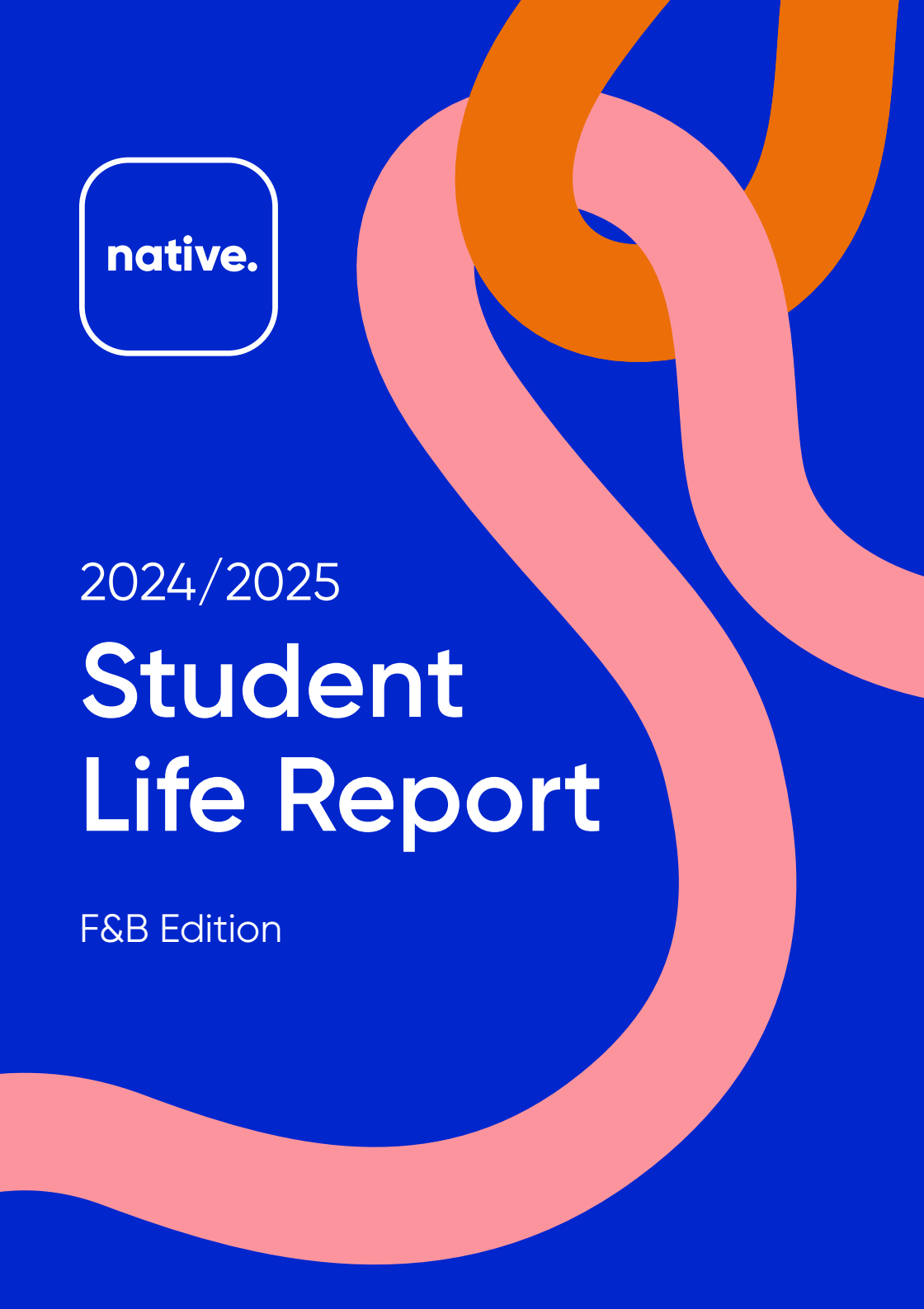




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2024/2025

Student Life Report

F&B Edition

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Foreword

Can you believe it's been a whole year since we published our last insights report? A lot has changed since then.

