



ADVERTISING AND BRAND DISCOURSE AIMED AT GENERATION Z Ethnographic Study of a Digital Community

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ABSTRACT

The research aims to identify the key characteristics of Generation Z as a target audience for advertising campaigns. To achieve this, a virtual community was established to examine the extent of acceptance and rejection of various advertising aspects, ranging from content creation to how Generation Z is portrayed.

The methodology used is qualitative and involves participant observation within the framework of digital ethnography.

The findings provide an accurate description of the concerns of a generation that is establishing new ways of relating to technology and content creation.

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1. Introduction

Human history can be interpreted in many ways, one of which is as a continuous and often unsuccessful effort by each generation to understand and comprehend the next. This constant search for understanding intensifies during historical moments like the present, characterised by technological advancements that foreshadow shifts in social paradigms. Consequently, generations seem more distinct from one another than in the past, not only in their behaviour but also in their perceptions of the world and the society they inhabit.

Technological development, particularly accentuated by the advent of information technologies and the internet, has brought about a truly relevant and remarkable social and cultural transformation in recent decades. Technology is changing how we produce and consume, thereby influencing our perception of the world, interpersonal relationships, aspirations, desires, communication methods, value systems, and the formation of socio-cultural and behavioural norms.

Communication in general, and advertising in particular, is a professional and academic field in which technological factors play a very important role in the way its structures are configured, its models developed, and its creative messages generated. The knowledge of the public to which its messages are addressed and the configuration of the audience are essential elements in understanding the processes of content creation and the characteristics of the messages. As commonly understood, commercial advertising communication typically aims to enhance consumption. This can be achieved either by stimulating sales and making commercial interactions more dynamic, or more fundamentally, by creating value through the association of intangible values, particularly the brand, that imbue products and services with significance in the eyes of their target audiences. Therefore, it is entirely logical for advertising to be interested in understanding different generations, especially the younger ones, as they are the most lucrative from an economic perspective.

This research seeks to understand Generation Z, focusing on their overall media consumption habits and their interactions with advertising. The aim is to develop insights into their acceptance or rejection of various advertising approaches, encompassing both formal presentation and substantive content.

2. Theoretical Framework and State of Affairs

Generation Z is made up of young people who, as the INJUVE (Instituto de la Juventud of the Ministry of Youth and Children) points out, were born between 1994 and 2010. Gutiérrez-Rubí (2016) highlighted that "members of Generation Z were at most 6 years old when the Twin Towers fell, and 13 years old when the most serious economic crisis in history broke out. They are children of a world in conflict" (p. 161).

According to the INE (National Statistics Institute), around 6.5 million children were born in Spain between 1994 and 2010, making Generation Z an extremely interesting audience in terms of consumption and a preferred target for brands, making them the undisputed protagonists of advertising messages.

Generation Z has been studied from various perspectives. Naturally, such a broad and complex phenomenon as studying an entire generation must be approached from a multidisciplinary perspective and with a broad view that allows for understanding the interrelationships between variables of very different natures. As Dolors Monserrat points out in the prologue to the book *Generation Z: Everything You Need to Know About the Young People Who Have Outgrown the Millennials*, written by Nuria Vilanova and Iñaki Ortega in 2017:

They are young people born into a society that transcends the physical, where individuals establish personal and business relationships virtually. Their creativity has boundless channels because technology allows them to be part of an even larger society than their immediate environment. (Vilanova and Ortega, 2017, p.7)

From a historical perspective, it is noteworthy to highlight efforts made in various decades of the twentieth century to understand coexistence patterns among different generations (Carlsson & Karlsson, 1970), their engagement in social change, and the transformation of social structures (Ponce, 1977). Additionally, the formation of younger generations at each juncture as a social entity, and

consequently, a significant subject of study (Souto Kustrín, 2007), underscores their merit for scientific scrutiny.

The study of a generation necessitates an examination of its members. Hence, it is unsurprising that the field of psychology offers abundant literature exploring variables such as lifestyle, age, and gender (Angelucci et al., 2017). These factors are crucial for comprehending the motivations and behaviours of young people, which collectively shape a psychosocial identity (Páramo, 2008) that, when shared, can be generalised.

As is logical given the nature of the object of study, sociology has extensively explored the study of generations (Bauman, 2007; Mannheim, 1993), including the concept of generations and their relationship with youth (Leccardi & Feixa, 2011), processes of generational formation (Mauger, 2013), and their globalisation (Beck, 2008). Recently, there has been significant research focusing on generational relationships amidst economic crises, such as that of Generation Z (Urraco-Solanilla & Moreno-Mínguez, 2018), while acknowledging the potential for the concept of a generation to oversimplify generalised patterns of thought and behaviour (Duffy, 2022). Therefore, it should be considered within the broader context of social, cultural, and economic processes when attributing common behaviours to generations.

