CLASS OF

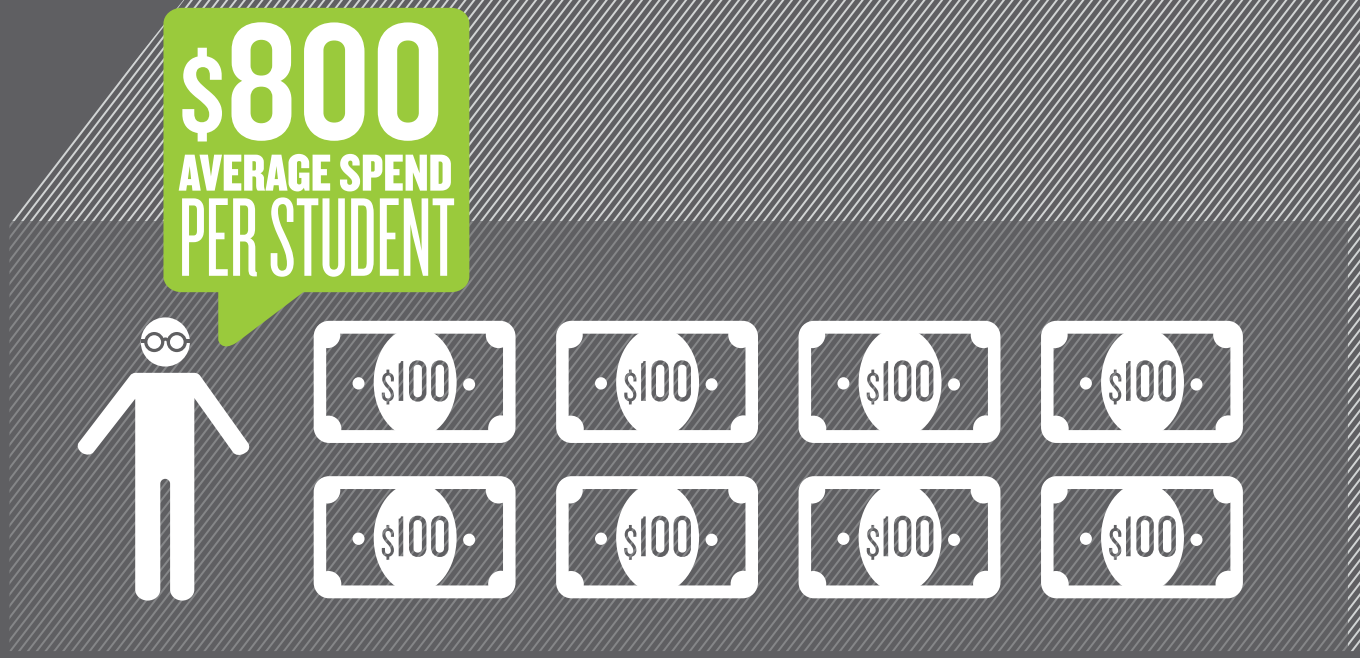
THE NEW COLLEGE ORIENTATION

How Social Media Has Revolutionized Back-to-School

MR YOUTH™

Back-To-School Basics

Each year hundreds of thousands of students graduate high school and begin the most formative chapter of their lives—college. They leave their comfort zones, their routines, and their communities for a world of the unknown. They've seen the movies and heard the stories, but, ultimately, they have no idea what to expect. For some, it represents freedom, the first time in their lives when they are in full control of their every decision. For others, it represents exploration, the time to develop their passions and experience everything the world has to offer. Of course, there's education, the time to nourish interests and develop new ones. Understanding the opportunity back-to-school offers—an average spend of $800/student for a combined total of $33.77 billion — brands design programs that attempt to engage students from their first moment on campus with the hopes of turning them into brand advocates and ultimately, loyal lifelong customers. Typically, the industry identifies August and September as the center of the back-to-school bullseye. Though this may be when most dollars are spent, it's the tail end of a 6-month journey that brands, for the most part, are completely missing.



