Top 10 Global Consumer Trends for 2017

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INTRODUCTION

Which consumer trends will reign around the world in 2017?

1. Ageing: A changing narrative
2. Consumers in training
3. Extraordinary
4. Faster shopping
5. Get real: The allure of authenticity
6. Identity in flux
7. Personalise it
8. Post-purchase
9. Privacy and security
10. Wellness as status symbol
Consumers are now more demanding of products, services and brands than ever before and are using digital tools to articulate and fulfil their needs. The 2017 consumer is harder to characterise, not least because identity is multidimensional and in flux, with shoppers more likely to have a hand in defining themselves and their needs. They want safety in a perceived volatile world, particularly for their nearest and dearest, and look to tech tools as aids in this quest. They want to shop faster and secure the swiftest convenience. They want authenticity in what they buy and expect elements of personalisation in mass produced as well as upscale items. Consumers who are “beyond average” in terms of size or dietary needs, for instance, are pushing to see their needs better met. The global cultural reverence for wellness has many consumers regarding it as a status symbol, particularly as the significance of material things as indicators of achievement has paled. Consumer requirements even extend to the post-purchase experience; to their relationship with brands once the transaction has happened.

Younger “consumers in training” have a voice that goes beyond “pester power” (the ability of children to pressure their parents into buying them things). This gives them a more active role in what is purchased, often turning them into functioning in-house shopping consultants. Consumers aged over 50, the most vocal and youngest of whom are part of a generation known for their outspoken views—the baby boomers—are themselves living a changed ageing narrative with articulate “ambassadors” and organisational advocates with greater faith in their abilities and purpose.
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AGEING: A CHANGING NARRATIVE

In 2017, almost a quarter of everyone on the planet will be over the age of 50, a record number. These consumers are transforming what it means to be older in terms of lifestyle and are more demanding in their consumption needs, creating what is increasingly referred to as the “Longevity economy”. Anxious as well as inspired by ageing, they are keen consumers of a long list of health and beauty products and fashion-forward options and are receptive to tech developments. “Midorexia” is a tongue-in-cheek label for the middle-aged and older consumer who acts younger than their years. However, this label highlights the shifting status and expectations of a demographic whose members are living and working for longer and prioritising wellness while challenging the typical age-appropriate behaviour of older people.

A bigger consumer voice

It is being suggested brands focus less on millennials and more on customers over the age of 50. According to AARP, a US lobby group for seniors, the annual economic activity of the longevity market in the US is worth US$7.6 trillion, “The growing population over 50 represents both a transformative force by itself and a net asset—a fast-growing contingent of active, productive people who are working longer and taking the economy in new directions”, AARP’s “The Longevity Economy” declares.

In an autumn 2016 New York Times article, “The Hottest Start-Up Market? Baby Boomers”, Constance Gustke outlines a flourishing start-up scene, creating innovation for the longevity economy at popular events like the “Silicon Valley Boomer Venture Summit” and by Aging 2.0, a San Francisco platform accelerating innovation to improve the lives of older adults around the world.
New business ideas for the boomer market include chefs, online dating sites and yoga instructors for those with health issues. Tech offers often need adapting for this segment. The millennial passion for wearable trackers, for instance, is tempered by the reported difficulties that older consumers face in syncing wearable products with their computers or understanding user directions. Services and products finding a receptive audience include companies offering home downsizing, specialist gyms, electric bikes and meal kits for people with health conditions. An online “family concierge” service called Envoy employs stay-at-home mothers for light duties like walking pets. Envoy now operates in 22 US metropolitan areas with significant ageing populations, such as Miami and Phoenix, and plans to expand to 100. One of the many brands showing a more inclusive approach to older consumers is accessories brand Dune, promoted as defining its customer through attitude rather than age.

**Disrupting ageing: “Midorexia” and more**

Website “High 50”, with a tagline “Age has its benefits”, looks at the spectrum of lifestyle interests of this segment which could equally apply to younger consumers: Home, beauty, dating, fitness, food, health, life, money, startup and travel. A late 2016 feature on this website celebrates “age disrupters”, declaring, “Enough. It’s time to change the story about ageing. It’s time to change the stuff around us. It’s time to look at the bigger picture, too, and demand what we want—from our car, our home, our workplace, our doctor, our communities and more”. Age disruptors featured include punk singer Cyndi Lauper and Geoffrey Pank, a Chinese cookery YouTube star with a million followers. This feature is inspired by the recent book “Disrupt Aging: A Bold New Path to Living Your Best Life at Every Age” by Jo Ann Jenkins, focusing on health, wealth and self. This book is lauded by figures like Joseph F. Coughlin, director of MIT’s Technology Age Lab, Arianna Huffington and Facebook’s Chief Operating Officer, Sheryl Sandberg.
The visibility of older role models in fashion campaigns continues in 2017, as creative directors such as Gucci’s Alessandro Michele recognise that teen Instagram stars may not impact a wider demographic. He picked theatre doyenne, Vanessa Redgrave, 79, for Gucci’s current Cruise ad campaign. In an industry known for celebrating youth, some see this as a shift. Mainstream celebrities like actress Renee Zellweger have been outspoken about the demeaning “body shaming” of older people in the public eye. The first London 50+ Fashion Week in 2016 saw models Daphne Selfe (87) and Marie Helvin (63) lead the catwalk. The main impetus for the show, organised by mail order retailer JD William, was research showing a majority of older women polled felt ignored by the high street. Angela Spindler, CEO of JD Williams’ parent company N Brown, told The Telegraph, “Our findings show women over fifty want to be represented by the media. They want beautiful aspirational fashion imagery; they want someone in their age and shape they can relate to”. Hollywood actor, Kurt Russell, 65, stares confidently from the October 2016 cover of men’s style magazine GQ in double denim. Style-aware older women grace the sequel to Ari Seth Cohen’s new style bible, “Advanced Style: Older and Wiser”. Wang Deshun, a muscular 80-year-old actor, catwalk model and DJ takes obvious joy in subverting China’s image of what it means to be old, in a country where early retirement is standard.

“Midorexia” is a label for middle-aged and older consumers who suddenly dare to act younger than their years, embarking on rigorous triathlons (called “young sports” in Latin America) or keen to borrow their offspring’s clothing. Shane Watson, writing in the UK’s Daily Mail in 2016 observes, “Those in the grip of Midorexia think…they look amazing—in the dungarees or the plaits or the thigh boots”. Mr. Watson believes the “blame” rests on a host of improved consumer props, including better hair dye, fitness trackers and diets they can rely on as confidence-boosters.
Ageing and working
At the 2016 Rio Olympics, much was made of the participation of former gold medallist Oksana Chusovitina from Uzbekistan. In her forties, Chusovitina took part in her seventh Olympics, competing against athletes whose average age was 20. She plans to be part of the 2020 Tokyo Games. The model Nicola Griffin was scouted in a bank queue; various modelling shoots followed, and she became the oldest ever Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue model in 2016 in her late 50s. “I have had wonderful feedback from normal ladies, who are saying this is a breakthrough”, she says. “They think, ‘great, I am not invisible any more. I too can look good—56, 66, 76, it doesn’t matter’”.

For many 50+ consumers, of course, work is a necessity, and they face the challenge of adapting to new tasks and skills. In countries like Singapore, with a tradition of multigenerational living but also costly, fast-paced modern lifestyles, demographic shifts see families with working parents supporting their kids but also ageing parents. To ease the burden, more “retirement age” parents feel compelled to work.

Entrepreneur and author, Seth Godin, insists that continuing education and learning new skills and workflows are vital to ensure older consumers remain relevant both professionally and socially. A trend seeing a rise in the middle-aged intern supports this. Marc Freedman is the CEO of San-Francisco-based Encore. His NGO pairs experienced corporate retirees with work in the non-profit sector. According to Carol Fishman Cohen, who runs Boston-based iRelaunch helping the middle aged start a new career, “Some of the biggest and most prestigious companies in the world now run re-entry internship programmes [for older people]”. Among them are US banks Goldman Sachs and MetLife and UK accountancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers. UK bank Barclays offers “Bolder Apprenticeships” for prospective employees aged up to 65.

New ageing solutions
A cluster of books and research studies published in the last year reveal a focus on different ways of living and consuming to suit our longer, healthier lives. “New Aging: Live Smarter Now to Live Better Forever”, from architect Matthias Hollwich, aims to help readers think how they can start preparing earlier on in life to stay in their communities. “New aging” also entails cooperation from professionals; “A retailer could be inspired to have a store redesigned to work for older people or an HR manager could get inspired to be less ageist”, he believes.
In “The 100-year Life: Living and working in an age of longevity”, London Business School professors Lynda Gratton and Andrew Scott emphasise that the education-work-retirement model most consumers have been raised on is crumbling. Multiple careers and new education, living and financial planning strategies are needed to create a fulfilling longer life in which intangible assets, like family and friends, are key. It calls on consumers, governments and brands to help make a longer life more inspiring. “Aging and the Digital Life Course” is edited by two anthropologists working for Intel, David Prendergast and Chiara Garattini, and highlights the ability of tech to improve the ageing experience as well as new forms of community, retail, healthcare, learning and leisure.

