B&A RESEARCH & INSIGHT

B&A Sign of the Times

2023 report

J. 224218

Prepared by: B&A

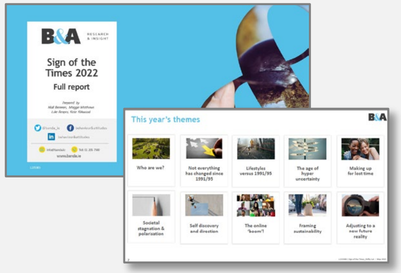
Delve Deeper

About B&A ‘Sign of the Times’

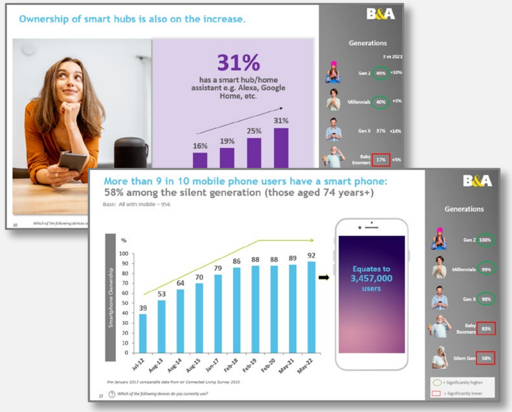
B&A’s continued connection to culture and social relevance is maintained through the success of our frequent in-house culture and trends projects. Enabling us to get ever closer to people, their contexts and decision making.

- Sign of the Times
- TechScape
- Sunday Times polls (once a month)
- Consumer Confidence reports (monthly)

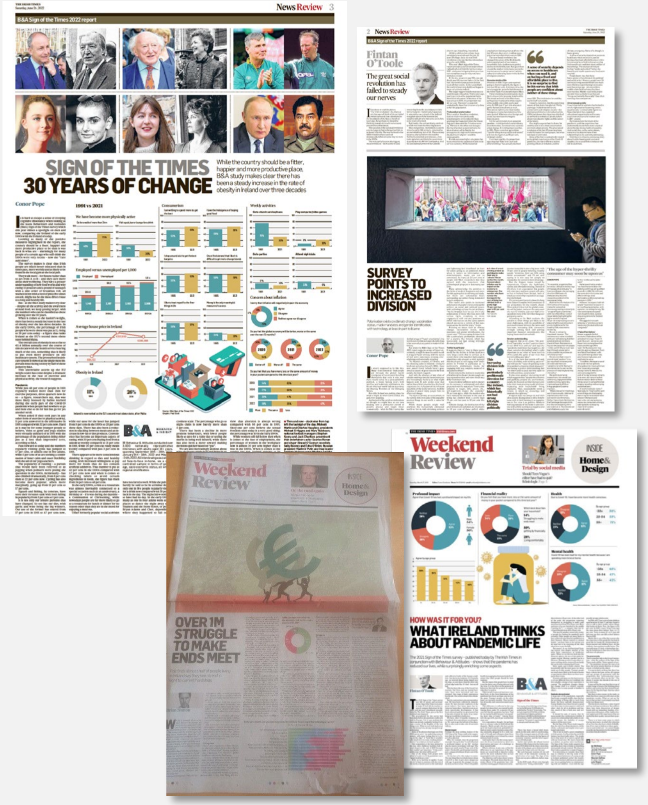
B&A annual state of the nation report on consumer trends since 2010. Sign of the Times (Annual)



B&A TechScape (Annual)



Published as a Weekend Review in the Irish Times



B&A Consumer Confidence

Business Confidence survey on a quarterly basis on behalf of Linked Finance

B&A Lockdown Diaries (Covid)

B&A Sign of the Times 2023

Methodology

Consumer groups

5 groups

ABC1, 24-55, Dublin and Cork

Fieldwork Jan 2023

National online survey

Nationally representative

(n = 1,000 Adult 16+)

Fieldwork January 2023

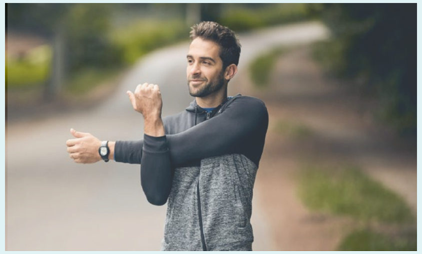
This year's themes

The cultural backdrop

An increasingly fractured society and fading north stars

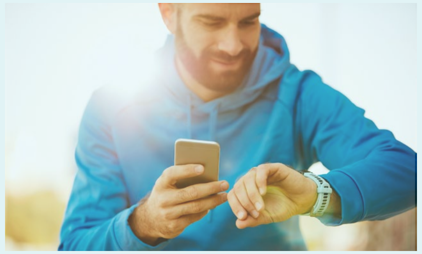
Trained to endure

Despite a challenging economic climate, we have learned how to navigate choppy waters



The rise of self care

We have fallen head first into a productivity trap but not all lessons have been lost



The battleground of human & technology

A growing desire to have authentic and honest online experiences

A new frontier for sustainability

It's time to prepare for the age of the circular economy

The cultural backdrop

An increasingly fractured society and fading north stars

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Ireland - A changing country

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AGING SOCIETY

By 2050, Ireland's population of over 65's will double to reach over 1.5 million people - with Ireland also experiencing a slower birth rate.

SHIFTING MILESTONES

People still want to reach traditional life milestones. However, they are happening later and later in life. The average age of first time mother is now 32 years.