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[1] http://www.nrf.com/modules.php?name=News&op=viewlive&spid=966

The New College Orientation

College orientation has been the same for decades. After being accepted to school, students receive a letter in the mail with orientation details about where and when they'll meet their future classmates. Traditionally, this was the first time students were able to meet one another, make new friends, and explore their campus. With the proliferation of social technologies, this tried and true ritual has evolved.

Growing up with social media, the Class of 2015 represents a new generation of students. With the world at their fingertips and a second-nature understanding of social, they have fundamentally changed the college orientation experience by effectively leveraging social tools to onboard themselves to college.

Within minutes of acceptance, today's students seek out, join, and co-create online communities—communities that represent the incoming class at their future school. This indicates a dramatic shift in the flow of information, taking the power away from the admissions office and putting it in the hands of socially empowered students who connect with future classmates and important information on-demand and online.

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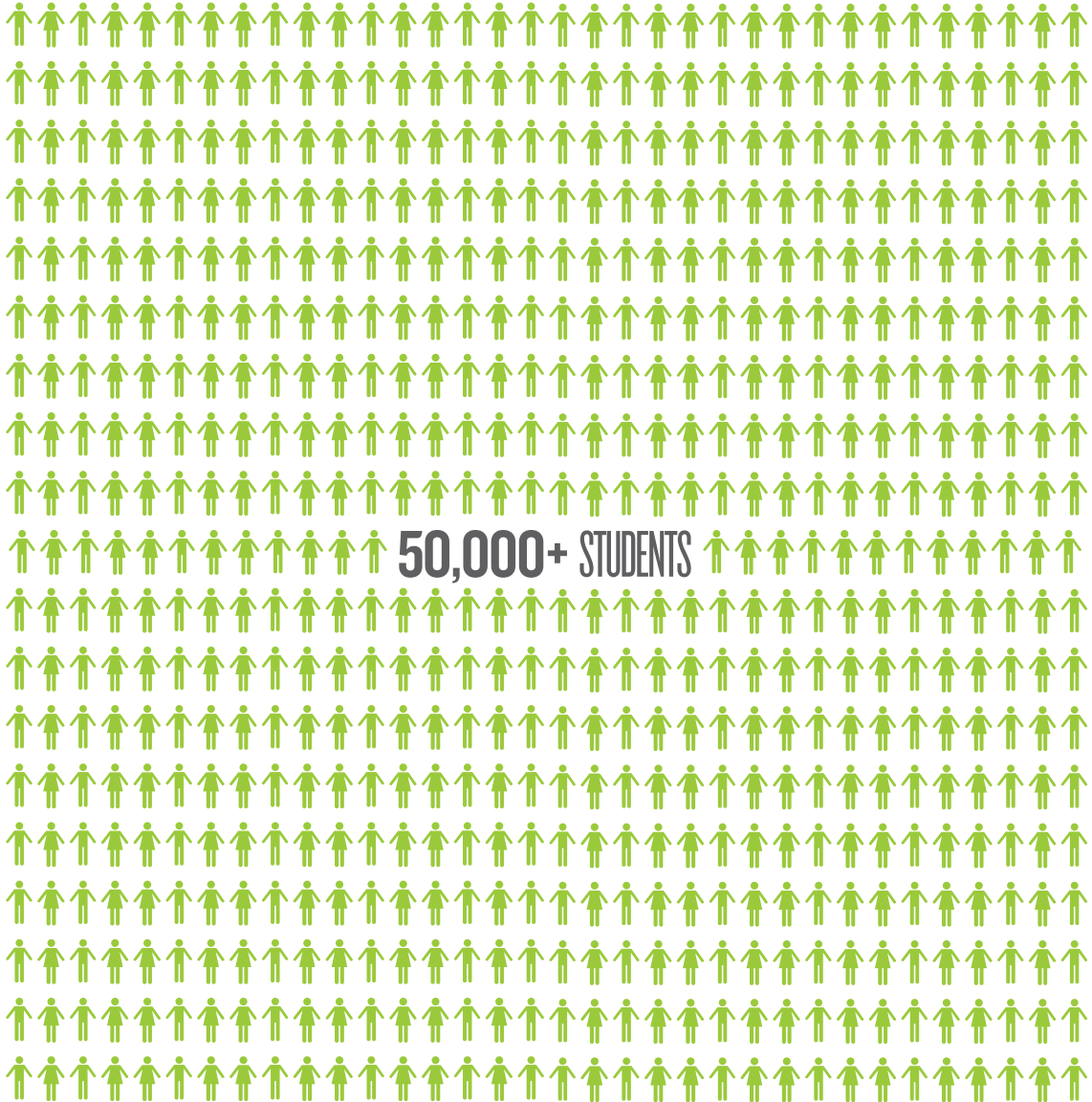
Students are no longer lone soldiers, forced through this journey in the dark with the helpful, yet antiquated support and understanding of their parents. They have naturally, organically, and instantly come together to transform the journey into a shared, global experience. Powered by students and enabled by social, this is the new college orientation.



