

SEASONAL INTELLIGENCE SERIES

BACK TO SCHOOL

Reach High-Intent Shoppers with
Contextual Precision Across Web,
Mobile & CTV



\$85.4B

Total BTS Retail Sales in
2026

eMarketer 2026

\$43.3B

K-12 Spending — Record
High

NRF 2026

\$103.5B

Back-to-College — First Time
Over \$100B

NRF 2026



The 2026 Back-to-School Opportunity

Back to school is the second-largest retail season in the US — and in 2026, it's bigger and more complex than ever. **The audience is fragmented, the shopping window has stretched, and the categories driving spend have expanded well beyond pencils and backpacks.**

BTS retail is projected to reach \$85.42 billion (eMarketer), up 3.3% YoY. K-12 families plan to spend an average of \$863.86 per household, while back-to-college has crossed \$100 billion for the first time. 57% of parents say they'll do more BTS shopping this year than last — and 82% are willing to spend extra (Paramount, 2026).

\$85.4B

Total BTS retail
sales, 2026

3.3%

YoY growth over
2025

\$864

Average K-12
household spend

82%

Of parents willing to
spend extra

FOR AGENCIES & ADVERTISERS

Getting in front of the right consumer — in the right context — is the difference between capturing BTS budgets and being invisible during the season's peak purchase windows. Contextual targeting is the most effective, scalable way to reach this audience without cookies or audience IDs.

SECTION 01

4 Trends Reshaping BTS in 2026

01

Why the shopping window now runs a full five months, not two weeks.

How back-to-college became a life-stage event, not a supply run.

Why value-seekers are spending more, not pulling back.

01



The Shopping Window Has Shifted — Earlier Than Ever

What was once a two-week sprint in late July is now a five-month window running June through October.

1 in 3 shoppers started by early June — the highest since NRF began tracking in 2018. (NRF)

67% had started purchasing by early July — record high, up from 55% the prior year. (NRF)

+28% Revenue peaked the week of June 8 vs. any other week in the June–Oct window. (MNTN)

IMPLICATION

Brands waiting until August are already behind. BTS contextual campaigns should be live by early July at the latest.

02



The Dorm Effect: Back-to-College Has Transformed

Back-to-college is no longer about supplies — it's a life-stage event. Top BTC categories in 2025: electronics, dorm furnishings, clothing, food, personal care. School supplies didn't crack the top five.

\$10K+ Some students spend on custom dorm designs, driven by TikTok's #collegelife (30B+ views). (MNTN)

+74% Average revenue YoY for dorm-adjacent advertisers during peak window. CPA dropped 68%. (MNTN)

IMPLICATION

Home goods, electronics, lifestyle, and personal care brands have a major BTC opportunity extending through August–September.

03



Health & Wellness Is a Core BTS Category

Parental anxiety and the college coming-of-age moment have made health & wellness one of the fastest-growing BTS spending categories.

88% of K-12 parents say health is a bigger concern than ever; half prioritize it over affordability. (Outfront)

\$7.9B Personal care is the #5 BTC category — purchased by 86% of BTC consumers, more than clothing or food.

+88% Average visit rate for health/wellness advertisers during BTS season. (MNTN)

IMPLICATION

Wellness brands should be present throughout the full BTS window. Campaigns acknowledging the emotional weight of the season outperform pure discount messaging.

04



Value-Seekers Are Spending More, Not Less

Price sensitivity is high — but the most budget-conscious shoppers are among the biggest spenders this season.

78% of shoppers expect higher prices on BTS items in 2026. (Deloitte)

+14% Value-seeking parents (adopting 4+ cost-saving behaviors) spend 14% MORE than other shoppers. (Deloitte)

66% say BTS ads help them find deals — making a clear promotion the most important element of ad creative. (Paramount)

IMPLICATION

Lead with your offer. Reach value-seekers in coupon and shopping content during the July sale events window — where intent and purchase behavior converge.

The back-to-school shopper isn't one audience anymore — it's five months, three life stages, and a value-hunting parent, all in the same bidstream.

Peer39's analysis of 2026 BTS shopping behavior

SECTION 02

CTV Is the Channel for BTS

02

Why BTS shoppers trust TV ads more than social, display, or search.

The two high-intent windows to plan flights around.

What happens to recall after BTS season actually ends.

Connected TV has established itself as the highest-trust, highest-impact channel for reaching BTS shoppers — driving real purchase behavior, not just awareness.