Michael Hodin heads the Global Coalition on Aging, a think tank on ageing policy and strategy aimed at reshaping how global leaders plan for 21st century demographic shifts to get commerce engaged with new consumer needs. The coalition works with businesses across industry sectors with common strategic interests in ageing populations. Technology is an obvious opportunity. Keen to help older consumers take better care of themselves in their own homes, a long list of robotic and artificial-intelligence-derived technologies will be commercially available in the near future, including smart pendants that track falls. Dr. Naira Hovakimyan of the University of Illinois is even designing small drones to perform simple household chores like retrieving items from another room.

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CONSUMERS IN TRAINING

Today’s family demands are launching youngsters into consumption at an earlier stage. Typical factors include parents struggling with work / life balance and a consequent greater consumer reach for paid-for convenience, extended online time for all and youngsters staying in the home, often into their 20s and beyond. This reality empowers children with greater agency—not just as family consumption influencers, but consumers in training. Increasingly, the input of children in purchasing decisions is welcomed by their parents, rather than being perceived as a nuisance. The parent-child relationship, characterised by delayed parenthood and smaller families, is now more bilateral. Parents seek their kids’ opinions about all kinds of once-adult decisions, including where to go for dinner, what kind of car to buy, even what to wear. Online life is also exposing children to buying opportunities and to brands that solicit the start of an evolving consumer relationship.
**Mini consumers with greater agency**

A late summer 2016 Bloomberg Businessweek article, looking at US discount retailer Target’s involvement of kids in planning 2017 clothing aimed at them, is entitled “Target’s future will be decided by kids”. It compares brands to bemused parents facing more opinionated consumer offspring. “Like contemporary parents who give children so much decision-making power, Target is also learning about the institutional confusion that comes when children are really seen and heard”. A picture of casually-dressed children is captioned, “Mini taste arbiters select favorites at Target’s head office”.

One factor behind the growing influence of children on consumption patterns is the fact that they are assuming adult roles at a younger age. In school and at home, they’re exposed to more adult topics such as poverty, the environment, sexuality and identity. In March 2016, the New Yorker magazine noted that “The prevailing ethos of middle class child rearing” is one in which “offspring are urged to find their enthusiasms and pursue them”. One aspect of this trend is giving children greater agency as both consumers in their own right and as influencers on the spending of their parents.

A common driver of this new-found, younger consumer independence is parent struggles with work / life balance. The need to make the most of their time finds parents open to ready-meals and other time-saving convenience. In this context, parents often pass down some of the decision-making around consumption to their children. This trend is so strong that children in some developed markets have turned into “El Rey de la Casa” (the king of the house), the title of a book from Spanish family marketing specialist Miguel González-Durán, often quoted in Spanish-speaking countries. According to González-Durán, the relation as equals formed between parents and children has turned the latter into so-called “Columbus Children”, who sit in shopping trolleys and stretch their hands towards the new products they “must” buy.

This child input in buying decisions is illustrated by the results of Euromonitor International’s August 2015 Analyst Pulse survey, offering feedback on consumption from its network of global researchers. In terms of child-specific treats, such as toys and games, for instance, 67% of analysts in the US, Canada and Caribbean asserted that children aged 3-11 had considerable input or complete control of the purchasing decision in their countries. In the Asia-Pacific region, this reached 69%, in Europe it was 77%, while in Latin America, this figure rose to 82%.

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82% of Latin American survey responses said that children aged 3-11 had considerable input or complete control of purchasing decisions.
Targeting children and teenagers via ads continues to raise ethical questions. Ongoing policy moves are attempting to hold brands in check, recognising the vulnerability of younger audiences. Recent studies show a direct link, for instance, between the viewing of ads for sweet cereals and the desire to consume them. Obese and overweight youngsters are an increasing concern in many countries. Recently released figures collected through the National Child Measurement Programme in the UK, for instance, show that the proportion of 10- and 11-year-olds who were obese in 2016 was 19.8%, up from 19.1% the year before. These reverse earlier signs that obesity rates were declining.

Among business strategists, teens and young people are key. These budding consumers set trends and spend money or compel parents to spend it for them. The selection of higher education institute and the advanced study experience itself are both spheres in which the notion of consumers in training is very apparent. Universities and colleges have been discussing a shift in emphasis, from the institution evaluating and grading the student potential and achievements to the students evaluating the institution and reviewing staff on an ongoing basis. Education can be more about what students and their families can expect and less about their responsibilities. In a bid to offer value, investments in state-of-the-art fitness centres, dormitories and landscaping are more common, particularly in the US, with some remarking that learning institutions resemble country clubs with libraries.

Playing at consumption

The success of KidZania—which, according to its website, “allows kids between the ages of four to twelve to do what comes naturally to them: role-playing by mimicking traditionally adult activities”—is significant. As in the real world, children perform “jobs” and are paid in a currency that can be used for shopping or entertainment. KidZania branches feature mini cities complete with “a functioning economy, and recognizable destinations in the form of ‘establishments’ sponsored and branded by leading multi-national and local brands”. There are almost 40 worldwide. Countries include Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Japan, Portugal, Thailand, the UK and Turkey, with plans to open in the US, Thailand and Singapore among others.

Such trends are unsettling to some. One commenter, Itaxpica on website MetaFilter writes, “Kids love pretending to do adult stuff, and a place where they can do that on a grand scale sounds wonderful. But really? We’re talking about building brand loyalty in children? How can you even say those words without feeling like some sort of cartoon caricature of a greedy capitalist?” Another disillusioned consumer remarks, “There’s a fine line between letting kids play at doing grown up stuff and creepy corporate / consumer indoctrination. The Price Chopper supermarket near me has little plastic kid sized shopping carts, and the first time I saw a little kid pushing one around I was all ‘aw!’ Then I saw the ‘customer in training’ sign on the side of the cart”.

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The “youngest social network” and other tech outreach

Kids and young people may navigate the digital world including ecommerce with ease, but there’s an ongoing discussion on their lack of communication skills and functional literacy, making them too immature to be full “digital citizens”. However, with even the youngest “digital natives” shifting their entertainment in most countries from TV to online life, tech brands are playing a daring game, reaching out to this tech-hungry audience, with a nod to parental involvement. The “Create Your Pokémon Trainer Club Account” page, for instance, is a clear invitation to a child to become a consumer in their own right. As well as capturing details and offering a “Parents’ Guide to Pokémon”, it paves the way for further brand / consumer communication through an offer to add friends on Pokémon.com, for instance.

Apps used by kids include Musical.ly, reported as being the youngest social network to date; the Shanghai-based company claims over 100 million users. While aimed at the 13–20 age group, some users are known to be younger still, entranced by the chance to create videos in which they can joke and dance to popular songs and film scenes and post the videos to an Instagram-type feed. This reality highlights tension between younger users, tech companies and the norms and laws that regulate them. While Musical.ly emphasises that it “talks” to parents, rather than users, it is a functioning social network which is popular with young people but not marketed to them. In this sense, it is different from YouTube Kids, which is marketed to children and shows children’s programming and ads that are walled off from adult content.

Campaigns are already focusing on the dangers of online influence on children’s and adolescents’ consumption choices. A new World Health Organisation report, for instance, argues that children need to be protected from pervasive junk food adverts in apps, social media and vlogs (video blogs). The report is critical of the way some vloggers get paid by junk food retailers to promote their food and warns that these have more impact on youngsters due to perceived authenticity. This report also raises concerns about the way fast food chains entice kids through their doors by marking restaurants as significant locations in augmented reality games. Countries such as the UK have introduced rules to control advertising in peak children’s viewing times. However, the report states that regulation has “failed to keep up with the pace and scope of change in the media”.

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EXTRAORDINARY

We have reached a point when mass-produced items have lost some of their shine. The internet is enabling consumers to purchase and discuss the “long tail”—unique, customised and exotic products and services; these “extraordinary consumers” are grabbing some of the limelight and spelling out their needs. Extraordinary consumers fall into “atypical” consumer categories in terms of height, security, weight, physical ability, dominant hand, music taste and sound experience or food tolerance. These subsets are now finding a voice and calling for more buying choices and solutions-based design. Extraordinary consumers are now more outspoken when their needs are underserved, in areas like travel, hotel accommodation, furniture design and medical care as well as fashion. It transpires that these needs are also less niche and more mainstream.

Fashion sizing for “real people”

In 2017, Euromonitor International forecasts that the obese population (BMI 30 kg/m² or more) will represent 42.7% of the population aged 15+ in North America and 19% in Western Europe. “Special sizes” for “real bodies”, both young and old, are emerging as a sales opportunity in the fashion world, which is starting to mirror the demographic picture, although largely restricted to online stores. The global plus-size market has an annual turnover of around US$18 billion, according to market-research firm Plunkett Research. In things outsized, however, one size doesn’t fit all, with budget, region, internet retailing security concerns and religion among the factors impacting purchasing choices.
Despite growing waistlines, many consumers have encountered challenges when looking for apparel and footwear in larger-than-average sizes. Writing in the UK’s Daily Telegraph in mid-2016, Bethany Rutter highlights the shame that prevails among bigger consumers, which she believes isn’t helped by the squeamishness among brands around bigger clothing sizes. In her opinion, brands fear that a plus size label marginalises consumers. “As plus size women, we simply cannot assume that clothes are being made for us”, said Rutter. “Acknowledging this is more useful to us in practical terms than pushing the lie that we’re all the same”, she explains.