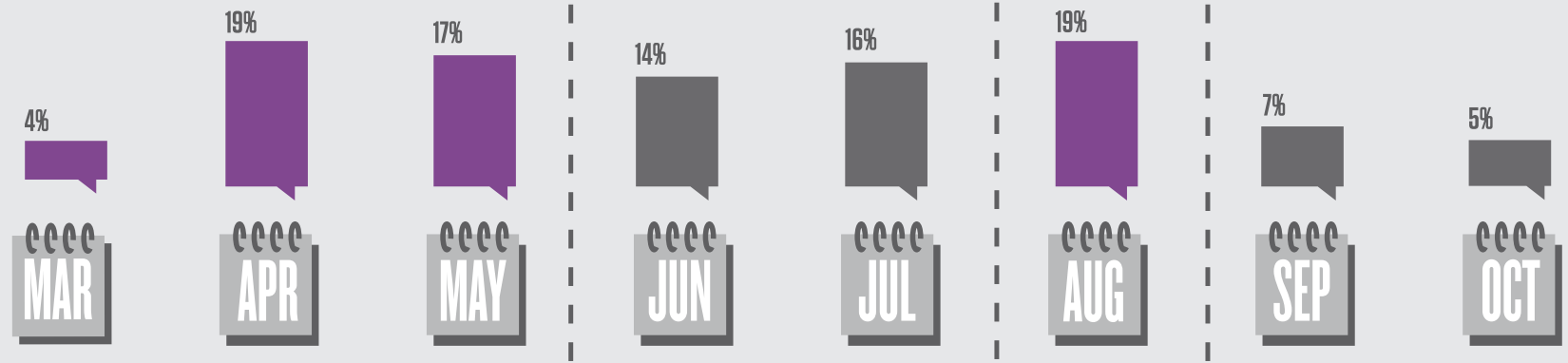
Methodology

By studying the activity, engagement, and conversation across 200 Class of 2015 Facebook communities made up of over 50,000 students who generated over 50,000 threads, we have decoded the back-to-school experience post-by-post. This analysis revealed an unprecedented understanding of the journey through the lens, lives, and keystrokes of the students themselves. The key to unlocking the power of Back-to-School lies in understanding where along this new journey your brand can add value to the student experience, solve a problem, and deliver against a need.

The Bigger Picture

Brands that design programs for late August and early September are missing the opportunity to participate in the larger conversation and connect with students at a time when they are in most need. Acceptance letters are sent out mid-March, marked by the formation of co-created school-specific online communities. Visualizing the overall online activity level across these communities enables us to understand when students are most engaged in back-to-school conversation. By engaging students throughout the 6-month journey, brands have the opportunity to build a deep emotional connection that could pay off at retail.

WHEN ARE THEY TALKING?



WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

The Journey

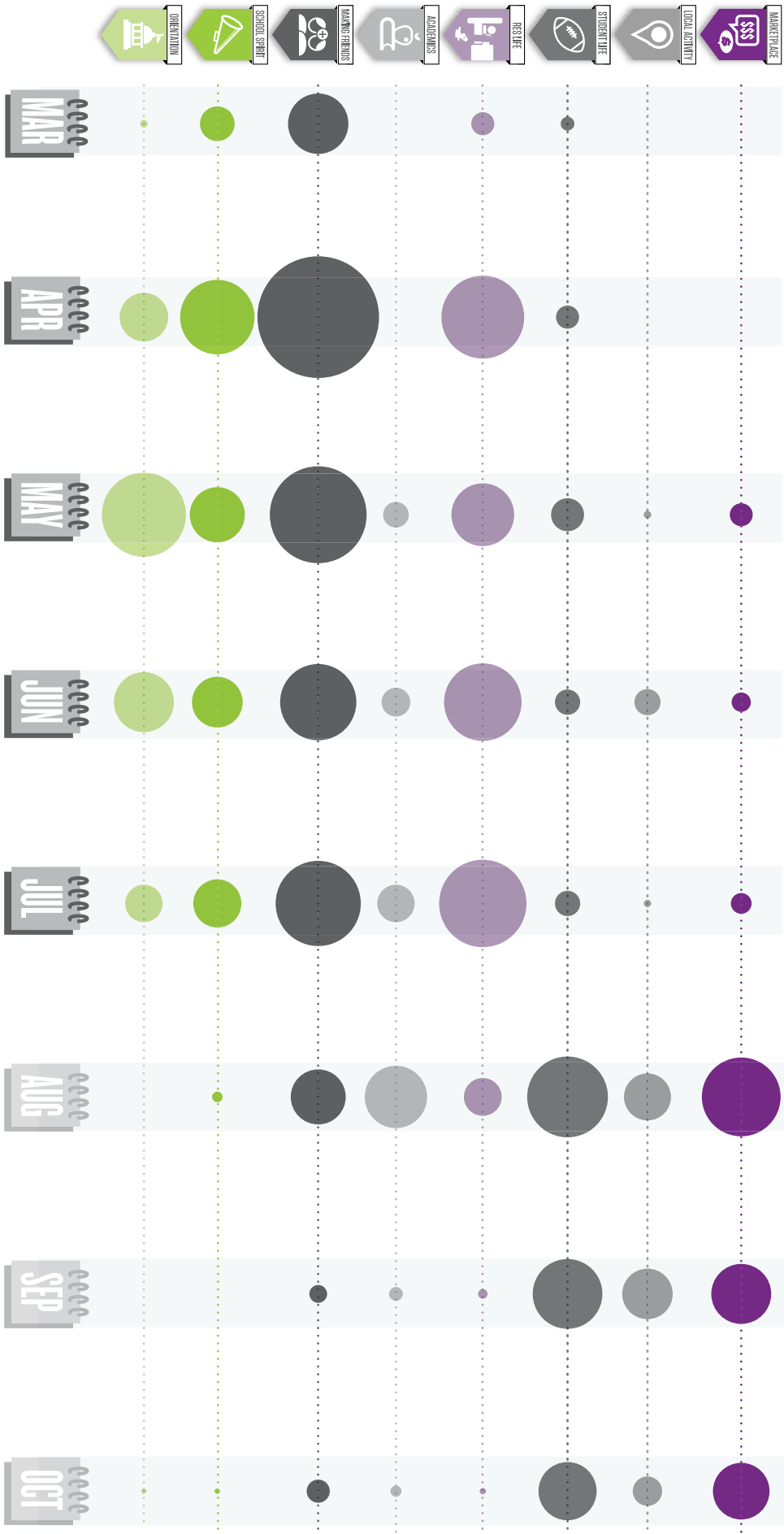
According to the actions as observed and noted within this study, after receiving their acceptance letters in **March**, students instantly seek out and join their class community. As strangers brought together by a common denominator, they celebrate their accomplishment and future together through proclamations of school spirit. Throughout **April** students connect with each other over shared interests, majors, and geographic location, building digital friendships across the globe months before arriving on campus.

News of their orientation group assignment arrives in **May** amid senior prom and high school graduation. They say goodbye to lifelong friends while simultaneously building digital friendships with future classmates. Through the month of **June**, students seek potential roommates and arm themselves with friends to combat the anxiety that comes from leaving the familiar behind for their new, college lives.

