

Enrolled at first sight:

Why desperation in student
recruitment marketing isn't working
(plus what they really want).

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University marketing in the United Kingdom has become a bit, dare we say it, desperate.

And if we take a good look in the mirror, we can't deny that marketing has played a role in that perception.

With more budget, more time, and more eyes on uni marketing than before, the stakes are higher than ever when it comes to doing it right. But are we buying impressions instead of making impressions?¹

To solve the problems associated with university recruitment, we first need to dial it back to the basics of human-to-human interaction and relationship building.



Let's start with the things we know:

- Relationships are formed through two-way connections.
- For something to last in the long-term, it relies on each party knowing and understanding each other.
- Meaningful connection takes time and commitment – it's not just a flash in the pan.
- Shared values built through insightful conversations create the foundation for true love.

No one watches 'Married at First Sight', a reality TV show that matches and marries couples literally on first look at the altar, and thinks "this seems totally functional and it will all turn out swimmingly!".

So why are we using a 'Married at First Sight' approach when it comes to recruitment?

On the reality show, after the generally dysfunctional couples meet for the first time at the altar, they go on a honeymoon, live together for a bit and then decide whether they will continue their relationship. The relationships are by their nature very surface level and more than a little bit shallow.

And it's worth noting that your odds of finding love on this show are abysmal... four couples from the series' first seven seasons have remained together.

That means the odds of a lasting relationship are 7%.

While things aren't quite that bad in the UK university world, there are some worrying parallels between 'Married at First Sight' and the recruitment approach of some universities...

Laptops and £1,000 cash payments: the 'bribes' UK universities are using to entice students

Exclusive: About a quarter of UK universities offer 'incentives' or 'perks' to tempt students



Whether you believe the Daily Mail, inews or The Guardian, **the media's depiction of the sector isn't exactly glowing.**

Revealed: Quarter of UK universities are 'bribing' A-level pupils with laptops and up to £1,200 cash if they select them as a 'firm' choice on UCAS form in desperate scramble to fill places

- Figures show universities offer 'incentives' to encourage A-level students to join
- Of 133 universities asked by i, 35 said they offered such incentives to students
- It comes as 80,000 students expected to get places through clearing this year
- Record number of students have applied for university in 2020, despite Covid-19

By JAMES ROBINSON FOR MAILONLINE
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Universities are bribing students with unconditional offers *Robert Allison*

In their desperation to secure 'bums on seats', some universities are killing academic endeavour and damaging career prospects



▲ With a place secured, some will think they can take it easy because it no longer matters if they get an A or a C grade. Photograph: Yakubov

Quarter of UK Universities bribing A-level pupils, The Daily Mail, 2020

Universities are bribing students with unconditional offers, The Guardian, 2018

Being described as a “desperate scramble”² and “desperation to secure ‘bums on seats’”³ is probably a bit of a turn-off for prospective students, and in fact in our November 2020 Research Report, ‘Why Gen Z is seeking more savvy university brands’, a quarter of respondents had seen university advertising that actually put them off... “boring”, “unappealing” and “desperate” were some of the top terms used to describe the university marketing that they’d seen.

And just like with our friends on ‘Married at First Sight’, there are some second thoughts when it comes to uni. In June 2021, psLondon ran a survey interviewing 500 current and prospective students aged 16-19 in the United Kingdom about their perceptions of university brands.

Over a third have had second thoughts about their choice of university - 37% of prospective students and 40% of current students.

Our findings also showed that the level of pride students feel before they attend university is greater than once they arrive...

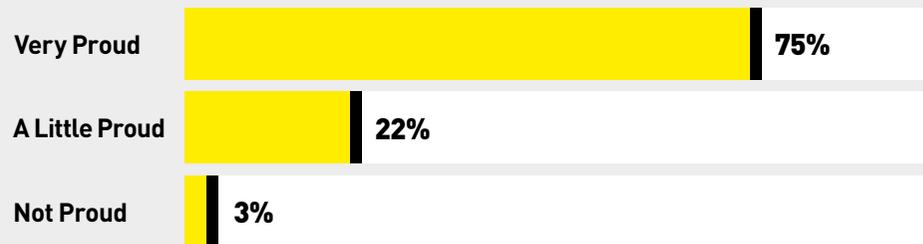
75% of prospective students saying that they were very proud and only 57% of current students saying the same.

