

The Invisible Advantage:

Five CX Imperatives for AI
That Earns Its Place

2026 CX Imperatives

A Note from Pete Stein

It's my pleasure to introduce this year's Customer Experience Imperatives.

We're now in an era where organizations are investing billions in AI and personalization, yet customer satisfaction isn't keeping pace. The disconnect is striking: only 43% of consumers say it's important for their shopping experiences to be powered by new technology, and just 51% find the personalization they receive genuinely valuable. The money brands are investing in CX isn't generating the returns it should.

The reason is straightforward, even if the solution isn't. **Every company now has access to the same AI tools. Rushing to deploy technology isn't enough to differentiate.** What matters is how companies deploy it: leading with outcomes instead of "innovation theater," solving real customer pain points instead of unintentionally creating new ones, and building trust at every stage of the journey.

This has been the narrative among service providers for a while, but as our research shows, few consistently put it into practice. The ones that do stand to gain the most.

In the following pages, you'll find five imperatives to enhance your strategies around personalization, AI, and loyalty, backed by data that shows the gap between what companies are doing and what consumers actually value.

Customer experience has always been about knowing what your customers need and delivering it effectively. Today's tools give us more ways to do that than ever before. My hope is what follows gives you the clarity to use those tools with intention.

Pete Stein

Global President, Merkle



If you're new to Merkle's CX Imperatives series, welcome.

If you've been here before, welcome back.

The 2026 edition combines our experience and consumer research with something new: real voices. Fifteen customers across eight countries shared their everyday brand interactions with us so we could capture their highs, frustrations, and unmet expectations. This year, we also expanded our survey to Latin America, bringing our reach to 23 countries across four continents.

The result: more perspectives and a deeper look at how consumers think about personalization, AI, and the state of customer experience, exploring not just what the numbers say, but the stories behind them. This report presents a global view of the findings. We'll be publishing future deep dives exploring how results vary across geographies, industries, and demographic segments, so stay tuned for the fuller picture.

Profiling Respondents

Total N=2,500

Individuals who had a qualifying consumer interaction with one or more brand categories in the past 3 months.

Surveys administered in 10 languages.

Region & Country

NAM: 25%



EUR: 25%



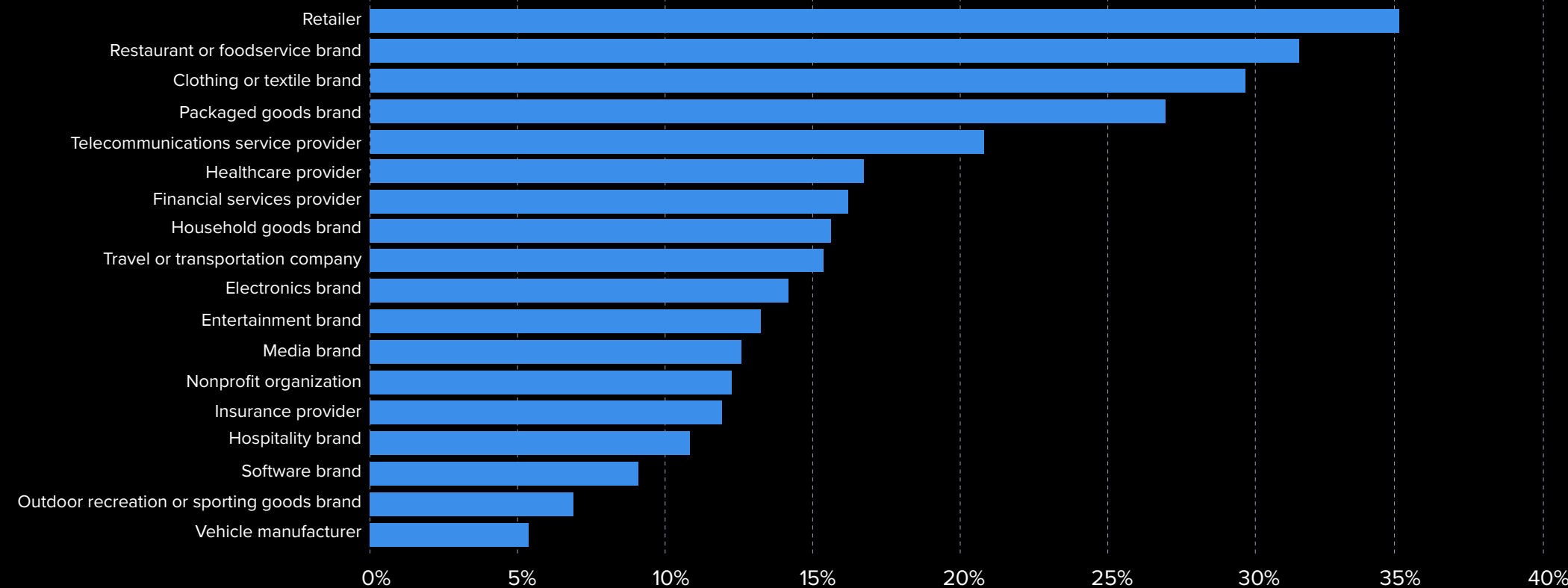
APAC: 25%



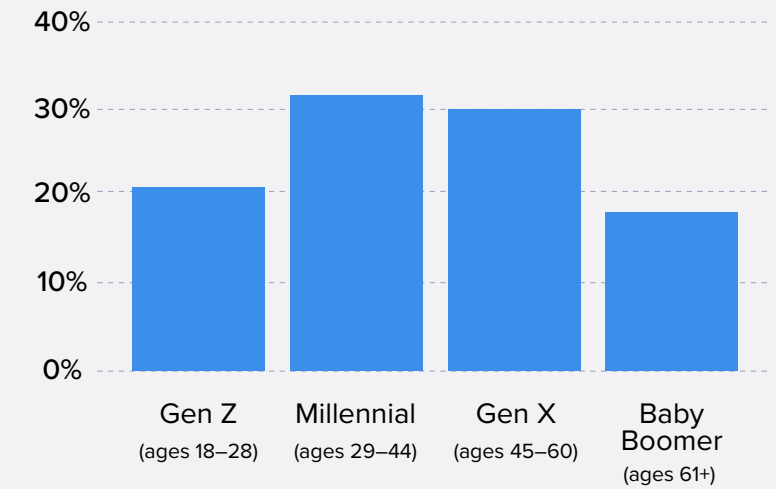
LATAM: 25%



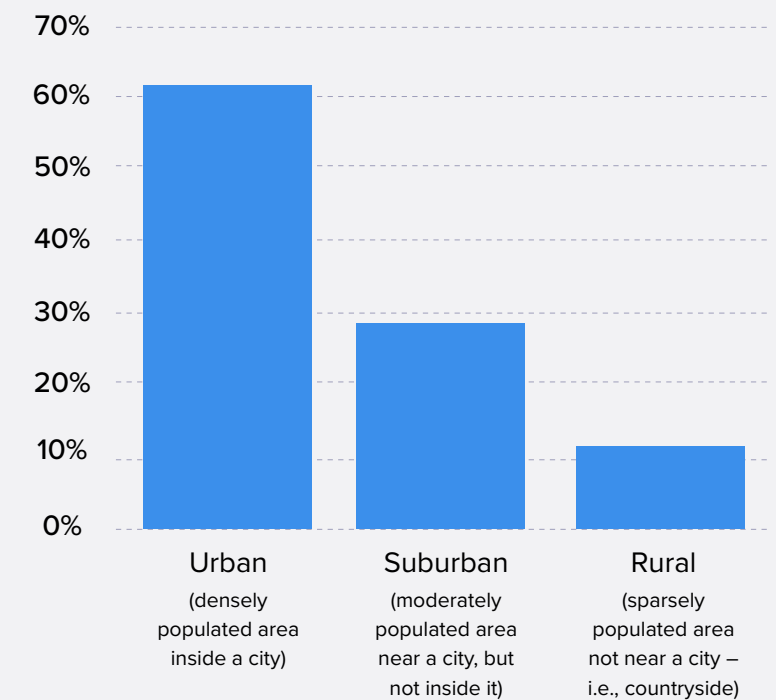
% of respondents interacting with each industry category within the past 3 months



Age Group

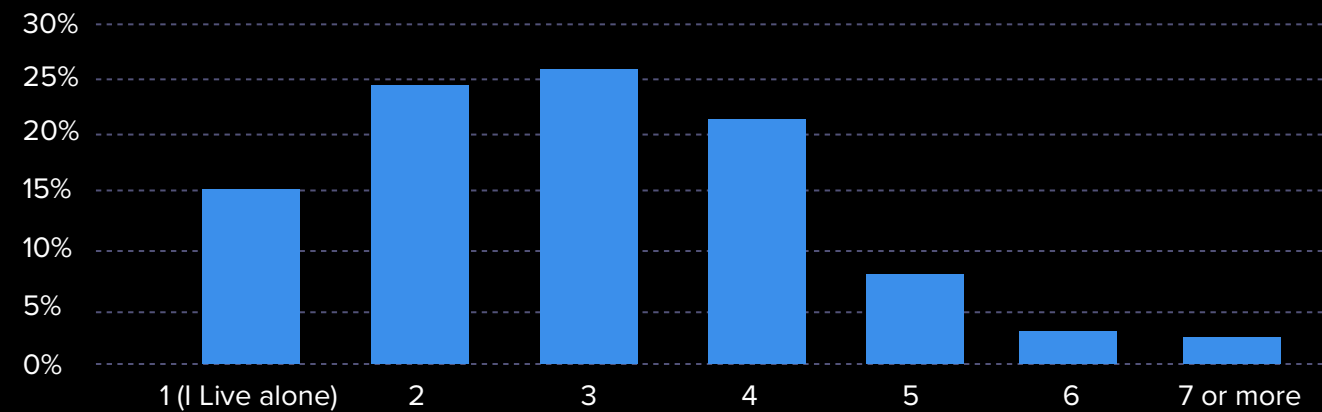


Community Type

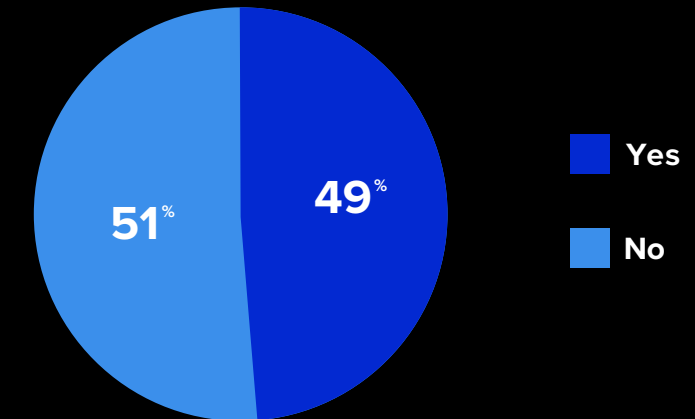


Profiling Respondents: About Their Households

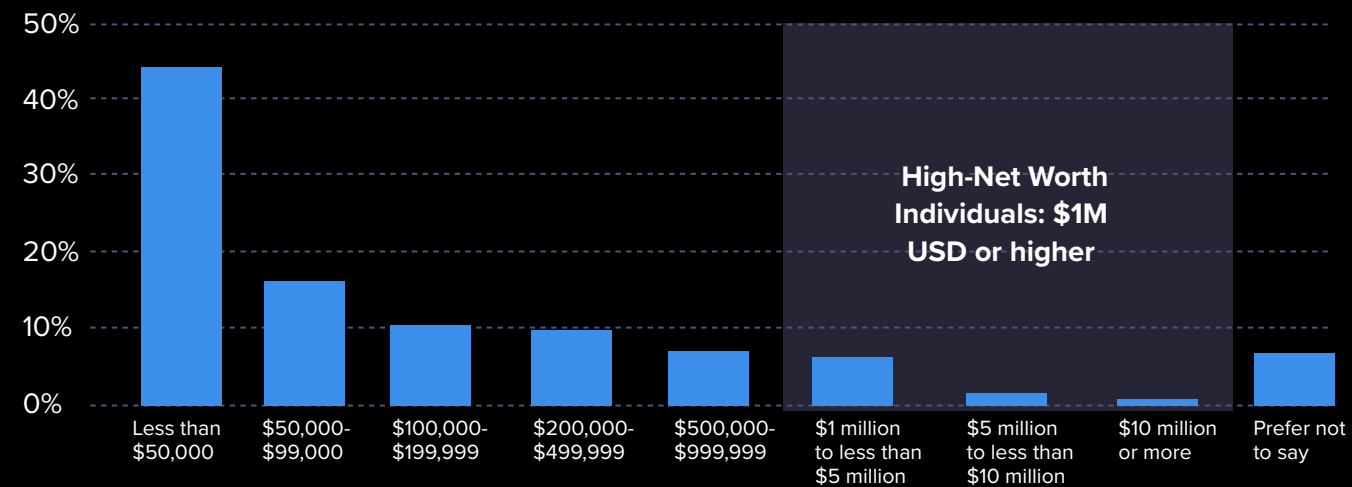
of People in the Household



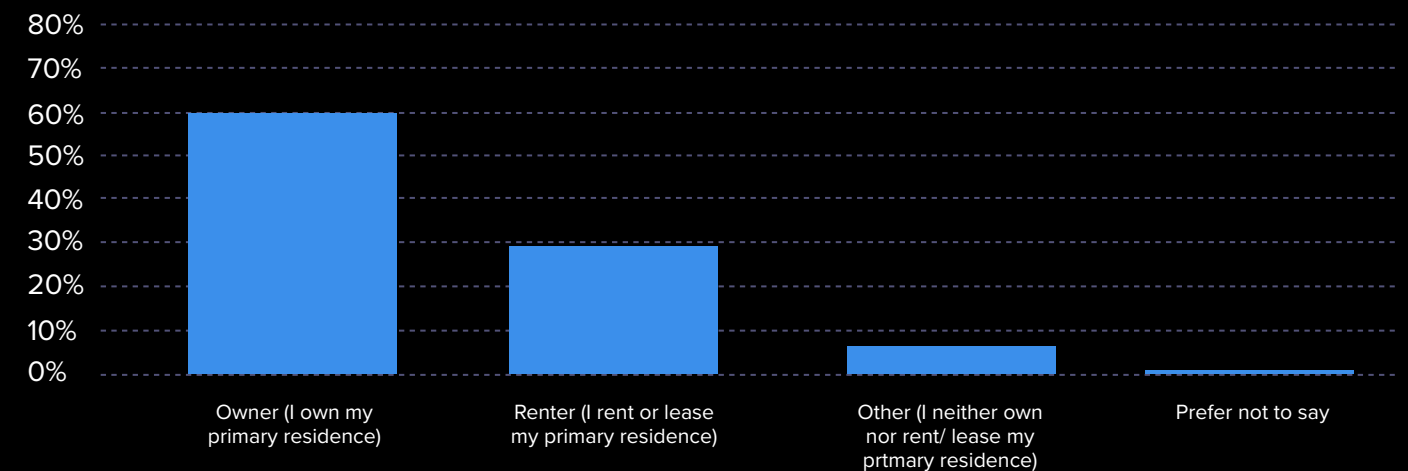
Responsible for Children in the Household



Household Net Worth



Residential Status



Meet the Real Voices You'll Find Throughout the Report.

- 15 respondents participated in mobile ethnography and 1:1 interviews
- Screening requirements:
 - Ages 18+
 - Must have had a qualifying consumer experience with a brand in a qualified category in the past month. Qualifying consumer experiences include any of the following:
 - Shopping (at stores or online)
 - Making purchases
 - Consuming/using products
 - Joining or renewing subscriptions or rewards/loyalty programs
 - Contacting customer service/support
 - Making donations (for nonprofits).
 - Lives in one of the following markets:
 - NAM: US, Canada, Mexico
 - LATAM: Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Chile
 - EUR: Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK
 - APAC: Australia/NZ, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand



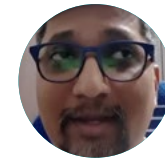
Amber,
53 United States



John,
30 Scotland



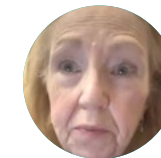
Adriana,
38 Brazil



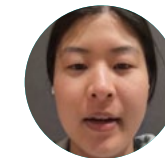
Raghav,
34 India



Rebecca,
33 UK



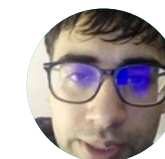
Margaret,
54 Canada



Jenny,
24 Australia



Rodrigo,
28 Chile



Hamza,
27 England



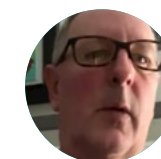
Zohair,
48 Australia



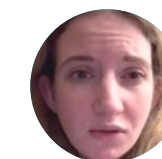
Camille,
44 Canada



Richard,
44 Canada



Jeff,
68 United States



Clare,
31 UK



Martin,
54 Chile

Our Study Reveals Five Critical Imperatives For CX Leaders:

O1	Use personalization to empower your customer’s next move, not replay their last.	pp. 8–16
O2	Move safety and security to center stage.	pp. 18–25
O3	Make technology the enabler, not the experience.	pp. 27–32
O4	Match AI investments to actual customer needs.	pp. 34–42
O5	Turn post-purchase into your pre-purchase advantage.	pp. 44–51

Use personalization
to empower your
customer's next
move, not replay
their last.