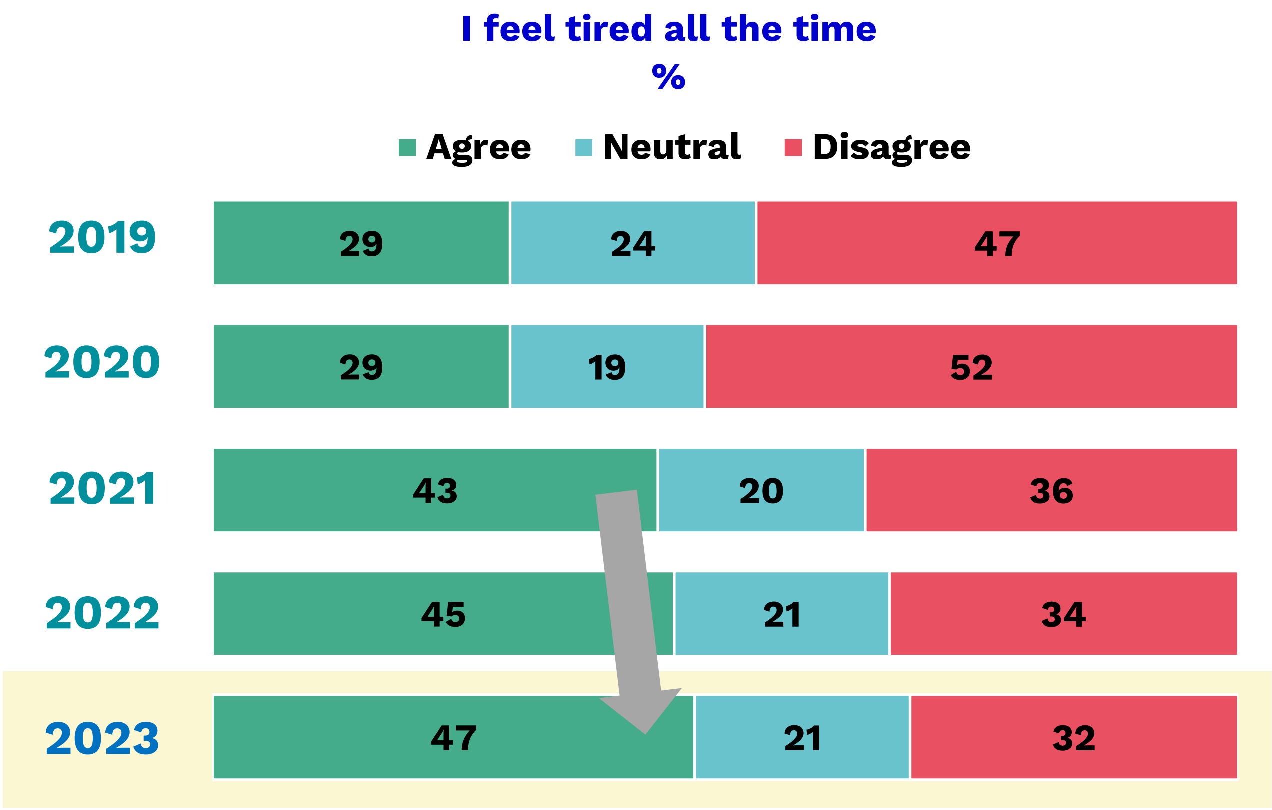
INCREASED OPENNESS & DIVERSITY

A vastly different country from the mid 90's when only 1.5% of the population (53,000) were residents born outside of Ireland, the UK or US. Nearly 70,000 arriving from Ukraine, into Ireland in 2022 alone. Dublin in particular is more diverse.

There are significant demographic changes in train. Important for brands to adjust to this new Ireland.

Post pandemic syndrome – the longer term impacts of the pandemic

Base: All adults 16+ n=1,019



The level of change and uncertainty in life has contributed towards us feeling increasingly tired as a nation over the past few years. And as life picks up pace, many are finding it challenging to come to terms with the return to the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

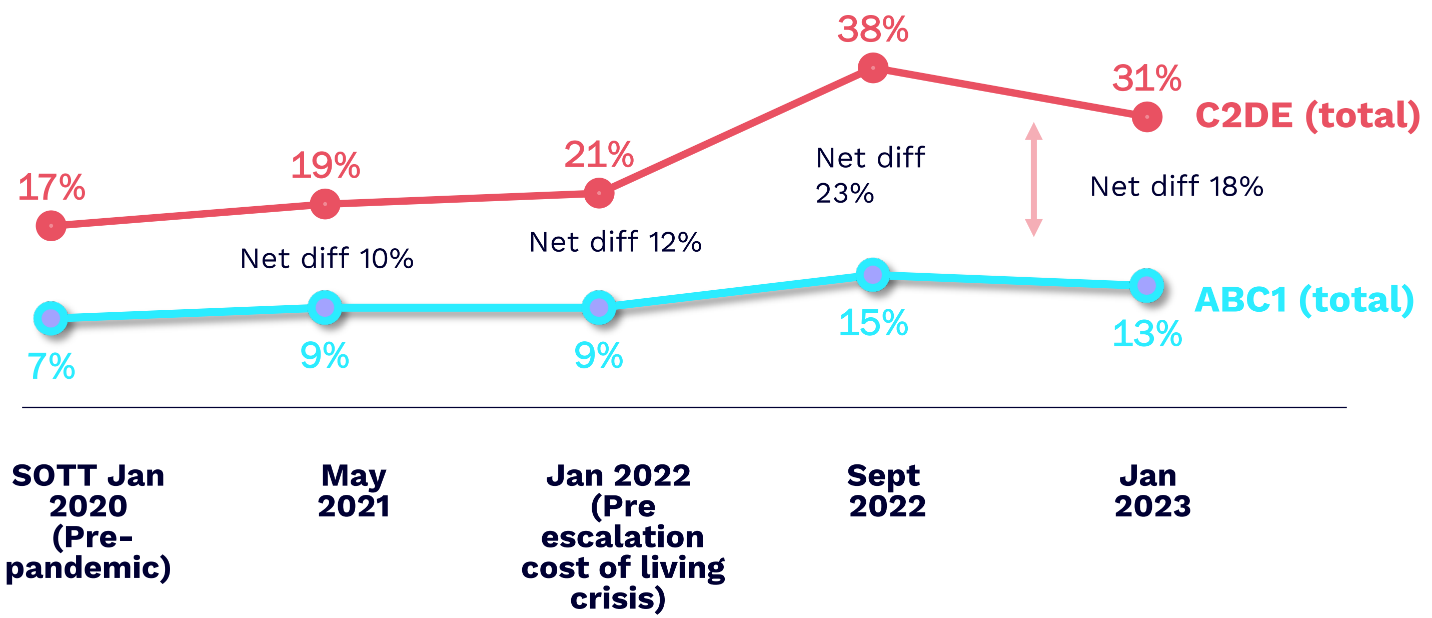
Q.13 I feel tired all of the time

The financially vulnerable are more vulnerable

Base: All adults aged 16+ - n-1005

The gap between the middle and working classes has widened significantly since the start of the cost-of-living crisis.

Struggling financially to make ends meet
%



A significant gap exists. However, there has been a reduction in the numbers of those struggling since the Autumn 2022, as consumers recalibrate their spending to deal with the increases in the cost of living.

Q.13 Which best describes your household?

With the continued growth of ‘relatable influencers’ making us increasingly positional in our worldview

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Top down influencers

RTÉ

BBC

THE IRISH TIMES

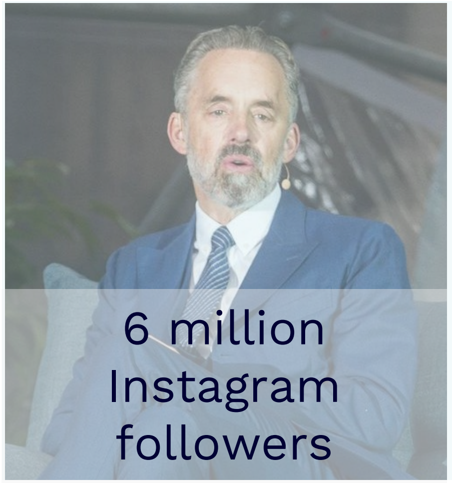
Paywall!

Irish Independent

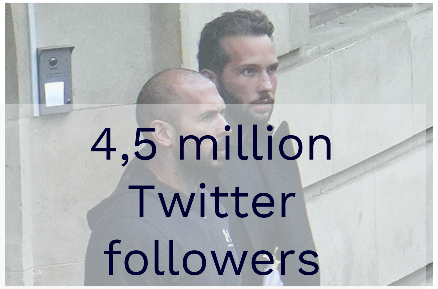
> *I just get all my news off TikTok now, that’s how I keep up with the world and what’s happening.*

57%

Influencers do more harm than good on social media



TikTok



Growth of bottom up influencers

A ‘positional’ worldview is being exacerbated by the echo chamber of social media and the growth of ‘relatable’ influencers – whose millions of followers can elevate the sense of message credibility.

