The Harris Poll

Return of Touch

The Human Advantage

How Consumer Desire for More Tactile, IRL Experiences Continues to Transform Marketing

PRESENTED BY

Quad

What's Inside

Executive Summary 3

Return of Touch: The Human Advantage

- **The Digital Reset:** Consumers Continue to Seek Relief by Disconnecting 4
- **The Touch Advantage:** Physical Media, Packaging and Product Details Create Trust 6
- **The Rise of Destination Shopping** 9
- **Human by Design:** Consumers Set the Terms for AI 12

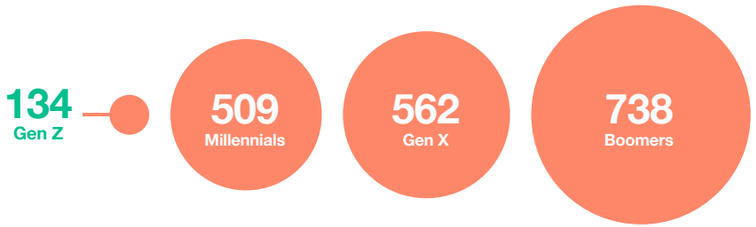
COVER IMAGE: D3SIGN/GETTY

OZGURCANKAYA/GETTY

Methodology

This study was conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of Quad from July 23 to August 12, 2026, among 2,004 U.S. adults ages 18 and older. This year's wave includes 134 Gen Z (ages 18-29), 509 Millennials (ages 30-45), 562 Gen X (ages 46-61) and 738 Boomers (ages 62 and older). Data are weighted where necessary by age, gender, region, race/ethnicity, household income, education, marital status, size of household, employment status and political party affiliation to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within +/- 3.0 percentage points using a 95% confidence interval. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

This research is the second year of a multi-year study, with trended questions revealing consistent beliefs from year one. It also references findings from a similar study conducted from January 16 to February 5, 2025, among 2,068 U.S. adults ages 18 and older. Throughout the report, respondents are interchangeably called Americans / consumers, with both terms referring to the total sample from the survey.



Executive Summary

TOM WERNER/GETTY

After a year of AI acceleration and digital fatigue, Americans are continuing to stage a Return of Touch (RoT), seeking out brands and experiences that are tactile, human and intentional.

Digital detoxing continues to improve mental health among Gen Z and drives desire for intentional brand engagement.

- Eight in 10 Gen Zers say, “Taking breaks from social media improves my mental health” (+6 points since 2025).
- Human touch is especially important to young adults, with two-thirds of Gen Z desiring packaging (67%) to feel “human,” and six in 10 expressing similar sentiments for online ads (62%), and catalogs (60%).

Physical and print touchpoints are still key for creating credibility, memorability and conversion.

- Consistent with last year, roughly eight in 10 (79%) Americans say touching and feeling products is essential to their purchase decisions, while 71% continue to say experiencing a brand in-store deepens their connection and loyalty to it.

The future of physical retail is a destination for discovery, sensory engagement and community.

- Nearly seven in 10 (69%) Americans report going out of their way for an in-person shopping experience, with unique products (46%), food and beverage areas (42%) and popular “must-see” locations (34%) transforming retail from simple transactions into memorable destinations.

Retail is grounded in people-to-people moments; Americans believe AI integration should be convenient, transparent, controllable and human-supported.

- While younger generations show greater AI openness, Americans are vigilant of brands’ AI use, with nearly three-quarters (74%) wanting guarantees that their data will not be sold, 73% desiring AI features they can turn off and only 38% trusting AI-driven dynamic pricing.

The Digital Reset: Consumers Continue to Seek Relief by Disconnecting

For consumers, digital convenience is increasingly accompanied by digital fatigue. As news feeds, social media and AI become more embedded in daily life, Americans are looking for ways to reclaim their time and live in the present. This is not a rejection of technology but a call for brands to create interactions that feel more intentional, human and restorative.

Digital fatigue is shaping how consumers want to engage in everyday moments.