50%

of BTS shoppers trust TV ads more than social, display, or search

Paramount Advertising,
June 2026 · N=1,033

3 in 5

have made a purchase after seeing a BTS TV ad

Paramount Advertising,
June 2026

68%

will remember the brand after BTS season ends

Paramount Advertising,
June 2026

Two High-Intent Windows to Plan Around

WAVE 1

Early July July 5–15

Align with major sale events (Prime Day). Contextual impressions alongside deal content run **20% higher**. Capture early K-12 shoppers before budgets are committed.

WAVE 2

Late August–September Aug 18–Sept 15

The compressed intent window. BTS content impressions surge **31%**. Capture late college shoppers and last-minute K-12 purchasers. Reserve budget here.

Source: IAS Audience-Enhanced Targeting research, based on 2025 BTS season data.

82%

of BTS shoppers say they're willing to spend extra this season — even as they expect higher prices across the board.

Paramount Advertising, June 2026 · N=1,033 BTS Shoppers

SECTION 03

How Peer39 Powers Your BTS Campaigns

The contextual targeting numbers agencies and advertisers are acting on now.

Six Peer39 solutions built for BTS — from CTV intelligence to brand safety.

Where to get the full Category Recommendations Sheet.

Contextual Targeting — The Numbers Speak for Themselves

74%

of programmatic buyers maintaining or increasing contextual usage in 2026

Proximic by Comscore, Jan 2026

+43%

Higher purchase intent with contextually optimized ads vs. non-contextual

Industry benchmark

2.2×

Higher engagement rates with contextual vs. behavioral-only targeting

Industry benchmark

Peer39's media intelligence helps agencies and advertisers reach BTS audiences with precision — across web, mobile, and CTV — without relying on cookies or compromising brand safety.

SOLUTION	WHAT IT DOES FOR BTS
 CTV Contextual Intelligence	2,100+ program-level CTV categories — target by genre (Comedy, Family, Reality, Sports, Health & Wellness, and more), ratings, and content quality across 175+ streaming platforms including Disney+, Hulu, Peacock, Roku, Paramount+, and Amazon Prime Video. Authenticated programming means no blind inventory — only verified channels and content.

SOLUTION	WHAT IT DOES FOR BTS
 Post-Buy Analytics	See exactly where your BTS campaigns ran and how they performed — across 75+ reporting dimensions including CTV Quality Score, completion rates, brand safety, and attention. Mid-flight visibility so you can optimize before peak spend windows close, not after.
 Contextual Targeting	Place ads alongside the content BTS shoppers are actively consuming — education, parenting, student life, shopping trends — without third-party cookies or audience IDs. Activate across web, mobile app, and CTV.
 Social Predict	Trend-responsive categories built from social signals — College Bound, Thrifty Shopping, Sneakerheads, Teenagers, Fall Sports, and more. Stay aligned with what BTS shoppers are talking about in real time.
 Third-Party Data Partners	Extend reach with Experian household and purchase intent data, GoldfishAds BTS audience segments (Fashion, Technology, Sustainability), and Qortex parents and parents-of-teens video audiences.
 Brand Safety & Suitability	Structured exclusion controls for web, mobile in-app, and OTT/CTV — including Safe from Fake CTV Content, Verified Valid Channels, and issue-level exclusions. Preserve reach in relevant BTS contexts without over-blocking.

Category Recommendations — Companion Document

A full Category Recommendations Sheet is available from your Peer39 account team. It includes:

- **Context Categories (Web)** — Seasonal: Back to School, Education, Interest: Parents, Shopping, Style & Fashion, and more
- **OTT-CTV** — Genre/Channel, Program Level, Cable TV Channels, and Program Networks
- **Contextual Data Marketplace** — Social Predict, Third-Party Data Partners (Experian, GoldfishAds, Qortex)
- **Mobile App & Mobile Games** — 7 categories including Educational Games and Shopping Apps
- **Safety & Suitability** — Web negative categories, Mobile In-App exclusions, OTT/CTV safe environments
- **Keyword List** — 100+ BTS-specific keywords for custom targeting

Sources

NRF, "Early shopping marks the start of 2026's back-to-class shopping season," June 2026

Deloitte, 2026 Back-to-School Survey

MNTN Research, "Back-to-School Isn't What It Used to Be," May 2026

IAS, Audience-Enhanced Targeting Segments for Back-to-School

NRF, "Back-to-school spending forecast to reach record highs," 2026

eMarketer, "Data Drop: Back-to-School Forecast 2026"

Paramount Advertising, June 2026, N=1,033 BTS Shoppers

Proximic by Comscore, Contextual Targeting Adoption Study, Jan 2026