

Student spending: a new school of thought

 By [Mike Silver](#)

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In days gone by, the university student was viewed as a dreamer. According to them, the world was their oyster. If conditions didn't suit them, off came the shoes and out came the placards. With drinking abilities often matching their outspokenness, they were the noisy neighbours of society. Their jovial and carefree existence was juxtaposed with *real* adult life of taxes, mortgages and in-laws.

Until only recently, brands looked at them with a similar disdain.

A little more seriously

In recent times, though, businesses have been schooled that maybe it's time to take their studies into the student market a little more seriously. For brands, students offered a bit. They had to study, drink and, at times, eat. But, aside from banking brands, no one really gave them that much attention.

This all changed with the advent and adoption of on-campus media. University-based engagement was seen as another channel of marketing student-focused sub-brands, as well as helping mass FMCG ones improve their annual growth figures ever so slightly.

Despite the use of these one-on-one channels, communication was basic at best, with no real strategic considerations. The evolution of three major marketing, media and social trends, however, would irrevocably change this mindset:

1. The birth of experiential marketing

No consumers value experiences quite like students. Give them a great experience that they can appreciate, tell their friends about and potentially 'score' something free from, then Bob's your uncle. If brands could tap into this psyche, NBFs (social media lingo for 'new best friends') with mostly disposable income are around the corner.

What makes experiential marketing that much more impactful is the willingness of the student consumer to engage. A potential psychological explanation of this is the students' appreciation for 'cool'.

Today, this often translates creatively into the retro, nostalgia craze where Ninja Turtles, aviator sunglasses and Photobooths are back with a vengeance, leveraging off of an almost ironic edgy factor.

This is evident in the adidas Originals Legends Cup held annually at the Plett Rage student festival [*disclosure*:

produced by Stretch]. Dressing up in 70s-inspired soccer gear, complete with moustaches, tight shorts and afros, seems to make so much sense to this market.



adidas Originals Legends Cup- Plett Rage 2011 [*Stretch* produced].

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2. Early adoption

This 'cool-dar' factor has also manifested itself in students being termed 'early adopters': either setting trends or adopting them closely thereafter. Nonetheless, brands today realise more and more that, to be cool, the work often starts with the leaders of tomorrow and it's imperative to seed your brand at student level.

In this back-to-the-future scenario, students are recognising trends the rest of us will follow at a later stage. Google+'s targeted on-campus launch [*disclosure - produced by Stretch*] is testament to this as the super brand looks to campus recruitment to spread the love of Circles and Hangouts across the globe.



Google + On Campus Launch [*Stretch* produced].

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3. Social media power

Google are, of course, by no means the first to recognise the ever-increasing role that social media communication plays in shaping everyday life.

Consider that a recently graduated but unemployed Tunisian fruit vendor sparked the [Arab Spring](#) uprising using social media to affect global regime change. Similar power is at the fingertips of UCT and UJ students, with the ability to tarnish a brand's reputation with a few misplaced tweets.



Arab Spring student protester. Source: [A1Social](#).

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Being realistic, we're never going to see Mercedes Benz on campus any time soon (except maybe at a few posh Varsity College sites). Products such as washing powder and energy drinks, though, are desperately seeking to make acquaintances with students in the hope that they'll 'poke' back at a later stage.

Communicate appropriately

A warning: feeble attempts to communicate inappropriately can easily be equated to [#thatawkwardmoment](#) when their fathers [try using words](#) such as 'kiff' and 'awesome'. Never before has a consumer group been so acutely sensitive to the tone and delivery in communication.

Get it right and you may be entitled to your place on their Facebook wall and share of their bar tips indefinitely. Speak down to them, and you may risk regime change on a corporate level.

ABOUT MIKE SILVER

Mike Silver is the founder of Elevator, a brand experience agency now part of the Smollan Group. Mike has been working in the below-the-line and brand experience arena since 2000. Current clients include Lipton Ice Tea, Old Mutual and Pernod Ricard.

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