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# 2026 Consumer Outlook

## Cohort Focus: 55+

Brand & Communications Strategy

## Report Contents

- ✓ 2026 Consumer Story
- ✓ The Backdrop: Why Everyone Feels “On Edge”
- ✓ How It Shows Up In Behavior: Consumer Trends
- ✓ Key Takeaways

# 2026 Consumer Story



In a year where the world refuses to slow down – economically, politically, and culturally – people are **running on emotional low-battery.**

# They are cutting back on what drains them and doubling down on what feels grounding, joyful, and real.

Brands have an opportunity to show up not as more noise in the feed, but as a source of stability, connection, and small-but-meaningful relief in their everyday lives.

2026 CONSUMER STORY

2026 is a story about people trying to **stay sane, hopeful and connected** in a world that keeps turning up the volume.

- **This is a high-pressure year:** money stress, political noise, digital fatigue and global events are all peaking at once.
- People are exhausted after several years of uncertainty, but still hopeful.
- Consumers are looking for small moments of joy, real connection and comfort, and brands that feel like **steady companions**.



A photograph of an elderly man with a white beard and hair, looking out a window with a serious expression. He is wearing a grey sweater over a blue collared shirt. The background is a blurred living room with a wooden chair and framed pictures on the wall.

# The Backdrop: Why Everyone Feels “On Edge”

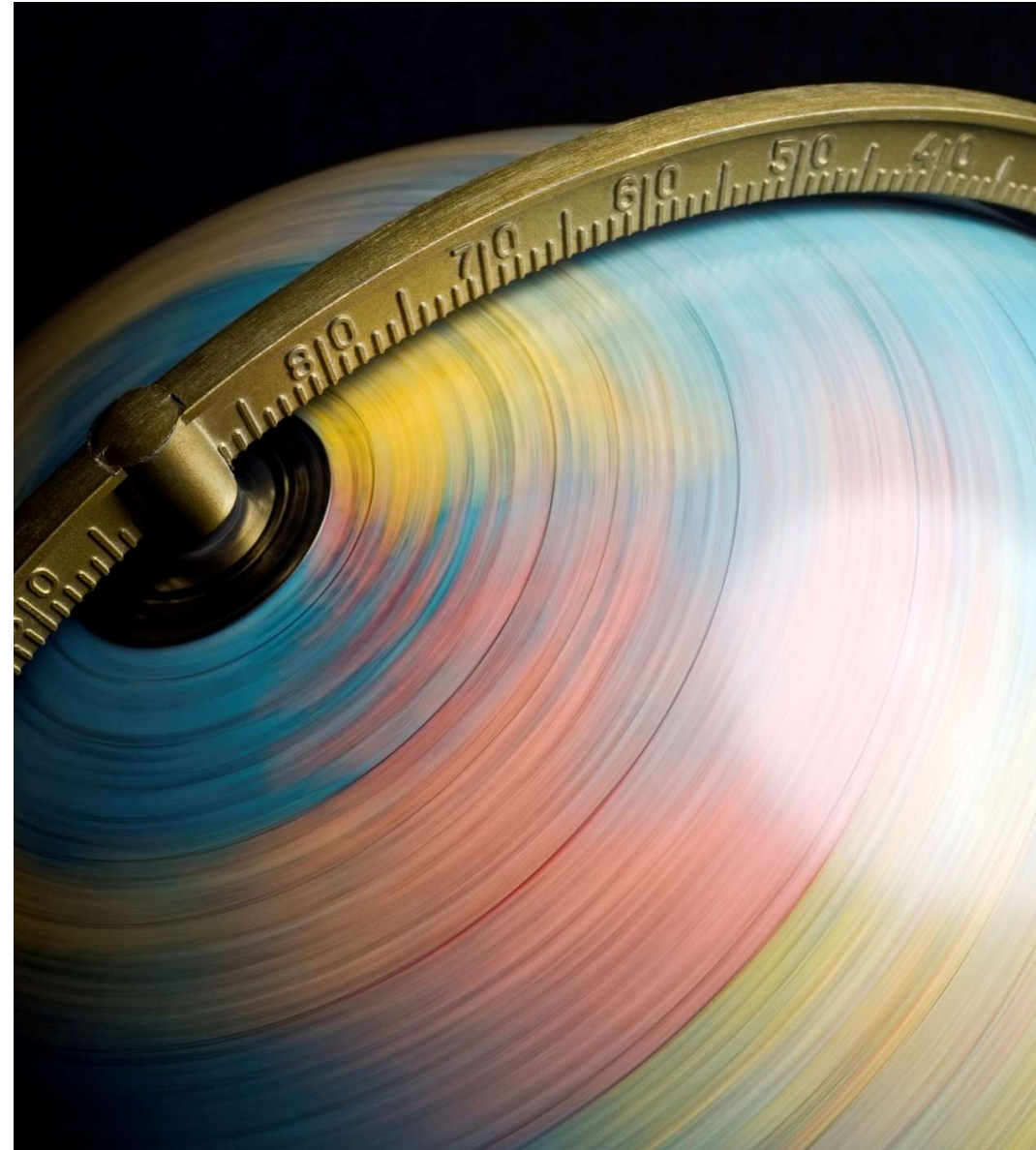
THE BACKDROP

## The World Won't Slow Down

- Persistent inflation, rate pressures, and wage anxiety have consumers **stretching every dollar**
- Political polarization and the U.S. Midterm Elections add **constant background tension and conflict**.
- Big global moments (Winter Olympics, World Cup) **amplify emotions** – pride, rivalry, escape –on top of daily stress.



*Goodwill Thrives as Americans Stretch Their Dollars*



THE BACKDROP

## Economic Uncertainty Persists and Causes Hypervigilance

- People are still spending, but they're much **more careful** with money, especially in lower-cost categories that squeeze lower-income shoppers.
- Consumers are:
  - Very deal-sensitive
  - Choosing store brands more
  - Demanding transparency on price increases





THE BACKDROP

## Political Polarization, the U.S. Midterm Elections, and Global Instability Continue to Drive Anxiety

- People are **anxious** and want **steady, honest brands**.