01

51% of consumers find the personalization they receive to be extremely or very helpful. That means 49% do NOT.

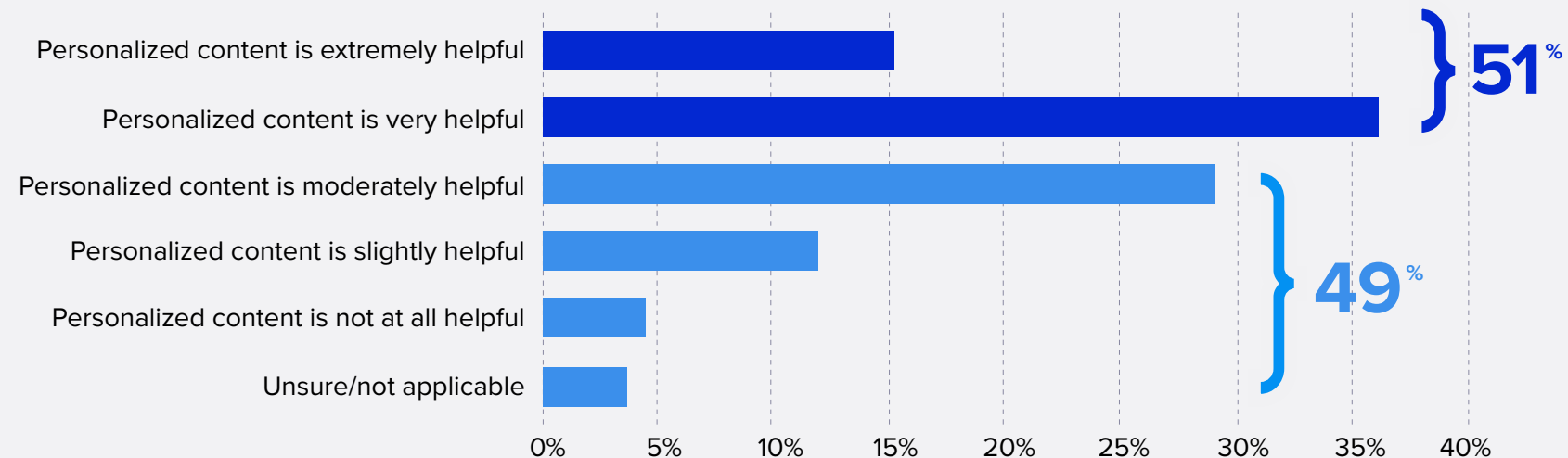


“This second screenshot shows how well [online marketplace] “suggests” things in their online shop. Very proactive. **The thing is: I don’t buy books, I’ve never bought a book, nor do I intend to buy a book in the future.** Their algorithm is off on miscellaneous items.... Although I do receive a lot of very good buying recommendations, some are worthless to me. I like [online marketplace] - they do an excellent job, but they are not perfect.”



– Jeff, 68, US

How do you generally feel about the helpfulness or usefulness of personalized content you are receiving from [category]?



We've been talking about personalization for years. So why are brands still stuck at “Hi, [first name]?”

Fifty-one percent of consumers find the personalized product/service recommendations, ads, and emails they receive to be extremely or very helpful. With the amount of data available today, satisfaction should be higher than that.

Why the gap? Because building deep customer connections is hard. It requires the right data—behaviors, preferences, and interests—unified under a single view of the customer, activated at the right time, in relevant contexts.

When companies experience breakdowns at any of these stages, they fall back on the basics, such as a first name or a carousel of previously viewed products. Personalization becomes a history book of what the customer has shared, not a guide to what they need next.

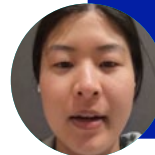
But customers don't want a recap of their past actions. They want assistance with current needs or future decisions. Just because you know something about a customer doesn't mean you should surface it. Understanding when (and when not) to use information is critical for maintaining trust.

Our research and consumer anecdotes confirm brands aren't there yet. Even the positive personalization examples participants shared often relied on basic tactics.



“The emails I receive are always personalised in my opinion, because they are the brands that I signed up for, so they are ones of particular interest, and I am especially keeping an eye out for them during the black friday sales.

A lot of them will mention my name, and some recommendations that say they are based on what I have purchased/browsed in the past.”



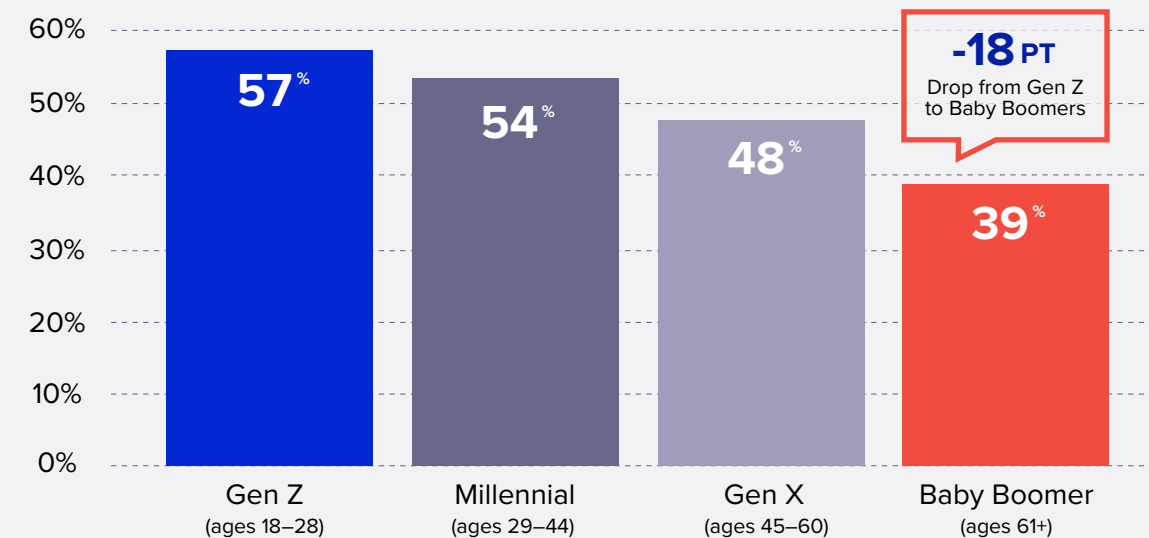
– Jenny, 24, Australia

Satisfaction with personalization drops significantly with age.

Satisfaction with personalization drops significantly with age, from **57%** among Gen Z to just **39%** among Baby Boomers.

Baby Boomers are also more likely to view data usage for personalization negatively (**23%**) than the average (**17%**).

% finding personalized content extremely or very helpful

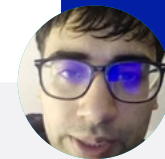


80% of consumers are comfortable with data-informed personalization, as long as their information remains secure.

**Permission isn't the problem.
Responsible use and value exchange are.**

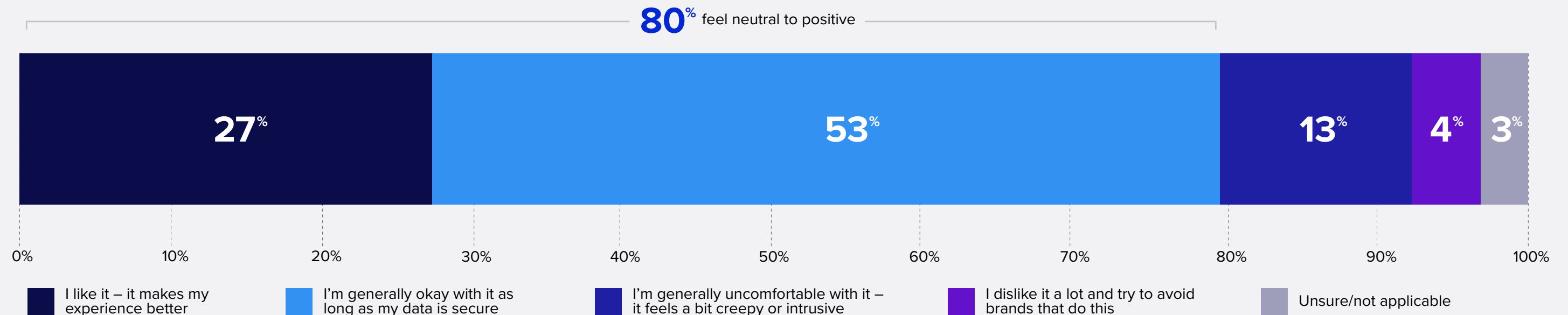


"I think it does get creepy sometimes on how targeted these ads are. I have not put anything into Facebook about my serum, but it has somehow used the other sources, most likely Google, to know this. Which is not good, as I don't remember allowing Google to share my data with Facebook."



– Hamza, 27, England

Which of the following best describes how you typically feel when [category brands] use your personal data to personalize or customize your experiences and interactions?



The data above shows responses for all categories. Refer to page 54 for the full list of categories used in the survey.

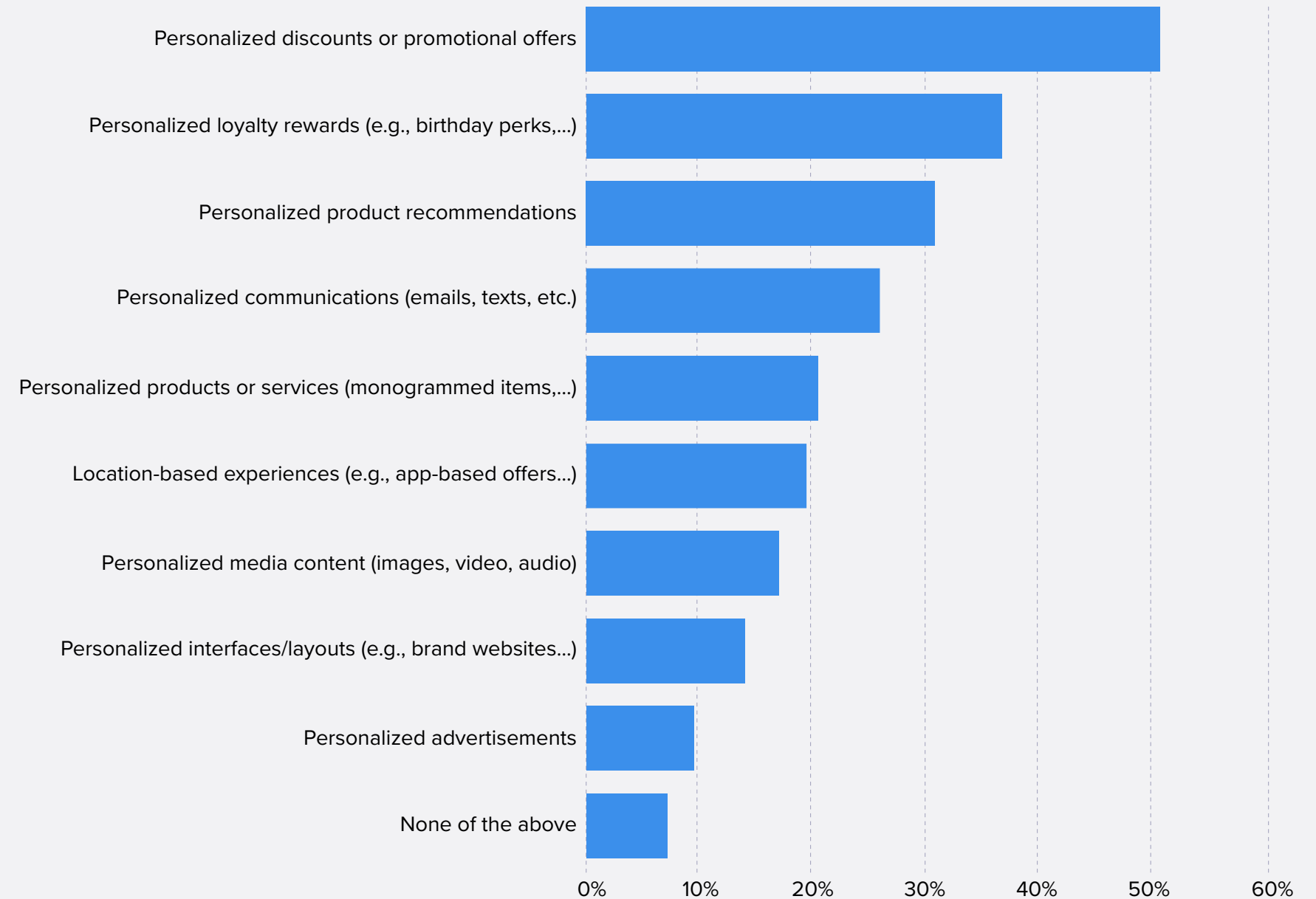
Predict what your customers need next and use personalization to help them get it.

In addition to anticipating needs instead of reacting to them, great personalization should: (1) Be genuinely helpful in ways that eventually drive purchase, rather than just pushing for the sale; and (2) use insights, not just data, to deliver value that's deeper than a generic promo code.

This fosters [emotional loyalty](#), forging relationships built on connection, trust, and meaningful support. It's the difference between sustainable, long-term business growth and quick hits that meet short-term goals and erode margins.

Part of being helpful: understanding the personalization your customers like best. **Our research reveals that personalized discounts, loyalty rewards, and product recommendations resonate most.** How much each type resonates, however, varies significantly by audiences.

Reflecting on your experiences and interactions with [category], what types of personalization do you value the most?



The data above shows responses for all categories. Refer to page 54 for the full list of categories used in the survey.

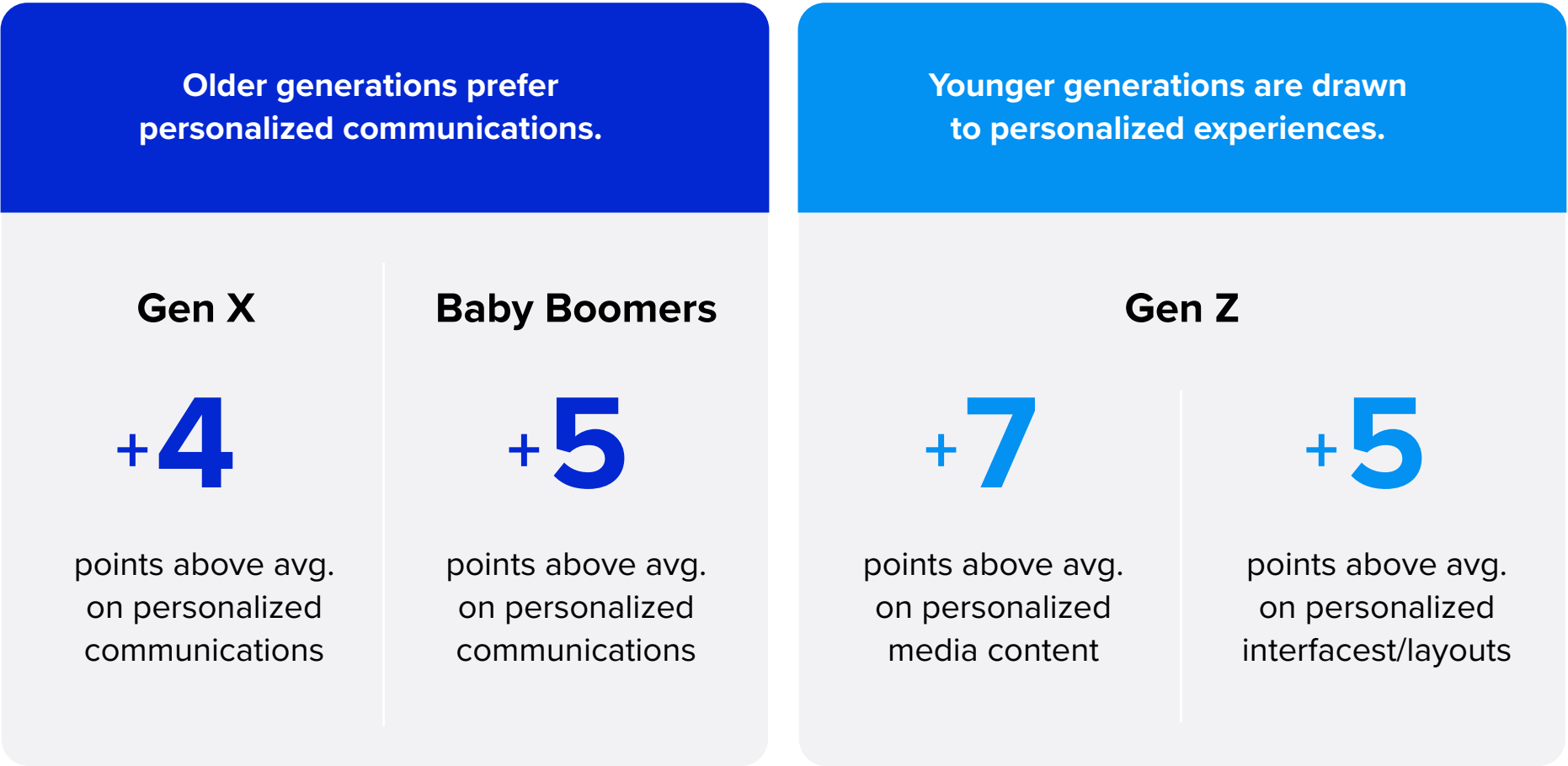
For different segments, the channel matters **as much as the message.**

Older generations respond most strongly to personalized communications. Gen X and Baby Boomers both index above average, suggesting they value relevance in how brands reach them, not just what brands offer. Younger consumers, meanwhile, are drawn to personalization that shapes the experience itself: Gen Z indexes significantly above average for both personalized media content and personalized interfaces and layouts.

