



Method1

State of Indulgence 2026

When and why Americans reach for consumable rewards—a rising category as commercially durable as it is emotionally essential.

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What is INDULGENCE?

Certain consumable brands offer moments of pleasure that have always taken up more room in people's lives than their small space on the shelf suggests. Sometimes the treat is remarkable, sometimes not, but the pause to enjoy it is always meaningful.

Indulgences, particularly small ones, are known for holding their market ground through even tough economic eras and major lifestyle shifts—resilience psychologists and economists call it the *lipstick effect*.

In 2026, we see that durability tested by ongoing inflation, work-life routines still recalibrating after the pandemic, and a wellness culture that makes consumers more intentional about every choice, including what they consume to provide that essential something that essential purchases don't.

As an agency grounded in the unique psychology of treats and emotional rewards, Method1 sought to establish new baselines for consumable indulgence through our inaugural *State of Indulgence* report —studying how Americans think about it, what they get from it and how they feel about spending on it—to reveal what pausing for pleasure now means and requires.





America's Leading Indulgences

84% Sweet Treats

60% Beverage Alcohol

36% Cannabis

Q4: Below is a list of different categories. Select the categories that you would consider to be an indulgence. (Chart displays the three categories carried forward as primary indulgences in the report's analysis.) Base: Total n=1,200.

How we explored the question:

To understand indulgence at its most fundamental, a national survey of 1,200 U.S. consumers was fielded to explore Americans' relationship with non-essential consumables.

Participants reviewed a broad list of categories and were asked to flag those they consider indulgences. Four rose to the top: sweet treats (84%), beverage alcohol (60%), snacks (48%) and cannabis (36%).

When asked about *primary* indulgences—the ones respondents considered their most meaningful—three clear leaders emerged: sweet treats, beverage alcohol and cannabis.

Sweet treats were the top pick across every generation, income level and gender surveyed (capturing 48% overall), while preferences for the other two reveal statistically significant demographic splits: alcohol leads among men (27% vs. 14% of women), and cannabis leads among Gen Z (17% vs. 4% of Boomers).

From there, the survey turned to deeper questions about the distinct needs that indulgences meet, the payoffs they provide, the frictions they survive, and what justifies treating yourself in the first place.

Indulgence is the reward people choose to improve their mood.

When asked what makes their most meaningful indulgence “worth it,” respondents agreed on one universal driver across all ages and incomes: mood improvement, which ranked first overall at 30%.

Consumers’ desire for an emotional reset even outranked feeling special (17%) and product quality (16%).

Specifics vary by product category, generation, gender and whether there are children in the household. The emotional role that indulgence plays in American life does not.



Indulgence is a ritual that's increasingly the stuff of daily habit.

As a mechanism for finding a better mood, indulgence is only gaining ground.

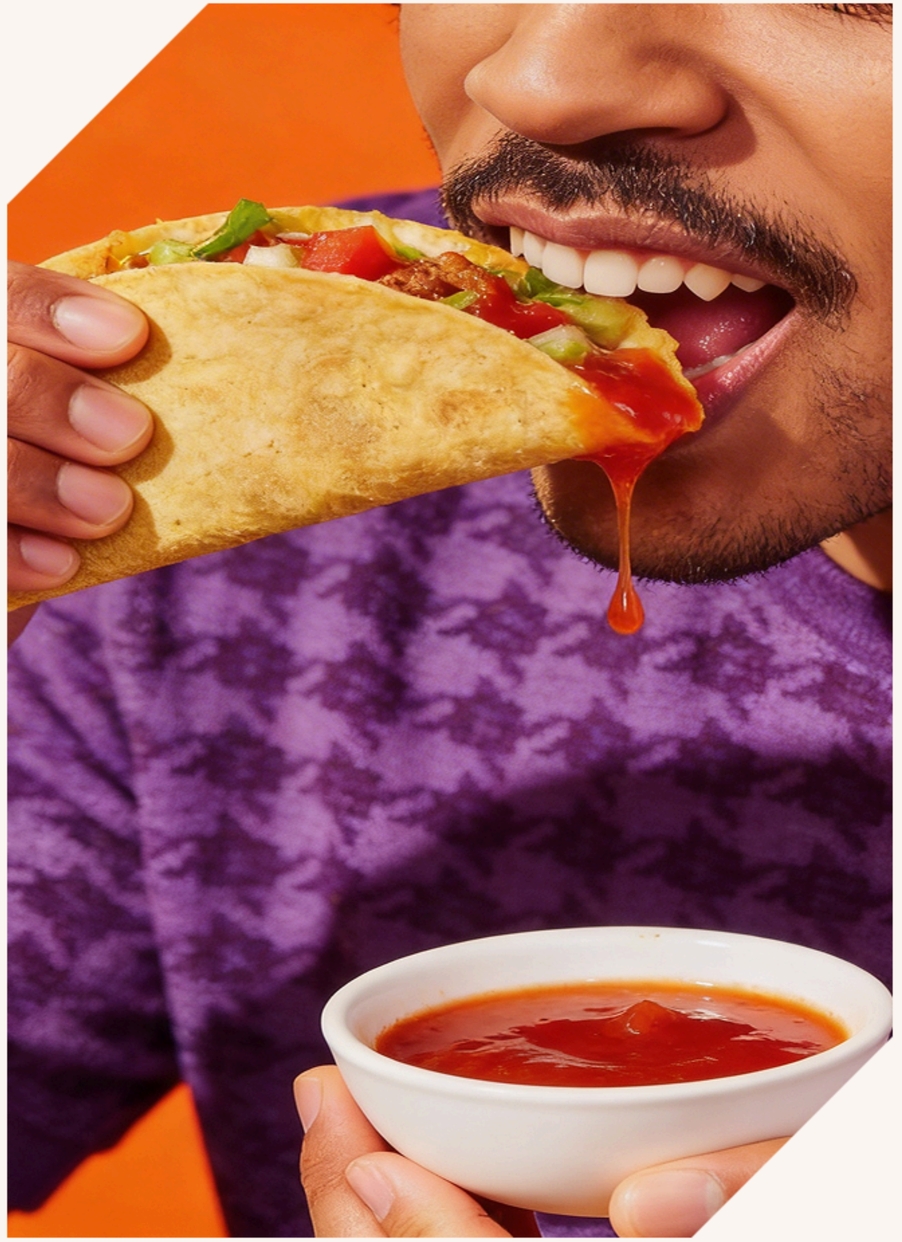
The data shows that consumers' most meaningful indulgences—sweet treats, beverage alcohol and cannabis—each improve moods by different means. But all three work through rituals consumers have learned to rely on. Repeating the experience reinforces their emotional memories of the mood lift (behavioral scientists call these *somatic markers*), guiding the decision to indulge again to achieve the same reset.

These rituals are no longer reserved for special occasions.

Frequency of indulgence looks to be rising across every generation; 45% of all respondents agree they are more permissive about indulging than they were 12 months ago, with younger generations leading the shift toward daily (34% of Millennials and 30% of Gen Z). It's a finding that defies what behavioral scientists call *hedonic adaptation*, the idea that repeated pleasures lose their punch.

It appears the trigger has simply moved from the calendar to the clock.

