

# MOMENTOUS KH TRENDS & INSIGHTS

McCall Moore  
SENIOR CONTENT AND GROWTH STRATEGIST

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## THE GREAT REBALANCE: TRENDS SHAPING 2026

**PEOPLE AREN'T REACHING FOR MORE, THEY'RE REACHING FOR REAL. WE'RE WITNESSING A RETURN TO WHAT FEELS HUMAN. WE'RE WITNESSING A RETURN TO WHAT FEELS REAL AND HUMAN.**

Across every sector, from travel to finance to wellness, the same pattern emerges: a collective desire to rebalance our relationship with work, technology, time, identity, and each other. This report explores that rebalancing through five key industries, each experiencing its own version of the shift: finance and banking, food and beverage, higher education, healthcare and wellness, and travel and tourism—with some bonus content at the end on general cultural predictions.

Rather than moments, these are directional signals guiding brands toward a future built on clarity, connection, and cultural alignment.

**WELCOME TO THE GREAT REBALANCE.**



## TRAVEL & TOURISM

In 2026, travel is shifting from escape to intention. Travelers are chasing presence and pace, looking for meaning and human connection where they go. Most importantly, they're prioritizing how they want to feel when they get there. And with our new partnership with Madden Media — a leader in destination storytelling — we're bringing an even deeper, insight-driven lens to how travelers choose, experience and remember the places they visit.

## THE HUMAN CONTACT ECONOMY

For years, travel marketed convenience, frictionlessness, and automation. But after a decade of self-check-in kiosks, AI chatbots, and disappearing hospitality, travelers are craving something technology can't replicate: human presence.

In 2026, connection will become the new currency. Destinations that cultivate warmth, attention, and emotional texture rise above those offering efficiency alone.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Brands that lead with care, warmth, and real human connection will outperform those prioritizing mainly on speed or scale. Hospitality becomes the differentiator, not the baseline.



Only **44% OF CONSUMERS** trust healthcare organizations to do what's right, but travelers expect humanity from brands more than ever.



**PER MCKINSEY**

## LITERARY NOSTALGIA, AND SLOW TRAVEL ARE ON THE RISE

2026 travelers want experiences that feel like stepping into another emotional frequency. Reading retreats, outdoor libraries, bookish itineraries, and retro-inspired travel

(analog photography, vintage trains, heritage stays) continue to surge.

In an overstimulated, over-optimized world, being fully present is now a luxury.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

DMOs that craft narrative-driven itineraries—rooted in story, memory, or sensory immersion—will capture travelers seeking emotional rather than transactional travel.



Over **6 IN 10 AMERICANS** feel nostalgic right now.



**PER CIVIC SCIENCE**

## THE RETURN OF THIRD PLACES

In 2026, the most coveted destinations are communal. Travelers want beautiful, grounded spaces where people gather: chess clubs, bookstores, gardens, artist-designed rooms, shared tables.

As digital primacy intensifies, physicality becomes a differentiator. Being somewhere you feel (textures, sound, light, shared energy) brings meaning in a way luxury amenities no longer can.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Destinations should design around touchable, human-scale environments. Think: craftsmanship over spectacle, presence over performance, and community over isolation.



Third spaces will have a huge power to attract consumers seeking 'glimmers' — **MICRO-MOMENTS OF JOY** — a growing trend set to become a key value driver.



**PER WGSN**

# HIGHER EDUCATION

In 2026, the value of education will shift from prestige to precision. Students are looking for a compass in an increasingly uncertain world.

## MICRO-MASTERY BECOMES CAREER INSURANCE

College is no longer a default path; it's a strategic one. Rising tuition, shifting employer expectations, and AI reshaping every career field are pushing learners toward modular skills instead of monolithic degrees. In 2026, micro-mastery becomes

the new academic currency: flexible, stackable competencies that help people stay employable in a volatile landscape. Students are paying for long-term adaptability.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Institutions that unbundle learning, offering micro-certifications, modular pathways, and rapid upskilling, will win both traditional students and lifelong learners.



Students will increasingly expect **FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS**, mixing in-person, online, micro-credentials, and stackable modules.



**PER EIM PARTNERSHIPS**

## THE ENROLLMENT CLIFF HITS & ACADEMIC READINESS COLLAPSES

After multiple trend reports hinting at an enrollment cliff, the demographic dip is no longer theoretical. And it's arriving at the same moment that academic readiness is deteriorating. American high school seniors are entering college less prepared than ever, with literacy

and numeracy rates hitting record lows. For institutions already under pressure, this convergence accelerates a deep structural shift: colleges must now meet students where they are, not where the system once assumed they'd be.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Institutions that unbundle learning, offering micro-certifications, modular pathways, and rapid upskilling, will win both traditional students and lifelong learners.



