



Photo by Michaela Kovacevic
Kearney, Chicago

Stressed, resilient, and bored: how today's consumers are dynamically managing stress

Consumer Stress Index, Q2 2025 update

Kearney Foresight
Consumer Institute

KEARNEY

KEARNEY FORESIGHT **Consumer Institute**

The Kearney Consumer Institute (KCI), part of our Foresight network, examines today's business challenges and opportunities through the eyes of consumers. Through cutting-edge research and ongoing dialogue, we uncover the insights and attitudes that drive consumer behavior, empowering organizations to think and act consumer-first.

Call it numbness or exhaustion, disillusionment or dissociation, but consumers have gotten used to living in uncertainty. They have developed “stress tolerance”: the ability to function normally while carrying a constant low-level hum of anxiety about everything from global conflicts to grocery prices.

The glaring issue is that the realities of economic impacts (price hikes, job insecurity, geopolitical tensions) are coming slowly, not all at once. This creates a “death by a thousand cuts” phenomenon, where stress becomes cumulative rather than event-driven. When bigger stories hit the news cycle (Middle East conflicts, trade tensions, policy changes), they cause a momentary blip in consumer sentiment, but not immediate, lasting behavior change (until the impacts become tangible in daily life).

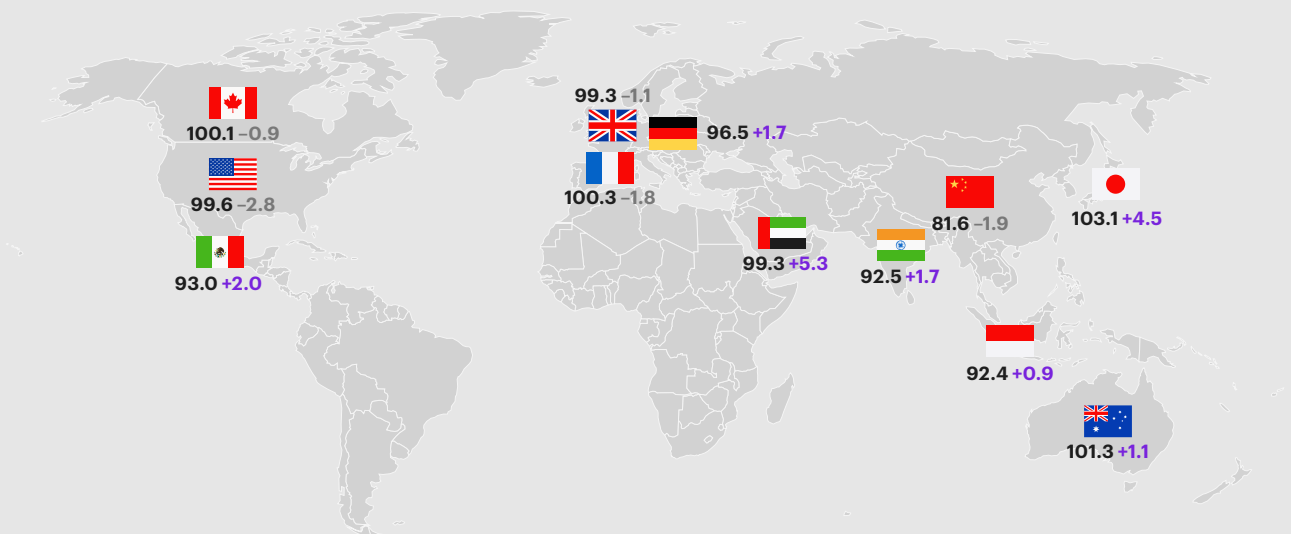
Results from the Kearney Consumer Institute’s latest Stress Index survey show consumer stress persisting and shifting, but not markedly growing in most regions (see figure 1).

Figure 1

Consumer stress levels vary across markets, falling in some countries, rising in others

Consumer Stress Index: score by country

Delta to Q4 2024



Source: Kearney analysis

Inflation and housing are the twin pillars of consumer anxiety across virtually all markets. Food, fuel, and other price increases create universal stress, while housing concerns, particularly rent in cities and mortgage costs, dominate consumer psyche from the United States to Australia. However, some of the supporting sentiments do show improvement (see figure 2).

