Walk, Lounge, Sweat: How the Generations Are Redefining Activewear

SEPTEMBER 2025

Executive summary: Activewear growth is slowing as market pressures rise and generational shifts redefine demand

Activewear is at an inflection point

Category growth is flattening as closets saturate

- After years of strong growth, activewear sales are projected to slow to ~3–5% CAGR through 2029
- Wardrobe penetration is high, with consumers already owning multiple activewear pieces across occasions

Competitive pressure is eroding returns

- The top 15 brands have collectively lost share as challenger labels capture consumer attention
- Market valuations and margins are under additional strain from tariffs and global uncertainty

Generational shifts are redefining expectations

- Gen Z sees activewear as a tool of self-expression, blending comfort with trend-led style
- Millennials view activewear as a marker of identity and belonging, with a focus on wellness and longevity at the core
- Gen X *and Boomers* emphasize durability, quality, and comfort for lower-intensity lifestyles

Consumer journeys are becoming more complex and digital-first

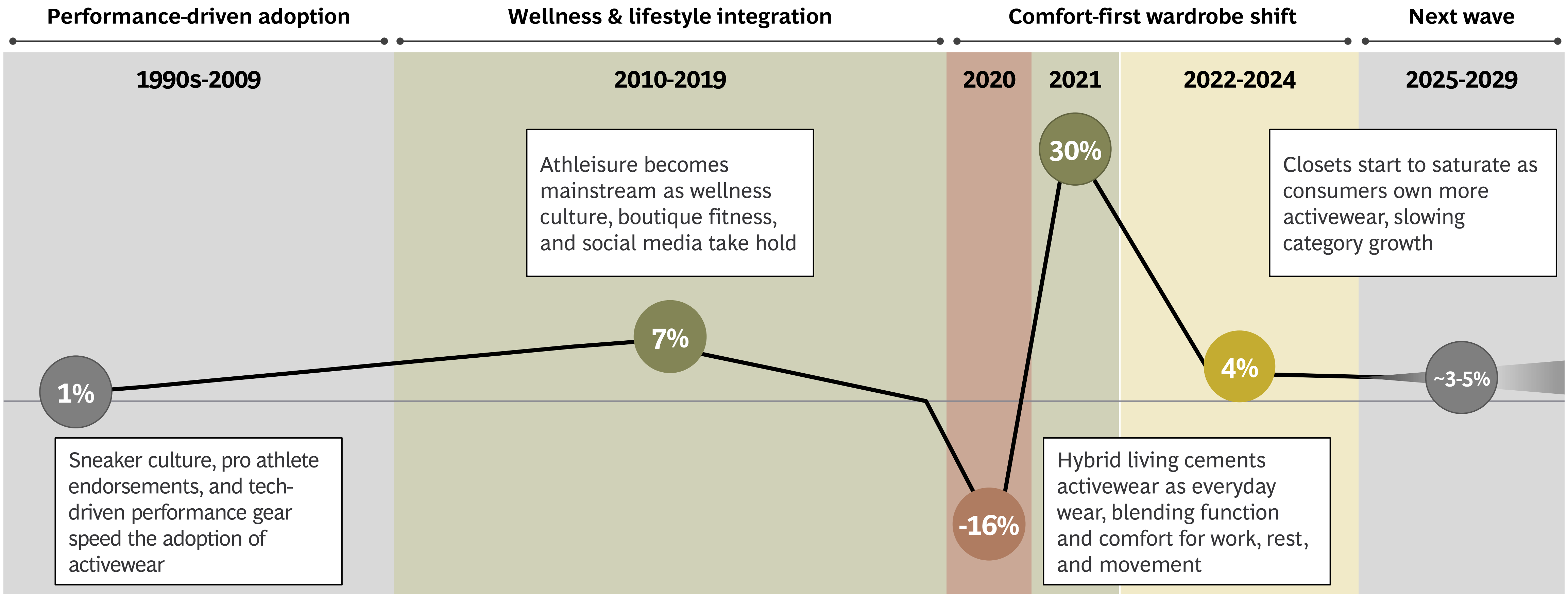
- Over 50% of purchases now start online, with discovery and research fragmented across multiple channels
- GenAI and social commerce are emerging as disruptive forces in how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase

The era of effortless growth is over

- Brands will need sharper differentiation, stronger consumer relevance, and greater agility to sustain momentum

After three waves of rapid growth, demand is leveling off as consumer wardrobes become saturated with activewear

Activewear sales CAGR evolution



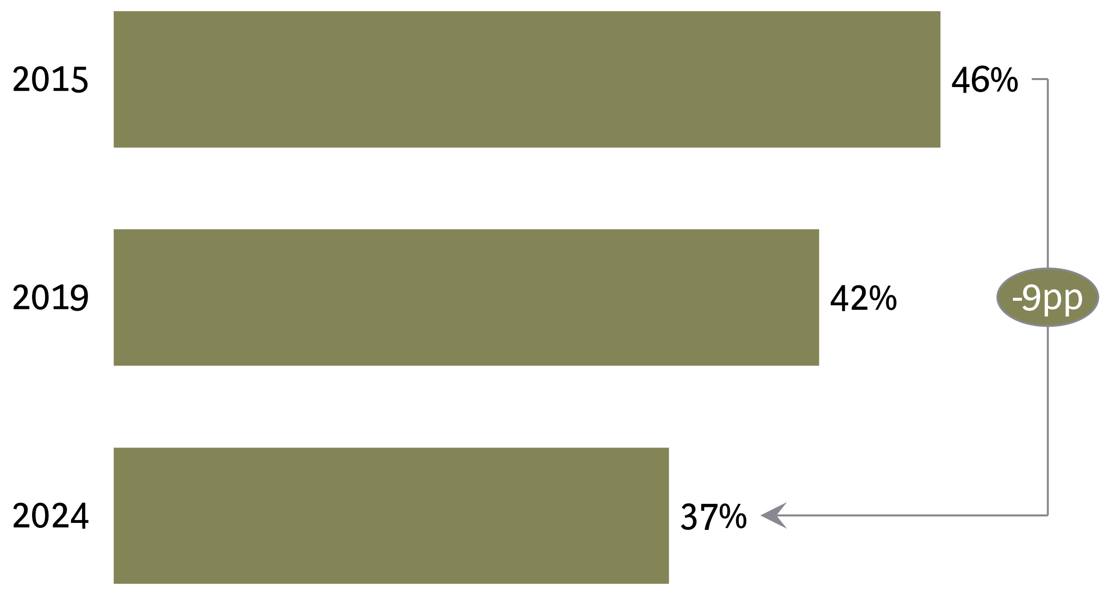
Source: Euromonitor; Statista; S&P Global; US Census Bureau; BCG Analysis
Note: Current prices, Fixed 2024 ex rate–Compound Annual Growth Rate of Sales Data for Activewear (active apparel and active footwear)

Rising competition from challenger brands is intensifying pressure in the activewear market

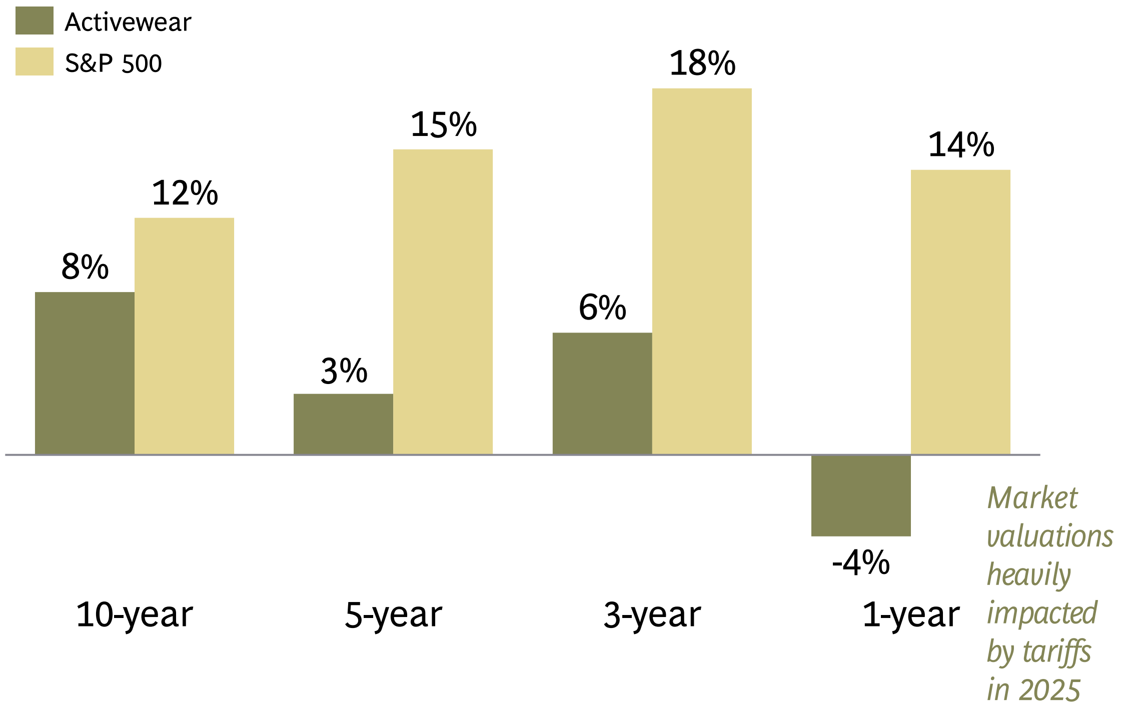
Top 15 brand market share has steadily declined as challenger brands have entered the market …

