

The most photographed generation in history

Written by Ehekatl Hdz.



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Checking our *Facebook*, *Instagram* or *Tumblr* accounts at least once a day has become a routine, almost daily practice for millions of Internet users across the globe. One important motivation behind this seductive curiosity is investigating and intruding into the life of another person whom we may or not have met. Much of this fascination would not be possible without the socialization of information and in particular the thousands of photographs that update profiles, blogs and social networks every day that are almost compulsively reviewing an era in which the private immediately passes into the public domain.

Why do we like to be seen? We like to construct a fragmented and often pretentious identity to reinforce our sense of belonging, an increasingly important value in modern society, which has also brought millions in profits to those who have been able to exploit this goldmine.

However this is not a new phenomenon, as photography as a social and anecdotal act has also undergone fundamental changes since it first emerged. Few of our grandparents or great-grandparents have a single photograph of the early years of their life, as photography was then an activity that required planning, in addition to the resources and time to create a frequently careful, elaborate setup. The event had to be special and unrepeatable: a marriage, anniversary or simply the immortalization of a person in a photograph.

Years later, following the first photographic revolution led by Eastman Kodak, the technological advances in camera mobility and the mass production of cameras and films, the social act of photographing was taken to another level. For the first time social photography could consolidate itself in situ as a result of its mobility and the speed of developing and printing. Increasingly events of an everyday nature were captured, going beyond the formal or unique act, and there was even a break with scene engineering; consequently the photographic click became even more democratic.

For the first time thousands of families began to capture holidays, meetings and any moments that were intimate or particularly important to the photographer. The latter was no longer required to be professional, and could be any person with the inclination and funds to purchase a camera, which also became an indispensable appliance in contemporary Western life during the second half of the 20th century. From that moment onwards, the way of seeing and showing oneself to the world began to change, and people became aware of the power they possessed to recreate an identity and fabricate a series of social, cultural and consumer values. These gave the majority of the population access to the seductive game of aspiration and status, which had previously been the sphere of only a few privileged persons.

In this way, the generation born after 1960 was the first to have an early record of their life through photography, which was initially presented almost exclusively in wooden frames and stage sets, but eventually filled the pages of the increasingly popular family photo albums, in which a single subject could be depicted in dozens of photographs that gradually traced their growing process. Today many of the children photographed in that era perceive these archives as basic tools for constructing their history or, failing this, giving some indication of their origin. In more profound cases they are the study or inspirational material for reconstructing an identity.

However, within less than two decades this phenomenon had grown exponentially as a result of the revolution of digital photography and the use of Internet, particularly social networks. In the medium or long term, what will happen to these hundreds of millions of images being produced at such breathtaking speed? Let us look more specifically at the wide sector of persons who are over-photographed today: teenagers and young people belonging to the “millennium generation”, a consequence of the postmodern era: young people born between 1982 and 2000, who have grown up and developed alongside the recent technological revolution. On the other hand, there are also the persons from the generation that preceded that of the Millennium (the less fortunate Generation X defined by Strauss and Howe). Their children, who are now referred to as I gen, children born after 2000, have witnessed the spread of digital photography and from birth have been insistently photographed by parents, relatives and any person with a camera to hand. They are undoubtedly the first generation to have an accurate record of their life, starting from their early years and even their first few days.

This leads us to ask: what will happen to these children and teenagers who are today being photographed so unbelievably frequently? What will be the uses and implications of this avalanche of images produced every day? Will this archive still constitute fertile material to construct a person's identity, as it did for the previous generation?

And, exploring this point even further: how will the socialization of this material occur? What social or cultural implications will there be when the lives of these people - beginning in their early years – are made public, and how will this affect the relationships between individuals once they possess extensive personal records? To what extent will a life history cease to be an intimate and private act and become public property? And how will these people assimilate the existence of a public record of their early years, which – itself a separate subject – will always represent the viewpoint of whoever took the photographs? And lastly, what will then be the limits of the rights of the photographed subject, who is unaware of the photographs being taken and of the subsequent use of his image? We are perhaps leaping ahead and should instead enquire what percentage of these images remain in the ephemeral sphere and which indeed generate extensive personal archives. Although there are as yet no clear, precise answers, the sense and meaning of what privacy represents and how it is understood will undoubtedly be redefined in the next few years. Thus the manner of telling, narrating and understanding family histories will also somehow change to more complex meta-languages that interact in different spheres. Let us therefore watch carefully to see what the coming years will bring in this regard. It would however be particularly interesting to stop occasionally to think before taking a photograph and automatically sharing it, to think of the image as a living entity that will have various meanings, uses and reinterpretations over time, both for the viewer and the subject of the photograph. We should therefore ask ourselves why we photograph and above all what we wish to convey and record when we take and socialize images.

As we have seen on several occasions, in order to understand the direction that our reflection is taking we will have to answer these questions with more questions.