

# The public/private relationship in youth mediated by digital social media platforms

A relação público/privada na juventude mediada pelas plataformas de redes sociais digitais

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## Abstract

This article aims to discuss, through exploratory and bibliographic research, the relationships between the public and the private in the life of young people mediated by digital social media platforms. Initially, the article approaches the main characteristics of this population, and then throws light on digital social media platforms and their algorithms. The last part of the text addresses the public/private relationship for urban youths in their digital social media. The main result is an in-depth discussion about the conflicting relationship between capitalist platforms of digital social media and the young mind that barely manages to perceive the difference between public and private.

**Keywords:** social media; youth; public; private.

## Resumo

*O presente artigo visa discutir, por meio de uma pesquisa exploratória e bibliográfica, as relações entre o público e o privado na vida juvenil mediada por plataformas de redes sociais digitais. O início do artigo versa sobre as principais características dessa população, para adiante explicar acerca das plataformas de redes sociais digitais e seus algoritmos. Em sua última parte, o texto aborda a relação público/privada para os jovens urbanos em suas redes sociais digitais. O principal resultado é a discussão aprofundada sobre a conflituosa relação entre as plataformas capitalistas de redes sociais digitais e a mente juvenil que pouco consegue perceber a diferença entre o que é público e o que é privado.*

**Palavras-chave:** redes sociais; juventude; público; privado.



## Introduction

This article aims to discuss the current youth and their relationship with the public and the private, always mediated by digital social networking platforms (A.K.A. social media) that permeate society. In its beginning, the article will approach the main characteristics of this group of individuals, each time more diverse and singular, trying, in a comprehensive way, to synthesize some attributes that are common to its participants. Then, the article will address the characteristics of social media platforms and their algorithmic and capitalist orientation, and then establish the relationship between youth and the public/private binomial mediated by social media.

This text is, therefore, of a bibliographic nature, and proposes an exploratory research (Moreira & Caleffe, 2008) that aims to broaden the discussion of topics both on digital social networks and on the relationship between what is public and what is private for youth of the 21st century. We searched for national and international literature, trying to trace some characteristics that, although not applicable individually, can be useful in the reading of some of the characteristics of the current youth in Brazil and in the world.

## The youth in the 21st century

There seems little doubt that we are faced with another culture when we discuss urban youth in this third decade of the 21st century. And it is urgent and necessary to try to understand its characteristics. From a nomenclature point of view, there are several possible ones, such

as Post-millennials, Centennials, Generation i, iGen or Generation Z (Twenge, 2018). In this text we will use all these terms as synonyms, and we will seek to map the main characteristics of this generation and their relationship between what is public and what is private.

Naturally, mapping the characteristics of a very comprehensive group cannot understand or explain the subjectivity of the individual. Even so, it can help in the understanding of certain facets that, as well as in the group, are found in the subjects. There are, even in the cases mentioned here, nuances, differences, which can be regional, circumstantial, or informational. However, we seek, albeit imprecisely, to understand society within a broader context and, for that, certain generalizations had to be made.

Usually generations are marked and labeled from some cultural, social or economic event that modify characteristics of a large part of society. It is in this way that those born immediately after the Second World War until approximately 1964 were called baby boomers, and their main quality was hope for the future (Emmanuel, 2020). The subsequent generation, which was born between 1965 and 1984, approximately, is called Generation X, and its main daily component was living with the Cold War. With the permanent threat of nuclear war, which would decimate the human race itself from the face of the Earth, it is a far less hopeful generation. In addition, it was the first generation where women conquered their place in the labor in a massive way, in addition to a strong migration to the cities. These two characteristics added together led to a decrease in the number of children in the family. From a cultural point

of view, Generation X had much greater access to television than the previous one, and this equipment was crucial in the cultural development of these individuals who were mostly urban, since until 1960 Brazil was still a country mostly rural (Oliveira, 2016).

The later generation comes with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the consequent end of the Cold War. Without a constant threat of a nuclear winter, the generation born between 1985 and 1994, called Generation Y or Millennials, is much more hopeful about the future. The environment in which they were raised had greater optimism, and even fewer siblings at their side, since families greatly reduced the number of children, with most of them contained in just one. With this, it can be said that the fruits of this time are more narcissistic, self-assured and hedonistic (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

The generation, however, which we will focus on in this article, is the one born after 1995, whose great breakthrough was the popularization of the commercial internet. It is the first generation that was born with the world wide web and that had access to smartphones from a very early age (Twenge, 2018).