… and, despite a surge post-COVID, top activewear brands have had declining shareholder return

Top 15 activewear brands, U.S.
Value market share over past 10 years



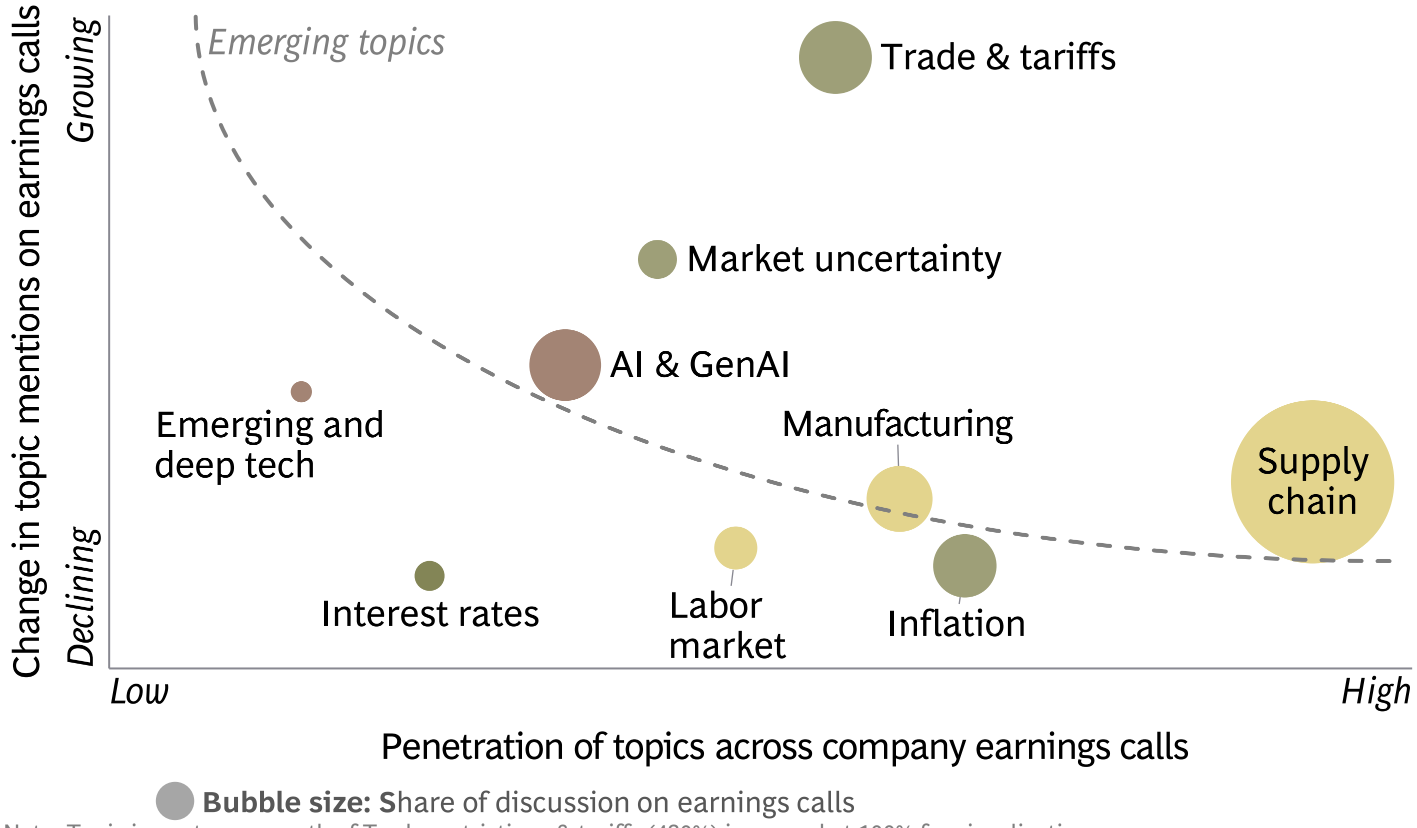
Average shareholder return
Top publicly traded athleticwear brands



Source: BCG ValueScience Center; S&P 500 publicly reported earnings data; Euromonitor; BCG analysis

Winning is harder as operational challenges raise the stakes

Key themes discussed on quarterly earnings calls

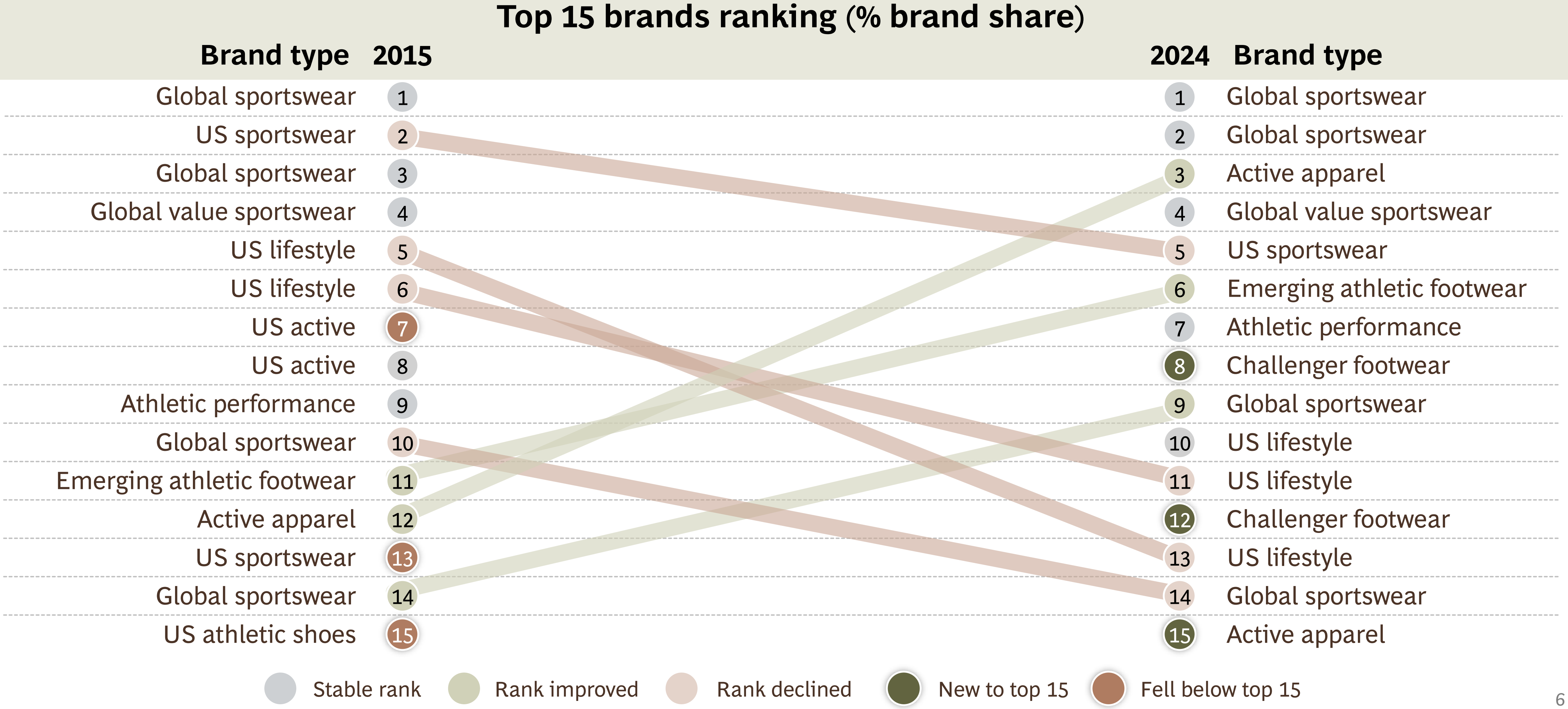


Note: Topic importance growth of Trade restrictions & tariffs (480%) is capped at 100% for visualization
Semantic analysis based on transcripts of investor events (earnings calls, analyst calls, etc.) of fashion and luxury companies held since 2024
Source: LSEG Refinitiv; Market Sensing by BCG; BCG analysis

