

SIGN OF THE TIMES 2026

March 2026

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Ipsos B&A



@IpsosBandA

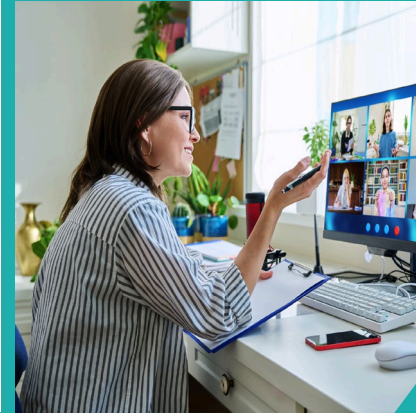


About Sign of the Times 2026

Sign of the Times 2026 features bespoke consumer research conducted specifically for this project.

Built atop our researchers' deep cultural understanding from hundreds of annual focus groups, interviews, digital ethnography, and large-scale consumer/business surveys.

Online consumer groups
(with immersive pre-tasking)



5 x focus groups

BC1/C2D, 16-70, mix of locations
Fieldwork February 2026.

National online surveys



Ipsos B&A Sign of the Times

(Nat rep; 1042, Adult 16+)

Fieldwork: 24th February to 5th March 2026.

Ipsos B&A Consumer Confidence (slide 10-13)

(Nat rep; n= 1,010; 16+)

Fieldwork: 10th-20th March 2026.

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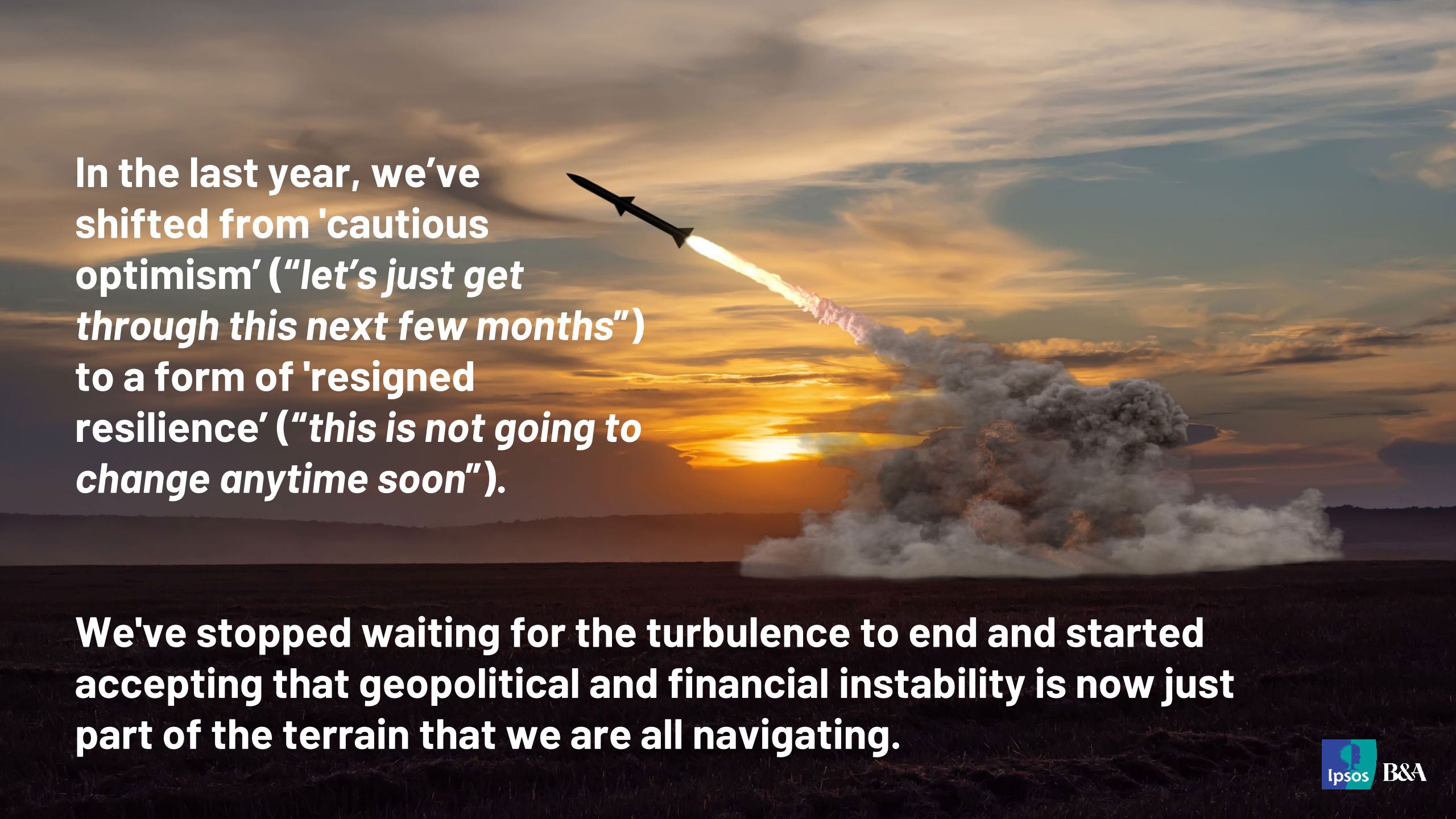
Our Performance Nation

Stuck Together



NEW RULES, NEW MAP



A black silhouette of a rocket is shown in flight, angled upwards and to the right. It leaves a bright, glowing trail of fire and a large, billowing plume of white and grey smoke that extends across the lower right portion of the frame. The background is a dramatic sunset sky with warm orange and yellow tones near the horizon, transitioning to cooler blues and greys as the sun sets. The foreground is a dark, silhouetted landscape.

In the last year, we've shifted from 'cautious optimism' (*"let's just get through this next few months"*) to a form of 'resigned resilience' (*"this is not going to change anytime soon"*).

We've stopped waiting for the turbulence to end and started accepting that geopolitical and financial instability is now just part of the terrain that we are all navigating.

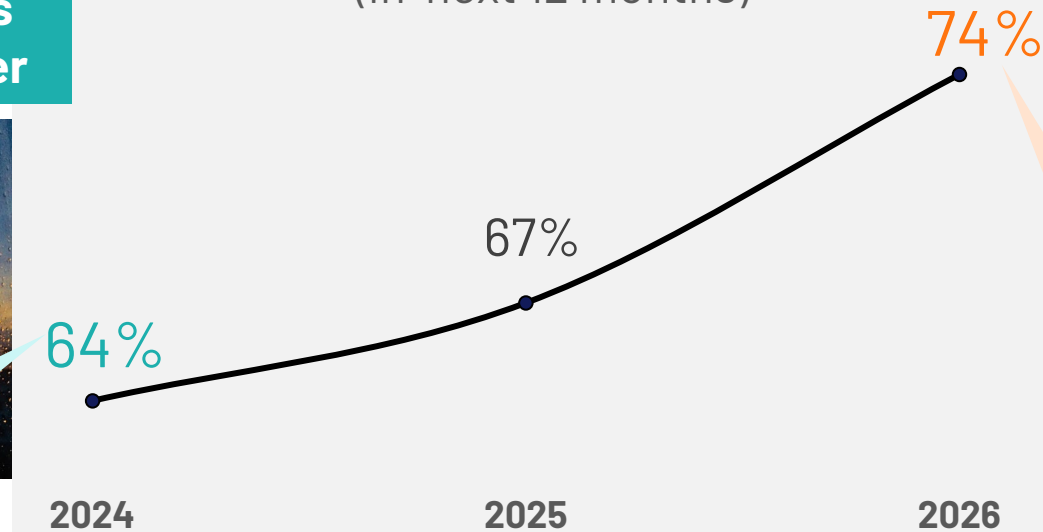
From 'cautious optimism' to 'resigned resilience'

FROM
Cautious optimism:
Short term problems
are likely to get better



"I'm hopeful that things are going to improve soon. We just need to get through the next few months..."

