

Are Marketing-Oriented Generational Narratives Consistent with the Identity of Catholic Higher Education Institutions?

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Abstract

This article analyzes generational constructs as negative stereotypes that shape how personal relationships are addressed across settings, including education and work. It explains the identity and responsibility of Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) in pursuing human dignity by analyzing and calling out accepted views of humanity that lack scientific rigor and are polarizing, discriminatory, and divisive. The method used was the literature review.

Theological encyclicals and other documents were integrated to provide a catholic perspective when addressing current issues such as marketing-oriented narratives. The objective of this study is to provide a general background of how generations were created and why they should be analyzed in the light of CHEIs, promoting critical judgment of their use when they try to fit everything human into a box. It questions whether these narratives are consistent with the identity and philosophy of CHEIs. It is also a call to eliminate generational labeling in higher education settings to promote a culture of peace and human flourishing.

Keywords: Generations, stereotypes, dignity, polarization, Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs), responsibility

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Introduction

Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design.

Gaudium et Spes 29, 1965

In today's world, discrimination takes different forms, including socially established labels called generations, which posit that different groups of people are substantially different to others based on their age, the relevant worldwide and national events that occurred, what they think, how they act, what they eat, how they spend their money, and other assigned characteristics, that have become viral in the media (Bhattacharya, 2022).

Through this study, the use of generational narratives will be analyzed as a form of discrimination that creates polarization and division in society and should therefore be considered as incompatible with the work and everyday life of CHEIs.

Generations have become one of the most celebrated and publicized myths and the dominant narrative about the population. They are used as a common language that has taken a strong hold in the public imagination. Although they are arbitrary labels, they have become mainstream and normalized through constant repetition. Media outlets have played a significant role in the acceptance of these apparently innocuous generationalisms (Rauvola et al., 2019; Rudolph et al., 2020). However, the seemingly harmless lexicon filters into influential research, being legitimized through public discourse.

Generational constructs are clichés about externally defined groups of people born within a range of birth year cohorts; once identified as such, they become labels. Most of these constructs were introduced into mainstream media by the Pew Research Center, which started publishing "research" on the subject, defining categories and characteristics for them. The mission of the center is to build a foundation of facts that enriches public dialogue and supports sound decision-making, as a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nonadvocacy think tank that values independence, objectivity, accuracy, rigor, humility, transparency,

and innovation (Pew Research Center, 2026). Pew Research Center prides itself on being made up of intellectuals from across many fields, places, and backgrounds, stating that due to their expertise, best-in-class methods, commitment to high quality, and fact-based research that has been done for decades, they have become a trusted resource around the world (Pew Research Center, 2026). Nevertheless, in 2023, Pew researchers and directors, after being questioned about the validity of their constructs, asked for readers to act with caution stating important considerations to keep in mind whenever they come across a news story or research about generations, especially, that the categories developed were not scientifically defined, hence they could lead to stereotypes; that categories focused on differences instead of similarities, could carry an upper-class bias, and that people change over time (Dimock, 2023).

Analyzing generational narratives is relevant because one of the most important themes in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is the life and dignity of the human person, and generational constructs tend to move in the opposite direction. They try to fit everything human into a box, eliminating individuality, leading to self-fulfilling prophecies (most of them negative) about how a person of a portrayed generation should think and behave. Furthermore, generations of people who are not yet born have already been named, and their characteristics assigned. What these generations will experience in their lifetimes is yet to be seen, but some believe they can foresee their future. These narratives are creating gaps at a moment in which we need union. This study proposes that, since generational labels are not scientifically based, narratives that promote generations as stereotypes should be eliminated from everyday conversations in CHEIs, leading by example to promote spaces of unity and peace where human dignity rises above commonly accepted archetypes.

Methods

This article is based on a literature review analyzing the constructs of generations that have been created and adopted worldwide, demystifying their narratives by falsifying the very elements that constitute them. The perspective of Social Catholic Teachings will be used to explain CHEIs' responsibility to seek truth in research and teaching and to avoid social misconceptions that harm human dignity.

Understanding generational constructs

Generational labels are simple and catchy (Parker, 2023); for decades, these arbitrary designations of generations and their characteristics have been blindly accepted. In mainstream media, they have been used as a marketing tool and to "create" a sense of certainty in uncertain environments, primarily through negative stereotypes.

Narratives based on generations are everywhere. Digital calculators are available online, allowing people to identify which generation they belong to (The Calculator Site, 2024). The abundance of publications about generations can create confusion, and whether we like it or not, we are unconsciously biased by archetypes that minimize diversity (Jauregui et al., 2020).

To clarify what generations are and their different origins, the perspective of Arber and Attias-Donfut (2000) has been used through five distinct meanings: something that distinguishes cohorts; kinship-based relationships or lineage; a measure of historical time; the construction of historical consciousness; and the institutionalization of society.

1. When considering generations to distinguish cohorts, they represent people born in the same year or a group of years, who will age together and experience sociological changes roughly at the same time. This definition is based on the concept of *chronological age* (Rennes & Throssell, 2019).
2. Family generations describe the lineage between grandparents, parents, and children and are synonymous with *kinship-based relationships* (Mabry, Giarrusso, & Bengston, 2004).
3. In terms of *historical time*, generations represent the number of years between the ages of parents and their children. This is common in Biblical writings to express the history of human progress and was equated with the average age of childbearing, set between 20 and 40 years; therefore, it is based on a time frame (Knierim, 2013).

4. From the perspective of historical or social generations or collective identity, generations are said to result from exposure to social change, creating *historical consciousness* (Pilcher, 1994).
5. Finally, the sequence of education, work, and retirement, considering welfare as the point of departure, based on paid employment, contributions to social security, and the extent to which benefits are received, generations can be understood as the *institutionalization of society* (Kohli, 1996).