Key themes

- **AI and GenAI**
  Rapid advances require operational shifts and continuous investments in new capabilities
- **Supply chain and manufacturing**
  Long design cycles clash with faster fashion dynamics, stretching operations and complicating lead times
- **Geopolitics and economic environment**
  Tariffs and global uncertainty disrupt planning, create cost volatility, and force tough strategic trade-offs

Established brands have lost share as the market has become more fragmented and new challengers have captured share

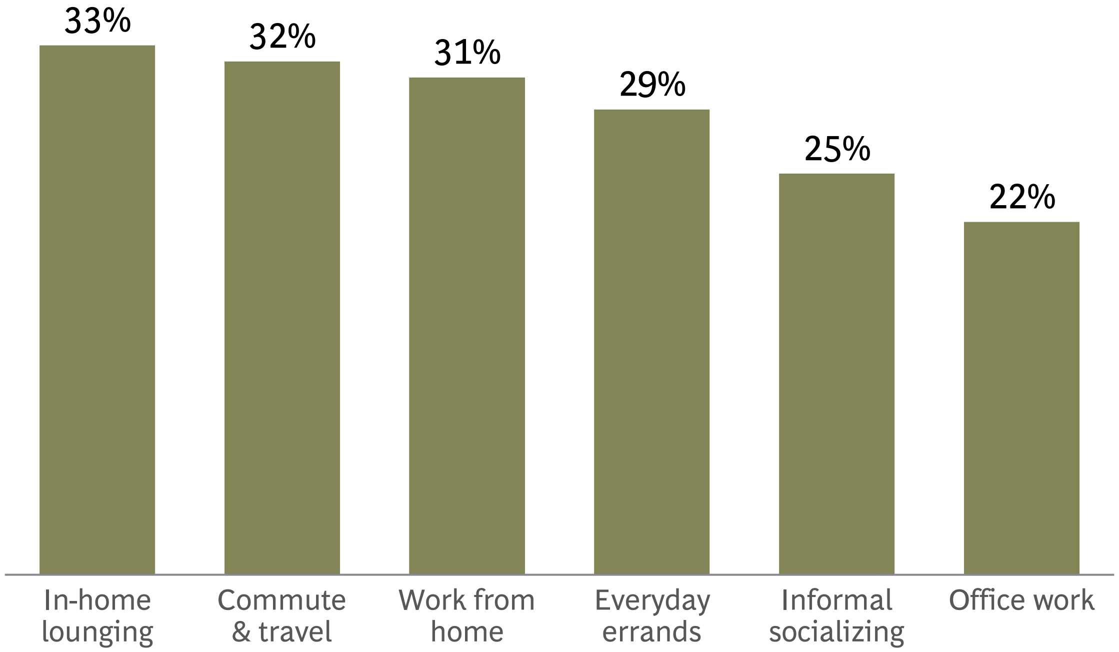


Source: Euromonitor

Different strokes for different folks: Generational expectations vary widely

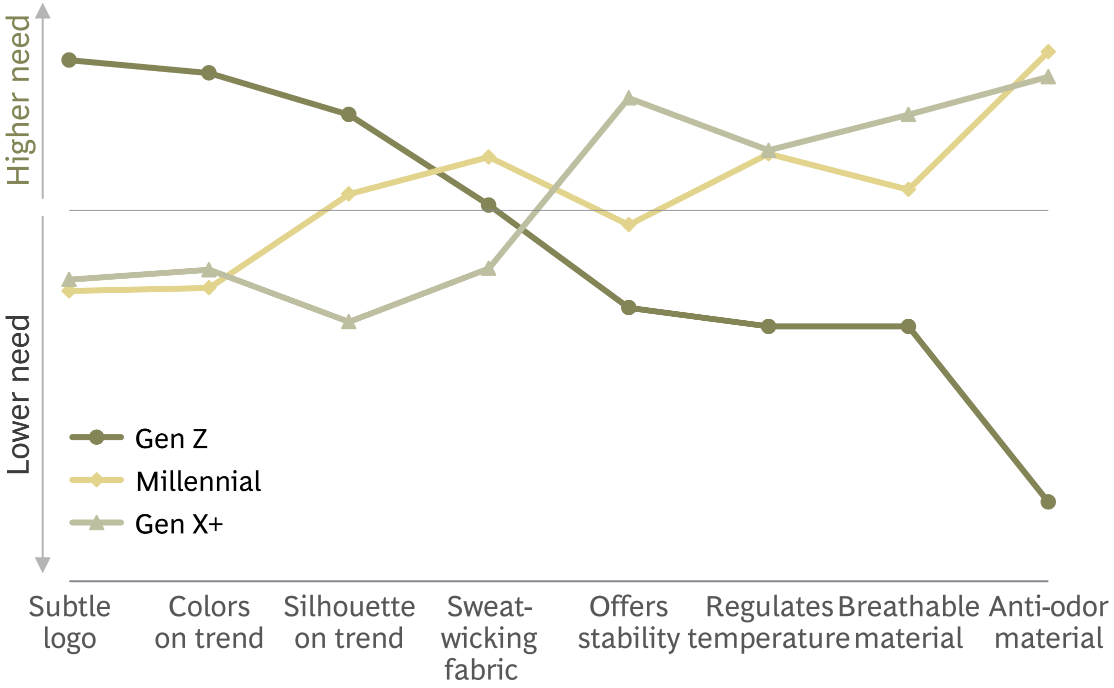
Consumers wear activewear across a range of activities

% of time wearing activewear within non-exercise occasions



But generational differences reveal different priorities

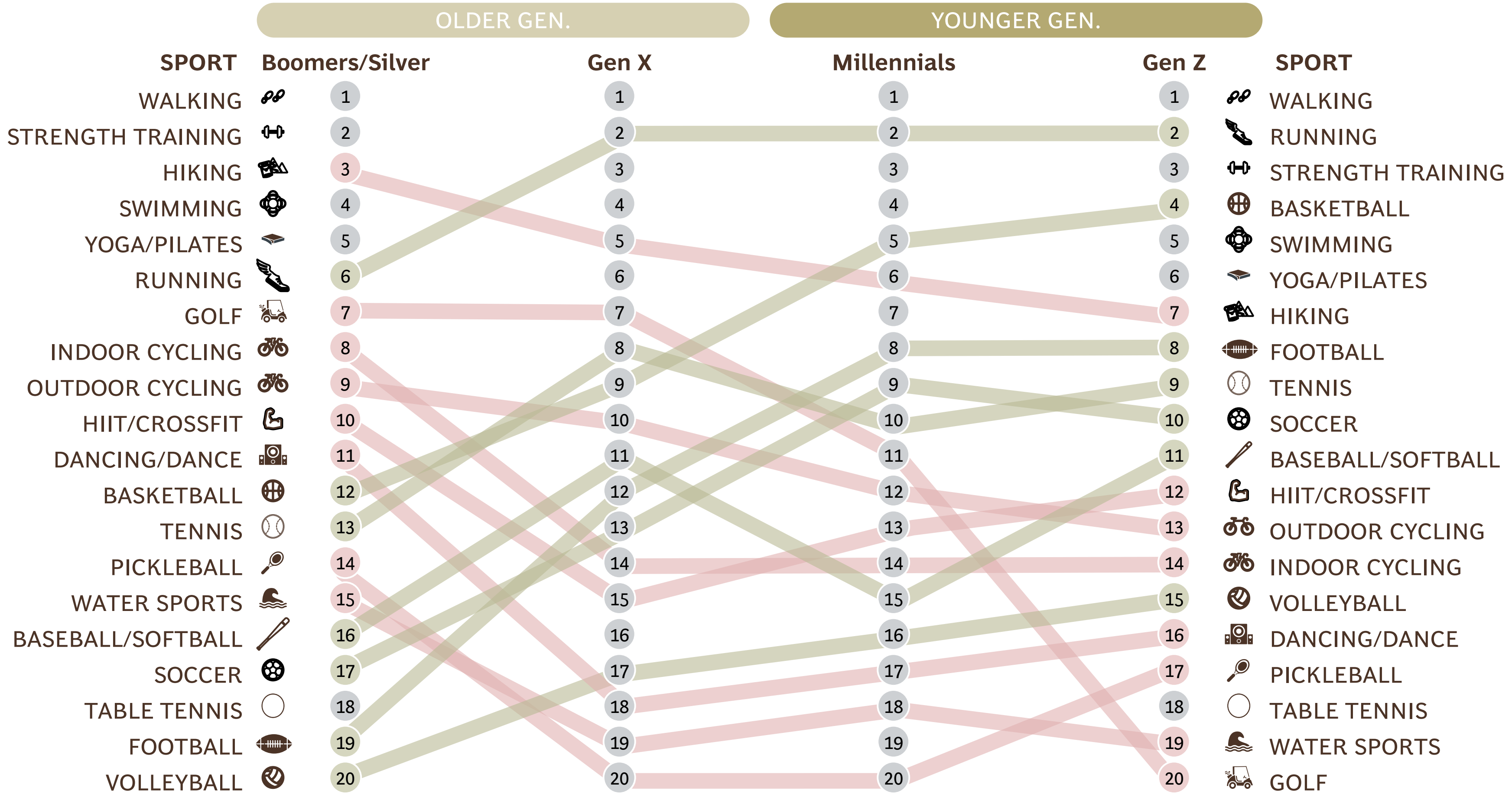
Relative importance of each product feature by generation