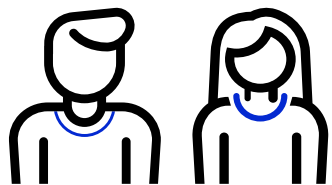
Women place notably higher value on personalized discounts and loyalty rewards compared to men, pointing to an opportunity to tailor incentive-driven touchpoints by gender

Getting through to someone takes more than the right words; it takes the right channel, too.

Personalization Preference Differences Across Generations



INCENTIVE PREFERENCE BY GENDER



Women place greater value on personalized discounts **(+6pts)** and personalized loyalty rewards **(+7pts)** compared to men.

Elevate basic personalization by adding value based on deeper insight.

 Most Preferred Personalization	 What Good Looks Like	 What Great Looks Like	 The Difference
Personalized discounts or promotional offers	A hotel offers a 15% discount based on previous stays in Chicago.	A hotel offers a discounted late checkout + airport transfer bundle based on a late flight departure booked through a partner airline.	Reduces stress and solves a real travel pain point.
Personalized loyalty rewards	A retailer offers point multipliers in categories the customer shops frequently.	A retailer makes reward points convertible into a free family activity pass (movie, bowling, museum) because the system recognizes family-oriented purchase patterns.	Reinforces lifestyle, not just transactions.
Personalized product recommendations	A grocery store recommends items similar to what a customer has purchased before.	A grocery store recommends a recipe based on the customer's item purchases. A follow-up notification asks for a thumbs up or thumbs down, and recommends a new recipe accordingly, with the necessary shopping list prepopulated.	Extends the value of the purchase and creates an exciting activity: a new recipe to try. The customer also gets an invitation to provide feedback.

These examples represent the current benchmark. Adaptive experiences raise the bar for what personalization can deliver.



“This is an email I recently received from [media and telecommunications company], thanking me for being a VIP member, and giving me a code to access a free movie. It felt relevant, because it was a nice reward I’ll actually use. And it was clearly personalised, as it had my name on the email, and rewarded me specifically for something I’d done. **I wasn’t in the process of purchasing anything from [media and telecommunications company], but it did increase my fondness of them.**”



-John, 30, Scotland

Adaptive experiences: Predictive CX, powered by agentic AI.

Agentic AI has introduced a new tier of personalization called adaptive experiences. These experiences use real-time data signals to anticipate customer needs and act before they ask.

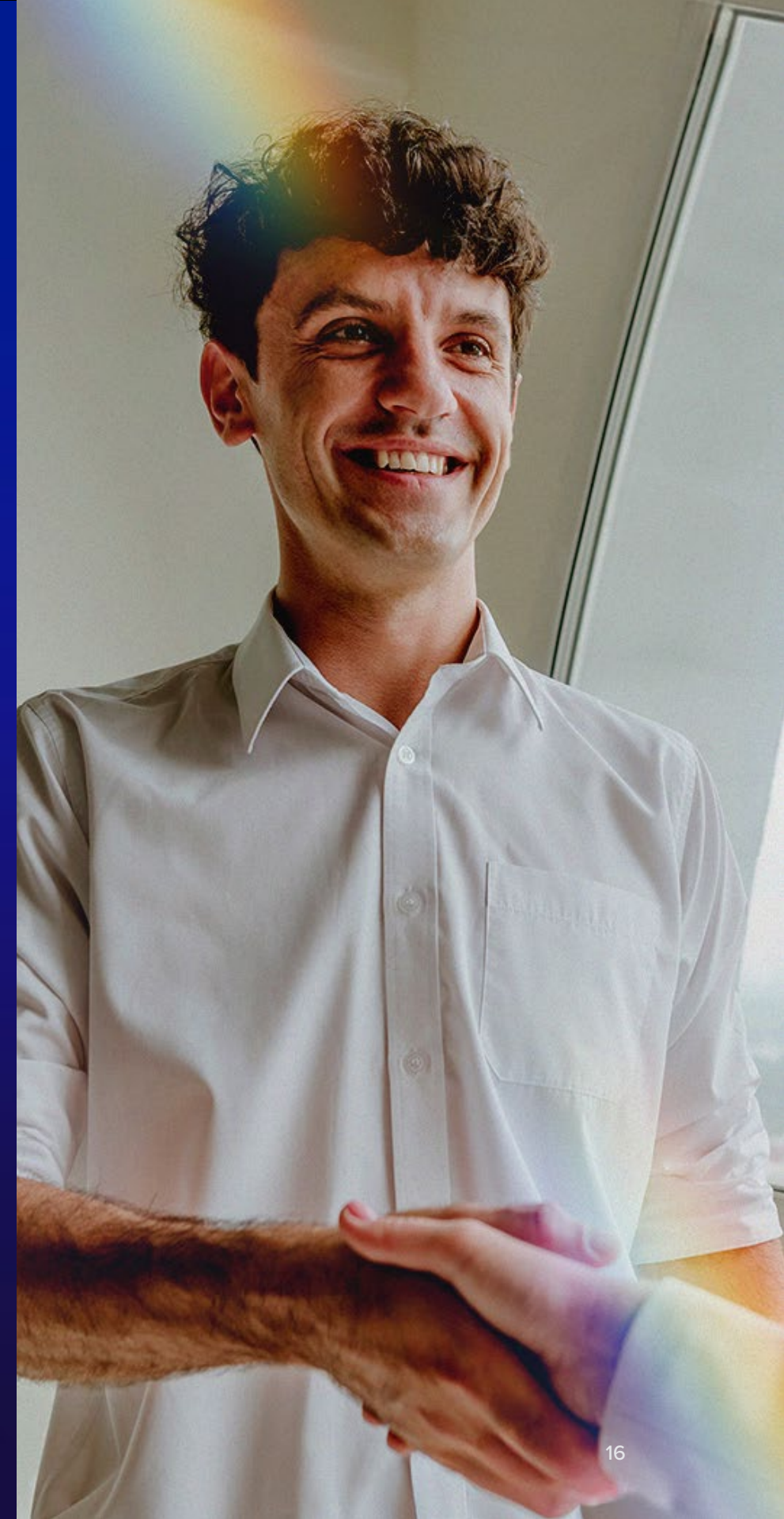
Take the grocery store example from the last page. “Great” personalization had the grocery store recommending a new recipe based on the customer’s previous shopping habits and recipe preferences. An adaptive experience would go a step further, adjusting the recipe based on the customer’s own signals: suggesting quicker recipes for a weeknight when items in their in-app cart suggest a time-pressed trip, such as a rotisserie chicken, bagged salad, and pre-cut vegetables, or recommending more ambitious dishes when their ratings show they’ve become a more confident cook.

Adaptive experiences represent where personalization is headed, and where customer expectations are already pointing. Read our ebook, [How Real-Time Analytics Keeps You a Step Ahead of Customer Expectations](#), to learn about the intelligence foundation that powers this level of personalization.



Want to empower customers through personalization? Ask yourself...

- 1 Is our personalization driving the next purchase or just acknowledging the last one?
- 2 Is our personalization built on actively learning from customers, or just demographics and purchase history?
- 3 Can we act on customer signals fast enough to influence their next decision?

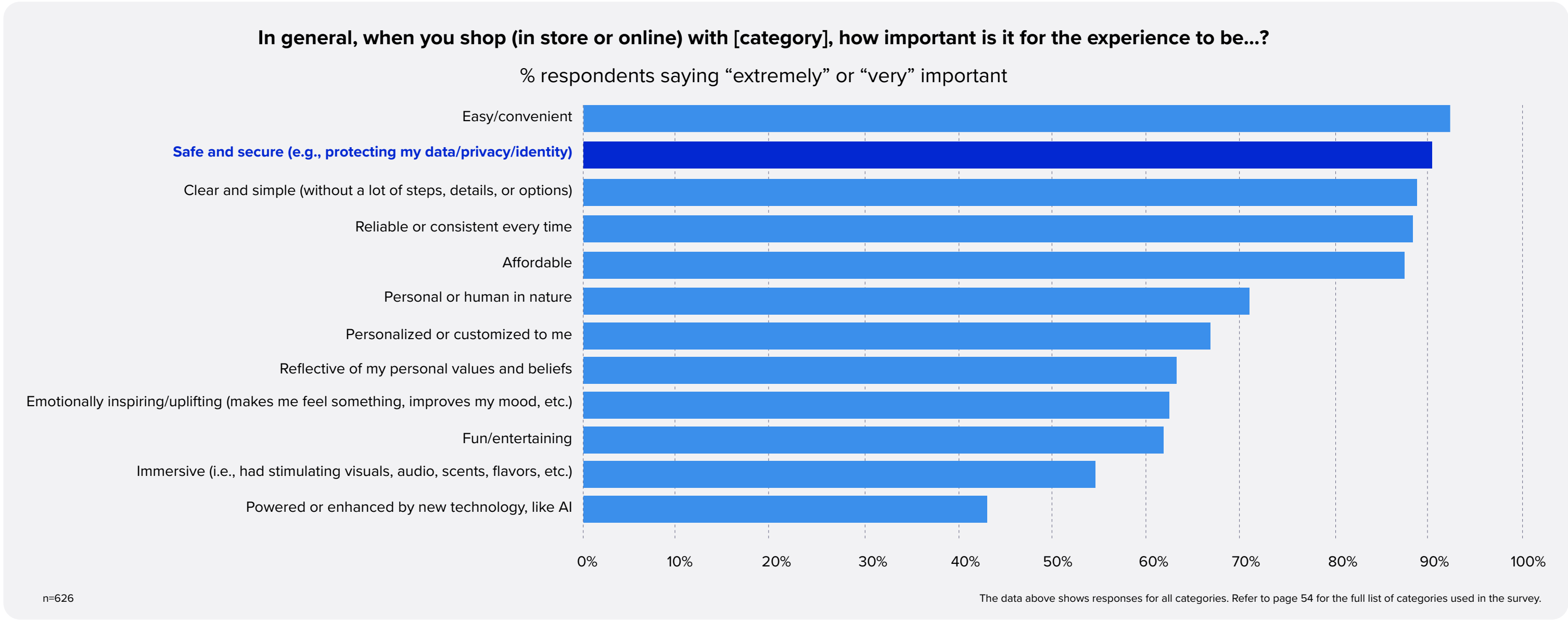


Move safety
and security to
center stage.



02

90% of consumers say **safety and security** are very or extremely important to their shopping experience, ranking second only to convenience across all CX attributes measured.



From creepy ads to endless data breaches, consumers feel like their data is under attack.

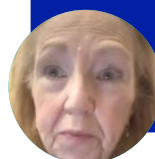
The importance of safety and security surfaced repeatedly throughout our research. It's an important condition for data-informed personalization, a major worry around AI, and the second-most important attribute for customer experiences.

In 2025, over [278 million people in the US](#) were affected by data compromises. Data breaches are pervasive—and [they're getting worse](#). AI has added a new layer of concern, as news headlines highlight large language models (LLMs) that can hallucinate, leak data, and perpetuate bias. **Companies must proactively prove to consumers that every part of the customer experience is safe and secure.**

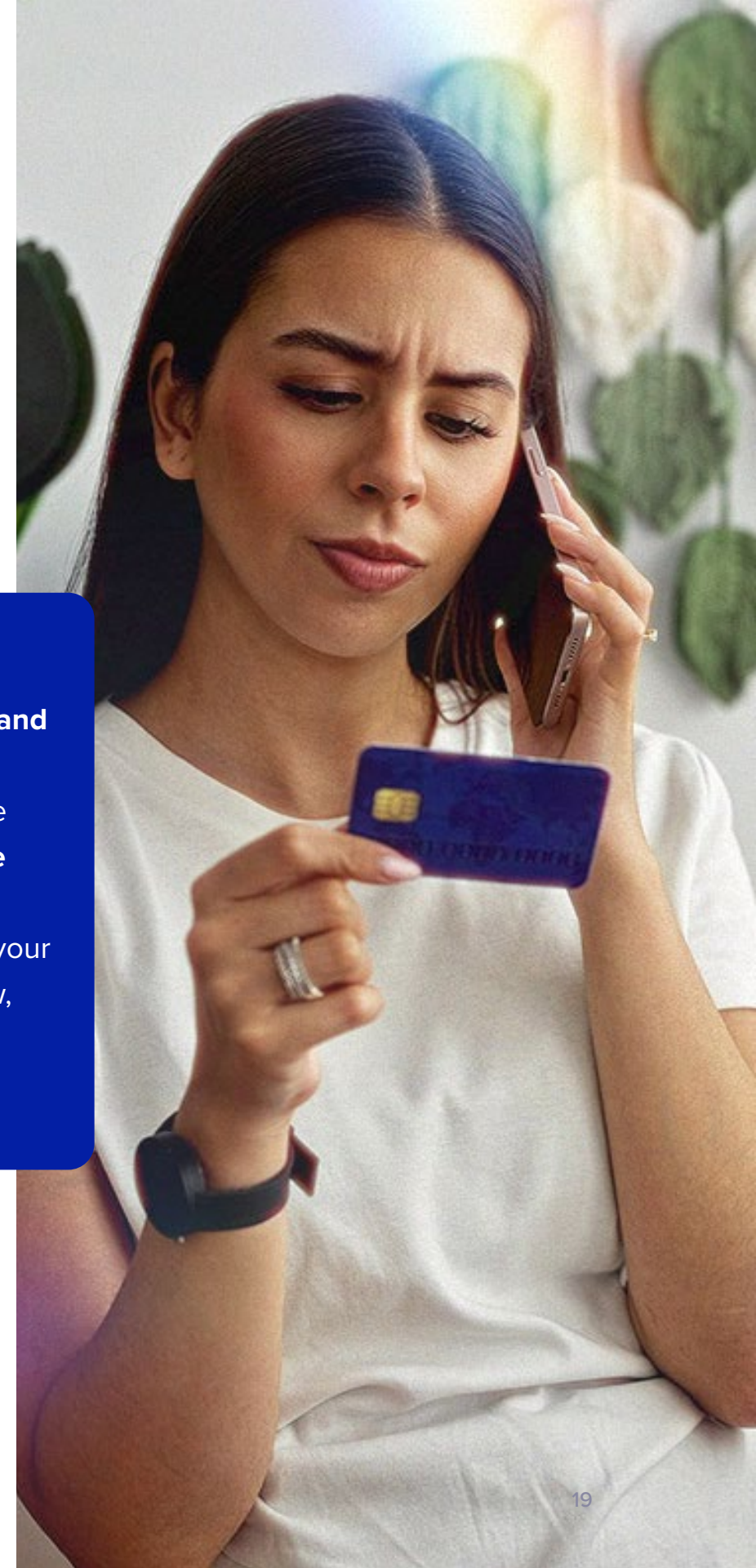
That proof is critical. You can have strong security practices and still lose customer confidence if those practices aren't communicated effectively. You need to secure their data, ensure your practices are sound, and reassure consumers that both are true. That's how experiences don't just become safe and secure, but feel that way, too.