We will not, however, be so naive as to believe that a mere mapping by year of birth corresponds to an objective reality. We know that the reality of a person born in 2001 in Sydney, Australia is different from a person born in the same year in La Paz, Bolivia, for example. The “generation” is much more defined by socioeconomic and cultural characteristics than by the simple year of

birth. More than that, when generations are researched, authors hardly converge on the beginning and end years of each stage.

This difficulty, however, will not enter this brief study. Here, we will base ourselves on the idea that all the people included in the group to be studied were already born with the internet in their lives, and most likely their first form of distraction, their first digital pacifier, was the screen of a computer or smartphone. These are people who have a very different life from that of the generation immediately preceding theirs.

Perhaps the main characteristic of iGen is to communicate more digitally than face-to-face. In this generation, most encounters, friendships, flirtations are created and maintained through a shiny glass screen. For this generation, the smartphone is practically an appendix of the body. In Brazil, 96% of the inhabitants have a cell phone, and a young person normally spends between nine and seventeen hours a day connected to the internet (DataReportal, 2020). In a brief analysis, we can say that for a good part of the population, more than half of the individual's waking time is filtered by an illuminated screen. And most of the time on the device is spent on digital social media platforms.

Digital social media platforms are ubiquitous in the daily lives of a typical urban middle-class youth across the West. Upon waking up, the first thing this adolescent does is check his social media. The last thing before bed is to double-check these platforms. In addition, throughout the day, these environments are used for more than nine

hours (ibid.). The internet and the smartphone are like an appendix to the youth body.

Adolescence in the third decade of the 21st century seems to be conducted online. Most social relationships are therefore mediated by platforms that, as we will see, are driven by engagement and motivated solely by profit. Young people spend their days and nights interacting with a bright screen that fits in the palm of their hand. In this way, relationships of power, friendship, affection, love, etc., are observed, filtered and manipulated by algorithms. In Brazil, the biggest form of youth communication is Facebook, owned by Mark Zuckerberg. The second largest interaction tool is the Whatsapp messenger, also owned by Zuckerberg. The third form of interaction is Instagram, which, again, is owned by Mark Zuckerberg (ibid.). Thus, we can say that a North American company knows more about Brazilian adolescents than Brazilian government or research institutes. To make this scenario worse, the Covid-19 pandemic made these tools even more powerful, since any type of communication, supposedly, should be done through digital applications, to avoid social interaction and infection with the virus.

There is also social pressure, even before the pandemic, to use social media. In 2008, when Facebook was becoming the most used digital social media platform in Brazil, having an account on it was an option for a teenager. In 2022, it seems to be a social obligation. An urban youth without social media is a silenced youth, socially dead. Since a good part of the social relationships are constituted within the platform, there is no possible choice for a good part of the youth.

Communication mediated by networks seems to be mandatory. Given that adolescence is the time in life where individuals define their identity and come together in like-minded groups, it is difficult to avoid using digital social networking platforms. In interviews, teenagers say it is impossible to leave the networks because that is where all their friends interact (Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

There is enormous difficulty in socializing in person. Most socializing is done through apps and digital devices. Even at school, it is not uncommon to find students who relate more to their smartphone than to their peers (Desmurget, 2021). In addition, even when they interact in face-to-face groups, the bright screen of the cell phone and the presence of social media do not abandon individuals. We can even say that there are always more people than we can tell from the body count in the conversation. There always seem to be one or more virtual bodies, which are manifested through chats, interactions and memes. We can safely say that because of social media and smartphones, teenagers are rarely in an argument only with their peers who physically meet. A teenage couple, for example, is usually never alone. There are always one or more smartphones on, with side conversations.

As online relationships mediated by social media have the characteristic of being more fragile, it is not uncommon to find cruelty in breakups of romantic relationships, since, to end a relationship, it is enough to block the person on platforms. A conversation, an explanation is not necessary. All it takes is one ruthless block and the relationship is over. In this way, the bonds that were already weak due to the excessive use of platforms mediated

by algorithms, end up being even shallower, since people introject that this is the current way of relating (Bauman, 2004), resulting in a difficulty in forging bonds.

This fragility in social ties can have another consequence, which is insecurity and the generalized low self-esteem of generation i. The weakest ties are added to the fantasy fed daily by social media, a fantasy of success propagated by Facebook posts and Instagram photographs (Araújo et al., 2020). Standards of beauty and financial gains are read, seen and heard by young people who still cannot have a very effective discernment of what is reality and what is an exaggeration promoted by the need for ostentation typical of the time we live in, where public and private confuse, as we will see. Achieving full and perennial happiness seems to be one of the most propagated goals by the current industry of digital social media platforms. The problem is that such utopia does not exist, and what we have, therefore, are young people who are increasingly depressed, since they are far from such goals and do not have the capacity to critically evaluate the social media's post they are observing.