Note: Occasions were grouped as follows: Exercise (Exercise), Everyday errands (Errands, gardening, housework, studying at school, volunteering/community service), In-home lounging (Lounge & leisure, sleep, studying at home), Commute & travel (Travel, vacation), Informal socializing (Informal social occasions), Work from home (Working at home), Office work (Professional events, working in office), and Formal/elevated socializing (Formal social occasions); Q79. Approximately how often did you wear Activewear for the following occasions in the last 12 months? Please provide your estimate as a % of the total time you spent wearing Activewear for this occasion vs. wearing other clothing for this occasion. Q93. How important are each of the following attributes in deciding to purchase focus_category from last_trip_brand?
Source: BCG Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); Active Apparel Consumers N = 899

Generational preferences are shaped by underlying patterns in how different age groups engage in activities

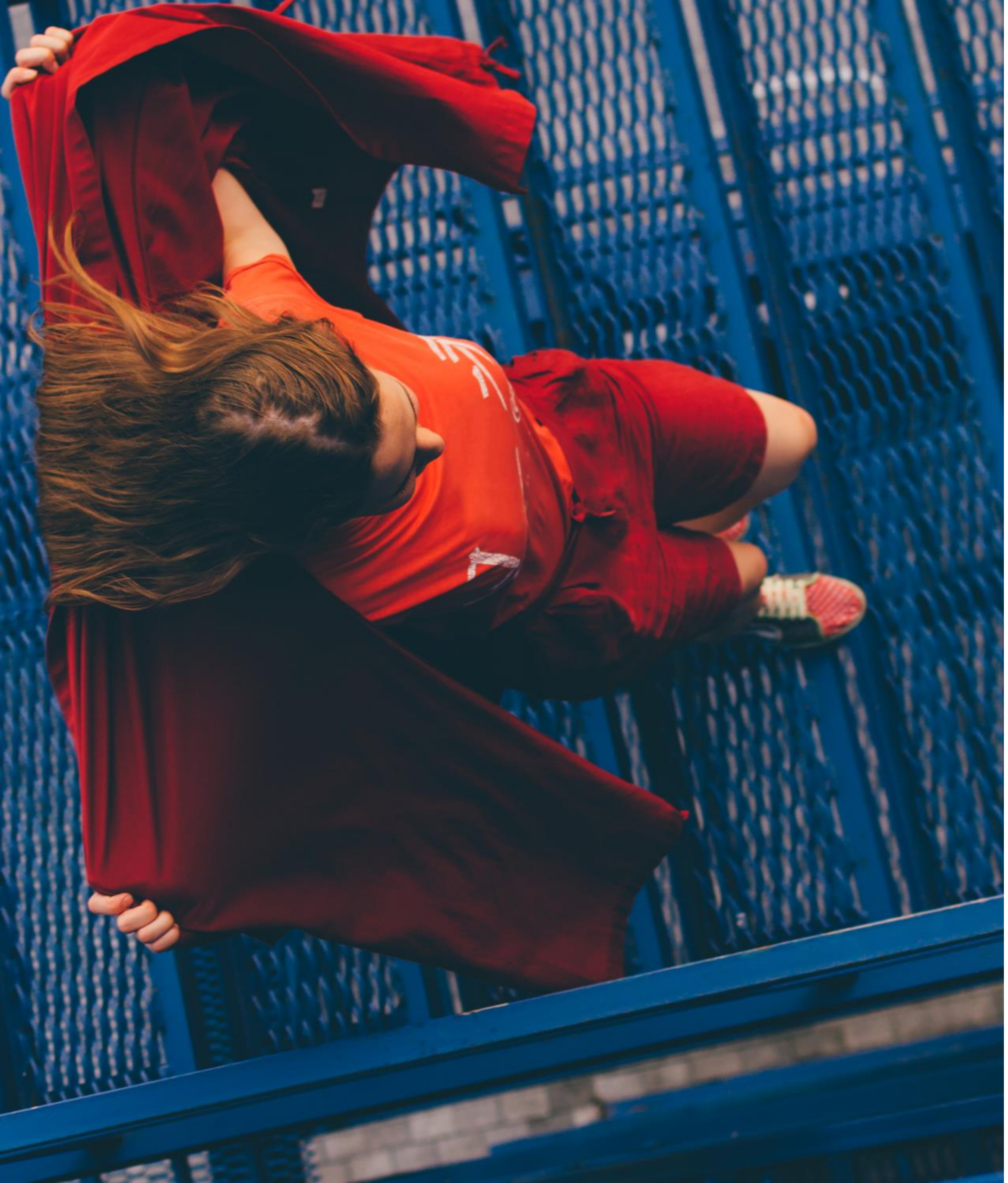
Relative rank of average top 20 sports by age group (based on % participation)



Older generations favor **individual sports that aid in their overall wellness goals**

Younger generations lean toward **team-oriented and high intensity activities**

Q42. You shared that you have spent some of your time on exercise, which of the following types of exercise did you participate in within the last 12 months? Select all that apply.
Source: BCG Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025)



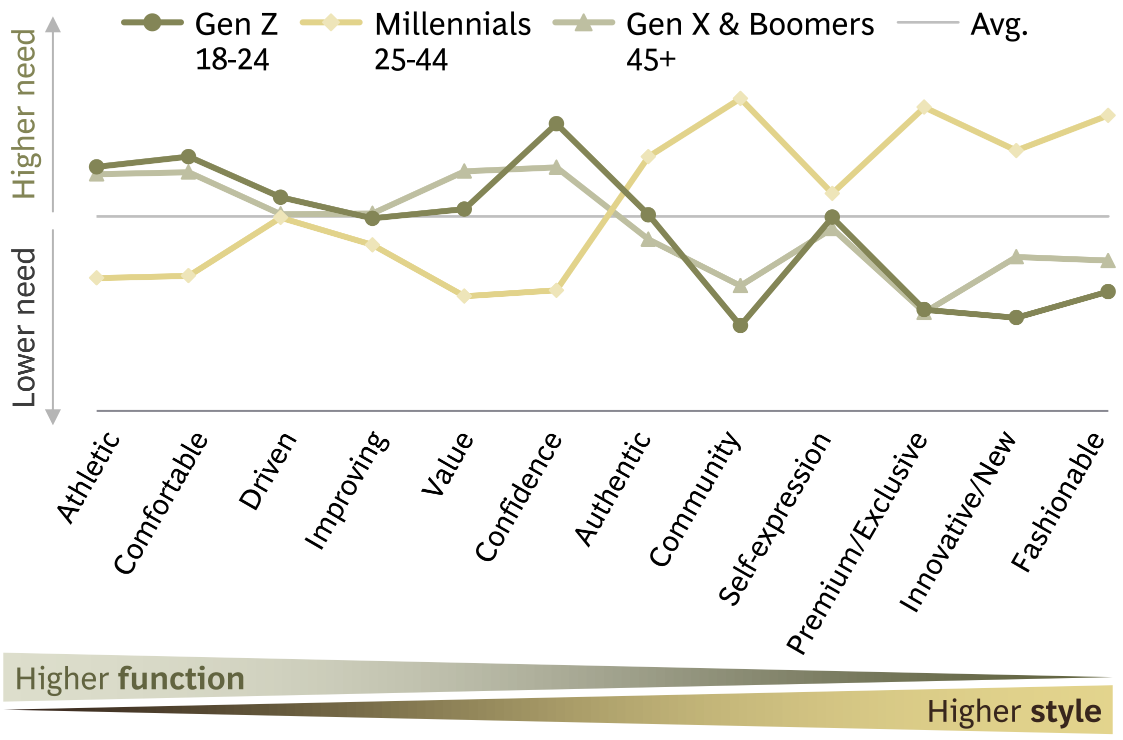
Gen Z: The Trend-Setting Generation

A tale of two Gen Zs: Emotionally confident in apparel, culturally cool in footwear