Whether it's the end of the workday (when 41% of those who favor alcohol and 35% of those who favor cannabis partake) or after the kids have gone to bed (when 37% of parents and 35% of sweet treat-lovers indulge), increasingly routine occasions now come with a category already attached.



Indulgence is a behavioral category that proves emotionally necessary—keeping it resilient under pressure.



Indulgence persists despite real frictions.

Respondents cite health and wellness goals (46%), cost (40%), guilt (32%) and fear of social judgment (particularly for parents, 22% of whom fear it compared to just 11% of non-parents) as factors that weigh on the decision to treat themselves. Yet none seem to prevent indulgence; if anything, they sweeten it. A majority (51%) say it's highly important that indulgence feels earned—the need for justification appearing to enhance the emotional payoff.

The most universal barrier, health and wellness, is being resolved by the very consumers most attentive to it: 72% of Millennials, 67% of Gen Z and 69% of women overall agree that indulgence is part of a healthy, balanced life.

Even financial strain doesn't prevent indulgence. Consumers under the most economic pressure actually indulge daily at the highest rate of any income group (35% of respondents earning under $50K). Across income levels, women are most likely to pull back, with 65% agreeing indulgence is the first thing they cut when money gets tight. But as noted, nearly 70% of them agree indulgence brings a healthy balance to their lives, suggesting the desire never dies.

These insights explain what earnings reports have already shown. In 2024, confectionery added $5.4 billion to reach $54.2 billion. Even as spirits face headwinds more broadly, premiumization is outperforming—58% of revenue still comes from the bottles that feel worth the investment. Legal cannabis reached $30.1 billion in U.S. retail sales last year as the national market continues to expand.

What the markets report in dollars, this research explains in human behavior and motivation.

Growing as a priority, emotionally rewarding, and remarkably well-defended in the face of real pressures, indulgence is—for Americans in 2026—the gratifying new hallmark of living well.



METHODOLOGY



The quantitative study was conducted via a 10-minute online interview among a nationally representative sample of n=1,200 U.S. residents aged 18–65.

Quotas were implemented to ensure representation by age and income within the 4 target generations: Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X and Boomers. The sample also enabled subgroup analysis by gender and parental status (parents with children in the household vs. non-parents). Statistical analyses were conducted to identify meaningful differences between these cohorts, with significance testing applied to highlight differences unlikely to be due to chance.

The survey explored how consumers define indulgence and which categories they consider indulgent, with respondents choosing from a broad list:

Beverage alcohol (wine, spirits, beer, etc.)
Cannabis or marijuana (e.g., flower, edibles, beverages, etc.)
Coffee
Functional beverages (e.g., kombucha, probiotics, sparkling water, seltzers, etc.)
Non-alcohol wine, beer or spirits
Other beverages (e.g., full sugar soda, energy drinks, water, etc.)
Snacks (e.g., chips, popcorn, pretzels, etc.)
Sweet treats (e.g., chocolate, candy, ice cream, etc.)

Respondents identified their primary indulgence category, then answered questions about frequency, spending, occasions and motivations, as well as barriers to indulging. The survey also explored respondents' feelings about their personal financial situation and broader macro trends.

Only respondents 21+ were asked questions regarding beverage alcohol and cannabis.

The research was fielded February 4–6, 2026 in partnership with consumer insights firm Morpheus Brand Consulting.

The Indulgence Brief 2026

Nothing tastes sweeter than a better mood.
Mood improvement is the top reason indulgence feels “worth it” across every category and demographic studied. Barriers only make the reward feel earned.

1. **To deliver an emotional lift, each indulgence requires its own ritual.**

   Respondents’ leading indulgences—sweet treats, alcohol and cannabis—shift moods through unique emotional journeys that consumers have learned to rely on.

2. **Indulgence remains special as every day becomes special enough.**

   Indulgence doesn't need to be rare to feel worthwhile and earned. With access now greater than ever, frequency is rising across generations without the emotional payoff losing its power.

3. **Indulgence occasions are chosen by the clock, not the consumer.**

   Indulgence now marks specific moments across daily life. Each occasion comes with a category already attached, so the consumer’s decision is made before the moment arrives.

4. **Resistance actually adds to the reward**

   Indulgence comes with barriers like cost or guilt, but this friction is what makes the mood shift feel earned. Those negotiating the most resistance are often the most committed to treating themselves.

5. **Consumers who made wellness non-negotiable make indulgence part of the deal.**

   Health is cited as a barrier by nearly half of all consumers, yet frequency of indulgence hasn’t declined. Consumers resolve the tension by embracing indulgence as part of a balanced life.

6. **When it comes to a better mood, Americans will find the money.**

   Indulgence frequency holds even under financial pressure, with households earning under $50K per year actually indulging most often. The tighter the budget, the more protected the ritual.



Based on a national survey of 1,200 U.S. consumers, fielded February 2026.

FINDINGS IN DEPTH



Further explore Method1's core insight on American indulgence and six supporting findings. Together, they reveal what consumers are actually buying when they indulge—and trace the rituals, timing, frictions and financial dynamics that shape their purchase decisions.

Nothing tastes sweeter THAN A BETTER MOOD

Mood improvement is the #1 Factor that makes indulgence “worth it”

Q11A: What most often makes your indulgence feel "worth it"? What makes it justifiable?
First Response base: Total n=1,200

The indulgences that Americans consider worthwhile feel like emotional shifts into better territory.

When asked what most often makes their primary indulgence feel "worth it"—what factor, above all others, makes the choice feel justifiable—one answer holds a clear lead: mood improvement (30%).

This driver leads in all four generations surveyed: Gen Z (27%), Millennials (36%), Gen X (32%) and Boomers (25%). It also leads across all three primary indulgence categories: cannabis (43%), beverage alcohol (31%) and sweet treats (26%).

Feeling the indulgence is earned (19%) is the closest—a priority that surfaces throughout the data, positioning indulgence as a reward. It's followed by feeling special (17%) and superior quality (16%), with remaining factors trailing even further: feeling in control (6%), feeling guilt-free (4%), feeling it's a good value (4%), feeling it's socially acceptable (2%) and feeling it saves time (1%).

What's striking, as the 6 findings ahead show, is how priorities we might expect to limit indulgence don't overpower the pull. Most frictions studied only seem to add a cost that makes the mood lift feel deserved.

This suggests indulgence brands are not ultimately competing on flavor or price, but on whether they meet people where they are to reliably upgrade their emotional experience.

When brands do, this research shows Americans will plan for it, make room for it and invest in it—believing a little joy is worth indulging in.



To deliver an emotional lift, EACH INDULGENCE REQUIRES ITS OWN RITUAL.

Mood is often physical before it's conscious. Over time, our bodies learn to connect sensory experiences like flavor to specific feelings. The connection becomes so reliable that our emotions start stirring before the experience even begins. We've created a ritual—humanity's infrastructure for mood management.

Each indulgence offers a unique sensory and emotional sequence that consumers have learned to rely on. Behavioral scientists describe these as *somatic markers,* emotional memories that connect a familiar experience to a predictable emotion. Once built, the ritual works because the body already knows what comes next.

How the ritual works depends on the category.

Sweet treats deliver emotional shifts through immediacy. Of those respondents whose top indulgence is sweet treats, 72% report indulging spontaneously vs. planning ahead. Their leading motivations are to satisfy a craving (69%), self-reward (65%) and comfort-seeking (49%). This may explain why sweet treats have the widest reach of the three categories: 84% of all consumers surveyed recognize them as a valid indulgence.