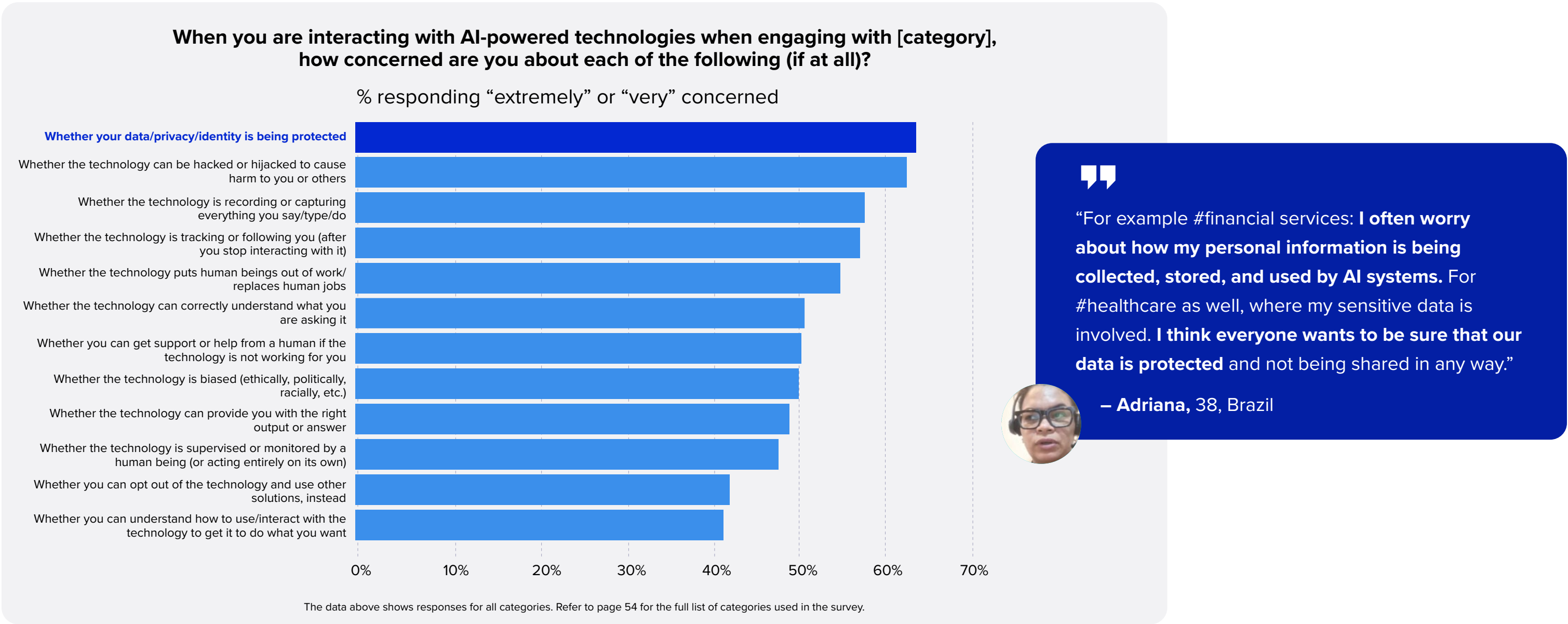
“I know how dangerous it is and how lax some organizations and some companies are with privacy and confidentiality. It's a big concern, and I think it's growing, and I think it's going to explode in the next couple of years, that **people are really going to have a problem with their healthcare information and their privacy being invaded**, and the lack of controls that exist in controlling your medical information, and who has access to it. If you really knew, and I only know a tiny little bit of it. **It's disturbing.**”



– Margaret, 59, Canada



Consumers’ top concern when interacting with AI-powered technologies is whether their data, privacy, and identity are being protected.





High net-worth individuals are less concerned about privacy and hacking when it comes to AI. They’re also more interested in using AI agents and more familiar with several technology-enabled ways to engage with brands, suggesting an overall **higher level of comfort with AI**.

Concerns with AI-Powered Technology: High Net-Worth Individuals vs. All Respondents

	Less Concerned than Avg.	More Concerned than Avg.
Whether your data/privacy/identity is being protected	-10%	
Whether the technology can be hacked or hijacked to cause harm to you or others	-9%	
Whether the technology is recording or capturing everything you say/type/do	-6%	
Whether the technology is tracking or following you (after you stop interacting with it)	-1%	
Whether the technology puts human beings out of work/replaces human jobs	-8%	
		1% Whether you can get support or help from a human if the technology is not working for you
		0% Whether you can get support or help from a human if the technology is not working for you
Whether the technology is biased (ethically, politically, racially, etc.)	-2%	
		2% Whether the technology can provide you with the right output or answer
Whether the technology is supervised or monitored by a human being (or acting entirely on its own)	-2%	
		4% Whether you can opt out of the technology and use other solutions, instead
		2% Whether you can understand how to use/interact with the technology to get it to do what you want

“High-net-worth individual” refers to any person with a net worth of at least \$1 million.

Security is important, but cost effectiveness, convenience, consistency, and simplicity still matter.

The 3 Cs—cost effectiveness, convenience, and consistency—were the most important customer experience factors in our [last survey](#). They're still important, but they're now joined by 2 Ss: simplicity and security. Companies must strike the right balance across them all.

Security anchors the framework. Here's how the other four attributes round it out:



Cost effectiveness

Providing value. “Value” doesn’t always mean “a low price.”



Consistency

Enabling the consumer to gather information about, purchase, or use a product in their preferred manner with minimal friction.



Convenience

Delivering on your promise to consumers. This doesn’t mean an experience that’s unchanging, but one where consumers receive what they’ve come to expect.

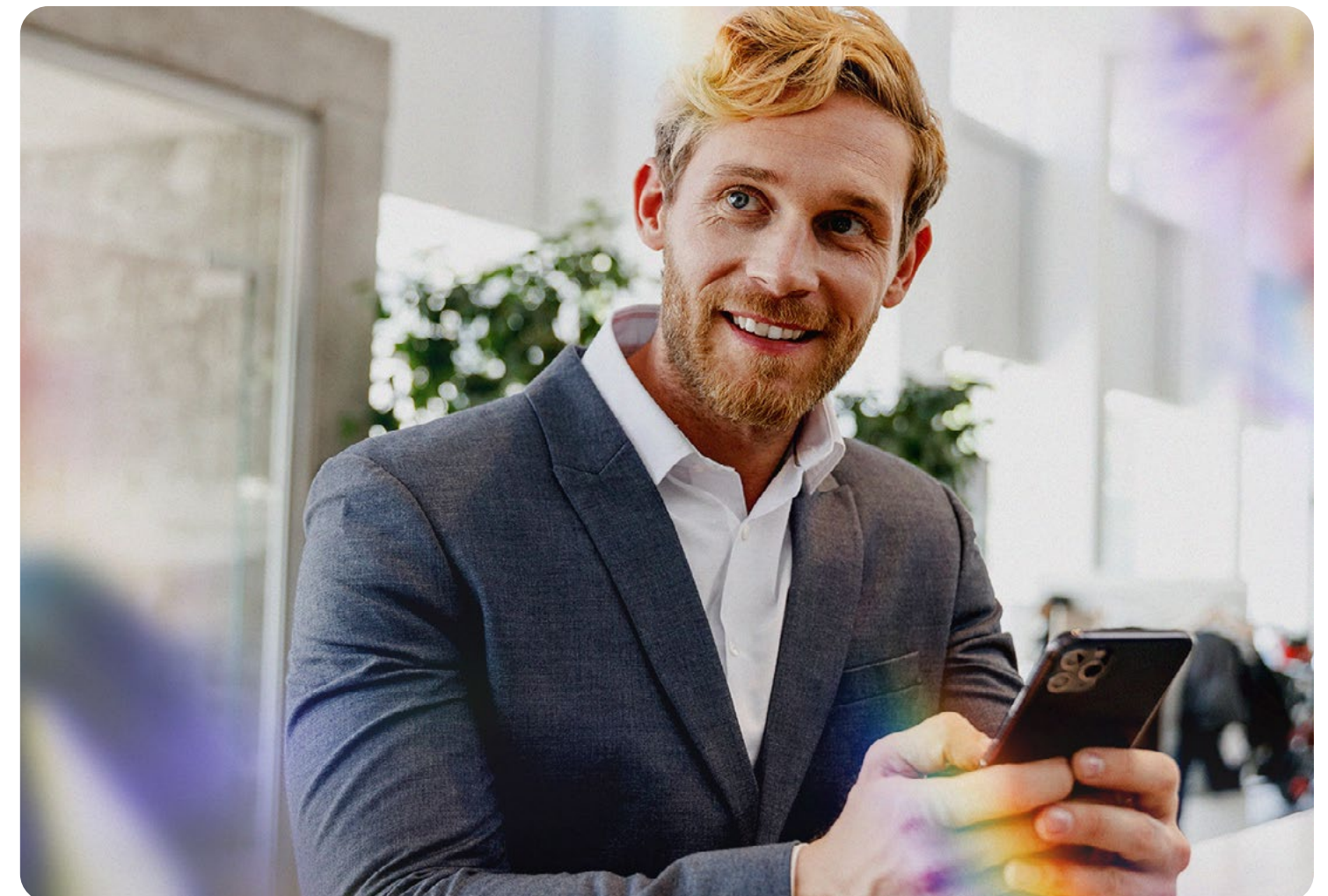


Simplicity

Limiting steps, options, or details to create a focused, streamlined experience.

It’s critical not to sacrifice one for the other. Shortcuts that create convenience but put data at risk are not an option. Neither are experiences that protect data but treat the customer like a stranger at every touchpoint.

When data is robust and secure, it becomes the foundation for everything else, helping you understand what customers find valuable, build frictionless purchase paths with clear details and options, and consistently meet their expectations.



Emotional aspects of experience matter more to some audiences.

When it comes to shopping, the most important CX attributes are all about practicality. The softer elements of experience are less valued overall, though some segments prioritize them more than others. Knowing your audience isn't just a personalization advantage. It's how you build the trust that makes data sharing possible in the first place.

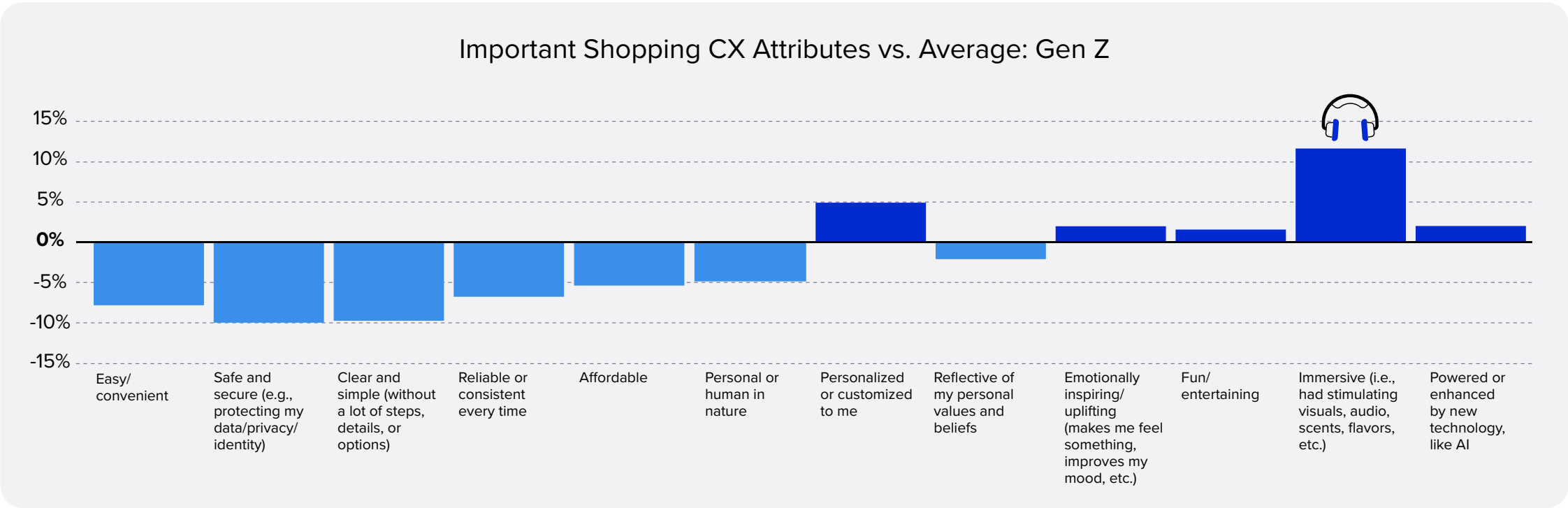
Region

Consumers in LATAM expect their experiences to deliver practicality *and* emotion, placing greater importance on experiences that are entertaining, immersive, and inspiring than other regions. European consumers, by contrast, are the least likely to prioritize those emotional dimensions.



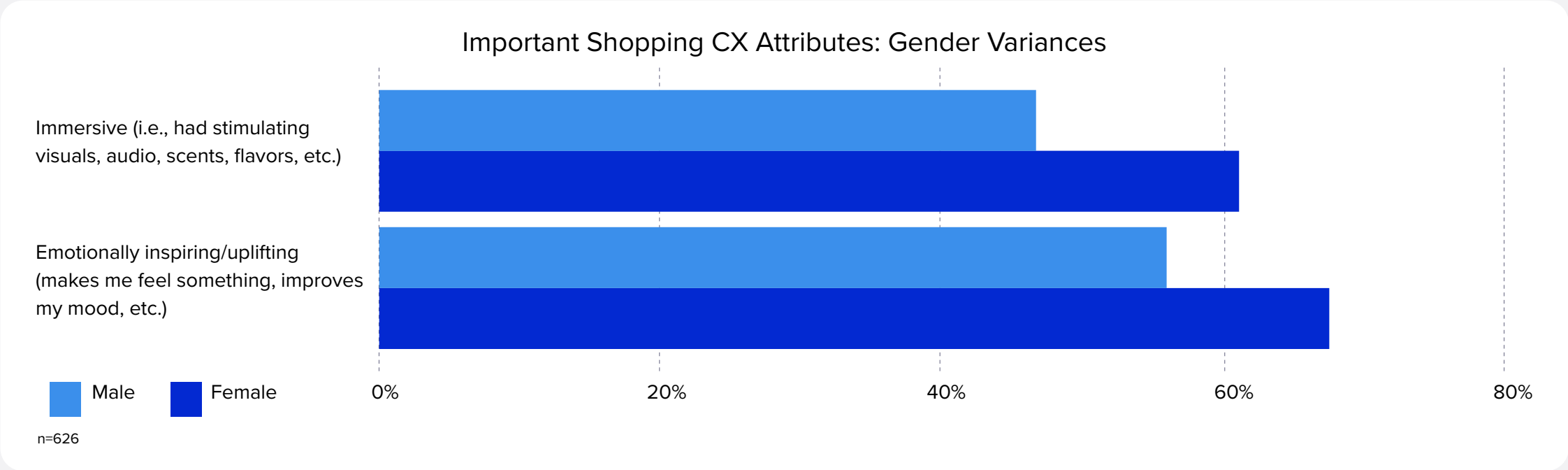
Generation

Gen Z finds the 3Cs and 2Ss most important to experience, but to a lesser degree than older generations. What they value more: immersive experiences.



Gender

Women place greater importance on emotionally inspiring and immersive experiences than men.



Ready to move safety and security to center stage? Ask yourself...

- 1 Do our customers trust us with their data, and what evidence do we have beyond the fact that they haven't opted out?
- 2 Are we treating data security as a compliance checkbox or a competitive differentiator?
- 3 When did we last stress-test our AI implementations for privacy risks, and who owns the answer?



Make technology
the enabler, not the
experience.

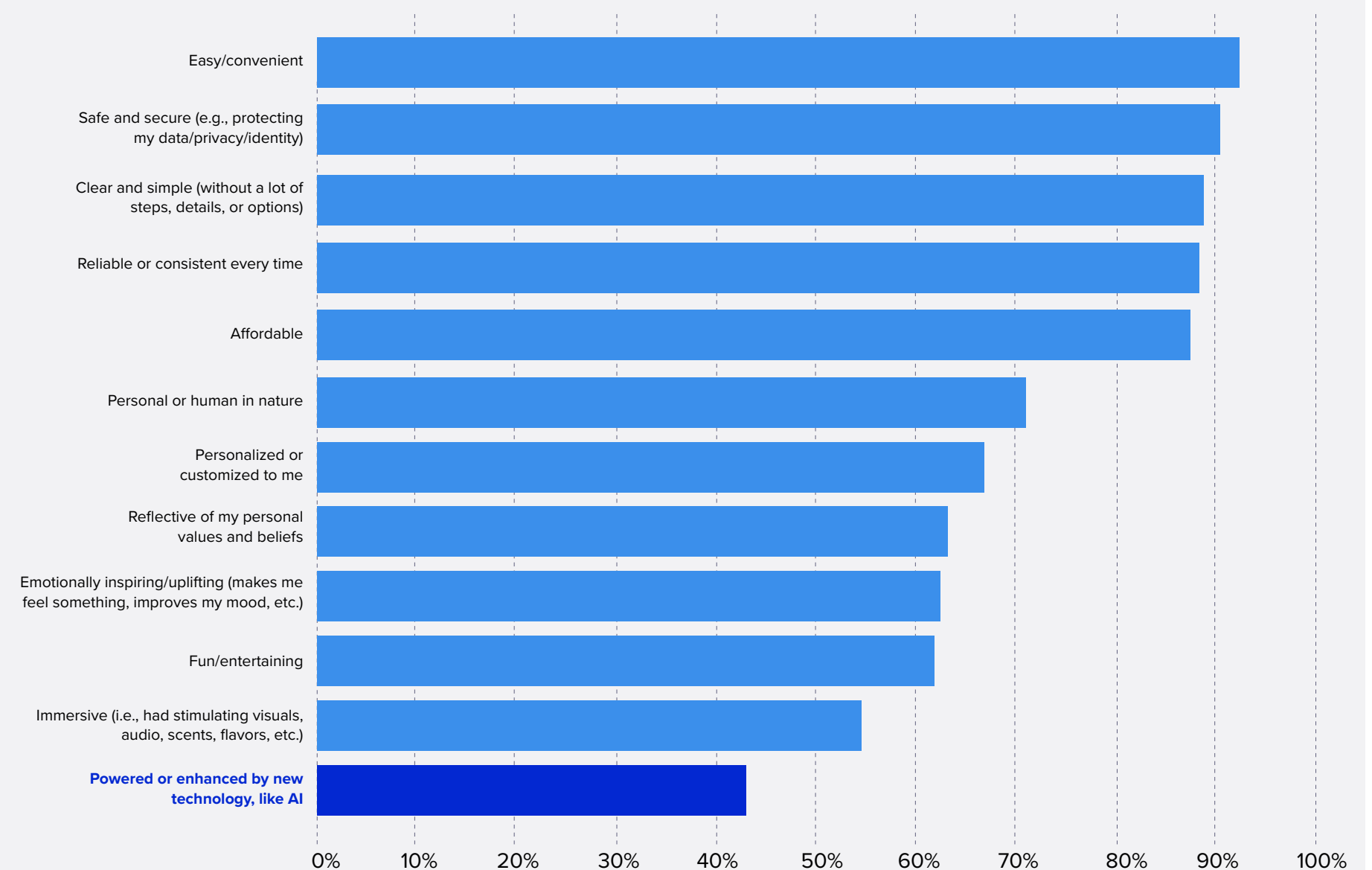


Only **43%** of consumers say it's very or extremely important for their shopping experience to be powered or enhanced by new technology. That **ranks last** among all CX factors we measured.