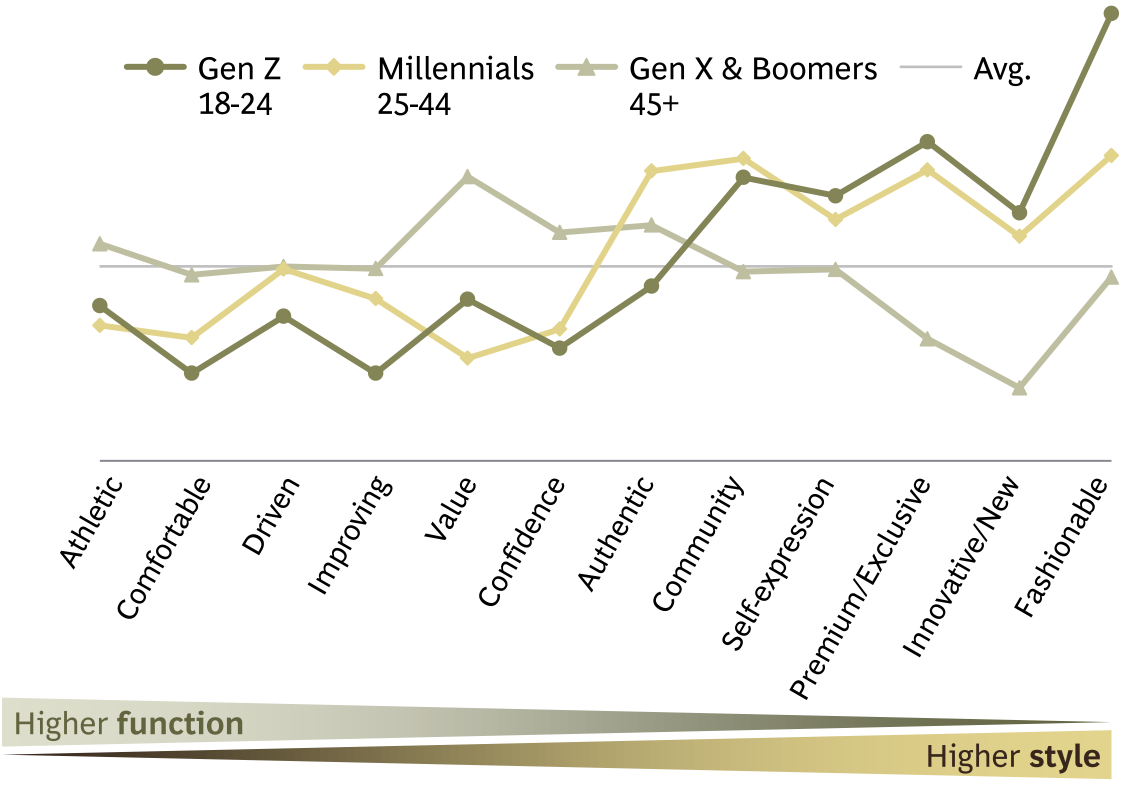
In apparel, Gen Z prioritizes traditional needs like feeling comfortable, athletic, and confident

In footwear, they want to be fashionable because exclusivity and community matter to them

Emotional needs for **active apparel**



Emotional needs for **active footwear**

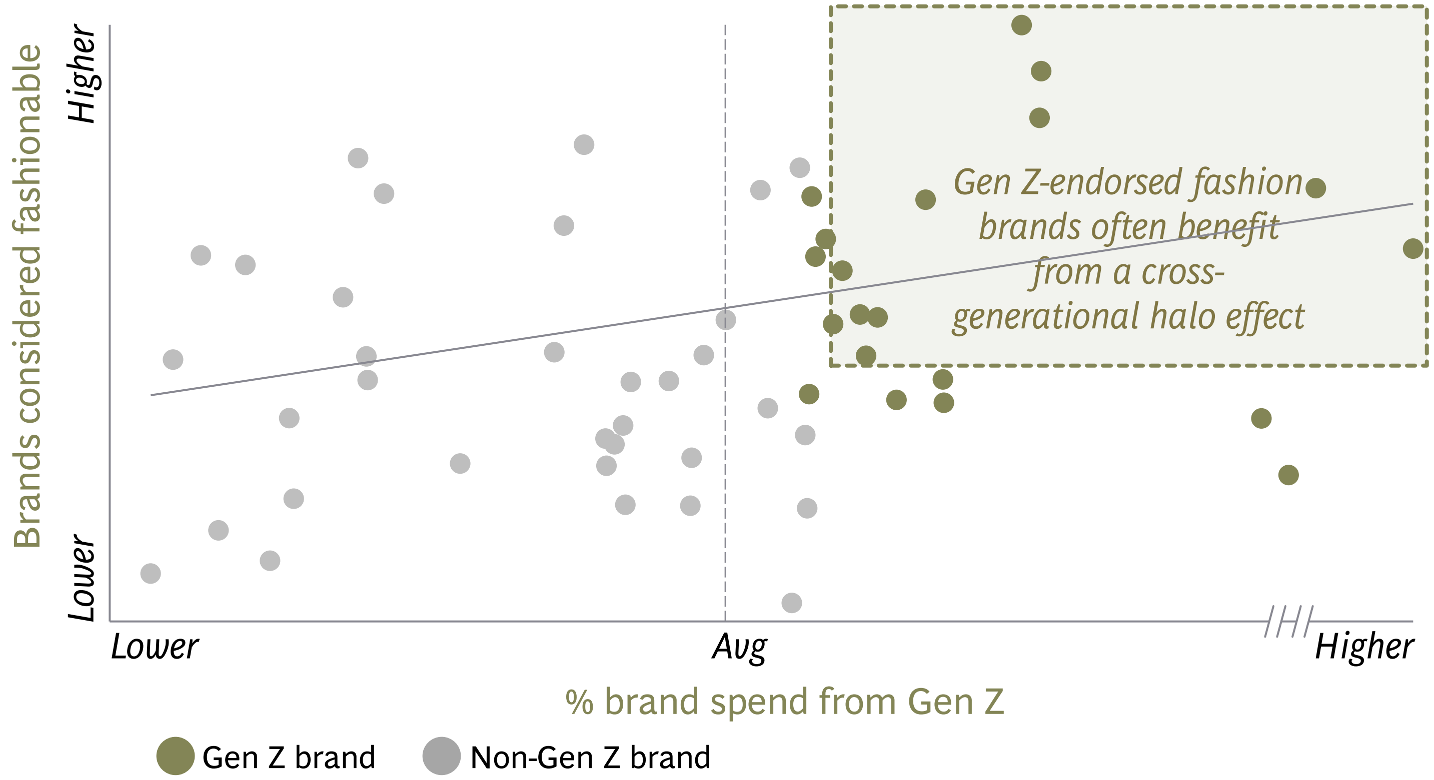


Note: 'Higher' and 'Lower' needs indexed off average score for each need; Q95. Which of the following statements describe what was most important for you to feel when deciding to purchase focus_category from last_trip_brand?
Source: BCG Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); Active Apparel Consumers N = 899; Active Footwear Consumers N = 1107