As room assignments and class schedules are released in **July**, students share where they'll be living and what classes they'll be taking to further connect with their classmates. With the school year approaching in **August**, students seek out information from their peers and upperclassmen about back-to-school basics. Orientation sessions close out the summer, bringing students together with the intention to do what, for the most part, has already been accomplished online—create friendship, familiarity, and comfort within the incoming class.

September marks the long awaited move-in and students head to campus, teary-eyed parents in tow. After unpacking and accessorizing their dorms, they see their families off with bittersweet goodbyes, full of nervous excitement for the first day of class.

STUDENTS POSTING TO SCHOOL FACEBOOK PAGES BY TOPIC (MARCH 2011-OCTOBER 2011)



The overall activity across the 6-month journey is made up of eight core themes: Making Friends, School Spirit, Orientation, Residential Life, Local Activity, Student Life, Academics, and Social Marketplace.

The Core Conversation

While it is important to identify when these online communities are most active, the power comes from understanding the root of the activity. With a wide range of topics being discussed, the volume and timing of the discussion varies from topic to topic. While every school is unique, each Class of 2015 community hosts the same core conversations, revealing a universal back-to-school journey. The overall activity across the 6-month journey is made up of eight core themes: Making Friends, School Spirit, Orientation, Residential Life, Local Activity, Student Life, Academics, and Social Marketplace. The chart below visualizes the activity levels throughout the 6-month period across each key category. By understanding the different discussions taking place and when these conversations are happening, brands can identify where they can add value and when to engage.

"Making Friends" conversations were most active in March, April and May, accounting for 40% of the overall conversation.

Making Friends

Making new friends is, by and large, the most formative part of the incoming college freshman's journey. For the first time in years these students are free to reinvent themselves, redefining who they are, what they stand for, and who they associate with.

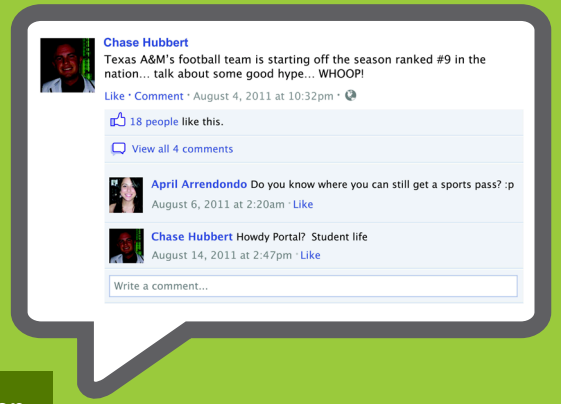
In years past, students were limited to meeting their future classmates at official orientation events shortly before the school year began. Now with the emergence of co-created online communities, students connect from the moment of acceptance to share the experience and build friendships months before they arrive on campus.

Shortly after joining their class community, students share where they're from, what they plan to study, and other personal interests in an effort to connect with like-minded classmates. Students write "Friend Me" or "Message Me" on the community wall, calling on their peers to add them as friends. Students even plan local offline gatherings to meet other fellow students from their area.

The high level of connection between incoming freshmen powerfully changes the back-to-school dynamic. Students now arrive on campus with a built-in network of "friends" and a level of comfort never before possible. Rather than a sea of unfamiliar faces, students spend their first days on campus connecting people with their digital personas.

School Spirit

On the heels of college acceptance, students are exploding with school spirit. This is a deep-rooted and meaningful school spirit, representing their sense of pride and accomplishment. College acceptance represents the culmination of everything they have worked for their entire lives. It represents their future, both short- and long-term. These students' sense of pride in their school is really their sense of pride in themselves.



"School Spirit" conversations most active in March, April, and May accounting for 12% of the overall conversation.

Orientation

After the initial flurry of socialized school spirit and new friendships, students eagerly await their first opportunity to connect offline at "Freshman Orientation." Though the emergence of co-created online class communities has taken much of the allure out of the official Orientation program, the excitement and anxiety around meeting new friends and future classmates in person for the first time endures. Orientation-related online chatter revolves around students socializing their Orientation program timeframe and connecting with other students who share the same dates.