- News and politics feel chaotic
  - Consumers gravitate toward calm, consistent, straightforward brands – not loud or opportunistic

THE BACKDROP

## Global Sports Events Amplify Emotions, But Can Be a Release Valve

- **Global moments of shared tension and joy**
  - Big events surface stories of resilience, rivalry, and national pride – offering a collective release valve for everyday anxiety and a rare feeling of being part of something bigger
- **World Cup attention on North America**
  - Great moment for brands to show up with real, community-first stories



Winter Olympics – Milan & Cortina (Feb 6-22, 2026)



2026 FIFA World Cup – U.S., Canada, Mexico



**53%**

*of seniors believe their retirement income won't cover essential goods and services*

*(The Senior Citizens League's 2025 Retirement Survey)*

55+ COHORT LENS

## Why Older Adults Feel Especially “On Edge” in 2026

- **Economy:** Many 55+ adults on fixed or limited incomes worry that inflation and market swings will erode savings and make retirement money run out faster
- **Healthcare costs & access:** Rising premiums and the risk of rural hospital closures increases anxiety about accessing basic care
- **Medicare Advantage disruption:** Roughly 1 in 10 Medicare Advantage enrollees are being forced to change plans for 2026, creating coverage disruption and loss of trusted providers
- **Long-term planning mindset:** Seniors are stretching every dollar with more deliberate planning

[10% of Medicare Advantage enrollees forced to change plans](#)  
[AARP's 2026 Senior Financial Security Survey](#)



# How it Shows Up In Behavior: Consumer Trends

## Three Key Themes for 2026



### From More to Meaningful

People are cutting through noise and choosing **fewer, better, more emotionally rewarding things** across categories.



### Regulation & Reprieve

Consumers are managing nervous systems as much as calendars; **wellness is emotional armor.**



### Connection Beyond the Algorithm

As trust erodes, people gravitate toward what **feels human, shared, and real.**

# From *More* to *Meaningful*





FROM MORE TO MEANINGFUL

## Value with Intention

In an era of economic caution, **value is no longer defined by "cheapest price" but by "Emotional ROI."**

- Consumers are trading down on commodities (e.g., cleaning supplies, staple items) specifically to free up budget for **high-joy investments** such as premium coffee, personal care, wellness, fashion/accessories.



