



The New Rules of Retail Trust in the Age of AI

Transparency, fairness and control are shaping whether consumers embrace or reject AI-driven shopping experiences

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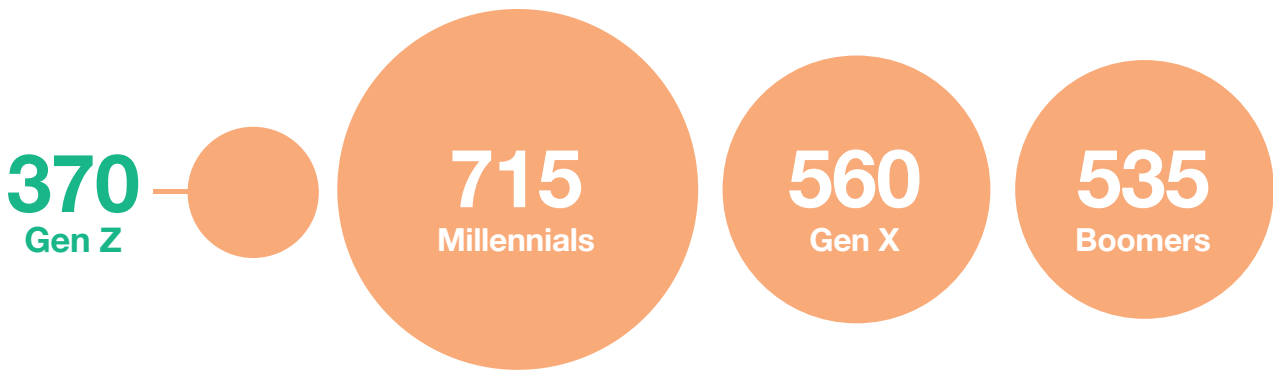
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METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a custom survey that was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll Feb. 5–7, 2026, among 2,180 American adults aged 18 and over.

This research comprises 370 Gen Z (ages 18–29), 715 Millennials (ages 30–45), 560 Gen X (ages 46–61) and 535 Boomers (ages 62 and older).



OVERVIEW



SERHII/ADOBE STOCK

Shopping in 2026 is becoming more cautious, more calculated and increasingly shaped by complexity. Americans are placing greater weight on both price and decision-making, with nearly three-quarters (74%) agreeing: “Price plays a bigger role in my shopping decisions than it did 12 months ago,” alongside 73% who say: “Being an informed shopper matters more to me now than it did 12 months ago.” At the same time, traditional digital shopping influences are losing some of their appeal. Social media is becoming less attractive as a place to shop (69%), trust in influencer recommendations continues to soften (68%) and frustration with pricing dynamics is rising, as nearly three-quarters of Americans (73%) agree: “Algorithm-driven pricing makes it hard to know if I’m getting the best deal.”

Within this environment, AI shopping agents are quickly moving into everyday consumer behavior. Over a third of Americans (36%) report they have already tried or currently use AI-powered shopping tools. Shoppers are drawn less by novelty and more by practical benefits, especially spotting pricing inconsistencies (66%), helping stay on budget (60%) and narrowing choices faster (60%). Yet even as usage grows, unease remains a defining tension. Nearly three-quarters (73%) agree: “I feel uneasy about how AI might use my personal shopping data.”

Even as AI tools gain traction, physical retail continues to hold a powerful advantage. Majorities of Americans say stores reduce decision fatigue (63%), provide greater confidence in evaluating product quality (81%) and feel more socially engaging (70%). Pricing perceptions further reinforce this preference, with 71% agreeing: “Personalized online pricing makes me want to shop in stores, where everyone pays the same price.” Rather than replacing traditional shopping experiences, AI is increasingly becoming a tool consumers use to navigate a retail landscape that feels more dynamic, more complex and at times more uncertain.



THE AI-ASSISTED ECONOMY: SHOPPING UNDER PRESSURE



TANG MING TUNG/GETTY

69% of Americans agree, **“Social media is becoming less appealing to me as a place to shop.”**

Americans are approaching shopping with greater caution and consideration. Nearly three-quarters (74%) say: “Price plays a bigger role in my shopping decisions than it did 12 months ago,” with Millennials reporting even stronger intensity (79%). But price sensitivity is only part of the story.

Consumers are also becoming more intentional, as 73% agree: “Being an informed shopper matters more to me now than it did 12 months ago,” rising sharply among Millennials (81%).

At the same time, traditional sources of shopping inspiration are losing some of their influence. Over two-thirds of Americans (69%) say social media is becoming less appealing as a place to shop. Trust in influencer recommendations is also softening, with 68% saying they are less likely to trust influencers than they were a year ago.

Layered onto this skepticism is growing frustration with pricing itself. Nearly three-quarters of Americans (73%) agree: “Algorithm-driven pricing makes it hard to know if I’m getting the best deal.” For many, pricing systems designed for personalization increasingly feel like sources of uncertainty.