Education, as a transversal discipline, has also been involved in the study of Generation Z, particularly focusing on their digital skills and competences, which highlights the necessity to introduce new teaching-learning systems and integrate tools and applications that support mobile device usage (Escoda, 2018; García & Mesa, 2019). This approach is crucial in adapting to students who are accustomed to seeking information through these devices (García-Aretio, 2019). Likewise, research has been carried out on the need for curricular adaptations to promote these new digital skills (Pérez-Escoda, et al., 2016), both at the basic level and in higher education (Cataldi and Dominighini, 2015), to the point of proposing the concept of Education 4.0, based essentially on virtualisation as the central axis of the teaching-learning process (Muñoz-Guevara et al., 2021).

From an economic and consumer perspective, Generation Z has been extensively studied in the past decade. Particularly notable are studies examining their role as product influencers (Harrigan et al., 2021) and their impact on brands as influencer figures (Critikián et al., 2022), including within virtual platforms (Rodrigo-Martín et al., 2021).

In the field of communication, scientific literature underscores the interest in studying the relationship between Generation Z and the media (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014; Wolf, 2020). The main focus is on analysing the role of Generation Z and their relationship with social networks, especially in their dual role as content creators (Nicolás, 2016) and content recipients. The dominance of content consumption created for and by social networks necessitates companies and brands to devise communication strategies that increasingly shift away from traditional media. Instead, they must focus on the intricate realm of social networks (Lara & Chacón, 2016), where the concept of audience undergoes profound transformation, giving rise to new roles (Echegaray-Eizaguirre, 2015). Similarly, the concept of content, particularly advertising content, is undergoing significant transformation. It is increasingly evident that new advertising formats diverge substantially from traditional formulas outlined in legislation, leading to challenges regarding legal compliance (Gutiérrez & Blanco, 2021) for content produced by brands, agencies, or influencers. Consumer brands, driven by the need to connect with a young audience that constructs digital identities (Tafesse & Wood, 2021) and avoids media with captive audiences, decisively opt for the creation of branded content in digital media.

Generation Z has also been studied from a gender perspective. In this sense, it is worth highlighting works related to gender identity (Gauche & Lovera, 2019; Martín-Ramadall et al., 2023) in metaverses and virtual communities, those that analyse the stereotypes used by advertising (Martín-Brito and Comesaña, 2022), and those that study communication as a tool to prevent gender violence (Colás-Bravo & Quintero-Rodríguez, 2020; De Jesús Sánchez, 2020).

3. Methodology

The present study is framed in the context of digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2019). Digital ethnography is the logical evolution of traditional ethnography to address the new realities that emerge and are sustained in virtual worlds. This phenomenon is also referred to as netnography, cyberethnography,

virtual ethnography, and ethnography of the digital. The contributions of digital ethnography facilitate an understanding of cultural dynamics that evolve within communities formed through social interactions in digital contexts (such as computers, mobile phones, smartphones, and tablets). These insights align closely with the objectives of this research, which seeks to explore Generation Z's engagement with current advertising that is generated, consumed, and shared in digital environments.

To establish digital ethnography as a credible research methodology for studying advertising and brands (Reyes Reina, 2013), we begin with the premise that the internet constitutes an embodied experience. This means that internet interactions are continually shaped and embedded within frameworks of action and meaning created through social practices online. This is essentially what brands aim to establish through their content and communications (Castello-Martínez & del Pino Romero, 2018), which predominantly serve for advertising purposes (Waqas et al., 2021). They strive to create a brand experience that generates meaningful associations, thereby imparting symbolic value to products introduced to the market under their umbrella (Eguizábal Maza, 2007).

Building on these foundations, our research is qualitative in nature and involves establishing a virtual community. Through participant observation (Aguiar, 2015; Kawulich, 2005), we aimed to identify patterns in how community members (all belonging to Generation Z) interact with and perceive the creativity of advertising brands. This includes examining the content they create and share to enhance its value and to support market objectives.

The virtual community, named "The UCM Z Community," was established and administered by the Chair of Digital Communication in Childhood and Adolescence under the leadership of Professor Núñez Gómez. Comprising 75 members exclusively from Generation Z, the community was selected from first-year students enrolled in the Advertising and Public Relations course at Complutense University of Madrid. These students voluntarily consented to participate in the study and contribute to the generation of knowledge.