Social networks can have a very negative effect on youth mental health, as they are apparently more anxious and more depressed than previous generations, and this has been the case since the proliferation of smartphones and digital social networking platforms (Fidalgo, 2018), and anxiety is considered one of the great disasters or risks involving social media platforms.

Depression, when in a serious condition, can lead to suicide, and unfortunately, the rates of this practice are increasing

alarmingly worldwide since the massification of smartphones in 2011 and the increasing use of the internet (Twenge, 2018). In Brazil, the situation is not very different, since the suicide rate has increased by more than 250% in just 30 years, with a worsening of the curve from the 2000s onwards (Globo.com, 2014) when the internet became more popular in the daily lives of young people. Between 2000 and 2015, 11,947 suicide deaths were observed in adolescents in Brazil, and these numbers do not seem to stop growing (Cicogna, Hillesheim and Hallal, 2019). There is even the growing relevance of the expression "suicide epidemic" or "contagious suicide", which show the size of the public health problem. Most juvenile suicides are associated with the use of the internet and, in particular, the use of digital social media platforms (Fidalgo, 2018). The presence of social actors in the process of mitigating such disasters, and in the construction of public policies related to the use of social media, seems to us to be of great importance. The use of networks and possible disasters can go beyond the capacity of parents and children. In many cases, it can be a state problem (Desmurget, 2021).

Self-image, closely related to the public/private relationship, also seems to be a problem for young people in the third decade of the 21st century. Adolescents historically have problems with acceptance of their own bodies, and this is an almost natural process at this stage of life. However, an application like Instagram, for example, reinforces a body pattern that is inaccessible to most people, which ends up adding another degree to the feeling of inadequacy and low self-esteem

in young people. But it's not just the body pattern that is propagated on this platform. There is also the social pattern. Houses, cars, watches, clothes... Ostentation seems to be a constant on the youth timeline. Seeing beautiful photographs daily of people – friends or strangers – enjoying hedonistically can promote feelings of envy and inadequacy in more fragile minds.

Another characteristic is that young people seem to be multitasking, and there is even a very strong discourse in society extolling this characteristic. However, the cognitive capacity of the human being is limited, and doing more things at the same time only indicates the superficiality of such actions. A mechanical process can, of course, be shared with another mechanical process. But a complex cognitive process, a deep reflection, seems to us incompatible with multitasking. Thus, young people think they have a greater cognitive capacity for performing more tasks at the same time, when, in general, they seem to be losing part of their cognitive capacity due to difficulty concentrating (Bontempo, 2018), and research has shown a strong drop in school performance by the lack of ability to concentrate and reflect more deeply (Desmurget, 2021).

There is also a certain lack of interest in studies and school. Much of this lack of interest is due to the confusion between information and knowledge. The school, which for hundreds of years was the main provider of information, as teachers had access to more content, is no longer the only holder of information. It's not even the main one, as Google retains far more information than

all the teachers on the planet combined. But the 21st century school cannot claim to be a source of information. It should be guided by being a curator of information, separating what is interesting and what is not, at the same time as a promoter of critical thinking, an entity that seeks to change the individual's perception of the world. Each teacher, in each curricular subject, must try to make their students develop an internal process of reflection and, through this, individually acquire knowledge (Freire, 1997).

Nor can we forget the “futurologists”, who from time to time appear on television and on social media categorically stating that what young people are learning today will be useless in a few years, and that studying is a waste of time. With this, the motivation to study, which is indispensable for learning, falls apart.

In addition to spending a lot of time on the internet and on the screens that provide access to digital social media platforms, another characteristic of iGen's youth is the extension of childhood. There are several reasons for this. The first of these is the fact that it is a monitored generation. Most members of Generation I are monitored by their parents since birth. They always have their cell phones with the location mode on, so their parents can always know where they are, and they are somehow obliged to indicate from time to time where they are and what they are doing. This generation practically does not leave home without their parents, with school (where they are monitored by other adults, the teachers) usually the only exception (Twenge, 2018).

If 30 years ago it was common for an 11 or 12-year-old middle-class child to take a bus alone to go to school, this is currently unthinkable for most of them. In the same way that playing loose on the streets of a large metropolis seems to be unacceptable. Even playing is only possible with adult supervision or cameras (Santos, 2022b). We understand that there is indeed an increase in violence in Brazil, but perhaps there is too much surveillance, which ends up generating a lack of freedom. And with a lack of freedom and excessive vigilance, fearful individuals can be created. In many cases, it's not just a parental imposition of lack of freedom. It is also a choice of the young, who are afraid to face adult life and prefer to adhere to nesting behavior, in which they are protected under the wings of their parents.

