

The Influence of Photography on Identity Construction over Generations

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine trends in photography usage as they pertain to identity construction across differing generations. Five Northwestern undergraduate students, two Northwestern professors, and three Northwestern alumni participated in the interview process. The major finding of this study was that the younger generation focused more on sharing experiences, establishing connections, and cared about their physical image projected via photography, while the older generation focused more on preserving memory and using photography as a medium of recollection and reconstructing their identity. Future steps to improve upon this include gathering more participants to solidify findings and including quantitative data analysis.

Keywords: photography, identity, memory, relationship

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Introduction

The goal of this study was to identify differences in usage of photography between younger and older generations as they pertain to identity shaping and construction. It was also relevant to the problem of the negative effects of social media as it relates to the distorted perception of one's bodily image, which is increasingly more apparent in the younger generation. It was also relevant to the evolving trend of digital media consumption following the advent of social media and the digital age.

The main research question was "How do different generations use photography to help construct their identity?" This question specifically addressed the generational gap between the younger and the older generations in terms of how they utilize the tool of photography to influence their identity construction and morphing process as well as how they are influenced by the photographs they take and have access to.

The report would start with the discussion of initial brainstorming and literature review, followed by the discussion of the final research question, research relationships and methods, final findings, validity and ethical considerations, conclusion and discussion for future research, and references and appendices.

Conceptual framework/literature review

The initial conceptual framework of this research was represented in Figure 1 (below). Different platforms of digital media consumption were identified as subtopics (in light navy color), and possible interview questions that sprung out of those topics were highlighted in sky blue boxes. These boxes all came back to the topic of identity (at the bottom, in green). Note that the initial framework had focused on digital media in general and not just photography; after the literature review, I came to realize that the topic of digital media was too big to explore, and thus set my focus on photography.

