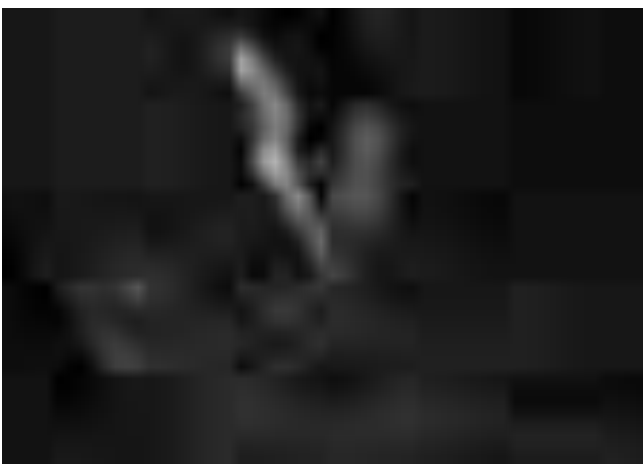
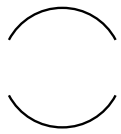


Forget Gen Z. This Is Generation Surveillance.

Colin Horgan

The defining experience for generations to come will be knowing what it feels like to be constantly watched



Credit: Hero Images/Getty Images

What does it mean to have an unforgettable childhood — or an unforgettable life?

“First memories, forever.” That’s the promise of Babeyes, a product unveiled in January at the Consumer Electronics Show. The idea is simple: Attach the Babeyes camera to your newborn or infant, and it will gather footage of the world from a baby’s point of view. “Thanks to Babeyes, all these moments, filled with love, will be watched later by the grown child, as if he remembered the scene,” the Babeyes site explains. Online reaction, however, was far less charitable. “Sci-fi dystopias are warnings not development road maps,” one Twitter user [tweeted](#) in response to an ad. “This is fucking creepy!” another [declared](#).

But if a baby body camera feels like it’s a step too far now, will that always be the case?

From being the early test subjects of “sharenting” — the modern parental propensity for putting every moment of their child’s life on social media — to having smartphone apps that follow their every movement, Generation Z is the first to come of age in a world of total surveillance. Every generation that follows will inevitably know what it feels like to be constantly watched. Fundamentally, they will be linked by a logic of their era that they have no choice but to accept:

Every aspect of their lives must be documented and tracked.

Recently, Haley Sharpe, a 16-year-old midlevel TikTok star, [spoke](#) to Vox's Rebecca Jennings about achieving the height of minicelebrity that many in her generation crave. "To be a very online young person in 2019 is to share the same goal: have the kind of social media following wherein performing your life online becomes a paying job."

But it comes at a cost that Sharpe said she never anticipated. "It's cool, but it's also weird to think I'm sitting here and somebody out there — more than somebody — is watching my videos right now. Constantly somebody is watching one," she said. "That's so weird for me."

Sharpe may be part of a shrinking subset of young people who can still remember that it once felt weird to know you were always being watched. This will be the defining experience of Generation Z, and it will shape the world they create—how they dress, how they talk, how they think of art and culture, and how they think of politics and law. Which is to say that, when considering these aspects of life, they won't think of surveillance at all. It won't be weird.

The way Gen Z has chosen to deal with it is reflective of the surveillant world in which they were raised. Instead of trying to disappear, they have become hypervisible.

It wasn't that long ago that we figured things might turn out differently.

In 2014, Kate Crawford, co-director and co-founder of the A.I. Now Institute at New York University, [dissected](#) what she called "surveillant anxiety." The condition, she writes in the *New Inquiry*, is a product of fears that our data has the power to both reveal too much of our intimate selves and also potentially obscure the truth, "like a fluorescent light in a dark corridor." Crawford was writing in the immediate context of the Edward Snowden revelations about the National Security Agency's domestic tracking program. That anxiety, Crawford wrote, manifested itself in the consumer realm by way of the then-nascent "normcore" trend, a nondescript style of clothing. Normcore was the opposite of distinct, it was a bland fashion of sameness. Normcore, Crawford argued, was symptomatic of always being watched, "an indication of how the cultural idea of disappearing has become cool at the very historical moment when it has become almost impossible because of big data and widespread surveillance."

Half a decade later, there's every reason to still be anxious. Our post-Snowden fears have been buttressed by fresh news that corporations mine our intimate data, too, not just governments. But the way Gen Z has chosen to deal with it is reflective of the surveillant world in which they were raised. Instead of trying to disappear, they have become, like Sharpe, hypervisible.

Even some of the mechanisms to soothe the latent anxiety of hypervisibility are buried in its source: ASMR videos streaming on YouTube, photos of perfectly organized consumer items posted on Instagram to calm a jangled mind, reruns of *Friends* and *The Office* on Netflix. As for normcore? Instead of being a fashion of invisibility, it's become the opposite: What was the fashion of disappearing is now the influencer's uniform.

Gen Z knows they are shedding data. But they can't choose to turn off the tap. Instead, the system dictates they must instead open the floodgates. You need to be seen: to board a flight, [go to a concert](#), and even [apply for a job](#). And, of course, to get rich. In the surveillant society, you only exist if you're visible.

But this began with a question about memory — not human, but computer.

In [an interview](#) earlier this month, essayist Natasha Stagg spoke to Tavi Gevinson about who we are: the personality projected over social media, or tracked by our online behaviors, or some other version entirely?

“There’s not only one way to be a real person,” Stagg said. In our current era, Stagg continued, it’s easier to understand a “splintering” can occur. “I understand that I come alive in different ways in different places or different interactions.” This is a message of freedom, and in some cases, technology has indeed proven freeing. It unbinds people from expectations, it connects the disconnected. But it never fully lets you go. There can be many ways to be a real person, but if it’s on Instagram or TikTok or even with a mobile phone, there is really only one path to follow to those multiple realities: via surveillance.

“As our documented histories grow, the profile looms larger, on the screen and in our minds, weighing on our behavior, our range of curiosity, and our sense of possibility,” Nathan Jurgenson [writes](#) in *The Social Photo*. For all the lightness of being attainable — all the ways you can come alive online — there is the inescapable, inflexible data shadow: the one that prevents you from getting health coverage, stops you from boarding a flight, or means you don’t get the job.

It’s time we acknowledge this reality and adopt a new name for Gen Z — let’s call it Gen S for surveillance. They are saved in the cloud, perpetually viewable, the memories of memories posted to the stream long ago, unable to forget or be forgotten. They are a generation living in a paradox: The more they do and the more they come alive, the more they’re watched and the more narrowly they’ll be defined, boxed in and buried under the data they produce.