

DISCOVERING THE ESSENCE OF GENERATION Z: A VISUAL JOURNEY TOWARDS A PARADIGM SHIFT

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The behavior and predominant traits of Generation Z (Gen Z) need to be studied, as they are authentic digital natives in a complex and changing environment where the presence of multiple screens has modified their ways of interacting and communicating, creating a social and global challenge. This study takes an interdisciplinary approach combining communication, marketing and sociology to generate a positive social impact by reconnecting Gen Z with organizations and institutions. **Methodology:** Qualitative, observational and experimental. The project merged Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) and Challenge-Based Research (CBR) to design a stamp collection for the Correo Group that reflected Gen Z's identity. Criminology and Psychology students (who are part of the same generation) conducted digital ethnography to collect relevant data, while Advertising students developed visual proposals based on the analysis. Guided by Cultural Criminology and Ultra Realism, the research aimed to have a positive impact on the community. **Results:** The students

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developed a total of 37 stamps, which were organized into five thematic categories that provided insight into Gen Z: a) Work; b) Lifestyles; c) Social Activism; d) Audiovisuals; and e) Connectivity. The process concluded with the presentation of the stamps to *Correos de España*⁵. **Discussion:** After analyzing the stamp designs, it was confirmed that there are distinctive characteristics that define Gen Z as a generation that is clearly different from Millennials. This was evident when analyzing the stamps they created for *Correos*, which aimed to connect with this generation. Comprehension of the interests, fears, values, and forms of expression of Generation Z has not only facilitated a more profound understanding of the generation, but also enabled the development of connections that foster loyalty and engagement. This information is extremely valuable for any organization as it can help to reduce institutional disaffection and develop more effective, targeted advertising and marketing campaigns. **Conclusion:** Ten key factors that define Gen Z have been identified.

Keywords:

Generation Z (Gen-Z); social media (SM); consumer behavior; marketing; advertising; cultural criminology

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is the result of the research entitled "POSTAL. A study on the interests of Generation Z from the perspective of Cultural Criminology" (CI Code: 2023-290) developed by the Knowledge and Research Group on Social Problems (GCIPS) of the European University of Madrid (UEM in Spanish), (Gen-Z). focused on understanding the concerns and lifestyles of Generation Z

To this end, it was decided to involve members of Gen-Z in the project, specifically two groups of students from the University, by applying research methodologies such as digital ethnography, Challenge-Based Learning (CBL) and Challenge-Based Research (CBR), in the real-life environment of the company. Partnering with the Correos Group, the project entailed the creation of a final product: the design of stamps intended to resonate with Gen Z, while also catering to centennial students.

Establishing a specific time frame that encompasses Gen Z is complicated, given that there are different proposals in this regard. However, following Lara and Ortega (2016), it can be concluded that it groups together those born between 1994 and 2009. This truly digital generation (Oscar, 2016) is systematically and continuously exposed to digital information. The individuals that comprise it are hyperconnected through different languages and digital channels through multi-screen use. Therefore, the way in which Gen Z relates, educates itself, or obtains information cannot be understood without the combination and emergence of the internet and this technology (Oliver Wyman Forum, 2023). This hyperconnectivity has made Gen Z the first generation to cross cultural and language barriers, establishing a generational solidarity unprecedented in previous generations (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). That is a way to reinforce an identity that is highly contested socially by other age groups. This is a generation that feels misunderstood (Vilanova & Ortega, 2017) and is trying to escape the label of the "glass generation." They

⁵ Spanish Postal Company

are becoming great agents of change, challenging and transforming deeply rooted paradigms in society.

These individuals have expressed discontent with the societal roles and norms allocated to them, often challenging established social conventions. Notably, their influence over communication processes, where they hold significant power, has increased compared to previous generations (Fernández et al., 2024). This suggests an elevated capacity for social influence among this group. Contrary to the notion that Gen Z members are merely consumers of information, they are considered prosumers, defined as individuals who not only consume content but also actively create and disseminate it on various digital platforms (Cordero Verdugo & Reyero Simón, 2021).

SM, as the main channel of participation for these digital natives, becomes the main place of expression of their needs, tastes, hobbies and complaints, from where they build all kinds of social interactions, which directly influences their social behavior (Vilanova & Ortega, 2017).

Connecting with Gen Z, responding to their needs, and preventing or intervening in their disaffections requires an in-depth understanding of their traits, interests, and characteristics as a generation.

Furthermore, the symbiosis between Gen-Z and technology allows them to take on different roles, such as brand ambassadors, judging and giving opinions based on their level of connection and attachment to what these brands represent. While millennials have been considered voracious consumers, Gen-Z are valued as trendsetters in the global world (Dobre et al., 2021).