It is this nervousness and unwanted judgement surrounding the term plus size that convinced singer Beth Ditto to launch her own clothing line, critical of a market that tells the plus size consumer they are bigger, but not supposed to be. “When I tell people I’m a model, they look at me like I’ve said I murdered someone”, Tess Holliday, a plus-size model with over 1.2 million Instagram followers, revealed to The Telegraph. While aimed at the plus size market, new brand Coverstory doesn’t state this on its website. “Straight size, plus size, I don’t think it’s an issue...If you like beautiful clothes, you like beautiful clothes”, founder Heidi Kan told fashion news site Fashionista.

Bloggers have been publically “outing” brands charging more for larger sizes, which appears to be a global problem. “If I have a [bigger] client who works in a corporate environment and who needs decent work clothes we would need a A$3,000 (US$2,180) budget if she wanted a basic wardrobe”, stylist Sarah Donges told Australian consumer advocate group CHOICE. “If the same woman was a size 12 I could do it for half the price easily”. There are exceptions, however. Lidl, European budget supermarket giant, introduced its plus-size clothing range in summer 2016, helping “curvy men and women to look and feel great” for less. Other consumers gripe about the lack of choice and trend-sensitivity in outsized clothing, as well as brand assumptions about height and body type. As one US male posted about his frustrating search, “My doctor tells me to stay fit...Macy’s tells me to gain 30 pounds”.

However, positive body confidence has recently become higher-profile. In late-2016, Yahoo Style ran a piece, “10 Plus-Size Women on the Power Pieces That Make Them Feel Unstoppable”. In a recent Barbie-themed fashion shoot in plus size fashion magazine slink, model Hayley Hasselhoff celebrated the doll’s curvy makeover in bold clothing and make-up. German blogger Anke Gröner doesn’t feel clothes need to camouflage her fuller figure, “ I want to wear things that make me joyous, things that make me look like ME...Are we really still stuck in the days of dressing to hide...I refuse to participate in that”.

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Solutions-based design

“Healthwear” is an apparel niche that adapts the techniques and trends of fashion and applies them to the challenges created by illness and disability. This term was coined by Maura Horton, CEO of MagnaReady, whose shirts with magnetic closures were inspired by the challenges of her husband’s Parkinson’s disease. PVH, the largest US shirt maker, has worked with Ms. Horton to incorporate her technology into its Van Heusen dress shirts. Maura Horton is part of what Vanessa Friedman, New York Times Fashion Director, calls “Fashion’s newest frontier”, or clothing for the disabled and displaced. So too is Angela Luna, named designer of the year at Parsons School of Design for a collection of convertible outerwear addressing the refugee crisis. It included a utility coat that could become a tent. “Systems and society” is a new subject area at this college, enabling designers to operate in “outlier” fashion orbits.

Meeting the needs of the displaced often involves a different type of planning. In Milan, InGalera (Italian slang for in prison) is a new restaurant located in Bollate Prison, fully staffed by inmates. It has enjoyed rave reviews and is seen as a model of rehabilitation. The enterprise is the work of Sylvia Polleri, a teacher-turned-caterer, who secured support from a local architect for the transformative venue design.

Getting from A to B made easier

The travel challenges of larger consumers, particularly for obese and taller consumers, are never out of the news for long. These frustrations take in complaints from those who feel discriminated against by airlines, especially those being asked to pay for two seats. Consumers fumed when Hawaiian Airlines won a legal battle to weigh consumers on one route in 2016, an idea since dropped. “Have you ever noticed that humans are getting taller but the seats we get into are getting smaller?” asks the Talltraveller.com blog, adding, “The TallTraveller loves seeing the world, but hates banging his head and paying for extra legroom”.

Healthwear

Apparel that applies fashion trends to challenges created by illness or disability
The CS100 from Bombardier Aerospace is a new aircraft with wider seats and aisles and larger luggage bins. The aircraft was developed after several commercial airlines requested a more comfortable journey for their passengers, according to Ross Mitchell, Bombardier’s vice-president of commercial operations, with the first plane delivered to Swiss in mid-2016. A “re-configurable passenger bench seat” could resolve disputes around aircraft passengers’ varying sizes. In 2016, Airbus publicised its patent adjustable bench seating in planes, aimed at families with small children and customers with restricted mobility, as well as larger passengers. Airbus’s new product is just one of a range of new personalised items which have been created to attract the growing proportion of non-standard consumers who are becoming more assertive with their needs, creating and responding to demand.
FASTER SHOPPING

In 2017, consumers are impatient. The digital world has schooled more of them into becoming so-called “IWWIWWIWI”—“I want what I want when I want it”—consumers, impulsive and in pursuit of immediate gratification. They want services yesterday and real-time virtual dialogue with their brands. Ordering in advance is no longer enough. Brands are responding with a slew of speed-up business models, from one-hour delivery to offers via beacon technology, used by retailers to broadcast messages to nearby consumers via their smartphones. One example is in fashion collections, where consumer impatience has wreaked havoc with the traditional “preview” system. Along with mobile internet access, it has led to “hot off the runway” offers. “Our psyche has changed. It is all about immediacy”, explained Sarah Rutson, vice president for global buying at Net-a-Porter, to the New York Times.

Rapid convenience
Internet shopping giant Amazon is working on delivering packages to people’s homes in under 30 minutes through the use of drones. Amazon customers in France can already buy SEAT mii city cars from the shopping site, delivered to their home within 72 hours. The #DeliveryToEnjoy campaign has been created to enhance the vehicle buying experience, “offering a 100% online experience, with speed and respect of delivery and a streamlined payment solution”, says SEAT.
The small town of Jun in southern Spain has turned to Twitter to accelerate liaison with public services. Over 50% of locals are on the microblogging site, using it to communicate with local government officials and police or book medical appointments. According to Jun’s mayor, Rodríguez Salas, the town’s 3,500 residents interact online with town officials almost daily. In London, new service Doctaly gives patients a guaranteed same-day appointment with a National Health Service general practitioner, offering them faster access to medical advice, for a fee. The success of this enterprise has led to plans to roll it out nationally. Push Doctor, offering virtual consultations, promises that “The wait is over. Whether you’re unwell, looking to improve your fitness, have a specific aspiration in mind, or just a quick question—you can talk face-to-face with a professional, caring UK doctor in as little as six minutes”.

Bite-sized helps make products more immediate and easier to consume fast. A new micro news bulletin in international and British editions is designed as a “new way to get your [news] fix without the time commitment”. A promotional message explains, “Your Tiny Daily is a daily dose of news in two minutes or less, delivered directly to your inbox every morning. Essentially, it’s very digital, and very short”. The BBC and a host of other news providers are delivering stories in films under a minute long on Instagram.

“Proximity-aware tech” has an obvious fit with more spontaneous shopping habits and the ubiquity of smartphones, as it facilitates an immediate response when consumers are right by retailers or service-providers. Sending alerts from beacons in stores directly to the mobile phones of passers-by, it is a communications tool that is growing in popularity and getting more sophisticated. Alerts, often flagging offers, are increasingly tailored to past purchases or items customers have viewed on the brand’s website. KNOMI, a London fashion boutiques app offers this. Many consumers consider these targeted, more relevant promotions less irritating than regular ads, as they are being messaged about something they want and in a location where they can act on it. ShopAdvisor, working with brands and lifestyle magazines, claims to create mobile shopping experiences via its proximity marketing service, “Your personal shopping concierge for fashion, tech, décor and more”.

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Food rush

Next-day delivery is being overtaken by ever-faster delivery possibilities for the shopper in a rush. UK supermarket chain Sainsbury’s launched one-hour delivery of food and groceries by bike in parts of London in September 2016, the first UK supermarket to do so. It is doing this via its Chop Chop app, competing with Amazon’s Prime Now and Deliveroo. Sainsbury’s said that the technology is perfect for buying up to 20 goods in an emergency. Sainsbury’s director of digital and technology told Telegraph Online that this development is “part of our strategy to give our customers more options to shop with us whenever and wherever they want. Speed of delivery is important to some customers, so we have brought back our bicycle service to test demand further”.

As consumers want healthier, better quality food on-the-go or delivered, brands are evolving to meet this interest. For instance, UK bakery chain Greggs, with almost 2,000 outlets, is considering moving away from traditional bakery items to focus on lower-calorie and gluten-free food on-the-go after seeing its business grow with the launch of its healthier “Balanced Choice” range. So-called “groceraunts” attest to the consumer interest in fast food as they become even more popular. For customers out food shopping, there are in-store restaurants and bars in shops like Whole Foods, which considers itself a pioneer in providing restaurant-quality meals to shoppers. Its new store in Hawaii will feature 200 seats for shoppers to enjoy a meal.