Describing and defining generations is nothing new. Since the writings of Herodotus in 430 B.C., generations have been used as a dating tool, as genealogies were the most common way to measure historical time, establishing that in the span from the first to the last king, there had been three hundred and forty generations. To translate generations into years, Herodotus (ca. 430 B.C./1992) considered that each century was equivalent to three generations on average and that each generation lasted about 33 years. Generations were initially connected to biological constructs: a succession of birth cohorts in which offspring are born, develop, mature, and then have their own offspring. Because of personal and familial differences, the idea of three generations in a century should not be considered a biological fact, but rather a model of genealogical estimation, based on the observation that a traditional line of descent passes through three individuals in a century. New frameworks for population and evolutionary dynamics in stage-and-age-structured populations have been established through mathematical models (Steiner et al., 2014).

Manheim (1952), a Hungarian sociologist, explained that generations represent a particular kind of identity of location embracing related age groups embedded in a historical-social process, and identified critical group experiences that constitute *crystallization agents* for generations. He viewed generations as collective agents of change (Nilsen, 2014).

Generations, as Manheim suggests, can shape individual consciousness because major historical events shape them. He incorporated another descriptor of generations, that of *generation styles*, which emerge from the triggering action of social and cultural processes. He explained that generational dynamics is one of the basic factors contributing to the genesis of historical dynamics, and that analyzing the interaction of forces is essential. In

this connection is a large task without which the nature of historical development cannot be properly understood: "Individuals who belong to the same generation, who share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process" (Mannheim, 1923, in Kecskemeti, 1952, p.290).

Ryder (1965), a demographer, proposed cohorts as generations, addressing the sociological argument underlying the 'cohort' concept and its conceptualization of social change. He defined cohorts as the aggregate of individuals within some population definition who experience the same event within the same time interval (1965, p.845). However, they could also be viewed as independent variables in the context of social change. Ryder identified two cohort approaches; historians of the arts who started to use the trend generation for cohort against conventional historians' use of chronological sections, and demographers, who used fertility time series 'away from the period-by-period format toward an appraisal of temporal variations from cohort to cohort' (Ryder, 1985, p. 845). Ryder did not include discussions of social location, social bonds, or responses to historical events, but suggested that other population parameters, such as geographic location, education, and race, should be added to better understand generations. He therefore suggested that 'generation' should be used only in the sense of a 'temporal unit of kinship structure' (Nilsen, 2014, p. 477).

Strauss and Howe (1992) analyzed American history from 1584 and projected the future until 2069 through what they called generational theory and psychology, establishing generational narratives as the most powerful social grouping. They suggested that generations emerge when impactful historical changes occur in important stages of development, especially during the formative years, adolescence, or early adulthood, leading to shared memories, values, beliefs, and personality characteristics. The idea of generations as historical periods took hold, especially as cohort groups encountered historical events and social trends at the same stage of life. Strauss and Howe proposed four archetypes that were supposed to be cyclical and iterative, recurring roughly every 80 years with specific behavior patterns that changed every 20 years.

These historical cycles were called: *The high*, as it follows a crisis that ended the previous cycle and is typified by social collectivism; *the awakening*, which is a period marked by

increasing personal and spiritual autonomy; *the unravelling*, typified by weak institutions that are distributed and a growth in individualism, and *the crisis*, which is an era of destruction, in which society rediscovers the importance of community and starts rebuilding (Strauss, & Howe 1997). In each cycle, there are archetypes. Archetypes and their most dominant characteristics are introduced in Table 1.

Table 1.

Strauss and Howe's four archetypes

Group name	Most dominant characteristic
Prophet (idealist)	Idealistic leaders who trigger a new awakening
Nomad (reactive)	Pragmatic adults who lead during crises
Hero (civic)	Team-oriented optimistic fixers
Artist (adaptive)	Creative conformist adults

Source: Howe & Strauss 1992; Strauss & Howe, 1997; Howe, 2023

Table 2 integrates generations to archetypes, describing the years, the turning point, the meaning, the main context conditions, and who they relate to the Second World War, which in American history has been considered a turning point.

Table 2.

Example of cyclical archetypes as proposed by Straus and Howe, paired to generations and to the Second World War

Generation name	Archetype	Years	Turning and meaning	Main conditions	Generational Connection to WWII
Baby boom	Prophet (idealists)	1943-1960	1 st High	American high	Victory babies
Generation X	Nomad (reactive)	1961-1981	2 nd Awakening	Conscious Revolution	Symbol of lost direction
Millennial generation	Hero (civic)	1982-2005	3 rd Unravelling	Tech bubble, 9/11	Last adult memory of GI's
Homeland generation	Artist (adaptive)	2006-present	4 th Crisis	Great recession, Covid 19 pandemic, war	History only

Sources: Howe & Strauss, 1992; Strauss & Howe, 1997; Howe, 2023.

As can be observed, the way in which generations are connected to WWII appears to be a relevant element shaping American generational narratives. Still, war and certain events, such as 9/11, cannot be generalized to other regions of the world, yet some generational labels have crossed borders.

Pew Research Center, a "nonpartisan fact-tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes, and trends shaping the world" (Pew Research Center, 2025), became one of the leading "authorities" on generational narratives and the most-cited source, influencing multiple publications. In 2019, its president explained that generations offer an opportunity to view Americans through their place in the life cycle and their membership in a cohort born at a similar time, describing six living generations with distinct characteristics, as presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

The six generations by Pew Research Center

Generation name	Date of birth	Most dominant characteristic
The Greatest Generation	Before 1928	Saved the world
The Silent Generation	1928-1945	Traditional and civic instincts
Baby Boomers	1946-1964	Leaders of the countercultural upheavals
Generation X	1965-1980	Savvy and entrepreneurial
Millennials	1981-1996	Growing influence in society, the workplace, and politics
Generation Z	Post 1997	Digital natives have higher rates of depression and anxiety

Source: Dimock, 2019.

These generational narratives became part of common parlance because a research center published them. As can be observed, the time frames established by Strauss and Howe are not consistent with those of the Pew Research Center. Still, their descriptions and characteristics became widespread in scientific and non-scientific outlets, suggesting that groups differed systematically and predictably (Constanza et al., 2023) and that these differences extended across the globe, with certain variations.