% expecting global economy to worsen (in next 12 months)



Q.12 Do you feel the global economy will be better, worse or the same over the next 12 months?

TO
Resigned resilience:
Longer term problems that are not going anywhere anytime soon



"There just doesn't appear to be an end in sight... the cost of everything is still so high and I can't see that changing"

Ireland's housing crisis to last another 15 years, Department of Finance predicts
Estimate of future demand based on current demographic trends

We are developing a more zoomed out, longer term acceptance of instability, chaos and for many in society - disappointment.

What worries Ireland?

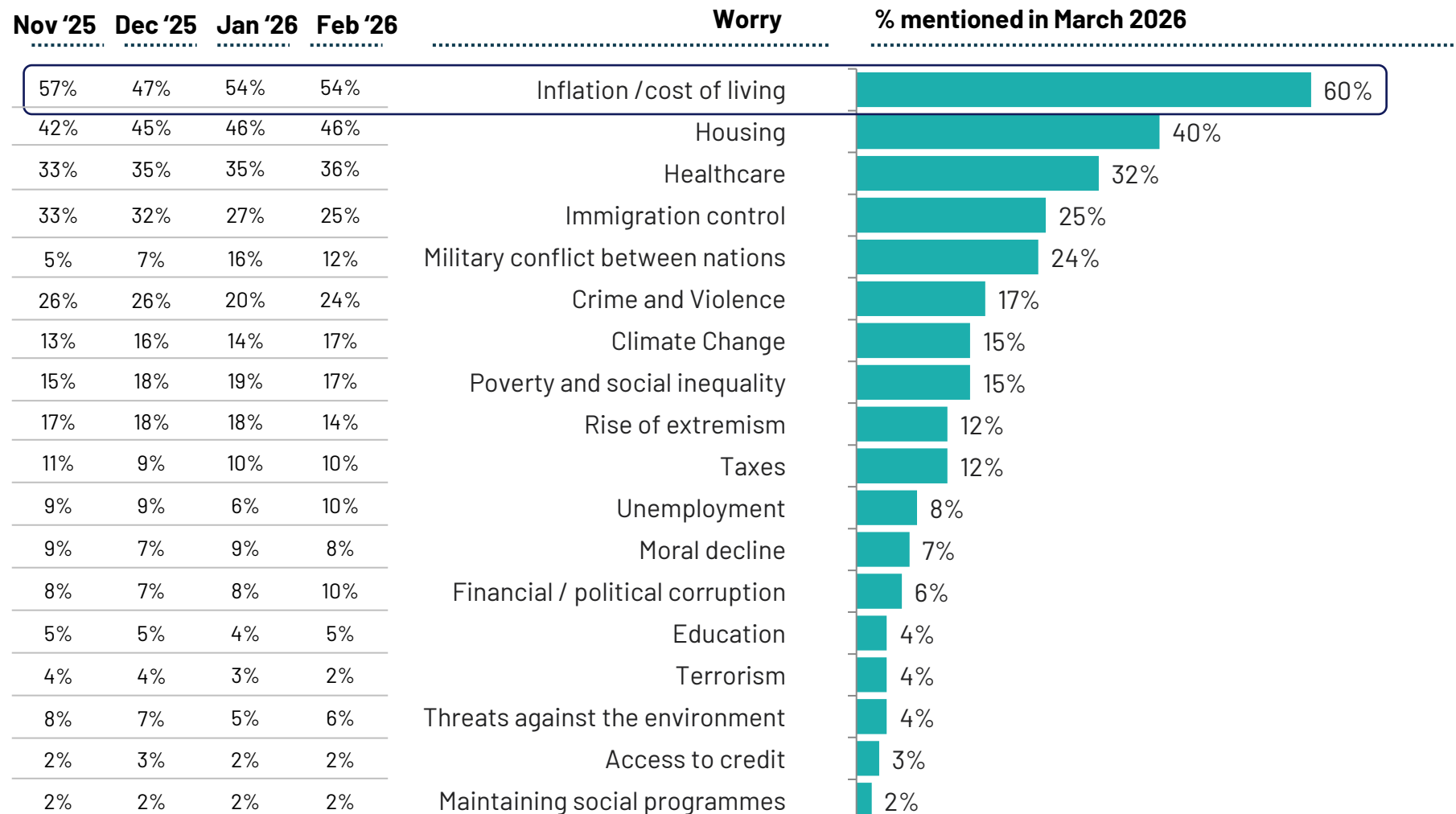
The cost of living and housing are by far the most pressing issues in Ireland. Both are cited across most demographics.

The impact of the Iranian War is beginning to seep through into public consciousness.

Base: All adults N = 1010

Source: Ipsos B&A Consumer Confidence March 2026

Q: Which three of the following topics do you find the most worrying in your country?





After years of overlapping crises, **We've run out of shock.**

Outrage fatigue – emotional exhausted and becoming **numb to what is extraordinary news.**

Headlines that once felt unbelievable **now feel routine.**

We are scrolling and viewing with a **'sigh'** instead of **emotional engagement.**

People aren't panicking anymore. Instead, they are increasingly tuning out.

Joy is medicine



Around the kitchen table at home we just don't talk about all that awful stuff that is happening out there at the moment... It's all just so much, it's confusing and unsettling...instead we talk about more boring stuff, our holidays, good food, we laugh...

The kitchen table becomes a sanctuary. A 'bubble of normalcy'.

Conversations shift to the tangible and controllable – holidays, food, shared laughter.

There's an unspoken family agreement: "Not here, not now"



We need lightness, boundaries, and restorative pauses to replenish our emotional reserves – joy is medicine. This isn't apathy, but a key strategy for maintaining longer term resilience.

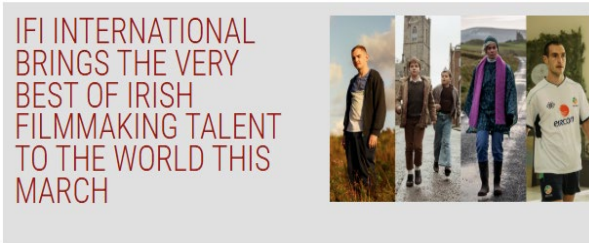
**As a
country we
are also
being
forced to
reassess
our place in
the world**



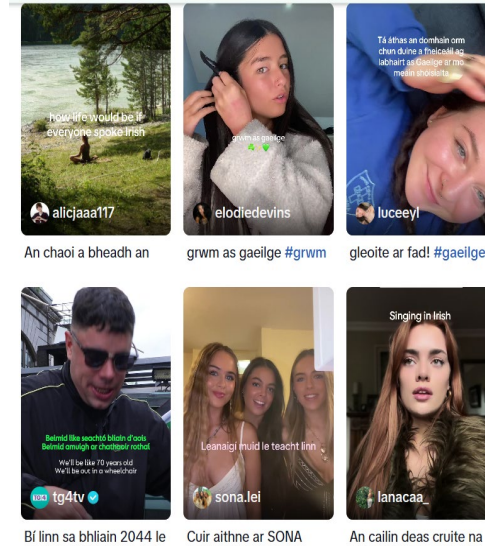
We are anchoring in our roots amid global chaos. We are reaching back to what feels authentically ours. With a lack of global role models, we are starting to reflect more on 'what is actually ours'.