Alcohol, for respondents of legal drinking age, builds emotional shifts more slowly by strengthening social ties. Of those whose top indulgence is alcohol, 41% drink during social gatherings, and 27% do so specifically to connect with others. This suggests the ritual begins before the first sip, in both the anticipation of getting together and the shared moment.

Of all three categories, alcohol sets the highest bar for quality. Respondents say they need the product to be noticeably better than alternatives for the ritual to deliver. It's a standard that 20% of alcohol consumers surveyed cite as the single factor that makes the experience worth it, and one that men hold more firmly than women overall (19% vs. 14%).

Cannabis delivers an emotional shift by clearing the user's slate. Among those whose top indulgence is legal cannabis, consumption is deliberate (46% plan their indulgence in advance) and often solitary (35% partake when alone or seeking downtime). When asked what makes this indulgence worth it, 43% cited the feeling of a clean emotional reset. That's the highest rate of any single justification across all three categories—suggesting a profound emotional impact.

Anticipation Builds Some Rituals, Immediacy Sparks Others



Q10: Which of the following statements best describes your approach to your indulgence?
Base: Sweet treats most meaningful indulgence n=575, beverage alcohol most meaningful indulgence n=244, cannabis most meaningful indulgence n=143

No matter the category, the ritual delivers when it feels deserved.

The need to earn indulgence runs through every cohort studied. As noted, "I've earned it" ranks as the second most important factor in making indulgence feel "worth it" (19%), trailing only mood improvement (30%) and well above feeling it's a good value (4%). Whether or not an indulgence feels worth the money, it seems, what adds weight to the ritual is the sense of reward.

The need to earn indulgence is especially pronounced for parents. Nearly two thirds of parents with children in the household say they need to earn their mood lift (63%, compared to 46% of non-parents), suggesting that caregiving raises both the stakes and the bar for deserving indulgence.

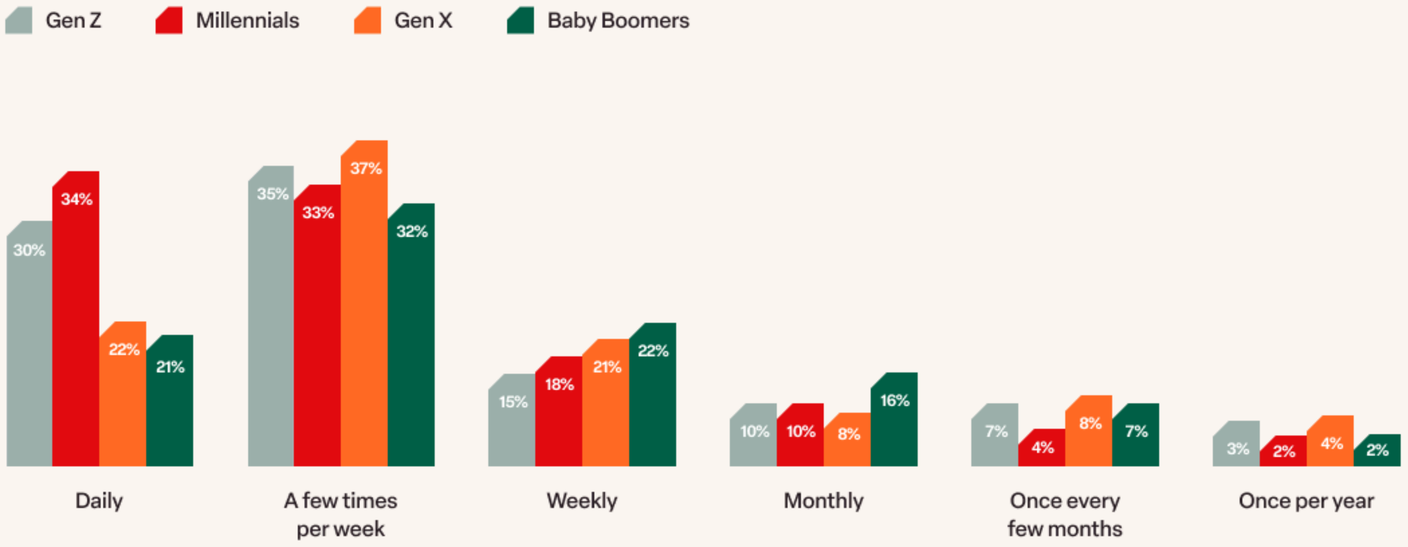
The product that owns the ritual owns the lift. Reinforcing the rituals your category depends on makes the difference between a brand that sweetens the mood and one that simply gets consumed.

When these rituals work, they stop being reserved for special occasions. They become daily emotional rewards.



Indulgence remains special as EVERY DAY BECOMES SPECIAL ENOUGH.

Indulgence is Routine



Q7: How often do you indulge in your most meaningful indulgence?
Base: Gen Z n=300, Millennials n=300, Gen X n=300, Baby Boomers n=300

As a rule, the more we encounter a pleasure, the less it tends to move us. Behavioral scientists describe this as *hedonic adaptation*, the way repeated exposure to a stimulus dulls our emotional response to it.

Based on what our respondents had to say, indulgence appears to be an exception. Its rituals are becoming a daily source of enjoyment for many because the payoff—getting an emotional lift—doesn't need scarcity to retain its power.

Our data shows 34% of Millennials now indulge every day. For Gen Z, it's 30%. Across all generations, indulgence happens at least a few times a week. The pattern extends well beyond indulgence as this report defines it and confirms a greater trend. Mondelēz's most recent State of Snacking report found 65% of Gen Z and Millennials report snacking more than they did a year ago globally, nearly double the rate of older generations.

This is partly a story about access. Delivery platforms, grab-and-go retail and price points set for daily purchase have arguably made indulgences easier to reach than at any point in modern consumer history. But as these results suggest, what's changed just as much are consumers—the younger ones, especially—who've stopped treating the emotional shift as something that demands a special occasion.

Instead of holding out for life's bigger moments, consumers are increasingly treating indulgence as daily emotional maintenance.

Each life stage finds its reasons.

