

What's *Really* Happening in Back-to-School Spending



Back-to-school shopping typically includes #2 pencils, wide-ruled paper, a water bottle with a waiting list, and parents with noble intentions to stick to the plan. But the receipts tell a wildly different story: secondhand clothing, meal replacement shakes, and... tattoo aftercare? The back-to-school shopping cart has officially gone rogue.

Here's how America *really* spends before the first bell.

#1. Parents are drinking their back-to-school season meals

Back-to-school is a fresh start. New sneakers, notebooks, a backpack that won't survive October — and one coping mechanism that definitely isn't going in the lunchbox.



Meal replacement beverage units % increase during Back to School season

+8%



Period-over-period % change, units, Category 2: Meal Replacement Beverages

Solid foods didn't make the supply list.

Maybe it's efficiency. Maybe adulthood finally broke them. Either way, **parents are slurping meal replacement drinks** like the lunch they packed their kid was the last real food in the house.

#2. The back-to-school cart is a battlefield between kale and cheese curls

Back-to-school is prime season for the household nutritional reset — more fruit, less processed everything, and a conscience as clean as green juice.

Rate of co-purchase with Fruit & Vegetable Snacks

COOKIES

+13%



CHEESE CURLS & PUFFS

+11%



CHOCOLATE CANDY

+6%



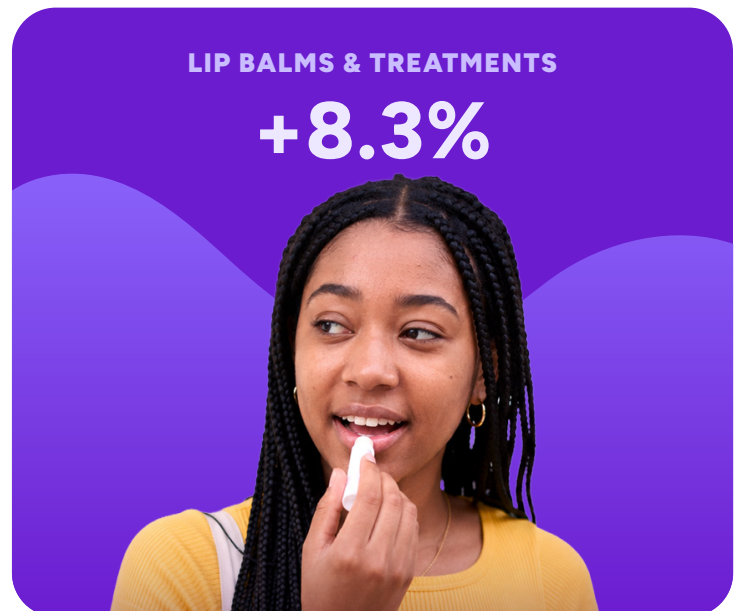
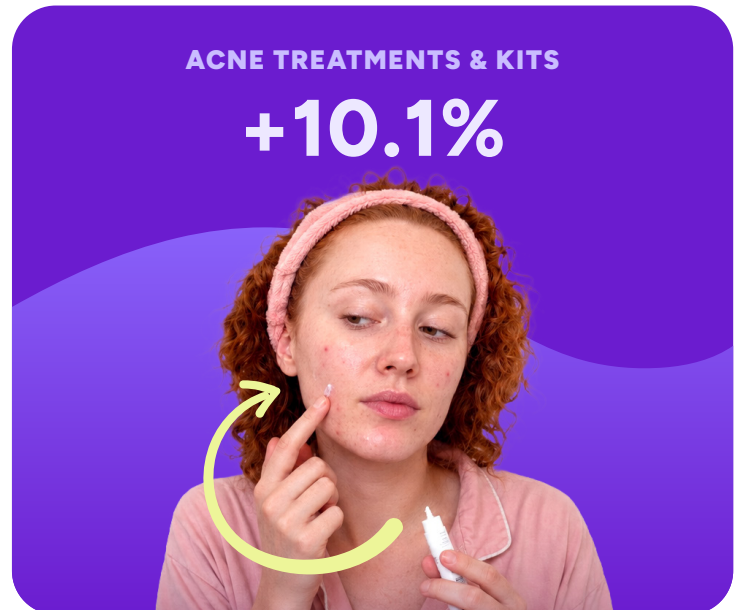
% change during back to school season

Healthy snacks and junk food are officially in a situationship.

Co-purchasing of **healthy and indulgent snacks** is climbing. It turns out clean eating and emotional eating aren't mutually exclusive.

#3. College move-in checklists now include tattoo aftercare

Every fall, someone decides this is the year they become a completely different person. But “new school year, new me” comes with a commitment clause.



Period-over-period % change, units

2 This fall, at least one person’s fresh start is covered with plastic wrap

Tattoo aftercare products see a surprising spike during back-to-school season. Apparently, that “new you” is flaking slightly and was told to avoid direct sunlight.

#4. The back-to-school budget went to Goodwill. Literally.

Back-to-school usually means a trip to the big-box retailer to shop new arrivals that look suspiciously like last year's. For this generation of schoolkids, a \$5 bill and a good eye beat all of it.