"I think Irish music and the Irish language is definitely making a comeback, and that's quite nice to see."



182 SCREENINGS OF 122 FILMS ACROSS 17 INTERNATIONAL FESTIVALS IN 10 COUNTRIES



Explosion of **#Gaeligetiktok** on TikTok. 'Learn Irish online free' - **40%** rise on Google search.



11% rise in attendance at LOI games in 2025 (now 1.1 million fans)

In a world of chaos, our language, our music, our sport, our stories, become something solid to stand on.



Our 'Moral Compass' and our Economic Reality

There is **significant emotional disappointment with the USA**. It feels like a best friend revealing values you didn't know they held

That being said, the **economic pragmatism tempers our moral dismay**.

We're caught between our conscience and commerce.

This creates **cognitive dissonance - criticising America amongst friends**, while knowing the **pay-check might depend on a US tech giant**

76%



57%



38%



35%



Q.9 Which of the following countries or regions should Ireland prioritise when developing strong international alliances in the coming years?

China 25%

Implications for brands

Become a source of "Restorative Pause". Brands that offer **"emotional exhale" moments and lightness in these times** become welcome companions rather than additional noise.

Content that facilitates **connection, laughter, and small pleasures** becomes genuinely valuable. 'Heaviness' is being rejected as people 'ration' their emotional engagement.

The reaching back to **"what feels authentically ours"** is significant. Brands that feel rooted in genuine cultural specificity (rather than globalised sameness) will feel more trustworthy.

The **US relationship (and indeed EU relationship) tension creates a tricky space**. Overt American branding may carry new baggage. But performative "anti-American" positioning risks backlash given the economic realities.



FUTURE OF SHOPPING

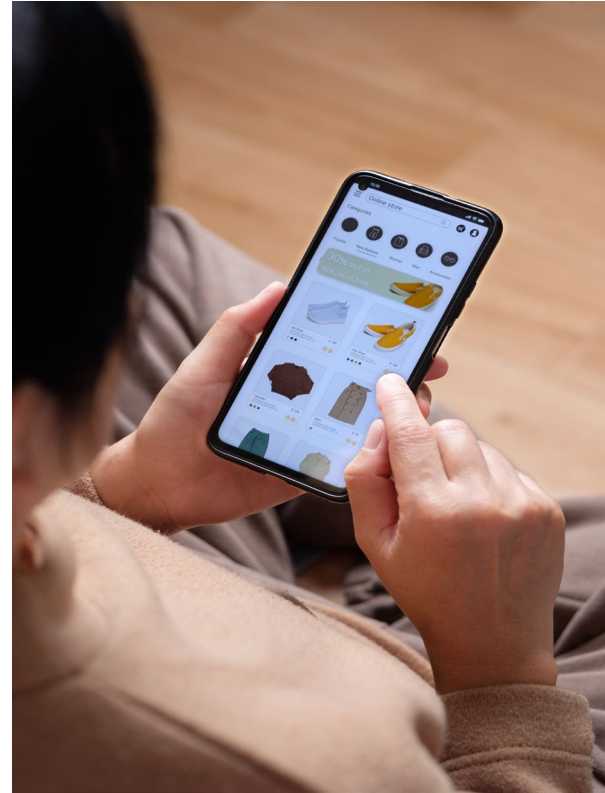


Let's just step back and understand just how much has fundamentally changed

Shopping was a 'walled' activity

Shopping used to have walls.

A destination, a purpose, a clear exit.



It is now an ambient possibility

Now those edges have blurred.

Discovery never really stops—it weaves through feeds, conversations, idle moments.

What was once a deliberate act has become a low-frequency signal that's always transmitting. The result? Purchasing decisions stretch, loop back, and unfold over time rather than resolving in a single moment.

But it doesn't stop there. Models of how customers search for and research products and services and make decisions is being further upended by AI



AI Search...



We are in the process of moving from an age of **static information discovery** to **dynamic, conversational discovery** that is supercharged with AI.

From 'Searching' to 'Asking'

I want to find the best running shoes for flat feet



From this...

Static information discovery

You **google** "best running shoes for flat feet."

You **click 3-4** listicle articles.

You open a few product pages, **read specs** and **reviews**.

You **manually compare** cushioning, stability, price, and brand.

You leave the product in your **basket for two days** and then decide to buy it.

To this...

Dynamic, conversational discovery

I'm a 38-year-old, 6'1", 210 lbs, running ~15 miles a week, flat feet, history of knee pain. I run mostly on pavement. **Which shoes should I try and why?**

"Do you prefer a softer or firmer ride? Any brands you've liked before?"

Narrows down to **3-5 specific models**.

Explains the trade-offs ("These are more stable but heavier, these are lighter but a bit less support").



46%

of those who use AI use it for **learning or conducting research** (consistent across lifestages).

Consumers will not be browsing static pages. They will be having a multi-step conversation that keeps refining based on their context and feedback. Now imagine this across, financial decisions, insurance, holidays, etc, etc.

The truth is this is already well under way

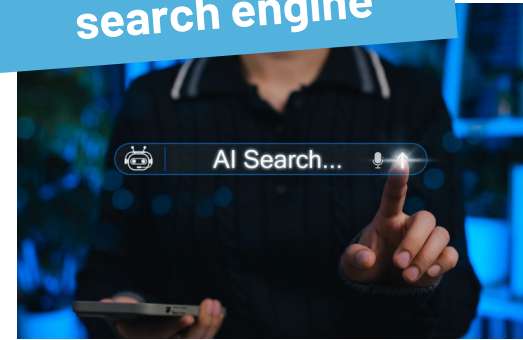
Holiday plans



Electronics and Tech



Alternative to search engine



51%

of all people using AI using it as alternative search engine (and many more using it this way without knowing it through Google)