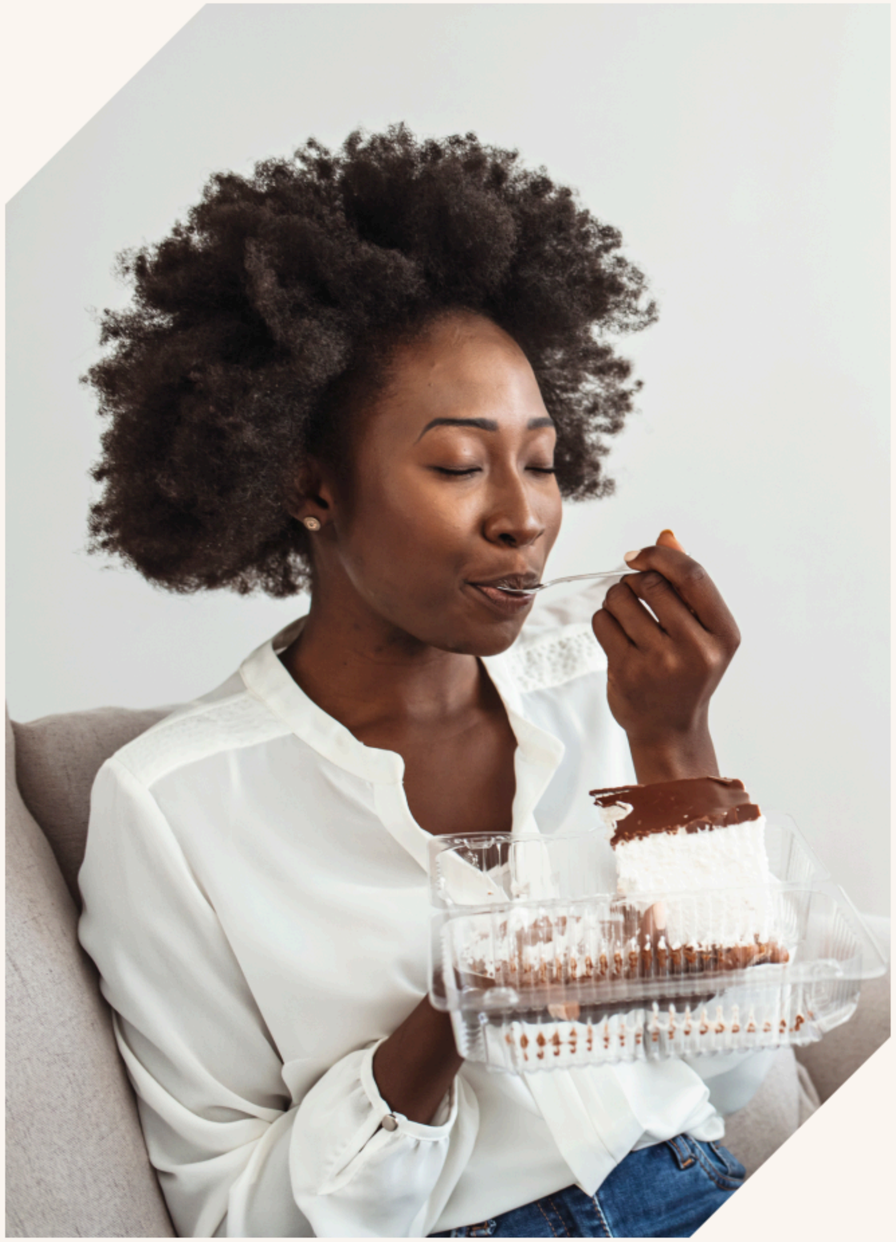
Boomers are actually the most spontaneous indulgers. Nearly three-quarters (70%) of Boomers report making unplanned decisions to indulge. However, they are also the most likely generation to say indulgence is “worth it” when it feels special (22%) and to cite celebrations as a top context for indulging (39% of Boomer women, 37% of Boomer men), when celebrations are often planned.

These seemingly-contradictory sentiments can coexist. Some Boomers likely remember a time when it was harder to access many of the indulgences we studied, which may explain why they still register spontaneous, daily experiences as special.

For those with children in the household, the appetite for indulgence is rising fastest. The majority of parents say they're more open to indulging than they were a year ago (53% vs. 39% of non-parents), with 72% framing indulgence as self-care, not hedonism (vs. 63% without children in the household).

When every day is special enough for indulgence, every day becomes a chance to drive purchase. The brands that show up for daily rituals win the moment and earn the habit.

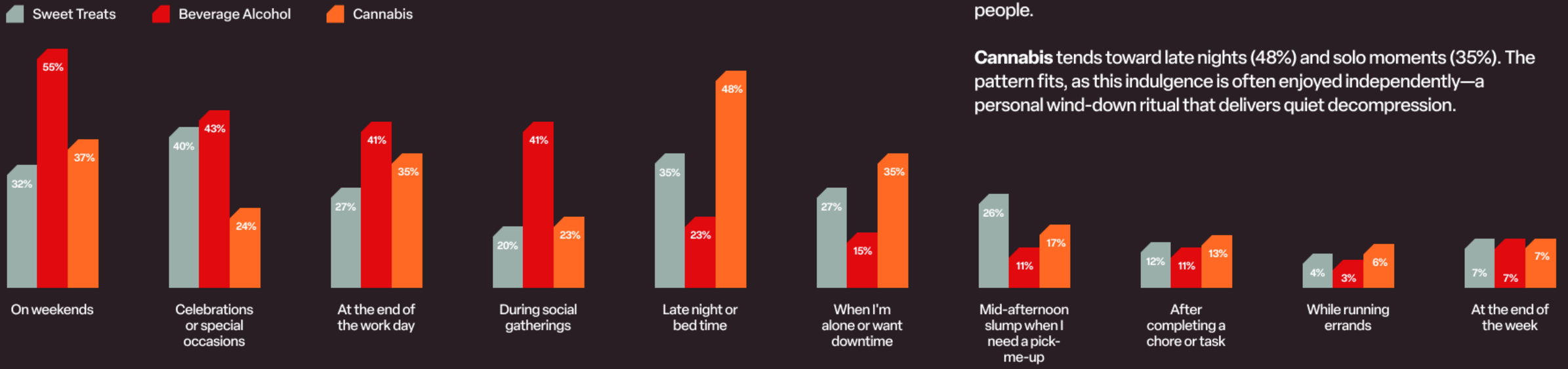
Once indulgence becomes daily, the question shifts from whether to when. The clock, it turns out, does most of the work.



Indulgence occasions are CHOSEN BY THE CLOCK, NOT THE CONSUMER.

What counts as an indulgence-worthy occasion, particularly for Millennials and Gen Z, has expanded well beyond birthdays and holidays into the predictable rhythms of daily life. The workday ends, the scrolling-on-the-couch hour starts, the kids go to bed, and each of these moments comes with a category already associated.

Alcohol Wins the Weekend, Cannabis Owns the Night



Q9: Which of the following best describes the circumstances of indulging in your most meaningful indulgence?
Base: Sweet treats most meaningful indulgence n=575, beverage alcohol most meaningful indulgence n=244, cannabis most meaningful indulgence n=143

Behavioral scientists call this an *implementation intention:* a pre-commitment to a specific behavior in a specific context. Once a consumer is telling themselves, "If it's bedtime, then I treat myself to an emotional shift," the decision is already made before the moment arrives.

Sweet treats, the most spontaneous indulgence in our survey (accounting for 72% of unplanned purchases), likely dominate the most occasions and times of day because they're so widely available, with no legal barriers and no advance planning needed. Perhaps the impulse alone makes the moment when a product can show up at any time; this may explain why candy at checkout flies off the shelf, marking the occasion of simply "adulting."

Alcohol concentrates around social gatherings (41%) and weekends (55%) for respondents of legal drinking age. This is likely because drinking requires a social context that sweet treats don't. The occasion is planned and then shared, the mood lift amplified through connection with other people.