In general, when you shop (in store or online) with [category], how important is it for the experience to be...?

% respondents saying "extremely" or "very" important



n=626

The data above shows responses for all categories. Refer to page 54 for the full list of categories used in the survey.

Customers don't care about the newest technology. Some are actively put off by it.

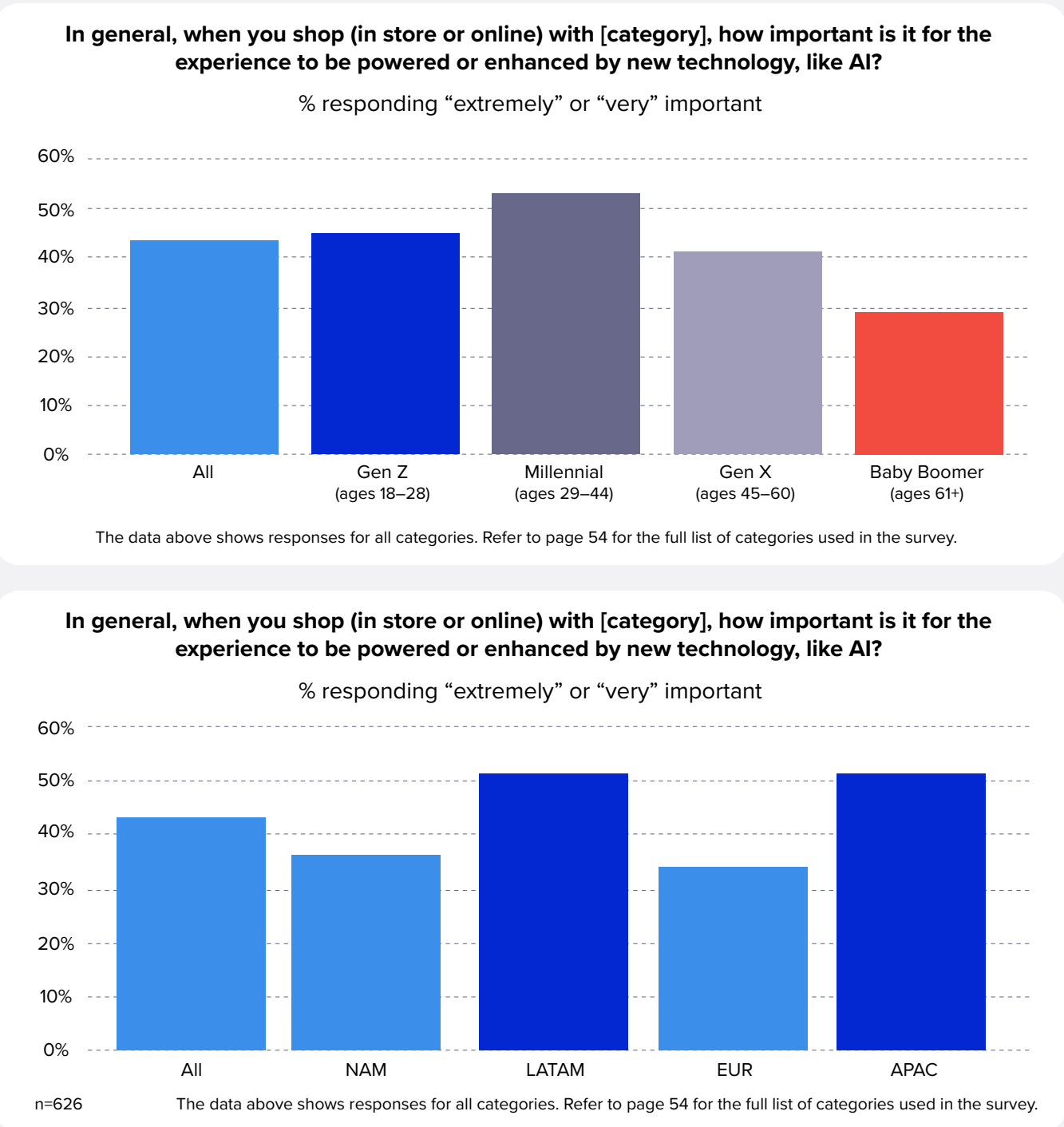
The 3Cs and the 2Ss (simplicity and security) are the clear shopping experience winners in our research. The outright loser: experiences powered or enhanced by new technology.

Technology is the means to the end, not the end itself. The degree to which that's true varies across regions and generations. North American consumers find “powered or enhanced by new technology” even less important than average (36% versus 43%), and European consumers report similarly low levels (34%). Consumers in Latin America and APAC are more receptive, though still rank it lowest across all CX factors.

Generationally, Millennials value technology-enhanced shopping experiences more than average, while Baby Boomers are least receptive. Gen Z falls in between—perhaps reflecting a desire for simplicity after growing up surrounded by technology.

“Powered or enhanced by new technology” ranks last across every customer activity we measured, including making a purchase, using a product/service, starting a subscription, contacting customer service, and participating in rewards programs.

Consumers should feel your technology's benefits without noticing its mechanics. They want experiences that are consistent, convenient, cost effective, secure, and simple. The company's job is to deploy technology in service of those promises.



If consumers explicitly notice your technology's mechanics, that's bad customer experience.

Technology creates the most value when it operates in the background. Three high-impact zones where this applies:



Behind-the-scenes optimizations: Capabilities such as inventory prediction and fulfillment routing may sound like logistics, but they are also essential to providing customers with the right assortment, delivered quickly.



Friction removal: One-click reordering, proactive issue resolution, and intelligent defaults, such as a geolocation auto-fill or autoplay on a streaming app, streamline the customer journey.



Personalization engines: Customers see content tailored to their needs, like the adaptive experiences we discussed earlier, to more easily make decisions.

When is it OK to make technology visible? When that visibility builds trust. But take care to only call out AI when it creates credibility. Noting when AI was used for a process like reviewing a claim: helpful for building trust, for the customer. A generic “Powered by AI” tag: touting innovation, for the company.

New technology and simplicity are often in conflict. Technology increases complexity—sometimes by design, sometimes by accident. **A detailed look from the consumer's viewpoint is a must for revealing areas where technology may unintentionally create pain points.** A classic example: chatbots are often designed to resolve issues faster, but if customers overwhelmingly prefer a human, the chatbot becomes a new hurdle, not a shortcut. When technology draws attention to itself by creating friction, it's no longer an enabler.



“I had to cancel a credit card while I was travelling as I received a text message saying there was fraudulent activity on my card. I responded to the message with a ‘yes’ and then you get an automatic message back saying hey we’ve cancelled your credit card so it seemed like an auto generated messaging based on my response which was likely some AI driven response. In that situation it was great to get a quick response and the card was cancelled quickly so I do not mind that the whole process was handled by a computer.”



– Richard, 44, Canada

Industry context shapes how much technology matters to the experience.

Consumers are more open to technology-enhanced experiences in certain industries.



Financial Services & Insurance: The complexity of financial and insurance products makes AI a natural fit, helping consumers compare options, understand tradeoffs, and make more confident decisions.



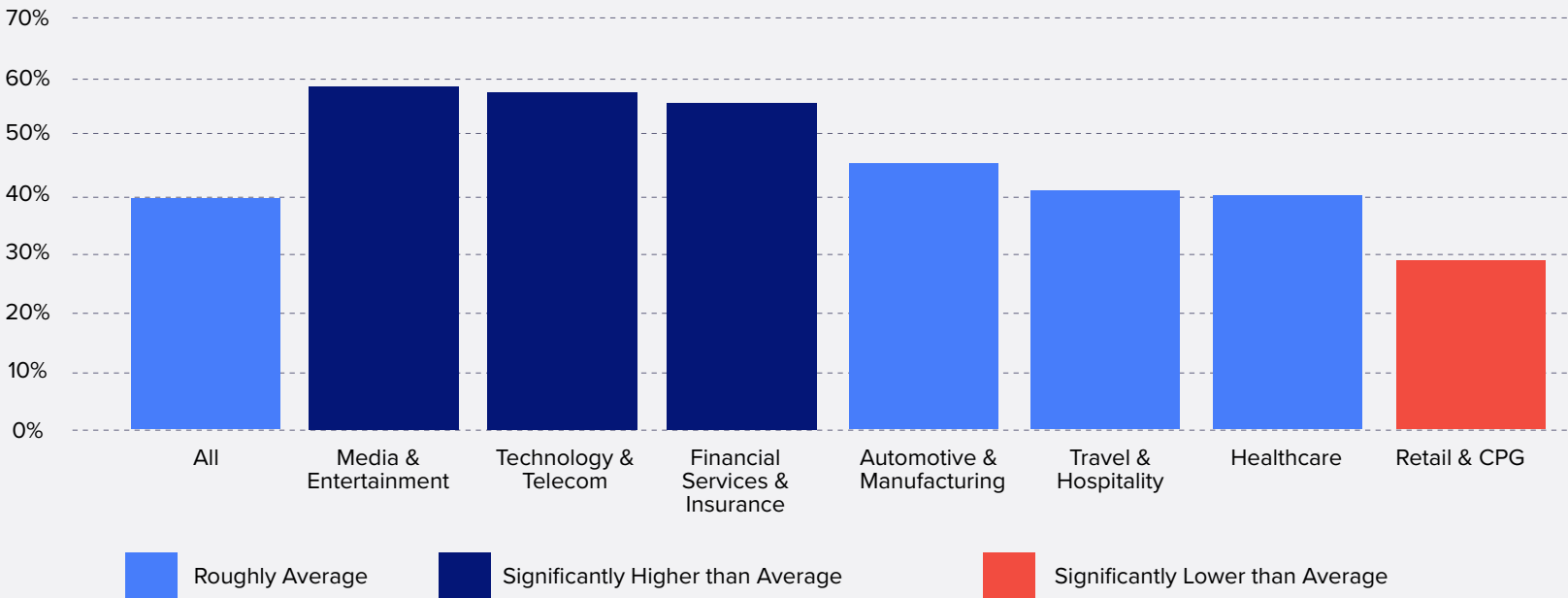
Media & Entertainment and Technology & Telecommunications: In these categories, new technology isn't just part of the experience, it's often the product itself. Consumers expect it, which is why it registers as more important here than elsewhere.



Retail & CPG: These are generally lower-stakes purchases, so consumers are less reliant on technology to feel confident in their decisions.

In general, when you shop (in store or online) with [category], how important is it for the experience to be powered or enhanced by new technology, like AI?

% responding "extremely" or "very" important



n=626

The data above shows responses for all categories. Refer to page 54 for the full list of categories used in the survey.



"I saw an advert on Instagram for an AI financial advisor and thought it looked interesting. After asking my name the AI took me through a five minute conversation asking about current financial situation before creating a personalised plan. it looks great and I will definitely be exploring it in more detail. **Unlike some models which seem to ask questions then flag generic plan 6/15 this one is highly personalised** and relevant to me and it hasn't actually asked for money yet (free offer post budget?) which is making me more open to paying in the future."



– Rebecca 33, UK

Kellanova Case Study

Technology in the background, engagement in the foreground.

Heightened price sensitivity was pushing shoppers toward lower-cost alternatives. Kellanova needed to prove their brands' premium value without making the technology the story.

Merkle created Poptopia and Kellogg's Town—immersive web experiences that turn product packaging into gateways for games, promotions, and year-round engagement. A scalable backend powers rapid deployment across markets and languages. Consumers experienced the brands. The technology stayed out of the way.

Read the full Kellanova
case study

[VIEW NOW >](#)



1M program sign-ups in
the first 12 months

93% increase in return visits
to platform

40% increase in operational efficiency
through reusable systems

Ready to use technology to enable – not overwhelm – the experience?

- 1 When customers complain, are they complaining about the outcomes or technology?
- 2 What percentage of our technology budget makes experiences simpler versus more “innovative”?
- 3 Are we measuring technology success by adoption rates or customer problem resolution? Or are we measuring our AI maturity against our competitors? (As a reminder, our [2024 research](#) found that CX leaders acted based on customer data, not competitor capabilities.)

EBOOK

Read our report, **The Future of Invisible Experiences**, to learn more about how people feel about brands acting on their behalf, where automation feels helpful, and more.

[DOWNLOAD NOW >](#)

Match AI
investments to
actual customer
needs.



04

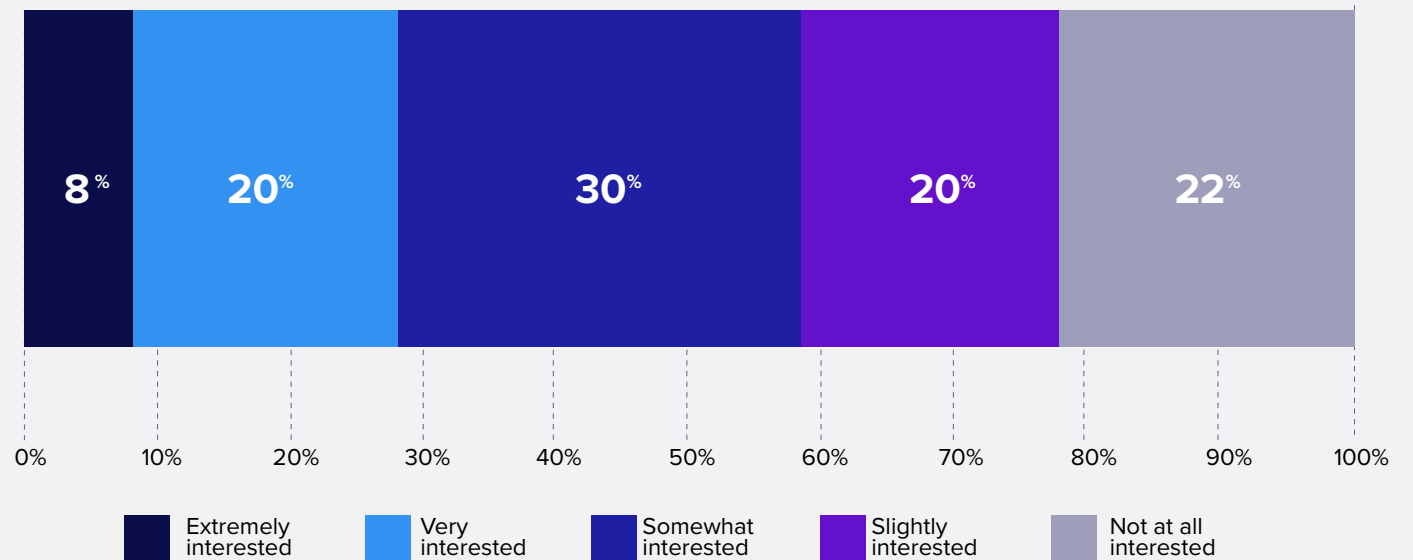
There's a gap between executive enthusiasm and consumer reality when it comes to AI.

AI is a specific area where “technology as the product rather than the enabler” is a challenge for many brands due to competitive pressures and market hype. The result: AI investments that don't solve specific customer pain points and therefore sit idle or worse, repel users.