**57%**

of seniors plan to increase spending in at least one category in 2026, with health and wellness being the top category

*(Civic Science 2025 Report)*

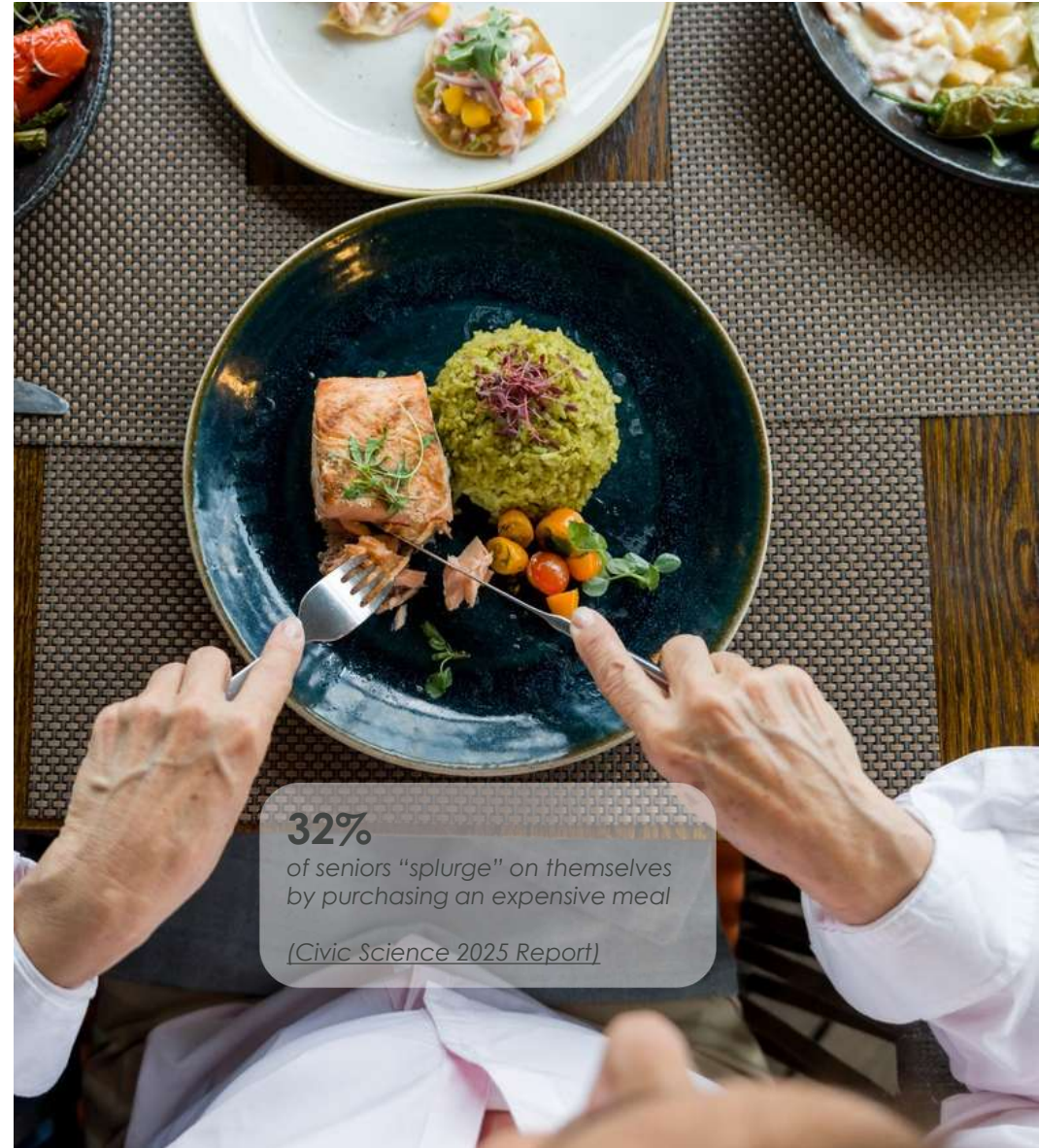
*How today's consumers are spending their time and money – McKinsey (podcast)*  
*State of Fashion 2026 – McKinsey*  
*The New Consumer 2026 And Five Mega-Trends Reshaping American Commerce – Forbes*

FROM MORE TO MEANINGFUL

## Glimmers & The Joy of Tiny Things

Categories such as food, beauty and home overlap as sources of **“glimmers”** (small, affordable moments of joy) serving as emotional relief during a hard year.

- These moments deliver bite-sized dopamine hits that satisfy the itch for novelty **without the guilt of excess consumption.**
- The rise of **micro-vacations**: short, intentional trips centered on a single high-impact experience.
- Explosion of "miniatures"—including mini-sized versions of your favorite products.



**32%**

of seniors "splurge" on themselves by purchasing an expensive meal

(Civic Science 2025 Report)



Top Trends for 2026 – WGSN  
WGSN Future Consumer 2026 – WGSN  
Travel's Latest Buzzword: 'Microvacations' – NYT

## From More to Meaningful

For older consumers, 'meaningful' means it works – reliably, simply, and without friction.