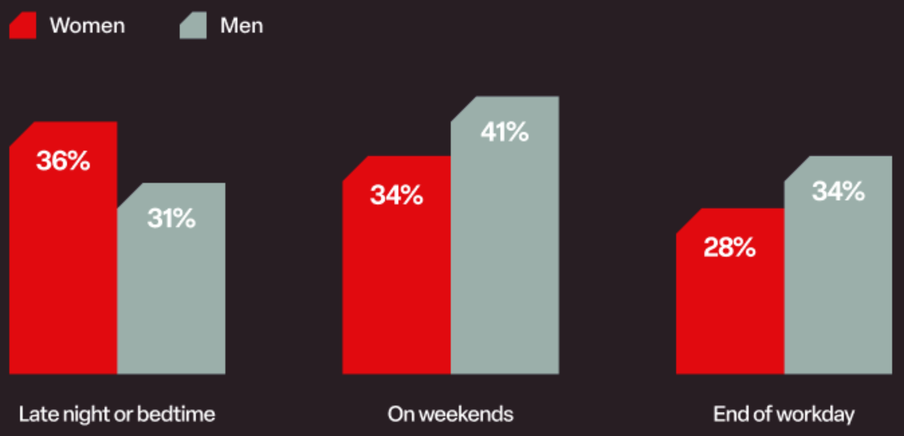
Cannabis tends toward late nights (48%) and solo moments (35%). The pattern fits, as this indulgence is often enjoyed independently—a personal wind-down ritual that delivers quiet decompression.

Each category has found its occasion, but gender influences when it arrives.

Women indulge most at the end of the day. Late night and bedtime are women's peak indulgence hours (36% vs. 31% of men), a pattern that interestingly holds whether there are children in the household or not. Women are also significantly more likely than men to reach for sweet treats (55% vs. 41%), the category that fits the widest range of moments.

Men treat themselves more on the weekends (41% vs. 34% of women) and at the end of the workday (34% vs. 28%), and they are nearly twice as likely as women to choose alcohol as their most meaningful indulgence , the category that requires a social occasion (27% vs. 14%). For men, there is also a less structured trigger: boredom, which men cite at more than twice the rate of women surveyed. When the day offers them no occasion at all, perhaps the empty space becomes one.

Women Mark When the Day Ends, Men When the Work Does



Q9: Which of the following best describes the circumstances of indulging in your most meaningful indulgence?
Base: Total male n=600, total female n=600



For parents, the moment is appointment-only.

Always on double duty, parents manage to both plan and experiment more. Respondents with children in the household are significantly more likely to treat themselves at the end of the workday (36% vs. 28% of non-parents) and when caregiving pauses: at social gatherings (27% vs. 22%) and particularly late at night (37% vs. 30%, and again, especially for women).

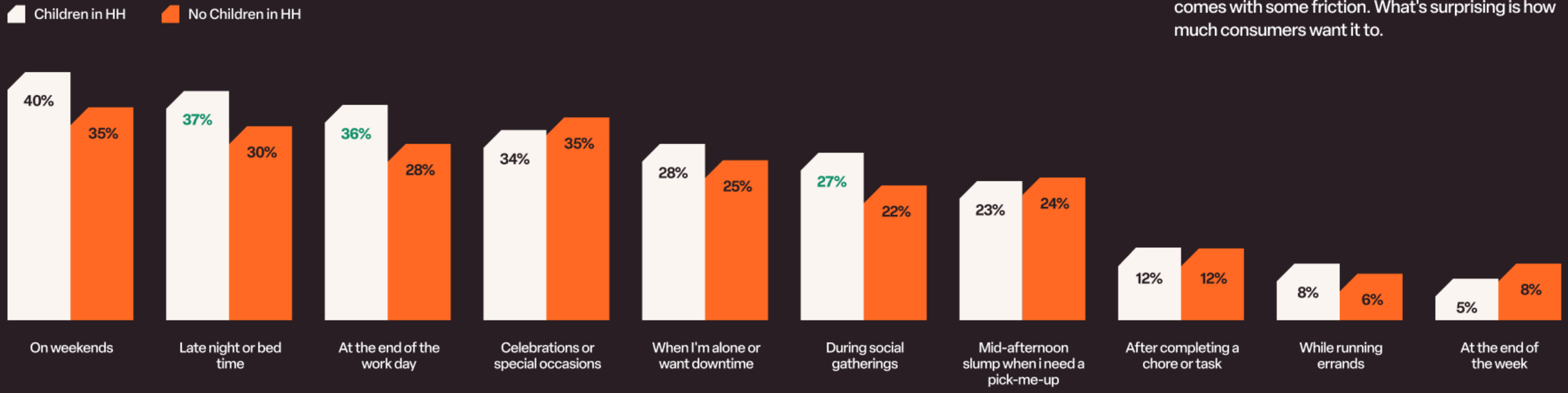
They are also more likely to plan their indulgences in advance (43% vs. 35% of those without children in the household), probably because their occasions need to be carved out of overstuffed schedules.

Despite planning more, parents are actually more open to trying new things; 67% say they mix in or mostly try new brands (compared to 61% of those without children in the household). This may reflect a desire to keep searching for treats the entire family can enjoy. Or maybe when you've already decided *when* to indulge, the novelty of trying something different is the treat.

The occasion selects the product. Brands that match their media to the moment—and their message to the consumer—turn timing into preference.

Even with a ready occasion, deciding to indulge still comes with some friction. What's surprising is how much consumers want it to.

Having Children Shifts the When and Where



Q9: Which of the following best describes the circumstances of indulging in your most meaningful indulgence?
Base: Children in household n=488, no children in household n=712
Note: Green indicates a statistically significant higher rating compared to no children in the household.

Resistance actually ADDS TO THE REWARD.

To indulge is to give ourselves permission to choose something we'll enjoy but don't need, so most treats come with some inner negotiation. But the data suggests a little resistance is what makes an indulgence feel *earned*—something that's central to enjoying it.

Multiple behavioral principles reveal how this unique friction adds flavor. *Effort justification* increases how much we value a reward based on how much we invested in obtaining it, including psychological work. *Moral licensing* gives us permission to treat themselves after we feel we've been good. And the *guilty pleasure effect* shows that even when some guilt is present during indulgence, it only amplifies our satisfaction.

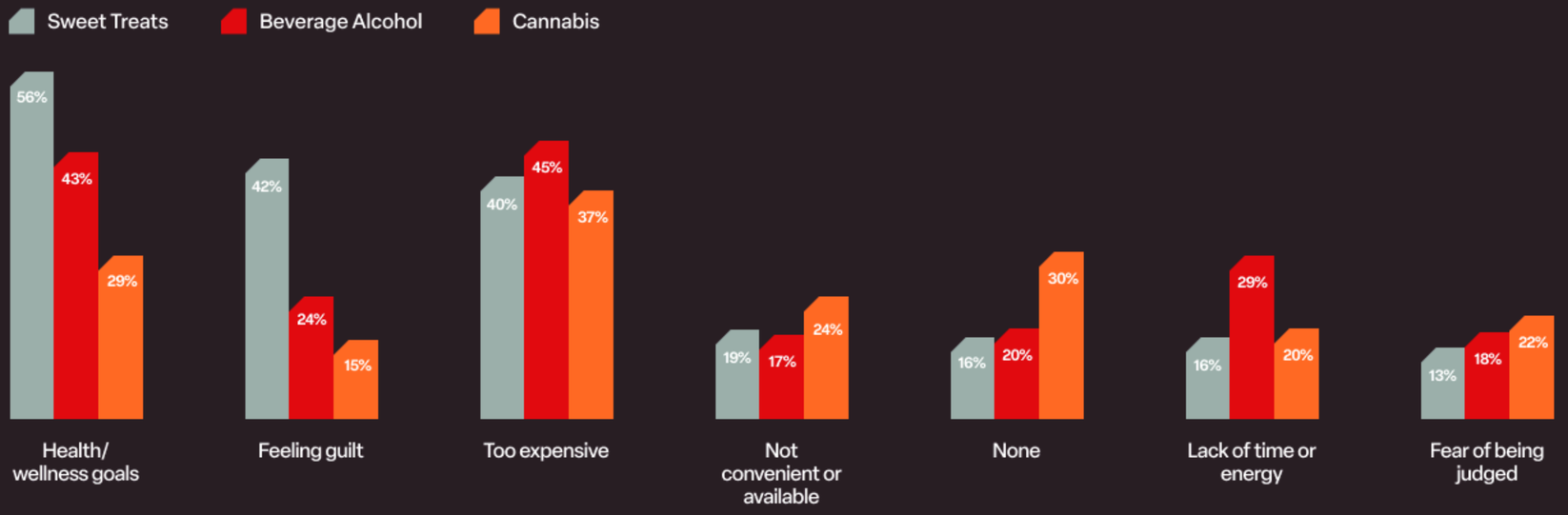
The findings align. Just 4% of respondents say feeling guilt-free is what makes an indulgence "worth it"—one of the lowest-ranked factors studied.