AI SHOPPING AGENTS BECOME A NEW LAYER OF RETAIL

51%

of Americans agree, **“I’d rather use AI-powered shopping tools to reduce the risk of making a bad purchase.”**

62% Gen Z, Millennials

Against this backdrop, AI shopping agents are moving rapidly into consumer behavior. Over a third of Americans (36%) report they have already tried or currently use AI-powered shopping tools.

Adoption is being driven by more than curiosity. Many consumers see AI as a way to shop with greater confidence. In fact, 51% of Americans agree: “I’d rather use AI-powered shopping tools to reduce the risk of making a bad purchase.” As pricing becomes more complex and purchase decisions feel higher-stakes, AI is increasingly viewed as a tool for smarter decision-making rather than just convenience.

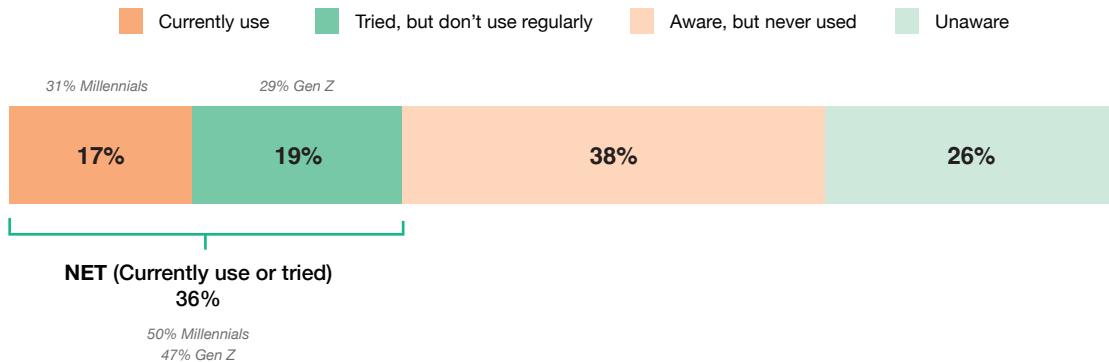
Current users represent 17% of Americans, with usage more common among parents¹ (34%), Millennials (31%), urban consumers (28%) and high-income earners² (22%).

Even as engagement grows, the category continues to evolve quickly. Thirty-eight percent of Americans say they are aware of AI shopping agents but have never used one, while more than a quarter (26%) report they were not aware of these tools prior to the survey.

AI shopping agents are becoming familiar, though still far from universal.

¹ Parent of a child under 18; ² Those earning \$100,000 or more annually

Which of the following best describes your experience with AI shopping agents (e.g., Google AI Mode shopping, Perplexity Shopping, Amazon Rufus, etc.)?














WHY CONSUMERS FIND AI APPEALING

What about AI shopping agents (e.g., Google AI Mode shopping, Perplexity Shopping, Amazon Rufus, etc.) seems appealing to you as a consumer?

(Somewhat/Very Appealing)

	Americans	Millennials
 Spotting pricing inconsistencies or discrepancies across retailers	66%	76%
 Simple, easy-to-use interfaces	63%	73%
 Help staying on budget and controlling spending	60%	72%
 Narrowing down choices faster	60%	68%
 A more seamless experience without switching between multiple apps or platforms	58%	68%
 Recommendations that feel less biased than influencers	57%	69%
 A more personalized, curated approach to product discovery	56%	71%
 Having the tedious parts of shopping handled for me	55%	69%
 Access to exciting new technology	52%	67%

Consumers are drawn to AI shopping agents for clear and practical reasons, as they express strongest interest in capabilities that simplify decisions and reduce uncertainty.

Two-thirds (66%) say spotting pricing inconsistencies across retailers is appealing. Similar majorities highlight help staying on budget (60%), narrowing choices faster (60%) and simple interfaces (63%). More than half of Americans (58%) also say a seamless experience without switching between multiple apps or platforms is appealing, reinforcing that convenience remains a core driver.

Many consumers also see AI as a potential counterbalance to perceived bias. Fifty-seven percent say recommendations that feel less biased than influencers are appealing, while 56% say a more personalized, curated approach to product discovery is appealing, suggesting shoppers value relevance alongside efficiency.

Yet personalization remains a defining tension. A majority (54%) of Americans find “allowing the tool to access my shopping history and preferences” unappealing. Reinforcing this discomfort, nearly three-quarters of Americans (73%) agree: “I feel uneasy about how AI might use my personal shopping data.”



YOUNGER CONSUMERS TRUST AI MORE THAN STORE ASSOCIATES

Trust in AI shopping agents is highly contextual. Consumers express greater confidence when recommendations feel grounded in familiarity. Over half of Americans (56%), including 65% of Millennials, agree: “I trust an AI shopping agent’s recommendation more when it suggests a brand I’ve encountered in real life.” At the same time, many Americans now express meaningful confidence in AI-driven guidance itself. Forty-five percent agree: “I trust an AI agent to make a better product recommendation than an in-store associate,” a sentiment led by younger generations:

- Gen Z – 54%
- Millennials – 60%
- Gen X – 42%
- Boomers – 25%

Confidence in AI recommendations skews heavily younger. Younger consumers are also more likely to actively use AI tools during shopping experiences, with majorities of Gen Z (52%) and Millennials (55%) saying they use AI in-store for real-time help (compared to 39% overall), suggesting trust is reinforced through usage.