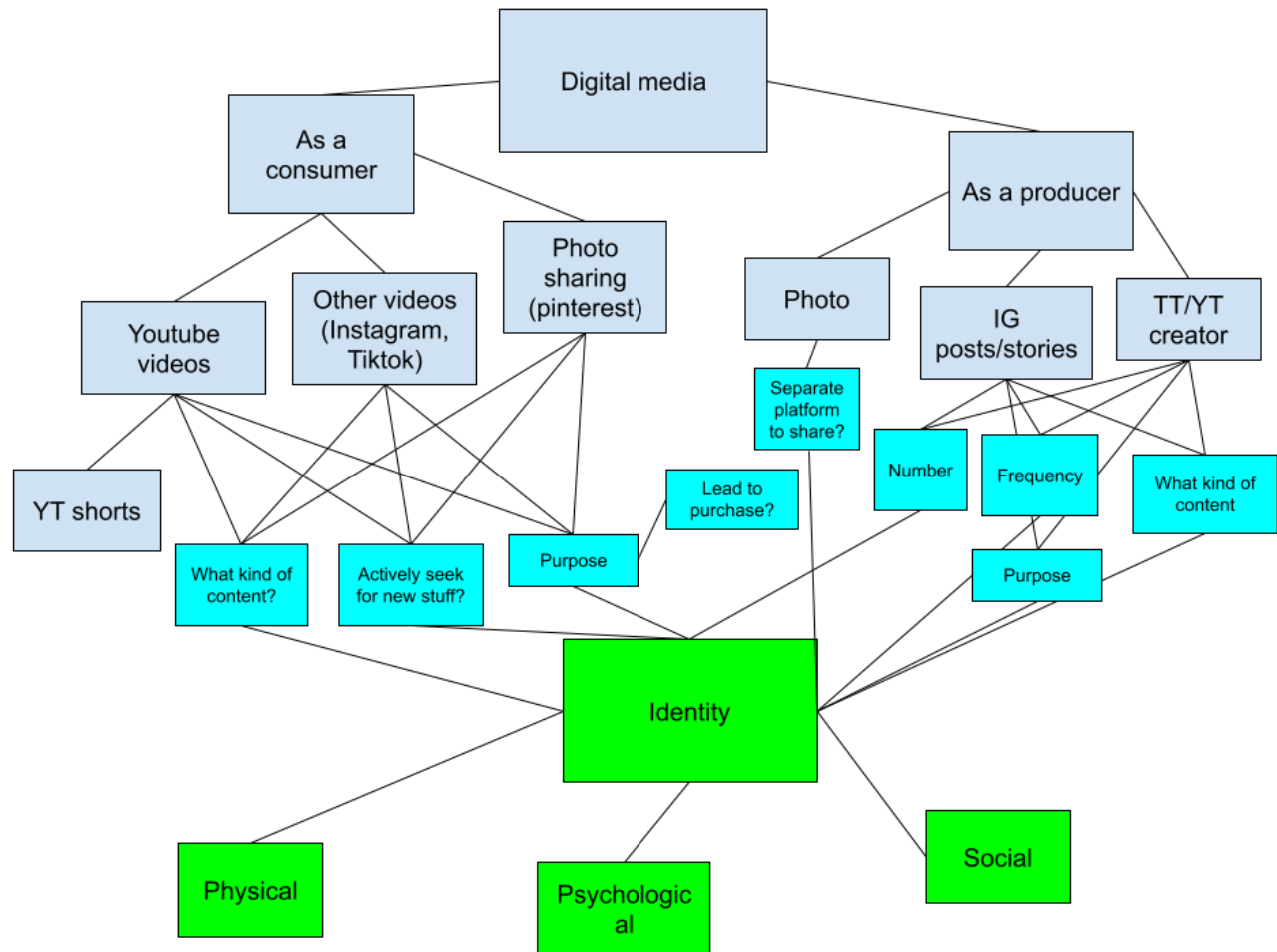


Figure 1

Initial Concept Map

As part of the background research for this study, three main topical areas were explored. First, photography and its connection to personal identity research were explored, with a focus on the research technique of auto photography. Second, photography and its connection to identity shaping were discussed. Finally, the influence that different platforms of social media have on one's self-esteem and identity was explored.

Multiple findings were discovered as a result of the literature review/background research. Over time, the purpose of photography has transitioned from preserving memory to sharing experiences (van Dijck, 2008). With that change rose the importance of editing and manipulating photographs (Winston, 2013). The subject of the photos can provide substantial information about a person's perspective on topics and self-identity, and the act of manipulating and sharing photos also can provide a glimpse into a person's perceived social and psychological

identity (Engeln et al., 2020). The consumption patterns of digital content on platforms like Instagram also reflect a person's sense of identity and self-esteem (Staniewski & Awruk, 2022). Also, activity on Instagram can reflect the lifestyle and values that an individual chooses to pursue (Hakkenberg, 2021).

Stemming from the literature review, I decided to put more focus on comparing the younger and older generations' usage of photography. Thus, the population of the study was divided into two main demographic groups - the younger generation and the older generation. This was deliberately done so in order to compare how different generations handle photography differently. As for the younger generation, undergraduate students at Northwestern University were chosen due to the relative convenience in terms of accessing the potential participant pool. As for the older generation, professors and alumni of Northwestern University were included in the participant pool. Professors were included not only because of their proximity to campus and thus more convenient access in the interview process, but also because they conducted research and published work related to topics relevant to my study, such as bodily image in social media.

Research questions

My initial research question idea was merely about photography or digital media and its influence on identity in general, and as a subtopic, I was exploring how different social media platforms were the basis of identity construction and shaping. However, after going through my literature review, I came to focus more on the comparison between generations.

The final research question was "How do different generations use photography to help construct their identity?" This question stemmed from my prior research in my literature review, which suggested that older generations tend to use photography more for recollection of memories. My research question allowed me to explore this idea further and see to what extent the above mentioned statement was true.

The question also had its roots in my own experience, as I used photography primarily to capture beautiful moments and good experiences in my life, and I wanted to see whether people in the similar generational group used photography similarly or differently, especially as the advent of social media definitely altered the meaning and context of photography.

The question also connected back to my research goal of getting a clearer idea of how others use photography and whether they are as heavily into photography as I am. Specifically, I wanted to address how other people's purpose for photography was similar or different to mine.