The prevalence of age-based differentiation is evident today. A quick Google Scholar search conducted in October 2025 for "generational differences" yielded over 2 million

results. In contrast, a search for "generational similarities" yielded fewer than one-fifth as many results as the previous search, suggesting that narratives of generations are mainly used to show differences and create distinct age-based groups. The documents collected on generational differences covered almost every topic one could think of. They analyze differences in the workplace regarding values, work attitudes, work ethics, roles, leadership, career choice, organizing skills, work quality, turnover intentions, conflict management, work practices, and motivation; also about life goals, behavior, personality, patterns of thinking, eating habits, dietary intake, spending, savings, leisure, distress, fears, reaction to stressful situations, concern for others, civic orientation, popular beliefs, musical preferences, alcohol consumption, sexual partners, frustration, attitudes with parents, illness prevalence, mental health, electoral behavior, learning difficulties, and perception of climate change. The list is endless.

Almost all aspects of life are viewed as similar to the ingroup of the same generation and different from other generations. Although generations were developed to help understand Americans, differences have become ingrained in regional, national, and international settings, in all economic sectors, political parties, and everyday life. Not even religion is left untouched. Generation-based differences in religious practices, spirituality, religious identity, religious giving, religious orientation, religious behavior, preferences, and churchgoing practices are frequent topics. Affirmations such as Generation X having a more consistent belief in God than the Baby Boomers (Burge, 2021), Millennials and Gen X having largely dismissed Christianity as irrelevant (Barna, 2024), or that Gen Z is more religious than previous generations (Kayata, 2025), but also less likely to believe that people are basically good (Barna, 2024); or that post-Millennials are more tolerant of Christianity (Sherwood, 2018), are everywhere.

No official commission of the group decides what each generation is called and when it starts or ends. At the Pew Research Center, different names and birth-year cutoffs were proposed for the American-style generations, and, through basic consensus within a limited group, they were selected and gradually adopted in the media and popular parlance (Twenge, 2018).

The only generation officially designated by the US Census Bureau was the Baby Boomers, to describe the surge in post-WWII births and the decline in birth rates in 1964 (Cohen, 2019), but this did not make it a worldwide generation. With other generational labels, the same situation occurred. For instance, millennials are not meaningful in countries with alternate calendars such as Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic, Chinese, Sakka, or KollaVarsham (Rudolph et al., 2020).

Anyone who wrote publicly about generations could add characteristics, conditions, or differences to the existing definitions. Twenge (2018) stated that generational labels and birth-year cutoffs were merely convenient shorthand and that, although they might be squishy, the evidence of generational differences was strong. Furthermore, "knowing what generation you are does not perfectly predict your attitudes and experiences, but it can tell you something about how the culture and events mold what you believe in, how you spend your time, and what you become" (Twenge, 2018). A daring statement about how narratives pretend to tell what a person might become.

Some authors have gone as far as creating specific concepts to "validate" their ideas about generations, such as Johnson and Johnson (2010), who coined the term *generational signposts* to describe events or cultural phenomena that are supposed to be specific to a generation, shaping, influencing, and driving expectations, actions, and mindset about work, consumption, and life in general.

It is challenging to keep up with all the constructs surrounding generations, such as cuspers, or cusps (Dorsey, 2018; Arsenault, 2004; Hyatt, 2021), or even tweeners (Arsenault, 2004). These are people within and between sub-groups of generations that experience a crossover effect because their birth years bridge two generations, being at either edge of a generation (Arsenault, 2004). Authors have gone as far as establishing that this supposed group includes people three or five years into the beginning of a generation (Dorsey, 2018), and are expected to have advantages over people just belonging to a generation because cuspers are said to be more empathetic to the generations that precede them, as well as the one they belong to.

As if these additional designations were not enough, *micro-generations* have been created as additional categories. By doing so, they further divided generations. Microgenerations are similar to cuspers, but the main difference is that people in those groups apparently do not fully relate to those born slightly before or after them. As well as with generations, micro generations do not follow a scientific method to create them, nor is there a common agreement on what they are. They are supposed to bridge the generational gap (Kempf-Taylor, 2023). Consulting companies such as Kadence International (Chhatwal, 2025) introduced the microgenerations Gen Jones, Xennials, Zillennials, and Zhalpas by combining previous labels. For instance, Generation X and Millennials will result in Xennials, Millennials, and Generation Z in Zillennials, Generation Z and Alphas in Zalpas.