The regional variations in secondary stressors reveal local economic realities: Americans cite declining middle class and policy confusion, while Europeans grapple with growing credit issues and regional fiscal disparities. Asian markets show concerns about aging populations and stagnant wages, reflecting longer-term demographic and economic challenges.

Stress may be steady, but consumer behavior is anything but static. Beneath the baseline anxiety, a shift is under way—less emotional, more intentional.

From revenge spending to revenge selection

The evolution of consumer rebellion

Remember revenge spending, that post-pandemic splurge where consumers threw caution to the wind, buying experiences and goods to reclaim normalcy? Well, at its core, revenge spending was less about indulgence and more about agency. That desire for control has not faded, it has just taken on a different form.






As economic volatility has become the norm, consumers have evolved their rebellion. The new revenge is not about spending freely or abstaining entirely, it is about being thoughtful and selective about how and where they spend. Today’s consumers wield deliberate choice and strategic optimization as weapons against uncertainty, putting themselves firmly in the driver’s seat.

Figure 2

Many countries are showing a decline in more extreme stress behaviors, suggesting a shift toward psychological rather than purely financial tension

Data snapshot

Delta to Q4 2024

											
Select survey questions		% agree	6-month change	% agree	6-month change	% agree	6-month change	% agree	6-month change	% agree	6-month change
Global conflict causes feelings of helplessness.	Agree when it comes to global conflicts, like wars in other countries, I feel like I don't have any control	66%	11%	63%	2%	67%	—	73%	34%	72%	18%
	% feeling very or somewhat financially secure	58%	12%	60%	9%	43%	7%	21%	-27%	47%	-2%
	Agree I could handle an emergency bill of \$2,000 (or equivalent value and currency)	43%	12%	40%	2%	38%	3%	16%	-14%	35%	-2%
	Agree I've recently had to purchase less food overall	13%	-13%	12%	-3%	18%	-6%	25%	4%	16%	-7%
Consumer sentiment on some key metrics is improving.	Agree I've had to delay buying a home or have faced a significant increase in my rent/housing cost	18%	-11%	20%	-7%	17%	-9%	13%	-19%	29%	-2%
	Agree my pay/income has fallen behind my cost of living	21%	-7%	17%	-6%	26%	-10%	16%	-5%	28%	1%

Source: Kearney Consumer Stress Index Surveys and analysis

This shift reveals something fascinating: the act of *choosing* how to spend can be just as emotionally satisfying as the purchase itself. When consumers research alternatives, negotiate better deals, or deliberately select where their money goes, they are not just making transactions; they are asserting control.

This selective spending behavior provides a crucial sense of normalcy. The weekend trip to the mall, the carefully chosen restaurant meal, the researched purchase, these become rituals of agency in an unpredictable world. The consumer who spends 20 minutes finding a better deal has not just saved money; they have proven they still have marketplace agency while maintaining their ability to participate in normal consumer life.

Unprecedented choice architecture enables this consumer selectivity. Research tools, comparison platforms, and direct-to-consumer brands have dismantled traditional gatekeepers, coinciding with the “good enough” economy, market saturation with mediocre products that meet basic needs without inspiring loyalty.

This new agency isn’t just changing how people spend, it’s reshaping why. To understand today’s consumer, we need to look not just at their choices—but the shifting mindsets behind them.

The consumer in motion: the dynamic mindsets behind modern consumer behavior

Describing today’s consumer can sound like a mood ring: volatile, anxious, resilient, “vibey.” Depending on who you ask, consumers are either under pressure or showing surprising strength. One moment, they are portrayed as stressed and financially strained; the next, they are celebrated for their resilience. This back-and-forth oversimplifies what is a much more dynamic psychological landscape.

Rather than fixed consumer types, we are observing a rotation of mindsets: distinct mental modes that individuals move through, sometimes within the span of a single week.