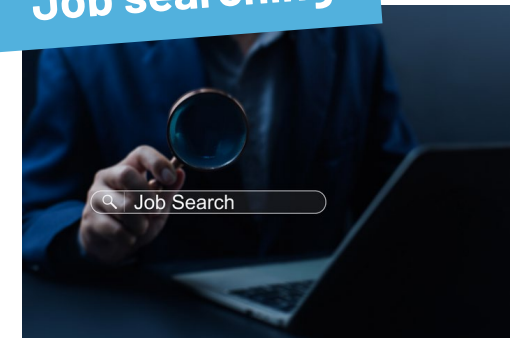
Gift ideas



Insurance, finance etc



Job searching

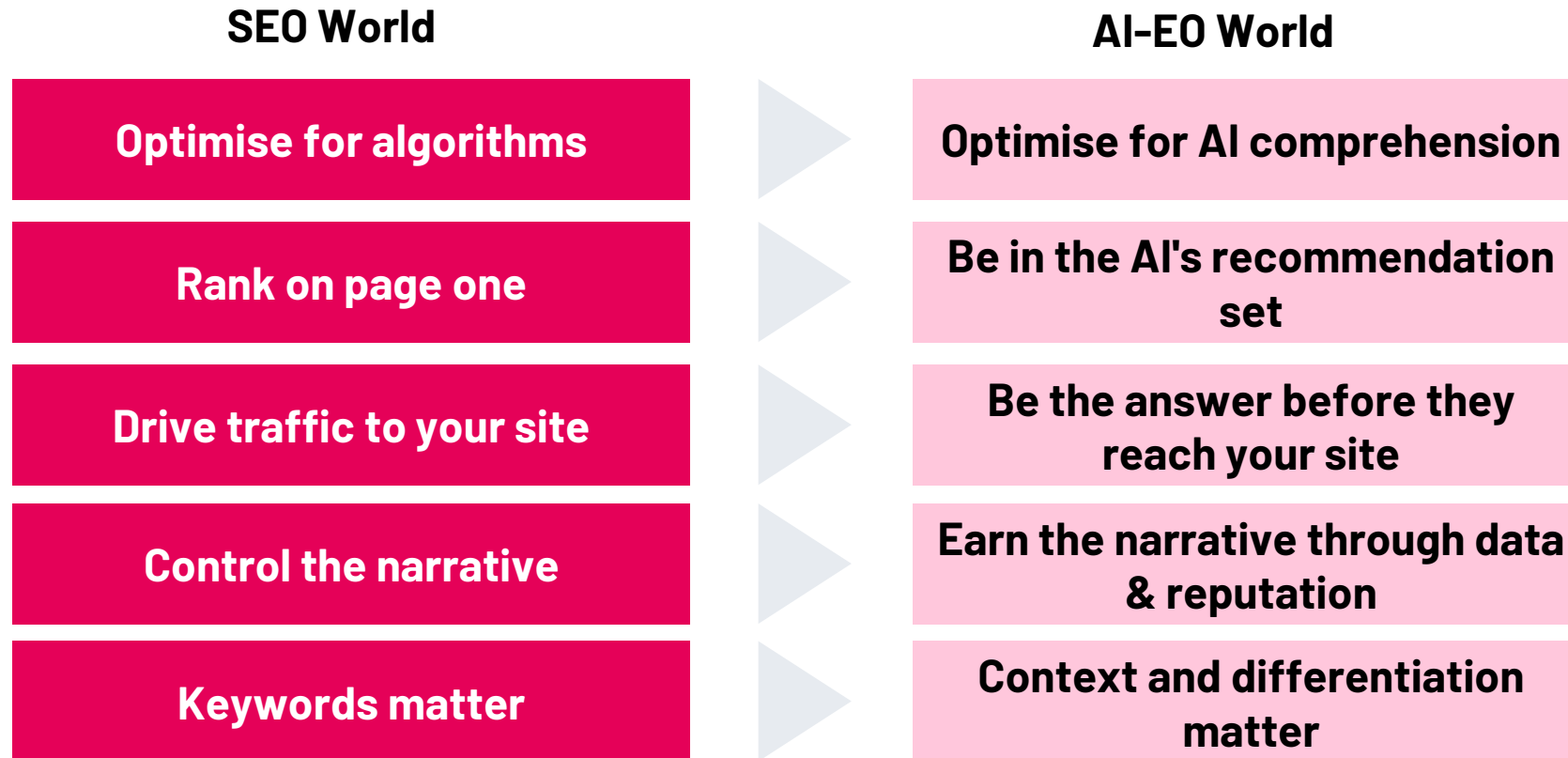


20%

of 16-24 year olds (AI users) using AI for job searching

We are moving from a world of SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) to AI-EO (AI Engine Optimisation).

From SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) to AI-EO (AI Engine Optimisation)



Clearly distinguishing differentiation is absolutely critical for brands, products or services going forward. There can be no grey area anymore – we need to be clear and exceptionally precise on our differentiation – that's the difference between being suggested or not.

Implications for brands

While AI adoption is growing, it remains more concentrated among the **young, educated, and middle class**.

However, just like adoption of many technologies its use will **increasingly democratise and become mainstream**.

This is not a **matter of if, or even when, it's now**.

Businesses and brands need to **start designing for new methods of consumers search and decision making**.

We need to know the **ins and outs of our products** and services and what **differentiates us from the market more than ever before**.

The precision, clarity and depth of differentiation is increasingly important.



THE REPRICING OF HUMAN VALUE

The Industrial Revolution repriced muscle. AI is repricing cognition

AI's Expansive role

- Greater productivity** – can do more with less
- Expands capabilities** – knowledge in more areas
- Aids decision making** – direction and advice



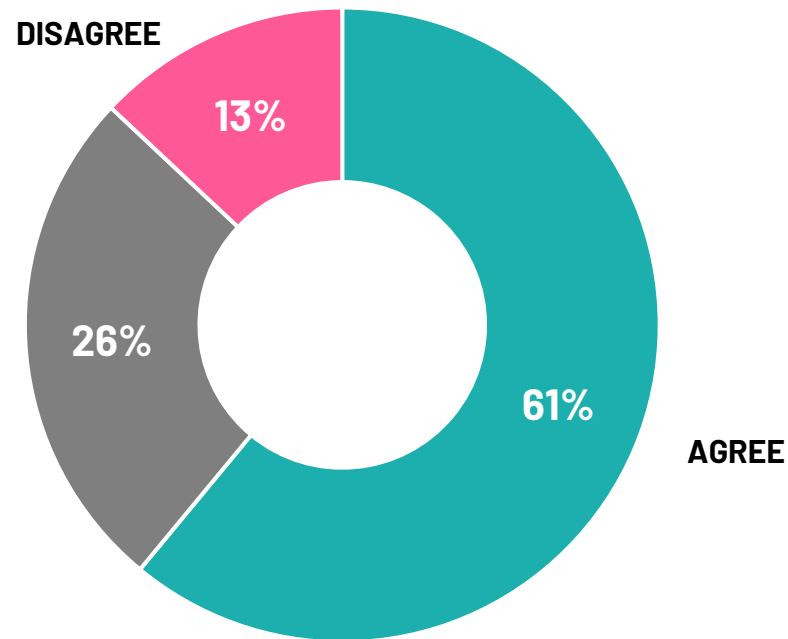
AI's Invasive role

- Human creativity** – the incentive to be **curious, wonder and innovative** is being squeezed.
- Human expertise** – AI has already fundamentally shifted the **meaning of intelligence**.
- Human agency** – Potential for us to become **passengers in our own lives**.

Like a farm, what you don't water you lose. If we let AI water the crops, will we forget how to farm?

“No matter how much I know, AI will always know more...”

With AI, it will become more challenging for individuals to achieve mastery in their field



We used to:

Struggle through problems

But..

But now:

AI gives instant answers—struggle bypassed

Learn from mistakes

But..

AI prevents mistakes before they happen

Build layers of knowledge

But..

AI lets you skip to the end

Deep, focused practice

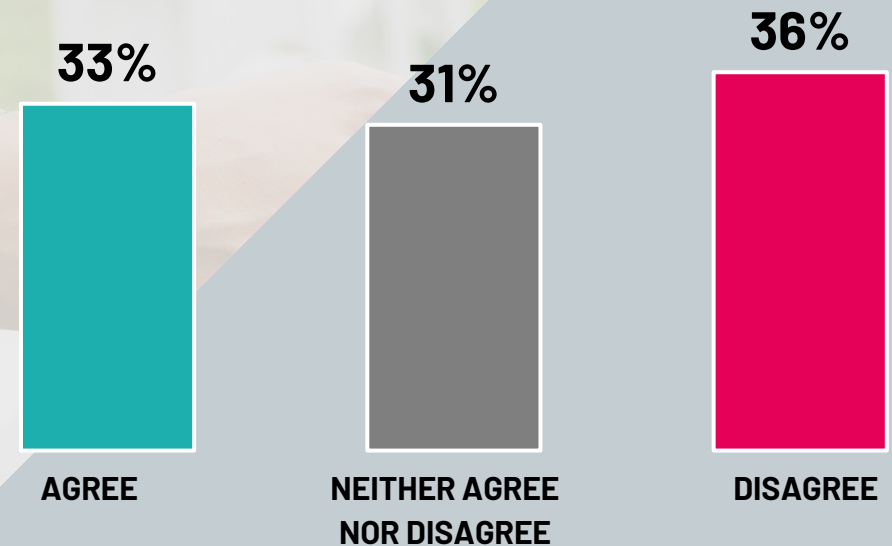
But..