The appetite for apps means that tech-driven delivery is “disrupting” food service worldwide. China’s internet companies, such as Ele.me and Meituan Waimai, are competing with Western food chains via apps by offering door-to-door delivery to homes and offices from a choice of thousands of restaurants. Their apps display menus of smaller local eateries as well as big chains, allowing online customers to access a wide variety of choice via a single channel. A new app in the UK, Too Good To Go, is operating in several cities; addressing small budgets and food waste simultaneously, it connects consumers to quality restaurant leftover food at affordable prices. The Needed app combines shopping lists and special offers. Like other to-do list apps, it helps users keep track of products they need to buy when food shopping, but it does so with location-based awareness of the special offers available in nearby shops.
Fashion’s fast lane

Fashion is getting faster. Alongside the fast-track interpretation of catwalk trends for the high street, genuine designer pieces from the catwalk are now walking into fashionistas’ lives much sooner. This trend has been attributed to the influence of social media and ecommerce, which have led to shorter attention spans and have trained consumers to insist on instant gratification. An autumn 2016 full-page newspaper ad resembling a letter “signed” by designer Ralph Lauren explains how the brand is adapting to shopping habits—“I am proud to share with you, for the first time ever, my new women’s collection right off the runway and into your lives... immediately in my flagship stores around the world. From the very beginning, I’ve always designed with you in mind. You are changing the way you live and the way you want to shop, and we are changing with you and for you”.

Several designer labels are adopting this “see-now, shop-now” trend, letting consumers buy or order new fashion items they see on Instagram almost immediately; these include Burberry and Tom Ford. In a statement, Christopher Bailey, Burberry’s CEO and chief creative officer, explains that this trend will build a closer connection between the experience created on the catwalk and “the moment when people can physically explore the collections for themselves”. Luxury watch brands are also working to make models shown at the industry’s annual fairs available to buy sooner. Jean-Claude Biver, president of the watch division at LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, explained that the brand began production of TAG Heuer watches in 2016 that are set to unveil at the 2017 Baselworld show, for immediate delivery afterwards. “Once people see it on Instagram, do people want to wait six months? No way! In six months they have...another thing they’re thinking about”, he told journalist Rachel Feldermarch in spring 2016.
GET REAL: THE ALLURE OF AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is a standout consumer value in 2017, heralded by everyone from changemakers and celebrities to supermarkets and chefs. Authenticity has been identified as the key word helping sell items on eBay in 2016, by researchers Andrew Kehoe and Matt Gee from Birmingham City University’s School of English, when looking at the most lucrative words used by sellers. Quizzed about the media circus surrounding his then relationship with Taylor Swift, Tom Hiddleston responded with “as long as you’ve committed to it with authenticity then you’re ok”. This emphasis on “real” crops up in numerous contexts. It is in Twitter’s blue tick badge signifying that the accounts of high profile individuals are verified as real, and in the winter 2016 glossy magazine ad for Amazon Fashion, “Don’t look like me look like you”, celebrating shoppers’ unique style. It is in the way consumers are curating their buying aspirations on pinboard-style websites, the girl-next-door persona of Chinese star vlogger Papi Jiang and in the book “Choose Yourself” from self-empowerment blogger James Altucher. Pursuit of the genuine, be it in food, pre-loved goods, beer or character, is essential, even if it is contrived. “It took three hours of hair and make-up to get me looking this real”, actress Emily Blunt told British Vogue in November 2016.
Less than slick

Visual culture in an age of digital communications is unsurprisingly at the forefront of discussions about the authentic. Social media and selfie culture have affected insecurity about appearance, exacerbating body dysmorphia in some.

The newly reopened New York International Center of Photography now features images on both suffering and happiness flowing in real-time data streams, captured via webcams, video blogs, Twitter and Instagram. Projects include Martine Syms’s desire to express African-American life in the US in its entirety, through clips lifted from online videos of family life, police webcams and ads. The newest move of free-spirited computer academy Ecole 42 in Paris is its Art 42 museum, the first in France devoted to street art.

With millions more user-generated images shared among consumers due to mobile internet and phone cameras, a number of brands are identifying consumers’ own photographs and incorporating them into their marketing material to make it seem more authentic and relatable. “Less-than-slick” is not only acceptable, but sometimes desirable, as immediacy and the moment are what counts. Loews Hotels and Resorts in the US offer a #TravelForReal campaign with actual customer Instagram and other social media shots taken at its high-end destinations. “Because no one tells our story better than you: Stay with us and share”, is the strapline.

The draw of flawed is championed in recently published “Perfect Imperfect: The Beauty of Accident, Age and Patina”; the book, says publisher Murdoch Books, “Takes as its founding principle the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi, advocating the beauty to be found in imperfection, impermanence and the authentic...without losing sight of the benefits of living in the 21st century”. Another visual trend sees painting restoration become a live event in front of museum visitors at the Musée d’Orsay, Paris or at Cincinnati’s Public Museum among others to make this work more visible and boost arts funding.

Mobile tech has democratised being a creator. James Creech is co-founder of Paladin, a company identifying budding online video stars. He emphasises that amateurs can outshine professional content with authentic connections that make viewers think of them as friends. Experienced UK chef, Caroline Artiss, started posting videos of herself cooking in her kitchen on YouTube, and people tuned in from around the globe. Her videos are from the perspective of a single mother, short on time and money but needing to feed a family. China’s hit vlogger, Papi Jiang, has 44 million followers and vents on nagging parents, dieting and cramped living in satirical videos that young Chinese urbanites relate to. Her first live 90-minute unscripted ramble in summer 2016 saw 74 million views in one day.
Concurrently, skilled tech developments aim to use technology to create a new sense of authenticity and drive purchasing. A late summer 2016 ad for Dassault Systèmes, a 3D virtual shopping experience company asks, “How long before the living room and the fitting room become one?” with a photo of a woman stepping from her bedroom into a studio to illustrate the comforting “real” feel this technology offers customers shopping online.

Synthetic rebuff
Part and parcel of the pursuit of authenticity is a conscious debate about what actually counts as authentic. Foodies have been divided, for instance, on whether the fad for meal prepping—the advance preparation of single meal portions to cover days ahead and Instagramming the impressive photos—is authentic or unreal. Bob Geldof, musician-with-a-conscience, regularly teases festival-goers for dressing in unoriginal Primark clothing. Fake?—a current exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art reveals forgeries in art, fashion, literature, religion and archaeology. Dishonest marketing strategies don’t sit well with consumers, and social media are a merciless forum for denouncing incidents of greenwashing or “realwashing”. On Facebook, the 3,500 members of “Le Greenwashing et les cosmétiques faussement naturels” expose cosmetics falsely labelled as “natural”. Photoshop-fail stories are shared among millions; these include an image of models Kendall Jenner and Gigi Hadid in miniskirts but without visible knees on their winter 2016 W magazine cover.

Company efforts to ensure authenticity are part of this reach for the real. Home-sharing app Airbnb’s new Guidebooks feature lets owners share information about their neighbourhood’s attractions so tourists can “live like a local”. At work, entrepreneurs want to create a culture of authenticity to engage employees with touches like homelike spaces. “They don’t want to check their personality at the door, and entrepreneurs focus on creating conditions to celebrate that authenticity”, Brian Shapland of start-up furniture company Turnstone told Business News Daily.

Charity appeals to the public for donations are also seeking a more authentic angle, making the donor feel actual change is possible. DxMS is a young UK charity striving to increase the pool of blood stem cell donors; new ads promise a transformative opportunity, “You can delete blood cancer for someone”.

Ikea’s new “We Help You Make It” campaign tries to show “real people in real living situations that anyone could relate to”, says Leslie Stone, director of strategic services at Ogilvy & Mather, who worked on the ads. The scenarios mirror how the American dream has evolved to fit post-recession economic reality. One shows a family who have given the bedroom over to the baby with the parents camping in the living room.
Authentic eating

Food trends, particularly green-tinged ones, are a useful indicator of the focus on authenticity, with many revolving around what constitutes “natural”. They are part of consumer eagerness to make more considered purchasing decisions, buying from “responsible” brands that sell them quality products with real value. The restored shelf space for misshapen, “ugly” produce is driven by shoppers suspicious of the “industrialised food chain”, as well as the popularisation of traditional diets and concerns about food waste. In Wisconsin, the 1871 Dairy promises that “Milk done right makes for healthier bodies, happier cows, more empowered farmers, cleaner water, richer soils, and more connected communities”. Organic milk is part of a long list of traditional foods rediscovered by young entrepreneurs and their urbanite customers.

Food apps help consumers know more about what they're buying. The Sage Project app focuses on natural and organic food, telling users how much exercise would be needed to burn off calories in a chocolate treat or how far strawberries travelled to get to their retailer. As its website explains: “The Sage Project was created to cut through the jargon, pseudoscience and misinformation”.

Real-world holidaying

In a backlash against digital dependency and the difficulty of uninterrupted reflection, several tour operators, cruise lines and resorts are promoting their unplugged vacations to help consumers get away from “synthetic” digital life. Adventure travel company Intrepid Travel recently announced its short Digital Detox Trips. Participants pledge to leave digital devices behind them while the tour leader emails updates to their loved ones. Those seeking a DIY digital detox can also look for areas in emerging destinations with weak signals, such as Myanmar; Un-Cruise Adventures celebrates this reality in its off-grid Alaska sailings. Urban hotels helping guests switch off include Renaissance Pittsburgh hotel, offering a family digital detox package letting guests exchange their devices for traditional board games.