All members of the virtual community had to meet two conditions: being born between 2000 and 2010 and being first-year students, thereby assuming they possess limited prior knowledge of advertising, creative processes, or brand management.

The community engaged in five activities focused on analysing communication pieces created by various commercial brands. The members of the community were then invited to express their opinions using two different formats, a forum and a blog, which were later complemented by a survey (Romo, 1988). The use of the forum and the blog allowed the community members to work in an asynchronous way, in which the rhythms and time preferences of each member did not matter, thus facilitating their participation and work in digital environments that often correlate with their free time.

Table 1. Proposal of activities to be carried out by the virtual community both in the forum and in the blog.

<p>Activity 1</p>	<p>Your space - Members of the virtual community are invited to share anything that comes to mind and that they think might be interesting to share: news, memes, ads, campaigns, etc. We encourage them to tell us why they found it interesting and how it could be relevant to new advertising formats. In addition, our researchers moderate and launch topics or news for the community to express their opinions and generate debate.</p>
<p>Activity 2</p>	<p>Brands on TikTok - Activity designed for community members to voice their opinions about brands on TikTok, discussing whether they consider it an effective platform for brand communication and identifying the characteristics of the advertising they encounter there. Is it a good place for brands? If so, why? What should brands be aware of when communicating on TikTok? How do you think brands can innovate on this social network? Finally, we suggest that they show examples of brands, their profiles, or a TikTok they have been surprised by and like and explain why they think it is a valuable and effective example of good communication. Similarly, we also requested they point out poor examples where they believe things are not done well and why.</p>
<p>Activity 3</p>	<p>Branded content - We ask them what they think of the branded content from the brands that target them that they encounter across various media channels. We ask them to share the top examples they remember and tell us what they liked about them and how they matched their interests. Finally, we generate a debate by asking these questions: To what extent can a brand use branded content to communicate? Are there any types of content or actions that can be forced?</p>
<p>Activity 4</p>	<p>New formats - We propose contemplating the potential for new advertising formats, what can be attempted but has yet to be explored. We encourage stimulating creativity and collectively</p>

	imagining uncharted territories in media, styles, platforms, messages, or formats. What messages and values resonate with their generation? When reflecting on their peers and community, what messages can brands convey to foster connection, and how should they approach it?
Activity 5	Top disasters - Here are some instances where brands have attempted to communicate with Gen Z and failed. Are they seeking examples of common stereotypes about Gen Z in communications that they believe do not accurately reflect them? What arguments would they present to brands to help them understand who they truly are and how they wish to be addressed?

Source: Authors elaboration, 2024.

The survey, which consisted of eleven closed questions, made it possible to establish correlations between the variables and to formulate meaningful conclusions.

The virtual community was temporarily open and operational during the second semester of the academic year 2022/2023, specifically for 18 weeks, between 30 January and 26 May.

The research was carried out sequentially, structured in the following phases:

Table 2. Phases of the research

Phase 1	Planning of Activities/Provision of Content
Phase 2	Active Participation/Forum+Blog
Phase 3	Data Extension/Survey
Phase 4	Analysis of Results
Phase 5	Summary/Conclusions

Source: Authors elaboration, 2024.

4. Objectives

The overarching objective of the research was the following:

- To ascertain the level of acceptance of advertising communication and different types of brand-generated content among members of Generation Z youth.

To supplement this data, a series of specific objectives were defined and articulated as follows:

- To assess the level of acceptance of advertising, with regard to the medium and format through which it generates impact on members of Generation Z.
- To determine the most appropriate methodology for evaluating the various communication proposals.
- To analyse the degree of perceived originality of the different creative concepts.

5. Results

As described in the methodology section, the virtual community "The UCM Z Community" was active for a duration of 18 weeks, serving as an open and inclusive platform for participants to engage in discussions on pertinent topics related to communication and advertising. This freedom was complemented by participant observation by the researchers, who encouraged participation, channelled debates, and suggested content for viewing and discussion. As a result of this process, it was possible to carry out an exhaustive process of recording the reflections, arguments, images, links, and diverse content with which the community coexisted and on which its analysis was based.

The results of the analysis of activities within the virtual community, combined with the results of the survey, enable us to confirm the following findings, divided into two sections: factors that enhance the connection of brands and advertising with Generation Z and challenges that hinder or impede this connection.

5.1. Elements Favouring A Connection with Generation Z

In general terms, our findings suggest this is a generation in the process of forging its identity, marked by several notable characteristics.