AI enables shallow, fast outputs

This is a signal of profound anxiety about human value and development.

**We remain on the fence
about the longer-term
benefits of AI for society**

**I believe that AI will have a positive impact on
society in the longer term**



There is clear spaces where AI is welcome to play



We welcome AI solving many problems for us (especially in medicine, decision making when looking for products, etc.).

If AI finds a cancer cure, no one is going to ask "but was it human?"

The outcome matters. The origin really doesn't.

The key distinction brands need to make is when do their customers want efficiency... and when do they want authenticity and connection. The brands that win will use AI for efficiency—while protecting the human friction that signals meaning to customers.

However, there is a line we feel it must not carry (currently)



73%

consider art or music created by AI as less meaningful than human created art or music

Time signals care: Does an AI generated bot response make a customer feel like they matter, or that they are 'just a number'? Or does an AI agent salesperson really make somewhat want to buy your product?

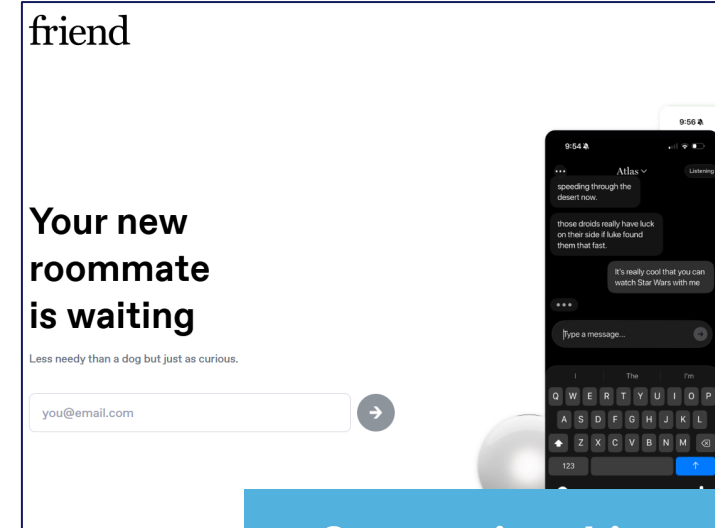
Effort creates intrinsic value: Struggle and labour become embedded in the output itself.

The process and the origin matters, as well as the outcome.

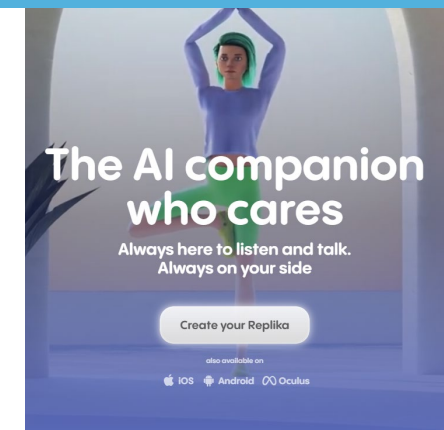
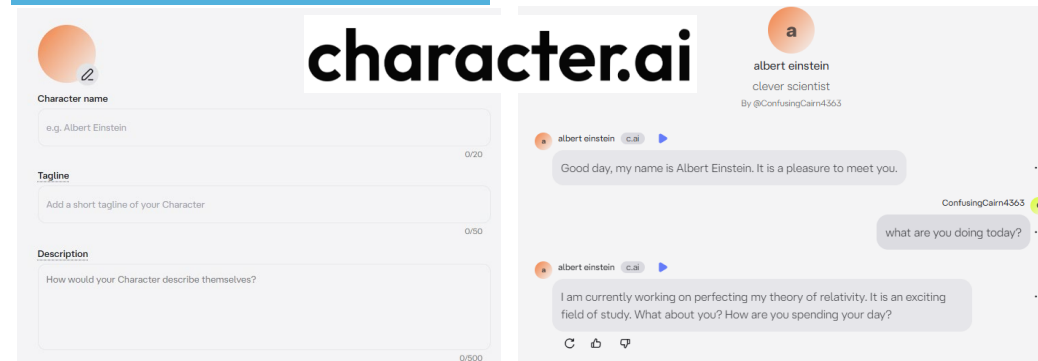
Most of us remain distant emotionally from AI... but there are signals that the next generation may be somewhat different

22%

of 16-24 year olds (AI users) using AI for emotional support or companionship



Building 'agents' to converse with



Key implications for brands

There are clear areas in which AI can have a transformational role, but others where it is less welcomed. **Knowing the difference for your brand is critical** to avoid misfire or breakdown in trust or connection with audience.

Expecting human and intentional engagement from customers while reducing human and intentional engagement from the service/product, can create distance between customer and brand, even distrust and disgust.

However, there is a great opportunity to create a human enhanced experience for customers; view AI as an extension of brand values, a tool for making customers feel more connected and more efficiently looked after.

Important to closely follow how emotional interaction with AI evolves. Keep an eye on Gen Z.



THE CIRCLE OF TRUST



We have MORE INFORMATION than ever and LESS CERTAINTY about what to believe

'Positional' world news

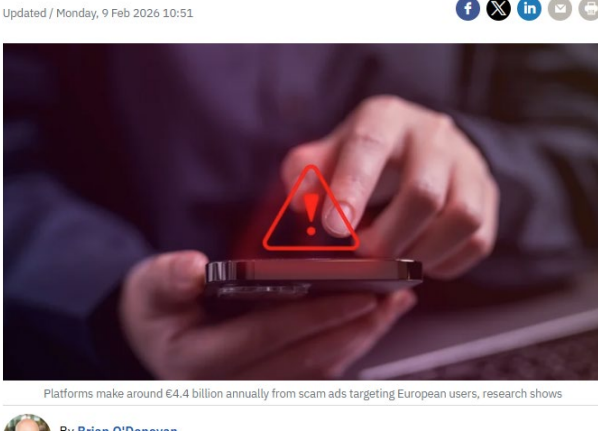


Rise of 'armchair experts/opinions' (podcasts)



Increase in 'bad actors'

Social media platforms made €32m from scam ads targeting Irish consumers

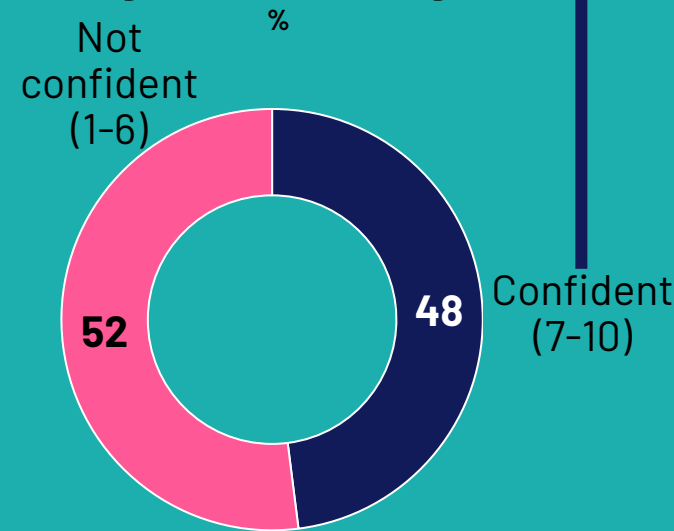


The information landscape has become exhausting and treacherous. There is a growing sense that we need to be always on and always vigilant and a realisation of the intentions that sit behind the information we consume.