The consequence of this behavior is usually an extension of childhood, when human beings are more dependent on their parents, are less autonomous and need constant supervision.

The last of the characteristics that we will present in this brief study is the issue of behavioral addiction that young people are facing when it comes to digital social media platforms. We have said before that cell phones are practically appendix of youth bodies. Although there is controversy regarding the word addiction, since it normally refers to ingestible drugs, its definition seems to be adequate, since addiction refers to the prolonged use of substances or behaviors that cause significant damage or suffering in the individual's life, such as not being able to work, study or relate to family and friends. In addition,

the abuse of this substance or behavior places the individual in dangerous situations and the subject finds himself unable to control his consumption (Barlow & Durand, 2008).

With this definition, we can then understand the excessive and harmful use of digital social media platforms as a behavioral addiction. In this case there are two serious problems. The first is that society has a hard time accepting that behavioral addictions exist (Alter, 2018). As most people use the platforms daily and are not addicted, there is a tendency to believe that it is not possible to become addicted, so they do not take any action when situations get out of control, not seeking medical or psychological help. The other problem seems to be even more serious since it is practically impossible to live in the 21st century without digital social media platforms. With the Covid-19 pandemic this became very evident. An urban person without access to the social media was practically doomed to be unemployed.

For iGen, most of the time online life is more important than real life, or at least just as important. The boundary between what is virtual and what is real is becoming more blurred, more diffuse every day. Taking a smartphone away from a teenager is like jettisoning them for at least half their life, and often more than that. It's taking away your identity, your way of relating, your contact with the world. For the 21st century teenager, most of his public and private relationships are mediated by a shiny box measuring approximately six inches that carries with it the networks and algorithms necessary for his social survival.

## Social media and algorithms

At this point it is necessary to make a distinction between social network and digital social media platform. This is because every recurring grouping of human beings can be called a social network. A social network is a tangle of connections that link multiple individuals who have some form of social bond. Social networks have multiple dimensions, such as size, density, integration of contacts, geographic dispersion, social roots, symmetry and homogeneity among members (Martino, 2016). The relationship that social networks promote in individuals is guided by the dynamics between them and the flexibility of their structure. It usually does not have a very rigid hierarchy, while its ties are created and thickened by mutual interests, in addition to tending to be more fluid, with easier creation and dissolution.

With this, we can say that social networks are “the set of relationships that an individual makes with other individuals and these with the first, normally mediated by a relatively flexible structure.” (Santos, 2022b, p. 52). And it is in the dynamics of the subjects that the social network is effectively built. It is based on the individuals that the network will be bigger or smaller, more comprehensive or more exclusive, for example. We can therefore say that social networks are shaped by their participants, while they shape those who participate in them, in a process of reflection and refraction already studied by semiotics (Bakhtin, 2006).

Thus, we can say that the first social networks emerged a long time ago, from the first human groups that interacted with other communities. From a historical point of view, the first social networks, therefore, were forged by commerce, then cities, the factory, the school and so on (Santos, 2022b).

There's something new on the horizon, though, when we talk about platforms like Facebook or Twitter. In this case, common sense and the media usually attribute the label of social media to these capitalist companies. We prefer, however, to use the term Digital Social Media Platforms, since they are distinct from the other forms of social networks known until their emergence. A digital social networking platform is “digital support, usually for-profit, that aggregates numerous resources and acts as a hub for the social networks of people and entities.” (Santos, 2022b, p. 45)

The first and most important distinction is that they are digital, virtual, that is, they need an electronic support to exist. Digital equipment works on a binary dyad of zero and one. Inside any application, instructions are written that, after all, are converted into zeros and ones inside the machine to perform an operation. These instructions are called algorithms.

The term algorithm derives from the name of the Persian Muhammad ibn Mûsâ al-Khowârizmi, a mathematician who wrote one of the first texts of the ancient world, the *Kitab al-jabr wa' l-muqabala* (Leavitt, 2009). Hundreds of years later, English mathematician Alan Turing defines an algorithm as an



unambiguous and ordered set of executable steps that define a finite process (Turing, 1936). Thus, it can be said that an algorithm is a huge mathematical formula, a set of defined logical rules and procedures that lead to the solution of a problem. Digital social media platforms, like all other digital devices, are forged by algorithms.

Users, however, do not see this system. They just use it. What Generation i people want is to participate in social interactions promoted by the algorithm used by the platform. What's more, people don't even notice the platform. The face presented to them is just that of friends and acquaintances looking for mutual interactions.