One cohort has graduated – joining the millions of young people across the world who are challenging workplace norms from the junior ranks. Another has arrived, bringing with them new trends and new ideas. Uni is less of a destination, more an emotional road trip. We can't wait to see which pit stops the class of 2027 will make.

This is not the same picture we were looking at in the height of the COVID pandemic. Many students we spoke to had no sense of digitised lectures, virtual Freshers Fairs, or quarantined halls. The students on campus today are forging their own culture. You'll see how important food has become to this cohort – more so, even, than nightlife and club culture. Gen Z, aren't as rooted in the digital world as we've come to believe.

We'll also share how students are browsing, spending, and building brand loyalties. From ad avoidance to Gen Z's penchant for multitasking, the latest evolution of shopping habits are fascinating.

Students are certainly not a monolith – in fact, they're quite the opposite. At university, they're figuring out what makes them unique. This is a glimpse into life on campus – in all its messy, contradictory glory. I hope that you find it useful in forging connections with the next generation.

The native insights team.

Methodology

The survey

native surveyed a sample of our student audience in 2024. There were 603 participants in total.

68%

of these were Gen Z students (aged 16-27), 21% were Millennials (aged 28-40) and 11% were 40+.

65%

of our participants identified as female, 32% identified as male and 3% identified as non-binary.

The student contributors

To bolster the quantitative data, we went on to interview 10 Gen Z students who completed the survey.



Keshavi, 26,
University of Strathclyde



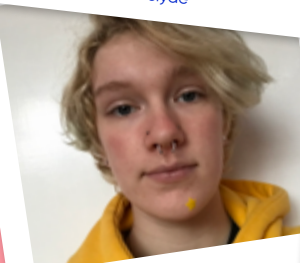
George, 19,
University of East Anglia



Ashikita, 20,
Sheffield Hallam University



Isabella, 20,
University of Sussex



Toby, 19,
University of Hull



Mari-Jeanne, 24,
Swansea University



Leo, 23,
Bath Spa University

+ 3 more

What's changed in a year?

More students have moved out of the family home

Back in 2023/24, 1 in 3 students were living with parents or caregivers – often in the same bedroom they'd grown up in. Commuter students were – and are – an oft-overlooked demographic. Not fully immersed in university culture, they often miss out on late-night activities, and can take longer to bond with their peers.

This academic year, the number of students opting to live with parents and caregivers has dipped significantly by 48%. Covid and financial restrictions meant that many students weren't living at home by choice. The increase in students moving out of their family homes is a positive one – it implies they are shedding their fears, finding financial security and embracing independent life.

Students who do live in close proximity to university have clearly felt the social benefits. Isabella, 20 –

a politics student at the University of Sussex – lives in a houseshare with friends. "I sit downstairs, I crochet with my friends – we drink a bottle of wine and watch a reality TV show. It's really giving middle-aged friendship group that are about to go for bottomless brunch. We're just so chill and I love it."

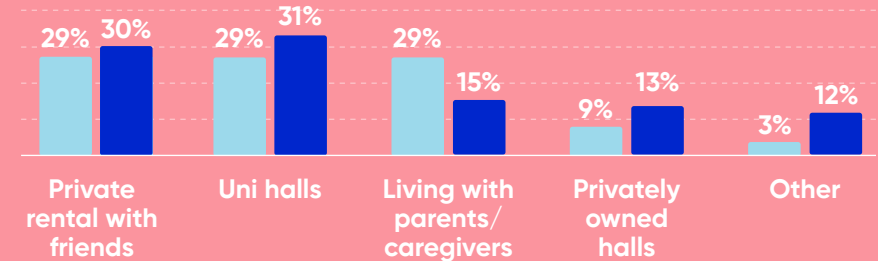
Students are spending more time on campus

It's not just that students are moving closer to their campuses – they're also spending more time there during the week. The average time spent on campus per week has increased by 2.7 hours. That's the equivalent of nearly three lectures – or one evening of dinner and drinks!