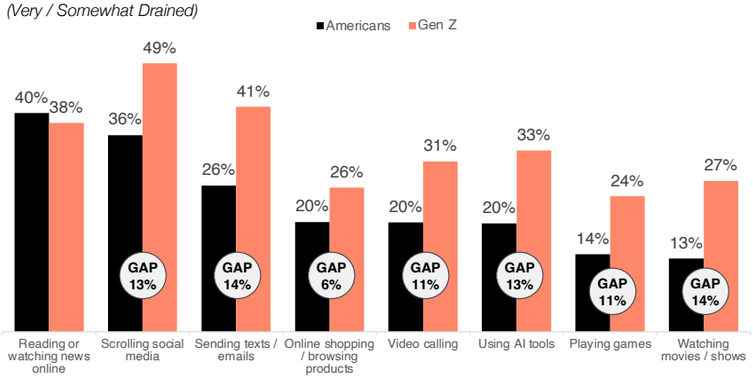
With the oversaturation of digital activities in today's modern lifestyle, it's no surprise that **80% of Americans say they're drawn to real-world experiences that don't revolve around screens**. When asked how the following digital activities typically make them feel, 40% of Americans say reading or watching news online leaves them feeling drained, while 36% say the same about scrolling social media.

Gen Zers feel the burden of digital life most acutely: Nearly half (49%) say social scrolling makes them feel drained (vs. 35% of Millennials, 36% of Gen X and 30% of Boomers). Digital fatigue also extends beyond feeds, as 41% of Gen Z say texting and emailing is draining (vs. 26% of Americans) and 33% say the same of AI tools (vs. 20% of Americans).

WESTEND61/GETTY

In the past year, how have the following digital activities typically made you feel?

(Very / Somewhat Drained)



**Gaps 5% or above are noted only. Percentages may vary slightly due to rounding.*

With over eight in 10 (82%) Gen Z reporting improved mental health from social media breaks — a 6 percentage-point increase over last year — young adults reveal the increasing benefit and importance of unplugging and experiencing life in the moment. Intentional, tactile engagement from brands fills Gen Z's desire for a "feel of the real," with roughly six in 10 young adults seeking a feeling of human touch around product packaging (67%), online ads (62%) and catalogs (60%).

In your opinion, how important is it that the following brand experiences feel "human" (e.g., human-made/designed, involves real people, etc.)?

(Very / Moderately Important)

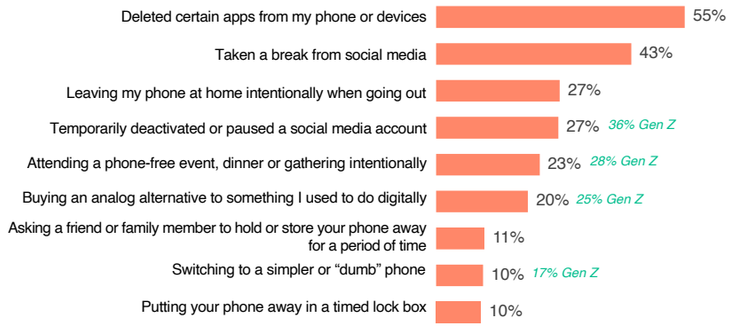
	Gen Z
Packaging	67%
In-store experiences or events	62%
Online advertisements	62%
Catalogs	60%
In-store window displays	59%
Television advertisements	58%
Social media advertisements	55%
Physical mail	55%

The Digital Reset: Consumers Continue to Seek Relief by Disconnecting

Americans are actively changing their relationships with technology.

As digital fatigue forces Americans to stop and reassess their digital consumption, **75% believe having a simpler relationship with technology feels like a lifestyle upgrade rather than a sacrifice**. 53% admit to intentionally leaving their phone at home or having it powered off to be present with others as one of the many tactics to reduce overall screen time. More than half (55%) report deleting certain apps from their phones or devices, and 43% have taken a break from social media — rising to 48% of Millennials. Temporarily deactivating or pausing a social media account is also common practice, with over a quarter (27%) of Americans doing so to reduce their digital consumption, soaring to over a third (36%) of Gen Z.

Have you done any of the following to reduce your digital presence or time online?
(Net "Have done this")



Young adults are taking more intentional forms of disconnection, with 74% of Gen Z wishing they could disconnect from digital devices more easily. A quarter of Gen Z report experimenting with analog alternatives such as a paper planner, physical camera or printed photos (25% vs. 20% of Americans) and nearly a fifth (17% vs. 10% of Americans) have even tried switching to a "dumb" phone that only allows basic calls and texts. With seven in 10 Gen Zers planning to pick up more hands-on hobbies this year to reduce screen time, it's no wonder that young adults are craving a simpler life.