Research methods

Research relationships

The relationships with the participants that I've studied could be divided into three main categories. First, undergraduate students were the participants that I was most familiar with, and thus I was able to build rapport relatively quickly and effectively. There were no power dynamics involved because both I and the participants were undergraduate students at Northwestern University. Second, professors were the adult participants that I was relatively more familiar with, but the degree of familiarity was definitely less than that of undergraduate students. Conversely, this helped me establish a sense of objectivity and fairness in the interview process since there was less of a convenience bias that was included in the relationship. Finally, Northwestern alumni were the adult participants that I was not familiar with, because I had never been in contact with them prior to the research - but this also meant I could maintain my objective and unbiased status. The relatively aloof relationship between this group of participants and I might have made it harder for the participants to initially open up their sensitive thought processes to me, but this was overcome over the course of the interview process.

Setting and Participant Sample

I obtained my participant pool primarily via email. In my recruitment list of undergraduate students, I purposefully diversified grades and gender to obtain a less biased sample. (See Table 1) I reached out to professors directly via email. I reached out to Northwestern alumni initially via LinkedIn, then via email once I obtained their email addresses. The description of all the basic demographic information of the participants could be seen in Table 1 (below):

Table 1

Participant demographics

S. K.	A. L.	K. J.	J. V.	S. C.
20, female College freshman	19, female College freshman	20, male College 2nd year	21, male College junior	22, male College senior
R. E.	J. B.	T. F.	T. J.	M. Q.
45, female Professor	39, male Professor	54, female Alumni	58, female Alumni	61, male Retired Alumni

Data Collection

My primary research included an in-person interview (see Appendix A: Interview Guide) and an in-person observation (see Appendix B: Observation Guide) after designating tasks for the participants to complete. For each participant, I started with asking the participants to take a photo of any object in the place of the interview and a selfie of themselves. I then asked the participants to ask why they chose that particular object (first photo) and explain their thought process when it came to taking the selfie (second photo). These were to see how their identities were implicitly woven into their thought processes in taking photos. Then, I asked short response interview questions to each of the participants. This was a way for me to get to know the participants' inclination to take photos as well as obtain initial quantitative data regarding photo usage. Then I got into longer response interview questions asking qualitative questions about their photography usage and how it relates to their identity construction as well as social media usage.

I conducted all parts of the above mentioned methods of primary research on all of my participants. Each interview lasted around 20 minutes, and each set of observational tasks lasted around 5 minutes. For undergraduate students, the interview process (which included the observational tasks) was conducted in the library; for professors, it was conducted in their offices; for alumni, the alumnus either came on campus or invited me to come to Chicago.

Data Analysis

The methods matrix below (See Table 2) is a tabular organization of the above ideas with the additional partition of younger generations being split into those who are heavy users of social media and those who aren't. I thought this was going to explain some differences in photography usage within the younger generation if there were any.

Table 2

Methods matrix

Research question	Selection decisions	Data collection method	Kinds of analysis
How do different generations use photography to help	Younger generations who use a lot of social media /	Interviews, observations	Transcription coding, memos

construct their identity?	photography		
	Younger generations who don't use as much social media/photography	Interviews, observations	Transcription coding, memos
	Professors	Interviews, observations	Transcription coding, memos
	Other people in the elder generation	Interviews, observations	Transcription coding, memos

After the data collection process, data analysis took place mainly in the form of finding commonly discussed subtopics and ideas. The table below (Table 3) is a summary of the main topics and codes that were discussed in the interview process.