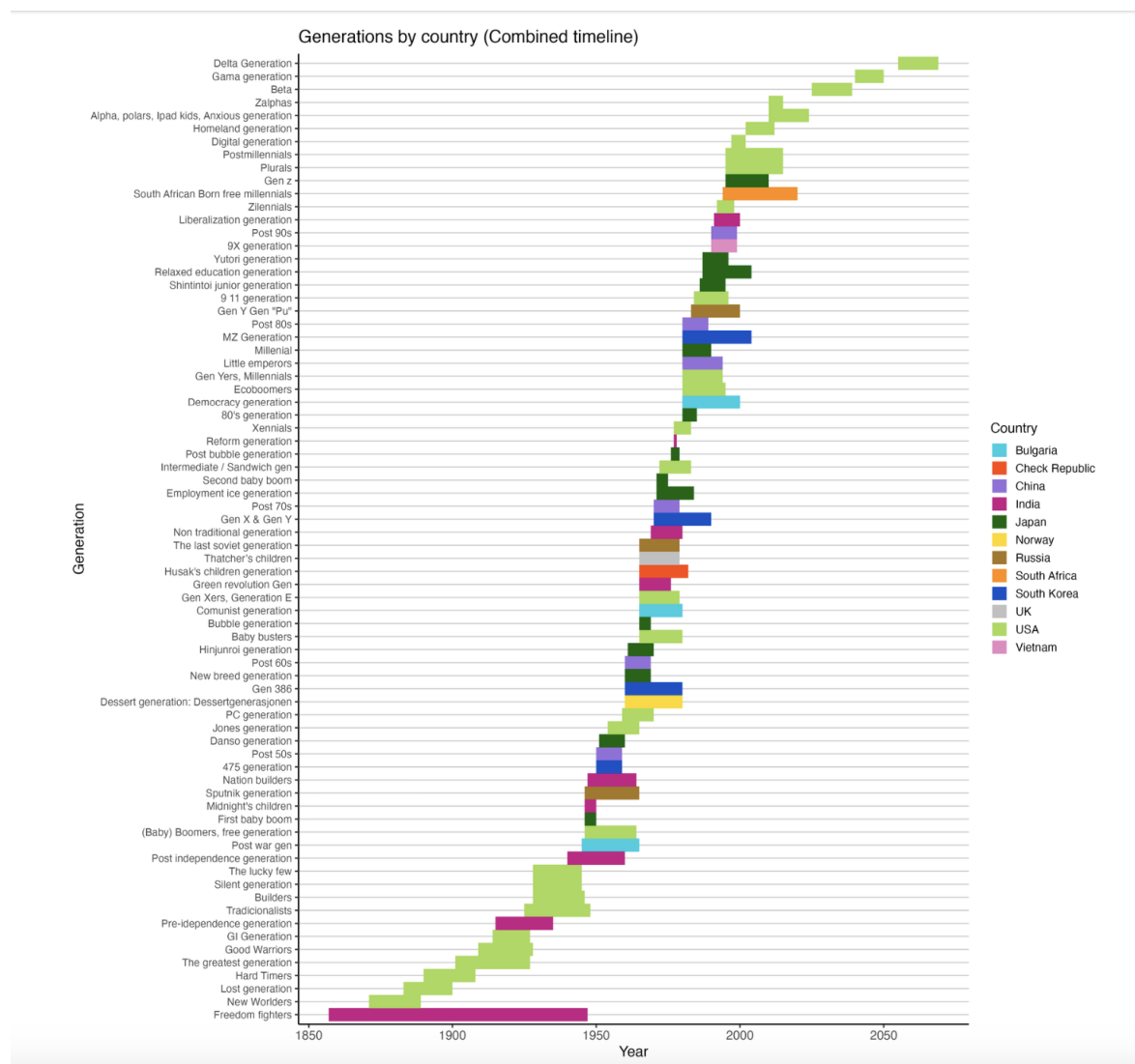
Self-proclaimed generational specialists have contributed to an excess in generational classifications. For instance, Generation Z has been divided into ZTRibe and Z Alpha. In contrast, Millennials have been divided into Pro-Millennials, Mid-Millennials, and New-Millennials, and even those born during the COVID-19 Pandemic can be considered a stand-alone microgeneration (Stillman, 2024).

These categories were created for marketing purposes in the United States, apparently offering the opportunity for companies to create targeted products and marketing strategies (Kabesa, 2022; Mahas, 2023). For instance, distinctions regarding marketing purposes suggest that Pro-Millennials have reshaped the social media landscape, making it a platform for both personal and professional development; that Mid-Millennials seek financial goal-setting with a sense of calm and anxiety-relieving atmosphere; and finally, New-Millennials are supposed to have an entrepreneurial spirit and innovative thinking and are transforming the business landscape in unimaginable ways (Mahas, 2023).

Falsifying traditional generational constructs can be done in multiple ways. First, a global search across generational narratives revealed important differences and variations in generational labels, indicating that the "American way" in which generations have been portrayed is not universal, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Identified generations across the world



Source: Montaudon, 2025.

Generations from different countries were identified, in addition to those from the United States. Important differences were identified in the UK, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Norway, Russia, South Korea, Vietnam, China, India, Japan, and South Africa.

Some of the generations identified in Figure 1 are the following: Lost Generation, Freedom fighters, New Worlders, Hard Timers, The Greatest Generation, Good Warriors, GI Generation, Traditionalists, The Lucky Few, Silent Generation, Post War Gen, Builders, Sputnik Generation, (Baby) Boomers, Free Generation, First Baby Boom, Pre-

Independence Generation, Post Independence Generation, Midnight's Children, Nation Builders, Post 50s, 475 Generation, Danso Generation, Jones Generation, PC Generation, Post 60s, Dessert Generation or *Dessertgenerasjonen*, New breed Generation, Gen 386, Shinjunroi Generation, Husak's Children Generation, Communist Generation, Green Revolution Gen, The Last Soviet Generation, Thatcher's Children, Gen Xers, Generation E, Baby Busters, Bubble Generation, Non traditional Generation, Gen XY, Post 70s, Employment Ice Generation, Second Baby Boom, Intermediate/ Sandwich Gen, Post Bubble Generation, Reform Generation, Xennials, Democracy Generation, Post 80s, Little Emperors, Gen Yers, Millennials, 80's Generation, MZ Generation, Gen Y, Gen "Pu", 9-11 Generation, Shintintoi junior generation, Relaxed Education Generation, Yutori Generation, Post 90s, 9X Generation, Liberalization Generation, Zillennials, South African Born Free Millennials, Gen Z, Digital Generation, Alpha, Polars, Ipad kids, Anxious Generation, Zalphas, Pandemics, Coronials, COVID Generation, Pandemic Generation, Quarentenials, Ecoboomers, Homeland Generation, Beta Generation, Postmillennials, Plurals, Gamma Generation and Delta Generation, but these are not the only generational descriptors that have been circulating, and the list is not exhaustive. The existence of all these labels shows that there are no standard definitions of generations, and that there are important differences based on where and when they were developed.

The Pew Research Center (2015) established that generations were a viable way to group age cohorts. However, this condition alone can be influenced by other variables, such as place of birth and context, as well as by the Human Development Index for that particular country or region. Life expectancy at birth is another condition that varies substantially, ranging from 54.6 years in Niger to 86.5 years in Monaco (World Population Review, 2025a). The average years of schooling can be used as a predictor of important outcomes in development, employment, and growth. However, this condition was not considered, and it varies worldwide. For instance, in Germany it is 14.3 years, while in Niger it is only 1.3 (World Stats, 2025). The onset of adulthood also influences generations' narratives. However, the threshold of adulthood varies, ranging from 15 in Yemen and Indonesia to 21 in countries such as the Arab Emirates and Niger (World Population Review, 2025b). Finally, the retirement age, another relevant variable, can differ by gender and country

policies, ranging from 55 years in Sri Lanka to 70 years in Libya (World Population Review, 2025c), and some countries are in the process of extending the retirement age. Also, specific work-related trends are creating significant gaps in retirement ages worldwide, such as the FIRE Movement (Financial Independence, Retire Early) (Taylor & Davis, 2021), in which people work hard early on in their careers and retire as soon as possible to enjoy life. The opposite movement also affects the retirement age: The Great Unretirement (Hill, 2022), in which people who have already retired are being re-employed due to an increase in life expectancy at birth, as well as economic and social needs.