High-tech, high-touch.

Americans are ultimately redefining what they want from brands, starting with a return of touch over screens. Finding balance between technology and in-person moments is key, with over eight in 10 (83%) Americans valuing brands that feel human and authentic in a world saturated with AI and digital content. **With nearly two-thirds (64%) of consumers expressing they'd pay a premium for products that are guaranteed to be human-designed or handcrafted**, brands would be foolish to dismiss the power of touch. In an AI-saturated world, touch has become the differentiator.

ALEKSANDARNAKIC/GETTY

The Touch Advantage:
Physical Media, Packaging and Product Details Create Trust

As digital content becomes easier to generate and harder to verify, physical touchpoints take on renewed importance. Print, packaging and collectible objects offer consumers something increasingly valuable: intentionality, quality and authenticity.

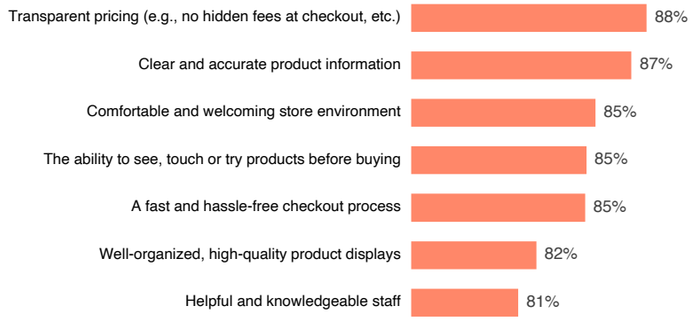
Touch remains central to confidence, understanding and loyalty.

Tangible brand experiences continue to leave lasting trust and memorability. Similar to last year, approximately **eight in 10 (79%) Americans say touching and feeling products is essential to their purchase decisions**. While 87% of consumers name clear and accurate product information as a top in-store priority that boosts brand confidence, a notable 85% also say the ability to see, touch or try a product before buying is important, underscoring a critical confidence advantage to in-store shopping.

Physical retail also strengthens brand resonance, as seven in 10 **(71%) say experiencing a brand in-store deepens their connection and loyalty to it (on par with last year)**, and that seeing how a brand shows up in a physical space helps them understand it better (70%). The in-store experience is even more powerful for lasting brand memorability, as 82% of Americans say that when a brand clearly puts careful consideration in its stores, they assume it puts similar care into its products.

When shopping in a physical retail store, how important is each of the following in making you feel confident buying from a brand?

(Very / Moderately Important)



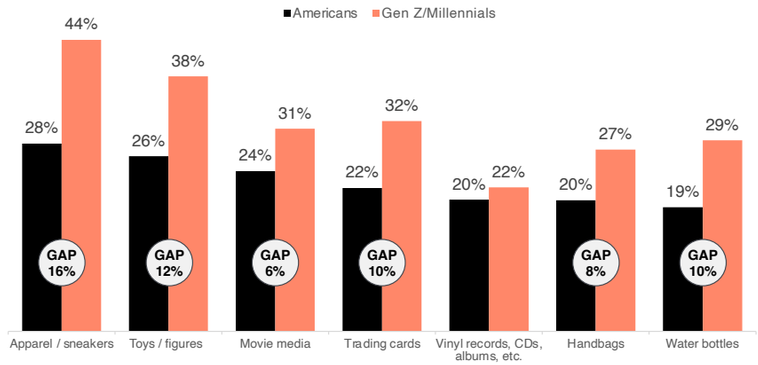
Physical ownership offers a meaningful counterweight to digital life.

84% of Americans say owning physical items feels more satisfying than owning digital items. When asked the reasons behind tangible collections, consumers point to nostalgia (46%), the enjoyment of touching and interacting with physical objects (42%) and self-expression (40%) as top reasons for collecting, revealing how sentimental and creative value are stronger collecting motivators than investment or resale value (28%).

Young adults particularly associate collecting with living in the present, as **nearly eight in 10 (79%) Gen Z say that collecting physical objects helps them feel more connected to the real world**. Yet, collecting is far from niche: **68% of Americans currently collect at least one type of physical item**, with apparel/sneakers (28%), toys/figures (26%), movie media (24%) and trading cards (22%) among the leading categories. Gen Z and Millennials overindex across all categories, underscoring how collecting is widely normalized among younger generations, with apparel/sneakers (44%), toys/figures (38%) and trading cards (32%) being collected the most.