That means we have a sweet spot to capitalise on, **before the honeymoon period seemingly wears off...**

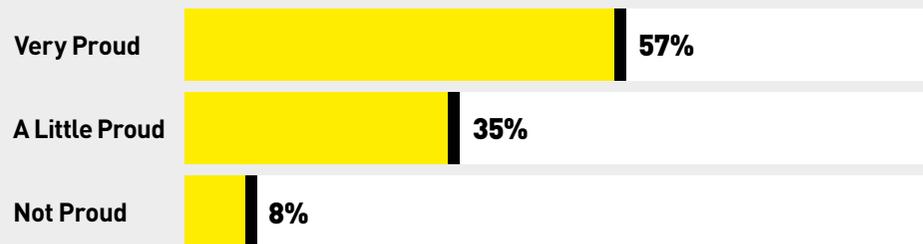


The level of pride students feel before they attend university is greater than once they arrive.

Prospective
students:



Current
students:



Once a student arrives on campus, we put time and energy into creating a brilliant experience for them. They buy the Freshers' Week ticket, they update their Instagram bio, they post pictures wearing their new Uof? sweatshirt on social. They make it "official".

But before they step onto campus, their relationship to prospective universities - arguably one of the biggest decisions of students' lives - is tepid at best, transactional at worst.



Figure 1 June 2021 Survey Responses to Q13: How proud do you feel about the university you're attending?



University is a long-term commitment, and **students are making decisions based on more than just surface-level, box-ticking exercises, like courses, rankings, location.**

While it might be true that most uni marketing departments focus most heavily on recruitment, at the end of the day, attracting students that will stay on, enjoy their time and become evangelists of the university is good for the bottom line... no matter what your campaign focus is on.

A long-term approach means building pride in the prospect funnel before they even arrive at your university. So, what makes a university brand seductive?

Brand loyalty, and creating fierce loyalty to your brand, are key drivers in long-term business viability and growth. Brand loyalty can't be found in bribes, and while most prospective students were happy (38%) or grateful (39%) to receive a gift, it was nowhere near the top of the running when it comes to how

they choose which university is right for them. A box of chocolates from a potential partner you're not interested in doesn't increase your seduction, and if you're already smitten, it is just the cherry on top.

Nike is a brand that does loyalty and seduction incredibly well in the consumer space. In November 2020, and six months later in June 2021, psLondon ran a survey of Gen Z's perceptions of brands and in both cases the top consumer brand listed by Gen Z was Nike (followed by Adidas, Apple, Pretty Little Thing, and ASOS). And the numbers reflect this – with annual profits shared in May 2021 soaring 196% over last year and 42% over 2019 – pre-pandemic⁴, Nike is a best-in-class example of long-term brand building. In fact, as far back as 1992, Harvard Business Review called

them a “champion brand builder”⁵. Nike aren't fumbling around in the dark here – they're employing proven marketing and communications tactics and employing a long-termist view to build a brand that is just as enduring now as it was in 1992 – and, as our research shows, beloved by those who were still a decade out from birth in 1992!

When we look at the appeal of Nike to our current and prospective student audience, it's easy to get stuck on the surface level differentiators.

We asked students why they loved their favourite consumer brands and many of the standard responses appeared: Good quality, Right price, Stylish, Good range. But these top-of-mind, light-touch responses aren't what truly drive Nike's buying power and loyalty.

We needed to dig deeper...