What do consumers really want out of AI experiences? Safety and security. That doesn't just apply to data privacy. It also applies to the quality of AI-generated information. Forty-nine percent of consumers are extremely or very concerned about whether AI-powered technologies can provide them with the right output or answer. **When stakes are especially high, as they are in healthcare, financial decisions, or home improvement, consumers need confidence that AI will solve their problem, not create new ones.**

Consider one of the topics dominating industry conversations that highlights the AI disconnect: agentic AI. Just 28% of consumers express strong interest in using AI agents, yet agentic AI is all over business news. It's easy to get swept up in what's talked about instead of what actually makes a difference.

Many brands are introducing AI agents, which can independently act on your behalf to complete more complex customer interactions without you need to do them... Based on this description, how interested are you in using an AI agent to interact with [brand category] in the future?



The data above shows responses for all categories. Refer to page 54 for the full list of categories used in the survey.



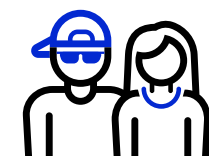
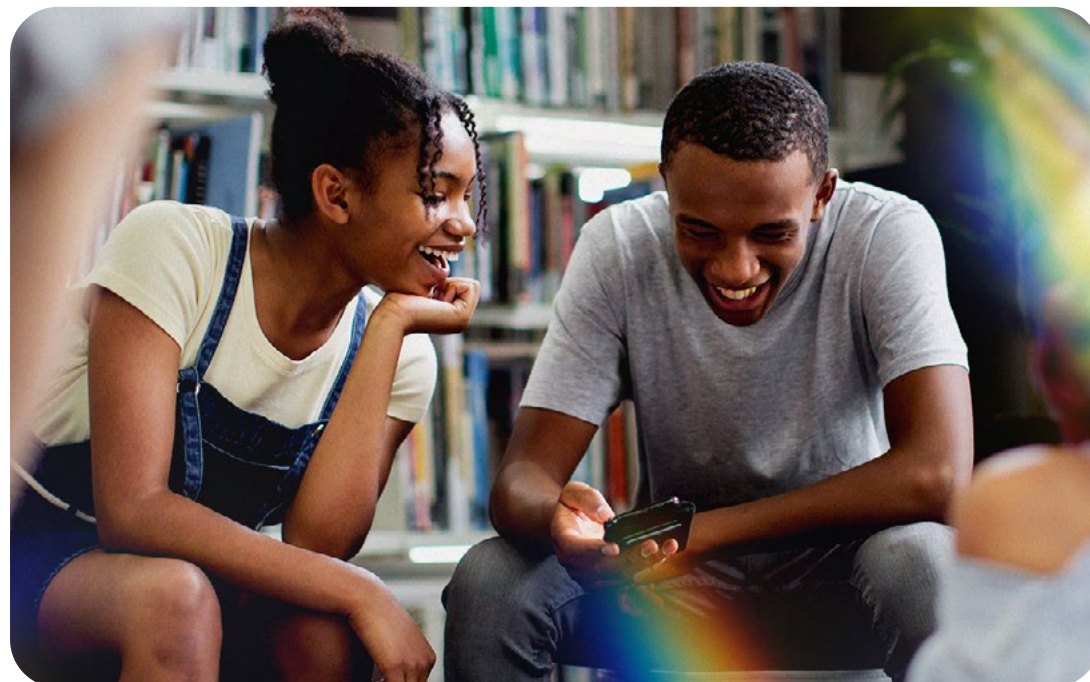
“I have never used AI agents because, I know that they're agents, AI agents that exist. That could book tickets for you, apply for a job. **But I've never used that because I feel like those are things that I stand a better chance of doing myself.** For example, booking a ticket. I would never be able to use AI to put my ticket because **I don't feel comfortable sharing my passport information. Credit card details with AI. I'm not there yet. I'm a skeptic.**”



– Camile, 44, Canada

Younger consumers and those living with children are among those with greater appetite for agentic AI.

Matching investments to customer needs means knowing your audience's unique sentiments. Only 28% of consumers have strong interest in using AI agents, but certain groups show a greater appetite.



Gen Z (+5 pts. vs. avg.) and
Millennials (+6 pts. vs. avg.)



LATAM (+6 pts. vs. avg.) and
APAC (+12 pts. vs. avg.)



Those with children living in the
household (+13 pts. vs. avg.)

Chasing competitors instead of customers leads to generic AI experiences deployed in the wrong places.

Prioritizing competitive pressures over your customers' unique interests and pain points can make AI-powered experiences feel generic: the last thing customers want when they're already skeptical about whether AI will give them the right answer.

Consumers' experiences with AI chatbots reveal this quality gap. Sixty-three percent somewhat or strongly agree that responses feel personalized to them, and 58% find responses inspiring or unexpected.

Moving without considering all customer needs can also lead to AI deployments in the wrong places. Here's an example: service and support consistently rank among the experience areas consumers most want to see improve. Long wait times and inconvenient hours make getting help a challenge. A natural solution, for many companies, is to create an AI chatbot to assist customers. At the same time, the company may reduce its service support staff, anticipating that the chatbot will handle a significant portion of service inquiries.

What they've missed: 51% of consumers want human-led experiences when they're requesting support or service. The chatbot goes largely unused, and because the company reduced human support staff, the customer service challenges escalate. This misalignment creates a compounded failure, with worse customer experience and wasted investment.



"I'd want a human to listen to me, because **I feel a human can relate to you more**, and maybe understand that you don't just want, like, a refund or a solution, you just want someone to listen to your story of what you've been through and just empathize with you."



– Zohair, 48, Australia



"**AI in healthcare, at least at this point, because a typo can be the difference between life and death**, and I don't want to be seen in the situation that I took a medicine incorrectly because of a typo, and that's not something I would want to be, like, the end of me, right? **So, medicine and monetary aspects, I'm kind of away from AI as much as possible, because there's a lot of risk involved**, and life risk involved."



– Raghav, 34, India

Only **18%** of consumers want a mostly or fully digital experience when requesting customer service, yet service remains a common deployment area for customer-facing AI.

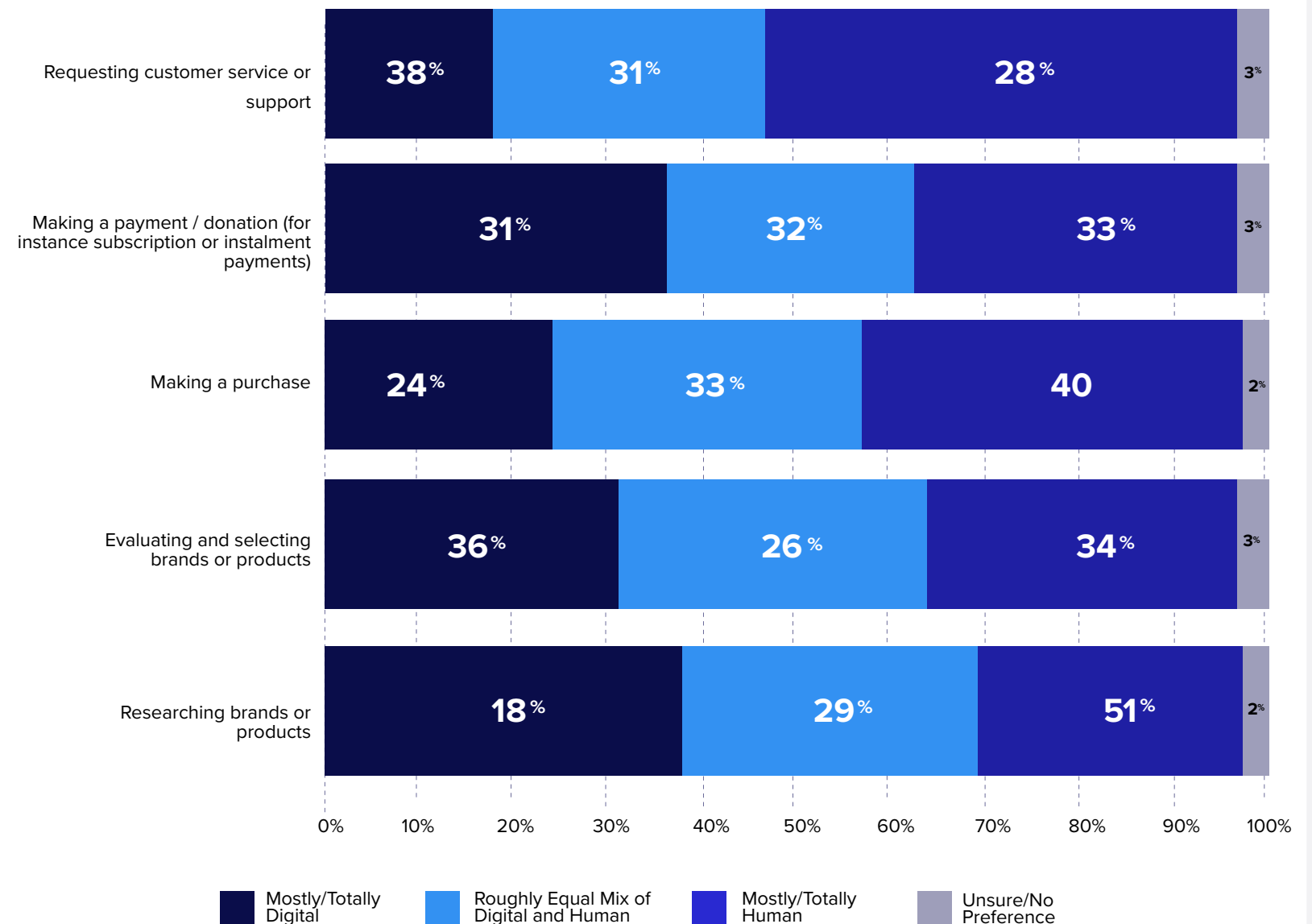


“One thing I have noticed with how some companies are handling customer service is, some companies are investing. They are adding a mixed feature of customer support to their websites. **Maybe you start with a chatbot, but can move to a human if needed. I am sure this cuts down on the amount of man hours needed. I really appreciate the ability to speak with a human when necessary.** I also appreciate the ease of chatting with a bot that can direct me or quickly answer a simple question without having to wait in a queue.”



– **Amber**, 53, United States

In the future, when engaging in each of the following activities with [category], what kind of experience would you prefer?



The data above shows responses for all categories. Refer to page 54 for the full list of categories used in the survey.

Align solutions with customer pain points and digital versus human preferences.

The solution isn't less AI. It's better-placed AI.

Map customer improvement priorities against digital appetite. Where both are high, customer-facing AI has a genuine role to play. While this intersection varies across industry and generation, research and evaluation stages offer the most prominent opportunities, with AI helping customers confidently compare different options.

AI doesn't have to face the customer to add value. In areas where consumers want improvement and prefer human-led experiences, like customer support and service, AI can make those humans significantly more effective: helping them have a more informed, continuous conversation with the customer; powering more intelligent troubleshooting; or evaluating customer sentiment to prioritize service calls and route them to the right person.

Our ebook,

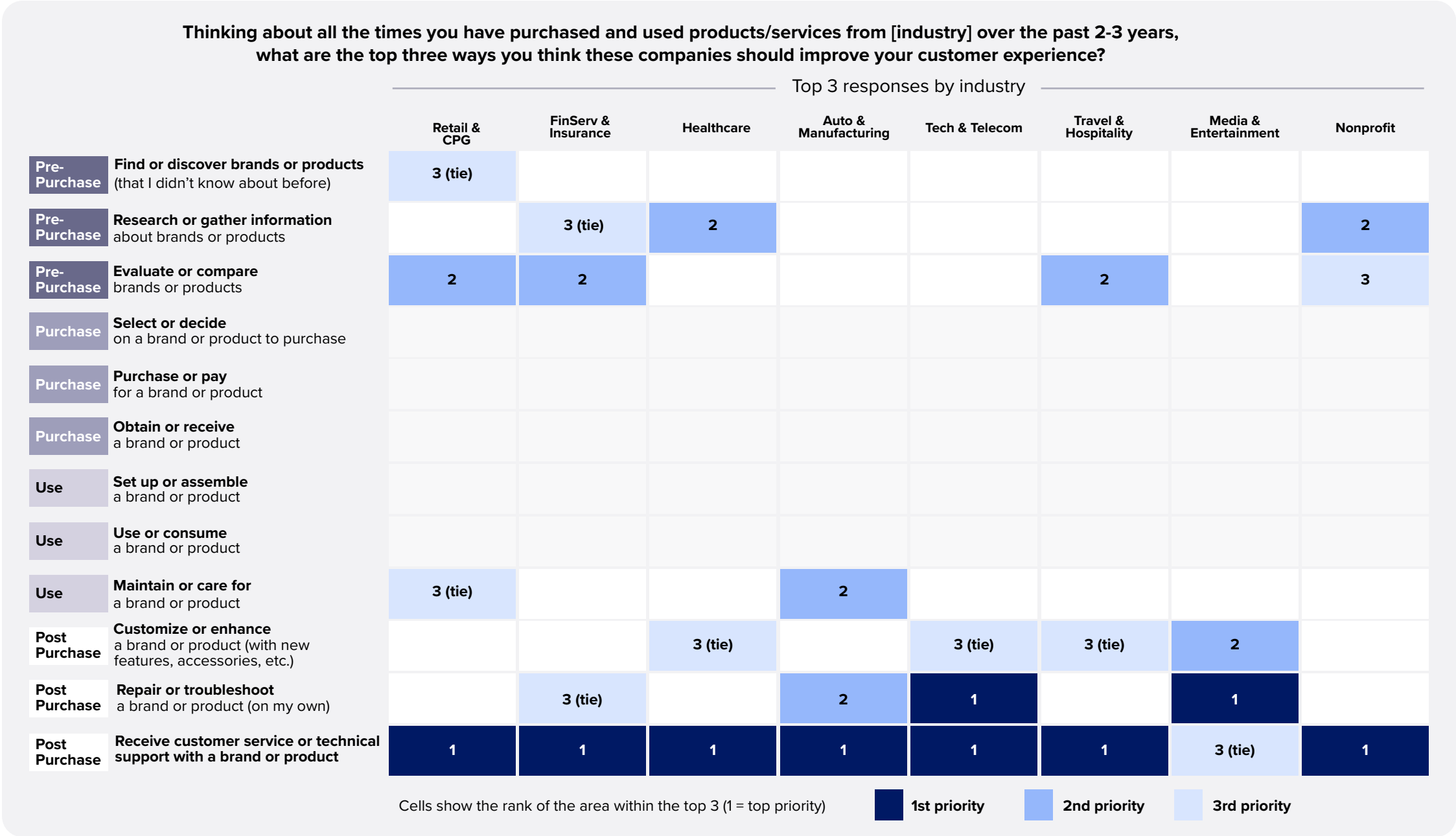
Contradictory by Design: Why Opposing Truths Rule Tomorrow's Experiences

explores this Innovation Paradox in depth—how advanced technology requires human empathy to connect digital and physical touchpoints to solve real problems.

[DOWNLOAD NOW >](#)

Top Opportunities to Improve the Customer Experience

Consumers across industries want to see CX improvements in service and support, but AI must be deployed carefully to match human versus digital preferences.



“I believe it was this one. It was with a human for most of it; the only bot part was at the beginning to request a person. **However, I have had several interactions with support bots recently, and I can categorically say that I hate them.** They are extremely frustrating and annoying, borderline useless, and they can easily make things worse. **It’s just a waste of time if you’re just going to end up talking to someone anyways, not to mention they are liable to hallucinate, make stuff up, or get things wrong.”**



- Rodrigo, 28, Chile



Across industries, **post-purchase** support stands out as the most critical area for improvement, followed closely by the **research** stage.

Consumers living with children show a stronger preference for digital experiences.