Even with all the variations among supposed generational categories, they all have one thing in common: they are stereotypes that describe mental states and blind spots (Bottom & Kong, 2012) as well as firmly held assumptions based on generalizations. Stereotypes abound; they can be used to refer to people experiencing poverty, the foreigners, the women, and the *others* (Lake & Yamamoto, 2019) who, for some reason, do not belong to *us*. They are commonly held mental pictures that represent oversimplified opinions, prejudiced attitudes, or unconsidered judgments (Webster-Merriam, 2025). Generational stereotypes do not explain differences among individuals, yet they shape our perceptions of the roles people play in our society. We need to question what using generation labels says about us and what they evoke. When used in generational constructs, they constitute ageism against people of all ages (Rudolph et al., 2020), pitting younger and older people against one another (Guterman, 2022).

Each generation in a position of power and control tends to see subsequent generations primarily negatively (Riggio & Saggi, 2015), and dominant stereotypes further reinforce this ingroup/outgroup bias.

Effects related to the use of generational cohorts

When using generational narratives, two important effects help explain how stereotypes work. One is the *Pygmalion effect*, and the other is the *Kids these days effect*.

The Pygmalion effect was coined in reference to studies conducted in the 1960s on the influence of teacher expectations on students' IQs (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). This

effect shows that expectations can shape outcomes. A problem arises when members of a supposed generation tend to endure stereotypes about themselves and then fully accept them (Riggio & Saggi, 2015). If even a tiny part of the narrative seems true, they end up believing the whole thing and acting on the other characteristics. *The Pygmalion effect* has a downside: *The Golem effect*, which explains that low or negative expectations lead to poorer performance and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. From a generational perspective, this can lead to unfair treatment and the perpetuation of biases, such as lower expectations for certain generations of students or employees. This effect is a reminder to be mindful of the potential influence of our expectations. Even if the effect is small, having high expectations in many situations can only inspire others about their own capabilities, and people's limitations can be stretched when their perceptions change.

Kids these days effect: This effect was described by Protzko and Schooler (2019) as a generational phenomenon. The effect explains that while older generations seem to have a bleak outlook for younger generations, it is a result of faulty memory and biased projection. There is evidence that, since the Greeks back in 624 BC, people have been complaining that the next generation is a disappointment (Stillman, 2019) and lamenting the decline of the present generation (Protzco & Schooler, 2019). Old folks complaining were once on the receiving end of those same complaints (Gopnik, 2019). The belief in one's own superiority is a pervasive illusion among humanity, leading people to see others as lacking something (Scheinman, 2020). Denigrating the young has increased in recent years, in part due to stereotypes included in generational designations. The elderly are concerned about the moral values and the capacities of the young to fulfill the roles and responsibilities they will acquire (Arnett et al., 2013). Also, there is a tendency to romanticize the past, focusing disproportionately on its negative aspects (Mastroianni & Gilbert, 2023). The flipside of yearning for a golden past is bitterness about the present, since the tendency to claim that things used to be better is both dangerous and mostly false (Khon, 2023).

Kids these days effect is linked to two additional effects: the biased *exposure effect* and the biased *memory effect*. Together, these biases can create the illusion of moral decline (Mastroianni & Gilbert, 2023), which people believe began around the time they were born, regardless of the events that occurred.

When there is a disconnect between the old and the young, and a lack of contact, this becomes a perfect breeding ground for additional stereotypes and fake arguments that increase the distance between age groups and deny everyone the benefits of intergenerational connections (Duffy, 2021a). For instance, “Millennials have been incited to regard their parents’ generation as entitled and selfish, and to blame the Baby Boomers for the cultural and economic problems of today” (Bristow, 2019).

Demystifying generational narratives

One of the most important issues about generational constructs is that they tell us little about who people are or what their experiences might be (Giles, 2024). Since 2018, a growing chorus of criticism has publicly discredited generational narratives as irregular and ineffective, especially because they do not reflect individual identities and ignore differences within cohorts (Bhattacharya, 2022). Menand (2021), one of the critics, surveyed the academic and popular background for references on generations in politics, business, media, academia, and other areas of society. He suggested that treating age cohorts as cultural units was like doing astrology, because it would equate birthdates with what is only the result of changing conditions.

Publications that embrace generational labels (Lindner et al., 2023) suggest that most participants self-identify with their "correct" generational labels, as if Pew's narrative fit groups of people (Cohen, 2023). Nevertheless, in terms of methodology, even Pew researchers suggested that poorly trained and informed consultants made inflated claims about generational differences that lacked research grounding (Twenge, 2018; in Jacobs, 2019). Generational narratives have not been validated for several reasons, including significant discrepancies in the start and end dates of each label (Constanza et al., 2012; Rudolph et al., 2017).

At the beginning of the new millennium, John Quiggin, an Australian professor and researcher in economics at the University of Queensland, began writing about generations as invalid constructs and a vicious game that needed to end. The article titled "*The end of the generation game*" (Quiggin, 2000) was published in the Australian *Financial Review*. Although it attracted some interest and several responses, its reach was limited because it

was published in a country without generational constructs. In keeping up with his ideas, in 2018, Quiggin wrote another article, called "*Millennials mean nothing*", this time published by The New York Times, in which he specifically wrote about the millennial generation as portrayed by Pew Research Center, and the uselessness of generational clichés, stating that age groups could not and should not be used as the base for classification. A brief response in the same publication was issued by Pew Research Center's president, Michael Dimock, as a letter to the editor in which he stated that "when it came to understanding people's values, behaviors, and life outcomes, these generational signals often pale in comparison with other, more fundamental factors like race, class, and gender". Moreover, "generational labels quickly become unproductive when they turn into overgeneralized caricatures". Still, Dimock emphasized:

Overgeneralization does not justify ignoring the fact that the social, political, economic, and technological context in which one comes of age can have a meaningful effect worthy of study, and that the answer to the public's desire to understand generational signals is not to silence the conversation but to inform it. (Dimock, 2018)

Although several posts followed, nothing came from these communications.