"Orientation" conversations most active mid-April through mid-July, accounting for 14% of the overall conversation.

"Residential Life" conversations most active from April through July, accounting for 23% of the overall conversation.

Residential Life

Leaving home for the first time is an experience no student is fully prepared for. Moving out of their parents' house and into the dorms gives students the long-awaited freedom they've only dreamed of. For the first time, they are fully in charge of their every decision; how much they study, what time they go to sleep, and how they spend their money. At the same time, leaving the comfort of their friends, family, and life-long routine isn't easy.

Traditionally, schools do their best to assign compatible roommates based on a short survey. Who students would live with, a major variable in their overall quality of life, was determined by disconnected adults or an impersonal automated system. The Class of 2015 took the task of finding compatible roommates into their own hands, turning to their online community to socialize their search and screen potential candidates.

The next residential life milestone is the announcement of room assignments. Until this point, students may know who they are living with and when they move-in, but receiving their assigned room number in a specific dorm is the final piece of the puzzle. A rush of activity follows, where students socialize their dorm assignments to connect with students living in the surrounding rooms, on their floor, and in their building.

With the knowledge of where they will be living and with whom they'll be living with, students begin to search for dorm room specifics. They socialize any and all questions, from the exact size of their beds to how they should accessorize their room. Rather than relying on the school's official packing list, students turn to their peers to find out how to best prepare and what they really need.

"Student Life" conversations most active in August and September, accounting for 19% of the overall conversation.

Student Life

A student's college experience is made up of many factors, most of which take place outside the classroom. Schools pride themselves on offering a wide variety of student organizations, active Greek life, and competitive athletic programs. While the glossy brochure presents a school's offerings in the best light, students want the real deal on student life and leverage these communities to get the inside scoop from their peers. Most interesting about the student-life dialogue taking place within these communities is the presence of upperclassmen participating in the conversation. Older students who understand the socially infused journey join these pages to answer questions about student life and recruit incoming freshmen into their organizations.

Academics

The freshman year academic experience is made up of required courses and lecture-hall learning, different than the high school format these students are used to. For the most part, this is the first time they have been able to design their own schedule, choosing when they want to be in class and what courses they'd like to take. With little familiarity with the professors and their new academic system, students make these choices with the help and guidance of their peers, turning to their online community for advice on professors, class combinations, and related workloads. Upon completing their schedule, students socialize their chosen classes as a way to build new connections. In a fascinating use of the Facebook platform, they share screenshots of their schedule for all to see, calling on classmates to add them as friends. This allows them to collaborate on summer assignments, discuss homework due the first day of class, and establish a sense of camaraderie before stepping inside the classroom.

"Academics" conversations most active in July and August, accounting for 7% of the overall conversation.

"Local Activity" conversations most active August and September, accounting for 6% of the overall conversation.

Local Activity

Local businesses and area nightlife promoters have caught on to the existence of these communities and have proactively used them as a marketing platform to speak at incoming students. More often than not, these unwelcome outsiders post marketing messages on the community wall, asking students to attend their events or purchase their products. Without adding value to the student experience or solving a need along this journey, these messages go unread as social savvy students glance over what they see as spam. Worst yet, these marketers run the risk of turning students off from their brand before they arrive on campus as a result of ill-executed outreach.

Social Marketplace

While students leverage these communities to connect with each other and share important information, they also recognize the market opportunity of several hundred students with similar needs and interests. Upperclassmen leverage these communities to sell used textbooks to the incoming class at a discount, rather than selling their books back to the college bookstore for a small fraction of what they initially spent. Freshmen resell sports tickets to games they can't attend to ticketless fans. Students sell each other furniture and dorm-room supplies they no longer need. Rather than turning to Craigslist or eBay, students keep the marketplace within their campus community.

"Social Marketplace" conversations most active from mid-July through mid-Sept, accounting for 15% of overall the conversation.

FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

So what does this mean to the brand marketer? Our research informed five key takeaways for your brand to consider when designing back-to-school initiatives:

UNDERSTAND WHAT THIS JOURNEY REPRESENTS

Beyond the specific student needs and corresponding conversations within the journey, realize what this experience means for the incoming college student on the deepest level. After living under the authority of their parents for 18 years, they are finally in the driver's seat of their every decision, their lifestyle, and their future. These students are making cross-category purchasing decisions for the first time, forming buying patterns and brand loyalties they will take with them throughout life. Furthermore, when transitioning to college these students experience the rare opportunity to re-define who they are. This new chapter offers a unique ability to recreate themselves, reshaping the identity and reputation they've developed over the past 18 years. They use the 6-month journey to architect the person they want to become the moment they arrive on campus. This is done through strategically selecting the people they connect with, the organizations they associate with, and the brands they identify with. Playing a key role in the journey will keep your brand top-of-mind as students create their new identities.

DELIVER ON CORE NEED-STATES

At the highest level, all activity across the 6-month journey reflects three core need-states of inbound college freshmen. Design programs that enhance, streamline, or deliver on these need-states to secure your spot in the heart of the college experience.

Celebration

College acceptance represents the culmination of everything these students have achieved in and out of the classroom for the past 18 years. When students celebrate their acceptance and school spirit, they are ultimately celebrating themselves and the countless hours of hard work, extracurricular activities, standardized testing, and college applications that got them to where they are. Their feeling of accomplishment is overwhelming. This celebration offers them a sense of release from the stress and pressure they have been putting on themselves, and allows them to reward themselves for the success of their hard work.

Connection and Connectivity

Leaving their family, friends, and everything familiar behind is likely the boldest move any of these students has ever faced. The deep need to connect fills the entire journey. By establishing these connections before school starts, students are able to piece together the unknown, one friend at a time.