Companies and brands aim to understand the purchasing behavior of their potential customers. This practice is complex and requires moving away from reductionist theoretical approaches that ignore social and psychological variables as an essential way to understand consumer needs. In a highly competitive market, identifying social groups with similar characteristics can be key to establishing an emotional connection between brands and customers (engagement), achieving loyalty, and becoming lovemarks (Roberts, 2005). Generations change in habits, customs, and personality traits, creating generational gaps. To connect with younger generations, it is crucial to understand and thoroughly study the interests, aspirations and needs that influence their decision-making and consumption habits.

2. OBJECTIVES

How does Generation Z address its sociocultural challenges? This was the research question being addressed at the beginning of the project. The basis of this work was three hypotheses: 1) Generation Z presents a future perspective that entails a breakdown with currently accepted social norms; 2) socioeconomic uncertainty is causing Generation Z to disaffect institutions, generating social and political polarization; and 3) members of Generation Z use the digital world to articulate their generational principles, given that they find no way to express them in the analog world.

Thus, the overall objective of this study was to analyze the life perspectives of Generation Z, with a focus on identifying criminogenic elements that require early preventive intervention.

3. METHODOLOGY

To answer the hypotheses and achieve the objectives, a methodological innovation was adopted: the CBL (Gallagher & Savage, 2020) was merged with the CBR (Cordero et al., 2021) to design a stamp collection for the Correos Group that reflected Gen Z. These sources of inquiry facilitated the application of the visual research method within the framework of the social sciences (Mannay, 2017) to access narratives representing the “collective unconscious” (Jung, 2009) of Gen Z.

Students from the Criminology and Psychology double degree program, taking the Sociology of Deviance module (Group 1), and students from the Advertising degree program and the Advertising and Audiovisual Communication double degree program, taking the Corporate Visual Identity module (Group 2), were involved.

Group 1 conducted a digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2015) to gather empirical materials in virtual public environments within the following thematic areas: a) Work; b) Lifestyles; c) Social activism; d) Audiovisual media; e) Connectivity. They then analyzed their field diaries and conducted a critical synthesis to convey their findings to Group 2 in the form of a visual presentation.

After analyzing the presentation, Group 2 had to design different visual proposals based on the identity of Generation Z. These proposals were intended to establish an emotional connection and were far different from the everyday use of postal messaging. The 37 resulting stamps can be seen in Annex 1. The dimensions used are shown in Annex 2.

Being epistemologically guided by Cultural Criminology (Ferrell et al., 2015) and Ultra Realism (Silva, 2024), the research results sought to have an impact on the community. This CBR culminated in the presentation of the stamps to *Correos de España*.

4. DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the understanding of Generation Z's identity by providing different observable traits in the decision-making behind the design of the visual products under study, which may have relevant implications for the development of marketing communications. As Martínez and Romero (2019) point out in their Integral Persuasive Communication (IPC) model, the fundamental condition for a communication to be persuasive is its origin from a receiver-sender perspective. This is why an in-depth knowledge of this sender becomes a key element in developing insights that truly connect with the consumer. Therefore, the main findings of this research are shared below, which could be used as a guide to generate engagement with the centennial target audience.

To analyze the stamps, the Groupe μ (2010) theory on visual signs was applied, which helps to understand visual products as complex semiotic systems. The findings are divided into two groups: the plastic dimension, which refers to the formal and perceptual aspects of the visual object (colors, lines, textures, shapes, etc.), and the iconic dimension, which relates to the visual object's ability to evoke recognizable references or concepts. This parallelism between container and content serves as a guide for the design of commercial communications. Table 1 details the criteria used to analyze the stamps that make up the sample (Annex 1), with the aim of identifying the specific traits of Generation Z and guiding future communication strategies.

Table 1. *Criteria applied in the analysis of the stamps.*

Continent – Plastic dimension (Visual part)	Content – Iconic dimension (Discursive part)
Image (level of iconicity)	Predominant themes
Typographic form	References
Color palette	Narratives

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

4.1. Preference for images over text

Taking into account the results of the 37 stamps developed (see Annex 1), it can be seen that the message in 31 of them is conveyed through images rather than text. This highlights the deep influence of visual representations on Generation Z, the digital natives, in an environment dominated by screens. As López and Gómez (2021) point out, SM and the internet are their favorite means of communication, and they construct their entire reality from these sources, from images and emojis. Images become the center of contemporary communications, which suggests a significant cultural change.

This result can be interpreted in several ways: (1) images are familiar to them and allow them to process information quickly, (2) images not only reflect the world, but offer the possibility of creating and shaping it, encouraging personalization and participation (Tapscott, 2011), and (3) for Generation Z, reading images and videos is as important as reading words, since images are a tool of immediate, emotional and universal expression. These interpretations suggest that images are replacing words in communication spaces because they convey a great deal of information, rich in content and context, aligned with their perception of the world.

4.2. Use of images with a medium degree of iconicity

When analyzing the sample, it can be observed that there are no images with a high degree of iconicity. In fact, as shown in Table 2, the sample is dominated by images belonging to the degree of iconicity 6, followed by 5, whose pragmatic function, according to Villafañe, is closer to creation than to description.