In 2021, Phillip Cohen, a sociologist from the University of Maryland, College Park, wrote an article titled "*Generational Labels mean nothing; it is time to retire them*" (Cohen, 2021), which appeared in The Washington Post. Cohen explained that the supposed limits between generations were not based on science, any more than the names assigned to them, and that there was no research or empirical evidence to establish the traits considered their defining elements. He appeared at various academic and research events to raise awareness of the subject (Bhattacharya, 2022). In 2023, he decided to launch an open letter to address Pew's generations, asking researchers and scholars to sign the petition to reconsider generational narratives. The letter was signed by over 150 sociologists and demographers who strongly opposed the use of generational labels in research. In the letter, Cohen stated that Pew's generations created confusion because their divisions were arbitrary and lacked a

scientific basis; they were based on pseudosciences, which impeded advances in the social sciences and affected important research on cohorts and life courses. It continued expressing that generations were widely misunderstood as official categories and identities; “therefore, the generational scheme, which had become a parody, needed to end” (Cohen, 2021). It also called for Pew to publicly acknowledge the validity of generational constructs and to establish corrective measures to address the use of arbitrary and misleading labels and names.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the lack of validation for generational narratives came from the nonprofit that created most of them. As a result of different publications based on Quiggin’s and Cohen’s efforts, in 2023, Kim Parker (2023), the Director of social trends research at Pew Research Center, acknowledged -only in the Center’s web page- that their generational studies had methodological and conceptual problems, and that methods used in their studies were flawed because the instruments used, twenty or thirty years ago, such as surveys, could not be compared to those used today. After all, even the way surveys are administered has changed from face-to-face to telephone and, now, to online. Also, she added that there has been increasing criticism of generational research and generational labels, because content sold as research has been used as clickbait or as marketing myths. In an email (Abraham, 2023), Parker explained that the problem with what Pew called generations is that they covered too wide a time span to offer any practical impact, and cited an example in which a person in a generation might be already working, while another in the same generation might be just finishing elementary school; their life experiences would not be comparable. Parker (2023) stated that going forward, Pew Research will only do generational analysis when they have historical data that allows making comparisons of generations at similar stages of life, and that they will try to control other factors beyond age in making generational comparisons, expressing that “ the question is not whether young adults today are different from middle age or older adults today but whether young adults today differ from young adults at some specific point in time in the past”. She even declared that "by choosing not to use the standard generational labels when they are not appropriate, we can avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes or oversimplifying people's complex lived experiences" (Parker, 2023). Parker concluded that Pew Research Center

will use a clear set of guidelines to frame its approach going forward, and that its audiences should not expect to see much new research from them using a generational lens unless it adds value, advances important debates, and highlights meaningful social trends.

Michael Dimock, President of Pew Research Center, also published on the Center's webpage that Pew Research still thinks it can be useful to talk about generations, but that there are some important considerations for readers to keep in mind whenever they come across a news story or research about generations, which can be summarized as follows:

- Generational categories are not scientifically defined.
- Generational labels can lead to stereotypes and oversimplification.
- Discussions about generation often focus on differences instead of similarities.
- Conventional views of generations can carry an upper-class bias.
- People change over time" (Dimock, 2023).

Dimock also expressed that he was aware that "*suspensions about generational labels may have hardened*", but that Pew's recommendation is for readers.

"to bring a healthy dose of skepticism to the generational discussions they see. However, we still believe generational thinking can help us understand how societies change over time, and that generational labels will continue to serve as general reference points rather than scientific facts to help readers navigate a changing world. However, we will do so sparingly and only when the data support the use of the generational lens. (Dimock, 2023)

In essence, Pew will address the generational framework slightly differently (Prakash, 2023), but the media frenzy about generations has not stopped. Acknowledging that Pew was wrong to create the generational labels was not well-received. This did not attract as much media attention as the published works in which Pew validated their existence.

The myth of the framework is helpful in desmitifying generational narratives. Frameworks are intellectual fashions that exaggerate what science and rationality have done or denigrate what they can do (Popper, 1976). A study by McKinsey & Company concluded that many generation-based stereotypes in the workplace were more myth than fact (De Smet et al., 2023). However, because generations have become a widespread framework, they have permeated business and academia, with significant investments of time, money, and resources in their creation and dissemination. Since generations are made-up constructs, schools and businesses of all types are trying to fix problems between people of different age groups that do not exist. They are developing methodologies and training courses, using generational lingo as part of their diversity strategies, spending millions on consultants and professionals to understand apparent generations, and integrating multigenerational workforces, leading to decisions that can be harmful, divisive, and potentially illegal (Rudolph et al., 2020).

Despite that, some support the use of generational cohorts, especially in marketing, arguing for their ability to understand collective mentalities, calling sociologists shortsighted, and defending the Pew Research Center for its "inspiring and profound insights into the dominant dynamic" (Green, 2021). Green (2021) is adamant that marketers will not eliminate the construct of generations in the name of social equity.

Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) in the search for truth

The Idea of the University, as proposed by Newman, asserts the distinct mark and philosophy of higher learning catholic institutions as spaces of universal knowledge and cradles of openness, commonality, shared wisdom, and collective experience (Cariño, 2012), in a healthy environment for serious consideration of ideas without the tyranny of harassment, political correctness, or enforced relativism (The Cardinal Newman Society, 2025). His educational vision has become a resource for addressing new challenges facing educators (Sindenvall, 2016).

The pursuit of truth is a central element in Newman's idea, along with the integrity of all knowledge, helping students to see things as they are (Hoopes, 2024). Newman wanted the university to be the place where faculty and students examined universal knowledge

together (Denig, 2004). This idea introduces an approach to education that is intellectually vital, humanizing, broad, and coherent (Newman, 1976). The university engages in difficult work, critical and constructive dialogue with others, incorporating what is good while discerning what is not and rejecting it (Crosby, 2007).