More specifically, which of the following physical items, if any, do you currently collect?

(% Selected)



**Gaps 5% or above are noted only. Percentages may vary slightly due to rounding.*

The Touch Advantage: Physical Media, Packaging and Product Details Create Trust

Print continues to break through digital noise and drive action, especially among younger adults.

Similar to a year ago, half of Americans show interest in brand mailers or postcards with exclusive offers (51%) and print magazines (51%), and 49% are interested in local or niche publications. The trended insights are further backed by data this year, which reveals that physical materials are not just interesting, they are influential: **73% of Americans say mail, print materials or catalogs could prompt them to seek out more information about a brand, and 72% say they make them likely to visit a physical store**. Younger generations are especially influenced by print, with Gen Z and Millennials overindexing across all actions and nearly eight in 10 reporting they would seek more information (79%) or make a trip to a physical location (77%).

How likely or unlikely would physical mail, print materials or catalogs from brands directly influence you to take the following actions?

(Very / Somewhat Likely)

	Americans	Gen Z / Millennials	
Seek out more information about the brand	73%	79%	GAP 5%
Visit the brand's physical store	72%	77%	GAP 5%
Make a purchase from the brand's website	68%	73%	GAP 5%
Save items for future gift ideas or wishlists	67%	73%	GAP 7%
Choose this brand over competitors	66%	72%	GAP 5%
Sign up for brand communications or loyalty programs	63%	72%	GAP 9%
Share or discuss the brand with others	60%	70%	GAP 9%
Display or save the materials as inspiration	57%	66%	GAP 9%
Spend more than you initially planned	55%	65%	GAP 10%
Follow the brand on social media	46%	63%	GAP 17%

**Gaps 5% or above are noted only. Percentages may vary slightly due to rounding.*

LEON/GETTY

71% Americans

"Print catalogs or magazines feel more authentic than digital campaigns."

63% Americans

"I wish more brands focused on surprising me through mail."

70% Gen Z/Millennials

54% Americans

"I'm more likely to buy from brands that create unique unboxing experiences."

70% Gen Z/Millennials

Print can also bridge channels, as 68% of Americans say it could influence them to purchase from a brand's website, while 66% say it could lead them to choose one brand over competitors. **Personalized print continues to strike particular value, with over seven in 10 Americans (73%) reporting they enjoy receiving physical mail from brands when it feels personalized (+4 points YoY)** and roughly two-thirds (64%) continuing to say that they look forward to receiving catalogs.

Packaging is both proof of quality and a storytelling platform.

Functional clarity of packaging is of top importance when consumers are considering a purchase, as 85% value clear product information and easy-to-follow directions, while 80% value clear ingredient or material details. Quality is also communicated through the physical experience and highly valued among Americans, with over seven in 10 (72%) valuing high-quality packaging materials and finishes, and 70% considering the overall look and design as important.

When deciding whether to purchase a product, how important are the following aspects of its packaging?
(Very / Moderately Important)

Consumers further reveal that attention to tangible details builds brand trust prior to purchase, with over eight in 10 (84%) reporting that they trust a brand more when it pays attention to elements such as packaging, textures and finishes. Especially in 2026, when three-quarters (75%) of Americans already believe much of what they see from brands feels overly polished or artificial, it's no surprise that consumers can easily spot when brands take the extra step to make them feel seen.

Yet in today's competitive retail space, Americans expect packaging to do more than just contain a product, as **64% expect it to contribute to a brand's story, while over half (55%) say packaging has influenced them to buy a product**. The data is undeniable: Print and packaging are not secondary touchpoints. Rather, they are tangible storytelling opportunities that can create lasting memorability long after the purchase.