Table 2. *Application of Villafañe's iconicity scale to the sample.*

Degree	Function	Level of reality	Stamps
7	Descriptive	Black and white photography	S8
6	Artistic	Realistic figurative representation ⁶	S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S9, S10, S13, S14, S16, S17, S18, S20, S21, S22
5	Artistic	Non-realistic figurative representation	S7, S19, S26, S27, S28, S29, S30, S31, S32, S34
4	Informative	Pictogram	S11, S12, S15, S33
3	Informative	Motivated schemes	-
2	Informative	Arbitrary schemes	S23, S24, S25, S35, S36, S37

Source: Elaborated by the authors applying and adapting Villafañe's criteria (2012, pp. 41-42).

The application of this scale is pertinent in that it is linked to the meaning of visual signs and how different degrees of iconicity influence perception and communication. The predominance of images with a medium degree of iconicity implies an interplay between the literal and the abstract, forcing the viewer to participate more actively in the interpretation of the message. It is interesting to highlight how these types of images adapt to and respond to the growing need to personalize the message in marketing communications to connect with consumer demands. The preference for figurative representations that are both realistic and non-realistic, with a subjective essence, over more descriptive options is valid for the 'notarial' record (Toro & Grisales-Vargas, 2021, p. 905). This preference is also a mere reflection of the world and links with Fontcuberta's (2016) reflection on how people have moved from an era dominated by photography to a more experimental visual culture, where the figurative and the conceptual blend to create new realities and meanings. This Gen Z preference for images that don't reflect reality could suggest their questioning of inherited narratives and the need to create their own discourse that reinforces their identity.

4.3. Preference for organic forms

The study of the stamps reveals a predominance of curved and organic visual content over geometric ones. Straight lines are broken (S11), erased (S12), bent (S8 and S9), or dissipated in several examples (S7).

Dondis (2000) points out that informal lines convey flexibility and experimentation, while formal lines suggest precision and control. Curvilinear compositions create dynamic visual effects that evoke movement and positive emotions such as freedom and friendliness, in contrast to straight lines (see Figure 1) that generate rigidity (Arnheim, 2008) and that could be associated with norms. This dynamism and flexibility reflect concepts of adaptability and fluidity, typical of liquid modernity, as described by Bauman (2000). From a sociological perspective, there are three possible justifications for this choice among Gen Z: (1) The constant pursuit of positive emotions, which is a

⁶ The original term that Villafañe used for Level 6 was "Realistic Painting." It has been deemed appropriate to replace it with "Realistic Figurative Representation" to avoid potential confusion when referring to a specific representational technique that is not the only one that achieves a high degree of iconicity.

characteristic of 'happycracy' (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019), to which they are exposed on social media; (2) a means of escaping the modern dystopia (Ramírez, 2020), in which they are immersed; (3) a way of expressing a gap regarding tradition and established norms, in line with their significant institutional disaffection (Temprano et al., 2024).

Figure 1. Visual comparison between a composition based on curves or straight lines



Source: Elaborated by the authors by using the generative AI tool Copilot Designer (Prompts used: Image 1 - "Composition of curved and organic lines. In black and white. No straight lines" and Image 2 - "Composition of straight lines and in black and white. No curved lines").

4.4. Choosing low-saturation color ranges

To extract a global color palette from the hues selected for the 37 stamps in the sample, several tools were used. First, the palettes for each thematic block were extracted using the Colors tool, which evaluates the predominant hues in an image, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Color palettes corresponding to three philatelic series

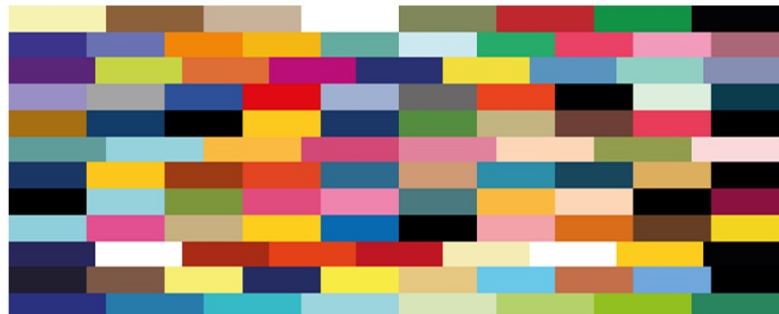


Note: The palettes shown correspond, from left to right, to the following philatelic series: "We (women) All Can " (S4, S5 and S6), belonging to the thematic block related to *Work*; "Life in Motion" and "Healthy Living" (S13, S14, S15 and S19), created to respond to the *Lifestyle* block; and the series "Messages for a Happy Life" (S35, S36 and S37), proposed to illustrate the theme concerning *Social Activism*.