A catholic university contributes to the good of the Church and the good of society, fostering true understanding rather than just acquiring information, as it is through education that a person can have a clear view of his/her opinions and judgments by teaching how to see things as they are, disentangling trains of thought to discard what is irrelevant (Vélez, 2011)

Philosophers and theologians have aided in clarifying and defending the catholic view of life (McGucken, 1962).

The philosophy of CHEIs centers on integrating faith and reason, focusing on a person-centered education that combines academic excellence with a search for ultimate truth. It is founded on Catholic Humanism, which emphasizes the dignity and value of the human person. As expressed in the Church's social teaching, catholic humanism seeks to promote a new social order based on the dignity and freedom of every individual.

Newman believed in fostering a love of learning and in the importance of personal influence as the best means of teaching the truth. Truth is considered more than knowledge because knowing the truth leads us to discover the good (Benedict XVI, 2008).

Commitment to truth plays an important role in selecting professors, study programs, guest lecturers, and events.

The role of CHEIs in avoiding discrimination and promoting human dignity and humanist fraternity

CHEIs use CST as an essential tool for promoting human dignity and human fraternity; it is a way of thinking and acting that nourishes thought through the research and analysis of different realities. From the perspective of CST, division is a defining feature of generational labels, in which attention is directed towards tensions that exaggerate differences and gaps. In developing currents of thought, it can be observed that generational

constructs are not based on truth and that their use results in attacks on human dignity through stereotyping and discrimination. CHEIs need to become a voice and take responsibility for stopping those messages from permeating research, influencing course content, shaping professional training, and shaping public discourse.

Over-reliance on generational stereotypes can result in interactions that are less than ideal (Urik, 2019), leading to social and political struggles and, at times, bitter conflict (Comaroff & Comaroff) in an increasingly divisive information environment. Most of the information people of all ages receive about their generation is negative, which promotes extreme views and distorts reality (Duffy, 2021b). This is because the negative traits of different age groups are framed through a "blame the victim" perspective (Alden Network, 2021). To address these issues, the Dicastery of the Church has, through various documents, shed light on CHEIs' responsibilities. The Social Catholic tradition governs how human beings treat one another in society, and prizes equality and respect for all people's inherent human dignity (de Bernardo, 2020), providing guidelines for acting in every aspect of human life, including education.

The Congregation for Catholic Education has stated that the Catholic identity profile contributes to the creation of a Global Compact on Education to "rekindle our dedication for and with young people, renewing our passion for a more open and inclusive education, including patient listening, constructive dialogue and better mutual understanding" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022).

The intrinsic value of CST lies in its ability to speak to humanity across all times. The words of Pope Francis (in White, 2021) should be used as a reference:

"People cannot be pigeonholed" or reduced to "pre-packaged ideas", "Our knowledge and appreciation of others must be grounded in our acknowledgment that each of them possesses the inviolable beauty of a son or daughter of God, a reflection of the creator's image." (Pope Francis in White, 2021)

From the perspective of personalism, which states that every person is unique and that no two people are the same, even if they belong to the same gender, race, or culture. Pope

Francis (in White 2021) questioned the use of labels to categorize others when speaking to Roma people:

"How often are our judgments really prejudices, pre-judgments? How often do we rest content with labels?" the Pope responded. "In this way, we disfigure by our words the beauty of the children of God, who are our brothers and sisters." [...] "It is not easy to leave prejudice behind, even for Christians." "It is not easy to value others, especially if we see them as problems or enemies; if we pass judgment without making any effort to get to know them and to listen to their stories." (Pope Francis in White, 2021)

This quote applies to various forms of stereotyping, including the use of generational labels. Judgments about their supposed characteristics will always emerge if we do not become conscious of them.

In the Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*, proclaimed by Pope Paul VI (1965), the Church emphasizes the importance and urgency of educating the young, promoting dialogue, fostering fraternal relationships, and fostering mutual understanding. It also seeks to promote the harmonious development of their endowments, to achieve maturity and become responsible, while fostering closer ties between people and groups. *Gravissimum Educationis* also establishes that education is tasked with promoting the betterment of the person, forming a correct conscience in judging moral and ethical matters, passing on the cultural, intellectual, and spiritual treasures inherited from past generations, and allowing students to understand their history and place in the world. It also emphasizes that education must nurture a sense of values, leading to an appreciation of moral goodness, and fostering a love for God and neighbor, while also preparing young people to participate actively in social and economic life.

The Second Vatican Council (1965) in *Gaudium et Spes* establishes the importance of scrutinizing the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, to respond to life and the relationships, understanding the world and its often dramatic characteristics, conflicting forces, and ideological disputes. It also establishes the idea of a community of composed men and the importance of deeper bonds connecting humankind

and its history. It emphasizes the importance of brotherly dialogue among men and of interpersonal relationships based on mutual respect and the full dignity of the person (Gaudium et Spes, 23). The encyclical also reflects on the need to promote better understanding of the laws of social life (23), the growing dependence between men, and the pursuit of a more united world (24), stating that the Church repudiates doctrines and actions that contradict reason and the common experience of humanity, dethroning man from its native excellence. It also posits that every form of discrimination, whether social or cultural, is to be overcome and eradicated, as it is contrary to God's intent, and that efforts are needed to establish a universal brotherhood.

In the Catholic Constitution of Pope John Paul II (1990), Catholic Universities have been recognized as incomparable centers of creativity and dissemination of knowledge for the good of humanity. The constitution establishes the importance of universities to study the increasingly serious contemporary problems, the promotion of justice for all, and the quality of personal life (32), and the importance of Catholic universities having the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society (37), discerning positive and negative aspects, to discern and to evaluate the aspiration contradictions of modern culture to make it more suited for human development.

Regarding education for fraternal humanism, the Congregation for Catholic Education (2017) promotes true inclusion and the establishment of relationships of solidarity with generations that come before us, since human societies, countries, peoples, and nations are the results of chapters of history (23), and today's citizens should be fraternal with their peers. Also, it urges other citizens to build a culture grounded in intragenerational ethics, with an ever-changing identity and an unchanging, inalienable dignity.

