



2026 Mid-Year Consumer Trends

The Backlash Against Artificial Everything



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Key Insights and Takeaways

Our Approach and Human Expertise

Who We Are – Human Expertise & Consumer Insights

Our researchers:

- Formal expertise (e.g., Ph.D.)
- Expertise geographic areas
- Expertise product areas

= Context and insights AI can't provide

Example: How a toothpick made a difference

- German context
- Product area: oral care
- Unexpected insights + context = value



AI as a Tool for Consumer Insights and Beyond

How We use AI:

- A tool to analyze and synthesize large amounts of data (e.g., virtual anthropologist)
- BUT: only that
- Human expertise = key (e.g., inquiry, delivery reports, webinars, etc.)

Shifting and Emerging Trends in Mid-2026

- AI and Trust
- Nostalgia & Retro Culture
- Authenticity
- Affordability & Financial Anxiety

Trend: AI & Trust

AI & Trust

In 2026, growing scrutiny of AI and declining trust in big tech shape the landscape.

Consumer conversations showcase a concern that AI has:

- Undermined its environmental costs.
- Changed the job market.
- Overpromised and undelivered.



AI & Trust

Consumers take note (and sometimes celebrate) brands that are publicly negotiating their relationship with AI.

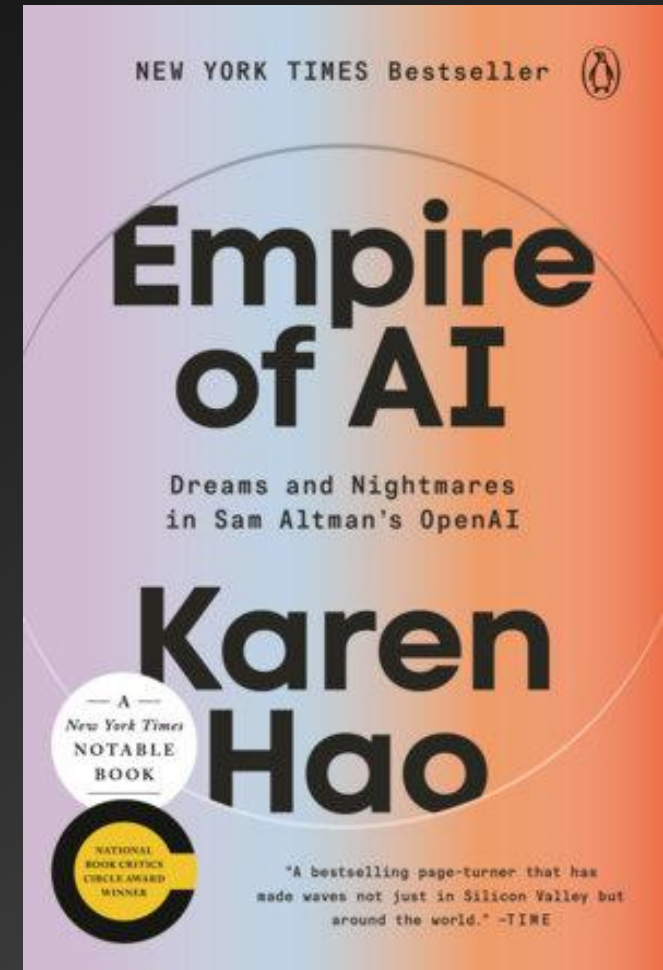


Uber

Building Trust with AI

Consumers are looking for brands that have moved beyond bragging about AI adoption and toward applying AI responsibly. Brands can demonstrate this by:

- Labeling and explaining AI use.
- Acknowledging limitations and showing how issues are remediated.
- Publishing clear guardrails for data use and generative models.



Trend: Nostalgia & Retro Culture

Nostalgia & Retro Culture

In 2026 uncertainty is driving consumer desire for emotional predictability, safety, certainty, and social connectedness.

AI & Nostalgia:

- Traditionally 20–30-year cycle,
- AI & feelings technological disruption
- AI & accelerating cycles
- *Nowstalgia*
- Aspirational nostalgia



Nostalgia & Retro Culture

Consumers don't become nostalgic because the past was perfect. They become nostalgic because the present feels uncertain.



Nostalgia & Retro Culture

Consumers are struggling with AI-fatigue and are craving something that feels real, tactile, tangible, or which provides a feeling of privacy. Brands can leverage this need for nostalgia by:

- Appealing to consumers' need for social connectedness
- Appealing to AI fatigue with analog as alternative
- Catering to new and traditional forms of nostalgia
- Targeting adults who can now afford items they couldn't as kids



Trend: Authenticity

Authenticity

In 2026, consumers search for ways to unplug and focus on lived, embodied experiences.

Consumer conversations showcase a concern that modern life has:

- Encouraged people to live online.
- Increased feelings of isolation.
- Made products feel overtly aspirational.



Authenticity

Consumers notice brands that can help them live authentically in the moment.



Creating authentic experiences

Consumers want products to be experiences that make them feel authentic by making them more aware of themselves. Brands can help by:

- Designing for embodied proof.
- Providing low-cost social opportunities.
- Making deliberate disconnection a feature.



Trend: Affordability & Financial Anxiety

Affordability & Financial Anxiety

In 2026, growing financial anxiety is making consumers less interested in maximizing and more interested in stabilizing.

Economic anxiety is fueling moderation:

- Persistent inflation concerns
- Housing affordability pressures
- AI-related job uncertainty
- Geopolitical conflict

Uncertainty = same driver as for Nostalgia

Affordable premiums are still going strong



Affordability & Financial Anxiety

Consumers are more susceptible to nostalgia driven campaigns. Nostalgia makes consumers less sensitive to affordability concerns. (Lasaleta et al.)

The Kellogg's logo, featuring the brand name in a red, cursive script.The Polaroid logo, consisting of a multi-colored diamond icon followed by the word "Polaroid" in a bold, black, sans-serif font.The adidas logo, featuring the three-stripe trefoil icon above the word "adidas" in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

Affordability & Financial Anxiety

Nostalgia reduces psychological importance money for consumers as what they get out of it is increased feelings of connectedness. (Pade & Feurer)

Brands benefit from nostalgia driven campaigns because:

- It reduces perceptions of price unfairness.
- Nostalgic consumers are more forgiving about pricing
- Nostalgic consumers are less focused on price comparisons
- Makes consumers purchase something that *feels* real



Key Takeaways

1

Reduce uncertainty by signaling what feels “real.”

Emphasize tangible, sensory, and human elements in products and brand experiences to help consumers feel grounded and confident.

2

Discuss AI as a feature, not as a selling point.

Focus on transparent, responsible AI that solves real problems with limited applicability rather than promoting AI adoption for its own sake.

3

Leverage nostalgia to reinforce long-term value.

Position products as timeless, emotionally meaningful investments that provide comfort, continuity, and durability in an uncertain environment.



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