Friction takes different shapes by category.

For respondents, feeling "I've earned it" ranks as the second most important factor in making indulgence feel “worth it,” trailing only mood improvement. Millennials feel this most acutely; 63% agree they feel the need to earn the treat.

Cost and health (and to a lesser extent, guilt) are universal frictions across all three primary indulgences studied. But there can be important nuances based on who’s considering what.

Sweet Treats Bring the Most Friction, Cannabis Sometimes None



Q14A: What are the top three barriers that get in the way of indulging?
Base: Sweet treats most meaningful indulgence n=575, beverage alcohol most meaningful indulgence n=244, cannabis most meaningful indulgence n=143

For sweet treats, the defining barrier is guilt, cited by 42% of consumers—far outpacing the guilt felt over alcohol (an 18-point gap) or cannabis (a 27-point gap). When women do indulge, the emotional stakes are higher: they are 60% more likely than men to need to feel in control and twice as likely to need to feel guilt-free before an indulgence can count as “worth it.”

For alcohol, it's logistics: 29% cite lack of time or energy as a top-three barrier, far more than any other category. Given alcohol’s role in social connection and the fact that it’s the most planned primary indulgence we studied, this likely reflects the coordination required: choosing the occasion, assembling the group and managing what comes afterward.

For cannabis, it's social stigma—22% cite fear of being judged, a friction that perhaps legalization can’t remove. At the same time, 30% say “nothing gets in their way,” suggesting that for these respondents, the choice is remarkably resolved.

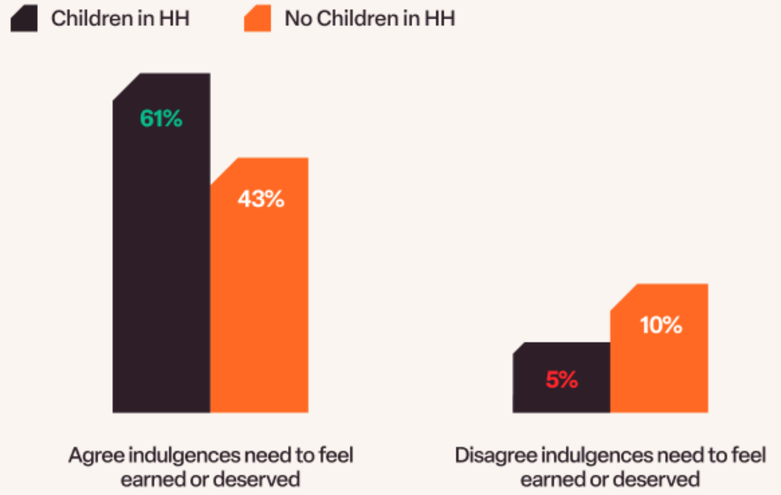
Resistance also varies by income and identity.

Income reveals how delicious a little guilt can be. Higher-income respondents and those who describe themselves as financially confident can likely afford to indulge more often—but they actually report more guilt after treating themselves, and by a wide margin (45% vs. 32% of those who say they are not financially confident). This is compelling evidence that guilt tracks with choosing to boost your mood, not abstaining from the pleasure.

Gender shapes the type of friction more than the amount. Women face more financial pressure: only 57% agree they can afford their indulgences (compared to 73% of men). Men's friction is more likely to run through social judgment, with 18% citing fear of being judged as a barrier (compared to 13% of women). It's a gap that widens with age, as 19% of Gen X men and 14% of Boomer men point to it (compared to 11% and 5% of their female counterparts).

Parents feel resistance most acutely. Those with children in the household are significantly more likely than those without to cite lack of time and energy (29% vs. 15%) and fear of being judged (22% vs. 11%) as indulgence barriers. This likely reflects the emotional cost of spending time and resources on themselves rather than their children —which would explain why they say they need to earn indulgence more (61% vs. 43% of non-parents).

Having Children Increases the Need to Justify Indulgence



Q15: How important is it to you that your indulgences feel earned or deserved? (1 = Not at all important, 7 = Very important)
Base: Children in household n=488, no children in household n=712
Note: Top/Bottom 2 Box represent the two highest (6, 7) and lowest (1, 2) scale points. Green indicates a statistically significant higher rating compared to no children in the household; Red indicates a statistically significant lower rating compared to no children in the household.

Each generation justifies indulgence on its own terms.

Gen Z frames indulgence as a prize for productivity (57% say rewarding themselves is their top reason). **Millennials** justify it as part of a healthy, balanced life (72% agree with this view). **Gen X** leans into pure desire—the body asks for it (56% say they indulge to satisfy a craving). **Boomers** are more likely to justify indulgence for its power to elevate the moment (22% cite feeling special as the top factor that makes indulgence "worth it").

These differences may echo the advertising of respondents' formative years. Millennials, for example, first saw treats marketed as rich, decadent escapes—but by their teens, they were seeing indulgence portioned into managed rewards. These combined messages may explain why Millennials rationalize treating themselves by balancing health and earned pleasures.

For brands, messaging must flex by generation, gender and whether there are kids in the household. But the barrier and the indulgence actually need each other. Resistance is the load-bearing wall.

One universal friction cuts across every generation, gender and household type: health and wellness. And it works differently than the rest.



Consumers who made wellness non-negotiable
MAKE INDULGENCE PART OF THE DEAL.

Wellness, once the narrow territory of marketing's infamous Yoga Moms, went mainstream with Millennials and became baseline for Gen Z. It now encompasses diet, exercise, sleep, mental health and mindfulness, along with the daily routines consumers build around them.