- For healthcare brands, meaningful means **simple journeys and visible outcomes**: one portal that works, one clear regimen, one trusted relationship beats a stack of disconnected tools.
- 55+ audiences cut quickly what feels wasteful and stick with brands that **reliably improve daily life** (mobility, comfort, independence, dignity.)
- They'll pay for **clear, functional outcomes** – better sleep, joint support, energy – rather than aspiration or aesthetic promises



# Regulation & Reprieve



## Wellness as Emotional Armor

In a world shaped by economic, political, and climate instability, **wellness has become a way for people to regain a sense of control**, even when they can't fix the macro picture.

- Younger consumers have turned recovery into performance, where sauna, cold plunges, and breathwork are shaped by our cultural lens of *faster, harder, more competitive*
- While the 55+ cohort is already living the counter-trend: **wellness as genuine rest, routine, and connection**



**90%**

of adults 55+ say they already practice or plan to start practicing self-care.

Top behaviors include media, better sleep, time with loved ones, and shopping

*(Civic Science 2025 Report)*





Researchers now propose GLP-1s may be the first true longevity drugs, with benefits extending across heart disease, kidney disease and cognitive decline

*(Nature Biotechnology, November 2025)*

#### REGULATION & REPRIEVE

## Functional Results, Not Extremes

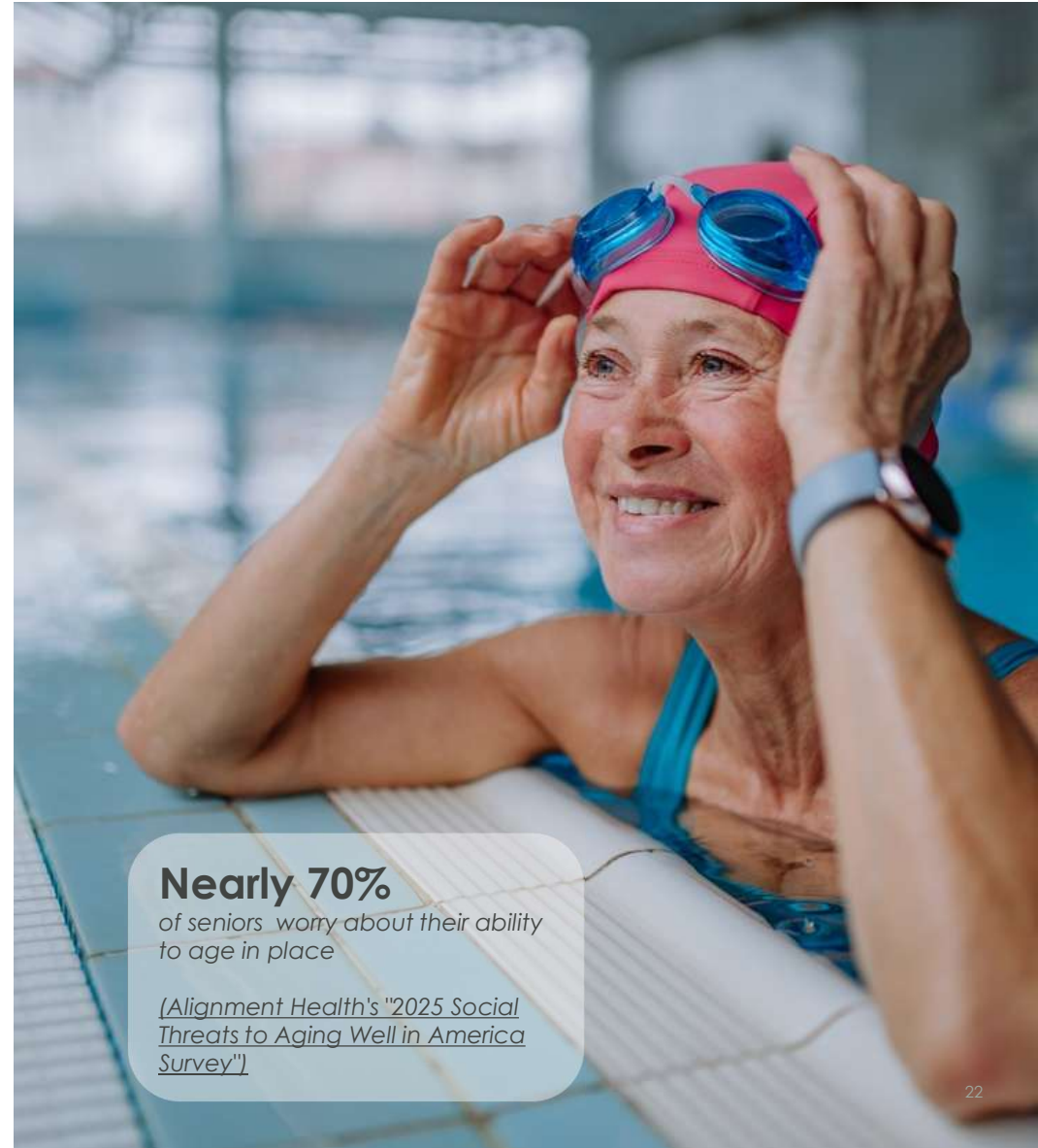
With the rise of GLP-1s, medical weight-loss has moved into the mainstream, but the drug is meaning very different things to different cohorts.