So, we introduced some thinking from a man named Milton Rokeach, a social scientist, who literally wrote the book on 'The Nature of Human Values'. In his Value Survey, he posited that a relatively few “terminal human values” are the internal reference points that all people use to formulate attitudes and opinions and that by measuring the “relative ranking” of these values one could predict a wide variety of behaviour, including political affiliation and religious belief.⁶

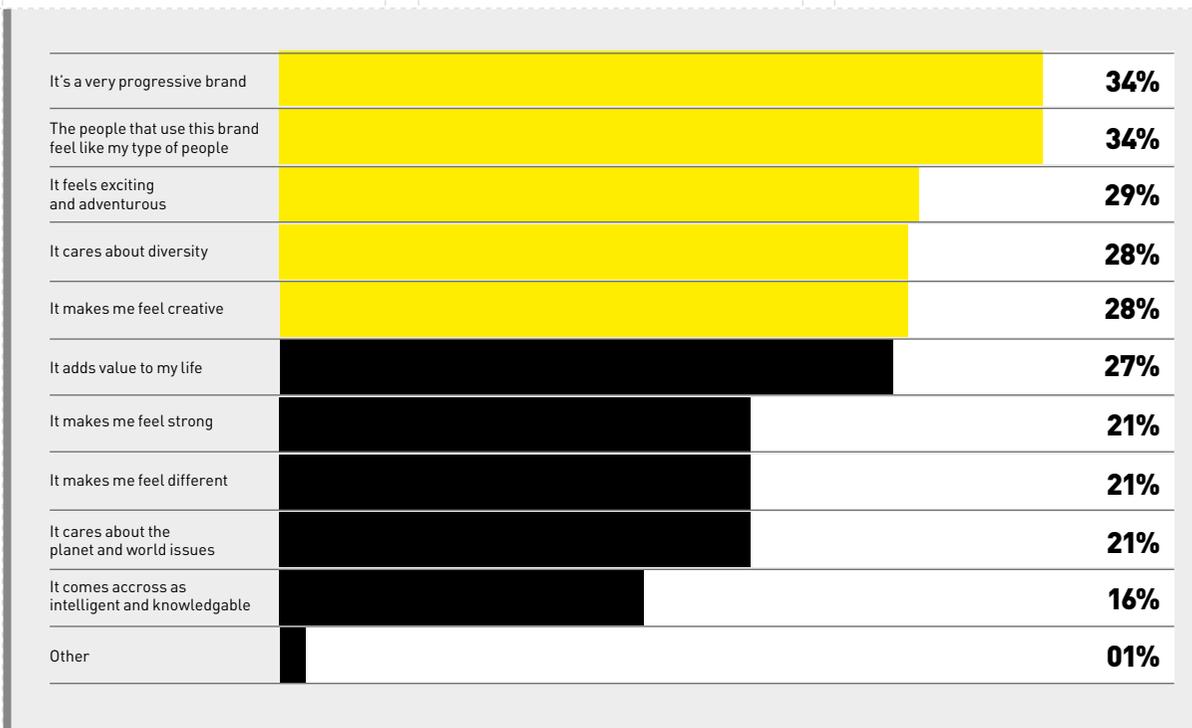


Social scientist **Milton Rokeach**



Values are what gives us purpose and our life meaning. **Values applied to consumer brands make us fall in love with them.**

According to Rokeach's view on values that drive behaviour, it is the more fundamental profound values that drive how people behave. Values are what gives us purpose and our life meaning. Values applied to consumer brands make us fall in love with them.



When we look at some of the more profound values, we start to see why young people love their favourite consumer brands: Progressive, Identification with 'my type of people', Exciting and adventurous, Caring about diversity, Creativity were all highly ranked. These deeper profound values provide great opportunities to differentiate a brand and of course, the right combination of values will be different for each brand.

So what about university brands?

Figure 2 June 2021 Survey, Q4: Which of these do you most associate with the consumer brand you love most? Choose top 3

We asked similar questions of our respondents **when it came to university brands, and the responses were consistent:**

How did you decide which university was right for you? Choose top 3 reasons. My university...