Students aged 34-40 are on campus the longest – averaging 24.3 hours per week. But Gen Z students are also spending more time in their university spaces than they were 12 months ago; their average comes in at 18.4

Students' living situation

23/24 24/25



hours per week. We'll get into the activities and cultural conditions that have shaped this increase in the wider report.

Students are more motivated by ethics – and convenience

When we last asked students about what motivated them to buy from brands, it was the height of the cost-of-living crisis. A year on, this crisis has solidified into a perpetual state of high cost-of-living. Many students' priorities reflect this: affordability remains the top concern for student shoppers when selecting a brand, closely followed by quality.

But there has been a significant shift in other priorities. Convenience – a new entry for 2024/25 – shot straight to third place. There has also been some movement within the more ethics-driven factors, in particular, the environment (up by

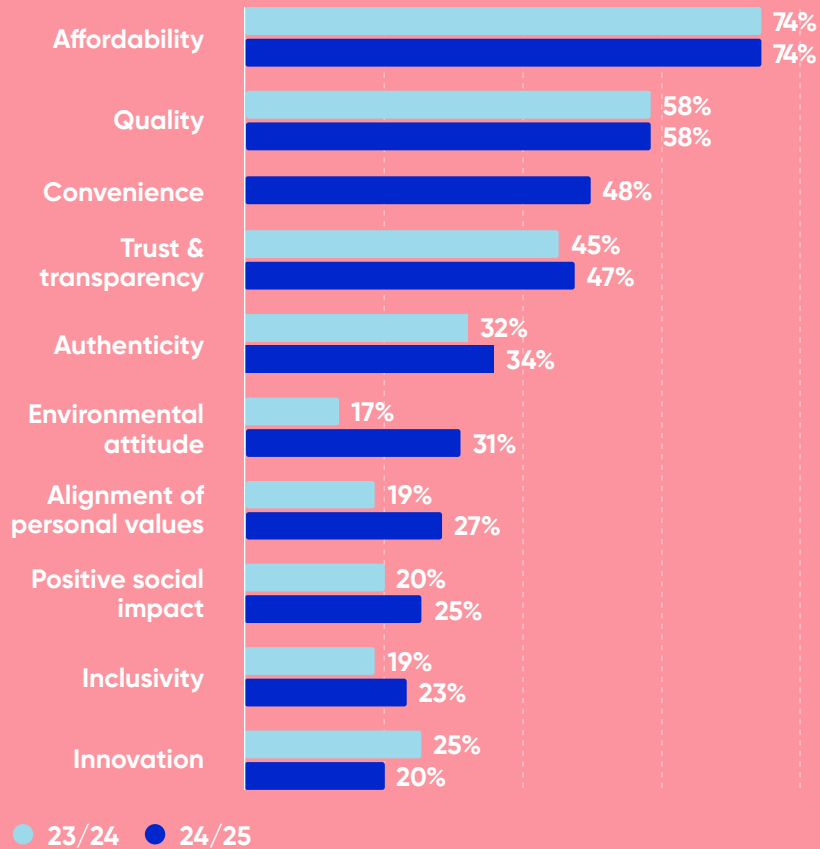
The number of students living with parents has decreased by

48%

14%), and value alignment – which has increased by a hefty 82%.

There has been more discourse online in the past year about ethics and values across a wide range of matters, from global politics to environmental decisions. This academic year's students could be more conscious of these factors than the 2023/24 sample due to osmosis. It's worth noting, though, that students still put affordability above all else.

What factors play a role in Gen Z students' brand choices?