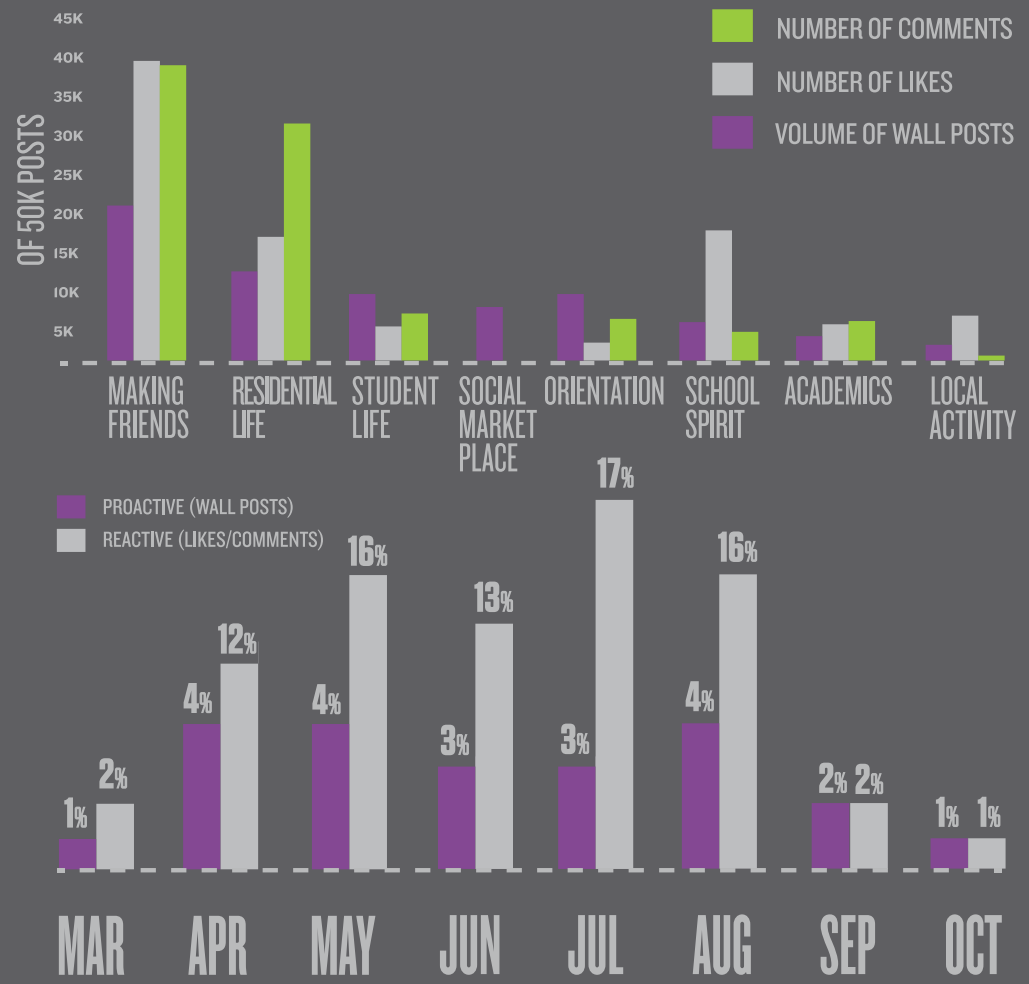
Exploration

After being accepted to college, students enthusiastically explore everything about their new world; from what classes to take and what items to buy for their dorm to what organizations to join and where to hang out around campus. As schools proactively develop ever-broader academic and social offerings, students spend the summer exploring everything their college life will bring.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Don’t think of Back-to-School as just August and September. Recognize that the journey begins with college acceptance and runs through the first days on campus. The conversation and underlying student need-states shift throughout the journey, reflecting a variety of offline events and key back-to-school milestones. Building programs that deliver on core needs is only powerful when executed at the precise time the corresponding conversation is taking place. Providing a tool for students to find the perfect roommate in August is destined to fail because it doesn’t take into account that roommate seeking takes place May through July. Design a program that solves a student need during its respective timeframe within the journey. This provides the relevance and value add needed to achieve traction and virality across the incoming class.

HARNESS
ORGANIC ENGAGEMENT



Each core conversation throughout the journey generates different levels and types of engagement. When students celebrate their school spirit, they'll receive a high volume of "likes" on their post. When students announce their dorm rooms, classmates continue the conversation by "commenting" with their room assignments to the thread. Understand the type of engagement each conversation generates and which topics garner the highest levels of engagement. Then design programs that harness this activity to power and propel your experience with excited students, eager to engage.

EMPOWER THEIR
SOCIAL NATURE

These students are social media machines. Of the Class of 2015, 50% have over 300 friends on Facebook, 43% have “liked” more than 23 brands, 40% visit Facebook more than 10 times/day, 67% access social sites from their smart phone, 75% upload photos via mobile devices, and 58% use Twitter “all the time.”[2] If you streamline their journey, they’ll socialize the experience to help their friends and get “cool cred” (read: social currency) for being in the know. Don’t just solve their need, bake in social through every step of the process. If your tool helps students design their dorm room, offer the ability to share their “dream dorm” across social to collaborate with roommates and get friends input on selected products. As their peers engage with this content through their feeds, they’ll experience your platform firsthand and ultimately create, curate, and share a room of their own.

[2]http://meet2015.com/Content/Pdf/MrYouth_ClassOf2015.pdf

About Mr Youth

Mr Youth works with many of the world's leading brands to connect them with today's digitally savvy consumers. We are a social media agency at our core, developing platforms and campaigns across an integrated mix of word of mouth, social interactive and experiential channels, with a strong focus on building consumer advocacy. With our headquarters in New York, our global footprint includes offices in London, San Francisco & Toronto. Mr Youth is a subsidiary of LBi International.

Contact Us

We love hearing from our fans and followers. Shoot us a tweet, Like us on Facebook, Circle us on Google+, or send us an email below and we will respond in a timely fashion. Please submit all press inquiries and/or questions about our study directly to David Yarus at DavidY@mryouth.com.

Please submit any new business inquiries or requests for a full presentation to our Vice President of Marketing, Christian Borges at ChristianB@mryouth.com.