Less than half of Irish Adults are confident they could identify AI-generated images



Confidence in identifying AI-generated images



Confident in Identifying AI-generated images

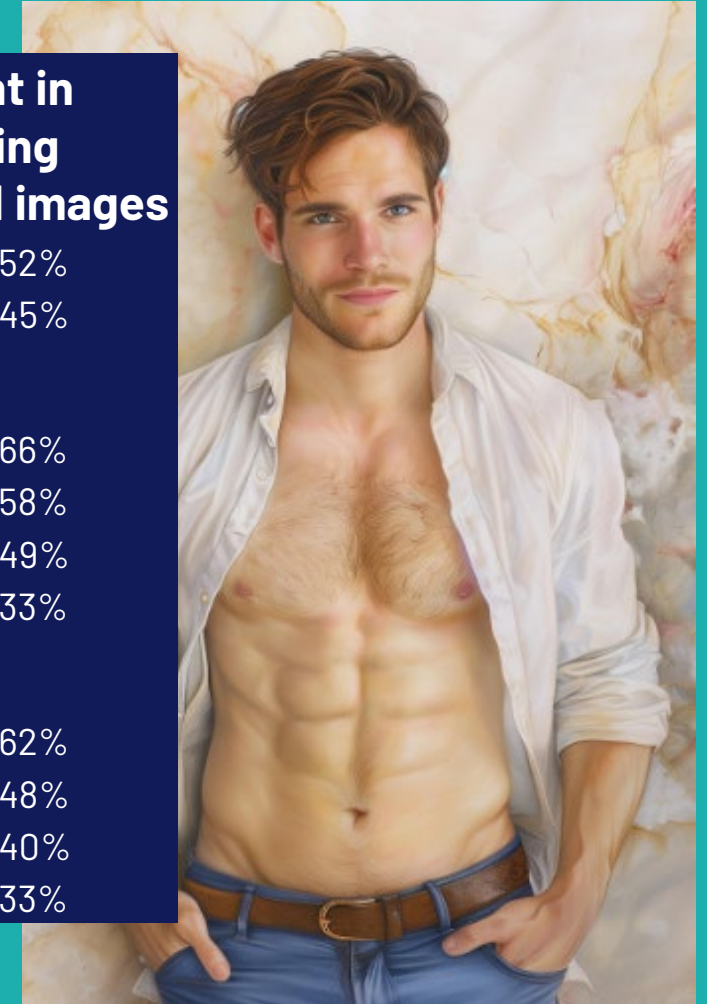
Men	52%
Women	45%

Male

Gen Z	66%
Millennial	58%
Gen X	49%
Baby Boomer	33%

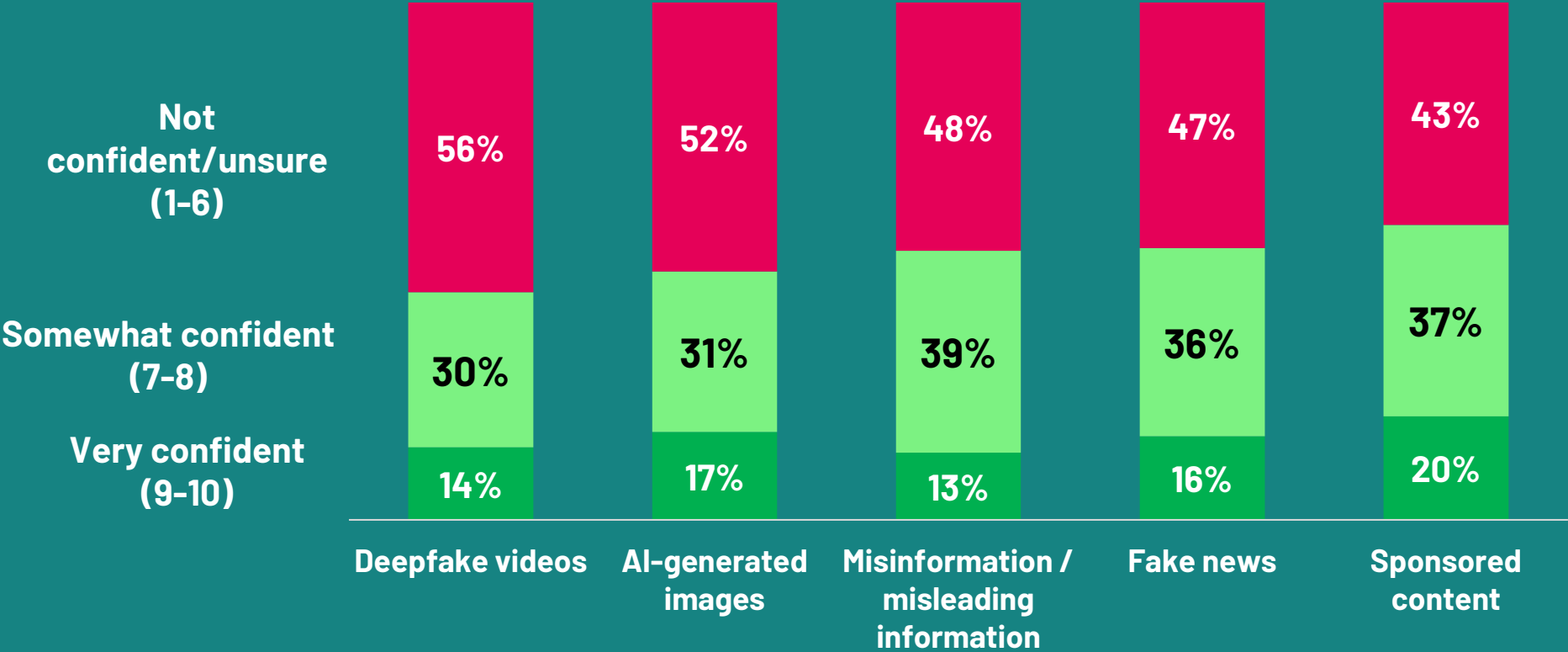
Female

Gen Z	62%
Millennial	48%
Gen X	40%
Baby Boomer	33%



We lack confidence in our ability to identify what is real and what is fake especially when related to AI

Q.12 How confidence to you feel in you ability to Identify...