Hours spent on campus
has risen by

16.6%

The DL for brands

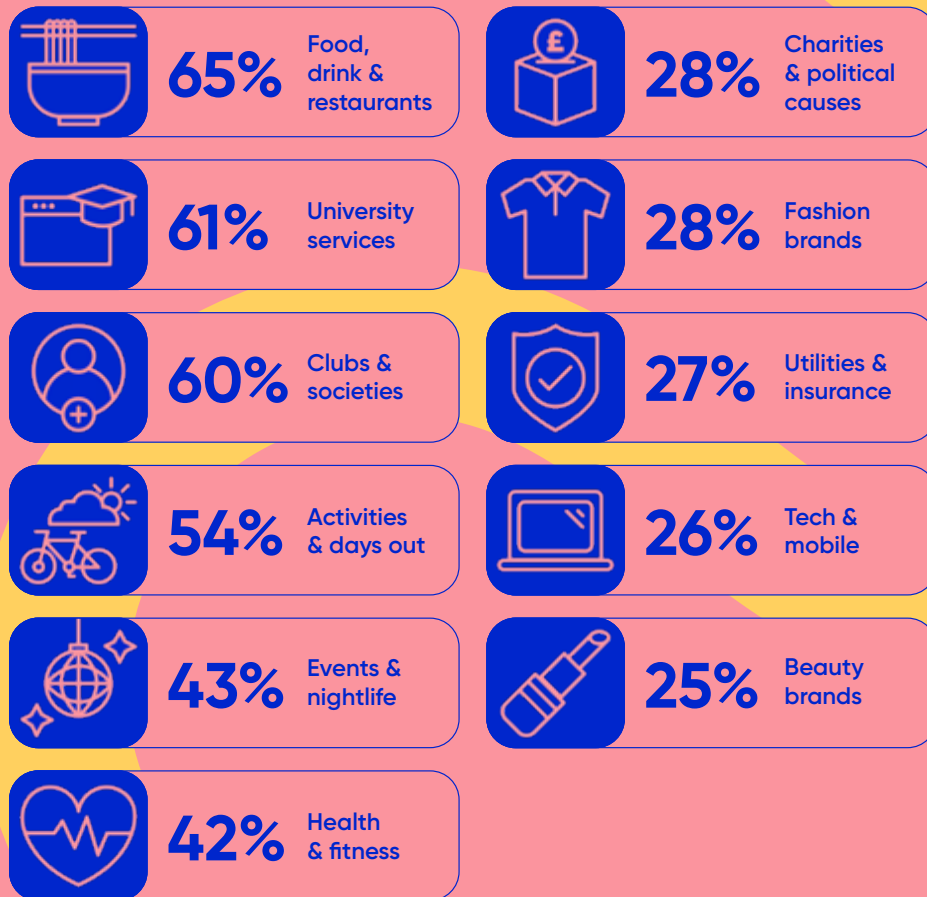
- * Friendships and connections are constantly being built at university – and campus fairs are the key moment, as a week or two that's designed for meet and greets. It's a great time to be on campus – as a student, as well as a brand.
- * Think about how your brand can create connections and facilitate bonding moments. From freebies to immersive in-person activations, you can play a role in bringing students together – and establish some positive feeling for your brand in the process.



Urban Eat made use of localised language to welcome students to their new home – and offered a free lunch to create community. 38% of students reached in the campaign converted into followers on social!