Fading north stars

Brexit

The geopolitical map has taken a pounding – it's a reminder of just how quickly things can get out of control.

Only **5%** of people say Ireland should aim to be more like the UK

US

And we are finding it hard to find inspiration from any other country.

Only **4%** of people say Ireland should aim to be more like the US

There is even social unrest in Sweden

And a 'Polycrisis' upon us

A situation where multiple crises occur simultaneously, compounding and exacerbating each other.

As a country, there is a sense that we have reached a tipping point. A realisation that we need to take our future into our own hands.

There has been a seismic mindset shift in Ireland over the past decade from the times of austerity post the financial crisis…from an Ireland that was kept tightly under control and given a blueprint out of a crisis to an Ireland that got through a pandemic in one piece. There is growing realisation that we need to shape our own future, a feeling that we can't truly rely on others – and a renewed sense of confidence that we have the ability to forge our own path.

The cultural backdrop

Ireland is currently going through a process of significant societal change. We are becoming older and much more diverse. The country is also in the process of redefining its values and identity – there is growing realisation that **we need to shape our own future**.

It is important for **brands** to adjust to the new Ireland to remain relevant - **agility and responsiveness to societal trends** are important. In fact, consumers on the lookout for brands that are relevant in today's world – inclusivity and empathy are key traits consumers expect to see from brands today.

However, it is **importan**t to ensure that brands do not lose sight of their **core target markets,** their **brand essence** and **differentiation** – these remains as important as ever. Trying to be 'all things to all people' will only deliver **bland copy**.

A balancing act for brands – in which they need to be responsive to the new Ireland that is emerging, whilst ensuring that brand differentiation remains front in centre.

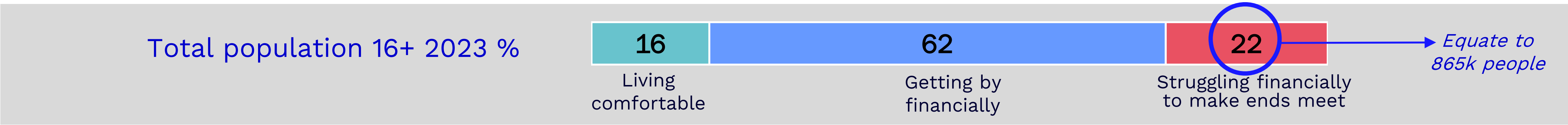
Trained to endure

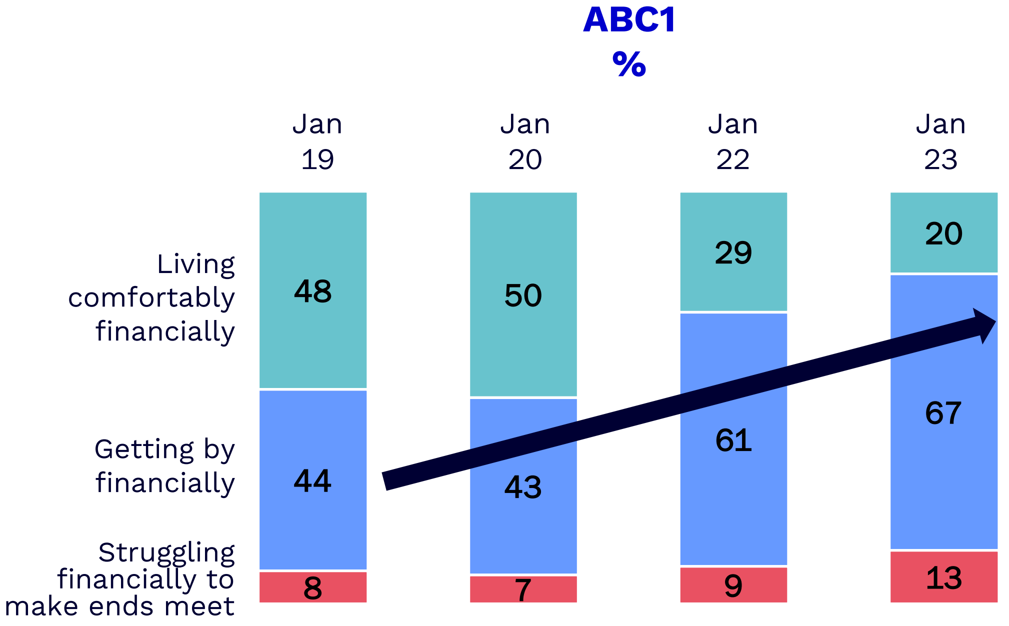
Despite a challenging economic climate, we have learned how to navigate choppy waters

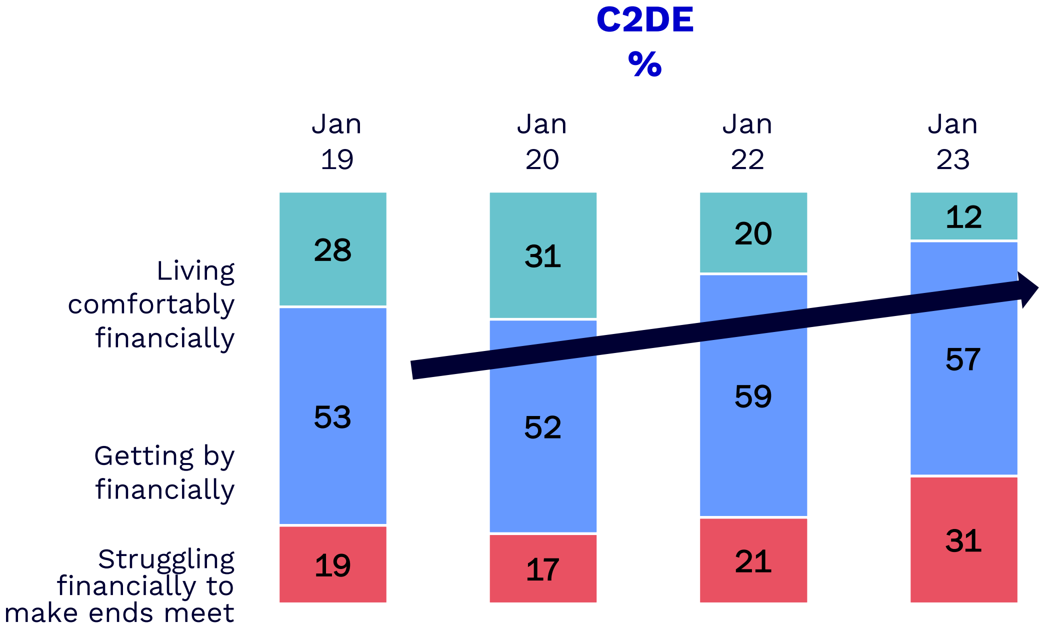
A nation feeling the pinch

Base: All adults aged 16+ - n-1005

The cumulative impact of feeling like we have less money is starting to be felt







There is a significant squeeze of discretionary income at present. Only 1 in 5 of the middle class are living comfortably compared to 1 in 2 pre-pandemic. Overall, the number of people struggling to make ends meet has nearly doubled since pre-pandemic (about 865k people).