The results of us asking a surface-level question were very similar to what most university marketers have seen before: **Course I wanted, Good rankings, Right location and NOT an iPad or other “bribe”.** This doesn’t really tell us anything we haven’t already heard many, many times before...

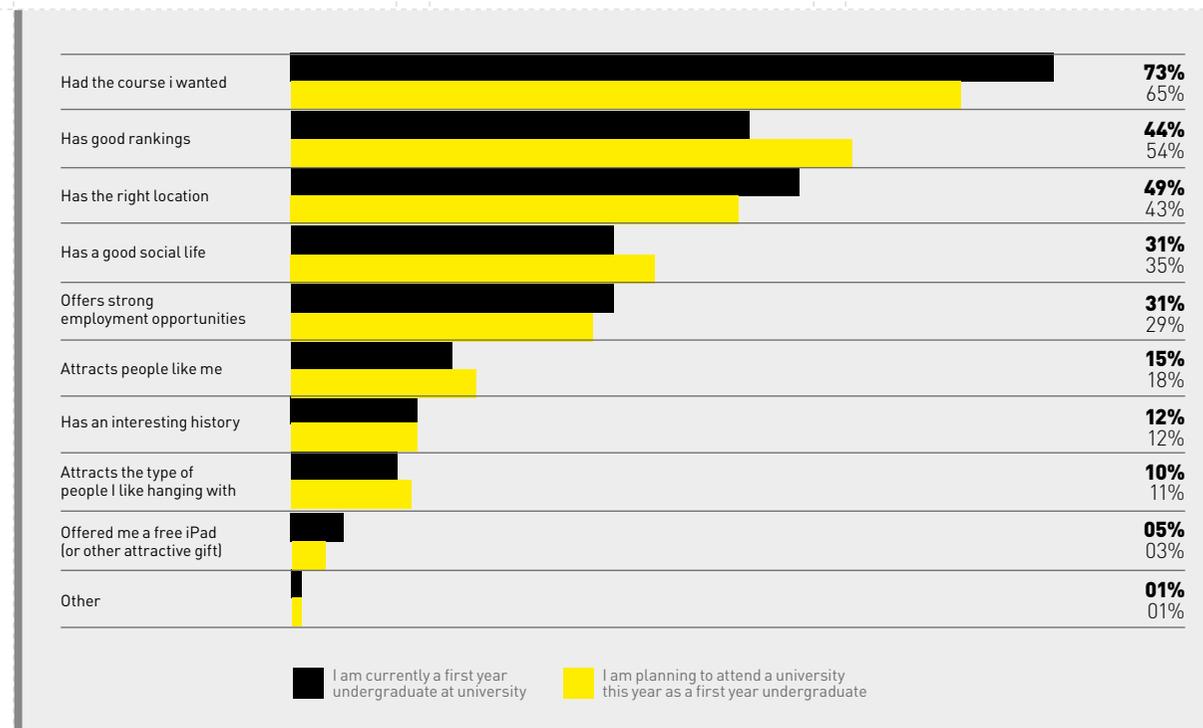
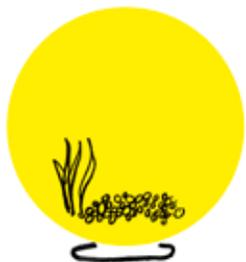


Figure 3 June 2021 Survey, Q6: How did you decide which university was right for you? Choose top 3 reasons.

But when we begin to unpack those deep, profound values in terms of university choice we end up somewhere much more interesting.

Which values do you associate with your choice of university?