The main objective of these platforms, which are led by multi-million companies, is the profit from advertising. This advertising, in turn, is delivered to the users of the platforms on an individual basis. Thanks to the data entered by users on the platform, it can filter the ads to be published on the user's timeline almost individually. For example, a single man in his 20s will not receive advertisements for diapers, just as a woman is unlikely to receive advertisements for hair transplants. But the algorithms go far beyond these simplistic examples, they can crudely illustrate the procedure, since the algorithms can be so precise that they can learn exactly what the person wants to consume, so that it is practically impossible to escape the advertising appeal, as we will see later.

Everything that is done on the platforms is tracked by them. Every photograph looked at on Instagram, every like on TikTok, the minute of every video watched on YouTube is captured

by the algorithms. Platforms are so refined that they even know how long the mouse was stationary on a news story or the scroll bar of a smartphone stopped to follow a joke (Sumpter, 2019).

With this immeasurable amount of data (also called Big Data) companies know more and more about their users at every moment, being able to generate very detailed profiles of each of their users. The Facebook platform, for example, can evaluate those who are on the platform in up to 100 different dimensions. A human being, at best, can rate 10 or 15 (O'Neil, 2020). Supercomputers process such algorithms and end up knowing individuals better than they know themselves, knowing subtleties that the person is probably unaware of about himself. More than that, algorithms can predict what the user wants. This is how music platforms like Spotify, Deezer or Tidal can make selections of songs to be listened to later by music lovers. The algorithm can analyze, in a fraction of a second, the beats per minute of the song, the vocal style or the energy of the music to deliver others with similarities that can please the user. And retain it more and more within the platform.

Such algorithms are the driving force behind the so-called Big Techs, that is, the technology companies, usually based in the USA, that exert great influence in the West. These algorithms, however, are very valuable secrets and kept in a way that they are huge black boxes that citizens or even entities do not even have access to (O'Neil, 2020). What people are able to perceive are just inputs and outputs, and the modes of processing are forbidden to society.

These mathematical formulas, therefore, end up being able to predict the behavior of those who use them and, moreover, make judgments. Because they are machines, judgments are cold and arbitrary (*ibid.*). In the real, analog world, people make judgments about other people based on data, but also on conjunctures, moral judgments specific to a given community and other sorts of feelings. Furthermore, we are seen as flawed, and there is nobility in the act of apologizing. Human judgments are hot and emotional. An algorithm analyzes a person's data and issues a verdict, with no possibility of redemption. And as the data once recorded on the world wide web is never erased, thousands of people today are paying for an attitude they took in years past, without the algorithm being able to understand that the person may have changed their way of life. No wonder a Spanish group rebelled against the giant Google for the right to be forgotten (Zuboff, 2019). The young person, knowing that there is always the possibility of being judged, ends up developing the behavior of prisoners in Bentham's panopticon (Foucault, 1987), that is, self-censoring.

Algorithms, always striving to make their users stay longer on the platform, always end up presenting what the person most engages in, that is, what keeps them longer on the platform, be it content they love, be it content she hates. The important thing is to interact, to be touched by the algorithmic structure and not leave the platform. With this, two structures are promoted that are very

harmful to the social framework itself. The so-called filter bubbles and digital resonance box (Bartlett, 2019).

The filter bubble is the way the algorithm ends up making its users only fall within a spectrum. Once the user, through likes, dislikes and comments, defines what he likes and what he doesn't like, the algorithm learns what engages and what doesn't, and delivering to this individual more and more content that keeps him stuck on the platform. From there, news or ideas different from what engages him are systematically removed from the user's gaze, who, almost naturally, comes to believe that there is only one correct field: the one in which he is inserted (Lanier, 2018). We can therefore say that the platform gradually deceives each of its users, causing a huge dissonance between the reality of the physical world and the reality of the virtual world. However, the more time people – especially the younger ones – spend in front of the platforms, the more the virtual world encompasses the real, and the more complex this relationship becomes.

The other element is the so-called digital resonance box, which works together with the filter bubble. This social construct ends up amplifying what the individual says on digital social networks, as it promotes the meeting of people with similar ideas and prejudices. Thus, a person with prejudiced ideas will find hundreds, perhaps thousands of people with the same ideas in their news distribution channel, and the voice of these people, like a mountain with echo in which the visitor does

not stop screaming, will become amplifying, until there is no longer any possibility of a dissonant voice.