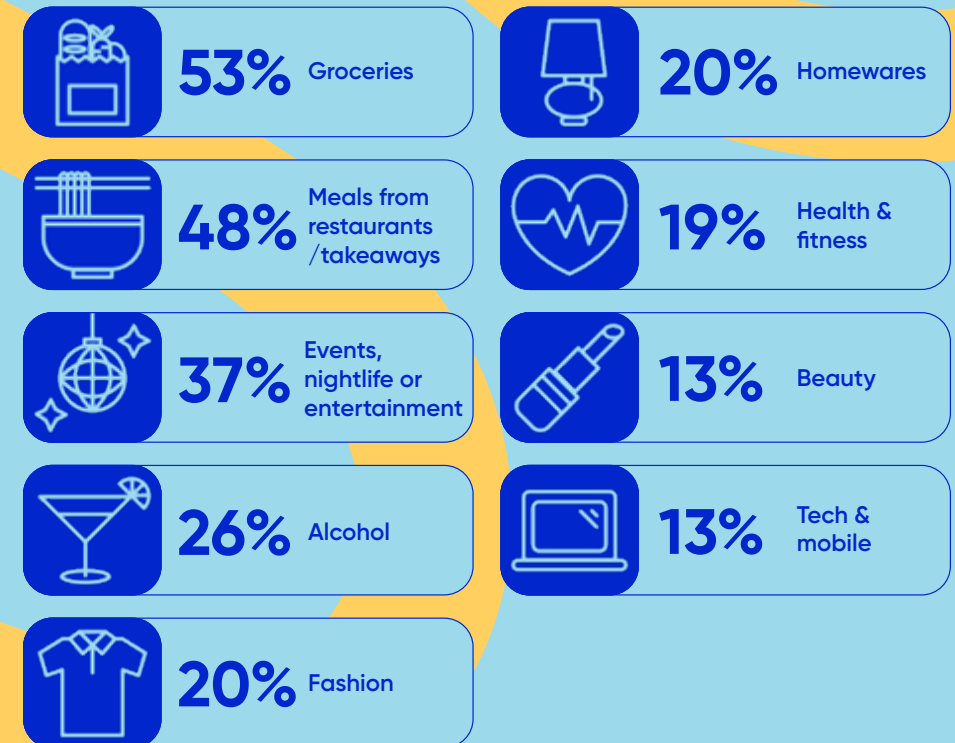
Brand discovery during University

What do students want to see?



Shopping in University

What do students recall buying during University?



Students' thoughts on brands

"I remember GiffGaff cell company. My current cell provider is GiffGaff because we had that information on it [at Freshers]. I did get takeaways from the local place. So yeah it sort of introduced me to a lot of brands that I obviously don't have in South Africa."

Mari-Jeanne, 24,
University of Swansea

"I remember seeing lots of clubs and societies. I also saw a lot of Domino's. I work at Papa Johns - but I have to say, the pizza nights we had last year were mostly Domino's. They were everywhere on campus during Freshers week."

Leo, 23,
Bath Spa University

"I remember seeing Trading Post, which is a Sussex-based coffee shop. We did have PRYZM there. They gave me a free lanyard. Also, the Brighton club Chalk was there. [Since Freshers], I've definitely been to PRYZM. Chalk too, because they're big student clubs. Trading Post is a big place - I go there to study."

Isabella, 20,
University of Sussex

The DL for brands

- * Food is a big deal for students - and above all, they value convenience. Keep your marketing exciting and to-the-point at the top of the funnel - and evolve your later stages to create a swift user journey for them.
- * Don't underestimate the value of community. With one in three students living in privately-rented homes with friends, you're not just marketing to one individual. Your messaging should engage the whole flat.

* Even if you're a household name, it's worth considering that students are new to buying food and drink for themselves - a savvy relaunch now that they're in control of their own budgets could work in your favour, a la

Burger King.



UK Gen Zs may already have known the Burger King brand - but this campaign ignited a love for it, with thousands of students getting involved in their gamified activation that drove increased footfall to local restaurants.

Fuelled by food

"I would say I get quite a lot of takeaways – usually three or four times a week", says Sarah.

She's a third-year student at the University of Oxford, and – while she balances ordering takeaway with home-cooked meals – "cereal or toast, pasta and sauce, or ready-made food I can just put in the air fryer" – takeaway meals are a big part of her sustenance.

"I get really fast food – like Popeyes, or maybe Boba sometimes", she continues. "I usually get bored with the food at home, and [will order] if I'm feeling a bit lazy and want something really fatty to eat".

Our research shows that food sits at the heart of the Gen Z student experience. It is how they socialise, how they connect with each other, how they express their creativity, and how they celebrate diverse identities.

53%

of students believe that food, drink and restaurant choices are a big part of their identity.

It is also something they're willing to spend a lot of money on. Restaurants & takeaway is the number one discretionary spending category in students' lives, outranking higher-AOV verticals like tech, mobile and fashion. When we dug a little deeper, students said that – in particular – takeaways featured heavily in their lives.