Table 3

Main codes

Research Q's (See Appendix A for question numberings)	Major themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Short response questions 1, 5, 6	Photography	Amount of photos, whether they like taking photos or not	Not applicable (quantitative)
Rest of short response questions	Instagram	Degree of usage of Instagram	Not applicable (quantitative)
Questions 1-8	Photography	Whether they like taking photos or not Purpose of taking	Memory Experience Sharing

		photos Value of photos	Relationships Moments Appearance Recollection
Questions 9-20	Instagram	Usage of Instagram Interaction via Instagram Social identity Doctoring photos Receiving influence from others	Self-esteem Relationships Sharing Memories Appearance Mental state
Questions 21-26	Instagram	Usage of Instagram Social identity	Relationships Experiences Moments Recollection

Findings

The biggest finding was that the older generation tended to use photography to preserve and collect memories, while the younger generation tended to use photography to share their experiences with others. Even under the same category of experience, older participants tended to use photography to capture their experiences, as it was a way to build their identity as a collection of moments and memories (See quote from M. Q. in Table 4 below). For younger participants, the experience was not the focus, but the focus was on the act of sharing it with others and using photography as a means to cherish the people they've been with (See quote from S. C. in Table 4 below). This went on to show that the younger generation's connection to photography is heavily related to their social identity.

Another finding in the younger generation was that their inclination to manipulate photos reflected their relatively unstable physical identity and bodily image. The quote by K. J. in the table below is a representation of how photography shaped and drove the younger generation's desire for a better physical identity.

Table 4*Major codes and quotes*

Codes	Quotes
Experience Moments	“I feel like if I don’t take photos, after a while, I may not remember the events too clearly.” (J. B., older)
Experience Relationships	“It’s almost like a reinforcement. I was here, with these people, at this time, and I looked like this... almost like an announcement of sorts.” (S. C., younger)
Appearance Self-esteem	“I tell my friends to take the photos so that I look taller... There’s a reason why I take tens of photos at a time.” (K. J., younger)
Memories Recollection	“I’m not sure how much people look back on previous photos, but I often do... It reminds me of the places I’ve been to, the memories I’ve made. I tell myself, ‘I’ve taken these steps to get to where I am now.’” (M. Q., older)

The figure below (Figure 2) is a revised version of the original concept map (See Figure 1). The biggest change in the two concept maps was the way how I approached the concept map. The first one was mainly about exploring different ideas and brainstorming ways to move forward with the research. The updated map mainly focused on main codes and trying to connect the codes to both generations and identity; in other words, it was a way of conveying my final findings to the public.