Another authentic-leaning travel trend is the social impact holiday. Companies like US brand Breakout target professionals aged 29–36 working in areas like tech, the media and other creative fields who holiday to mentor underprivileged fellow US citizens, sharing their business acumen. Carnival Cruise Line runs Fathom, which aims to respond to customer hunger for purpose. Passengers are invited to on-board self-improvement seminars and impact activities on land such as making water filters in the Dominican Republic.
IDENTITY IN FLUX

The nature of identity itself is in flux. The tension between global and local, part of the consumer trends landscape for some time, has been highlighted by the migrant crisis, which questions national identity. In addition, individuals demonstrating a more elastic understanding of ethnicity and “choosing” their identities may often be accused of cultural appropriation. But even as the fluidity of identity is recognised and debated, systemic inequalities and prejudice continue. Gendered identity continues to be the subject of public debate, with discussions focused on a post-gender world. Diversity is not just theoretical; brands are being forced to rethink just who their audiences really are, within countries and in different countries, and how they interact with each other. This shifting nature of identity is perhaps epitomised in the greater focus on online ID and data breaches, which threaten our digital reputation. At the same time, many consumers aspire to be global. In the so-called global village, universal brands are still perceived as an opportunity to be a world citizen by their consumers.

Identity politics

Towards the end of 2016, Airbnb sent an email to its members informing them they need to declare themselves prejudice-free to continue hosting or renting with the service. “What is the Community Commitment? You commit to treat everyone—regardless of race, religion, national origin, ethnicity, disability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or age—with respect, and without judgement or bias”. For Airbnb, trust and a prejudice-free ethos are key values in its rentals enterprise, and it refers to itself as a “community” rather than a business. So a study by Harvard researchers revealing that US hosts “widely discriminate” against those with African-American-sounding first names caused some serious rethinking. Recognising discrimination, Traity.com enables those who have found it hard to establish their identity for a bank or home rental because they lack a credit record, such as gig economy workers and immigrants, to draw upon the trust in their online networks to establish their reputation. Traity’s website explains: “Traity’s algorithms use non-credit data like eBay or Airbnb profiles, Facebook and LinkedIn social networks, to determine people’s trustworthiness, giving you the chance to get access to the services you need at the prices you deserve”.

Identity is a hot topic. Pigeonholing multidimensional human beings into a single identity and generalising from that is sometimes called “reductionist solitarism” and is being offered as one interpretation for the 2016 US presidential outcome, as well as being a consumer strategy no-no. “Fashion week has been hijacked by the real world... [now] identity politics has trumped everything else... public debate centres on issues not of policy, or economics, but of class, race and gender. On social media, if you are not cooing over cute panda videos you are probably debating a hashtagged identity issue”, said Jess Cartner-Morley, writing about the Spring / Summer 2017 London fashion shows in The Guardian.

Michelle Obama made a point of using fashion to express ideas, framing clothing as a collection of values taking in diversity as well as creativity and entrepreneurship. Paul Beatty’s novel “The Sellout”, a satire on racial identity in the US, won the Man Booker Prize in late October 2016.

New York Times journalist Wesley Morris concurs, “Our rigidly enforced gender and racial lines are finally breaking down... There’s a sense of fluidity and permissiveness... We’re all becoming one another”. Morris stresses that personal technologies of the digital age are facilitating our creation of alternate characters that can be “played with, edited, queered and fabricated, much as we filter images on Instagram and curate our Snapchats”. Positive discrimination isn’t spared criticism; last autumn, a Kayne West casting call requesting “multiracial women only” for his Yeezy catwalk show led to an outcry.

Some consumers are opting to challenge attitudes to race by “choosing” their identities, although this can result in accusations of cultural appropriation. Activist Rachel Doležal’s self-identification as “black”, for instance, brought the idea of racial fluidity to the fore. She has compared herself to Caitlyn Jenner, claiming race is “not coded in your DNA” and should be viewed like gender or religion. Her memoir “In Full Color: Finding my place in a black and white world” is due out in March 2017.

“The Worldwide Tribe” is the name of an organisation raising awareness of and aid for refugees by social humanitarian Jaz O’Hara, stressing a global rather than national human identity.
Rayouf Alhumedhi didn’t feel that being a princess, dancer or bride let her express herself in online chat rooms. As a headscarf-wearing Muslim teenager in Berlin, she felt let down by the standard emoji’s on her smartphone and began campaigning for ones she can relate to. The new Vogue Arabia, aimed at fashion-conscious women in 22 Arab countries, can be seen as the latest statement from Muslim women demanding global recognition for their culture and economic clout. In November 2016, CoverGirl announced that it had signed its first ambassador in a Hijab, Colorado native and mother Nura Afia, 24, whose online beauty tutorials for observant Muslim women have 13 million views. This follows on from L’Oréal’s decision to sign British blogger Amena Khan in summer 2016. These appointments recognise that consumers want to see people like themselves as well as their lifestyles reflected back to them by the beauty industry.

Post gender
The search for a new editor to cover gender issues at the New York Times is a reflection of just how much topics like gender fluidity, sexual identity and their expression in culture and consumption feature in the global conversation. Marketers have reported gender neutrality as a selling point for millennials, who have been raised in a climate of growing economic opportunities for women and with greater tolerance for non-traditional gender roles and identities. The third season of Amazon’s comedy show, Transparent, about a transgender father premiered in mid-September 2016 with a fourth now in production.

The ongoing “bathroom debate” in the US sees transgender people and their supporters objecting to laws in some states enforcing separate, single sex bathrooms, which they see as architecturally codified ideology. We hear actress Renee Zellweger emphasising that single and childless women shouldn’t be made to feel incomplete. Numerous websites, blogs and articles, such as “babynamenguide” and “stayathomemum” document the popularity of unisex names. This trend is being driven by consumers in their 20s and 30s who don’t wish their children to feel pressured to conform to restrictive stereotypes.
Campbell Soup’s Real, Real Life recent campaign sought to reflect the changing American family, with vignettes such as a scene with two fathers feeding their toddler. “We wanted to show actual families, which means families of different configurations, cultures, races and life choices”, said the brand’s Yin Woon Rani in a statement. A mixed race, same-sex couple relax on a sofa watching TV in Ikea’s new “We Help You Make It” campaign.

Part of this “post gender” context includes the sustained interest in androgynous style. Chanel’s newest fragrance, Boy, for him and for her, is the first gender-neutral scent from the fashion house.

Gucci has combined catwalks from 2017, and designers like Tom Ford and Bottega Veneta are already showing collections for both sexes, recognising that shopping isn’t a gender-specific pastime and showing a keenness to reflect different sexual identities. In summer 2016, the Green man sign on traffic lights was replaced with LGBT symbols to mark London Pride in 50 central London spots. London Mayor Sadiq Khan said, “One of the greatest things about this city is our differences and every Londoner should be proud of who they are”.

A popular Facebook group is using memes to smash sexist stereotypes in India. Spoilt Modern Indian Women has attracted tens of thousands of likes for mocking the idea of “appropriate” roles for women. Each meme begins with a phrase that seems to support a traditional idea before smashing it. For instance, “Urgently looking for a suitable boy...to manage the office at my new start-up”.

Make-up tutorials from men are trending. Skelotim, a.k.a. Tim Owens, is one of several men who have joined the female-led world of YouTube and Instagram make-up artistry. In mid-October 2016, CoverGirl featured its first Cover Boy, seventeen-year-old James Charles, who has a huge Instagram following. Another “beauty boy” is Manny Gutierrez, posting make-up tutorials, advertising for Maybelline and featured on People Magazine’s Ones to Watch.
We before me?
An aspiration towards altruism and a smaller ego, or “we before me”, prevails, particularly among younger consumers. This peer-to-peer trend sees a new cooperative paradigm among emerging artists and entrepreneurs and is apparent in French fashion label Vetements, describing itself as a “collective” and presenting a joint collection with other brands. It has been pointed out that the anger and sadness that merged into the Black Lives Matter movement did so without an over-prominent figurehead.

Of course, individual differences are celebrated too. In “Corporate America Chases the Mythical Millennial”, journalist Farhad Manjoo advises brands that, “For most practical purposes—hiring and managing, selling to, creating products for—your company may be better off recognizing more discrete and meaningful characteristics in workers and customers than simply the year of their birth”.

In a New York Times opinion piece, “The politics of me”, journalist Roger Cohen pokes fun at the idealism and ego of changemaker consumers speaking through their smartphones. He mocks the perceived fit between their personal consumption choices and world improvement stating, “The way I want to change the planet is through me! If I can attain mindfulness and wellness, and others follow, we will create a sustainable planet and harmony will prevail. What you wear and eat, how you travel, and what you do are your own political statements. They make you feel good about yourself at the same time as they advance world peace”.

![Image of a crowd](image-url)
In 2017, we will have come to accept the idea that an industrially-produced product can be customised or personalised, at least in part. While there is a lot more personalisation of “mass-produced” items, high-end personalisation is also thriving due to demand for “experiential luxury”, the shift from “having to being”. With an almost infinite capacity to gather information on clients and innovation in production technologies such as 3D printing, the masses can now imitate their high-end counterparts. This trend is changing consumer expectations, as customers demand that brands fulfil or even predict their needs. Brands are also looking to strengthen the brand / client relationship through the emotions they can arouse by making things “personal”.