"It's giving family" – food as a social medium

We've been tracking Gen Zs' abandonment of drinking culture for a few years now – and our 2024/25 survey shows a slight preference among Gen Z students for food-focused activities compared to alcohol-oriented ones. Overall, 58.54% of students are paying for restaurants or takeaways at least once every two weeks. 43% are paying for nightlife each fortnight. It's worth noting that Gen Z students do still go out – and that nightlife decline across the UK is not quite as drastic as it seems (see [Public First's nightlife index](#) for more on this).

Indeed, many students who we interviewed spoke of getting takeaways after a night out – the two industries go hand-in-hand. That said, food clearly has clout as a social currency among this cohort of students. Isabella, a 20-year-old student at the University of Sussex, describes how she cooks with her housemates. "Yesterday we had a lentil and sweet potato curry; Sunday we had pasta bake; Saturday we had halloumi roast. We usually eat dinner together, unless some of us are busy. Then we'll plate it up for the other person and leave it in the microwave – like, it's giving 'family'.

Leo, a 23-year-old Bath Spa University student, has also found communal dining to be a big feature of student living. "I have done a few pizza nights with my housemates – mostly it's a social thing, but also sometimes I'm too tired or lazy to cook", he says.



Food as entertainment: the power of wings

Gen Z students' love of food also overlaps with the entertainment sector. Take Wingstop for example. The US-headquartered chicken giant first flapped its spicy wings across the Atlantic back in 2018. It didn't take long for the chain to find its way right to the heart of British youth culture. Wingstop identified the subcultures it wanted to be a part of before it even arrived: Love Island watchers, JD sports shoppers and boxing fans, according to this [Business Insider profile](#). And, via strategic collabs with the likes of Xbox, Gymshark and PrettyLittleThing, it landed. These collabs – along with Wingstop's penchant for personalisation in how your chicken is flavoured – put it firmly on the menu of students.

Food as convenience

But, for most students, delivery culture has revolutionised how they live and work. This generation of students are, notoriously, time-poor. They speak of hefty contact hours, multiple part-time jobs, and other commitments that come from clubs, societies and extracurriculars.

When asked how often students get takeaway food, 3.15% said they do so every day. This was more common among males – 5.73% get a takeaway every day, with 17.19% getting one every few days. Overall, 58.54% of students get a takeaway at least every two weeks. 81.26% get one at least every month.

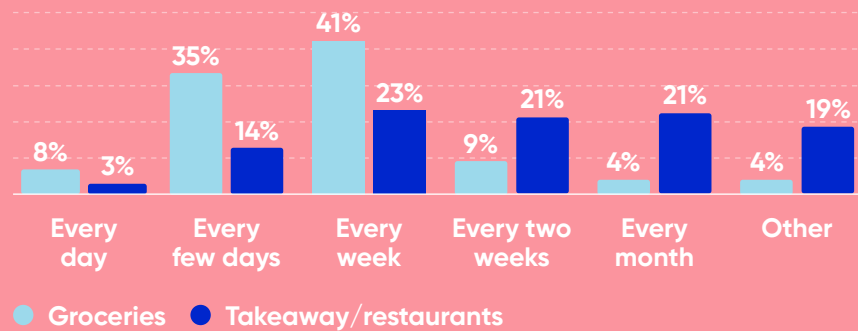
Most students cite convenience as the reason – as is the case for 20-year-old Ashikita, who gets food delivered directly to her campus in Sheffield if she's had a long day. "I have started getting more now due to the work study pressure.", she says. "I usually go for any fast food chain – the ones nearby to uni are McDonald's and Burger King... but if I'm [ordering to] my house, I would order a more fulfilling meal."

Most students we spoke to order their takeaways via apps. "Preferably I order through Deliveroo or Just Eat – I don't really like phone calls", says Hannah, 18, a first-year student at Anglia Ruskin University. Others – like Isabella – engage with their local takeaway in a more traditional way. "There's an Indian right on the corner. We'll just go and get that as they give us a student discount for coming in person."