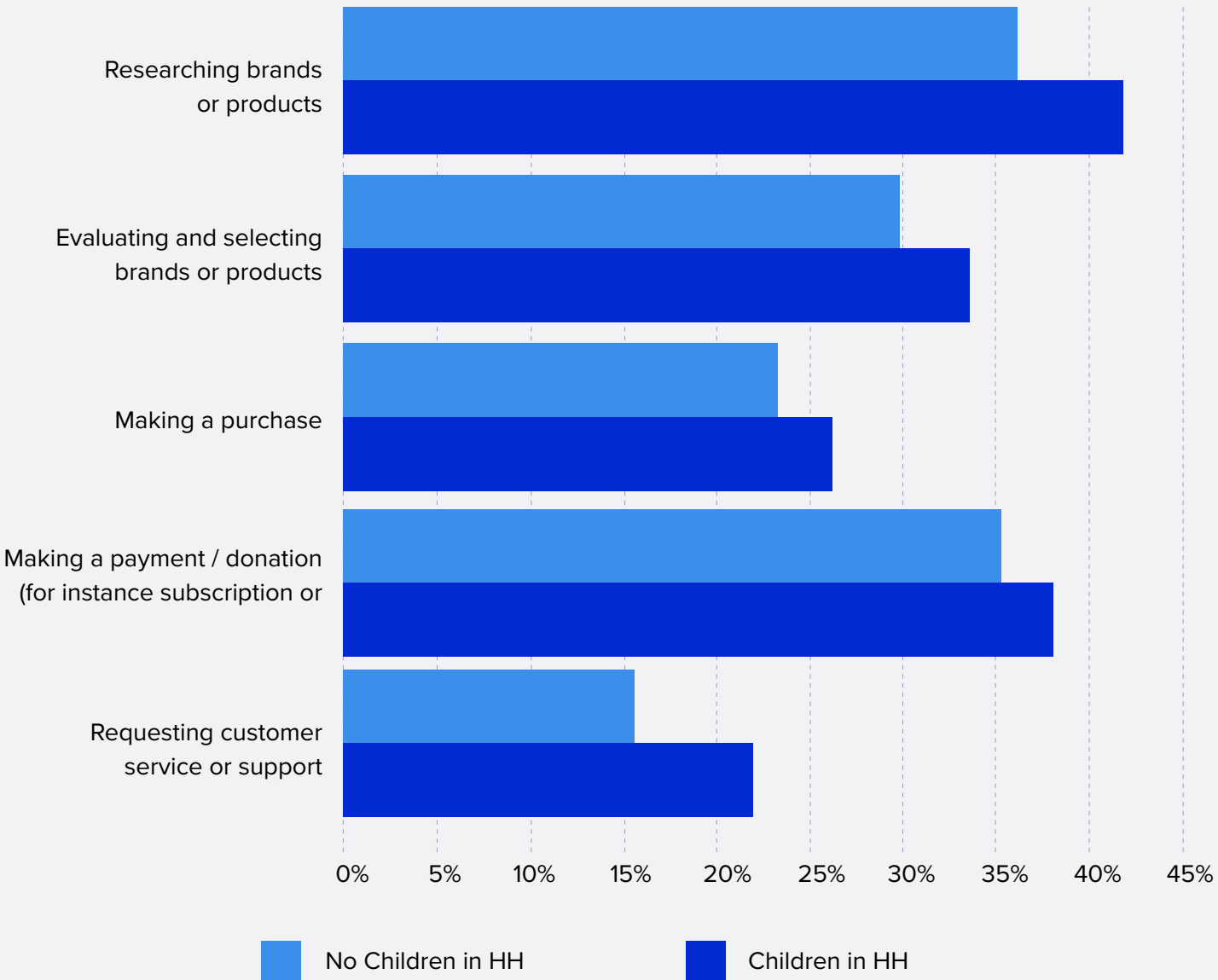
Consumers living with children prefer digital experiences at a higher rate than those in childless households. This is true across every stage of the consumer journey.

This likely reflects both a convenience preference and generational one. Consumers with children at home tend to skew Millennial—a generation that shows stronger preference for digital experiences overall. Baby Boomers, who are less likely to have children in the household, show the least preference for digital.



In the future, when engaging in each of the following activities with brands, what kind of experience would you prefer?

Totally/Mostly Digital, By Household Makeup



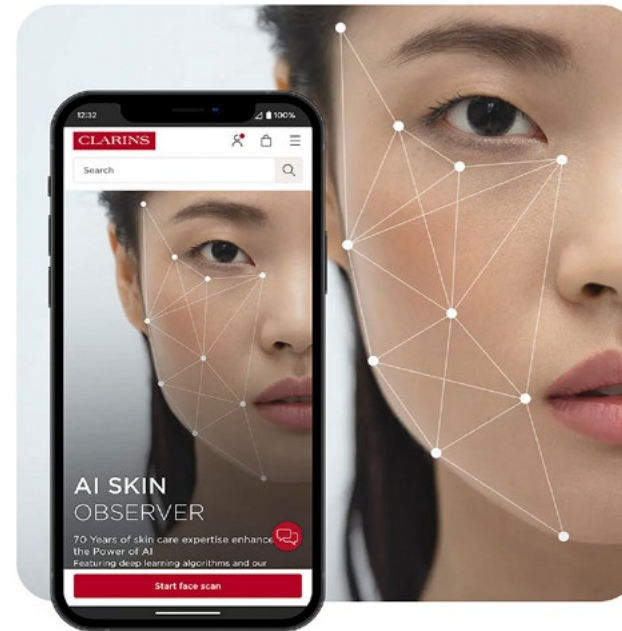
Clarins Case Study

AI where it matters, technology where it helps.

For 70+ years, Clarins has been committed to genuine, natural beauty. Accelerating their direct-to-consumer business meant delivering real value to customers, not deploying technology for its own sake.

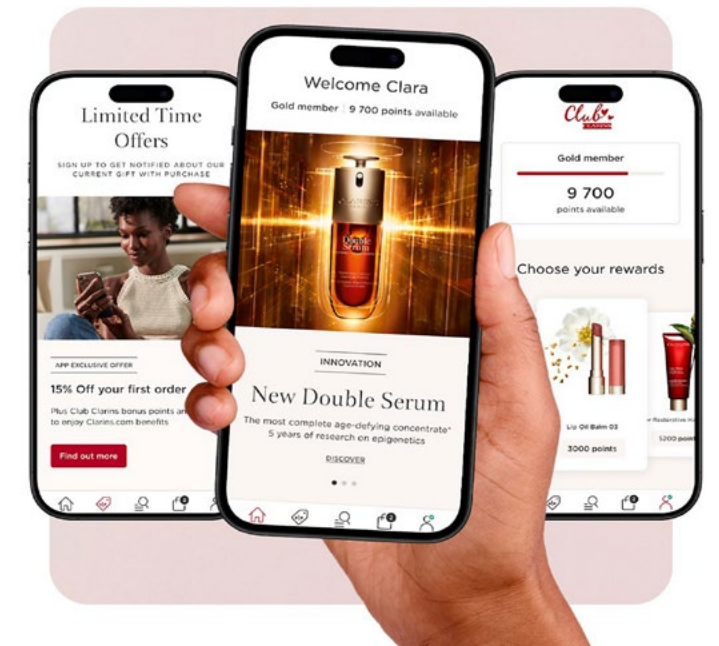
Merkle helped Clarins build an ecommerce architecture foundation to enable experience initiatives to address real customer needs.

One example: AI Skin Observer to help consumers identify which products are right for their skin type. The tool uses advanced skin technology in partnership with Perfect Corp to provide highly personalized recommendations to customers.



#1 best online shop in brand cosmetics & drugstore category in 2023 (Newsweek US)

#1 high-end skincare brand in Europe and one of the leading beauty brands in the world



Read the full Clarins case study

[VIEW NOW >](#)



Ready to align AI solutions to customer pain points?

Ask yourself...

- 1 Can we map each AI deployment back to a validated customer challenge?
- 2 What makes our AI experiences distinctively ours in a way that a competitor can't replicate tomorrow?
- 3 What's our framework for evaluating whether, or where, AI belongs in a given interaction?



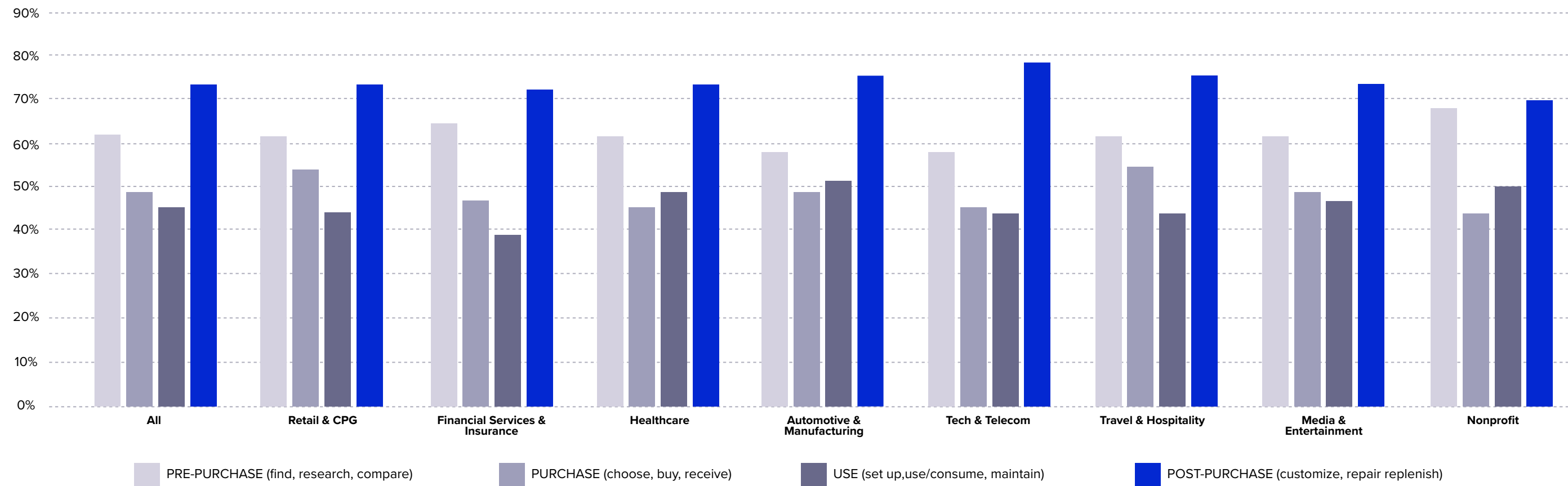
Turn post-
purchase into
your pre-purchase
advantage.



05

Across every industry, the post-purchase phase is the top experience area where consumers want improvement. **That's not just a service problem, but a growth opportunity.**

Thinking about all the times you have purchased and used products/services from [category] over the past 2–3 years, what are the top three ways you think these companies should improve your customer experience?



The data above shows responses for all categories. Refer to page 54 for the full list of categories used in the survey.

Post-purchase experience isn't overhead cost. It's your next growth investment.

In our last Imperatives research, post-purchase was the area where consumers most wanted to see improvements. Two years later, that gap remains—and it's consistent across generations, genders, household compositions, regions, and income levels.

Consumer expectations are higher post-purchase for two key reasons: first, the customer has already committed to your brand. Purchasing your product or service is an act of trust. They've given you their money, their data, and an opportunity to deepen the relationship. If they're reaching out post-purchase, it's either because their purchase isn't giving them the value they expected, or they're ready to replenish and spend more money with you. In both cases, the value exchange is uneven. The customer is giving more than they've gotten back.

Second, the expectation for personalization is higher. **The customer has already given you their data. Their next engagement with you should be much more seamless than their initial purchase journey.**

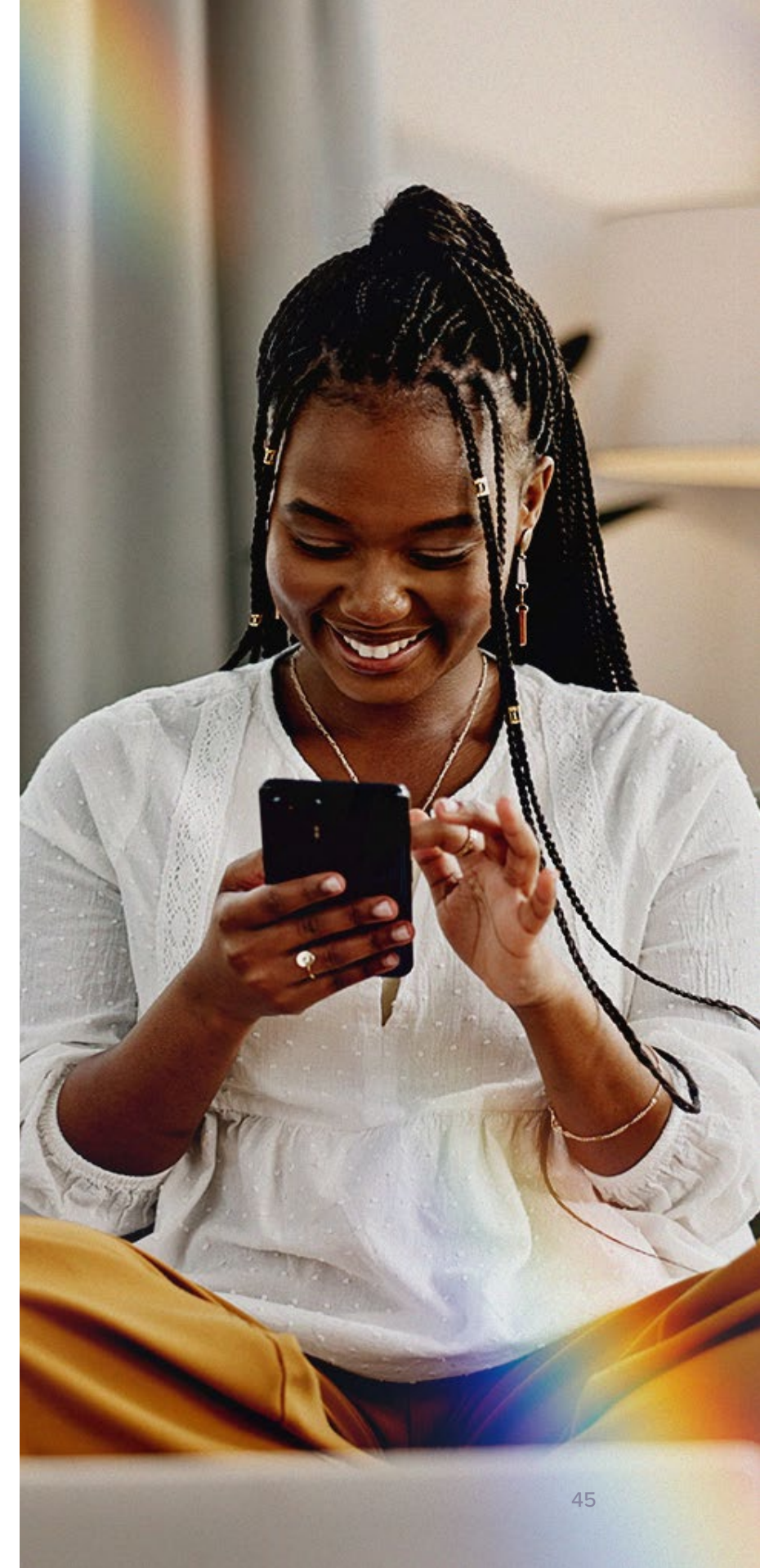
Post-purchase is the wrong frame entirely. Every post-purchase experience is also a pre-purchase opportunity to accelerate growth.



“My wife had an issue with their app a week ago and accidentally ordered 2 sets of meals and our credit card was charged twice. Had to call [meal delivery kit company], they could see the error and helped fix it on the phone. **It was too late to cancel the meal so they refunded the money and allowed us to keep the meals.** This was going above and beyond and we felt really satisfied with the service.”



—Richard, 44, Canada



Post-purchase is where personalization should be easiest, because brands already have the data customers have willingly shared. **Yet feelings of personalization in rewards and loyalty programs remain low.**

Travel and hospitality scores lowest on personalization (46%) and emotional satisfaction (62%). Since travel purchases tend to be high-value and loyalty programs are a cornerstone of the industry, consumer expectations for both are likely elevated, making the gap between expectation and experience especially costly for those brands.

Thinking back to the last time you joined or participated in a rewards/loyalty program with [brand type], how much do you disagree or agree with each statement below?

% who strongly or somewhat agree

	ALL	Retail & CPG	FinServ & Insurance	Travel & Hospitality	Media & Entertainment
Experience was frictionless (fast and easy)	83%	88%	85%	88%	80%
Experience felt empowering or emotionally satisfying	67%	65%	71%	62%	80%
Brand showed that it values my long-term business / loyalty as a customer	79%	79%	93%	82%	75%
Brand understood and anticipated what I wanted or needed during this experience	69%	73%	61%	66%	65%
Experience felt personalized or customized to me, individually	59%	55%	66%	46%	75%
Brand showed me media content and information that was relevant and helpful	66%	53%	71%	63%	75%

n=312

Customer loyalty is built through every brand interaction, not just programs and points.

Loyalty initiatives are often thought of as customers punching in a phone number to earn points or getting an app push notification about a random coupon. A brand's loyalty initiatives are much more than that: they're how the brand handles every engagement with a customer. Each email, each service call, each store visit, and each post-purchase follow-up contributes to the relationship and helps set up the next purchase.



Emotional connections make loyalty last, though they're valued more in some regions.

Sixty-seven percent of consumers feel a [stronger emotional connection](#) to brands that make experiences feel personal and human. That sentiment is even stronger in LATAM and APAC, where consumers place greater importance on emotional and immersive shopping experiences than other regions.