Products that fit you...

The concept of “bespoke” is enjoying a moment. A recent satirical short film about the launch of bespoke water, promising the freedom missing in “souless” corporate water, generated actual consumer enquiries, surprising director Paul Riccio. Quoted in a New York Times article, “Bespoke This, Bespoke That. Enough Already”, etymologist Michael Quinion observes, “There has been a distinct fashion for it...at this point, it’s really over the top”. The idea that a product features a personalised aspect has become increasingly common branding bait used by surgeons, insurance companies, vloggers, salad bars and tattooists. Examples of the democratisation of personalisation abound around the globe, from travel to media to clothing to toys. “Personalised learning” also sees universities innovate with customised curriculums. The website of global Italian fashion accessories brand, O bag, explains that its accessories are “customisable” with add-on parts. “The brand aim is to give our customers greater freedom to express themselves sartorially”. The use of “proximity-aware” tech in the form of beacon signals from nearby shops to consumer phones is also being boosted as the messages become more personalised through greater knowledge about shopper preferences.
Sports shoes serve as a useful model of what personalisation can do. Adidas’s app lets users order trainers with pictures taken from their Instagram accounts. Australian fitness guru, Emily Skye, with a mission to topple the notion of “body perfect”, is partnering with Reebok to launch a crowdsourced training shoe in 2017. It promises to incorporate preferences for a “bespoke shoe” from some of her 11 million followers. Writing in Forbes, Deborah Weinswig focuses on the promise of customised trainers with tech innovations. Nike’s HyperAdapt 1.0 is a self-lacing shoe with digital sensors to adapt to each wearer for greater comfort. More individual customisation options are due. Adidas is developing Futurecraft 3D-printed midsole technology. iFit and Altra are creating a smart running shoe. According to Footwear News, the shoe is “designed to collect data about your stride as you run, allowing you to stay better informed about your personal biomechanics”. UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, is photographed in her trainer-shoe hybrid “troes”, opting for a designer pair in her signature leopard-print.

...And learn about you

Greater consumer digital engagement has facilitated the easier compilation of a growing body of information on customers, with brands discovering consumer tastes and preferences. In practice, this ability lets brands target communication on an individual basis and offer products tailored for each person, thus upping customer satisfaction levels and perceived product value—at least in theory. This is not just about Amazon, Etsy or online news sites recommending products or stories based on search and purchase algorithms; smart shop windows are being tested that offer diverse promotions based on a “reading” of data, such as the age, clothing or language of passersby. Many high street stores are offering emailed receipts to customers to encourage a digital relationship and hoped-for loyalty with customers while capturing their details.

Home sharing app Airbnb’s above-mentioned Guidebooks offer pushes hosts to share more personal perspectives on the best their neighbourhoods have to offer. With crowdsourcing consumer views increasingly the “new normal” in FMCG product development, the wishes of more consumers are being incorporated into the production process. In the US, Columbia Crest offers a Crowdsourced Cabernet, a project allowing fans to vote online on decisions like how long to age a wine.
Subscription services: Curated by you

Subscription services, delivering selections of products directly to consumer homes, capitalise on consumer trends like self-treating and convenience, but their success is also likely due to the personalised nature of their offerings. Consumers around the globe have been captivated by these considered picks of everything from skincare products, pet treats, gaming and razors to meal kits with pre-measured ingredients and recipes.

Many subscription services are positioning themselves as curators, selecting the new-release, “greener” or best value products they feel will best please their clients, with help from bloggers and fashion magazines. New subscribers typically complete a user profile to determine their tastes resulting in the delivery of a product mix “tailor-made” for them, such as the high-end chocolate company Cocoa Runners—“We use sophisticated algorithms that continually learn based on your feedback combining the same techniques as top dating and music recommendation sites to find other bars we know you’ll love”.

Subscription services are a rapidly expanding market. An analysis of internet traffic from Hitwise, a division of Connexity, published in spring 2016, found that visits to top subscription box sites grew by nearly 3,000% in the US over the last three years. Over 21.4 million visits were made to these sites in January 2016. Birchbox personalised beauty, grooming and lifestyle samples for men and women topped the list.

HelloFresh develops recipes and delivers boxed ingredients to consumers in Europe and North America, shipping 7.5 million meals monthly in mid-2016 according to co-founder Thomas Griesel. Speaking at Freshfel Europe’s annual event in Brussels in summer 2016, he said that the brand is positioned for personalisation as it creates taste profiles for customers based on cooking preferences or “personal taste clustering”. Customers indicate what they don’t like, perhaps seafood or pasta, and are regularly asked for feedback leading to a “hyperpersonalised” service.
Personalised touches that tell a story
Crowdfunding, as a direct route for start-ups to showcase their new wares to consumers on sites like Indiegogo, is helping make early adopters of more of us, with appealing development narratives. Consumers making a greater financial investment can be rewarded for their support of untried products through personalised versions. One of the most successful Kickstarter projects ever, sleep machine Sense, monitors sleep and ambient room quality throughout the night to deliver a personalised sleep report to users in the morning.

Personalisation is also about adding a personal face to a brand. To enhance its coverage of the 2016 Summer Olympics, the New York Times introduced a text-messaging service to make readers feel that they were receiving daily texts from friends on platforms central to their lives, Andrew Phelps, the Times’ Director of Personalization, told CNNMoney. This friendly register extended to the casual dialogue and a liberal use of emoji. Brand stories can be simple but compelling. Popular clothing retailer ASOS (as seen on screen) has an #AsSeenOnMe feature in which shoppers can “Get inspired by how other customers have styled this item” and add their own look to the gallery.

While technology has made it simple to record and archive digital memories via posts, photos and videos, it has become more complex to access our past experiences. A solution may be the new mobile app Fabric, promising social networking that unclutters our past. With a tagline of “The story of your life that writes itself”, the app pulls in photos from a range of your social media from Facebook to Instagram, plotting them on a map while logging dates as new way to chart personal history. The aim is to eventually allow users to add songs and letters and access their past, creating a far richer timeline which could answer such questions as “When is the last time I saw Grandpa, and what music was I listening to at the time?”
POST-PURCHASE

In 2017, shoppers will be paying more attention to their post-purchase experience, increasingly an important part of the value offer of a product or service. Post-purchase contact with the company’s representatives, the medium and the tone of the response are also critical parts of the customer journey, shaping their view of the business. With consumer customer service expectations raised, brand willingness to address post-purchase queries and complaints will influence whether a consumer recommends or criticises it to fellow consumers and considers a repeat purchase. To satisfy and retain customers, more products and services come with a type of built-in offer of post-purchase assistance. This is linked to an emerging definition of convenience going beyond fulfilling customer needs to actually predicting them—including the post transaction period. The extended life of products, with the greater consumer openness to buying “pre-loved” items, is also part of the post-purchase picture. Durability is a more common consumer goal.
Support with purchase

Standout customer service is a savvy business route to a hoped-for consumer / brand relationship when consumer loyalty is not assured. Post-purchase tech support is something customers have come to expect and is set to grow with smart devices, as more products for smart homes are expected to have their own “digital profile” that helps sustain the consumer / brand connection. More businesses are offering personalised advice and support with purchase. Fashion-led brands, for instance, offer personal styling services, or some tech brands will consider the maximisation of tech devices in the home. This is often facilitated in physical shops, with a trend to offer emailed receipts to customers to extend the relationship in the digital realm.

Tech support for customers, particularly from services in less competitive markets, is often a miserable experience. Waiting on hold, interacting with automated systems and talking to people reading from unhelpful scripts, only to be sent back on hold, does not create customer delight. Companies with best-rated customer care, such as Amazon Prime and AppleCare, often charge more for their products or a subscription fee for enhanced services, so the cost of helping the customer is baked in. Contacting a company via social media by tweeting or sending a Facebook message is often seen as a faster route to attaining a response from businesses, fearful of the potential power of mass consumer frustration. Some relief is available via websites such as GetHuman and DialAHuman.com for advice on helplines and which digits to press to fast track to a live person. Apps like Fast Customer and Lucy Phone will wait on hold for you and call you when an actual person answers.

Car companies are increasingly using apps and onscreen displays to help digitally adept buyers become acquainted with the numerous features in highly computerised vehicles, recognising that younger consumers are unlikely to plough through printed manuals. “The question is, what do millennials expect from their cars, now that they view them as an operating system?” Professor Maggie Hendrie, chairwoman of the Interaction Design program at ArtCenter College of Design in Los Angeles, told the New York Times. Companies such as BMW and Hyundai incorporate augmented reality-style features, letting drivers point their smartphones at parts of their vehicle to see a three-dimensional view appear on the screen together with explanatory videos and operating instructions. Toyota’s app also displays explanations of dashboard warnings and can be used to arrange service, view the vehicle’s service history or request roadside assistance. Electric car maker Tesla offers owners a frequently-updated guide through its 17-inch touch screens.
Superhuman customer service is likely in the near future. Researchers are developing artificial intelligence to be more human, as well as making it useful; robots could even bring a more human touch back to customer service. Research is focusing on developing social robots that can assist people in their daily environments: homes, hotels, shops, banks, etc. American robotics designer and former Walt Disney Imagineer, David Hanson, has been working on robots capable of recognising subtleties in human expressions and emotions. Some of his robots have been used in autism-therapy trials with positive results reported.