- Younger consumers often want visible changes without the prescription – **seeking alternatives** that promise similar results without the clinic visit.
- For the 55+ cohort, GLP-1s are less about appearance and more about **health span**.

## Regulation & Reprieve

Wellness and fitness as emotional armor for older adults

- For this cohort, wellness means sustainable habits around sleep, mobility, and cognition – not programs or overhauls
- **Caregivers need support:** 43% of caregivers feel their mental health needs are not being met via U.S. healthcare (compared to 25% of non-caregivers)
- The best healthcare and health-adjacent experiences **reduce anxiety: clear next steps, predictable** routines, human **reassurance**



**Nearly 70%**  
of seniors worry about their ability  
to age in place

*(Alignment Health's "2025 Social  
Threats to Aging Well in America  
Survey")*

A photograph of three men of different ethnicities and ages smiling together. The man on the left is Black, the man in the middle is white with a beard, and the man on the right is Black with a beard. They are all smiling broadly. The image is overlaid with a dark blue semi-transparent layer.

# Connection Beyond the Algorithm

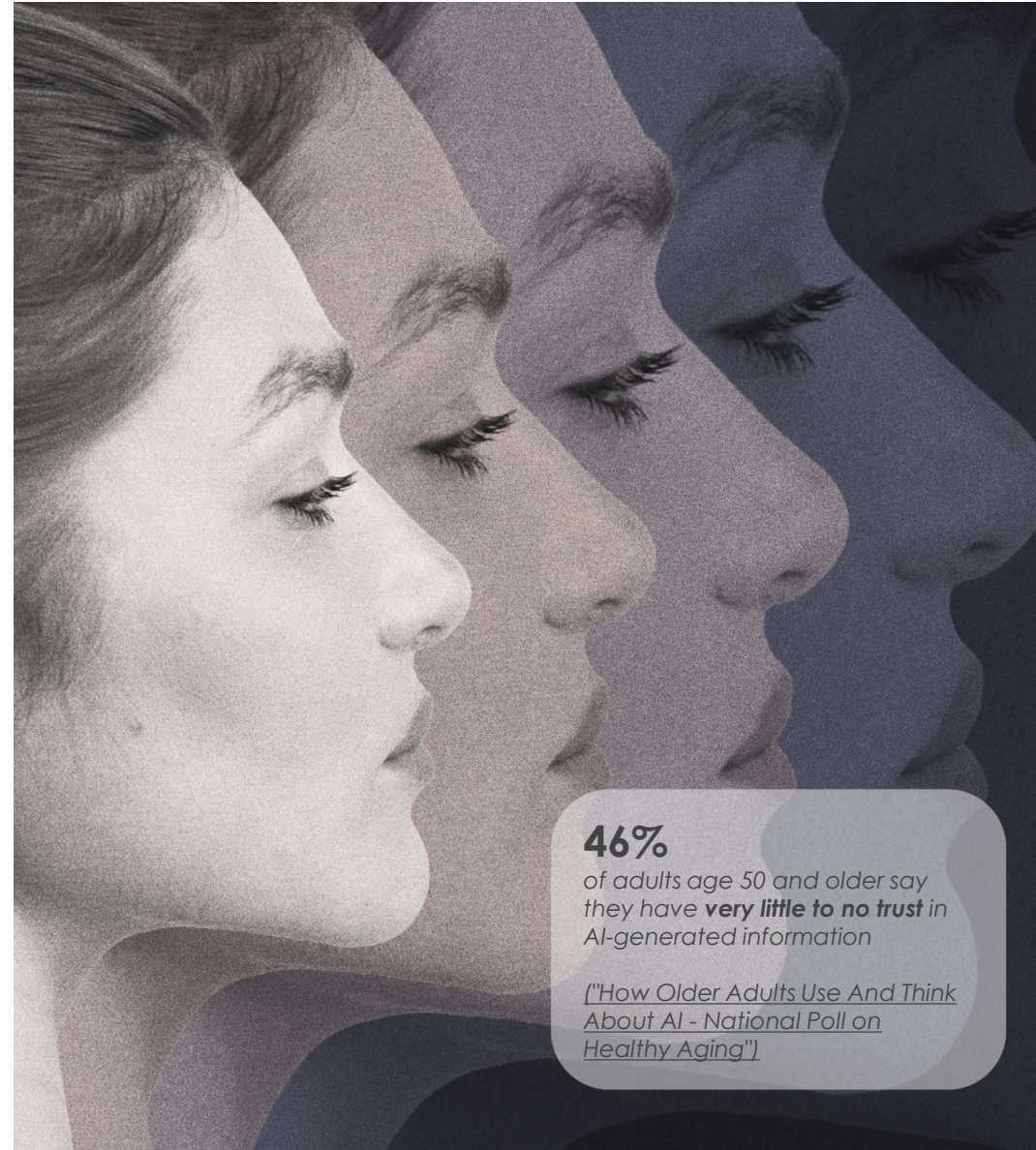
## The Trust Collapse

We have reached a tipping point of "AI Slop", the synthetic content filling feeds and eroding consumer trust in what's real.

- While **66% of adults 55+ say technology enriches their lives**, many are hesitant to adopt new tools because of **concerns about data privacy and security**.
- **Older Americans are less trusting of news from social media platforms** and are more likely to **lean on traditional outlets** they know: TV news, established publishers (*2025 YouGov "Trust in Media" study*)
- As AI scales, "human-led storytelling" becomes a premium asset.



*How today's consumers are spending their time and money - McKinsey  
2026 Lookahead: What Trends to Expect in Brand Marketing - Morning Consult  
"Tech Use and Adoption Keep Surging Among Older Adults" AARP  
YouGov's 2025 Trust in Media study*



**46%**

of adults age 50 and older say they have **very little to no trust** in AI-generated information