Therefore, several authors point out that the algorithms of digital social media platforms are altering the social framework (Bartlett, 2019; Zuboff, 2019; O'Neil, 2020; Bridle, 2019; Lanier, 2018) and in many moments even destroying the very coexistence possible. With digital sounding boards and filter bubbles, certainties increase in people's minds, while doubts are resolved. Without doubts about its position, radicalism arises. And with it, polarization. With polarization, the break. And people develop extreme difficulty in accepting the opinion of others that is contrary to their own (Castells, 2018), which will directly impact the public/private relationship of young people. Anyone who spends a lot of time on digital social media platforms gradually loses their critical ability to see the world.

We don't want, however, just to demonize the algorithms. It is important to point out that they can be extremely useful, and they have indeed made very beneficial changes in society. Today, any student can search for any term or concept with unprecedented agility. We know that there are some restrictions on this behavior, such as the homogenization of responses and a quick response with little reflection, but it cannot be denied that a teenager, when faced with a complex problem, can use the algorithms of digital social networking platforms such as YouTube or Twitter, for example, to have more content on a certain topic and thus seek a greater understanding. At the other extreme, a tool like Google Scholar can provide

researchers around the world with a quick screening of academic articles on a given topic, which would have been virtually impossible until the invention of the internet, when research was more decentralized, and the researcher had to move around to get a copy of the material. There is also a democratization of access. Until the proliferation of such algorithms, it was necessary for a researcher to be in a large city, a research hub, which had a large and varied library. Research was, to a greater or lesser extent, also circumscribed geographically (Chartier, 1999).

Another issue that the algorithms deeply touched was with minority movements, which have never had so much exposure and visibility. Movements that have historically been marginalized each day gain more visibility for their causes, with their battles increasingly visible to society, growing in size and exposure, generating a virtuous circle in which more people are engaged and tell their stories and struggles, aiming to reduce prejudice and promote a more egalitarian society. In many cases, driven by algorithms, private speeches become public and similar speeches gain a voice and reinforce each other.

However, although they can be beneficial under certain conditions, the basic function of algorithms is to promote engagement.

Engagement is, therefore, the term used by digital social media platforms to estimate the time each user is connected, watching, interacting, consuming, creating and manipulating content. Engagement techniques, such as those produced by algorithms, help individuals spend as much time as possible immersed within the chosen

platform and interact as much as possible, since interaction guarantees permanence. We can say, therefore, that a person is more or less engaged with a certain platform based on the amount of time they stay there and the amount of interactions – whether passive, such as watching a video or active, such as commenting on a post – performed (Santos, 2022a).

And companies strive to ensure greater engagement because it is from the amount of time and type of interaction that more data is obtained from individuals. Because it is from these data that we have the *modus operandi* of companies and their capitalist reason. Consumer data is the currency of these companies. Its business model consists of selling advertising, which is not unknown, given that radio was already doing it at the beginning of the 20th century. People listen to programs and music for free and in exchange they also need to listen to commercials. The difference with digital social media platforms is that they offer ultra-targeted advertising. As users feed a certain platform with a myriad of information, and of all possible types, such as their location throughout the day through GPS, the growth of their children through photos, the standard of living through online shopping and travel photos and even your eating habits through photographs and recipe searches, the more and more the algorithms will learn about the individual, and the more accurate the advertisements will be.

If on television, for example, everyone has to watch the same commercial during the soap opera, on the digital social media

platform, each user has the advertisements that supposedly interest them the most, which are chosen thanks to their way of life previously captured by the algorithms to from the data entered by the user daily on the platforms, as we have already mentioned in the example of the young person who probably will not receive diaper advertising. With that, we have what Zuboff (2019) calls surveillance capitalism, an invasion of privacy never before seen in human history. The human experience turns out to be free material for data extraction with a view to advertising sales (*ibid.*). In other words, the private life of individuals is invaded so that few companies can profit as much as possible, since the assertiveness of the advertisements becomes very high, since the advertisements are only made for people who have demonstrated, in some way, potential for purchase or use of the product or service offered.

The manipulation of data through algorithms is such that we can say that each user has a different platform in their hands when they enter a social network. From the data provided by the individual, a new, individualized platform is generated, with increasing potential for engagement. With each new data entry or manipulation of existing content, the more the algorithm knows about the person and is better able to predict what will engage them. And with more engagement, as we have already said, the more effective the advertising generated specifically for that subject (Sumpter, 2019).

There is also the fact that algorithms are always looking for engagement so that people give more and more of their personal lives. Thus, they provoke reactions and incite individuals to insert more and more data, which are treated, manipulated and reinforced, with the intention that the subject is more and more inserted in that world promoted by the platform, fraying both the line between the public and the that in many moments this line is simply broken, and public life and private life become the same thing.