Firstly, the generation is eminently technological and they understand technology as a transformative tool that offers new and interesting ways of communicating that they are not only willing but eager to explore. In this sense, the use of various forms of artificial intelligence to suggest creative or copy ideas, 3D, augmented reality, etc. are naturally present in their lives. Technology is a resource for innovation for a generation that is in constant contact with it. It allows them to create campaigns adapted to their own context, such as social networks, but more importantly, it allows them to develop campaigns tailored to their specific contexts, such as social networks. Importantly, it allows them to do so in a way that aligns harmoniously with these environments, thereby enhancing the credibility and acceptance of the campaigns. Unlike other generations, technology is not an element that impresses Gen Z but simply seems more original to them. The fact that personalised experiences can be created is a key element in generating interest, acceptance, and content prescriptions among young people who value expressing their differences, highlighting their individuality, and feeling that brands are addressing them in a personalised rather than global way. In this sense, some of the most commented on and appreciated campaigns by the community were the "Barbie Selfie Generation" and the Jaquemus "Le Bambino" bag launch campaign. The first consisted of a tool that creates a filter and allows everyone to become a Barbie or a Ken thanks to artificial intelligence. The filter could be used via an app or on Instagram and generated millions of content that invaded social networks with selfies of young people transformed into Barbie characters. The second campaign is a 3D recreation commissioned by the artist Ian Padgham, depicting the city of Paris invaded by giant bags that create disruptive situations.

Secondly, Generation Z is very enthusiastic about experiences. It is curious that this generation has a very positive attitude towards experiences and that the communication that surprises them the most and appeals to their sensibilities is that which goes beyond the usual formats. Physical and ephemeral experiences are becoming more important in a generation that is mainly offered digital experiences. When it comes to effective advertising for Gen Z, not everything is digital and not everything has to be technology-driven.

Perhaps because they were born into a technological context where distinctions are blurred, the significance of the experience itself becomes meaningful. People are looking for physical experiences in which they can participate and interact. The growing interest in advertising based on events, festivals, fairs, congresses, etc. can be interpreted this way. In short, Generation Z moves between digital and analogue.

Another important element identified is that this is a generation that communicates through humour. Self-criticism and irony predominantly define their sense of humour, which they view as a way to express frustrations and cope with an uncertain and often challenging reality. Within this context, the trend towards "cringe," an Anglicism that lacks a direct translation but can be understood as embarrassment, ridicule, and/or strangeness, becomes relevant. The term originated and became widespread on social networks to describe the feeling of witnessing someone in an embarrassing or ridiculous situation. It loosely relates to the original meaning of the verb "cringe," which refers to the fear of being in a similar position as the protagonist of a situation or context, due to the embarrassment one might feel

What childhood and adolescent psychologists say is that when young people begin to move away from their primary groups, mainly the family, and begin to correlate with reference and aspirational groups, it is common for them to create their own codes that are shared by their peers, which allow them to integrate and be accepted into these new groups. Therefore, "cringe" is a trend that intersects with the concept of humour, particularly rooted in irony. It has evolved into a significant trend and a crucial advertising element because it integrates elements that not only unify but, more importantly, differentiate.

Finally, creativity is not solely an exclusive element for connecting with Generation Z but rather the fundamental mechanism that advertising has employed since its inception to engage with the public. However, it seems to be an element that greatly facilitates the acceptance of commercial and advertising proposals, since these are people who were born and raised not only to consume content but also to generate it, so they are particularly open to finding new styles and formats, i.e. they are very receptive to creative experimentation. The advertising discourse, contrary to appearances due to a lack of awareness,

is inherently repetitive. Brands are constantly faced with the challenge of launching a message that fundamentally stays consistent, conveying an invitation to purchase their products or services, or encouragement to perceive their offerings as superior to competitors. Given this lack of innovation in the material aspect, creative experimentation in the formal aspect is essential. If brands and advertisers have to repeat the same discourse over and over again, they must do so in an original, surprising, different, and pleasant way, so as not to become repetitive which leads to rejection.

5.2. Difficulties in Communicating with Generation Z

Our research findings indicate three factors that significantly hinder the connection between communicative messages and commercial narratives with Generation Z members. These include the frequent use of stereotypes, the insensitive appropriation of their cultural codes, and a perceived sense of artificiality or lack of realism in the situations or messages presented to them.