D3SIGN/GETTY

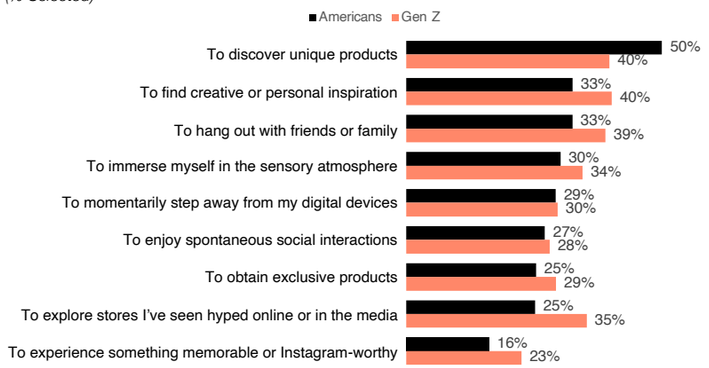
The Rise of Destination Shopping

Physical retail remains uniquely positioned to deliver what online shopping cannot fully replicate: touch, discovery, sensory engagement and community. The modern retail store is most impactful when it's designed not just as a place that handles transactions, but a third space that rewards exploration and gives people a reason to stay.

Discovery is the core draw of in-person shopping.

The opportunity to explore and discover remains a key reason why consumers choose to shop in-person. **Consistent with last year, unique products (50%) remain the leading reason why Americans shop at a physical store location.** Along with exploration, a third of consumers shop in-person to seek creative or personal inspiration (33%) or an opportunity to spend time with friends and family (33%), with both reasons resonating among four in 10 Gen Zers.

Why do you look forward to in-person shopping experiences?
(% Selected)



Younger adults are especially motivated by social-media-driven retail discovery: 35% of Gen Z look forward to exploring stores they have seen hyped online or in the media, while nearly a quarter (23%) seek out experiences that feel memorable or Instagram-worthy. Retail hype scores especially high among Gen Z and Millennials, with two-thirds (67%) expressing that shopping at a hyped retailer or pop-up feels like being part of a cultural moment (vs. 40% of Gen X/Boomers). The anticipation of waiting in line outside a hyped retailer is also part of the fun, according to 57% of younger generations (23% of Gen X/Boomers), while nearly six in 10 (59%) believe that waiting in line for a product release makes the experience feel more exciting (vs. 27% Gen X/Boomers).

Physical retail also provides a break from the digital world and invites consumers to connect in real-time: 30% of Americans look forward to the sensory atmosphere (34% of Gen Z) and 29% value the opportunity to step away from their devices (34% of Millennials). Two-thirds (67%) of Americans say they would spend time exploring a store even if they did not plan to buy anything, rising to nearly three-fourths (74%) of Gen Z/Millennials. With 77% of Americans saying browsing physical stores feels more like an adventure than shopping online, the data underscores how consumers come for the allure of in-person discovery and stay for the vibes.

77%
Americans

"Browsing physical stores **feels more like an adventure** than shopping online."
82% Gen Z/Millennials

70%
Americans

"Seeing how a brand **shows up in a physical space** helps me understand it better."
77% Gen Z/Millennials

65%
Americans

"I remember special store environments **long after the purchase itself**."
73% Gen Z/Millennials

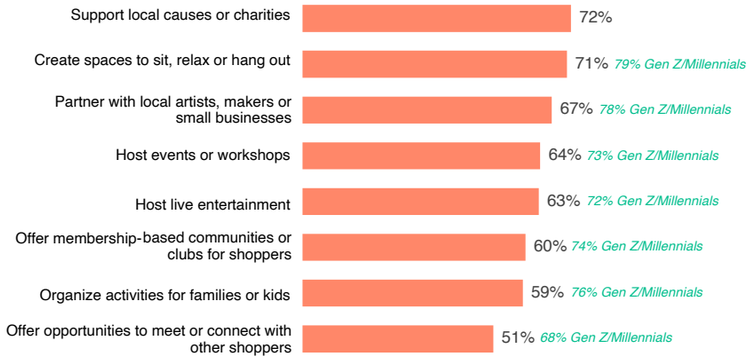
MASKOT/GETTY

The most compelling stores create room for participation and community.

In 2026, retail's role is not just a point of sale but a valued point of community and connection. When brands go the extra mile with their physical experience, nearly eight in 10 (79%) Americans say they take notice. Local impact in particular makes long-lasting impressions, as Americans are likely to shop at stores that support local causes or charities (72%) and partner with local artists, makers or small businesses (67%). Community resonates especially among Millennials, with 83% reporting that stores that bring people together make shopping feel more meaningful (vs. 70% Gen Z, 73% Gen X, 60% Boomers).

If a physical retail store offered the following experiences, how likely or unlikely would you be to shop there?