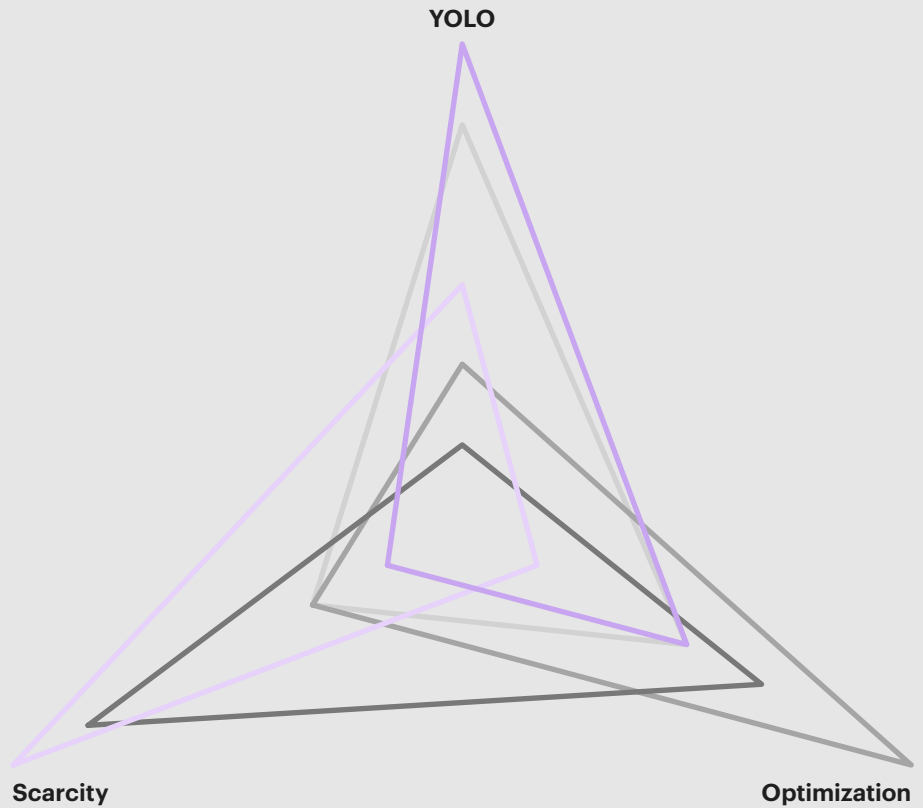
1. **The YOLO mindset** captures those “might as well live it up” moments and the mental permission to prioritize present pleasure in the face of uncertainty. This YOLO (you only live once) mentality manifests across income levels and situations—buying the ribeye over chicken breast, eating out instead of cooking.
2. **The scarcity mindset** triggers rationing and deliberate restraint. Consumers are mentally preparing for potential hardship by stockpiling essentials, delaying purchases, and weighing financial decisions.
3. **The optimization mindset** represents a strategic middle ground. These consumers make thoughtful trade-offs, seeking maximum value without abandoning discretionary spending.



Figure 3

Consumer mindsets are dynamic, shifting and leaning toward different philosophies at any given time

- Consumer 1
- Consumer 2
- Consumer 3
- Consumer 4
- Consumer 5



Source: Kearney analysis

These are not segments, but rather adaptive mindsets—fluid, contextual, and highly responsive to external cues. And critically, they can all be activated by the same person, depending on the moment (see figure 3). A consumer might indulge in a YOLO weekend, then pivot to scarcity mode after reading headlines about potential tariffs, before settling into optimization mode for grocery shopping. This constant movement creates unpredictable spending patterns. Everyone's oscillating at different times, making aggregate behavior appear contradictory.

Further, what looks like volatility may be a search for joy in a market that's forgotten how to deliver it.

This constant movement creates unpredictable spending patterns. Everyone's oscillating at different times, making aggregate behavior appear contradictory.

Are consumers stressed, resilient, or just bored?

Mapping out these mindsets in tandem with recent brand decisions exposes a third possibility on the consumer: maybe they're just... bored.

