

Opinion

Photo of the Day | Nearing the end of the semester



Students on the lawn chairs at South Campus Commons on April 28, 2026. The warmer weather has brought more traffic to campus green spaces.
PHOTO BY NORA MARIANO, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/THE DAILY CAMPUS

On Gen Z's fame addiction and the digital panopticon

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As a kid, I wanted nothing more than to be famous. I was raised on YouTube beauty gurus and iCarly, which would imbue any ten-year-old with delusions of grandeur. Twenty years into living, though, my big dreams have yet to be fully stamped out. It's a common thread among Generation Z — 57% of us want to be influencers. That's not even counting those who want to be famous for acting, sports or other pursuits. Despite these big dreams, we are still completely unused to constant perception.

On Monday, I sat down in my first class of the day and received a text containing a photo of myself from a minute prior. On my walk to class, I'd passed by a friend without realizing, and he'd taken a picture and sent it to our group chat as a lighthearted jab at my obliviousness. I remarked to another friend that it was exhausting being perceived in such a constant state, and I felt I couldn't let my guard down. She replied casually (and quite profoundly; I'd expect nothing less from an English major gearing up for 9AM creative writing), "It was supposed to be a fleeting moment, but it was captured. That's why you feel like that."

I can't help but wonder if Gen Z's desire to be famous has perhaps stemmed partially as a coping mechanism from the inescapability of perception in our digital age. At any moment, someone on the street could take a picture of you and post it. You could go viral and become ridiculed for anything from your momentary posture to the look on your face — things that would have gone completely unnoticed otherwise. Today, a lack of privacy is a fact of life. By framing fame as the aspiration, young people convince themselves that 24/7 surveillance is something they can benefit from. When constant monitoring becomes a given, receiving money and adoration seems like a fair tradeoff.

It all ties back to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, a conceptual circular prison with a central guard tower. Unable to see into the tower, prisoners are under the impression that they are constantly being watched and therefore behave in the way they perceive as "good". Philosopher Byung-Chul Han's "The Transparency Society" introduces the idea of the digital panopticon:

"Google and social networks, which present themselves as spaces of freedom, are assuming panoptic forms. Today surveil-

lance is not occurring as an attack on freedom, as is normally assumed. Instead, people are voluntarily surrendering to the panoptic gaze. They deliberately collaborate in the digital panopticon by denuding and exhibiting themselves. The prisoner in the digital panopticon is a perpetrator and a victim at the same time."

We respond to the digital panopticon with an acknowledgement that it is inescapable. If we can't beat the system, we try to take advantage of it. The result is a conscious choice to perform in every sense of the word: stage interactions for views, act out our daily routines in front of cameras, submit to microtrends and take on aesthetics as a form of personality.

Moreover, social media has validated big dreams by increasing fame's perceived possibility. Thanks to algorithms and overnight virality, fame can be accessible to anyone. The teenage girl posting dancing videos from her bedroom can become a millionaire it-girl within a few months. It's no longer necessary to have all the connections; yapping at a cell phone is enough to catapult young people to fame.

In the context of social media algorithms as our prison guard, what is "good behavior"? You might think it's nothing but luck. Truthfully, algorithms aren't as equitable as we perceive them to be. They prefer consistent posting, as well as recognizable traits like your face and "personal brand." The way to pleasing the algorithm is more: more personal details, more of your time captured by a camera and shared, more energy put into trying to make it all worth it. The more we work at achieving fame, the more we will do to ensure our effort pays off. Hence, addiction.

What is the pinnacle of performance but fame? Fame is the end goal because it means all our time spent suffering is worth it. We can finally take a break and indulge ourselves in doing whatever we want with the influence and money we've accrued along the way. Sure, we may be harassed by crowds with cameras or ridiculed for an outfit mishap, but those things could just as easily happen to us right now.

Fame or no fame, we could all stand to be more conscious of the digital panopticon's impacts on our daily lives. Fully throwing yourself into aspirations of fame isn't healthy, but neither is ignoring the presence of digital surveillance. Shutting your eyes to those perceiving you doesn't will them to do the same.



A person about to open the social media app, TikTok. Many young people have an "addiction to fame."

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