*("How Older Adults Use And Think About AI - National Poll on Healthy Aging")*

CONNECTION BEYOND THE ALGORITHM

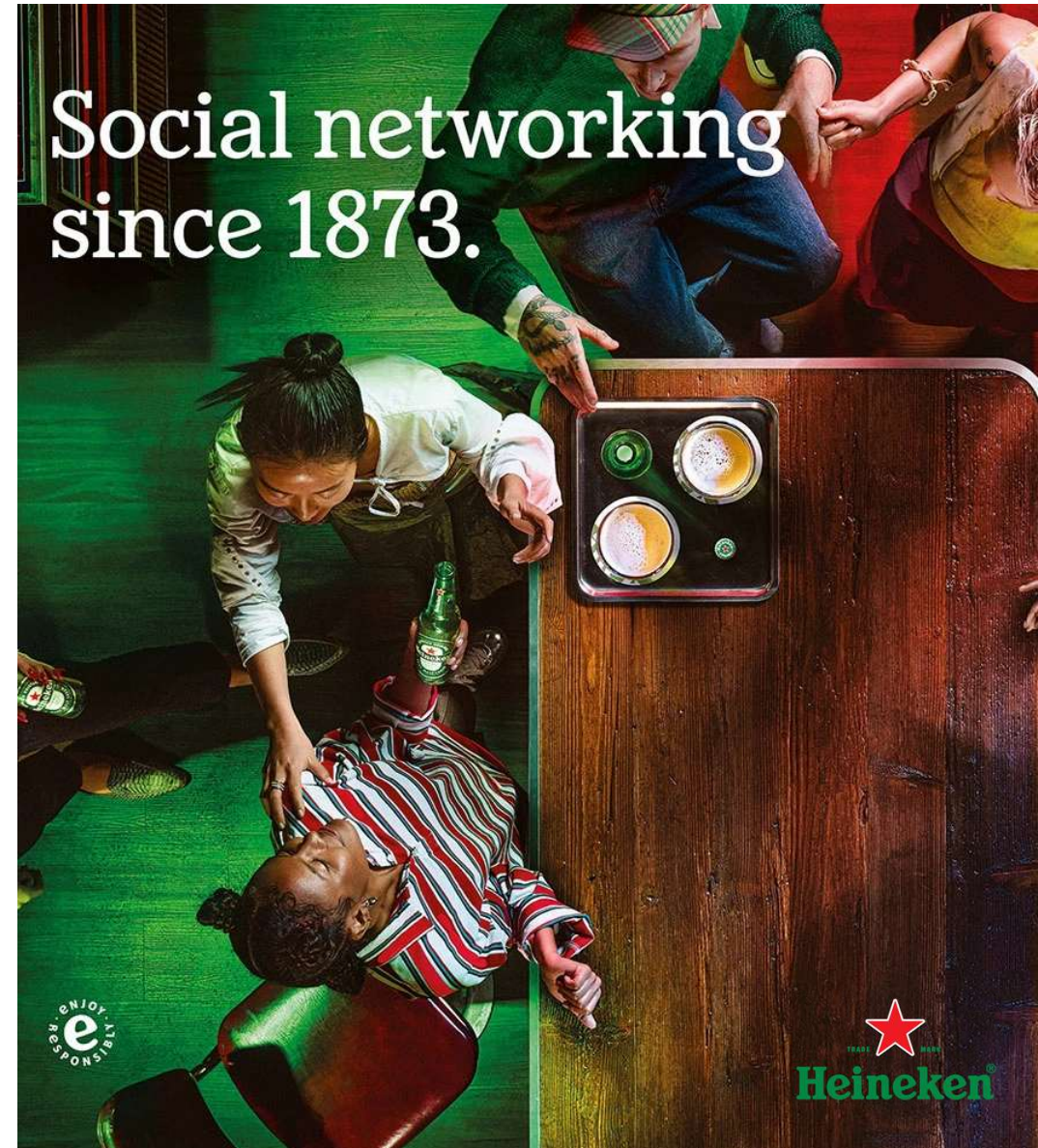
## Seeking Collective Effervescence

**Shared, in-person experiences are being sought out;** Places beyond work and home where they can feel part of something bigger.

- **Third spaces are resurging** as antidotes to isolation, offering communal energy that digital platforms can't replicate.
- **Communal events and live sports remain central to the experience economy**, driving major investment in stadiums and fan environments because they deliver collective emotion that cannot be simulated.



2026 M&E trends: simplicity, authenticity, and the rise of experiences – EY  
Top Trends for 2026 – WGSN  
WGSN Future Consumer 2026 – WGSN  
Social Off Socials - Heineken