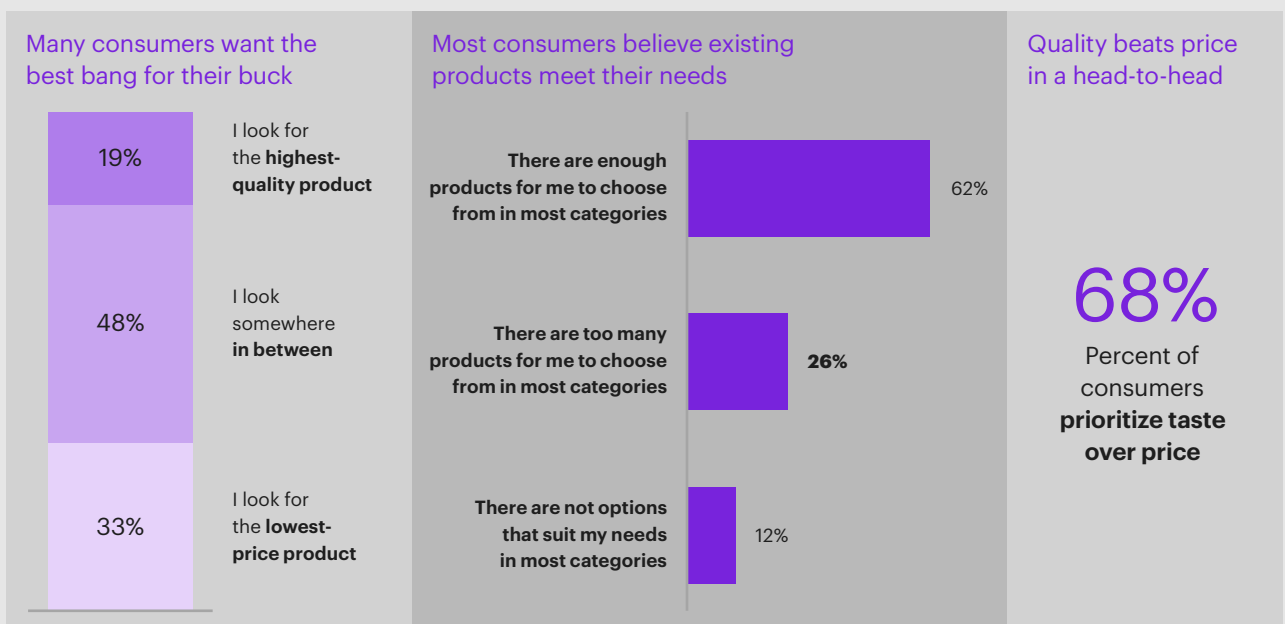
Over the past few years, many brands have leaned hard on pricing power, raising costs without offering anything meaningfully new in return. Same products, same positioning, just more expensive. The price/value equation has slid out of balance, and consumers have noticed. It's not just sticker shock; it's stagnation fatigue (see figure 4).

This "innovation deficit" is showing. Product launches feel incremental. Quality upgrades are rare. And while some brands are busy justifying price hikes with lofty brand campaigns, consumers are off chasing something actually interesting. When genuine innovation feels scarce, consumers create their own excitement through limited availability, social proof, and the thrill of acquisition. Some of these phenomena transform routine consumption into events.

Micro-trends, indie finds, and obscure snacks now command more attention than heritage brands with tired playbooks. Discovery is the new loyalty, in no small part due to the advent of TikTok. Scarcity is exciting again, and not the manufactured kind that shows up in glossy premium tiers, but the kind that causes lines for one specific frites shop in Amsterdam, creates a frenzy over Labubus (and avoiding Lafufus), or leads to Le Creuset mystery box unboxings dominating your algorithm.

Figure 4

Consumers seek balance between quality, price, and innovation



Source: Kearney analysis – quality and innovation briefs; US data

The joy deficit

Consumers are not retreating from spending, they are retreating from mediocrity. And despite the anxious tone of many brand campaigns (“we know wallets are tight”), consumers are not asking brands to echo their stress back at them. They are looking for a reason to feel something *other* than stressed.

An imbalanced price/value equation and anxiety-enforcing messaging does little to address any of the three consumer mindsets. This is where brands have real opportunity—if they stop treating stress as the headline and start treating joy as the invitation.