American high schoolers are getting less literate by the year... **45% OF SENIORS** scored below basic in math, and nearly 1 in 3 were below basic in reading.



**PER THE GUARDIAN**

## BANKING & FINANCE

In 2026, money will shift from economic to emotional. After years of volatility, stalled wages and identity-level exhaustion, consumers are recalibrating their relationships with earning, spending, and saving. The story of 2026 isn't about abundance, it's about agency, and the brands that help people feel more stable, capable and in command will win.

### THE QUIET WEALTH ERA

Young Americans aren't chasing flash anymore. With job stability wobbling and traditional financial paths looking shaky, many in Gen Z and younger Millennials are opting for savings over show-off spending,

side gigs over corporate ladders, and financial resilience over status flexes. What this really means: wealth is being redefined as control, optionality and liquidity.

#### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Brands that lean into utility, long-term value and subtle status will win over those chasing loud luxury.



**94% OF GEN Z** say they aim to hit financial independence by age 55 — with side hustles and nontraditional income streams powering that ambition.



**PER BUSINESS INSIDER**

### BNPL BECOMES BASELINE

“Buy Now, Pay Later” is officially a standard payment lane. As credit tightens and economic pressure lingers, younger consumers are increasingly treating BNPL as the new credit card: a default

when cash flow feels tight, a plan when budgets are stretched. Companies that imagine BNPL as an ephemeral checkout feature will get left behind.

#### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Brands that position BNPL as part of their core UX, frictionless checkout, built-in budgeting, clear repayment cues, not as a special add-on, will thrive amongst younger generations.



More than **25% OF U.S. CONSUMERS** have used BNPL for a purchase as of 2025, up nearly 8% YoY.



**PER MORGAN STANLEY**

### GEN Z IS GETTING FITTER, BUT THE JOB MARKET ISN'T

The labor market is wobbling just as the youngest working generation enters it. In July 2025, youth unemployment (ages 16–24) hit 10.8%, more than double the

national rate. Meanwhile many Gen Z-ers say they can't trust a single 9-to-5 to carry them through the next decade.

#### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

If you serve Gen Z, build around flexibility. Think modular offerings, subscription-style access, or pay-as-you-go models that mold to unpredictable income.



In July 2025, **YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT (AGES 16–24) HIT 10.8%**, more than double the national rate.



**PER THE BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS**

# HEALTHCARE & WELLNESS

In 2026, wellness will be a battleground of beliefs, expectations and personal autonomy. As medicine merges with lifestyle and longevity becomes a cultural obsession, the lines between clinical care, self-care and identity continue to blur. Consumers want personalization, transparency and options, not one-size-fits-all answers. Healthcare is shifting toward empowerment, experimentation, and a demand that wellness be accessible and personal.

## LONGEVITY AS LUXURY

Longevity has officially crossed over from Silicon Valley obsession to mainstream aspiration, and now, it's luxury. With biotech leaders reframing GLP-1s as anti-aging drugs and wellness resorts adding

"healthspan treatments" to their menus, aging well has become a status symbol. In 2026, extending your lifespan isn't just a medical goal, it's a lifestyle identity.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Brands that position longevity as accessible, personalized and habit-driven (not elite or biohacked) will win the cultural conversation.



Global longevity and anti-aging markets are projected to reach **\$183 BILLION** by 2029.



**PER FORTUNE BUSINESS INSIGHTS**

## THE MEDICALIZATION OF WELLNESS

The wellness space is shifting from "natural and intuitive" to "clinical and optimized." As distrust in traditional medicine grows, from birth control to OTC pain relievers, consumers are increasingly turning to medically adjacent wellness: diagnostic

wearables, lab-backed supplements, peptide therapies and precision protocols. Wellness has entered its "doctor-coded" era, where scientific legitimacy becomes the new credibility.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

To compete, wellness brands must elevate rigor, transparency and evidence, without losing the emotional storytelling consumers still crave.



The global digital health market (including diagnostics, telehealth and medical-grade wearables) will exceed **\$809 BILLION** by 2030.



**PER PRECEDENCE RESEARCH**

## HEALTHCARE & WELLNESS

# BIO-INDIVIDUALITY TAKES CENTER STAGE

Consumers no longer want generic wellness advice; they want personalized blueprints built around their biology, identity and lifestyle. From microbiome testing to customized nutrition to algorithmic fitness plans, 2026 marks the rise of “me-

shaped medicine.” Wellness becomes a political, personal and highly customized practice, driven by the belief that bodies are too different for universal solutions.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Hyper-personalization is the new baseline expectation for every brand in the wellness supply chain.