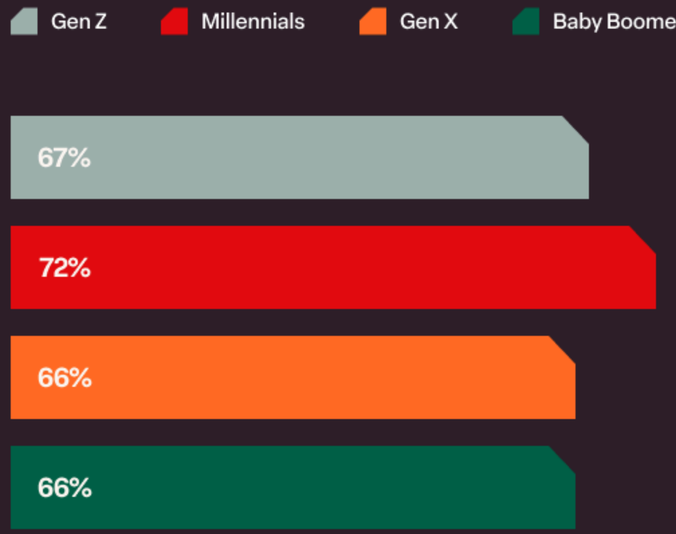
That cultural weight shows up directly in our data. Health and wellness is the most universal friction we measured—the #1 barrier across every generation and household type, with virtually no gender gap (46% of women, 47% of men).

Health and wellness may be a widely-shared friction, but it hasn't reduced indulgence frequency.

Consumers are actively finding the balance of wellness priorities and pleasure, likely through smaller portions or post-workout treats enjoyed as rewards for good behavior. Behavioral scientists might point to what they call *compensatory health beliefs*: the cognitive math that helps people believe healthy behaviors offset unhealthy ones.

The generational consensus is strong. Across Millennials (72%), Gen Z (67%), Gen X and Boomers (66% each), respondents agree that indulgence is part of a healthy, balanced life. Millennials lead in framing indulgence as self-care (69% agree); the generation that built the wellness economy seems to have built a place for indulgence inside it, with every other generation following their lead.

Most Consumers Agree Indulgence is Part of a Healthy, Balanced Life



Q17: On a scale of 1–5 (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree), how much do you agree with each statement? Statement shown: "Indulgence is part of a healthy, balanced life."
Base: Gen Z n=300, Millennials n=300, Gen X n=300, Baby Boomers n=300
Note: Top 2 Box represents the two highest scale points (4, 5).

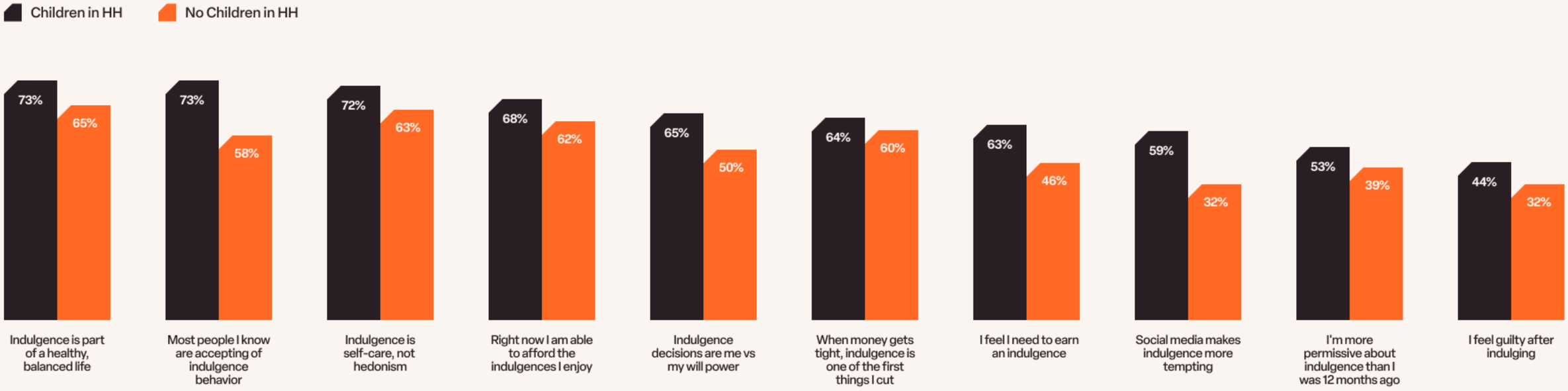
This coexistence is most pronounced for parents.

Respondents with children in the household agree that indulgence is part of a healthy, balanced life at a significantly higher rate than households without (73% vs. 65%). They are also more likely to say it is self-care (72% vs. 63%). Parents likely see treating themselves as a way to recharge so they can keep everything else running—making regular indulgence feel legitimate.

Wellness has actually become the most universal and reliable space for indulgence. By positioning products as part of a healthy routine rather than a departure from it, indulgence brands can adopt the permission language consumers are already speaking.

When strategies like these work, consumers will spend freely—even households that economists might expect to cut back.

For Parents, Indulgence Is Both More Loved and More Loaded



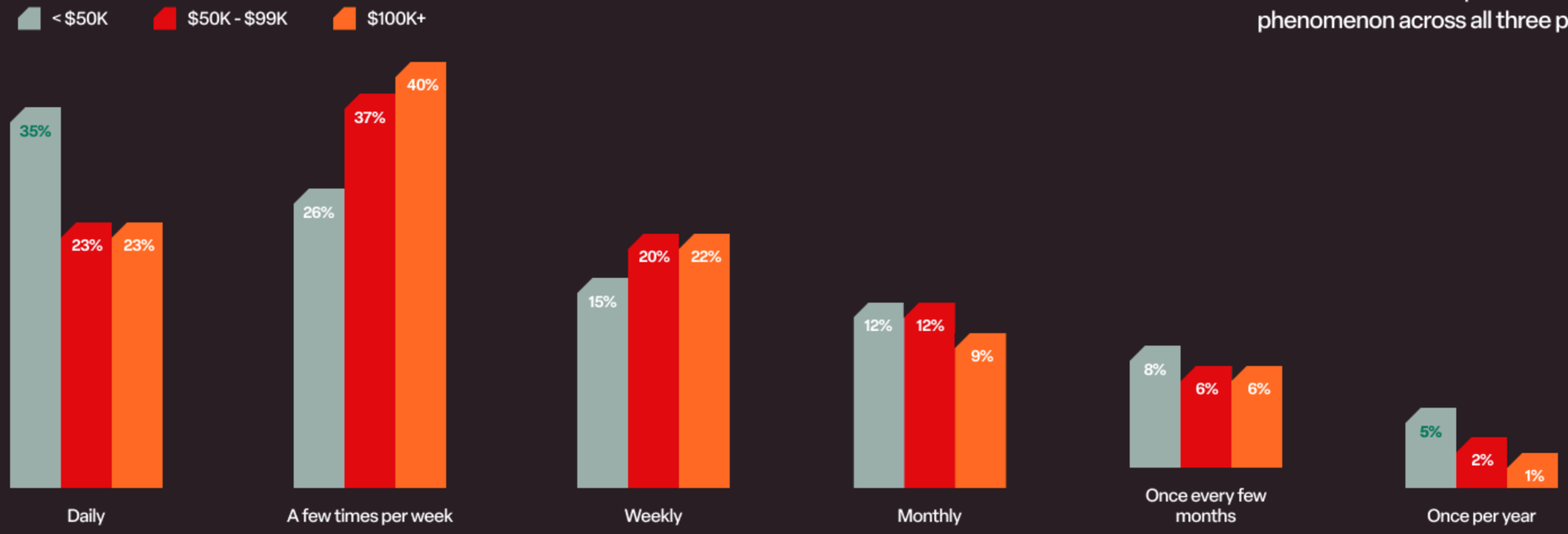
Q17: On a scale of 1–5 (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree), how much do you agree with each statement?
Base: Children in household n=488, no children in household n=712

When it comes to a better mood, AMERICANS WILL FIND THE MONEY.