Customers’ own role in the post-purchase experience

A recent American Airlines ad suggests an interesting post-purchase tactic: putting the onus of a good consumption experience on the customer. It urges customers to show consideration to fellow passengers to best enjoy the product. “Always upbeat, great fliers make the best of their situation no matter where they’re sitting”, one print ad says. Another, acknowledging that children aren’t the quietest travel mates and one of the frustrations of flying for many, is filled with a baby’s face. The caption reads, “They like babies but bring noise cancelling headphones”. “We really wanted to take the tone of...It's you the travellers...who kind of elevates the entire mood. Let’s move that conversation from us and turn it onto them and how they really move us forward in creating a much better experience”, Fernand Fernandez, American’s vice president of global marketing told US journalist Martha C. White.

Online reviews, of course, are where consumers discuss their new purchases. They share how they found the style and comfort of a handbag or rank hotel rooms for cleanliness. The sharing of buying experiences online is a recognised source of consumer power. What is thought to be Nigeria’s first consumer-review website, Have-your-say.ng, for instance, urges consumers to participate in the conversation so they can be taken more seriously by service providers.
Reviews are still under scrutiny, and the extent to which online reviews are genuine remains controversial. Review hub Yelp issues “Consumer Alerts”—notices it puts on a business’s page indicating it has been caught trying to pay for better reviews. “Navigating by the Stars”, published in April 2016 in The Journal of Consumer Research, found “a substantial disconnect” between the objective quality information that online reviews actually convey and the extent to which consumers trust them after analysing 344,157 Amazon ratings of 1,272 products. The consumer saw a number, 4.6 stars out of 5, and took it a lot more seriously than it merited. This nonetheless confirms the consumer respect for the review process.

With the demand for more reliable reviews, many online retailers, such as Amazon, are forcing their sellers to curtail their involvement and halt giving away free products in exchange for reviews.

**Longer post-purchase stories**

One side effect of the reduced emphasis on materialism and the green consciousness of consumers is the greater willingness to buy used items. Durability makes for a very positive post purchase experience. Tired of throwaway culture in 2016, sustainability-minded Londoner Tara Button launched website Buy Me Once. It offers her curated selection of goods that come with a lifetime guarantee or offer of free repair. Recommended brands include Dr Martens, Patagonia and Tweezerman. This is a theme also core to new brand Permanent Collection which seeks out elemental and classic features in objects like porcelain teacups and leather sandals. Founders Fanny Singer and Mariah Nielsen are inspired by things they’ve owned longest and which still feel relevant. An ad campaign picking up on this consumer interest in lasting rather than fast fashion is one from storets.com, “LOVE. WEAR. REPEAT”.

Openness to recycling, repairing and reusing—to mend, not end—sees movement against “planned obsolescence”, the criticised practice of designing products with restricted life spans to ensure consumers will buy more, formalised in policy. The French government has already legislated to compel manufacturers to state how long their appliances will last. French companies are also obliged to inform customers how long spare parts for their products will be available or risk a fine. Brands stand to gain from an extended relationship with customers, knowing far more about them too.
PRIVACY AND SECURITY

The poignancy of a 2016 New York Times opinion piece, “Our Immigrants, Our Strength”, from three major city mayors, themselves of immigrant origin—Bill de Blasio, Anne Hidalgo and Sadiq Khan—is striking. The piece emphasises the global sense of insecurity and argues that policies embracing diversity and inclusion can make cities safer places. In our volatile world, consumers are anxious to stay safe and well. The focus is on personal safety and that of loved ones. There is a greater leaning towards home and mobile cocooning. Consumers also experience hope, mixed with a tinge of distrust, in the promise of artificial intelligence and tech to keep us from harm in an uncertain world.

**Personal safety**

Goods and services—anything from smart home tech to insurance, organic food to travel upgrades and investment in education which help consumers feel they can buy back control as pilots rather than passengers—will hold a strong appeal. For consumers, personal safety extends to the need for protection from the elements and environmental threats. Late summer saw further debate over the “Facekini”, a colourful full-face mask worn by some Chinese bathers to shield themselves from the sun’s harmful rays, tanning pigment, algae and jellyfish stings. Mobile phones can operate as early warning systems on emergencies, from extreme weather to the spread of the Zika virus, via sites such as the Google Public Alerts page or Twitter alerts.

Businesses are benefitting from offering solutions that respond to consumer concerns about the negative impacts of air pollution. Rising sales of products, such as air purifiers and pollution masks, prove the commercial potential of product innovations tackling the consequences of air pollution head on. With consumers keen to protect their skin from air pollutants found to cause premature skin ageing, leading brands are already offering consumers products shielding them from air pollution, such as Dior’s One Essential City Defence SPA 50.
Consumers are using their online savvy to screen healthcare options. Those considering plastic surgery, for instance, are using the Zweivel app to help them initially screen potential surgeons virtually. The Natural Cycles app tracks users’ fertility cycles and is useful in pregnancy planning and prevention. The app has over 100,000 registered users in countries including the UK, the US, Sweden and Brazil. Research from Swedish medical body, the Karolinska Institute, found the app as effective as the Pill.

The spring / summer 2017 London Fashion Week was presented against a backdrop of bewilderment following the Brexit referendum. Designers were described as offering refuge in the sanctuary of nostalgia. Paul Smith, for instance, looked back to English gardens in his prints and the use of traditional fabric such as seersucker. Stepping into the territory of emotional safety, Qatari-American artist Sophia Al-Maria explores the emotional cost of the rapid transformation of oil-rich cities through ever more new malls, hotels and museums, and the incorporation of local indigenous Bedouin tribes into a global consumer class—to expose the human as well as environmental costs of hyper development. In her installation “Black Friday”, on show during 2016 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the opulent malls of Qatar’s capital Doha became a horror set with the luxury mall as consumer prison.

The allure of home and mobile cocooning

In 2017, consumers are keen to fortify their homes as a place of security and refuge. The traditional weekend staples of food, entertainment and romance are now available on demand via digital devices. Billed as a digital guard dog, crowdfunded home security device Cocoon listens for strange sounds in a house when its occupants are out, and alerts their smartphone with a video clip if it detects anything unexpected. “The device is all about making people feel safe in their homes”, Sanjay Parekh, co-founder of the start-up told Telegraph Online.
Tracking gives some consumers a measure of control and reassurance about the safety and activity of their loved ones. Many parents routinely monitor their children’s digital behaviour in some way. US mobile internet company, T-Mobile, reports that it has four million customers using its service blocking their children from viewing inappropriate content. Its “Family Allowances” service, letting parents block access to texting and certain numbers during school and homework hours, is also popular. Anxious dog owners can even monitor dog walkers via the Wag app. New ride-hailing start-ups are emerging to protect niche segments. In California, companies like HopSkipDrive, a company started by mothers working full-time, promise parents more secure rides, real-time updates and stringently-screened drivers for unaccompanied minors.

But while new home technology is giving some consumers piece of mind and security, other voices are starting to surface regarding its hidden dangers. Jacob Silverman is the author of recent book “Terms of Service: Social Media and the Price of Constant Connection”. In a mid-2016 opinion piece “Just How ‘Smart’ Do You Want Your Blender to Be?” he identifies the home as the new frontier in the rush to digitise the world. When most household items have been technologically upgraded and rendered “smart”—for example, lighting systems—he warns that rather than an upgrade, this online access is “A stealthy euphemism for ‘surveillance’”. The same applies to sharing our preferences with personal assistants like Amazon’s Echo. Mr. Silverman’s main gripe is that smart devices reverse traditional models of ownership. Running on managed software and being connected means companies can control them from afar. Dealers have begun installing “starter interrupt devices” on cars bought with loans, for instance, so that they can remotely kill the engine should the borrower delay payments.

**AI and tech as panaceas?**

From July 2017, a small robot selling for US$600 will help consumers manage their health. “Your Personal Home Health Robot” combines face recognition, video conferencing, machine learning and automation in a personal health assistant that can dispense vitamins and medicines to help users stay well. Its creators, Pillo Health, claim on the project’s Indiegogo crowdfunding page that it can connect users with health professionals and order refills. Lola Cañamero, head of the Embodied Emotion, Cognition and (Inter-)Action Lab at the University of Hertfordshire in the UK is working on a robot companion to help diabetic children cope with their illness. For her, robots are efficient and likeable service providers, but they are still robots, not replicas of humans.
There is growing ambivalence over the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to bring safety to consumers rather than more control over them. In mid-2016, physicist Professor Stephen Hawking warned that AI, disguised as helpful digital assistants and self-driving vehicles, is gaining a foothold. Speaking on the Larry King Now show, he warned that advances will not necessarily be benign. In a new book “Technology vs. Humanity: The coming clash between man and machine”, Gerd Leonhard concurs and warns that “digital obesity” could be the next pandemic. He reminds us that in our rush to upgrade and automate everything, from computers to wearables to brain-computer interfaces, we must pause to ask if human control over our lives is safeguarded.