(Very / Somewhat Likely)



83%
Gen Z/Millennials

"I like when stores include areas to sit, **work or meet up with friends**."
(vs. 64% Gen X/Boomers)

78%
Gen Z/Millennials

"I prefer stores that **encourage people to stay and explore**, not just shop quickly."
(vs. 71% Gen X/Boomers)

75%
Gen Z/Millennials

"**I wish more brands had cafes in their stores** so I could shop but also drink and eat if I wanted to."
(vs. 59% Gen X/Boomers)

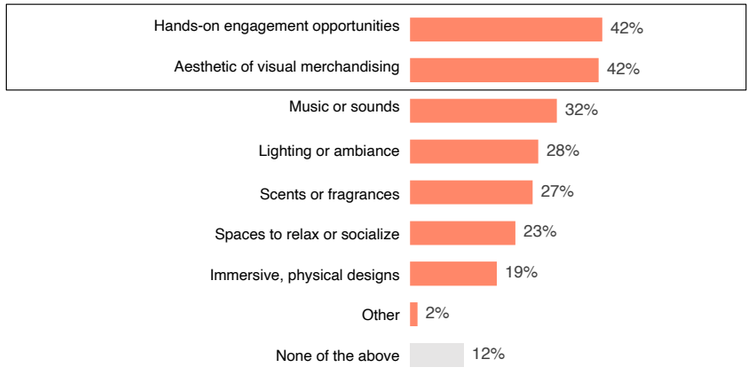
Americans want stores that are designed for lingering, with roughly seven in 10 (71%) reporting they are likely to shop at stores that offer spaces to relax and socialize; a similar proportion (69%) believes that brands should create inviting spaces for friends to gather, relax and have fun while shopping. Well-designed, intentional store spaces alone are powerful enough to draw consumers in, with 63% of Americans saying a store's design alone can convince them to visit, even when they don't need anything, resonating with over three-fourths (76%) of Gen Z/Millennials.

Younger generations especially crave retail "third spaces": Nearly eight in 10 (78%) Gen Z/Millennials prefer stores that encourage shoppers to stay and explore (vs. 71% of Gen X/Boomers), while three-quarters specifically want brands to offer cafes inside their stores to shop and also drink and eat (vs. 59% Gen X/Boomers). In addition, 83% of Gen Z/Millennials enjoy stores with areas to sit, work or meet friends (vs. 64% Gen X/Boomers).

Brands are primed to offer tangible consumer interactions, as Americans report **hands-on engagement — such as trying products, workshops and interactive stations — as one of the most valued in-store experiences (42%)**. Sensory experiences are also impactful connection points brands should consider, including music/sounds (32%), lighting/ambiance (28%) and scents/fragrances (27%). In-store events that encourage consumers to participate, watch or engage also add a meaningful draw, as over six in 10 Americans (64%) say they would be likely to shop at stores hosting workshops, classes, demonstrations or talks; 63% are drawn to stores with live entertainment; another 63% feel more connected to brands that host events or activities in their stores. As brands navigate physical retail in an increasingly digital world, those that combine tactile engagement, local relevance and spaces for people to gather will be best positioned to stand out.

When shopping in physical retail stores, which of the following experiences do you value most?

(Select up to three)



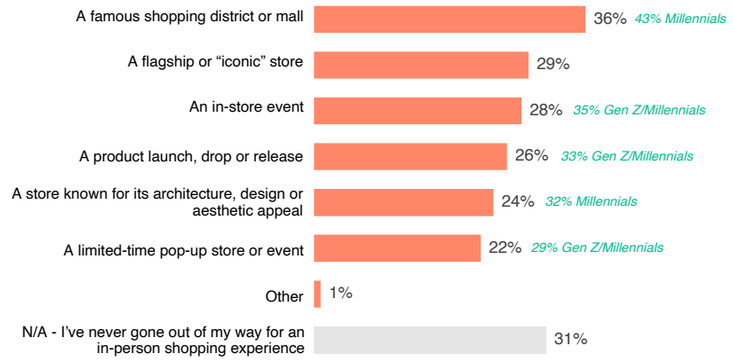
The Rise of Destination Shopping

Destination retail turns shopping into a cultural experience.

Destination shopping is becoming a meaningful way for brands to turn retail into an experience worth seeking out. **Nearly seven in 10 Americans (69%) have gone out of their way for an in-person shopping experience, rising to 84% among Gen Z.** Famous shopping districts or malls (36%), flagship or iconic stores (29%) and in-store events (28%) are among the most common draws for Americans, with Millennials overindexing across nearly every place.