45%

of Americans agree, **“I trust an AI agent to make a better product recommendation than an in-store associate.”**

54% Gen Z, 60% Millennials



THE NEW RULES OF TRUST

As AI shopping agents become more common, trust depends less on the technology itself and more on whether the experience feels fair. Two-thirds of Americans (66%), including 74% of Millennials, agree: “If a brand or retailer offered price matching for purchases made through AI shopping agents, I’d trust that brand or retailer more.”

At the same time, consumers express strong sensitivity to perceived influence. Three-quarters (75%) say they would trust brands less if brands were paying to influence AI recommendations, while an identical percentage say such practices would reduce trust in AI agents themselves. These concerns highlight how transparency plays a key role in shaping whether AI-driven commerce feels credible or compromised.

75% of Americans agree, **“If I learned that brands were paying to influence my AI agent, I’d trust those brands less.”**

Yet trust declines when AI shifts from advisor to buyer. Only 39% of Americans trust AI agents to make everyday purchases on their behalf, while just 34% express comfort with AI-driven purchasing for larger items. Even among younger consumers, where trust in recommendations is strongest, willingness to delegate purchasing decisions remains notably low, underscoring how consumers distinguish between AI guidance and AI control. Consumers view AI as a helpful companion rather than a replacement decision-maker.



THE EXPERIENCE GAP DRIVING AI ADOPTION

Consumers' reliance on AI shopping agents appears closely tied to how shopping itself feels. Over two-thirds of Americans (68%) agree: "If pricing and deals were more consistent and transparent online, I would be less likely to use AI shopping agents."

Similarly, 58% say having more time to shop would reduce AI reliance, while 66% say more enjoyable shopping experiences would decrease AI usage. Consumers are embracing AI not only because the technology is advancing, but because shopping increasingly demands more time, effort and comparison.

68%

of Americans agree, **"If pricing and deals were more consistent and transparent online, I would be less likely to use AI shopping agents."**



OSCAR WONG/GETTY



OFFLINE SHOPPING GAINS APPEAL

Physical retail continues to deliver distinct advantages for consumers. Majorities of Americans say stores reduce decision fatigue (“I experience less ‘decision fatigue’ when shopping in a store than when shopping online,” 63%), feel more socially engaging (70%), and inspire greater confidence in evaluating product quality (“It’s easier for brands to misrepresent product quality online than it is in-store,” 81%). Casual shopping remains firmly rooted in physical environments, with 72% agreeing: “Shopping casually (just for fun) is better in person than online.”

70% of Americans agree, **“Shopping in-store feels like a social activity, even when I’m shopping alone.”**

Digital fatigue is emerging as an additional driver. More than half of Americans (52%) say online shopping makes it difficult to reduce their screen time, reinforcing the appeal of physical stores as a break from constant digital engagement.

Consumers also signal strong preference for retailers that offer experiences beyond simple transaction. More than six in ten Americans (61%) say they prefer retailers that host in-store events, rising sharply among Millennials (70%) and Gen Z (67%). Pricing perceptions amplify this preference, with 71% agreeing: “Personalized online pricing makes me want to shop in stores, where everyone pays the same price.”

Positive store experiences are increasingly shaping cross-channel behavior. Eighty-one percent of Americans say a great in-store experience makes them more confident trying new products from that brand online. Retailer outreach also proves influential, with 71% of Americans, including 77% of Millennials, saying they are more likely to visit a physical store when a brand actively promotes it.

Physical stores remain powerful not simply as channels of purchase, but as environments that build confidence, engagement and long-term brand relationships.



AI AS A GATEWAY TO RETAIL ENGAGEMENT

Printed catalogs continue to play a meaningful role in consumer decision-making. Sixty-four percent of Americans say receiving printed catalogs makes them feel like more informed consumers.

Interestingly, AI may reinforce rather than replace these traditional channels. Nearly half of Americans (49%) say they would consider signing up for printed catalogs or retailer communications if recommended by an AI shopping agent. The same percentage say they would consider signing up for digital communications if recommended by AI, highlighting AI's potential role as a broader engagement gateway. Rather than competing with stores and print, AI is simply becoming another part of how consumers shop.

49%

of Americans agree, **“If an AI shopping agent recommended it, I would consider signing up for a brand’s printed catalog or mailers.”**

56% Gen Z, 59% Millennials



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ABOUT THIS REPORT



The Harris Poll is one of the longest-running surveys in the U.S., tracking public opinion, motivations, and social sentiment since 1963. Now part of Harris Insights & Analytics, we provide market intelligence that helps businesses and policymakers make informed decisions. To learn more, visit <https://theharrispoll.com>.



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