## Public/private relationship mediated by digital social media platforms

If in previous generations there was a clear difference between what was public and what was private, the same does not occur in generation i. For people born longer, there was a clear physical barrier that divided these two spheres of the individual's life. The private was what happened between the four walls of the house and the public was what was demonstrated outside this environment, on the streets and in communal establishments such as the Church, the School or the Square. There was always, however, a need to record private events. Hence came the intimate diaries, which were inviolable writings from the person to himself in the future. The diaries could only be opened by someone else after the death of their writer or after a certain period (Schittine, 2004).

Currently, however, the existence of private lives being or becoming public is increasingly common. In a brief consultation on the programming of television channels, we can see the number of programs in the "reality show" style, that is, programs that show the intimacies of their participants to an audience that increasingly wants contact with the private, with the intimate relationship with the characters that are developing on the screen. And this is not only true for participants in programs of dubious quality, but also for any type of professional who needs exposure. Currently we can say that all young actors and actresses need – imperiously – to have accounts on digital social media platforms and show their intimacy. Your home, your family, what you eat. Athletes also do not escape, and the maintenance of sponsorship is conditioned to the massive presence on social media. Comedians, teachers, musicians, architects, psychologists are scrutinized daily through the posts they place on the platforms. The maxim “those who are not seen are not remembered” seems to have become “those who do not have an account on a digital social media do not exist”. And in this account, it is mandatory to include your intimacies, under the penalty of not being interesting and, therefore, losing audience and money.

Like Orwell's (2018) dystopian world, citizens have their lives scrutinized daily by other people. But unlike the work written in 1948, it is not a totalitarian government that invades privacy, but other people, other citizens of the same community. We can say that the members of iGen live in a

gigantic panopticon where everyone watches everyone, and there is no privacy. Today's society doesn't need a Big Brother. It already plays that role.

But the loss of privacy increasingly exposes people to surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), that is, the loss of privacy helps capitalist companies sell more and more products, exploiting not only what is of a public nature, but also instruments for the individual's work or generic products, but rather exploring each person's intimate desire for products and services.

Thus, platforms increasingly force people to expose themselves. And, like the sportsman who loses his sponsorship if he doesn't expose his intimate life, young people imagine that they will be relegated to limbo if they don't do the same. Adolescents in the 21st century expose themselves daily, because, from their point of view, those who do not expose themselves have no life, if they are not registered, they did not exist (Twenge, 2018). In a way, part of the memory was transferred to digital social media platforms. And memory is always something intimate. If memory is collective, there is no intimacy, and those who gain from this are the big companies that manipulate the consumption desires of the youngest, that is, the current generation is losing its intimacy thanks to a nefarious need for profit through advertising. What should be information reserved only for the individual and his inner circle of coexistence ends up being wide open to the world.

With this somewhat blurred notion of what is public and what is private, in many cases supposed secrets of teenagers are discovered by their parents through the action

of algorithms that, seeking to offer products, end up denouncing the acts of their users. It's like the father who discovers that his teenage daughter is pregnant because the diaper ads popping up on the screen.

The division between public and private is so modified that not even a meeting of friends can be intimate. There is no more socializing among a small group. What exists is always a small group with a face-to-face presence with a much larger group of people who are on their smartphones, also participating in that moment. Just look at teenagers in any shopping mall in any major city in the country and we will see groups of people interacting with each other and also with other people and groups through their smartphones. As we have already said, the smartphone exists as an extension of the youth body.

More intimate than a meeting of friends is sexual contact. And this has also changed with the massive entry of smartphone applications that promote meetings between people. If the act of flirting was once valued, and much of the world's artistic production has focused on seduction, currently, for many of iGen's participants it is just a choice among thousands or millions of possible partners. The person then chooses who they would like to date from a short text and many photographs. It should be noted that photographs are images with only two dimensions, and even these are altered (Flusser, 2019). In the image displayed on the smartphone screen, we are not able to correctly evaluate even height and width. Much less other more important dimensions in a love or sexual relationship, such as the smell, the touch of the skin or the timbre of the voice.

In order to gain a competitive advantage over other potential partners, what ends up happening is an avalanche of intimate information – which should be private and discovered little by little if the partnership works – all at once. Young people seek to expose their intimate lives and, in many cases and in many applications, even their bodies.

Although nudity is no longer as taboo as it once was, many people are not comfortable sharing sensual images. However, given the voracity of algorithms and platforms, they feel compelled to do so, under penalty of not being able to find partners within these platforms. With such exposure, one of the main factors of eroticism, which is curiosity, is shaken. The privacy of the live encounter, notably a first date, is somewhat deflated by the privacy that has been lost (Twenge, 2018).