The educational pact includes the creation of cooperation networks as loving cells of fraternal humanism, interconnectedness, intergenerational ethics, and solidarity between teachers and learners, something that needs to become even more inclusive, plural, and democratic.

More recently, the Congregation for Catholic Education (2020) described education as a movement in polyphony, grounded in collective efforts in which everyone collaborates according to their personal talents and responsibilities. CHEIs need not only to collaborate internally across different areas, but also amongst themselves to foster stronger voices in the search for truth.

Fostering catholic identity and fulfilling a CHEI's mission in the search for truth

UPAEP University is a private Catholic university, founded in 1973 in Puebla, Mexico. To read the signs of the times and to fully respond to what it means to be a Catholic university, the board of trustees, the university president, and the research vice-rector began discussing the need to develop a project to promote CST.

UPAEP University developed the SPES project, an institutional initiative aimed at strengthening its identity and mission by fostering currents of Christian thought in the academic field.

In today's context, the university is called to respond to cultural, intellectual, and social challenges from a clear and grounded Catholic identity. The SPES Project arises from the need to strengthen dialogue between faith and reason across disciplines. Through this project, UPAEP is assuming what each generation of intellectuals is called to do: to rethink their truths from the Truth. To become Catholic intellectuals is both a challenge and a vocation; it is a responsibility, but also a grace and a gift (Medina, 2025).

The responsibility of all Catholic academics and intellectuals is to develop knowledge in accordance with what UPAEP has called *the Christian Clef*, becoming a voice of truth across all areas of education in which the university works.

Based on the institutional mission, which states in its first phrase: "To create currents of thought..." The SPES project seeks to provide answers that have not been formulated before, or that, if they were, need to be rescued and narrated truthfully to respond to the new era. Therefore, it is dedicated to developing viable alternatives so that the knowledge generated is truly human and can be sustained in the face of cultural challenges and trends. UPAEP strives to create new narratives that propose horizons of

hope, lay the foundations of a new civilization, and, in a responsible, determined, and unique way, contribute to the common good. As an institutional platform, SPES promotes the circulation of Christian thought through training programs, academic accompaniment, research, and interdisciplinary articulation, thereby strengthening the participation of researchers and academics.

This article is an example of the SPES project coming to life. UPAEP University is aware of its responsibility in the search for truth, even when generations (in the biblical sense) and circumstances change. By addressing widely circulated false claims that affect how people relate to one another across settings, including familial, study, and work settings, we are contributing to the search for truth and the defense of human dignity.

Discussion and conclusion

The fact that a think tank, business organization, or person is considered an authority in a certain field does not mean the information provided by those sources is the absolute truth; nor does it when information is repeated millions of times and shared constantly. Furthermore, just because generational narratives are everywhere and people somehow believe that they identify with them does not make them valid.

One of the most important responsibilities of CHEIs is to promote critical thinking, so that professors, researchers, and students can question authority when needed, with facts at hand. "To form the ability to judge rightly, to hand on the cultural legacy of previous generations, to foster a sense of values, to prepare for professional life "(*Gravissimum educationis*, 5).

As educators, it is our responsibility to become aware of the biases that generational labels create and eliminate them from our everyday exchanges, including less-obvious stereotypes (Kreigel, 2016). We must identify and combat generational stereotypes and misconceptions, recognize that our life experiences and cultural reference points differ from those of our students, and learn from them (Mintz, 2022). Kreigel (2016) advises that we also need to encourage others to avoid labels and ignore the generational hype entirely, by not pursuing any content on generational stereotypes, so that interest in the topic diminishes

and progressively blurs until it disappears over time. We need to listen to people rather than the stereotypes about them (Sendra, 2024) and create more flexible, innovative, and supportive environments that lead to human flourishing. In doing so, we can start creating peace through a new narrative in Catholic Higher Education.

We must use critical consciousness to explore the unique values and motivations of our students, faculty, and staff beyond arbitrary labels, understanding that the media is both a mirror and a lens that reflects and magnifies our inherent attractions to anger and hatred (Brooks, 2021), something we urgently need to avoid.

CHEIs need to question the intentions of Pew Research and other institutions in creating these false group identities. What was the purpose of grouping people based on their date of birth? Was it to attract audiences or for the sake of putting forward ideas that could make them leaders in a field and receive public recognition, or were their motives market-based? Have they realized the negative impacts of their narratives? Moreover, are they willing to drop them completely, and why?

There is an imperative need to rehumanize the relationship with learners and restore it, as Pope Francis explained, moving from prejudice to dialogue, and from introspection to integration (Pope Francis in White, 2021). We need to shift the perspective from generations to the individual as a unique, sacred being (Séneca & Inwood, 2007), who possesses inherent dignity, and constantly seeks an encounter with God (Kierkegaard in Pomodore, 2012) while being humanized through education (Maritain, 1955); becoming able to transform and transcend (Lévinas, 2001), and to participate in intragenerational and intergenerational solidarity (Benedict XVI, 2010).

In response to the question in the title: Are Marketing-Oriented Generational Narratives Consistent with the identity of CHEIs? The answer is No. These narratives pull in the opposite direction, and in these conflicting forces, CHEIs need to raise their voices and face the critics, articulating faith and reason, opening the way for important research that can lead to the creation of true currents of thought that can change the way we address our

students, our leaders, faculty, and staff; our relationships with the industry, business, government agencies. And society as a whole. If we can change the narratives we use to describe each other, we will be a step forward in transforming society.

This article is a call to action to stop using generational narratives to foster a culture of dialogue rooted in Catholic identity. CHEIs are called to become true Christian witnesses who can rebuild the social fabric by going against the current of accepted narratives that do not represent the truth. However, we need to do so in collaboration. The initial ideas for this article have been presented at different CHEIs forums. The next steps will include developing alliances to amplify our voices in rejecting false narratives, understanding that, in today's world, CHEIs must be a beacon of hope for the future.

A final reflection seems to be in place:

"We can justly consider that the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping" (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 31).

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