## Connection Beyond the Algorithm

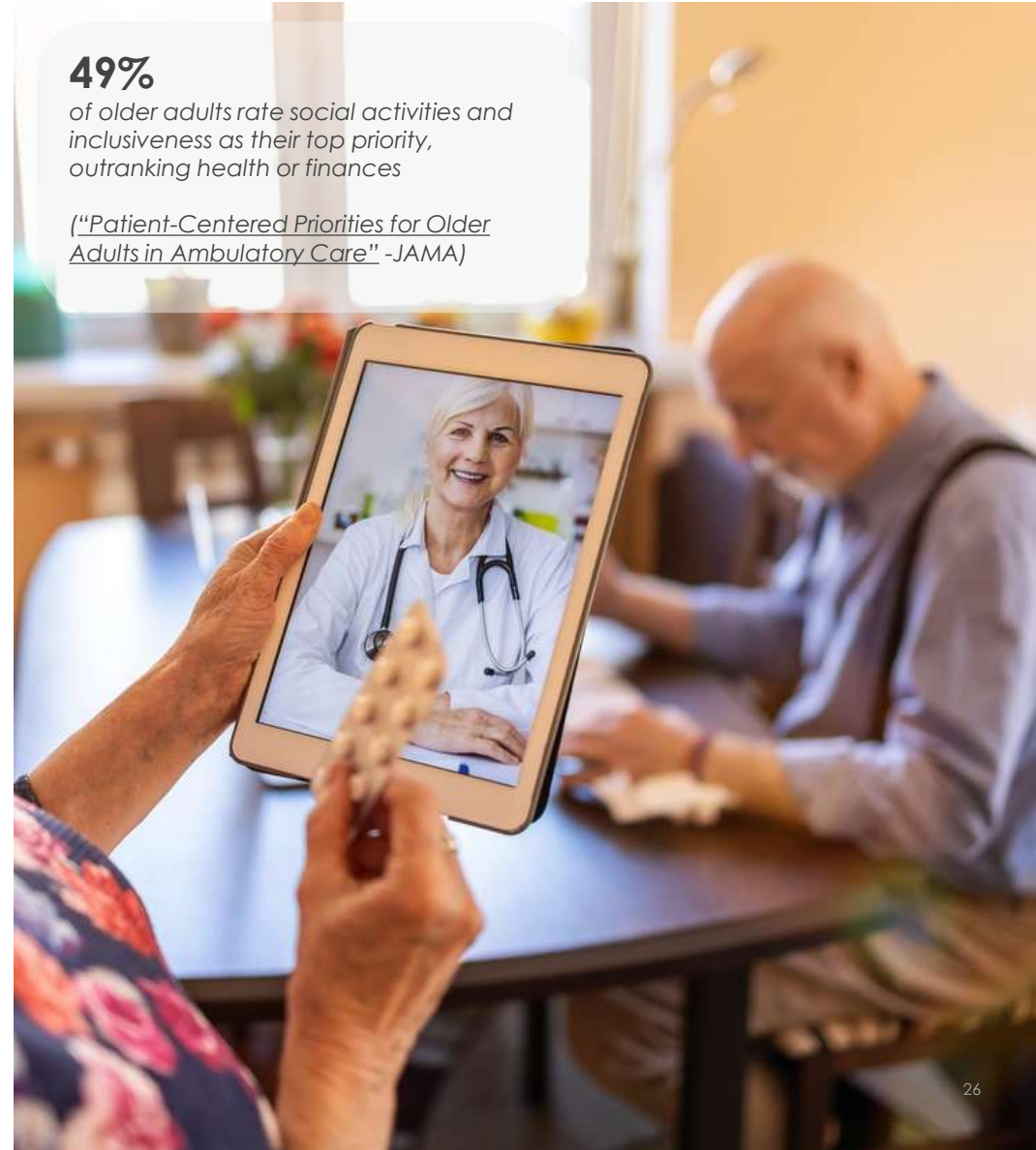
Community is medicine

- **Loneliness and lack of social connection** are among the top threats to aging well
  - Group visits, classes, and intergenerational programs boost health and connection
- Seniors embrace digital tools/AI companions **when they support relationships** (booking, reminders) and resent them replacing conversation
- **Tech-capable but trust-sensitive:** Older adults want clinicians, pharmacists, and peers explaining options plainly, not faceless systems

**49%**

of older adults rate social activities and inclusiveness as their top priority, outranking health or finances

*(“Patient-Centered Priorities for Older Adults in Ambulatory Care” -JAMA)*



# Key Takeaways



## Mindsets have shifted toward **the here-and-now**

People are increasingly operating with a short-horizon mindset – chasing glimmers and small wins because that's all their bandwidth can handle right now.

## Consumers are increasingly **choiceful**

Value with intention. Optimizing for emotions, not necessarily efficiency. Saying no to extra apps and extra pressure; “good enough” beats constant optimization.

## What they want from brands:

1. **Authenticity** – Fewer big statements, more proof in products, service, and behavior.
2. **Connection** – Human tone, real representation, and community-building that makes people feel less alone.