Q.13 Which best describes your household?

A battle-hardened bunch: Most feel equipped to navigate the cost-of-living crisis, having built resilience from the last few years

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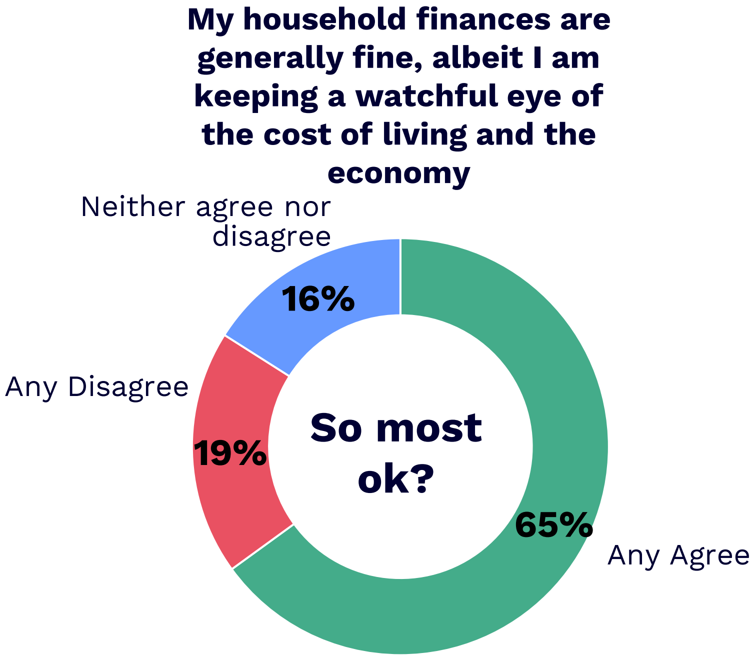
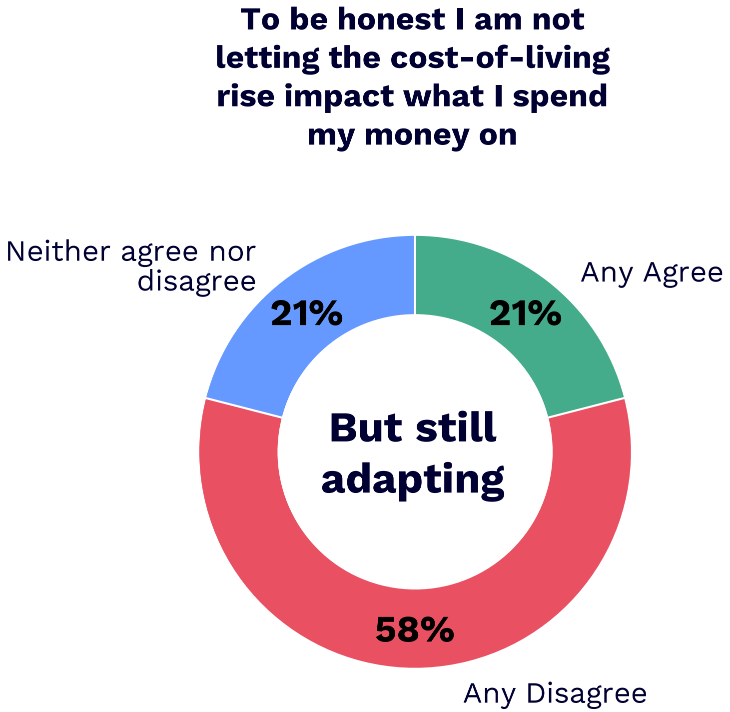
Base: All adults 16+ N = 1019

We have become 'trained to endure'

Adapting to circumstances as they arise
%





Q.4b To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following …

That being said, most are making at least some changes to their buying behaviour

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The challenges of the last few years has trained us to endure economic and social uncertainty – with consumers more able to adapt to circumstances as they arise.

Adjusting frequency

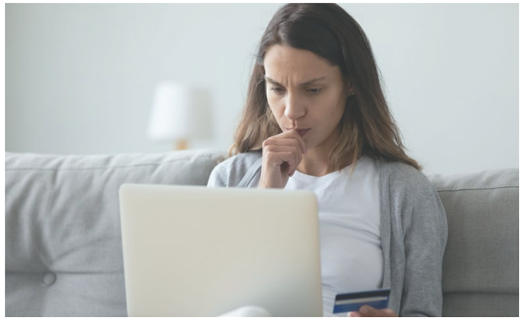
Reducing the number of times they go out per month (entertainment/socialising), reduced frequency of buying some discretionary items, reducing the number of trips in the car.

Simple swaps

'Price shock' means many are on the lookout for potential savings – 'promotional fishing' (retailers or brands – note: many find discounters are catching up on prices!)

Value stretching

Expecting more out of the products and services.
Looking for greater versatility from the products that we buy.



Pressing pause

Economic uncertainty coupled with a fear that prices have reached a peak means many are reluctant to purchase big ticket items or commit to expenses in the future (e.g. contracts, etc).

Today's consumer is savvy – making sacrifices and looking for ways to make their money go further while ensuring they still have enough to enjoy the day-to-day. Most consumers horizons have shortened, with many unwilling to commit to financial decisions too far in the future. In fact, versatility and flexibility are increasingly important.

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‘Eagle eyed’ consumers are on the lookout for any shortcuts they notice brands taking

“

A lot of brands are changing their products, they are cheapening them and making them smaller.

25-34 year old, Female

93%

Shopping around for better prices

Consumers are increasingly sensitive to price increases but also to any shortcuts brands, restaurants etc are making to their product quality or experience. Shortcuts are going to be spotted – a handle with care for brands.

Value stretching as we recalibrate our spending

At one stage we had Netflix, Amazon Prime and Disney plus, but we have reigned that in now. Netflix is all we have now and that will have to do for the entire household for the time being...it suits most of what we need anyway.

45-54 year old, Male

Consumers are trimming back, with the brands that can offer the most versatility winning. Demonstrating relevance to a variety of needs/occasions has never been as powerful.

From graduated needs to compromise decisions

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77%
buying private label products more often

76%
cutting back on non-essential journeys in their car

61%
spending less on non-essentials

Graduated needs

Some products that previously would have been classified as 'a treat' have now graduated to 'a need' as a more discerning shopper emerges.

Compromise decisions

However, consumers are now reassessing value, with many moving back 'down the ladder' in their purchasing decisions.

The cost of living crisis has been a reality check for many. Most are having to compromise on at least some areas of their consumption behaviour (private label, less trips in the car etc). Important for brands to drive home the added value they are delivering over private label as consumers are more willing to shop around.

? Q.15 Which of the following, if any, do you find yourself doing nowadays? -

Despite this, we all still have moments of carpe diem - Brands need to work hard to align with moments of release

Our self control only goes so far…

… like a muscle it gets tired! There are periodic (often unplanned) splurges of spending - felt to be a necessary antidote to a sense of perpetual good behaviour.