Gen Z sets the trend for other generations in activewear

Gen Z brands are highly considered fashionable …

Brands considered fashionable vs % of brand spend from Gen Z



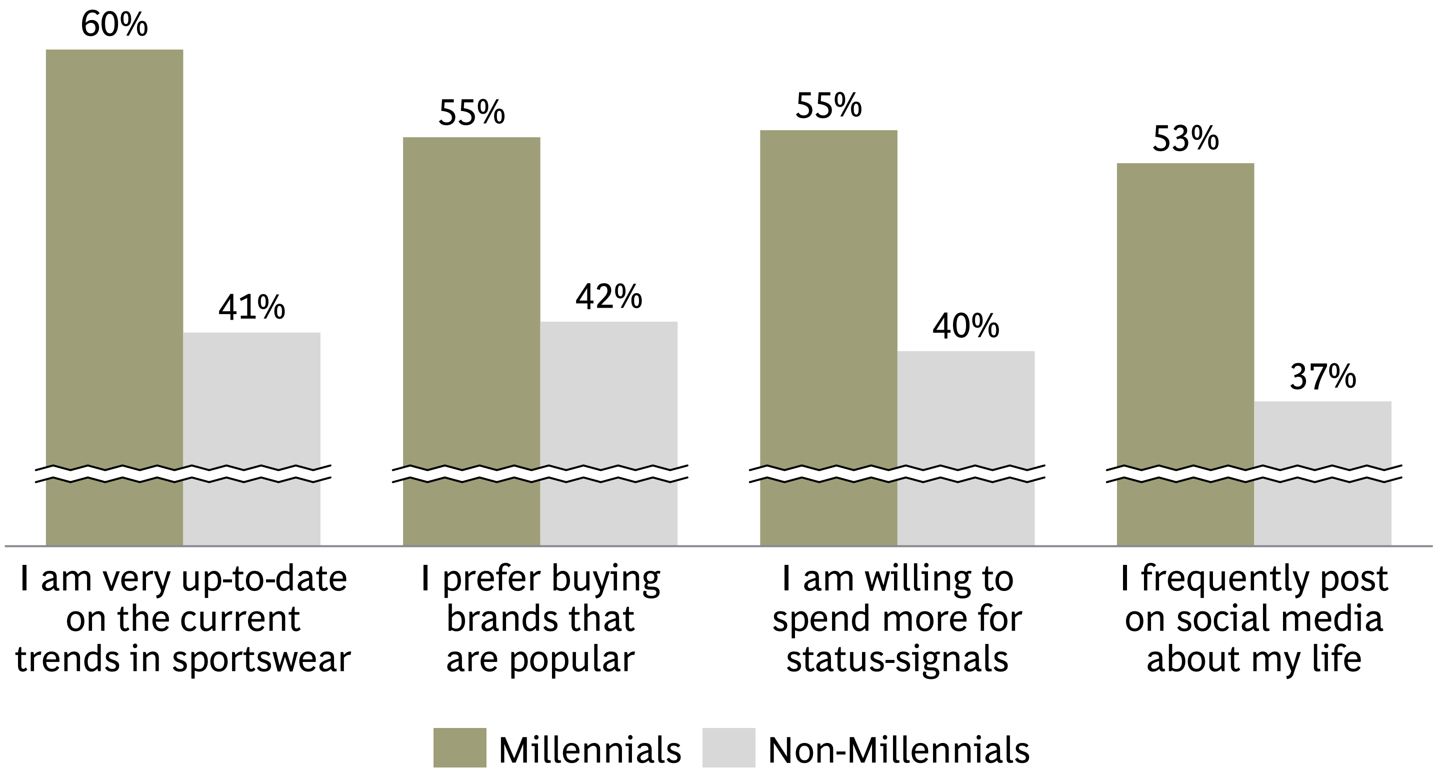
Q98 & 99. Which focus_category brands do you associate with the following statements?
Source: Vogue Business; Business of Fashion; British Vogue; BCG Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); Activewear Consumers N = 2652

… setting the trend for older generations

Millennials: From community to longevity

Millennials want a sense of belonging and identity

Share of population that agreed with the following statements



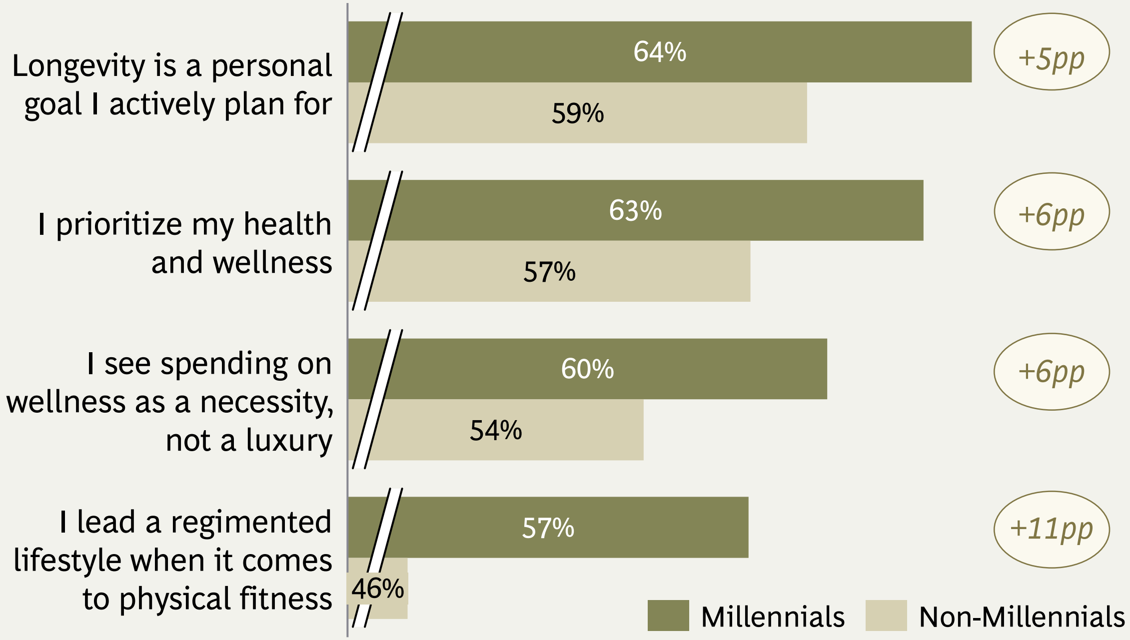
For Millennials, activewear is an outward sign of identity, values, and desire to be part of a like-minded, lifestyle-driven community

Q127. Now we would like to understand a little bit more about who you are. You will see a list of statements. Which of the following statements do you agree with, on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree
Source: BCG Activewear Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025)

Millennials are also turning inward, focusing on wellness and longevity

Millennials are adopting a proactive approach to health…

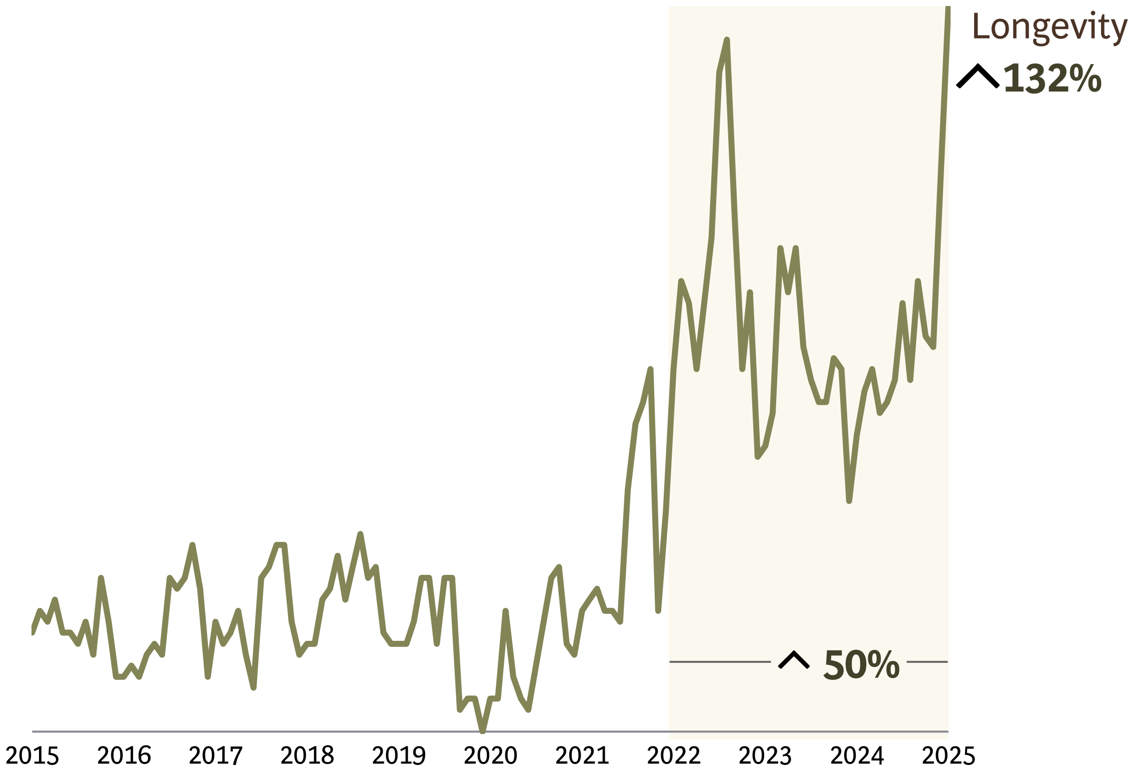
Share of Millennials that agree with the following statements