The economic word of the year is "uncertainty." But while financial pressures change what people spend, they haven't changed how often people indulge. Across every level, we found frequency has held or grown, including at the lower end of the income spectrum.

Respondents in households making under $50k per year indulge more often, more spontaneously and more loyally. Of those earning under $50K, 35% indulge daily (compared to 23% of those earning more). And for those respondents dissatisfied with their financial situation, 71% of indulgence purchases are unplanned.

Consumers on Tight Budgets Turn to Everyday Comforts



Q7: How often do you indulge in your most meaningful indulgence?
Base: n=400 for all segments
Note: Green indicates a statistically significant higher rating compared to $100K+ households.

The spending can dip (29% of those earning under $50K have cut back over the past year vs. just 14% of those earning $100K or more). But financially stressed consumers protect what they know works: 43% said they prefer to stick to a favorite brand when indulging, the highest loyalty rate of any income bracket. In sum, "Things that keep me going" appears protected as emotional overhead.

The well-known *lipstick effect* is part of what's at play. When nearly every purchase feels over-considered, consumers double down on the small pleasures they know will deliver the lift they need. Habitual purchases always offer relief (the decision feels effortless), and during downturns, consumers prefer not to risk their money on anything unproven.

Kantar recently identified the broader pattern as "treatonomics"—when major milestones like home ownership feel out of reach, day-to-day joys start being the point, not the consolation prize. (One Kantar executive even called it "the 'Lipstick Effect' on steroids.") Our data confirms the phenomenon across all three primary indulgence categories studied.

What gender amplifies, parenthood eases.

Women face the most financial friction. Women are nearly twice as likely to say they have decreased indulgence spending over the past year (27% vs. 16% of men), and they are significantly less likely to feel they can afford their indulgences (57% vs. 73%). The gap is widest within Gen X, where only 19% of women increased their spending (compared to 33% of men), and where women report the lowest financial confidence of any group in our study: only 30% report being satisfied with their financial situation (compared to 56% of Gen X men).

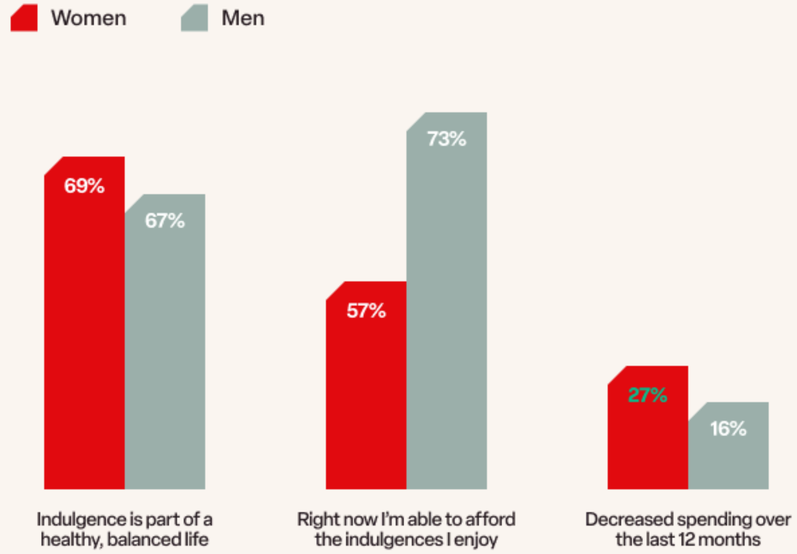
That said, women still see indulgence as part of a healthy, balanced life (69%) and as self-care (67%) at rates virtually identical to men. The desire for the mood shift remains fully intact. *This gap between wanting indulgence and accessing it may represent the largest untapped opportunity in our data.*

Parenthood seems to resolve the tension. While women as a group report financial strain, respondents with children in the household—many of whom are also women—report the opposite. Two-thirds are satisfied with their personal lives (67% vs. 54% of those without children in the household), 53% are satisfied financially (compared to 40%), and 57% are confident the economy will improve over the next 12 months (compared to just 35%). Parents are also less likely to cite cost as a barrier to indulgence (36% vs. 43% of non-parents).

Parenthood appears to introduce financial purpose. When these consumers (women among them) know exactly what an indulgence is for, their wallets can open.

Brands that position themselves as emotional rewards for managing the stresses of daily life—and communicate that value clearly, especially to women—can meet today's economically uncertain consumer where they are to end up in their cart.

While United in Belief, Men and Women Are Divided by Budget



Q17: Perceptions of Indulgence (% Agree);

Q18: Changes in Spending Last 12 Months (% Decreased), Base: Total male n=600, total female n=600. Note: Q17 represent Top 2 Box agreement (4, 5 on a 5-point scale). Green indicates a statistically significant higher rating compared to males.

KEY IMPLICATIONS



Apply Method1's research through 5 brand imperatives for the indulgence economy. Together, they unlock a significant growth opportunity for any brand credibly positioned to deliver a mood lift.

The 5 Brand Imperatives

One strategic reality emerges across this research. Indulgence is a structural growth opportunity—universal across consumers, resilient in the face of financial pressures and wellness concerns, and rooted in daily rituals and occasions that brands can own. Act on these five imperatives to claim share in the rising, durable market for emotional rewards.

1. Audit your brand for indulgence potential.

Indulgence isn't a fixed category—it's a perception shaped by context and need. Evaluate your product's potential to serve as an indulgence across consumer segments. The brand that articulates the emotional shift they offer and builds the ritual/occasion architecture to deliver it becomes a go-to reward in consumers' lives, potentially on an increasingly daily basis.

2. Frame indulgence as an everyday mood strategy.

As small daily moments and occasions take on deeper meaning, consumers are increasingly embracing indulgence as mood maintenance. Reflect their priorities in campaign creative—rooting its scenarios and emotional cues in everyday life. Brands that frame indulgence as routine turn the occasional splurge into a far more frequent purchase.

3. Win both mental and physical availability.

Indulgence is sometimes spontaneous, sometimes planned. To win, brands need both mental availability (being top of mind when a treat moment arises) and physical availability (being easy to reach when it does). Build both for impulse purchases, and ensure the payoff justifies the effort for planned ones. Brands that deliver on either (or both) become the default choice.

4. Show up at the moment of decision.

Indulgence decisions are highly contextual and emotionally driven. Activate your brand in the precise environments and moments where consumers reach for indulgence—with creative and messaging that meets their underlying motivation (e.g., reward, connection, reset). Brands that show up at the right moment with the right message turn intent into purchase.

5. Reinforce value—especially for women.

For many consumers, particularly women, indulgence decisions are more scrutinized under financial pressure. Make a clear case for why the indulgence is worth it up to the point of purchase—addressing both emotional payoff and perceived value. Brands that close these gaps reduce friction and protect share when women and other consumers tighten their spending.



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Allison Arling-Giorgi
Head of Brand
aarlinggiorgi@method1.com

Method1
17 State St Floor 33,
New York, NY 10004