Moments of Carpe Diem

In addition, due to uncertainty about the future and what is around the corner there is a sense of needing to 'do it while you can'.

Most want to splurge on experiences over products

Things they can share with others and things that contribute towards their mental health and social wellbeing. The value of experience has suddenly become very tangible. Often we seek higher quality experiences to rationalise the cost.

The struggle between carpe diem and prudence is real: leading to inconsistent financial philosophies. Deviations from good behaviour are defended as important for wellbeing – keeping us human.

With convenience and ease also making a come back as life becomes increasingly hectic – but our definition of 'convenience' has expanded

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January 2023

47%

Find the pace of life hectic

January 2020 (pre pandemic)

39%

Find the pace of life hectic

Discovery and confidence

With less running around, scratch cooking increased. Previously uncharted waters in the kitchen were also navigated. Many discovered cumin and turmeric for the first time!

Convenience and ease

However, with a return to the hustle and bustle and life feeling busier than ever consumers are **looking for shortcuts** that facilitate their busy lives.

Convenience is no longer just about speed and ease for example, the growth of 'healthy convenience' has strong appeal. Convenience options now need to fold in more value than ever before.

Trained to endure

There is no doubt that as a nation we are feeling the pinch – with consumers adjusting their spending behaviour in response. As a battle-hardened bunch since the financial crisis we have become **‘trained to endure’**.

Consumers openness towards private label is increasing as they look for simple swaps - meaning brands need to work extra hard to communicate the **added value** that they are delivering at the moment. In today’s market, customers need to be able to **justify spending** more on brands.

Highlighting **product versatility** has never been as powerful. However, it is important that brands continue to target consumer segment needs, and usage occasions too.

Convenience has made a strong comeback, once again offering significant **opportunities for brands**. However, consumers are looking for more from convenience options – brands need to fold in more value than ever before.

With consumers on the lookout to make savings, it is important for brands to continually communicate on their value add. Now is not a time for going into hibernation mode, but in fact, a time to be noisy and courageous - reinforcing the value of what your brand brings to the table for consumers.

The rise of self care

We have fallen head first into a productivity trap but not all lessons have been lost

The productivity trap: Establishing a sense of control

Despite having the desire to maintain a slower pace of life post pandemic, it **just hasn't transpired that way for most.**

In the last year, we have **flocked back to activities** and busy lifestyles to **reassert a sense of control over our lives.**

And a strong desire to **make up for 'lost time'**

With parents putting themselves under tremendous pressure to ensure that their children 'catch up' on experiences that were lost during the pandemic (more activities, more classes etc).

As we try to catch up on lost time, productivity has been a key focus (consciously or not) – with many filling schedules to the max. Despite wanting to hold onto some of the benefits of a slower life experienced during the pandemic, many have fallen head first into a productivity trap on their return to day to day life.

An evolving attitude towards care - opportunity for brands to connect with consumers on a deeper emotional level

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However, despite this, not all lessons have been lost – with people now **more determined than ever to put strategies in place** to achieve balance, maintain healthy mental, physical and emotional health within the chaos of life.

As a country we are on a journey from self care being perceived as **narcissism to confidence.**

In the past, standing out from the crowd and exhibiting excessive self care was previously ridiculed in Ireland.

Traditionally we downplay personal success.

Self deprecating to suppress individualism for cohesion of the collective.

However, a new vernacular around the self is building momentum:

'Me time'.

'mental health day'.

'my wellbeing'.

“

It is important that you understand yourself and what is good and bad for you in your life… at the end of the day we are all a work in progress and all we want is to be the best versions of ourselves.

As self care becomes more front and centre, consumers are willing to have more honest conversations on topics that impact them. There is a growing acceptance of being an agent for change in your own life – with consumers having permission at a societal level to live the life that suits them best.

An example of how a brand has tapped into the increased ‘openness’

Shampoo for people going through the menopause rather than just focusing on younger women’s needs.

FMCG manufacturers focusing on lifestage rather than just focusing on a variety of discernable youth.

Acknowledging other previously more challenging areas and conditions as valid, targetable groups: men with erectile dysfunction, women in menopause, teens in puberty etc

What next: As we hear a lot more about menopause and other important lifestages expect to see more marketing that acknowledges and champions this

The rise of self care

Despite having a strong desire to maintain a slower pace of life, it just hasn't transpired that way for most.

As consumers look for **strategies to help them navigate the challenges** they face in their day-to-day, there is an opportunity for brands to connect with consumers on a deeper emotional level.

'Permission to play' in new spaces is opening up - as previously taboo topics (e.g. menopause, mental health, wellbeing) are becoming an accepted part of consumers language.

A deep understanding of customer needs is critical, with consumers seeking out solutions that aid them in their busy lives.

Brands can engage in conversation around topical issues that really matter to consumers – creating the potential for deeper and more meaningful brand relationships. However, it is crucial that any efforts are authentic, with tangible proof points of a brands commitment to aid consumers lives.

The battleground of human & technology

A growing desire to have authentic and honest online experiences

There is a feeling that we are on the cusp of a giant leap forward

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Enhanced AI chat and search

'Living' in the Metaverse

Design AI

There is a fear that this leap forwards will further blur the lines between what is real and what is not. Many are apprehensive about the impact on their jobs and their lives – fearing that not all progress is necessarily a good thing.

We are reaching a point of 'app fatigue'

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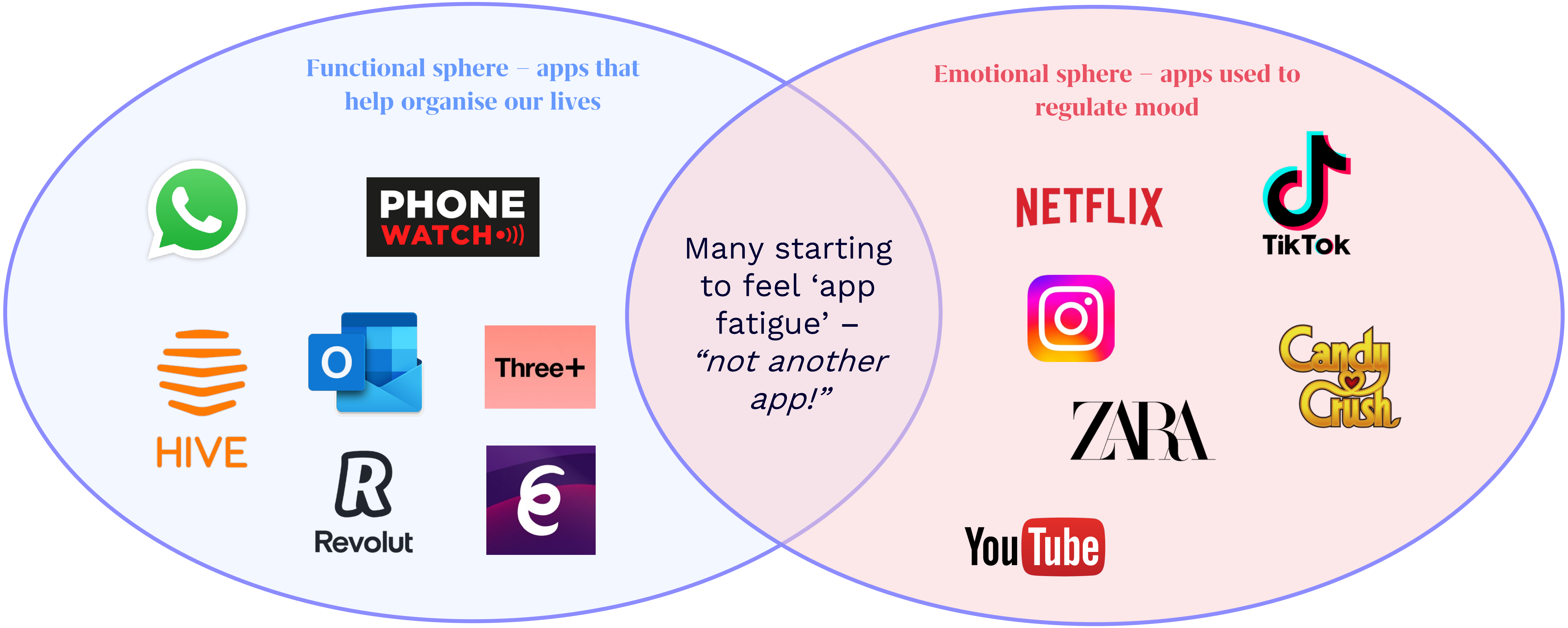