In recent months, device recalls have undermined consumer confidence in travelling with mobile technology. Online security breaches have shaken consumer trust in technology, even as consumers appreciate that trade-offs are necessary between safeguarding personal privacy and tracking down potential threats. In 2016, US President Barack Obama warned against “fetishizing our phones above every other value”, but these ubiquitous devices are minicomputers packed with every detail of the user’s life, from family photos to records of physical movements to texts to credit card purchases. Cindy Cohn, executive director of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a body with a motto of “Defending your rights in the digital world”, told the New York Times: “Everyone gets at a really visceral level that you have a lot of really personal stuff on this device...They know that the same forces that work at trying to get access to sensitive stuff in the cloud are also at work attacking the phones”.

In our rush to upgrade and automate everything, from computers to wearables to brain-computer interfaces, we must pause to ask if human control over our lives is safeguarded.
In recognition of consumer concerns and keen to steer developments along an ethical path, the non-profit OpenAI centre is funded by Silicon Valley investors. Its mission is “To build safe AI, and ensure AI’s benefits are as widely and evenly distributed as possible”. A key backer, Elon Musk, deploying AI-based technologies in products like the Tesla car, has expressed concerns that AI could be used against people. Separately, five of the world’s largest tech companies, including Amazon, Facebook and Microsoft have been meeting to discuss how AI research stays focused on benefiting people.

“Privacy and Security is in our DNA” was the message on WhatsApp’s security screen, as the Facebook-owned messaging app reported to be the most popular in the world, introduced end-to-end encryption in mid-2016. “No one can see inside that message. Not cybercriminals. Not hackers. Not oppressive regimes. Not even us”, the company promised users.

As so much of our lives are lived via social media, it is unsurprising that social networking brands feel they have a role to play in crises, despite many consumers expressing concern about privacy. Facebook’s suicide prevention tool is being rolled out globally while the social media’s Safety Check feature lets users connect with friends and loved ones during a disaster and track crisis updates.
The desire to be fit and healthier seems to be almost universal. Healthy living is becoming a status symbol, as more consumers opt to flaunt their passion for wellness through paying for boutique fitness sessions, “athleisure” clothing, food with health-giving properties and upscale health and wellness holidays. The spectacle of those willing to throw money at their quest for spiritual improvement is widespread enough to provide an easy target for humour, as are the frequent consumer Instagram posts of retreat experiences, expressing wellness by clichéd images of fitness-wear and toned bodies posing against scenic backdrops. At a time when consuming “stuff”, once an indicator of wealth, is now taking a back seat, the lack of things, of excess fat, of wayward thoughts even, now defines aspiration and is at the heart of the consumer interest in wellness.

Looking wellness-ready
Athleisure is seen on people everywhere outside as well as inside the gym. Consumers are signifying that health and wellness matter to them, and ever higher-end interpretations keep emerging. Celebrities, such as Beyoncé, are collaborating with brands on their take on the trend, even walking down the aisle in bejewelled, customised trainers. The term athleisure includes all of the word leisure, but less than half of the word athletic! Outdoor Voices is a US athleisure brand that grasps this. “We believe that fitness doesn’t have to be defined by performance”, its website explains. Designers are teaming up with sports brands to create clothes that InStyle magazine describes as “après sport” or “gym-to-the-office”.

WELLNESS AS STATUS SYMBOL
Wearable devices now offer to track mental wellbeing as well as physical fitness. WellBe is a new stress tracking bracelet that alerts wearers when they are in situations and around people that increase their stress levels using heart rate sensors. Competitiveness plays a key role in the search for peak fitness, and wearables rely on it to motivate consumers to share their progress or lack of it. Taken to extremes, however, addiction to exercise can be damaging. There is greater awareness of the fitness-loving consumers who are suffering from “anorexia athletica”, the compulsive and excessive use of exercise to maintain a low body weight. Online blogs and other social platforms discuss the affliction, also known as hypergymnasia or sports anorexia. On forums, others discuss anguish at missing workouts. Sports psychologist, Dr. Jill Owen, warns that these platforms may be encouraging hypergymnasia. “The trend on social media towards gym selfies, accompanied by the misinterpretation of inspirational quotes stressing hard work and pushing through discomfort, can fuel or reinforce the thoughts of the obsessive exerciser”, she told the UK’s Daily Telegraph.

Boutique health

The consumer interest in staying well sees them combining wellbeing activities with cathartic physical activity. This is reflected in a thriving menu of more esoteric, boutique fitness workout choices in urban hubs and spas. Some unlikely combinations have emerged, including BoxingYoga, a yoga-based training system. A new, holistic generation of gyms are about users defining themselves and about flaunting and sharing this exclusive lifestyle, as well as specialist activities. In London, creative hub Dalston’s Netil House has a roof top bar that combines a programme of yoga classes, outdoor cinema, one-off workshops and more. The trend serves as a lifestyle identification mark, visible across social media. Top fitness Instagram accounts include @msjeanettejenkins, personal trainer to a number of Hollywood celebrities, and @shadesofjoy.co, which offers a mixture of aesthetic yoga postures and fitness exercises in idyllic locations.
SoulCycle, a New York gym that has grown to more than 30 branches, has near-cult status. Celebrities like David Beckham cycle in a club atmosphere, spurred by trainers chanting motivational messages like “I want you to grow”. With BounceLimit, Asia has its first trampoline fitness studio in Hong Kong, with individual mini-trampolines. Supermodel Lara Stone was recently photographed smoking outside her London gym, Bodyism, which has a reported annual membership fee of £22,000. It is considered one of the most exclusive wellness companies globally, offering bespoke personal training, clothing, supplements and six best-selling books.

Many consumers are increasingly interested in products that promote healthy sleep, urged by professionals not to view sleep as a lifestyle choice, but to respect it as they do diet and exercise, as a core health building block. Wired magazine recently reported on the industry for aiding insomniacs, with an estimated three million plus people listening to sleep playlists on Spotify, making it one of their most popular genres. The above-mentioned sleep monitoring machine Sense has sustained its consumer appeal with the addition of new sounds to sleep to and greater accessibility thanks to a mid-2016 deal with Amazon, despite its £149 price tag. Clinical nutritionist Shawn Stevenson emphasises the role sleep can play in achievement as well as health in his new book, “Sleep Smarter: 21 Essential Strategies to Sleep Your Way To A Better Body, Better Health, And Bigger Success”.

Wellness leisure

Wellness holidays promote the idea that consumers can take some time off, transform themselves and return a better, happier person. As US journalist Sadie Stein puts it, “We live in a golden age of the ‘wellness vacation’, a sort of hybrid retreat, boot camp, spa and roving therapy session that...promises to refresh body and mind and send you back to your life more whole”. Wellness consumers seem to have rediscovered the link, with deep historical roots, between holidays and the pursuit of health. Pravassa, for instance, is a “wellness travel company”. Its website declares, “You work hard enough. It’s time to let vacation restore your best self”.

So-called medical tourism now takes in the broader quests of wellness- and fitness tourism, including curative therapies and weight loss. “Holistic wellness packages on vacation have become much more common and in some cases, the main purpose of travel”, says Cassandra Forrest, Director of Spa at Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, China.
Activity holidays for physical and mental health are a growth sector. Money is no object when it comes to top-of-the range luxury pampering and rejuvenation treatments in hotel spas and dedicated wellness centres. In the Danish luxury resort Hotel Vejlefjord, AquaMeditation “Combines the restorative powers of water with the principles of meditation”. For the ultimate combination of holiday and health, many cruises now offer health, Ayurvedic, “lite-dining” and detox treatments.

**Eat yourself better**

Consumers are aware that eating habits directly influence quality of life. This is fuelling unprecedented demand for healthier eating options with fitness-promoting attributes sought in supplements, beauty products and even pet food by consumers willing to pay for them. With the endorsement of health experts, such as nutritionists, chefs, fitness and medical professionals, brands are busy creating products with the addition of health-giving properties, including exotic vegetables, vitamins and fibre. Mainstream brands now speak the language of wellness. Mondelez International boasts that “We create snacks to bring people delicious moments of joy. To help consumers on their well-being journey”—a key brand priority leading up to 2020.

The health-conscious can choose from numerous “unusual” diets. In mid-2016, health food gurus the Hemsley sisters, in their UK Channel 4 show “Eating Well with Hemsley and Hemsley”, became advocates for “biodynamic farming”, also called “agricultural astrology”—a food production method from the 1920s advising crop farming based on moon phases.

One comedian poking fun at the “wellness movement”, clean-eating bloggers and the fact that they are trying to impress each other is Londoner Bella Younger. She posts photos of sweets, white carbohydrates and other “junk food”, borrowing popular wellness hashtags such as and #gettheglow to lure in followers. She calls herself Deliciously Stella, after healthy eating vlogger, Deliciously Ella.
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Daphne is inspired by making sense of contradictory global consumer and cultural trends. Her interest in sustainability and consumer awareness sees her actively participating in forums, including urban sustainable lifestyles at UNEP’s Division of Technology, Industry and Economics.