Millennials beginning their 30s exhibit the strongest wellness mindset

They also have a growing interest in longevity

"Longevity" has surged as a search term on Google

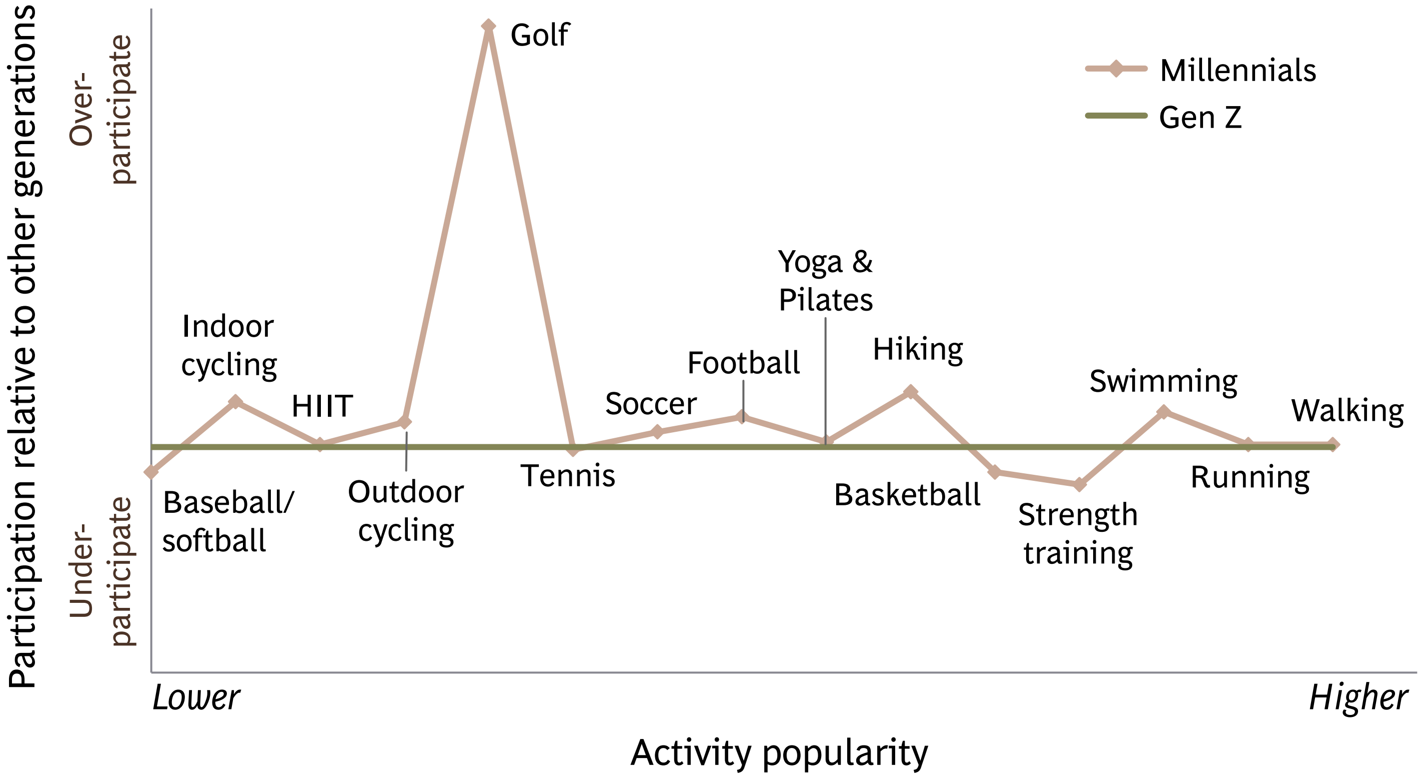


Q127. Now we would like to understand a little bit more about who you are. You will see a list of statements. Which of the following statements do you agree with, on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree?
Source: Google Trends, BCG Activewear Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); BCG Analysis

Millennials pursue a wide range of activities to support their wellness goals

Millennials have high participation across activities compared to other gens

Millennials' relative participation within activities compared to Gen Z



1. Includes walking for exercise as an activity 2. Activity participation over 12-month period
Q18. Pick the statement that best describes the frequency of your exercise; Q41. When shopping for each occasion below, please select which option is most relevant to you; Q42. You shared that you have spent some of your time on exercise, which of the following types of exercise did you participate in within the last 12 months?
Source: BCG Activewear Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); BCG Analysis

39%

Are looking for performance products

56%

Exercise 4+ times per week[1]

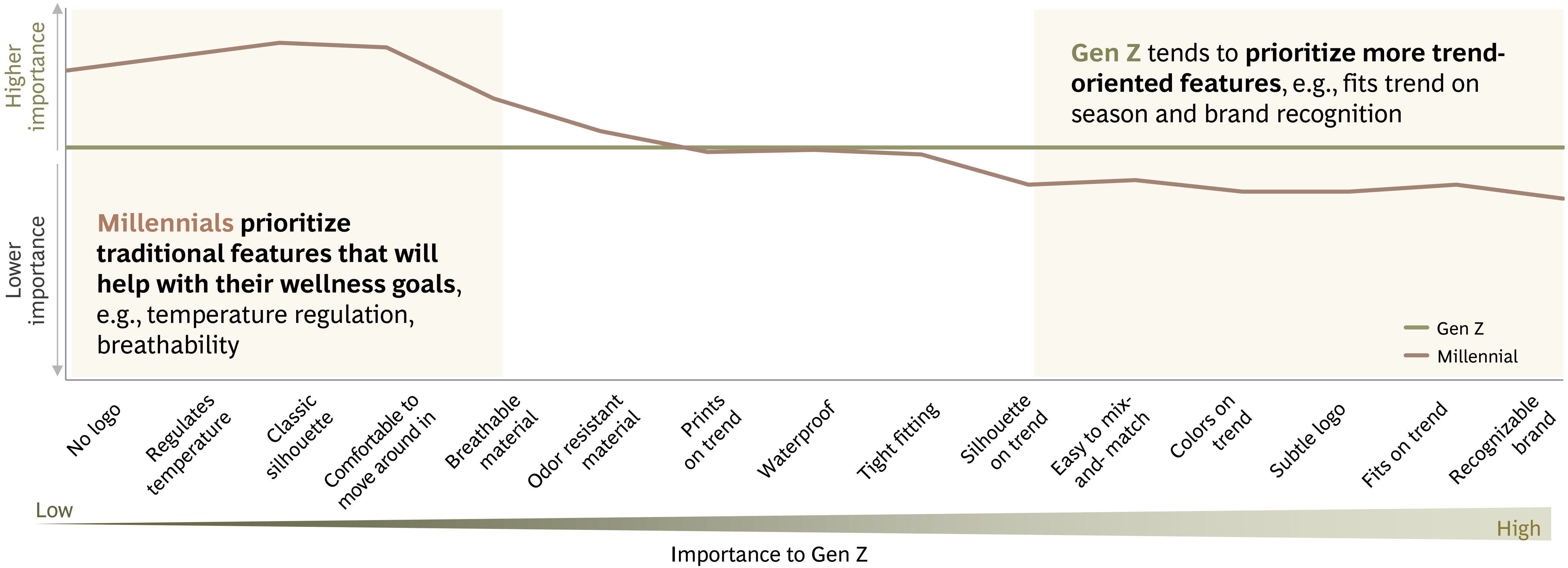
20%

Participate in **10+ activities[2]**

… and prefer specialized brands that elevate their performance across activities

Millennials prioritize product features that enable health goals, compared to the trend-conscious Gen Z

Stated importance of product features for Millennials relative to Gen Z



Q119: When thinking about your recent purchase from last_trip_brand, how important was each of the following features?
Source: BCG Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); Activewear Consumers N = 2652

Motivated by long-term health concerns, Millennials are driving the shift towards proactive wellness

Wellness is becoming a lifestyle priority

In The 'Soft Life' Era Millennials Put Wellness First In Their Careers

By Amanda Miller Littlejohn, Contributor. I write about branding, burnout, ... Follow Author

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2025's hottest trend? Living longer

The wellness sector is expected to be guided by rising interest in longevity. Here's what brands need to know.

