



Why Gen Z is seeking more savvy University brands

(and what this means for the sector)

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The world of university marketing has changed.

Customer expectations have risen, teams have grown and so have budgets, as has the expectation that additional spending will create an immediate return on investment.

There are more mediums for our message than ever before – and more universities trying to differentiate themselves within a sector that sometimes struggles to find unique selling points that haven't been claimed by competitors.

The expectations of our students are not set by the performance of other universities in the sector, but by the brands that students engage with every day.

In November, our Strategy & Insights department worked with Dr. Mark Skippen, Head of Marketing Intelligence at Swansea University, to craft a survey of 250 prospective students in the UK.

Two out of three of the respondents stated that they felt university marketing wasn't as good as their favourite consumer brands... yet nearly 80% said that their choice of university has been impacted by the sector advertising they've seen.

Huge media budgets get you in front of your audience, but without a creative brand strategy, are universities adding to the conversation, or just adding to the noise?

Student expectations of university marketing

psLondon spoke with 16 to 19-year olds across the UK who are planning to attend university in the next few years.

We wanted to hear what they thought about university marketing and what lessons that might offer the sector. The first thing we learnt is that universities are reaching the right audiences – nearly 90% were reached in the past six months (figure 1).

The good news:

Almost 80% of respondents said that marketing or advertising from universities had influenced their decision on where they might study and **86% of respondents said they found university marketing at least somewhat visually appealing.**

80% said that advertising influenced their decision on where to study.

When did you last receive marketing or get advertised to by a university?



Figure 1 Nov 2020 Survey Research, psLondon

Alarming, approximately a quarter said they had seen marketing **that had put them off a particular university.**

However, achieving cut through is more challenging, as over half of respondents said that all university marketing and branding looks the same... and alarmingly, approximately a quarter said they had seen marketing that had put them off a particular university.

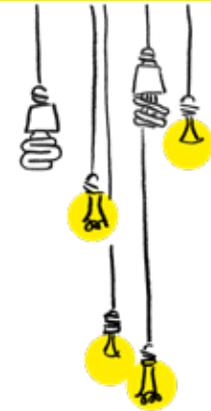
Of the universities that stood out to this audience, importance was placed on social life, student successes, the campus look and feel, rank and appropriate subjects for study. No surprises there.

Where things get interesting is in the number of responses professing positivity over marketing that is visually appealing, attention-grabbing, unique and “well put together.”

It's no surprise that an audience who can make their own TikTok videos with more graphic sophistication than many ads made in the last 100 years are looking for a:

“Layout that seems organised, well put together and modern”

(Female, South West).



Creative considerations gaining traction in

Higher Education marketing circles are also being noticed by prospective students.



When asked to describe a university whose marketing impressed them and made them think about studying there, responses included:

“University A - the design was very visually appealing”

(Male, East Midlands).

“University B - advertising included students who seemed similar to me.”

(Female, South West).

“University C - bold, bright, clear and concise information.”

(Female, West Midlands).

“University D - the amount of detail they did on one singular poster. All the editing was on point, which meant it was visually interesting!”

(Male, London).



Curious where your university landed?

Drop us a line at kendra@pslondon.co.uk and we'll let you know what students said about your MarComms - straight from the horses mouth!

They are conscious of trends on social media and expect advertising to feel new and fresh - **they see similarities across brand identities and notice when the appearance is too homogenized.**

As advertising targets since birth, they are savvy when it comes to describing advertising, using terms from a marketers handbook like “messaging”; “attention grabbing”; “clickable” and “personal”; **and they've developed a keen eye for the right “aesthetic.”**