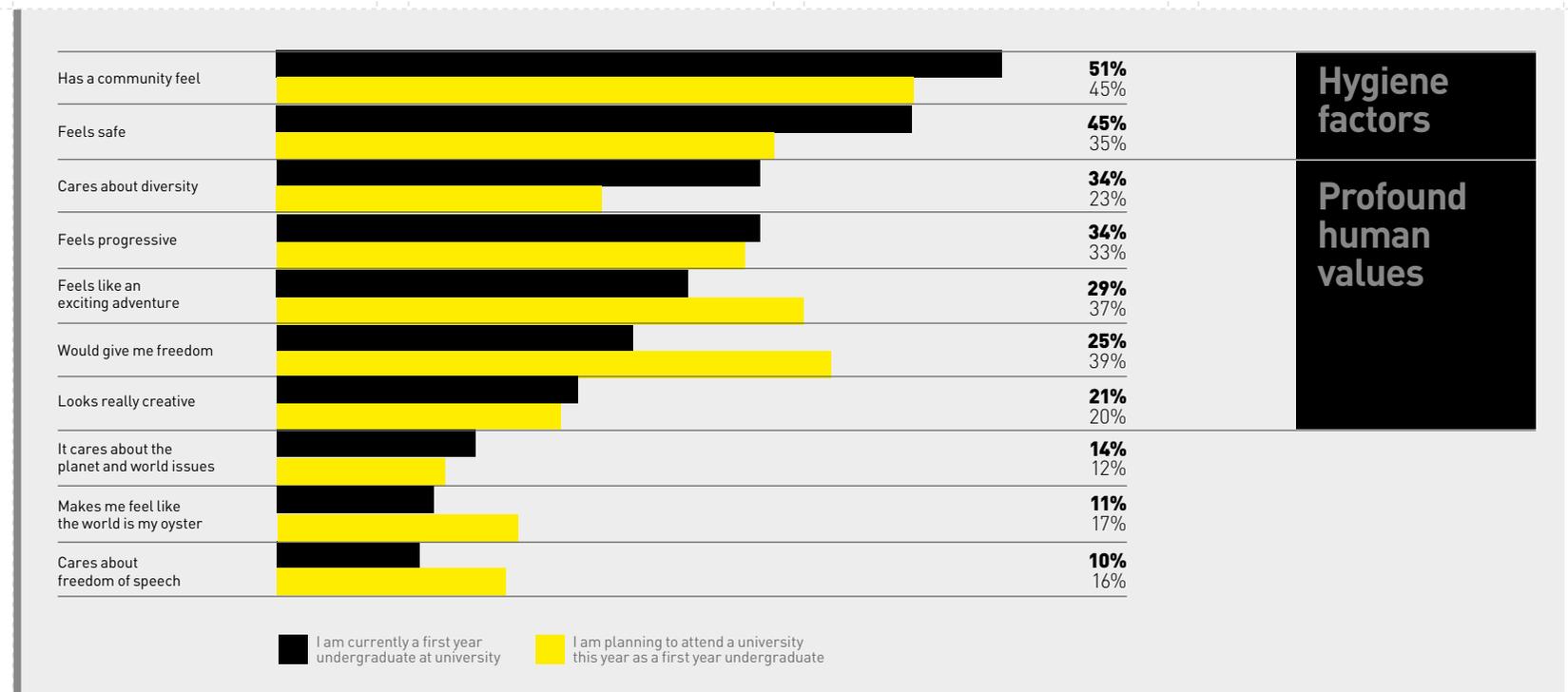


Figure 4 June 2021 Survey, Q7: Which values do you associate with your choice of university?



We are emotional beings – we make emotional decisions and then create a rational “story” in our minds to justify that decision.

There are two very important aspects to choosing a university

1. The hygiene factors are about safety, security, family feel, which makes a lot of sense as this is a transition from the familiarity of home and a momentous occasion in the lives of these young students.
2. Then, there are deeper meanings and values for choosing to go to university including diversity, freedom, feeling progressive, an exciting adventure.

In the first point, they are looking to meet their physiological needs and achieve safety – the two foundational pillars of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.⁷ This is a very important example of how basic needs need to be met first, followed closely by the top three – love & belonging, esteem and self-actualisation.

Our open text responses supported this: “it really makes **me feel at home**”, “It has a great **sense of community**, and I love what I study” – safety and security. Once those needs are met, we see more profound responses: “It seems like it would give me the **opportunity to express myself fully** like my A-Levels and high-school haven’t done in a way and allow me to develop as a student and **my own personal identity**” and “I think it

will be a great place to get to know people, **the freedom** you get as someone starting their adult life”.