Source: Elaborated by the authors using the Colors.co tool

After extracting the chromatic ranges of each of the 12 philatelic series that make up the sample (Annex 1), all the results were combined into a single image, giving rise to the following composition:

Figure 3. *Overall chromatic composition.*



Note: This composition features the 12 chromatic lines resulting from each of the different philatelic series that make up the sample. **Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

The composition displays repeated colors that reinforce a unique chromatic chord, communicating specific sensations, emotions, and meanings (Heller, 2005). To specify a more limited combination of tones, the Chat GPT tool was used to calculate the predominant hues in Figure 3, yielding the following palette.

Figure 4. Global chromatic chord extracted from the sample



Source: Elaborated by the authors by using the GPT Chat tool.

The chromatic chord contains tones reminiscent of nature and the earth (greens, browns, and ochres), along with vibrant colors like mustard yellow and coral red, which provide dynamism and energy. This combination blends modern minimalism (soft, neutral colors) with retro references (tones like mustard yellow, mint green, and coral red), connecting with Gen Z's visual trends, which combine the nostalgic with the contemporary.

As a whole, this palette reflects a diversity that could be related to the identity characteristics of Gen Z by harmoniously combining cool, warm, and neutral tones, reflecting that ability to adapt and navigate between multiple liquid identities in a possible search for authenticity and expressiveness as a consequence of the use of vibrant tones. The tendency towards hybridization that is characteristic of liquidity is also observed (Bauman, 2000). This is exemplified by the use of indeterminate, low-saturated tones resulting from subordinate mixtures that facilitate combination and adaptation to the rest of the group, thereby preserving harmony and visual fluidity..

4.5. Commitment to an eclectic style

The stamps that make up the exhibition form a hybrid world. Different examples clearly show how symbols from the digital and analog worlds are naturally combined to create a specific and more profound message.

Table 3. *Stamps with hybrid message*

Stamps	Digital symbolic sphere	Analog symbolic sphere
S7	Vector drawing	Hand drawing
S8	"Like" Hearts	Paper \$ bill
S10	Robot hand	Human hand
S11	Takeaway food	Paper airplane
S12	E-commerce	Computer keyboard
S27	Among Us online game	Classic game boy

Note: This series of stamps is based on a hybrid symbolic language that intensifies and personalizes the message. **Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

The exhibition also features stamps that specifically focus on elements or symbols belonging to one of the two worlds, reinforcing the flexibility and ease with which Gen Z navigates these two universes, which they also value as their own.

This can be seen in different examples where the focus is on analog objects, belonging to other generations (S7 - Rubik's Cube), which are even already obsolete (S20, S21, S22), or on aesthetics that take us back in time by recovering graphic patterns that remind us of North American tradwives (S4, S5, S6), very much in line with trends in SM, interspersed with references to anti-politics, used in this case to represent inclusion at work, or on cartoons whose message, however, is reformulated (S23, S24, S25).

On the other hand, there are labels that belong entirely to the digital universe, highlighting the break with other generations or population groups that have not had such easy access or such intense and prolonged use of SM, and of the internet in general. This can be seen in proposals whose characters were born and come to life solely in digital environments, as is the case with the game Among Us (S26, S27, S28) or the protagonists of different memes that went viral (S29, S30, S31). However, the presence of the digital world intensifies when we observe that it is not only reused, but also offers a space for the creation of new realities, such as those proposed to narrate how Gen Z understands work, generating impossible but aspirational scenarios (S1, S2, S3).

This hybridization of worlds may reflect a certain nostalgia or desire to connect with narratives that transcend the digital, reinterpreting other cultures and appropriating symbols from other generations to build their own identity. Gen Z could be using analog objects to redefine them in a digital world, integrating them as cultural symbols with a new aesthetic or emotional purpose, as is the case with the stamp that unites fast food takeout with a paper airplane (S11), or talking about the visibility of mental illness using a Rubik's Cube as a metaphor for the human mind, using it as a head (S7).

This fusion, however, is not exempt from other readings as it coincides with the value given to the image within the post-photographic era, in which meaning prevails over formal aspects, turning the creator into a "prescriber of meaning" by redefining the

images, removing them from their original context or offering them the opportunity to inhabit other semantic spaces (Toro & Grisales-Vargas, 2021, p. 909).

Some studies have also identified how Gen-Z flows in this fusion, highlighting however the search for and positive valuation of physical and ephemeral experiences (Rodrigo et al., 2024). Sax (2016) attributes this search to the need to reconnect with the physical in response to digital saturation or the desire to find, through the materiality of tangible objects, a more authentic and direct connection with the world (Han, 2021), which digital tools have not yet been able to replicate.

The eclectic style referred to in this section is therefore the result of the cultural bricolage upon which Gen Z builds its mindset, establishing bridges between the retro and the contemporary as a source of inspiration, redefining the past as a way to recount their present, and even demonstrating that they do not shy away from the boomers. It can be conceived as a reappropriation of "non-ephemeral" references, based on the longing for the belief that "any time past was better." Let us be aware of the enormous presence of grandparents in the processes of upbringing and caregiving (Marín-Rengifo & Palacio-Valencia, 2015) and the enormous emotional bond that is established between such disparate generations.