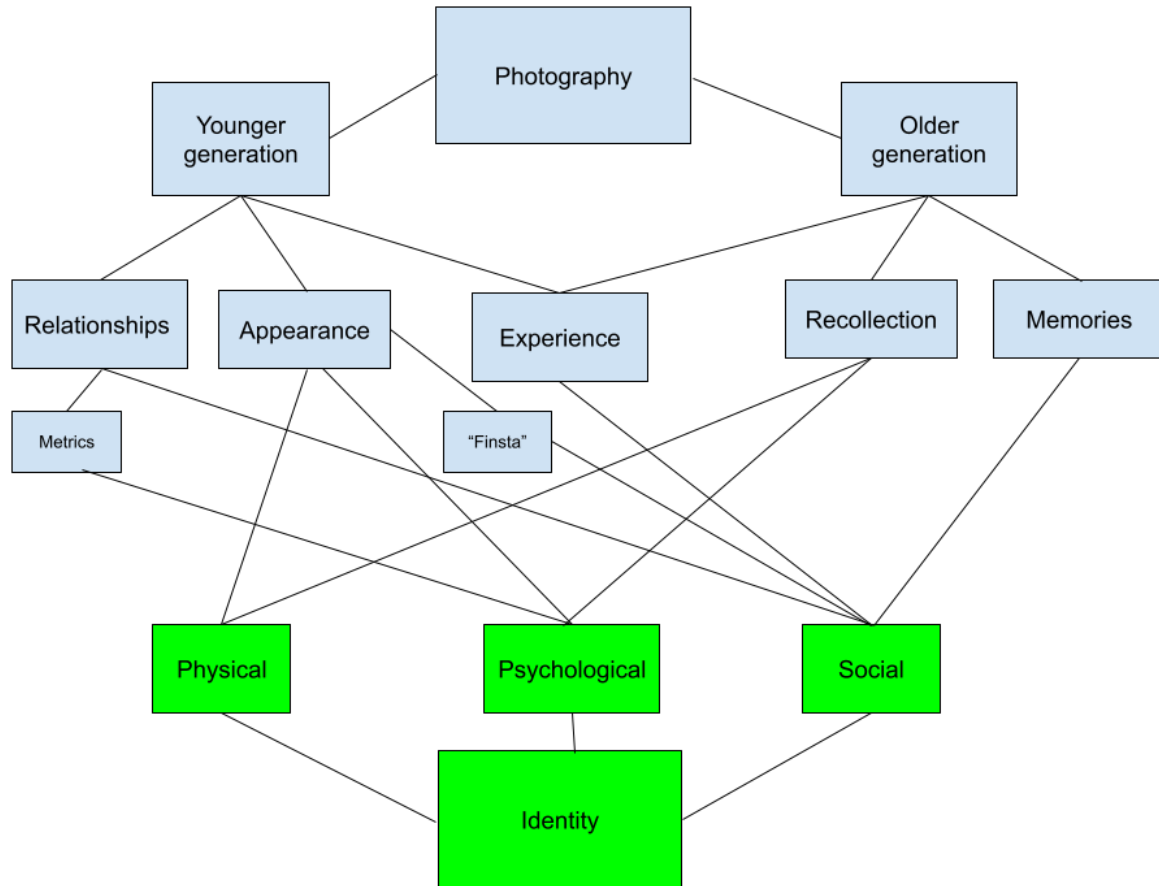


Figure 2

Updated concept map

Validity And Ethical Considerations

The most serious validity threat to my study was the authenticity of the responses. Some of my questions were geared towards eliciting responses that reveal the inner psychological workings of one's mindset as it relates to their thoughts on their own identity. If they were aware of how the questions are designed, they might have distorted their responses so that they fit the identities they wanted me to know instead of revealing their own true identities. This would be especially true if they cared a lot about their external appearances and how others perceive them.

I conducted this research to learn more about the trends of photography usage and its implication on social identity. I've read multiple articles about social media playing a role in degrading self-esteem, and I was wondering whether that effect could be linked to photography in general as well. Also, I just wanted to see whether my interest in photography was unique to me, or more reflective of an overall trend in my generation.

I went through an in-person interview process with all ten of my participants, and I also made them do observational tasks to get more insight into their photography-related activities. I purposefully selected participants to diversify the age pool in order to reflect the diversity of the population that uses photography.

The research could be related to a great number of people - not just for me, the researcher, or the participants involved in the research process, but also for people who take photographs and like to share with others in general. Photography has permeated into our culture even before the introduction of phone cameras, and the degree to which photography has shaped our lives could be explained, at least a little bit, through this research.

Conclusions about the degree to which photography is a medium to shape our identity and project our identity to others could be drawn from this research. (See Findings section) In addition, the evolution of photography and how we humans use photography could be seen via the generational comparison in photography usage.

Conclusion And Discussion For Future Research

The greatest merit of this research study is that it allowed me to explore how identity construction has evolved over time along with the advent of technology. I have always wondered why certain expressions such as “millennials” or “Gen Z” have come up, and now I feel like I know why those generational classifications are needed and used.

There is always room for improvement in this research study. A possible modification could have been including quantitative data in the analysis as well as qualitative data so that the data is more robust. Although I did collect quantitative data in the interview process, I merely used it as a way to obtain background information and did not engage in substantial levels of analysis.

Also, drawing insight from more participants would help - I thought ten was a lot, but since I selected participants from a wide range of demographic groups, the responses all varied (even within the same generational group). This research could be improved by getting more responses and seeing whether the responses reflect just an individual's tendencies or a larger trend of a bigger demographic group as a whole - for instance, why certain participants in the younger generation were not inclined to take as many photos as some of their other peers.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

My main goals for interviewing participants were to understand their interactions with photography and its connection to identity development and collect both qualitative and quantitative data from participants.

I planned to conduct interviews on the week of Feb 14th at one of the rooms in Main Library 3rd floor.

I interviewed a total of ten undergraduate students, two professors, and three other people in the elder generation, preferably in the age range of 50 and above. My undergraduate student participant pool included two freshmen, one sophomore, one junior, and one senior.