**Secondhand retail
receipt volume**

+4%



**Traditional retail
receipt volume**

-8%

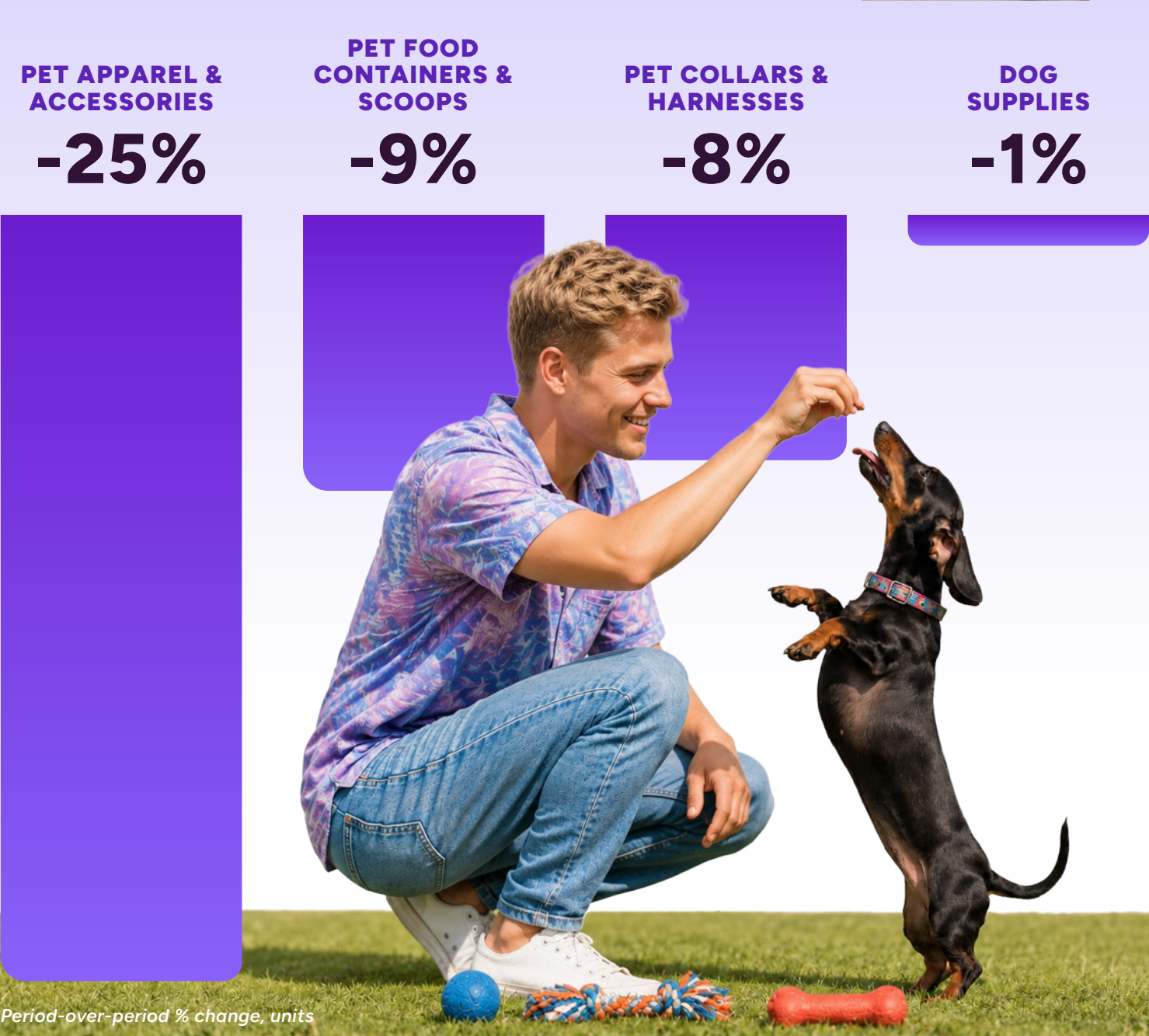
YoY % change, receipts, BTS period 2024 → 2025

🕒 The coolest kid in class is wearing a stranger's gym clothes.

Today's students are skipping traditional retail in favor of **secondhand stores**. Who needs that new seasonal line when there's a bin with vintage LL Bean cable-knit sweaters in every size.

#5. This September, the family dog is getting demoted

Between extra walks, treats, and playdates, summer is peak season for pet pampering. September has a way of reshuffling the priority list.



Period-over-period % change, units

"Part of the family" was a seasonal position.

The long walks on the beach, the midday baths, the monogrammed bowls — all casualties of a family that now has **school drop-off at 7:02 a.m.**



About Fetch Finds

Fetch Finds is a consumer insights series from Fetch, America's Rewards App.

Our insights are powered by billions of verified receipts — real transactions, not projections or approximations. This report draws from a static panel of Fetch users, capturing verified purchase behavior across back-to-school shopping categories from July through September 2023, 2024, and 2025.