On the other hand, one of the factors of greatest anxiety prior to a first sexual encounter is the embarrassment of showing yourself naked to the other person, while seeing the other person's body also naked. This moment of tension is partially alleviated by the lack of privacy in messages that explore, even before the face-to-face view, the naked body. It is not uncommon for young people to exchange nude photographs, the so-called nudes (Santos, 2022b). Usually, a young couple finds themselves naked in person after having already enjoyed photographs without clothes.

Sexual intercourse, however, has not guaranteed intimacy since the end of the last century. If before, sexual intercourse was the apex of a couple's intimacy, from the 1970s onwards it became a first attempt at intimacy, that is, a couple can have sex and still not be intimate, at the same time they can having

intimacy with someone without ever having had sexual relations (Bauman, 2004). There is, between a sexual relationship and an intimate relationship, an increasing distance.

The relationship, then, will only be intimate when effected in public. If in the 20th century making the relationship public meant introducing the partner to parents and friends, in the 21st century what matters is putting the relationship status on the digital social network platform. What was once a fact that took some time to be known by the community, is now instantaneous.

Another typical feature of times of massive exposure of private life is the unnecessary and constant updating of location and consumer goods. Young people seem to have the need to record everything that happens in their lives, as we have already said. But this need to disclose where you are, what you are doing and what your consumer goods are, seems to contrast with the security they demand. In the 21st century, it is much more common for the urban middle-class youth to be taken to school or to any activity by one of their parents than to get there via a walk, a bus or some other type of mobility device (Twenge, 2018). But at the same time that young people are afraid to go out on the street, they publicize their way of life on social media platforms. If we think about urban violence, the possibility of robbery that decreases with the protection of the parents' car, increases when you publicly disclose everything you have and what your habits are. For a criminal, it is enough to keep an eye on the account of digital social media platforms for some time to know all the habits and the best place and time for a criminal approach.

It is important to highlight that humanity has never been so exposed, or at least with so much possibility of exposure. And the internet never forgets. Even the most useless information posted is not deleted. This issue is so important that it even provoked a Spanish uprising against the largest internet search company in 2011 (Zuboff, 2019). The argument of this group of people is that it is essential that the privacy of individuals become private again if they so desire. But that's not what happens on digital social media platforms. Even deleting an account is complex. Deleting very old messages or ideas can become a herculean task, and made difficult by the platform that, after all, profits from the amount of content existing in its databases.

We know that each individual must be responsible for what he or she posts on the social media platform, just as they are responsible for every document they sign and every word they utter. However, the very structure of the social media seems to make this understanding difficult. What people see is an opaque screen, in which they cannot perceive neither the other who is beyond the screen, nor the action itself and its possible consequences (Schittine, 2004).

These platform characteristics added to the typical characteristics of youth form a cauldron of regrets, since youth is a time notoriously known for experimentation and wrong decisions, made, in general, by inexperience and impetuosity. The regret that existed in a baby boomer, for example, could last for a while, until everyone forgot what

happened. This no longer occurs. The flaws of a centennial are wide open for all to see, any day and time. Regret is present all the time and can cause serious damage to the subject's psychic structure.

When public and private merge, there is a disturbance in society. Social roles are confused, as are the minds of young people. Contrary to what one might imagine, by gluing the public and the private together, society no longer produces wisdom. What we perceive is a growth of beliefs that were previously relegated to the bosom of some groups reaching alarming levels, such as the case of people who believe that the planet Earth is flat or that vaccines cause autism (Sumpter, 2019). At the same time young people are being pushed to publicize their lives more and more and being watched not by a totalitarian government like Orwell's 1984, but by their peers. A 21st century boy is constantly watched by his friends, schoolmates, teachers, parents, etc. And there is no way out, since socialization is done in this way, with the distribution – on a world scale – of the intimate issues of young people (Desmurget, 2021). We live in an increasingly oppressive society, where digital social media platforms are the only real winners.

## Final considerations

At the end, this article sought to trace some characteristics of the current generation of middle-class urban youth, who use the internet constantly and, even more, digital social



media platforms. For this reason, throughout the article we also seek to inform about the operation of such tools and their algorithms. Finally, we analyze some characteristics of the relationship between the public and the private mediated by digital social media platforms in young minds.

Far from exhausting the subject, we recommend further studies, mainly

in the sphere of psychology or cognitive sciences, for a better understanding of this phenomenon, which apparently is installed in the bowels of society. We also know that this article is a portrait of the lived period, and that probably several characteristics presented here may change in a few years. Even so, we consider the debate not only pertinent, but urgent.

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