Which of the following places, if any, have you ever gone out of your way to travel for the in-person shopping experience?

(% Selected)



Yet, the strongest components of a true retail destination are those that blend discovery, social spaces and hype in one, as consumers report unique or hard-to-find products (46%), places to eat, drink or linger, such as cafés, restaurants or bars (42%), and popular "must-see" places (34%) as top retail tourism pulls.

MASSIMO RAVERA/GETTY

How likely or unlikely would you be to do the following for a unique or highly anticipated shopping experience?

(Very / Somewhat Likely)

Younger generations are especially willing to invest time for experiences that feel exceptional. **67% of Gen Z and Millennials would attend a product launch or special in-store event (vs. 54% of Americans), while 66% would travel to another city to visit a famous or flagship store (vs. 51%).** These investments ultimately have potential to pay off, as 74% of Americans say physical, in-person store experiences have influenced their behavior in the past year, including prompting immediate purchases (36%), brand recommendations (28%) and return visits to purchase later (28%). For brands, the steps are clear: create retail experiences distinctive enough to draw consumers, engaging enough to make them stay and memorable enough to drive purchases and long-term loyalty.

Human by Design: Consumers Set the Terms for AI

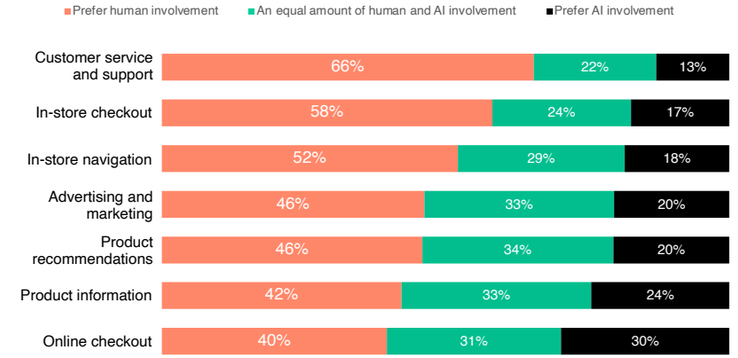
Consumers are open to AI when it makes shopping easier, more relevant or more efficient. But adoption is conditional. Shoppers want to understand where AI is operating, maintain control over how it affects their experience and know that human support remains available when it matters most.

Human involvement is the preferred foundation of shopping.

Consumers shouldn't be misunderstood as completely rejecting technology. Rather, there is opportunity for brands to enhance in-person, tangible moments with modern technology. **With over half (54%) of Americans reporting AI helps them make more time for the parts of life that matter**, consumers recognize the efficiency and convenience that today's technology provides.

That said, Americans prefer human involvement over AI across every shopping interaction measured, especially in customer service and support (66%), in-store checkout (58%) and in-store navigation (52%). The expectation for human-centered experiences is especially strong in the physical world: **80% of Americans say brands that feel human and imperfect stick with them more than those that focus on AI-generated perfection, while 71% believe it is important for in-store experiences and events to feel human**. With two-thirds (66%) of Americans saying they feel overwhelmed by how quickly AI is becoming part of everyday life, it's no wonder that consumers value humanity in brand expression, from television advertising (61%) and window displays (58%) to physical mail (56%) and packaging (54%).

Thinking about shopping, what level of human or AI involvement do you generally prefer?
(Net "Prefer Human Involvement")



Younger consumers are more open to AI but still expect choice.

Younger generations are open to AI simplifying routine tasks, but not at the expense of personal connection, confidence or control. Gen Zers and Millennials express greater openness than older generations for AI-enabled customer service and support (21% vs. 6% Gen X and Boomers), in-store checkout (24% vs. 12% Gen X and Boomers) and product recommendations (26% vs. 15% Gen X and Boomers). However, their strongest preferences for AI are in **utility-led moments, such as online checkout (34%) and product information (29%)**.