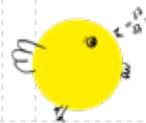
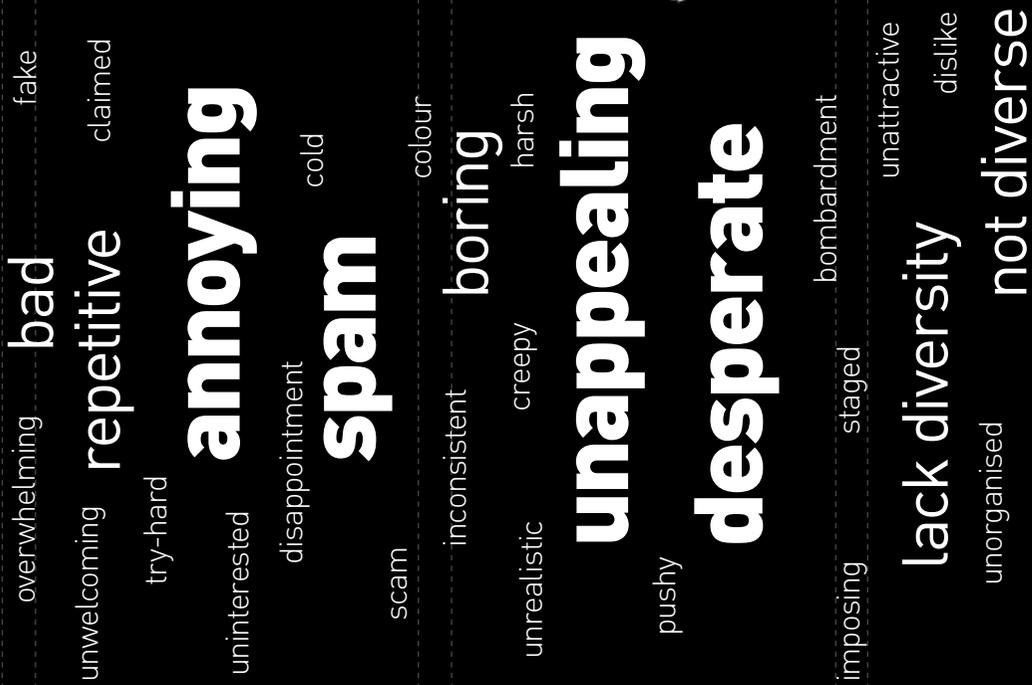


Figure 2
Word Cloud Consolidated
responses to the question
"What was it about that advertising/
marketing that put you off?"



ps. This is new way of looking at a word cloud...
it turns heads...



Problem
Solved.

The most frequently used negative word to describe University marketing was **unappealing**.



Yet, there's still quite a bit of work to be done, if the most frequently used words to describe what marketing put them off is any indication.

The most frequently used negative word to describe university marketing was unappealing, followed closely by spam, bad, not diverse, boring and desperate.

The sentiments can be summed up quite well by one respondent's thought:

“They just tried too hard.”

Ouch.

Responses to: “Thinking about marketing/ advertising you received from universities, what was it promoting?”

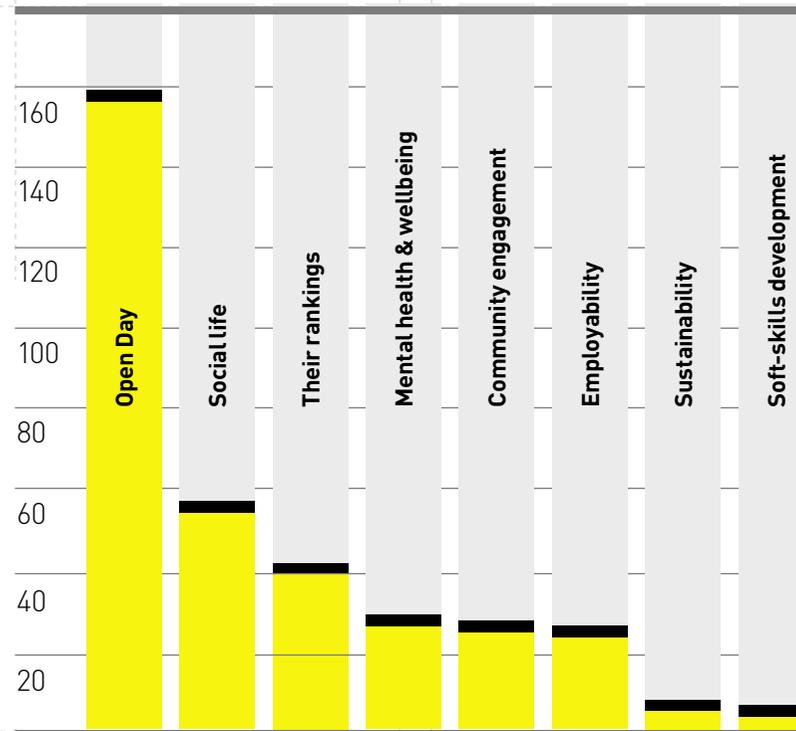


Figure 3 Nov 2020 Survey Research, psLondon

Interestingly, when the message does get through our respondents felt that it was mostly about functional aspects - like dates of open days - rather than anything that might persuade them to choose one university over another. [Figure 3] In the eyes of their audience, universities are still pushing hygiene factors ahead of brand level emotive messages - and that is reflected when comparing how respondents describe university brands and consumer brands.