4.6. Topics that spark their interest

The digital ethnography conducted by the students in Group 1 provided the students in Group 2 with a wealth of information about centennials. The aspects that these Gen Z students chose to connect with their own generation enable an assessment of the topics that they considered to be the most relevant and defining of their identity.

If these five thematic blocks, which were proposed to structure the study, are discarded (work, lifestyles, social activism, audiovisuals and connectivity), the themes that emerged in a comprehensive manner and caught the attention of this cohort are summarized in the following table.

Table 4. *Main themes*

Comprehensive topics	Stamps that allude to the topic
Mental health	S7 - S14 - S15 - S16 - S17 - S18 - S35 - S36 - S37
Attention to physical condition	S13 - S15 - S19

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

These topics have been referenced in various studies, thus corroborating the interest they arouse among Gen Z and the discourse that supports them.

A Pew Research Center (Mitchell, 2019) survey revealed that mental health is one of the main concerns of millennials. Respondents mentioned stress, anxiety and academic pressure as their greatest challenges, and the representation of yoga postures (S14), the search for professional support (S7), phrases for personal empowerment (S35, S36, S37) or the need to disconnect, turning to a simpler life by escaping into nature (S16, S17, S18), can be interpreted as a range of resources to address this identified discomfort.

The prominent presence of mental health on stamps, and its emergence in a wide-reaching and spontaneous way, speaks to the priority it has for Gen-Z, who have managed to break the stigma traditionally associated with these issues to give them the necessary visibility for proper awareness and attention. However, some authors argue that this sensitivity to mental health is a consequence of how the intensive use of SM and the stress associated with a tremendously changing, individualistic and competitive world, has especially affected this generation, causing anxiety and depression for which they demand resources and tools with which to manage them (Twenge, 2017).

Gen-Z also focuses on physical activity (S15) and healthy eating (S19) as part of a comprehensive approach to self-care and well-being. This is influenced by the hypernarcissism (Lipovetsky, 2000) of today's society. A McKinsey study (Francis & Hoefel, 2018) highlights their interest in brands that promote holistic well-being, from supplements to meditation apps, thus supporting the design of stamps starring an avocado (S19) or where a person practicing yoga is shown (S14). However, according to Engeln (2008), Gen-Z is redefining self-care, integrating physical and mental well-being with emotional exhaustion, especially in women, exposed to a multitude of pressures in this regard (as evidenced in stamp S13 when only the female figure is used to talk about the acceptance of non-normative bodies).

SM plays a crucial role in providing access to and tools for managing mental health and self-care. However, stamps also reflect a need to disconnect from the digital world and seek refuge in nature (S16, S17, S18) and in a more basic way of life, far from the risks that overexposure to social media can pose when seeking information or even validation (Weinstein & James, 2022), as recorded in the philatelic series "Messages for a Happy Life" (S35, S36, S37). This generation is not afraid to speak openly about their emotional challenges or seek active solutions for their well-being, but they do seem to rely on external opinions or a constant search for validation (Cordero et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2024), which can put added pressure on them that is difficult to manage.

Finally, it is worth noting that, although nature is explicitly referred to in three stamps, the message is not linked to environmental protection, which is significantly absent from the sample.

4.7. Audiovisual and digital references

As mentioned above, the exhibition includes stamps featuring characters from digital culture, unknown to some generations. A clear example are the stamps designed to respond to the "Audiovisuals" theme, which includes the philatelic series "Space Mail" (S26, S27, S28), *SimpsonsVibes* (S32, S33 y S34), and "Memes" (S29, S30, S31).

On the one hand, the series based on the online game *Among Us* enables discussion of the impact of C-19 pandemics on this generation and their need for socialization which was strongly influenced by a long strict lockdown. Adolescents and young adults found this game to be a way of socializing remotely, and had to navigate complex collaborative dynamics in an exclusively digital environment. However, beyond entertaining them and meeting their social needs at a specific time, choosing this character as a connecting element shows how video games have evolved from mere entertainment to become a source of memories, identities and conversations among other things (Muriel & Crawford, 2023). The real-time interaction involved in solving problems and making collective

decisions in this game speaks to a generation that naturally functions and interacts socially in digital environments, managing their interpersonal relationships with ease.

The philatelic series "Memes" illustrates how these have become a key communication tool for Gen Z, facilitating the rapid exchange of ironic and humorous meanings. They function as a language that overcomes cultural and linguistic barriers, creating a community with a distinctive sense of humor that reinforces their group identity. Each manipulation of a meme becomes a new shared meaning, which, furthermore, by drawing on cultural, political, or social content with an ironic touch, becomes a critical tool that questions norms or challenges authority. Thus, memes are consolidated as a critical tool in social media, strengthening collective identity. Here, activism (Ortega, 2015) comes into play, with visual constructions revealing the dynamics of Gen Z identity and the values associated with digital culture and a sense of community, which allow for experimentation and self-expression. Notably, the impact of *The Simpsons* on stamp design (S32, S33 and S34) is evident. Although the show began airing before most millennials were born, it remains relevant thanks to its presence on streaming platforms and its role in the creation of memes. This enables Gen Z to connect with the humor and social satire of the series, which has been a part of their pop culture for over 30 years. The *Simpsons* are not only reproduced, but also repurposed and reinterpreted to create new visual narratives that resonate with the values of this generation.