The relationship that consumers have with brands and companies is experienced more and more through mobile devices. Important for brands to consider how they can deliver a sense of their brand personality through these mediums.

That being said, most feel that they now need to adapt to technology or be left behind

Consumers increasingly notice how technology has become **embedded in a wider scope of brand and product experiences** – with some more positive experiences than others.

Making relationships with companies and brands feel **more transactional.**

This can result in lower levels of brand loyalty.

Only

24%

like the idea of using 'chatbots' when contacting service providers.

53%

agree that the move of services online has led to a more transactional relationship with organisations.

Less digitally enabled and older customers are starting to realise (and reluctantly accept) the idea that they will need to adapt to technology solutions to be able to use services in the future. However, there is a social responsibility on the part of organisations, to more vulnerable cohorts of society.

Technology is being used as a 'ritual of escape'

For many, technology has become a 'pacifier'.

Increasingly used as a 'ritual to escape' – an outlet to briefly disconnect from the stresses of the world around us when we need it (Instagram at lunchtime, TikTok scrolling in the evening etc.).

Our phones distract us – a **constant stream of dopamine** when we need it.

Our headphones signal that we are unavailable for conversation. As a society, we are losing the art of spontaneous conversation or interactions.

'Let's book a Zoom!'

Technology is impacting how and when we interact with the world around us (from how we spend our times in the evening to how we date and meet other people). With our desire for dopamine hits making our attention span is shorter than ever.

Some are experimenting with other platforms to cut through the artifice of social media, with questionable success

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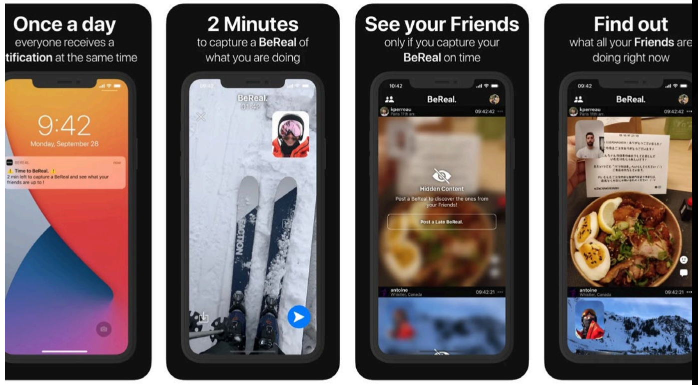
32%

of 16-24 year olds have a 'BeReal' account

However, the pressure to present a curated **'aspirational self'** frequently overrides the desire to present the reality of the true self



BeReal.

Your friends for real.

41%

of 16-24 feel that they have a different persona online compared to how they are in real life

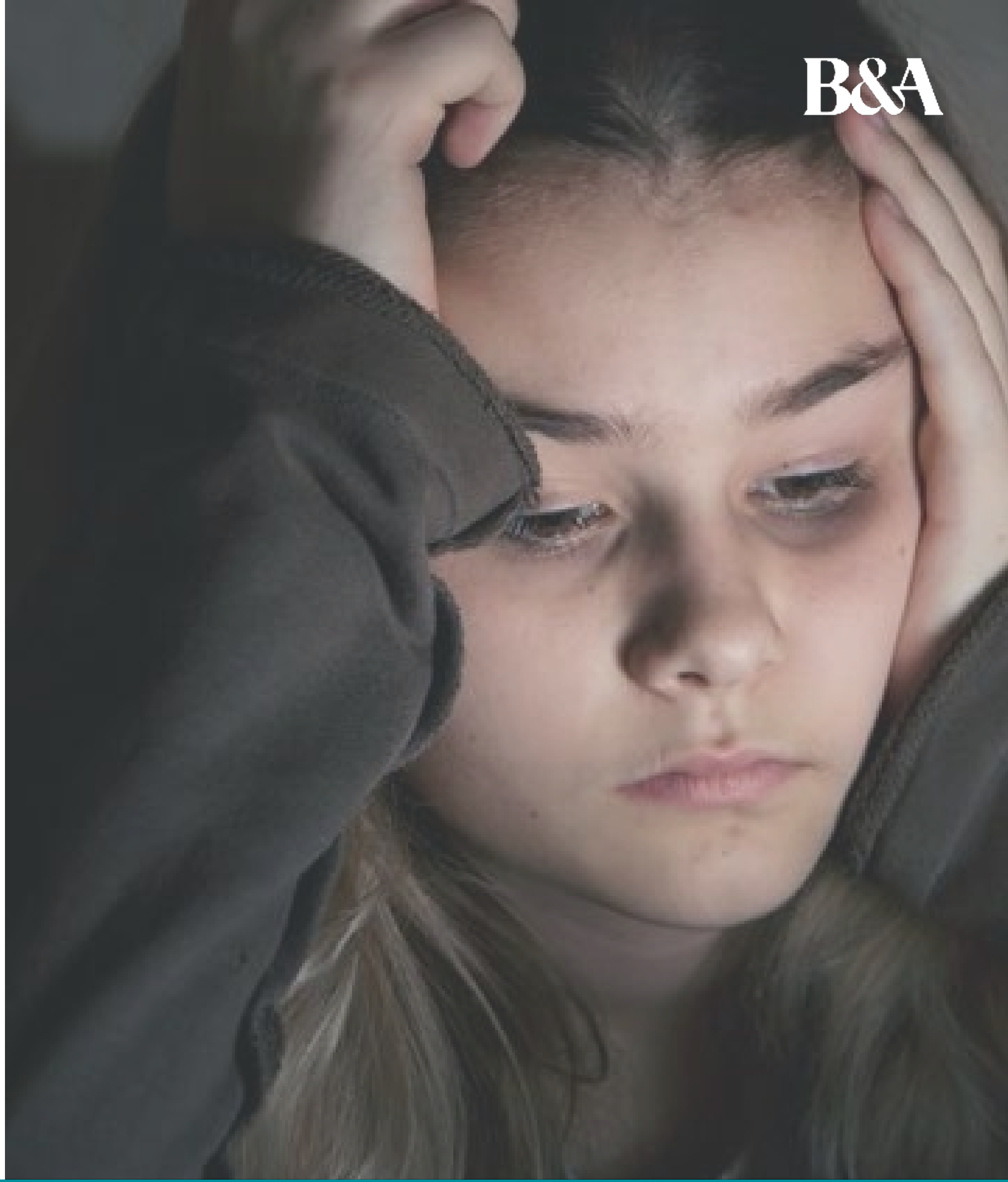
" ***I got rid of BeReal a couple of weeks ago. It's not what it is made out to be. People are still managing to post the perfect pictures"***