University brands VS. Consumer brands



Think about an ad you that you watched years ago, but still reference today.

Maybe it's:

J.R. Hartley... or the Milkybar Kid. And when someone says "BANG!" is your first thought "and the dirt is gone!"?

Now think about a University ad you've seen that really stuck with you. If you're reading this you are likely to be somewhat of a university advertising expert, so your recall may be quicker... But if you were to ask your mum, brother, spouse, or Uber driver, would they have an answer?

Iconic ads are a mainstay in consumer marketing – they reach that icon status when they are no longer just an ad for chocolate, Yellow Pages or power cleaner, but when they belong to everyone – creating a sense of nostalgia or impacting the cultural conversation.

There's no sure-fire formula to create an iconic campaign, just like there's no way to simply "go viral" when it comes to marketing – but assessing the past so that we can attempt to predict the future is a good start.

In 1477 William Caxton printed what could be described as Britain's first advert, for a book called *The Pyes of Salisbury*¹. Kodak sold a brand, not just a product in 1891 – forming the concept of brand identity before we'd even entered the 20th century. In 1955, the first UK television advert was broadcast: a one-minute advert for Gibbs SR Toothpaste. By the 1960s, psychologists got involved and focus groups transformed the industry – adding legitimacy and insight to make advertising about understanding audiences.

The '90s brought bigger budgets and less predictable tactics, and by the millennium ads were appearing beside search results on Google, driven by consumer interests.²



Figure 4 Advertisement for Kodak, circa 1888

In Higher Education, things have been moving, though not always with such urgency.

As recently as 2010, the term 'university brand communications' was practically non-existent.

Most students' unions (and academics) would have picketed your marketing department for even suggesting students were customers... and universities, with their legacy, gravitas and academic-first outlooks, were certainly not considered "brands."

Whilst McCain was asking the British public to consider "Daddy or chips?", the concept of a 'university brand' was often limited to a logo and some fonts. Marketing budgets were small and marketing teams were even smaller. Then, student expectations changed the sector, and as marketers, we in the industry acknowledged that we too had to change.

Now, a fundamental understanding of the role of a brand has become a more common conversation at many universities, often at the highest level. We have teams in university marketing departments of a size and capability we wouldn't have dreamed of a decade ago, and budgets we couldn't have imagined. But naturally, becoming savvy when it comes to HE advertising means a spotlight on what you're doing, why you're doing it, and a hunger for transparency, authenticity and quality from our audience.

And as university marketers, we're speaking to a generation who have grown up surrounded by more and more visual sophistication on every screen and surface. Google Ads is older than many of the prospective students that universities are targeting; this audience sees ads as simply part

of the conversation, and there is now hyper-segmented targeting that The Pyes of Salisbury couldn't have fathomed.

At psLondon, our futurethinking approach means we build the brands that the future of the sector needs. And because we work across multiple sectors, we frequently consider how the industry is changing as a whole – which means we can be confident in saying that things will keep moving fast.

Audiences will keep expecting greater levels of sophistication in messaging, emotional hooks that resonate (backed by data and insight), and the ability to use online tools in exciting new ways.

Despite a global pandemic, it's a great time to be in university marketing – if you're brave enough to be daring, and smart enough to differentiate.

What the consumers think about your university

According to UUK statistics, the UK university sector is worth £38 billion³ annually. That is considerably more than one of the most brand savvy sectors, the UK fashion industry, which is worth "just" £26 billion⁴. And it is nearly half of one of the biggest spenders in global brand terms, the automotive sector, which in the UK is worth around £82 billion⁵.



Comparison of some of the biggest spenders in global brand terms versus University spend

£38bn a year
UK University Sector

£26bn a year
UK Fashion Industry

£82bn a year
UK Automotive Sector

Figure 5 UUK/HESA, British Council, SMMT.

That makes the university sector a very significant player in the minds of our target audiences and we should ask the question, are we giving our brands the focus that this stature suggests?



When crafting a university brand, it's important to remember that your audience aren't seeing your ad beside a bunch of other university ads in isolation – they're also seeing it next to ads from Nike, Pretty Little Thing and Apple. Thus...

It's time to stop comparing yourselves with each other and start comparing your marketing to the world's biggest brands... because like it or not, that's what your audience is doing.