In conclusion, the nine stamps analyzed reflect how Gen Z appropriates elements of popular culture, both current and past, to create a sense of authenticity and community that transcends generations. This generation does not limit itself to passively consuming content, but rather reframes it and uses it as a form of genuine expression in a saturated visual environment. Interaction in games like *Among Us* and the manipulation of memes demonstrate their openness to collaboration and co-creation, demonstrating a desire to redefine and create digital culture. Furthermore, in initiatives such as the Social Activism philatelic series, "Feel Like Your Favorite Cartoon," a revisionist approach is observed (S23, S24, S25) including elements from various generations, highlighting the use of irony and subversion as tools to amplify their voice.

4.8. Search for alternatives to reality

In line with the visual recycling seen in the stamps under analysis in the previous section, it can also be observed how Gen Z is capable of creating its own reality based on artificial intelligence tools, as evidenced in the philatelic series "Live, Experience, Enjoy," designed entirely with Leonardo AI (S1, S2, S3). The stamps depict fictional situations that reflect this generation's quest to balance work and enjoyment. By using extreme sports and a laptop as symbols, their desire to challenge the idea that work is the most important thing in life and explore new possibilities, such as digital nomadism, is highlighted (Cook, 2020). This new work paradigm and the characteristics of centennials have been analyzed by Stillman and Stillman (2017), who agree that this generation seeks meaning in their work, considering it an extension of their passions and interests.

Representing work as a life experience through images of exploration and adventure (such as a skydiver, diver or astronaut) offers clues about Gen Z's identity by making some of its core values visible:

- Autonomy and flexibility: observable in the desire to work on one's own terms,

from anywhere, at any time.

- Work-life integration: deducible from the connection they make between both vital spheres, which they do not see as opposed or separate, but rather as complementary.
- Exploration and purpose: They see work as a means to discover the world and achieve their personal goals, not just a financial obligation. A world that seems to have no limits, including space and the ocean floor.

Finally, from a marketing perspective, this search for experiences and authenticity in all its spectrum clarifies aspects referenced in studies such as the one carried out by PuroMarketing magazine (2024), which indicates that the majority of Gen-Z values brand experiences more than low prices, clarifying that these experiences do not refer so much to grand events or actions but to the generation of relevant and meaningful relationships for the user.

4.9. Polarized opinions and contradictions

This section gains weight when observing how messages that at first sight appear contradictory, such as fast food (S11) and awareness of healthy eating (S19) or an exaltation of life with few resources and in nature (S16, S17, S18) with rapid consumption at the click of a button (S12).

These seemingly contradictory decisions may reflect how Gen Z navigates between different influences, adapting to the demands of the moment without necessarily committing to a single vision or lifestyle. This interpretation aligns with Bauman's (2000) characteristics of liquid modernity, where values are fluid and unstable. In this context, individuals act as consumers of choice, prioritizing immediate pleasure and convenience, such as ordering a pizza, over health and wellness awareness. This reflects the flexibility and adaptability of the current generation, which can lead to contradictions in their decisions.

The idealized perception of rural life, seen as simpler and more authentic, also contrasts with the speed and convenience of consumption in modern society, which seeks instant gratification (Bauman, 2000). In an environment saturated with consumer options, where the physical and digital (S10) intertwine, contradictions arise driven by immediate consumerism, despite growing awareness of climate change and sustainability. Given this dichotomous behavior, it is not surprising that the retail sector is promoting the production of reports to better understand the purchasing habits of a generation that is entering into a contraction when it comes to consumption (Moradillo, 2024).

These contradictions reflect the complexity that Generation Z is already dealing with, but also a warning of how the rapid, poorly contrasted, biased and exclusive consumption of information through SM can facilitate its manipulation due to misinformation and the lack of time and depth required for the development of critical thinking (Gómez et al., in press).

4.10. Positive reinforcement messages

The complex and ambivalent scenario described so far partly explains this last point, where Gen Z perceives a need for positive messages. The search for order and balance, more mental than physical (S7, S15), to be liked and appreciated by others (S8, S13), or

to have fun and use humor as a communication tool (S29, S30, S31, S34) is literally represented in the philatelic series, titled by the students as "Messages for a Happy Life," composed of stamps featuring different motivational phrases (S35, S36, S37).

These three phrases, which are a reminder of successful marketing strategies developed by brands like Mr. Wonderful, seem to resonate particularly with this generation due to their social and emotional context, in which emotional well-being, self-exploration, and the search for purpose, as discussed in previous sections, occupy a central place. Analyzing each of these messages reveals characteristics or aspirations already associated with this generation.