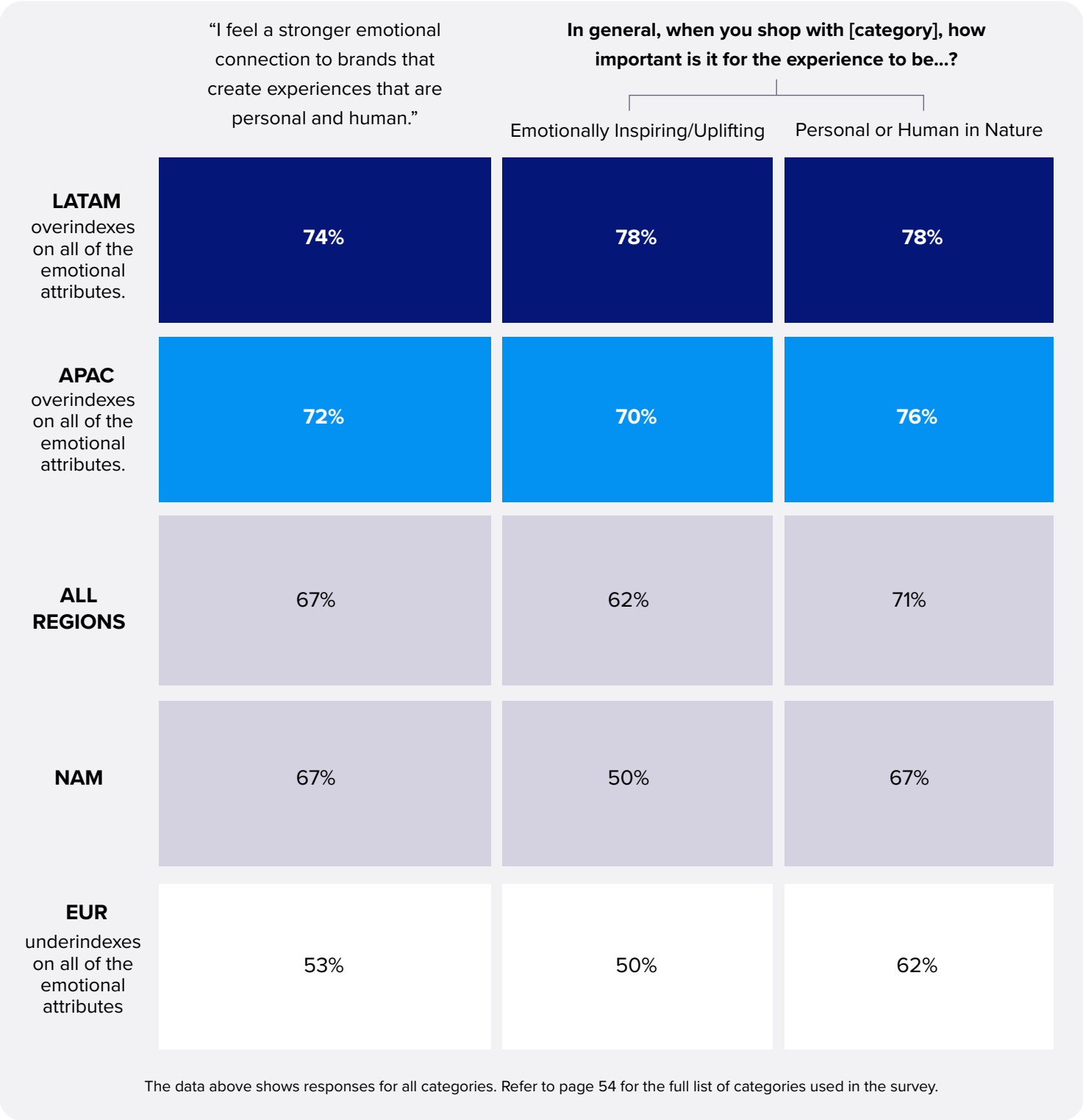
Emotional relationships last because they make customers feel understood, not just rewarded. Post-purchase is where those feelings are often either earned or lost.



“In short, I booked a train ticket online, and then had to change the details of my booking over the phone, as [train operating company] did not allow it to be changed online. **Then, [train operating company] did not credit me with customer loyalty points in their [loyalty] program, because they say I booked the journey over the phone, which is not eligible for loyalty points.** I’ve previously thought highly of [train operating company] when it comes to customer service, but this stance makes no sense to me. **I almost feel scammed. It has certainly changed how I see the company.**”



—John, 30, Scotland





Emotional loyalty comes from listening to - and delivering - what consumers want.

It starts with honoring how customers want to engage: human or digital, depending on the moment. And it means bringing the other imperatives to life in the post-purchase context specifically.

- 1 Using the data customers have shared to make their next buying journey faster and more relevant.
- 2 Helping customers feel safe and secure, especially when they're reaching out with a problem.
- 3 Using technology responsibly to make post-purchase interactions more cost effective, convenient, consistent, and simple.
- 4 Matching AI to real post-purchase pain points, like proactive order updates or intelligent troubleshooting.

Points and perks still matter for many companies because they deliver tangible cost effectiveness for the shopper. But they're just a piece. The other elements that drive loyalty are what separate brands that retain customers from brands that simply reward them. To explore in-depth data behind loyalty drivers, read our latest [Loyalty Barometer Report](#).

Digital transformation for magic on demand.

For over 180 years, Tivoli Gardens has delivered magical guest experiences. But an outdated business model and disconnected digital touchpoints kept the magic from extending outside the park.

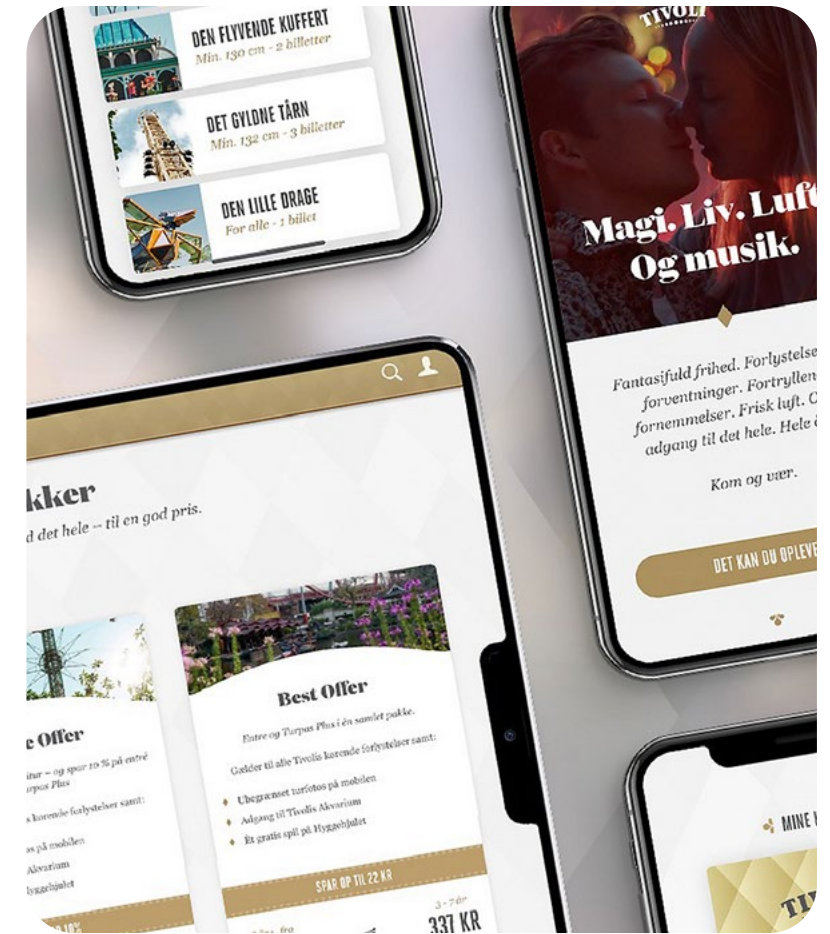
Merkle worked as an end-to-end transformation partner to turn one-off visits into ongoing relationships. Post-visit email summaries keep guests connected after they leave. Predictive intelligence tailors communications to life stages and proactively wins back guests at risk of churning. A new subscription model gives local families year-round access, replacing a 175-year-old annual pass structure that offered no incentive to stay engaged between visits.

The park visit is no longer the end of the experience. It's just one step in a long-term relationship.

9^x increase in in-app revenue

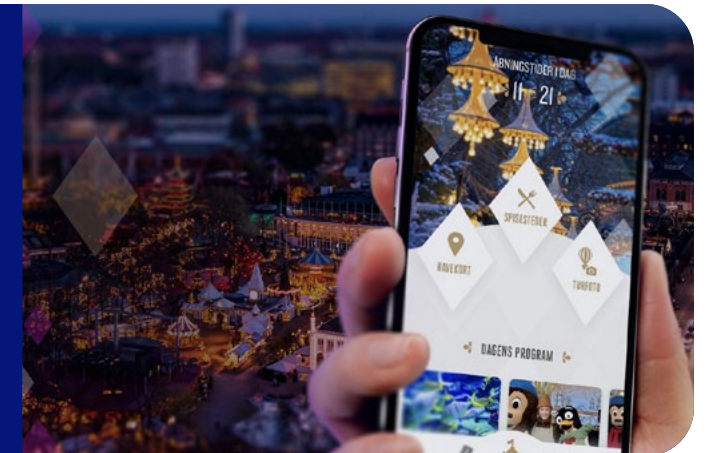
91%+ accuracy of predictive AI to drive targeted campaigns and offers

20% year-over-year growth through new products and a subscription model



Read the full Tivoli Gardens case study

[VIEW NOW >](#)



Ready to turn post-purchase engagement into pre-purchase opportunity?

- 1 Are we measuring post-purchase interactions as retention and growth drivers, or just as overhead costs?
- 2 Where in our post-purchase journey are we creating emotional connection versus just completing transactions?
- 3 Do we have a post-purchase strategy? How does it reinforce or undermine the experience promises we make during acquisition?



Wrapping Things Up



We set out to understand what truly drives customer experience in an AI-saturated world.

Here's what we found:

1) Personalization needs a purpose.

51% of consumers find current personalization helpful, yet 80% are willing to share their data. The gap isn't permission, it's execution. Predict what customers need next but know when to step back.

2) Security is the new table stakes.

Ranking second only to ease/convenience, safety and security have moved from IT concerns to shopping experience expectations. Consumers now assume their data is at risk until you prove otherwise, with AI raising that bar.

3) Technology should be invisible.

Only 43% of consumers say AI-powered shopping experiences matter to them, ranking last among every factor we measured. Customers want outcomes, not innovation theater. The best technology is the kind they never have to think about.

4) AI hype doesn't match customer reality.

Only 28% of consumers are interested in using AI agents, and even travel (a natural use case) landed at 24%. Align investments to pain points.

5) Post-purchase is pre-purchase.

The 74% of consumers who want better experiences with customizing, repairing, or replenishing are pointing directly at your next growth opportunity. Every support interaction is a chance to set up the next sale.



The bottom line: Growth won't come from technology alone. It comes from using it to embed the 3Cs and 2Ss into every interaction: cost, convenience, consistency, simplicity, and security.

Winning on experience has always come down to knowing your audience. With today's tools, you can do that better and act on that knowledge faster and more consistently. The advantage belongs to those who turn that capability into experiences customers actually remember.

Methodology

Primary research comprised online surveys of N=2,500 consumers who had a qualifying consumer interaction with one or more brand categories in the past 3 months. Surveys were administered in English to consumers based in 23 countries across North America, Latin America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region. Survey fieldwork was conducted November-December 2025.

At the start of the survey, each respondent was asked which of the following CX activities they had conducted in the past 3 months, and which types / categories of brands they had engaged with when conducting each of those activities.

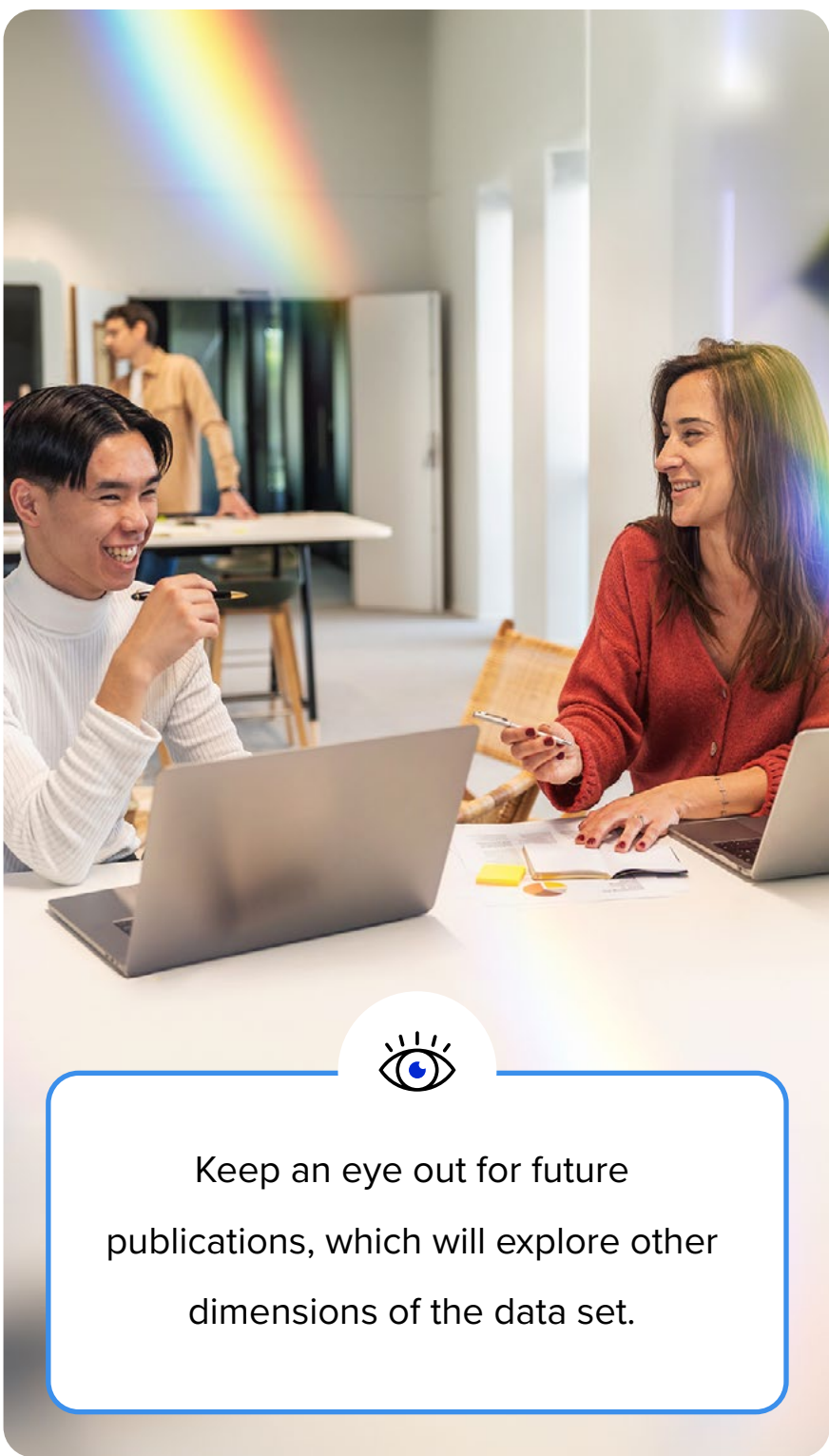
Each respondent was then assigned one CX activity and brand type / category to be asked about throughout the rest of the survey. We set quotas to ensure these were assigned equally across the entire sample, ensuring we captured reportable insights about each activity and brand / category shown below.

In-depth individual consumer research comprised a weeklong mobile ethnography and follow-up 1:1 interviews of n=15 who had a qualifying consumer interaction with one or more brand categories in the past 1 month. Conversations and data collection happened in English with consumers based in 8 countries across North America, Latin America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific region.

List of CX Activities Prompted In Survey	Assigned activity for survey
Made a purchase (either in-person or online)	13%
Shopped at a store (or visited a physical location / office)	13%
Shopped on a website or mobile app	13%
Used / consumed a product or service	13%
Contacted customer service or requested support	13%
Joined or participated in a rewards/ oyalty program	12%
Started / renewed a subscription or service plan	12%
Donated goods or money	12%

Assigned Brand Type for Survey

	Retail & CPG	16%
	Travel & Hospitality.	12%
	Media & Entertainment	12%
	Tech & Telecom	12%
	FinServ & Insurance	12%
	Auto & MFG.	12%
	Healthcare	12%
	Nonprofit	11%



Keep an eye out for future publications, which will explore other dimensions of the data set.

RELATED CONTENT

For further reading:

In future reports we'll dig into the differences across regions, household income, age, gender, and more. Here are some other resources you can explore in the meantime:



About Merkle

Merkle, a dentsu company, powers the experience economy. For more than 35 years, the company has put people at the heart of its approach to digital business transformation. As the only integrated experience consultancy in the world with a heritage in data science and business performance, Merkle delivers holistic, end-to-end experiences that drive growth, engagement, and loyalty. Merkle's expertise has earned recognition as a "Leader" by top industry analyst firms, in categories such as digital transformation and commerce, experience design, engineering and technology integration, digital marketing, data science, CRM and loyalty, and customer data management. With more than 16,000 employees, Merkle operates in 30+ countries throughout the Americas, EMEA, and APAC. For more information, visit www.merkle.com.

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