Participant interview introduction

Hello, my name is Paul Kim and I am currently a sophomore student at Northwestern University. Currently, I am taking IEMS 340 which is a course where we design our own qualitative research studies. My research project is focused on the relationship between photography and identity construction. This interview process is critical in the data collection of my research study.

If you grant me permission to record the interview, I will make sure that none of your personal information will be attached to the data because I will be using pseudonyms. Also, I will make sure to destroy all the data that comes out of the interview after the completion of the study. If you feel uncomfortable answering certain questions, you can always opt out of answering them. Do you consent to me recording the interview? Do you have any questions before we start?

Background information

1. What is your age?
2. Where is/are the place(s) you call home?

Short response questions

1. How many photographs do you currently have in your camera roll?
2. If you currently use Instagram, how many posts do you have on your main account?
3. Do you run more than one Instagram account? If so, why?
4. How many followers do you have on your Instagram account?
5. If you take photos, which device do you use? Why?
6. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you think you take photos?

7. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you think you use Instagram?
8. How many photographs have you taken this past month?

Long response questions:

1. Do you think you take a lot of photos? Why or why not?
2. What kind of photos do you think you like to take?
3. Why do you / do you not use a professional camera?
4. Why do you take photos / not take photos?
5. Do you often look back on previous photos?
6. Do you remember a lot about your past when taking photos?
7. Do you like to take photos or be taken? Why?
8. What do you think is the most important thing in photos?
9. Do you often post photos on social media such as Instagram? Why or why not?
10. What do you often see in your social media feed (such as Instagram)?
11. Do you often leave comments on people's posts? If so, which comments?
12. Do you receive a lot of comments on your posts? What do you think about them?
13. Do you think that looking at other people's photos has influenced you in any way?
14. Do you follow celebrities' feeds and look at their photos? If so, why? What do you feel about them?
15. Why did you pick your (Instagram/other) profile pic as the one it is right now?
16. Do you expect other people to feel a certain way about your posts? If not, do you not care about people's reactions to your posts?
17. Do you run separate accounts? Are they for photo purposes? If you do run separate accounts, why?
18. Do you think your relationships with others can be seen via photos?
19. Do you photoshop / doctor / manipulate photos you post?
20. Why do you think other people manipulate photos?
21. Why do you use Instagram? / not use Instagram?
22. Why do you think other people use Instagram?
23. Why do you think some people care about the number of followers? Do you care?
24. Why / why not do you set your account as private?

25. (Professor,) how has your work so far shed insight into how the current society uses photography?
26. (Professor,) do you think that photography on social media has more harm than good?

Appendix B: Observation Guide

Goals for user observation

My main goals for observing participants in my project are to collect qualitative data regarding photography usage.

Methodology

I plan to conduct interviews on the week of Feb 14th at one of the rooms in Main Library 3rd floor.

Participant observation introduction

Hello, my name is Paul Kim and I am currently a sophomore student at Northwestern University. Currently, I am taking IEMS 340 which is a course where we design our own qualitative research studies. My research project is focused on the relationship between photography and identity construction. This interview process is critical in the data collection of my research study.

If you grant me permission to record the interview, I will make sure that none of your personal information will be attached to the data because I will be using pseudonyms. Also, I will make sure to destroy all the data that comes out of the interview after the completion of the study. If you feel uncomfortable answering certain questions, you can always opt out of answering them. Do you consent to me recording the interview? Do you have any questions before we start?

Background information

Done in interview above.

Task breakdown

1. Take a photograph of any object in the room.
 - a. Note time it takes to perform the task
 - b. Note ease or difficulty of performing task
2. Take a selfie.
 - a. Note angle of camera (higher than face level, same level, or lower)
 - b. Note time it takes to perform the task
 - c. Mask on or off
 - d. Facial expression

Follow-up questions

1. Task one
 - a. Why did you pick that particular object?
 - b. Why did you position your photo in this manner?
2. Task two
 - a. Why did you take the selfie in this manner?
 - b. Would you be satisfied with this photo if you were to upload it to Instagram?

Things to bring

- laptop, phone