That's not to say that consumer brands and universities fill the same space in their mind, and the sales cycle/expectations are certainly different between FMCG and HE. However, at the core, when we can see the similarities, we are better placed to borrow from an industry that as it stands might be more fun to talk to at a party.

Gen Z^s are brand aficionados - 82% follow their favourite brands on social media and 34% also actively engage with their favourite brands on digital platforms.

The top brands listed in our responses showed a sport, tech and fashion focus. In the interest of getting to the bottom of things, we asked which brands our audience would be happy to be associated with publicly – and why.

Top brands were mostly recognisable as popular with this audience, but the reasons why were the real scroll-stopper.

They commonly used words like “Accessible,” “Reliable,” “Inclusive” and “High quality” – alongside expressing the importance in “helping people and the world” being “modern, popular and trustworthy” and “uniqueness.”

This aligns with new research from the Edelman Trust Barometer report, which finds that the pandemic has shifted what prospective students value – **“educators who deliver value for money, prove that they can be trusted, and support students through this difficult time will gain a competitive advantage that will stretch beyond the pandemic.”**⁷

Quality, accessibility and usefulness are key in the consumer brand playbook, and university brands should take note. But underneath that lies the more emotional piece – respondents associated their listed brands with their own personal identity, and their allegiance to the brand was driven often by their (often aspirational) view of themselves.

Let's make university marketing meet students' expectations

Brand loyalty doesn't appear overnight and no amount of media budget can accomplish it alone. But when we combine fundamental human truths with compelling products and services, we are one step closer to forming a lasting bond with our audience.

We love the science behind brand behaviour. In his book *Brand Seduction*, Daryl Weber investigated the neuroscience behind memorable brands:

“Brands are not singular concepts that exist as discrete items on their own in the mind - they are one node in a huge web of interconnected associations, ideas, feelings, and so on.”⁸

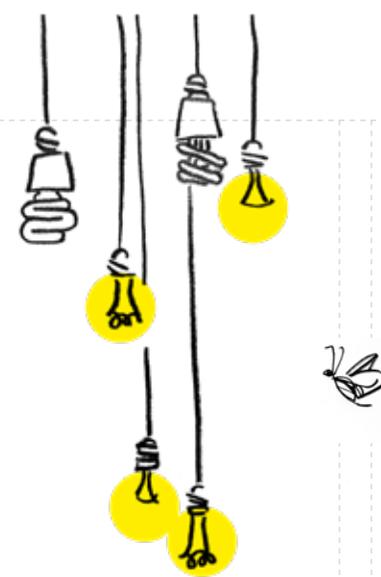
Put simply, every encounter your audience has ever had with your brand is nestled into the recesses of their minds and every encounter they have moving forward will evolve the network. “But memory is fickle, and the magic that makes an ad unforgettable is not a solved game but some combination of craft, timing and social engineering—and more than a little luck” as a recent article on iconic ads in *Ad Age*⁹ so eloquently put it.

When describing brands, ads were frequently described as creative, but also used more emotive words like breath-taking and captivating. It takes time to plan and build a strong brand experience, and the strategy behind it must be robust. A strong brand needs audience insight, a single-minded proposition, creative testing and a well-thought-out

journey. But if our research proves anything, it's that the appetite is there and that sticking to the status quo will only make the rug be pulled out faster. In an industry that was built on evolution, opportunity and innovation, universities must keep up or risk being left behind as their competitors realise simply existing isn't enough when speaking to a generation focused on channelling and leading cultural conversations.

There are conversations happening all over the sector about how to make university advertising iconic. There is recognition of the importance of tapping into the rumblings of the zeitgeist. And in the midst of it all, we must always ask the question:

Are we listening to and adding value to our audience...
or are we padding the pockets of the social media channels?



What now?

Action items for savvy university brands:



01.

Properly listen to your audiences, **identify your USP and craft a proposition** that makes your marketing unique from your competitors.



02.

Consider brand, **creative and audience journey as first priority** - media spend allocation as second.



03.

Make it memorable, visually appealing and well put together. **This audience are more visually tuned in than most.**



04.

Don't try too hard! Authenticity, **inclusivity and "cool" go a long way.**



05.

Back your decisions with insight and research... understand the audience and **look outside of your own sector.**



06.

futurethink!

Where will you be in 5 years' time?

Where will the sector be?



Thank you for reading.



If you'd like to discuss this report further, or how psLondon can help create a new future for your university brand, please contact:

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