

FMCG

Small Comforts,
Big Decisions:
How Snacks, Drinks and
Sweets Shape Student Life

An Eighteen24 White Paper · April 2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A preview of what UK students are buying, why it matters, and how brands earn the basket.

The full paper sets out the scale of the FMCG opportunity on campus, the cultural forces shaping Gen Z choice, and the role of the Students' Union in turning everyday purchases into long-term brand loyalty. This summary gives you the headlines.

FOR THE FULL PAPER

Email

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INSIDE THIS SUMMARY

- Section guide
- Six headline insights
- How to access the full paper

A complete guide to FMCG and the UK student audience.

The full paper runs to 30 pages of category data, Gen Z behavioural insight, brand case studies and media planning implications, drawn from 50+ industry sources including IMARC, Mintel, Mondelez, YouGov, Carlsberg Britvic, Tesco Clubcard data and NIQ.

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| 01 The Market Opportunity: scale, growth and category breakdown | 02 Visible at the Moment of Choice: the science behind impulse |
| 03 Students Drive Demand: spend, frequency and Freshers | 04 The Snacking Generation: how Gen Z eats now |
| 05 Small Treats, Big Returns: little-treat culture decoded | 06 Nostalgia. The Flavour That Never Fades |
| 07 Heritage Brands Lean In: Müller, WKD, Rowntree's | 08 Sweet, Bold and Functional: aesthetics, spice and provenance |
| 09 Functional with Feeling: HFSS, fibre and clean labels | 10 Brand spotlights: TRIP, trü frü, Itsu, Propercorn |
| 11 Viral Trends Drive Real Sales: Dubai chocolate & more | 12 Inside the Campus Shop: a real-world ranging case study |
| 13 Moments that Matter: when students reach for comfort | 14 The Long Term Value: why student years compound |
| 15 The Heart of Campus: the Students' Union | 16 Seen, Not Skipped: the case for in-person attention |
| 17 The Contextual Power of DOOH | 18 Why E24 Delivers Standout for FMCG Brands |

This summary covers six headline insights. The full paper goes further with brand case studies, viral trend analysis, contextual planning frameworks and the activation playbook for reaching 70% of UK students.

What the data tells us.

INSIGHT 01 • THE MARKET OPPORTUNITY

A £200bn+ market still in growth

The UK FMCG market is valued at over £200 billion and continues to expand, with food and beverage accounting for the largest segment of total UK manufacturing output. The categories most relevant to student life: snacks, confectionery and soft drinks, are all performing strongly. The full paper breaks down the size of each sub-category and what's driving growth.

£201bn

UK FMCG market value in 2024, with 5.04% CAGR forecast to 2033

Source: IMARC Group, UK FMCG Market Size and Share Analysis Report 2025-2033

INSIGHT 02 • THE SNACKING GENERATION

Snacking is no longer a habit. It's a behaviour pattern.

Research consistently shows Gen Z snacks more frequently, across more occasions, and with more intention than any generation before them. Six in ten prefer smaller treats over traditional meals. The full paper maps the moments that matter across the student day, from commute energy to late-night fuel.

78%

of global Gen Z say they are snacking more than they did a year ago

Source: Mondelez International, 2024 State of Snacking Report

INSIGHT 03 • SMALL TREATS, BIG RETURNS

A small, well-chosen snack is a deliberate act of self-care.

For Gen Z navigating cost-of-living pressure, exam stress and the social demands of early adulthood, the emotional return on an everyday treat is considerable. Snacking has become both stress management and social currency. The full paper explores how brands can earn affinity in those moments.

59%

of Gen Z plan to spend on treats in coming months — vs 35% of Gen X and 20% of Boomers

Source: McKinsey & Company (cited in Mass Market Retailers, 2025)

From culture to conversion.

INSIGHT 04 • NOSTALGIA. THE FLAVOUR THAT NEVER FADES

For Gen Z, nostalgia is inherited as much as remembered.

Cultural touchpoints from the 80s, 90s and early 2000s are discovered through TikTok clips and Pinterest mood boards. The appetite for looking back is growing. Food and drink brands are leaning in. The full paper explores 'newstalgia' and shows how heritage names are recruiting a new generation.

50%

of Gen Z feel nostalgic for media from previous decades because it reminds them of simpler times

Source: GWI, How are Gen Z and millennials driving nostalgia?

INSIGHT 05 • VIRAL TRENDS DRIVE REAL SALES

Social-first products move from feed to basket faster than ever.

From Dubai chocolate to the M&S strawberries-and-crème sandwich, the speed at which social trends convert to spend is accelerating. The full paper unpacks the case studies and what they tell us about the mindset behind successful Gen Z product launches.

90 mins

Time it took Lidl to sell out of 6,000 bars of Dubai Chocolate on TikTok Shop at £3.99

Source: The Grocer, Review of the Year 2025

INSIGHT 06 • THE HEART OF CAMPUS

The Students' Union is where habits form, in public.

Students' Unions are high-dwell, high-frequency environments where different need states and routines overlap throughout the day. They're where students eat, study, socialise and unwind. The full paper sets out why this matters for FMCG brands operating in HFSS-restricted media environments.

70%

of students spend more than 40 minutes a day in their Students' Union

Source: NUS Research

GET THE FULL PAPER

Ready for the full picture?

We share the full white paper directly with brands, agencies and media planners working in this category. It's a short conversation and we'll send the complete 30-page report straight back to you.

Email us for the full paper.

Tell us a bit about your brand or planning brief and we'll send the complete FMCG white paper, plus answer any questions you have about reaching the UK student audience.

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Already chatting with someone at Eighteen24? Reply to their last email and ask for the full FMCG paper.

Curated Research

Sourced from 50+ industry references including Mintel, Mondelez, NIQ, Tesco Clubcard data and Carlsberg Britvic.

Built for planners

Frameworks, case studies and category context structured for use in briefs, presentations and recommendations.

HFSS-aware

Reflects the post-January 2026 advertising landscape and the channels that still deliver compliant reach with Gen Z.

The UK's largest student DOOH network

Over 400 premium full-motion D6 screens placed inside Students' Unions across 130 campuses and 90+ universities, including 21 of the top 25. Positioned in cafes, study areas, gyms, social spaces and walkways where dwell time is highest.

400+

SCREENS

90+

UNIVERSITIES

2M

STUDENTS
REACHED
WEEKLY

116M

IMPRESSIONS
PER FORTNIGHT

Our formula for effective Gen Z engagement

Be where they
are

Be where they
care

Be where they
share

Be where they
see you

**Don't miss the moment to earn a
place in the basket.**

Habit formation, emotional connection and physical proximity converge during the student years in a way they never will again. The brand chosen on campus today could be the one chosen in every supermarket for the next twenty years.

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