The brands winning in high-pressure environments are doing something quietly radical: they’re bringing back *delight*. They are not peddling guilt or price panic, but rather emotional ROI. And they are effectively addressing one of the key consumer mindsets. Their message? You *deserve* this, and here’s why.

Dining out. Spontaneous getaways. That concert ticket they did not technically *need*. The **YOLO mindset** is arguably the easiest to address given these are the discretionary acts consumers protect even when budgets tighten, offering joy, identity, and a break from the grind. Brands can look to deliver experience and ceremony, not just product. Impeccable service, memorable packaging, or a personalized touch can transform a splurge into a story.

Bringing joy to the **optimization mindset** is where function meets fashion, particularly through (true) innovation or effective messaging. In these moments, consumers gravitate toward purchases occupying the sweet spot between desire and practicality. Think premium hair tools, top quality coffee beans, or high-end coolers that hit the intersection of “I deserve this” and “I will actually use this.”

For consumers in the **scarcity mindset**, joy comes not from avoiding spending altogether, but from the quiet triumph of spending well. The thrill is not in the product itself, but in the proof that they “beat the system”—found the deal, stretched the dollar, or avoided the trap. Think members-only bundles, early access, or pricing that feels like a reward rather than a markdown (such as a surprise discount at checkout).

Joy may be what consumers want, but pressure is what’s building. As the gap between desire and delivery widens, the consumer landscape is preparing for another reshuffle.

As the gap
between desire
and delivery
widens, the
consumer
landscape
is preparing
for another
reshuffle.



Looking forward: three shifts worth watching

Consumer stress is not easing. It is evolving. As wallets tighten and assortment fatigue sets in, brands and consumers face a reset.

1. Brand consolidation will accelerate, and even household names are not immune

As trade tariffs to global conflicts threaten to destabilize supply chains and sentiment, consumers will become even more discerning. Familiar brands that have coasted on scale or legacy will find themselves exposed in a market that rewards meaning, not just presence. M&A will surge, but so will quiet brand death, especially in oversaturated categories like beauty, packaged foods, and mass fashion. Relevance, not just recognition, will be the real moat.

Impacted industries may include: mainstream fashion, grocery (private label vs. national brand), consumer tech accessories

Behavior signal: consumer affinity for “curated” or “simplified” offerings. Leading indicators include popular grocery stores like Trader Joe’s, Aldi, and Costco.

2. Restraint will become a new form of status and trust continues to migrate

The rise of *revenge selection* is flipping the cultural script on consumption. Consumers are not just curating what they love, they are curating what they exclude. This selective signaling will influence everything from how people shop to what they post. Expect social proof to fragment further: shorter trend cycles, smaller spheres of trust, and a greater premium on perceived thoughtfulness. In this next chapter, reach alone will not persuade—taste and timing will.

Impacted industries may include: luxury (especially aspirational), home goods, beauty, and apparel

Behavior signals: growth in de-influencing and “what I didn’t buy”; use of AI to edit and select; shift back to peer influence from creator influence

3. Small joys will become big business

Consumers are revaluing the everyday, not by spending more, but by spending *smarter*. Brands that deliver emotional satisfaction in small moments (through packaging, product surprise, or personality) will punch above their price point. From niche sparkling waters to unexpected scent pairings, whimsy is returning as a form of relief, not escape. It is not frivolous, it is functional. And the brands that understand that joy can be both lighthearted and strategic will earn more than loyalty, they will earn relevance.

Impacted industries may include: grocery (food/beverage, mass premium CPG, personal care); makeup and beauty; self-care and wellness

Behavior signals: redefining “affordable luxuries,” such as premium instant coffee, wellness snacks, or body care rituals; use of social commerce and fun, one-click buys

In a climate where stress is ambient and uncertainty is structural, the most relevant brands will not just acknowledge pressure, they will offer consumers small, meaningful ways to push back against it.

Author



Katie Thomas

Lead, Kearney Consumer Institute, New York
katie.thomas@kearney.com

The author wishes to thank Joey Ribera, Naman Khattar, Priyanka Gupta, Simone Brenner, Amanda Riszko, and Tamara Gilberto for their valuable contributions to this report.