"Vibrate High" provides an invitation to keep a positive attitude and seek a high spirits. This could be related to the search for emotional well-being detected in Generation Z and to trends like mindfulness and expressions present on social media such as TikTok and Instagram.

"Blossoming is a Process" emphasizes the importance of personal growth and accepting the stages of development as part of life. It also praises values such as resilience and self-acceptance, themes that connect with the discourses on mental health and self-care promoted among young people and that are also present in the stamps under analysis.

"Con todo sino pa ´ que" ("All-out or nothing") expresses intensity, passion, and the idea that it's worth putting all your effort into everything you do. It reflects the Generation Z mindset of pursuing fulfilling and authentic experiences, aligning with their values of living with purpose.

These messages can exude emotional sensitivity. This has been interpreted as a symptom of fragility and vulnerability, prompting the labeling of centennials as the "glass generation." However, although this term has often been used pejoratively, there are authors who have interpreted it not as a weakness but rather as a change in values and priorities (Twenge, 2017) or even as a consequence of the education and culture in which this generation has grown up (Arias, 2025).

The American Psychological Association (APA) has conducted various studies indicating that Gen Z is experiencing high levels of stress and worries about the future, highlighting the mental health challenges they face (Medaris, 2023). The use of positive statements, therefore, could be interpreted as a way to counteract the effects of this stress, finding in these messages a way to develop constructive and hopeful messages and a tool to deal with complexity, as a way to escape from complex and dystopian reality (Ramírez, 2020), or an effect of the aforementioned happycracy (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019).

5. CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that with the verification of ten keys that outline the Gen-Z, a result of the three hypotheses stated at the beginning and that have been verified in their entirety: (1) Generation Z raises a future perspective that supposes a challenge with the currently accepted social norms; (2) socioeconomic uncertainty is causing disaffection in the institutions on the part of Generation Z generating social and political polarization and; (3) the members belonging to Generation Z use the digital world to situate their generational principles since they do not find a way to express them in the analog world.

Key 1 – Preference for images over text: This impacts their lifestyle, connectivity, and social mobilization, giving priority to messages that rely on images and are more attractive, motivating, and engaging. They may be attracted to jobs that work with images or videos, as they feel a connection to audiovisual media.

Key 2 – Use of images with a medium level of iconicity: The digital world gives them the opportunity to generate their own iconography, manipulating images to generate a discourse tailored to their needs. They may prefer flexible work that can be adapted to their personal lives.

Key 3 – Preference for organic forms: This would have an impact on how they shape their environment and personal relationships, as well as affecting their commitment to a social cause through formulas and messages that are more motivating and positive than alarming or negative.

Key 4 – Choosing low-saturation color ranges: This impacts the consumption of products with neutral, low-key, soft, and adaptable colors to facilitate combining with others in a simple and balanced way.

Key 5 – Strive for an eclectic style: They are drawn to mixtures because they facilitate the reuse of elements and choose aspects from other generations that speak to their interests. This impacts their lifestyle, both analog and digital, in which they appropriate any aspect of the past to construct a unique narrative.

Key 6 – Topics that spark their interest: We must pay attention to the topics that interest them most if we want to attract them to jobs and social causes where active involvement, which requires responsibility, is essential.

Key 7 – Audiovisual and digital references: They influence their decision-making, which can impact their choice of information sources, social causes, or jobs so that they find them more relevant and aspirational.

Key 8 – Search for alternatives to reality: This trait impacts all dimensions because it causes them to immerse themselves in a searching attitude in each area, which can cause conflict if they fail to achieve or find what they aspire to and believe corresponds to their values.

Key 9 – Polarized opinions and contradictions: In this case, feedback is observed in that, as information is obtained primarily through digital and audiovisual media. This impacts their physical reality, influencing their lifestyle, their integration into the labor market, or vindication of social issues.

Key 10 – Positive reinforcement messages: Facing a day-to-day life in which two worlds (digital and analog) coexist, which also require a high level of attention and participation, is generating stressful and conflictive situations with other generations due to the impact on their lifestyle and work performance, requiring external reinforcement to strengthen their belief system.

Ultimately, these keys constitute a guide for institutions and organizations that wish to connect with centennials. The comprehension of these identifying characteristics will

facilitate the development of strategies that foster meaningful engagement and strengthen relationships with members of Generation Z.

