margarita Hughes** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
Never used them too lazy. A friend met someone decent but most feedback from them it appears alot of men are out for a good time travelling around locally and basically lying to get laid. Another friend met her husband of 20 years and happily married through the old fashioned face to face singles nights.

Trust your instinct over algorithms. And we often don't know ourselves enough to know what we really want until we see it.
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B **Barry Boothe** 11 DECEMBER, 2022 ...
Like the last paragraph. Fits me to a tee.
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- B Bignose** 11 DECEMBER, 2022

We don't care

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- B Barry Boothe** 11 DECEMBER, 2022

Who is 'we'?

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- S Sigmund Savidge** 11 DECEMBER, 2022

Don't we?

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[I reply](#)

- T The Commentator** 11 DECEMBER, 2022

It's taken a decade?

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- R Rupert E Beehsley** 11 DECEMBER, 2022

So, over the period of the pandemic downloads decreased by 9%. Good result I would have thought considering.

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- M Mel Sims** 11 DECEMBER, 2022

Superb article. THANKYOU. They do make you fall in love quicker and exit quicker - like fast food dating

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