Many are actively trying to manage their social media consumption, in fact, nearly 2 in 3 have attempted to reduce the amount of time that they spend on social media. There is a growing desire to have authentic and honest online experiences…however, the desire to present the 'aspirational self' online can be overpowering.

Younger people seem much more negative/directionless

Stems from a number of possible factors. In contrast with older generations

- Lack of church direction and moralising.
- Lack of values growing up.
- Hectic lives.
- Addiction to tech.
- Addiction to social media.
- Everything is quick bite-sized chunks.
- Mental health issues (exacerbated by the pandemic).
- Shock of the pandemic itself (first significant shock for many).
- Tech reliance during the pandemic created a new norm
- Coincides with brands trying to take a more responsible or leadership role etc.



Where will it go: Creation of their own 'churches/ moral north stars' via online communities. May well play to Meta and VR as 'escape and idealization' required.

The battle of human and technology

There is an acceptance that the relationships with brands will be increasingly online – perhaps becoming more functional. It is important that brands ensure that they **deliver a sense of their brand personality through these mediums**. This is key for longer term **differentiation**.

Many customers who were initially reluctant to adopt online solutions are realising that it is **becoming a requirement**. However, it is important for organisations to bring customers on this tech journey and not abandon those who need a little more help – **the rate of change can feel overwhelming for some.**

Despite many making an effort to cut back on their usage of technology and using alternative platforms that promise more authentic online experiences – the lure of presenting the 'aspirational self' tends to be too strong for most.

Consumers are showing an interest in authentic experiences online – with more and more seeing past the deception of what they see from brands on social media in particular. Brands that can present an honest representation of themselves online resonate strongly (i.e. brands just can't jump on the bandwagon with TikTok, it needs to be done with 'brand fit' in mind).

A new frontier for sustainability

It’s time to prepare for the age of the circular economy

As we get closer to 2030, the gap between where we are and the governments targets feels wider and wider apart

Where we are

We are developing
an ethical mindset

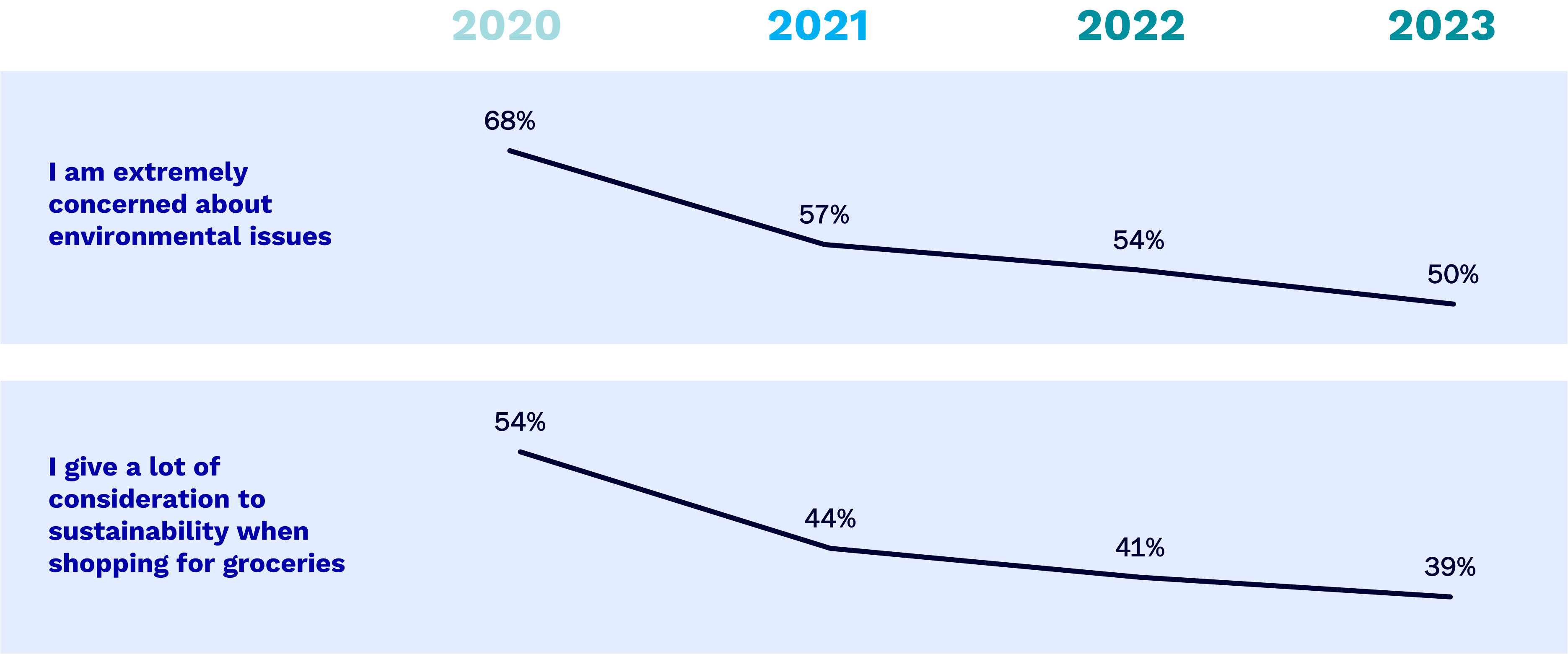
2030 targets

But we feel a long way off

Currently, there is a large disconnect between where we feel we are as a country and where we feel the government wants us to get to. Many expecting a shift from being ‘asked’ to be more sustainable to being ‘told’ to make more and more compromises in the coming years (a move from a ‘carrot’ to a ‘stick’ approach).

Environmental guilt continues to lift as other ‘more pressing’ concerns come into play

Base: All adults 16+ n = 1,019



A ‘finite capacity for worry’

Plus, it’s not ***all*** *about young people.*

During the pandemic, durability and longevity of products came sharply into focus, with cost now a core consideration for consumers at present. Despite the somewhat despondent attitude that many have, brands are applauded for credible sustainability efforts. But authenticity is critical, with consumers alert to spot insincere ‘greenwashing’.