3. **Relieve** – Make life feel a bit lighter: remove friction, add small joys, and offer useful tools instead of more content and complexity.

## Key Takeaways

### Authenticity & Usefulness

*Make healthier living simple, clear, and outcome-driven*

- Retire “anti-aging” tropes; talk about **living well longer**, not pretending to be 35.
- **Lead with outcomes, delivery with ease** (“this helps you walk further with less pain,” “this makes refills one tap”).
- This cohort is investing in sleep, mobility, and mental health. They use **exercise and wellness as emotional armor** and a way to regain a sense of control in a chaotic, roller-coaster world.

### Reassurance & Humanity

*Build trust through human touchpoints and reassuring rituals*

- Design offerings as **simple, repeatable rituals** (daily check-ins, weekly classes, monthly screenings), not overwhelming plans.
- Build in **reassurance moments**—proactive updates, coach or nurse touchpoints, friendly reminders that someone is in their corner.

### Hybrid, Human-led Journeys

*Design hybrid experiences where tech assists – not replaces – human care*

- Show **humans up front** in your comms (doctors, nurses, long-time members, caregivers) and use **tech as the helper in the background**.
- Offer **hybrid journeys** by default: yes to apps and portals, *and* easy phone lines, in-person help, and family-friendly touchpoints.



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