**IN 2025, 63%** of U.S. consumers said they want foods tailored to their specific health needs.



**PER MCKINSEY**

# RIGHT-TO-TRY TOURISM EMERGES

With Montana broadening access to experimental therapies and biotech companies eyeing state-level hubs, medical tourism is shifting from “spa destinations” to “frontier innovation zones.” In 2026, patients aren’t just traveling for relaxation, they’re traveling for access.

States and countries that loosen regulatory barriers are becoming magnets for patients seeking last-resort or next-generation treatments unavailable at home.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Destinations that frame care as both hopeful and responsible, not exploitative, will lead the next chapter of medical travel.



Medical tourism is projected to surpass **\$46 BILLION GLOBALLY** by 2028.



**PER YAHOO FINANCE**

## FOOD, BEV & LIFESTYLE

In 2026, aesthetics become real. Sustainability, tight budgets, and a backlash to perfection are pushing people toward what feels lived-in, wearable, and human, not “new.” Beauty turns biological, fashion turns functional, and taste shifts from status to sensibility. Brands that win will design for real life, not the algorithm.

### REALISM CHIC REPLACES THE AESTHETIC ARMS RACE

After a decade of hyper-curated feeds and impossible beauty standards, realism is taking center stage. Imperfection is proof of humanity, and consumers are craving it, with many choosing wearable

silhouettes, subtle makeup, undone textures and emotionally grounded style over the polished, optimized looks of the 2010s and early 2020s.

#### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Show the seams. Brands that embrace texture, imperfection and lived-in authenticity will feel more human than ever.



**1 OUT OF 3 BEAUTY PRODUCTS** in the U.S. are now labeled “clean.” The clean-beauty segment is expanding rapidly as more consumers opt for cleaner, more natural formulations.



**PER THE NEW YORK TIMES**

### PREMIUM PANTRY CULTURE BECOMES A STATUS SIGNAL

Consumers aren't showing off luxury goods anymore — they're showing off luxury groceries. In 2026, quiet-wealth behaviors spill into the kitchen as shoppers trade up for small-batch olive oils, functional beverages, biodynamic wines and chef-

driven pantry staples. Food becomes a subtle form of self-expression, where ingredients signal taste, values and discernment rather than price alone.

#### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

For food and beverage brands, premiumization isn't about exclusivity — it's about sensorial richness, provenance and products that feel worth savoring.



The global gourmet food market was valued at approximately \$27.93 billion in 2023 and is projected to grow to **\$48.38 BILLION BY 2031.**



**PER TASTEWISE**

# HUMAN BEHAVIOR & CULTURE

For the 2026 predictions of our trend report, we're introducing a new section: Human Behavior & Culture. Across every vertical, we saw the same underlying forces shape decisions and desires. In other words, people are renegotiating their relationship with themselves.

Digital primacy, chronic overstimulation, and shifting social norms are pushing consumers toward intentional disconnection and slower living. The way people seek meaning is belonging, and the brands that understand these psychological shifts will build relevance that lasts.

## INTENTIONAL ISOLATION BECOMES A MENTAL LUXURY

Solitude has shifted from a warning sign to a wellness strategy. After years of social overload and digital noise, consumers are redefining alone time as restoration.

They're opting out of gatherings earlier and choosing small, controlled social doses over constant connection.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Design experiences that honor limited social energy, not unlimited availability. Calm is now a value proposition.



**54% OF PEOPLE GLOBALLY** choose alone time even when social opportunities exist.



PER HINGE

## REALITY INVERSION SYNDROME

For Gen Z, online life is slowly becoming reality. Physical interactions feel draining to this generation, but the digital environments provide control and emotional safety. As proximity anxiety

rises, the physical world is increasingly perceived less as the default and more as an interruption. In 2026, brands must understand that identity is formed (and performed) digitally first.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

To resonate with Gen Z, meet them where they feel most themselves and where their "real lives" actually happen: digitally. Brands that show up with a human personality will win with Gen Z.



**63% OF POST-PANDEMIC TEENS** experience physical anxiety symptoms in unmediated social situations.



PER THE ANXIOUS GENERATION STUDY

## OFFLINE ESCAPES BECOME CULTURAL ANCHORS

While Gen Z opts for online experiences, it seems like every older generation is swaying the opposite way. People are rediscovering analog spaces as grounding rituals. Chess clubs, reading retreats, artist-built environments and tactile leisure

activities are surging because they offer what screens can't: presence. These offline escapes aren't just nostalgic, they're also necessary in a time of so much social tumult. They help people feel human again.

### WHAT IT MEANS FOR 2026

Design experiences that celebrate slowness and sensory richness. The more digital life becomes, the more Millennials and up crave something they can touch.



An interesting stat shows that **77%** of organizations that made significant space adjustments in the past three years reported high employee satisfaction. That number was at **61%** for companies that didn't make adjustments.



PER BELLIA INTERIORS GROUP