Despite this, shifts are evident in our attitudes to food

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Classifying as a vegetarian
%

January 2023

10%

I would classify myself as a vegetarian

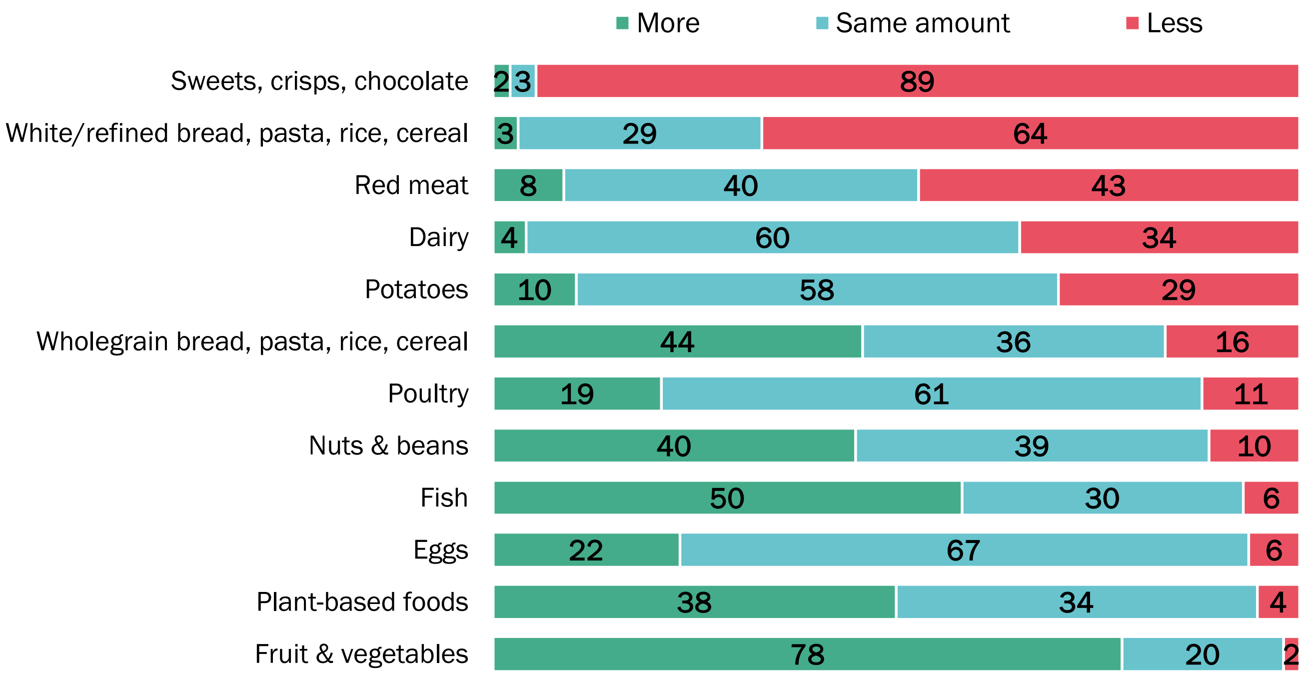
January 2020 (pre pandemic)

6%

I would classify myself as a vegetarian

Base: All adults 16+ N = 1019

Please state whether you plan to eat more, less or the same amount (new year resolution)
%



Base: Grocery shoppers resolved to eat healthier/ lose weight n - 191

There has been a sharp rise in those stating that they are vegetarian (especially younger), with an increasing number also aspiring to incorporate more plant-based foods in their diets. Brands need to evolve with changing consumer demand.

?

Q.4b Agreement Level ...I would classify myself as a vegetarian.

Q3. For each of the following types of food, please state whether you plan to eat more, less or the same amount.

And there are emerging shifts in our attitudes towards ownership

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Ownership is an important aspect of Irish culture - dating back to the country's colonial past.

In addition, as an emerging economy, in Ireland we tend to elevate buying new over adopting old – as a way of signalling generational progress and a way of reflecting a sense of security, stability, and social status.

However, there are some signs of change, but we need to support by making it the smarter, and perhaps savvier choice (like our parents!)

Core to the circular economy is the concept of the sharing and reuse of assets, space and products.

With some consumers starting to adopt new economic models of trade.

57%

of people say that they are considering buying items second hand more often nowadays

Facebook Marketplace

depop

Too Good To Go

GO CAR

Overcoming our default to buy new is a key step on the journey towards engaging with more sustainable economic models.

A new frontier for sustainability

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Brands need to start thinking about developing solutions that **incorporate sustainability at their core** – there will be great future rewards for brands who take the first steps with new economic models of sustainability.

Many consumers feel like their individual efforts can be futile – overridden by bigger players who are causing more damage. As such, brands that enable customers to **feel involved in something bigger can be highly motivating** – and can communicate a brand's desire to make an authentic effort in the sustainability space.

It is a matter of when and not if the 'circular economy' becomes a more prominent part of our lives – important for brands to start thinking now of how they can integrate it into their product and service offerings.

Parting thoughts

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Some thoughts for brands and organisations

Diversity, in particular in Dublin, presents challenges from a media, product and marketing perspective.

However, our advertising must still hit a bullseye – danger in trying to appeal to everyone = bland copy!

Yet, there are huge opportunities as Irish society becomes more diverse and inclusive.

And brands have 'permission-to-play' in new spaces that are opening up.

Taking note of the changing demographic profile of where you do business is important.

Staying true to your brand essence is critical – don't be distracted.

Consumers are human beings - never lose sight of human psychology

1) Self control only goes so far

2) We need release

3) Experiences are in vogue.

Definition of 'convenience' has expanded – more value needs to be folded in than ever before.

However, brands need to be careful that a discernable gap in pricing doesn't open up as this will impact purchase frequency.

Understanding how consumers reassess value and 'ladder down/up' by category is key.

Important to understand where your brand fits within consumers wider decision making.

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B&A

Some thoughts for brands and organisations

Communicating your value add is of vital importance with the growth of private label.

You need to be noisy and courageous - this is not a time for hibernation.

There is an acceptance that relationships with brands in the future will be increasingly online. However, it is important not to abandon those who need a little more help – the rate of tech change can feel overwhelming for some.

Important for brands to not become overly functional – there is a need to develop personality via digital. Consumers need to *feel* your brand.

Authenticity in ‘sustainability’ positioning is important – it needs to be credible. We have a smarter, savvier population than ever before. Consider this before we put out bland creative or attempting to fool with ‘greenwashing’.

Finally, be wary about social media commentary – it’s not always representative of the entire population.

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How these themes can inform strategy

Each choice, each price point and each cost of living trade-off is increasingly a more considered act. How can your brand best articulate its value in an increasingly *system 2* thought space?

Invoking emotionally led brand love will be ever more critical as a differentiator.

As a nation we are shining more and more light on historically taboo spaces. We are living with the long tail of pandemic trauma. How can your brand rise up to support the recovery of the nation?

The digital space is just one touchpoint amongst many, but it is church of both reward and guilt for consumers and so hard to navigate. How can your brand meet consumers in the digital space in a way that is clear, authentic and at the same time emotionally compelling?

The notion of collective effort in sustainable living is struggling for air. How can brands re-engage and re-invigorate consumers efforts? Leading people to feel responsible, motivated, better about themselves and your brand?

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Thank You

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