We are emotional beings – we make emotional decisions and then create a rational “story” in our minds to justify that decision. We label those superficial things as highly important when in fact the emotional response beneath is what is truly driving our behaviour...

We’ve been seduced, even when we may not know it.

There’s no such thing as a silver bullet when it comes to creating a truly seductive brand – but we can start by creating a brand and university proposition experience around:

1. The important basics like safety, security and community
2. The important life-decisions like future influence and greater things
3. The deeper values that drive choice like freedom, adventure, diversity, progressiveness

Brand loyalty means **understanding your audience and speaking with them, not at them.**



The last point is clearly the most important – and the easiest way to differentiate in a sea of universities focused on the first two.

Every university offers safety, security, and community. Every university promotes the opportunities for employment their graduates are bestowed.

But the deeper values are where universities will find true differentiation, and a space to be distinctive – and this will enable you to attract, retain and build long-term meaningful relationships with students.

If we look back at Nike's trajectory to where they are now, the important piece to note is a key shift that happened in the business. In the words of Phil Knight, the co-founder and former CEO of Nike, they pivoted to focusing on marketing "when the formulas that got Nike up to \$1 billion in sales—being good at innovation and production and being able to sign great athletes—stopped working and we faced a series of problems... we came to see that focusing solely on the product was a great way for a brand to start, but it just wasn't enough. We had to fill in the blanks. We had to learn to do well all the things involved in getting to the consumer, starting with understanding who the consumer is and what the brand represents."⁵

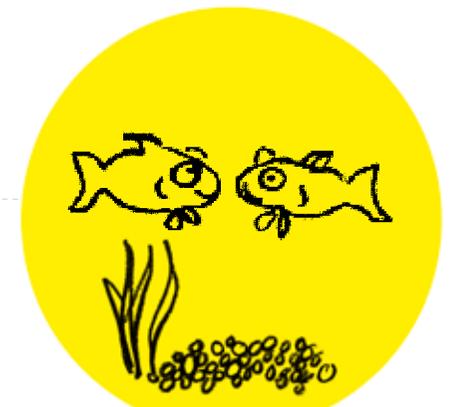
At psLondon, we are fortunate to work with many of the leading universities in the country and we know that Nike's struggle to fill in the blanks doesn't feel too far off from what many university marketing departments are facing today.

In a sector that has only recently acknowledged marketing for the value it adds, and that often rests too heavily on the laurels of the value of a university education for employment, strong rankings or popular courses, the course correction that Phil Knight had to face is inevitable.

As a sector, we have the opportunity and responsibility to get to know our audience on a deeper level and to provide communications that are meaningful to them. We are doing more than selling trainers – and the commitment we're asking of our audiences is longer and more emotional, so our approach to them should be proportionate.

Brand loyalty means meaningful customer relationships, via a variety of touchpoints along a well-thought-out journey. Brand loyalty means understanding your audience and speaking with them, not at them.

Brand loyalty means recognising and embracing your unique place in the market – your pull, your differentiators, your magic... and that starts with digging deep into profound values.



What now?

Action items to build lasting relationships with your prospects:



01.

Conduct qualitative research to **derive what is meaningful for the university and its students**



02.

Build supporting quantitative **research of key attributes and characteristics**



03.

Begin student **experience mapping, based around what students will think, feel and do**, so that what the university promises, it can deliver



04.

Craft a Brand Oyster: our reason for existing, the place our brand occupies in the mind of our customers, our values and how we fulfil our purpose (we can help!)



05.

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



06.

Bin the bribes and instead back your decisions with insight and research



07.

futurethink! Where will you be in 5 years' time? Where will the sector be?

And whatever you do, don't waste your time on flash in the pan seduction tactics. Save that for the brand-new brides and grooms on TV!

ps. Our futurethinking methodology might help here... hint hint

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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Head of Education

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Thank you for reading.



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