

Back to school

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SXSW newbie Sam Geer talks how and why his experience in Austin this year felt so strangely familiar. By Sam Geer, Associate Director of Strategy, MediaCom USA

I'm 26 years old, and I am proud to say that I now have relatively substantial facial hair coverage, recently purchased an ironing board and just last weekend managed to assemble a set of IKEA drawers unsupervised. At this stage in my life, I could legitimately be mistaken for a grown-up.

But no matter how many kitchen appliances I buy, it seems some situations can still so easily take me back to feeling like an awkward, metal-mouthed, pimply teenager again.

My recent trip to SXSW is the perfect example of this, where I consistently felt as though I had been teleported back to my early high school days... although things were not exactly as I had remembered them.

Imagine, if you will, "SXSW High", a school in a parallel universe where the cool kids, instead of playing basketball and football, play with robots and data. In some kind of vindictory role reversal, the jocks are replaced with geeks who rule the school with even more authority and popularity than their counterparts ever did.

Upon arrival on your first day of school, you are immediately faced with an ocean of new and unfamiliar faces. Nerves run as you try to pluck up the courage to talk to someone, hoping desperately to fit in and that no one will notice it's your first time here.

You take your seats and are lectured to for hours, just like a normal school. But in this classroom everything is backwards: the popular kids sit at the front and are actually respected for asking questions and actively participating. People still pass notes around, of course, but now they do it electronically.

Having the latest and greatest new trend is still the most valued form of social currency at this school, but sneakers and hairstyles have been replaced by startups and technology. I find myself overwhelmingly envious of an uber-geek as he speeds past me on a motorised skateboard.

If we indulge this analogy even further, we see that scoring an invite to the most popular kids' party, in this case played by the role of brands, also remains a constant. But instead of the cute girl ignoring you...well actually no, even in a parallel universe the cute girl still ignores you. Damn.

At my high school parties, everyone would buddy up with whoever snuck in alcohol in the hopes of scoring some. But in this Shelbyville-like alternate realm, the commodity seems to be battery power-anyone clever enough to bring a charger finds themselves with a number of new BFFs.

Upon closer inspection, the similarities are truly endless: constantly lining up for buses, agonising over which subjects to choose, having insecurities about your comparative level of ability...the list goes on.

And while I have drawn some rather pessimistic parallels, it's actually the positive comparisons that ring the truest. Yes, it can be challenging at times, but it's what you learn, the people you meet, and the experiences you have that far outweigh any of the negative. It was five days of comprehensive education, entertainment and inspiration that created memories I'll have for years to come.

But unlike real high school, I can't wait to go back.