Despite platforms like Deliveroo offering grocery deliveries, this phenomenon has yet to reach the student population. Students are still overwhelmingly likely to buy groceries in-person – 79% do this, compared to just 2% who purchase online, and 17% who mix and match. (2% actually said they never buy groceries – potentially the same cohort who frequent restaurants and takeaway every day).



Frequency of food shopping: students



Food as a cornerstone of community

It's likely that three years in lockdown enhanced this generation's appreciation for food. Throughout the pandemic's most restrictive eras, the world's menus converged online. Young TikTok users all ate the homebaked sourdough, the banana bread, and the feta pasta. Then came the Green Goddess salad, the salmon bowls. One student creator, @LazyPotNoodle, attracted the attention of Gordon Ramsay due to the intricate and high-end meals he produces - from a hotplate perched on his bed in his student dorm room. These days, digital diners are purveying slightly weirder concoctions - ice cream with olive oil, anyone? But the point is, they're eating together - these viral dishes have become rites of passage.

F&B brands taste success on campus...

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5

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Explore opportunities

Money matters

£29bn

We estimate that UK students have a collective annual spending power of £29bn.

Just 17%

of students said they were concerned about affording university.

What do students spend the most on each month?

- 1 Rent, bills + utilities
- 2 Groceries
- 3 Restaurant + takeaways
- 4 Fashion + beauty
- 5 Travel
- 6 Tech + mobile
- 7 Activities, nightlife + events
- 8 Entertainment subscriptions



How often do students shop across verticals?

Students buy groceries, restaurants and takeaway most frequently.

Female students are more likely to buy fashion and beauty regularly – 40.71% do so monthly compared to 34.90% of males.

Males, on the other hand, are more likely to make frequent tech purchases – 19.79% do so at least every two weeks.

	Every day	Every few days	Every week	Every two weeks	Every month
Groceries	7.8%	35%	41.1%	8.8%	3.6%
Restaurants & takeaways	3.2%	13.6%	22.7%	20.6%	21.2%
Fashion & beauty	0.3%	3.8%	9.8%	15.6%	38.8%
Tech & mobile	1.3%	2.5%	6.3%	6%	31.7%
Activities, nightlife & events	0.8%	8.1%	17.7%	16.1%	20.4%
Travel	15.9%	12.3%	14.1%	10.3%	20.2%

Where do students shop across verticals?

The most common vertical to shop within in-person is, by a significant margin, groceries.

Students are most likely to purchase tech and mobile products online. Students are most likely to mix and match where they buy fashion and beauty.

	Online	In-person	Both	Neither
Groceries	2.2%	79.4%	16.9%	1.5%
Restaurants & takeaways	10.8%	36.3%	43.8%	9.1%
Fashion & beauty	9.6%	32%	45.6%	12.8%
Tech & mobile	33.5%	17.9%	26.2%	22.4%
Activities, nightlife & events	10.8%	34%	32.3%	22.9%
Travel	26.4%	31.2%	27.9%	14.6%

You've met students. Now it's time to connect with them.

At native, we're your gateway to reaching students at scale.

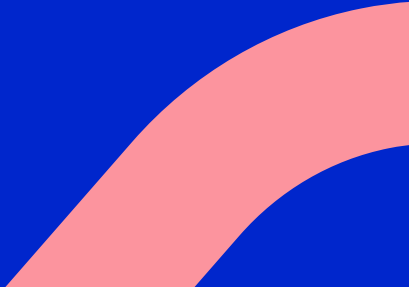
As campus media specialists, we propel brands right to the heart of student culture – reaching them when and where they're most receptive to brand action and discovery. Our roots lie within Students' Unions, who are our partners. Whether it's via an exclusive partnership or a non-exclusive agreement, our relationships with these Students' Unions allow you to access all 2.9 million students via just one point of contact.

We hold unique insight into how student communities function in the here and now – so when you use native to connect with students, you do so from the most informed perspective.

Gen Z students are the most valuable and exciting demographic in the UK today – and we'd love to introduce you to them. To find out what we could do for your organisation:

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