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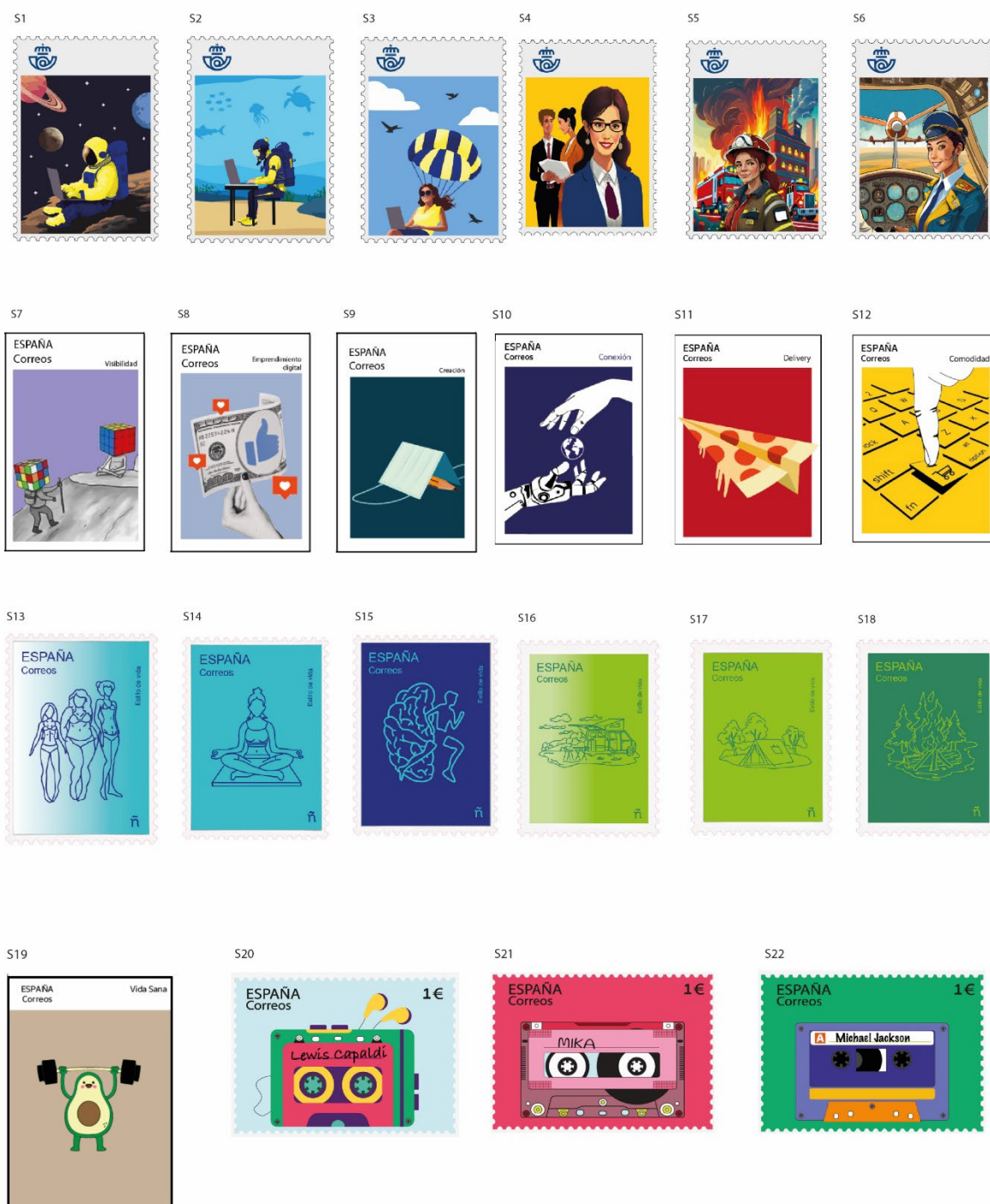
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Annex 1

Designs created by students of the Corporate Visual Identity program (Group 2) at the European University of Madrid.





Annex 2

Table 5. *Organization of the sample by thematic dimensions.*

DIMENSIONS	Title of the philatelic series	Stamps
WORK	<i>Series 1: Live, Experience, Enjoy</i>	S1, S2 and S3
	<i>Series 2: We (women) all can do it</i>	S4, S5 and S6
CONNECTIVITY	<i>Series 1: Social Networking</i>	S7 and S8
	<i>Series 2: Multiscreen</i>	S9, S10, S11 and S12
LIFESTYLES	<i>Series 1: Life on the move</i>	S13, S14 and S15
	<i>Series 2: On wheels</i>	S16, S17 and S18
	<i>Series 3: Vegan/vegetarian?</i>	S19
SOCIAL ACTIVISM	<i>Series 1: Artists or heroes?</i>	S20, S21 and S22
	<i>Series 2: Feel like your favorite cartoon</i>	S23, S24 and S25
	<i>Series 3: Messages for happy living</i>	S35, S36 and S37
AUDIOVISUALS	<i>Series 1: SimpsonsVibes</i>	S32, S33 and S34
	<i>Series 2: Space Mail</i>	S26, S27 and S28
	<i>Serie 3: Memes</i>	S29, S30 and S31

Note: This table shows the 5 dimensions that articulate the research together with the philatelic series proposed by Group 2 and the stamps belonging to each of them.

Source: Own elaboration.