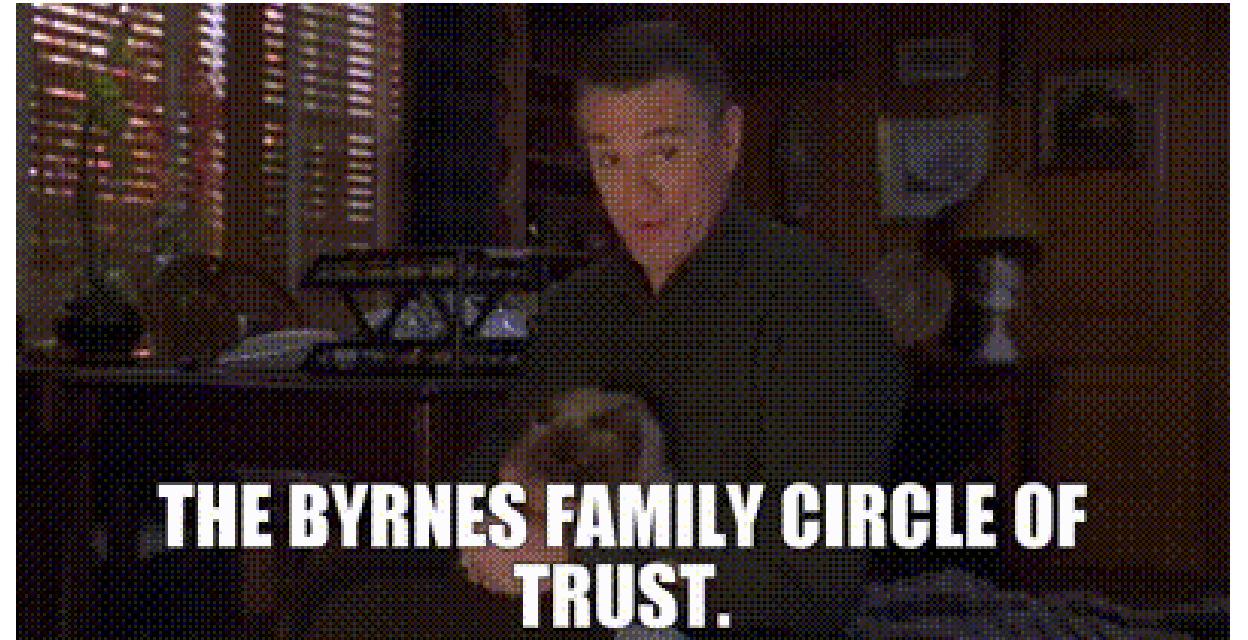
Our confidence is shaken. This means a constant need to triangulate information sources (especially for important, higher stakes decisions) – e.g. holidays Tripadvisor, but also YouTube vloggers, etc.

Channelling our inner Jack Bynes

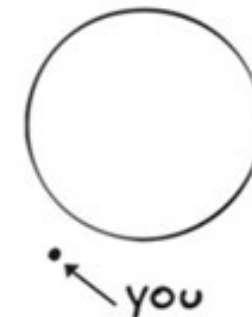
Like **De Niro's character in Meet the Parents**, consumers are becoming **deeply sceptical gatekeepers**.

They're asking, *"Who are you? Why should I believe you? Are you inside my circle, or outside it?"*

Trust is more fragile than ever. Earning it takes time and consistency. Losing it takes a moment.



circle of trust



When everything can be faked, proximity becomes proof

With trust being fragile and noise being everywhere, consumers are **tightening their circles to smaller, 'verified' networks.**

- The friend who has personal experience with the topic
- The WhatsApp group recommendations
- The expert with proven credentials
- The brand that's never let them down

Even Reddit and Boards.ie are reemerging as trusted sources for info "from the horse's mouth" (with a pinch of salt of course) – a sense that they have **yet to be corrupted by AI or bad actors.**



In an environment of infinite content, algorithmic manipulation, AI-generated everything, sponsored posts disguised as organic, and review fraud, consumers are retreating to smaller, quality circles of recommendations.

Implications for brands

Consumers are channelling their "inner Jack Byrnes"

They're actively interrogating every message. Brands need to demonstrate radical transparency – about sourcing, pricing, partnerships, even mistakes.

- **Word-of-mouth has never been more powerful** – but it must be genuine, not manufactured.
- **Micro-influencers and real customer advocacy** over celebrity endorsements.
- **Employee voices and founder authenticity** become brand assets.
- Brands that customers recommend in group chats are earning "**social proof premium**".
- **Community-building** over broadcasting.
- **Over-produced, "too perfect" content** may trigger suspicion rather than admiration.
- **YouTube and video content** as triangulation tool.



OUR PERFORMANCE NATION

The pressure to perform and be seen performing remains profound

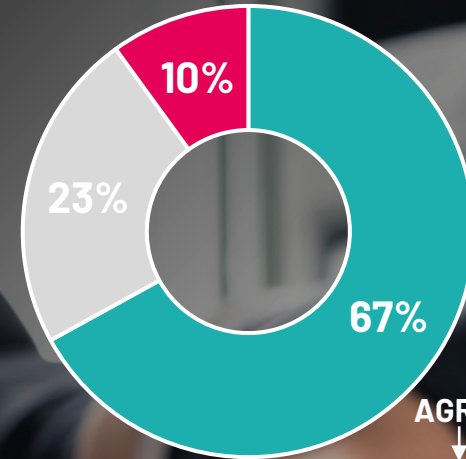
Self-care, mindfulness have all become additional things for us to optimise. Instead of rebalancing the scales, we have just added more weight to it.

Gen Z in particular now navigate impossible contradictions:

- Be highly productive *AND* present.
- Be ambitious/hustling *AND* at peace/content.
- Be crushing goals *AND* practising gratitude.
- Have experiences *AND* life progression.

I feel pressure to optimise everything in my life (gen z)

DISAGREE



AGREE

Female higher

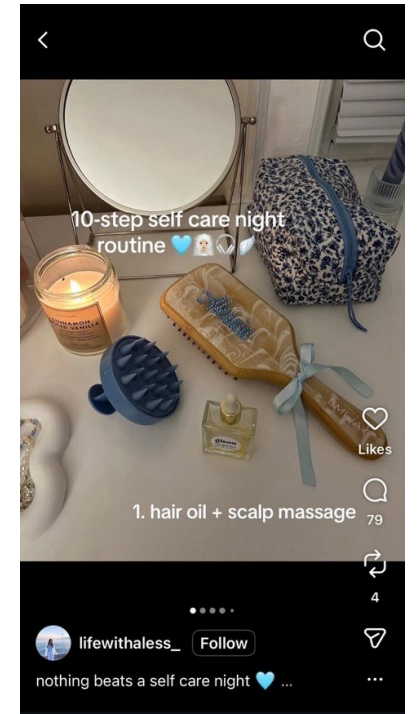
They're not fighting the contradiction – they're living inside it and trying to navigate it as best they can.

Even self care can feel more pressured than offering relief

The desire for pampering and nurturing in self-care is overshadowed by the need to tick boxes, transforming it into a preservation routine.

The focus on doing everything 'correctly' adds pressure, emphasising the 'right' products and rituals, which can contradict the true essence of self-care.

- ✓ SKINCARE ROUTINE
- ✓ HAIRCARE ROUTINE
- ✓ EXERCISING REGULARLY
- ✓ EATING WELL
- ✓ BED TIME ROUTINE



"I get irritated by it as it feels like it's all an act." (Gen Z)

The ultimate irony is now
that rest itself now
requires optimisation
(sleep tracking, recovery
scores, "*productive rest*")



The growth of 'trophy travel'

The language surrounding travel has become a telling indicator of its growing performative nature...

