2026 Mid-Year Consumer Trends

The Backlash Against Artificial Everything

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Agenda

01 | Our Approach and Human Expertise

02 | Four Shifting and Emerging Trends in Mid-2026

03 | Key Insights and Takeaways

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Our Approach and Human Expertise

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Who We Are – Human Expertise & Consumer Insights

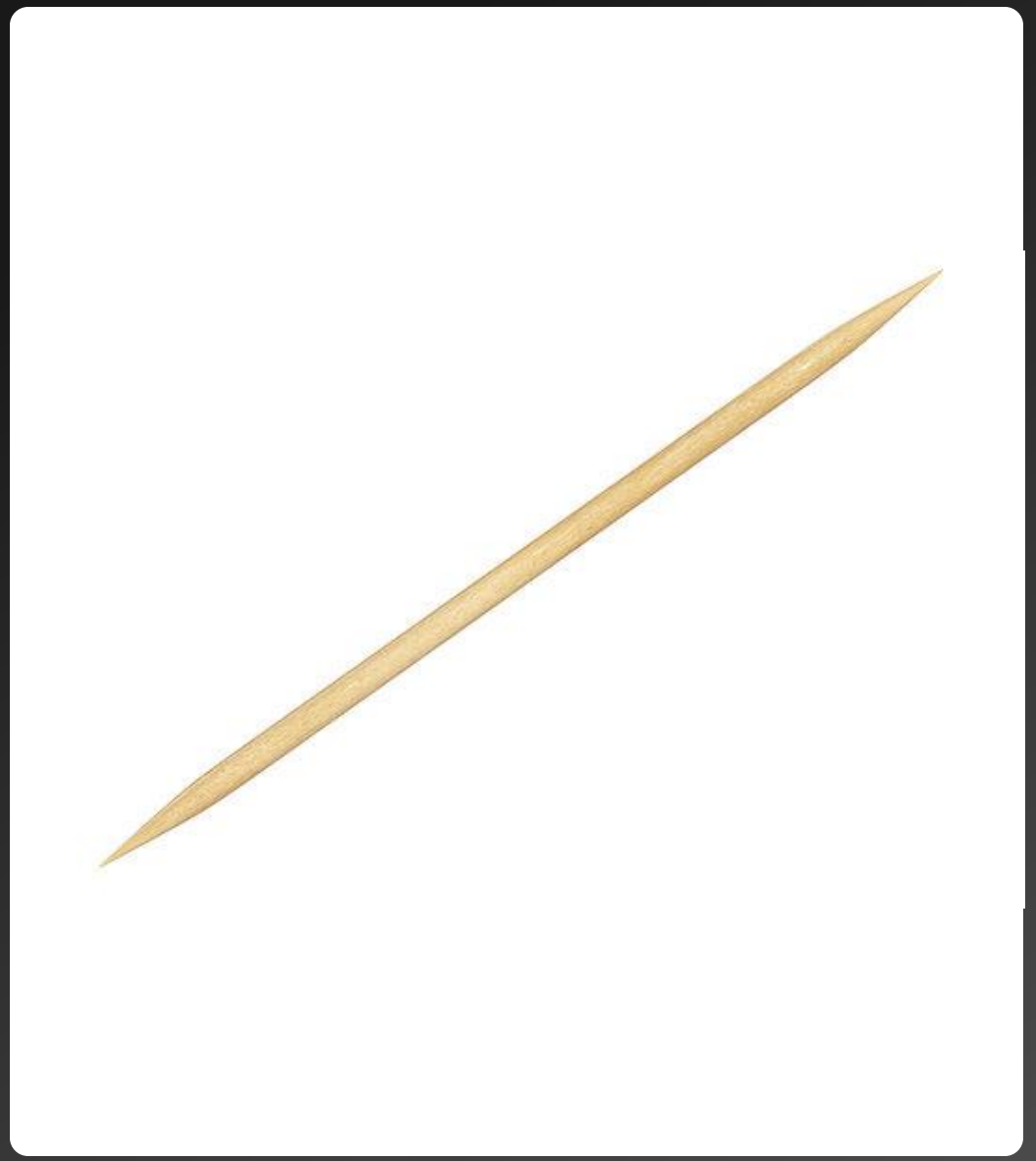
Our researchers:

- 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



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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

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Trend: AI & Trust

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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.

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Image source: Microsoft Stock Photos

AI & Trust

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

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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.

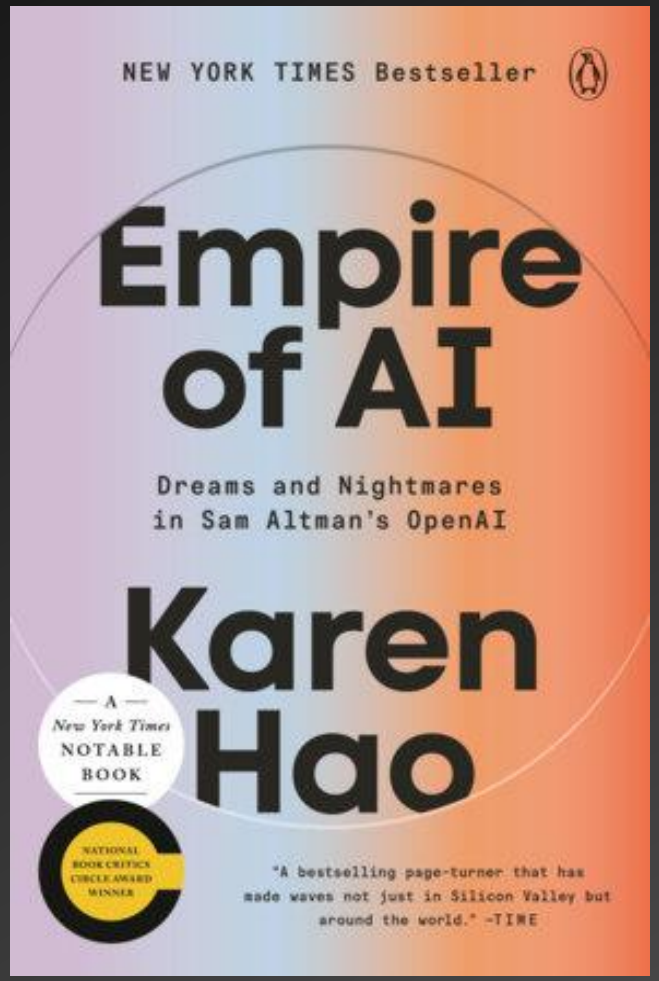

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Image source: Penguin Random House

Trend: Nostalgia & Retro Culture

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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

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Image source: Microsoft Stock Photos

Nostalgia & Retro Culture

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

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Source: Amazon.com

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

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Trend: Authenticity

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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.

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Authenticity

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

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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.

Image source: Tesla

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Trend: Affordability & Financial Anxiety

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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

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Affordability & Financial Anxiety

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

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Affordability & Financial Anxiety

Nostalgia reduces psychological importance of 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

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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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