

Marketing to the youth in South Africa: Changing the rules of engagement

 By [Mike dos Santos](#)

14 Sep 2015

In terms of segment size and buying power, the "youth market" are of great significance to marketers, with roughly half of South Africa's population being under the age of 24 and the most recent annual spend for consumers aged 8-23 being estimated at around R111bn...

Against this backdrop, it is therefore hardly surprising that many brands today are affording serious consideration to the importance of understanding and connecting with this highly lucrative consumer segment.

Demographically speaking, the latest Sunday Times "Generation Next" Survey identifies the country's youth as all individuals between the ages of 8 and 23 years, which it further splits into "Kids" (8-13), "Teens" (14-18) and "Young Adults" (19-23). Psychographically, however, it is important to remember that "youth" is not defined solely by age but by mindset, values and lifestyle factors; and even within age sub-segments, the young people of South Africa make up a highly heterogeneous collective of "tribes" and sub-cultures.



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Despite not being a monolithic group, it should be noted that there are several common themes and qualities that extend across the various demographic and psychographic dimensions. This article seeks to shed light on these shared characteristics, by examining the main trends shaping South African youth culture today.

These are the five of the most important macro trends in this regard.

Macro trend #1: The "Sharing Generation"

Today's youth define themselves not only by what they own or what they do, but also by their ability to connect and to share with peers and others around them. In a recent study by a leading global marketing services firm, young people all over the world were given 16 human motivations and asked to rate a series of value statements, in order to ascertain the individual importance of each motivation. "Commune" (i.e. the need for connection, relationships and community) was rated the most fundamental motivation. In this regard, technology may be thought of as a true enabler for "millennials" - the first generation of true digital natives, who have never known life without the Internet and cell phones.

As proof of the vital role of connection and experiential appeal to these individuals, this generation has also been referred to as "The Sharing Generation". In part, this term is attributed to the fact that today's youth are increasingly plugged into the world around them and have opinions and ideas that they wish to share. And from a marketing perspective, the brands that have been most successful in capturing their attention and imagination are those which have leveraged and facilitated not only the sharing of experiences, but the sharing of young consumers' voices and inputs as well.

FNB's controversial "You Can Help" campaign, which assisted in providing a "social microphone" to the country's youth, is a great example of this trend in action. Another example relates to the "photomania" phenomenon which is prevalent amongst the youth. We are seeing more and more brands tapping into this trend in their marketing activities and properties, for instance National Geographic Kids with its "Young Photographers Competition", which provides young South Africans aged 6-14 with a platform to showcase and share their world visually through the eye of a camera lens. The key success factor in both of these cases is the power of connection - driving brand and peer engagement simultaneously.

Macro trend #2: The influence of "participatory culture"

Linked to the previous trend of the "Sharing Generation", it is important to consider the pivotal role of participation within youth culture. In essence, today's youth want (and very often expect) brands to facilitate their experiences, rather than impose monologues on them. As such, savvy marketers are becoming increasingly cognisant of the fact that conventional marketing approaches simply do not work when the goal is to reach this new breed of consumer. Coupled with an evolution from consumer to "prosumer" (i.e. producer + consumer), today's youth want to feel as though they "own" their favourite brands, which calls for active and dynamic engagement over traditional advertising.

A manifestation of participatory culture is the phenomenon known as "fungineering", an umbrella term used to describe the creative transformation of everyday spaces and/or objects into experiential playgrounds, designed to foster unexpected, chance encounters between brands and consumers. A recent best practice example of this was a series of mall activations run by National Geographic and Qualcomm around South Africa, which served as an experiential showcase of augmented reality applications using Qualcomm's "Vuforia" software. As part of these activations, young participants were given the opportunity to interact with (and be part of) various real-time on-screen animations demonstrating weather systems, walking on the moon and a variety of African wildlife.

Macro trend #3: The youth as "truth hunters"

There is of course a backlash to the previous macro trend in that young consumers are growing progressively distrustful and cynical of marketers' attempts to capture their attention - and their wallets! In recent years, we have witnessed a rush amongst brands to connect with (and "befriend") the youth. However, young people today are growing up in an age of "infobesity", with a multitude of brands, messages and touchpoints competing for their attention and loyalty. As such, there is a danger of brands feeling like "fake friends" to these consumers. And simply engaging them, in itself, is no longer enough.

In order to achieve a more authentic role in these consumers' lives, it is thus important for brands to understand what young people value in their real friends. When considering the core values that they seek out in a best friend, for instance - over and above the envisaged values, such as sociability, helpfulness and generosity - it is worthwhile noting that the most

important values to the youth are "truthfulness" and "genuineness". From a marketing perspective, FNB once again serves as a best practice case study in this regard. Voted the "coolest bank" in the past few editions of the Sunday Times "Generation Next" Survey, the brand is seen by the youth as accessible and truthful in its consumer promise. Furthermore, FNB's real and meaningful engagement with the youth - their world and their "truth" - has helped to set the bank apart in the minds of young consumers.

Macro trend #4: A need to succeed

Although often stereotyped as being lazy, spoiled and entitled, research indicates that the youth of South Africa are actually filled with big ambitions and fuelled by the promise of realising their potential in life. As part of this, young South Africans are clearly recognising the importance of education as a vehicle for reaching their goals.

More and more companies and brands are leveraging this by investing in the education sector, with resounding success in capturing the hearts and minds of the youth. The ongoing Pick n Pay School Club is a prime example of this. Initiated as a means of enriching the teaching experience for children across the country, the interactive programme encourages lateral and creative thinking using teachers' and learners' support packs and "edutainment", geared towards making the learning experience fun. The initiative has met with resounding success over the years and currently has the distinction of being South Africa's largest independent education platform.

Macro trend #5: "KABAY" - kids are becoming aware younger

For several years now, the acronym "KAGOY"(i.e. kids are getting older younger) has been a buzzword within marketing and advertising circles. In recent years, we could consider another perspective on this concept, which postulates that kids are also becoming aware at an increasingly younger age. In particular, we are witnessing a growing sense of social awareness and health awareness amongst today's youth.

In conclusion, the following quote by Jason Levin (Managing Director of HDI Youth Marketeers) perhaps sums this up best: "Marketing to youth is more about marketing with them - it's a dialogue..."

ABOUT MIKE DOS SANTOS

Michael graduated with B.A. Honours in Marketing Communication (cum laude) and started his career as a marketing and research assistant before moving into Strategic Planning at Grey Johannesburg. With a keen attention to detail and experience across the marketing communication spectrum, Michael continues to be inspired by the dynamic world of brands and branding. Mike now works as a Strategic Director at Shift Joe Public.

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