SUPER SCOUT/GETTY

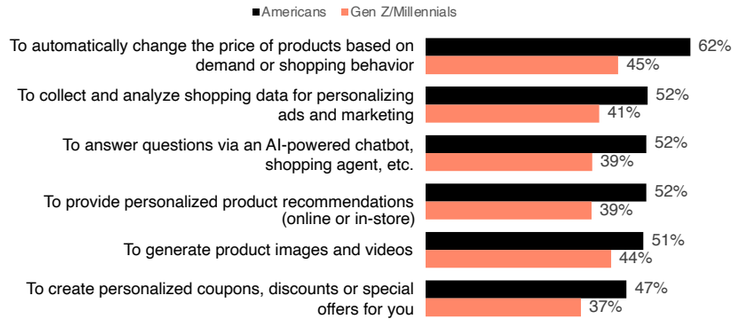
AI's trust ceiling: Fine for coupons, not for your wallet.

With three-quarters (75%) of Americans saying AI-generated content has made it harder to trust what they see when shopping online, establishing brand honesty is table stakes in today's shopping landscape.

Just over half (53%) of Americans trust brands to responsibly use AI to create personalized coupons, discounts or offers. Meanwhile, trust is split for AI-generated product images/videos (49%), product recommendations (48%), AI customer-service agents (48%) and data analysis for personalized marketing (48%). **Americans are particularly sensitive to dynamic pricing, with just 38% trusting brands to use AI to automatically change prices based on demand or shopping behavior.** While Gen Z and Millennials show greater levels of trust across the board, consumers make it clear: trust in AI isn't binary, it depends entirely on what's at stake.

How much do you trust brands to responsibly use AI for the following purposes?

(Slightly trust / Don't trust at all)



CATHERINE DELAHAYE/GETTY

Consumers want AI to be transparent, optional and accountable.

Brands that are upfront about AI use are those that win authenticity. **Over eight in 10 (81%) Americans trust brands more when they're clear about what is AI-generated or not**, with nearly three-quarters (74%) wanting brands to guarantee that their shopping data will not be sold to other companies.

Consumers are receptive to AI use as an assistive tool, but are firm that its presence, purpose and limits should be clearly explained. Nearly seven in 10 (68%) Americans believe AI can improve shopping convenience if designed with their interests in mind. However, allowing consumers to take control of AI capabilities is what ultimately builds receptiveness, as three-fourths (74%) are open to AI recommendations as long as they can easily ignore or turn them off.

When asked which actions consumers want brands to take if AI is used, 73% report interest in the ability to turn AI features such as recommendations, advertising and offers on or off, while 72% want a clear explanation of how AI is used in their shopping experience. Seven in 10 also want transparency of shopping data collection and clear labels for AI-generated images, videos, descriptions and recommendations, while 68% want reassurance that AI is being used to assist, not replace, store and customer-service staff.

For brands that use AI, how interested, if at all, would you be in them taking each of the following actions?

(Very / Moderately Interested)

	All
Guarantee that my shopping data will not be sold to other companies	74%
The ability to turn AI features on or off (e.g., recommendations, ads, offers, etc.)	73%
Clear explanation of how AI is being used in my shopping experience	72%
Clear labeling of AI-generated images or videos	70%
Transparency of shopping data collection (e.g., what is being collected, when it's occurring, etc.)	70%
Clear labeling of AI-generated product descriptions or recommendations	70%
Reassurance that AI is being used to assist store or customer service staff, not replace them	68%

About this Report

The Harris Poll

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.

Quad

Quad (NYSE: QUAD) is a marketing experience, or MX, company that helps brands make direct consumer connections, from household to in-store to online. The company does this through its MX Solutions Suite, a comprehensive range of marketing and print services that seamlessly integrate creative, production and media solutions across online and offline channels. Supported by state-of-the-art technology and data-driven intelligence, Quad simplifies the complexities of marketing by removing friction wherever it occurs along the marketing journey. The company tailors its uniquely flexible, scalable and connected solutions to each client's objectives, driving cost efficiencies, improving speed-to-market, strengthening marketing effectiveness and delivering value on client investments.

Quad employs approximately 10,000 people in 10 countries and serves approximately 2,100 clients including industry leading blue-chip companies that serve both businesses and consumers in multiple industry verticals, with a particular focus on commerce, including retail, consumer packaged goods, and direct-to-consumer; financial services; and health. Quad is ranked among the largest agency companies in the U.S. by *Ad Age*, buoyed by its full-service media agency, Rise, and creative agency, Betty. Quad is also one of the largest commercial printers in North America, according to *Printing Impressions*.

For more information about Quad, including its commitment to operating responsibly, intentional innovation and values-driven culture, visit quad.com.