Firstly, the use of stereotypes, although a fundamental element of advertising due to the mass nature of advertising communication, becomes a barrier and a reason for rejection when perceived as inconsistent with reality. A stereotype of a young Gen Z is often interpreted by the same young people as inconsistent with reality, thus it ends up being a caricature rather than a stereotype. As with any generation, the realities that coexist are rich and varied. Not all young people in Generation Z are constantly and pathologically addicted to technology; they are not rebels without a cause. This is a generation that expresses itself more freely than previous generations, largely because they are masters of the channels through which discourse is generated. They are content creators as well as content consumers. They exercise freedom of thought and expression in a manner distinct from previous generations. This has positioned them at the forefront of addressing profound and cross-cutting issues once deemed taboo. They have approached and brought visibility to concerns such as environmental preservation, animal welfare advocacy, understanding and acceptance of mental health issues, and challenging abusive practices by governments and large corporations with a notable sense of naturalness. Generation Z, perhaps more than any previous generation, requires advertising and commercial communication that respects them and acknowledges their integral role in society, rather than treating them merely as a demographic to sell products or influence opinions. The use of simplistic, inaccurate, or ill-constructed stereotypes turns the discourse into a caricature and irrevocably leads to their outright rejection.

Secondly, the appropriation of generational codes is often interpreted as an invasion. Nothing is more ridiculous and false than a brand or advertiser pretending to be what it clearly is not. Young members of Generation Z recognise this appropriation with astonishing ease. They operate in a world of codes, emoticons, memes, and other elements that make up their communicative ecosystem. It is crucial for brands and advertising to understand this ecosystem so that, in a second phase, they can get to know it, respect it, and learn to operate with a degree of ease and naturalness without falling into appropriation. When a brand uses codes that are not its own, it immediately generates rejection and, far from achieving its objectives of increasing perceived value or stimulating sales, it jeopardises its identity, reputation, and position in the market.

Finally, we have identified a lack of realism as a significant barrier to connecting with Generation Z. This is a generation that is particularly sensitive to the mismatch between communication and the media's portrayal of reality and reality itself. In an era defined by post-truth and "fake" phenomena, Generation Z openly rejects idealisation, fantasy, and exaggerated or unattainable promises in communication messages, especially within advertising. They show little or no empathy for brands that base their communication on ideas that they feel are unrealistic or far removed from their reality. They present themselves as a generation that is often dismissed as hedonistic, superficial, irresponsible, or disconnected while defining themselves as globalised, respectful of diversity and difference, tolerant, and inclusive. They openly reject any discourse that they see as discriminatory or disrespectful to any group, whether they belong to it or not.

Advertisers and brands must therefore communicate if they want to connect with people of Generation Z in a clear and precise way about the personal benefits of their products or services. They are looking for detail and a close connection to reality, which is why formats such as "unboxing" or "hauls" are so popular. In short, they demand that brands listen and understand them if they want to engage them, and that their communication goes beyond the product. They should not just sell, they should communicate.

6. Conclusion

The primary conclusion of our study emphasizes the need for thorough research into Generation Z to establish effective communication strategies with them.

Advertising faces a fundamental challenge that undermines the effectiveness of its communication strategies. Despite claims that young people universally reject and distrust advertising, our findings suggest otherwise. Rather than outright rejection, young people often embrace and enjoy advertising that is tailored to their needs, concerns, and interests. They value advertising that aligns with their aesthetic and stylistic preferences, which they perceive as authentic and realistic.

Generation Z is made up of young people who have grown up in an environment where the dissociation between the producer and the receiver of communicative messages is relative. They are skilled and used to constructing communicative messages and content. They are accustomed to sharing personal information, even with strangers, and they naturally accept the vulnerability of their privacy that social networks sometimes create.

They enjoy dialogue with brands, only rejecting them when they feel they are wrong or unrealistic, but generally accepting and enjoying being part of the conversation. In fact, as a generation, it is part of their identity, it makes them feel like a relevant part of society, and it validates them as a generation and makes a difference. They are comfortable with media exposure and understand the constant evolution of networks.

A continuous evolution that has transcended their original role as interpersonal communication channels to encompass a more intricate landscape. Here, various actors coexist and Generation Z accepts these platforms as arenas for interaction and dialogue with commercial brands. This interaction occurs either through corporate profiles or intermediaries, such as influencers.

Advertising faces the ongoing challenge of constant renewal. We are currently experiencing a period of profound technological and cultural transformation, marked by the emergence of new realities that may appear vastly different to previous generations. However, Generation Z embraces these changes with complete naturalness as a logical consequence. The rethinking of advertising must be based on three key factors if it is to achieve its objectives: knowing Generation Z, respecting them, and developing proposals that meet their needs through creativity and innovation.

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