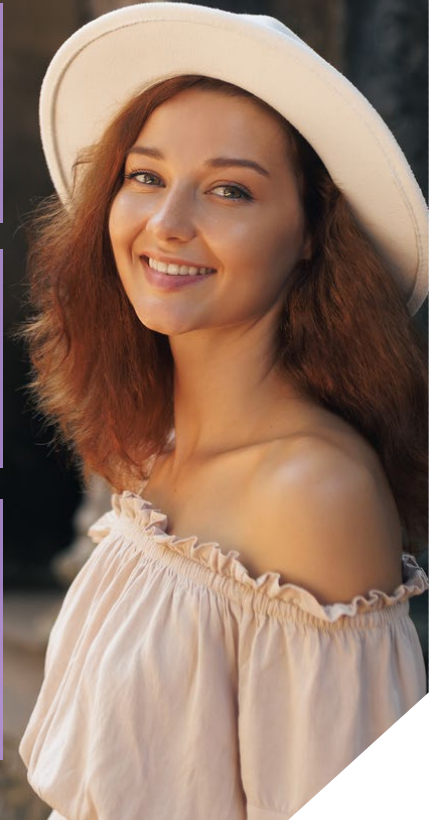


We **did** Vietnam, and then we **did** Cambodia....we **did** the Camino...we **did** the east coast of the US...we **did** 2,500km.

Experiences are increasingly viewed as accomplishments, not immersions.

Acquiring an experience and proving you had it (through social media) is increasingly the priority.

The anticipated sharing of the experience actually shapes how people experience it in real time. People are mentally composing captions while standing at Angkor Wat or at the Fuji mountains.



Travel experience is increasingly viewed as a 'must have' for development and 'social capital' (especially younger). Competing with all the other 'must haves' that exist in their lives.

'Semi-retiring' from social media?

The social dump as a 'flex' – Periodic updates over regular updates

Intentionally eclectic and seemingly random posts

- *"I'm too busy to post regularly"*
- *"I don't care enough to curate"*
- *Authenticity signalling*
- *Minor act of defiance ("I'm in control")*

Similar behaviour for WhatsApp developing – getting back to a lot of messages in one go rather than one by one as they receive them.

- Often through voice message over text



The flex isn't "look how connected I am" anymore – it's "look how disconnected I can afford to be."

There is a counter cultural movement growing – towards slowness, muted and intentional consumption.

Often with moments of defiance against always on productivity or performance.



I had a friend who told me they were going to go totally analogue for the next few weeks.. back to the stone age he said

Wired headphones are back
(but includes virtue signalling)



Implications for brands

We're living in an era of **compulsive self-improvement**, and **'performance escalation'**.

This carries pressure – and more pressure than most people realise as it is disguised within social norms.

Permission to be **imperfect** or to take a **short detour** from this becomes genuinely countercultural and interesting (e.g. pudding mit gabel) – give permission to be silly, letting guard down – **small acts of release, letting the guard down from constant self-optimisation.**

In all the seriousness of self improvement, there is more room for **play and fun** from brands that can be tapped into – consumers miss this.



STUCK TOGETHER

The housing squeeze has never been as significant

The housing crisis continues to get **progressively worse.**

Increasingly, there is now a need for **two good salaries PLUS a helping hand from mom and dad.**

Either in the form of free/low rent or through contribution towards a deposit.

Cost of renting **diminishes ability to buy.**



Ireland's housing crisis to last another 15 years, Department of Finance predicts

Estimate of future demand based on current demographic trends

The result has been a sharp increase in the numbers of young adults living with their parents for longer. And this trend is only going one way.

There are 'unspoken tensions'

Really **appreciative** that they can stay at home and have a roof over their heads.

There can be a degree of **embarrassment** – albeit this is easing in recent years as it becomes the norm.

They often feel **infantilised**, with privacy compromised and autonomy limited.

Despite living under the same roof, there can be a degree of **emotional distancing** – feeling further away.



Will do anything to help and **support** their children.

Had **envisioned this time differently** – travel, hobbies, saving aggressively for retirement, maybe downsizing the house.

Can experience a **cognitive dissonance**, wanting to help their child while simultaneously feeling like that help is perpetuating the problem.

There's often **disagreement** between parents themselves about how much to enable vs. push for independence.

They can feel like failures as parents or children, wondering "where did we go wrong?" even when external factors (economy, housing costs) are largely to blame.

And things both sides think.. but rarely say

"I know you compare me to my cousin who bought a house at 29"

"It really annoys me when you ask me where I was last night like I am a 16 year old again"

"Maybe I should just emigrate"

"What if I'm still here at 40"



"I love you, but I'm tired of cooking and washing for four when I thought I'd be done by now"

"I notice you bought new shoes and clothes but haven't mentioned rent"

"I don't know how to bring up you leaving without it sounding like I'm kicking you out"

"We're dipping into retirement savings to help you get your deposit"

These tensions live under the surface – thought of but dare not said.

An evolving 'next stage' of life



Delayed milestones means an extended period of parenting responsibilities (including grandparenting duties). 'Dreams' such as extended trips abroad, even moving abroad are often put on hold.

There is no place like home

Returning to Ireland has its perceived sacrifices, but most want and are able to do so.

Irish returners feel a sense of **frustration for their own stagnated sense of progress on return.**

Many are **living at home with their parents**, saving for a house, which is a stark contrast to the independence felt living abroad. Cost of living crisis irritation is more pronounced as a clear comparison exists between financial self-efficacy when living in Ireland vs outside.

However, progress in Ireland remains the ultimate goal, and thus, sacrificing financial and housing freedom, and to an extent, a social life, **is perceived as worth it.**



The bitter irony is that many returning felt that distance can sometimes create connectedness. The WhatsApp calls from Sydney had depth, with the conversations at home now centring around “grand, yeah, busy”.

Implications for brands

The housing crisis is fundamentally shifting what it means to be a 'young adult' and a 'empty nester' in Ireland. This is showing no signs of letting up.

- Living at home for longer
- Having kids later in life
- First time grandparents in retirement
- Extended financial commitments
- A shifted 'next stage' of life

How these life stages are being experienced is in flux and as a result how we target them needs to evolve too.

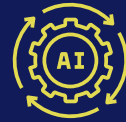


Top 10 takeaways for brands



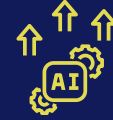
Be Light, Not Heavy

Consumers are emotionally exhausted ("resigned resilience"). Offer joy, laughter, lightness. Heaviness gets rejected.



AI is Changing Search – Get Precise NOW

Discovery is conversational. Fuzzy positioning will get buried by AI. Be crystal clear on differentiation or you will quickly become irrelevant.



Use AI for Efficiency, Protect Human Moments

Know when customers want speed vs. genuine connection. Humanness is a differentiator – use it well.



Earn Trust Through Transparency & Real Voices

People can't tell real from fake. Win with: radical transparency, real customer advocacy, micro-influencers, founder authenticity.



Lean Into Cultural Roots

Irish identity is resurging (Irish language, music, LOI). Brands that feel authentically rooted feel more trustworthy.

Top 10 takeaways for brands



Word-of-Mouth is King

Consumers trust tight circles – WhatsApp recommendations, friends with experience. Brands recommended in group chats earn a "social proof premium."



Watch out for Over-Polished AI Content

"Too perfect" triggers suspicion. Authenticity beats production value.



Give Permission to Be Imperfect

Performance pressure is intense. Brands offering release from constant self-optimisation stand out.



Navigate the US Brand Tension Carefully

Overt American branding carries new baggage. Understand the tension on conscience and commerce.



Rethink Life Stage Targeting

Housing crisis = young adults home longer, parents funding longer, delayed milestones. How we target needs to change.

THANK YOU

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