BY NATEISHA SCOTT

November 14, 2024

Why a good night's sleep is the new luxury wellness craze

From temperature-regulating mattress covers to high-tech wearables, products that promise to improve your sleep are booming.

BY LUCY MAGUIRE

April 26, 2024

> "[Boomers] are used to the doctors telling them what to do. **Young folks are thinking about [longevity]**"
>
> *Tom Hale, CEO of Oura*

and Millennials are embracing it by investing in holistic approaches

26% increased spend by Millennials across health categories from previous year

Recovery

Prioritizing rest, using tech-enabled tools to improve sleep quality, enhance restoration, and support long-term well-being

42%
Projected growth of mental health apps, VR relaxation, and AI-guided meditation

Wearable technology

Monitoring movement, and biometrics in real time, empowering optimized performance, and personalized health insights

16%
Predicted CAGR for the US Wearables Market from 2024-2028
+$34.5B

Supplements

Optimizing health through targeted nutrition and supplements that support performance, recovery and well-being

91%
Growth in the cellular health and healthy aging category at The Vitamin Shoppe in Q1 2025

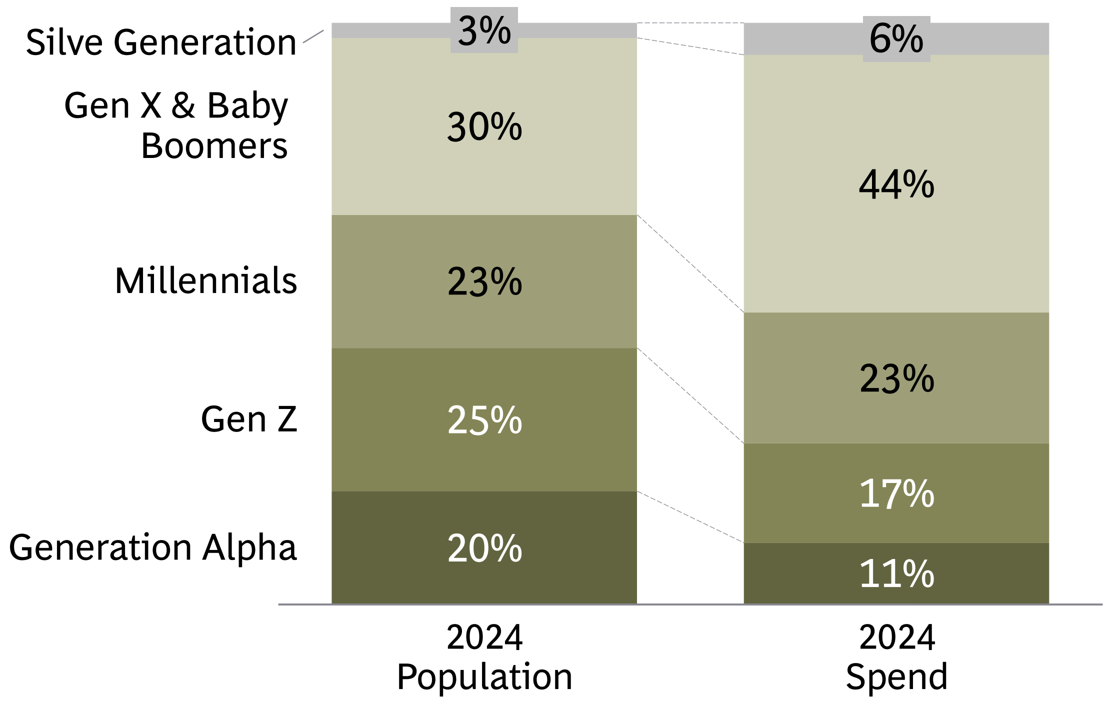
Source: Vogue Business; Forbes; Mintel; The Vitamin Shoppe

Gen X and Boomers:

Not everyone's a marathon runner

Gen X and Boomers are the biggest buyers of activewear

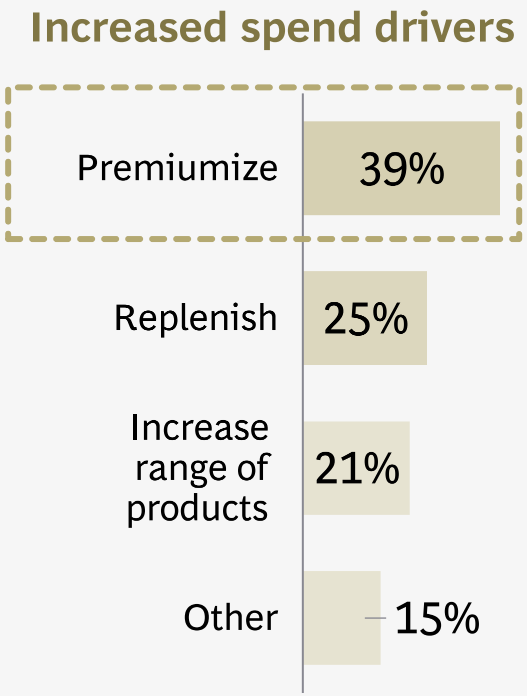
Gen X and Baby Boomers generate 44% of global activewear spending



Many plan to spend more in the future, especially on premium products

38%

of Gen X & Baby Boomers plan to increase spend on activewear



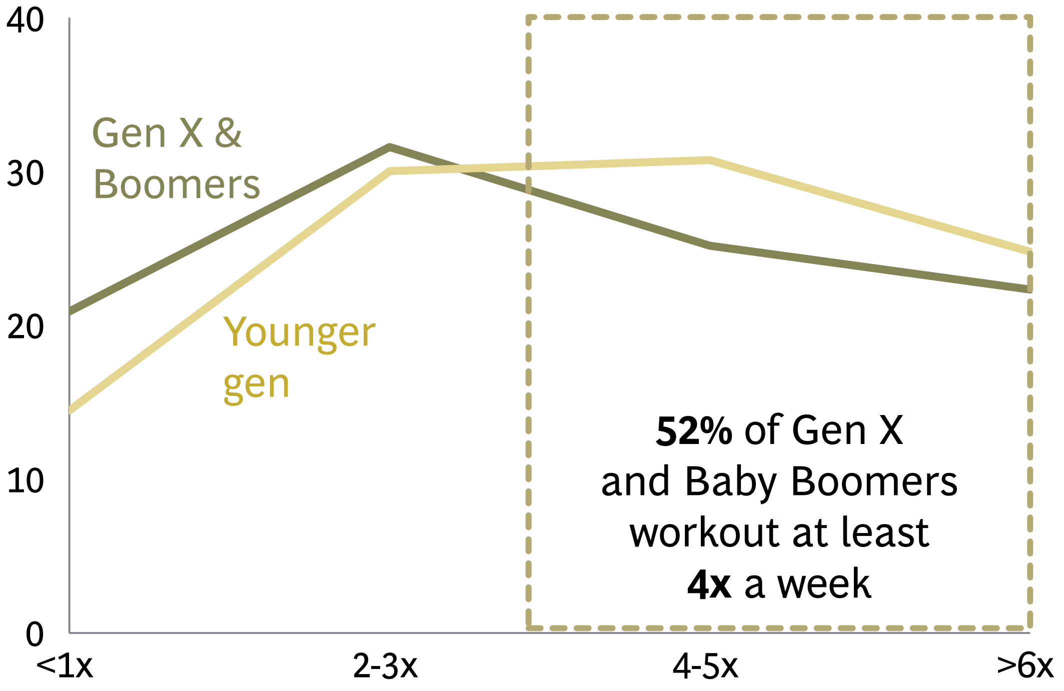
Q29 How do you expect your spend on the following categories to change over the next 12 months as compared to the most recent 12 months?; Q31. You mentioned increasing your spend on the following categories. How do you plan to increase your spend?; Q47 You shared that you have spent <category_spend> on <focus_category> in the last 12 months. Approximately how much of that spend was through each of the below brands?

Source: BCG Activewear Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); Nielsen 2024

Older adults are equally committed to fitness, but take a lower intensity approach

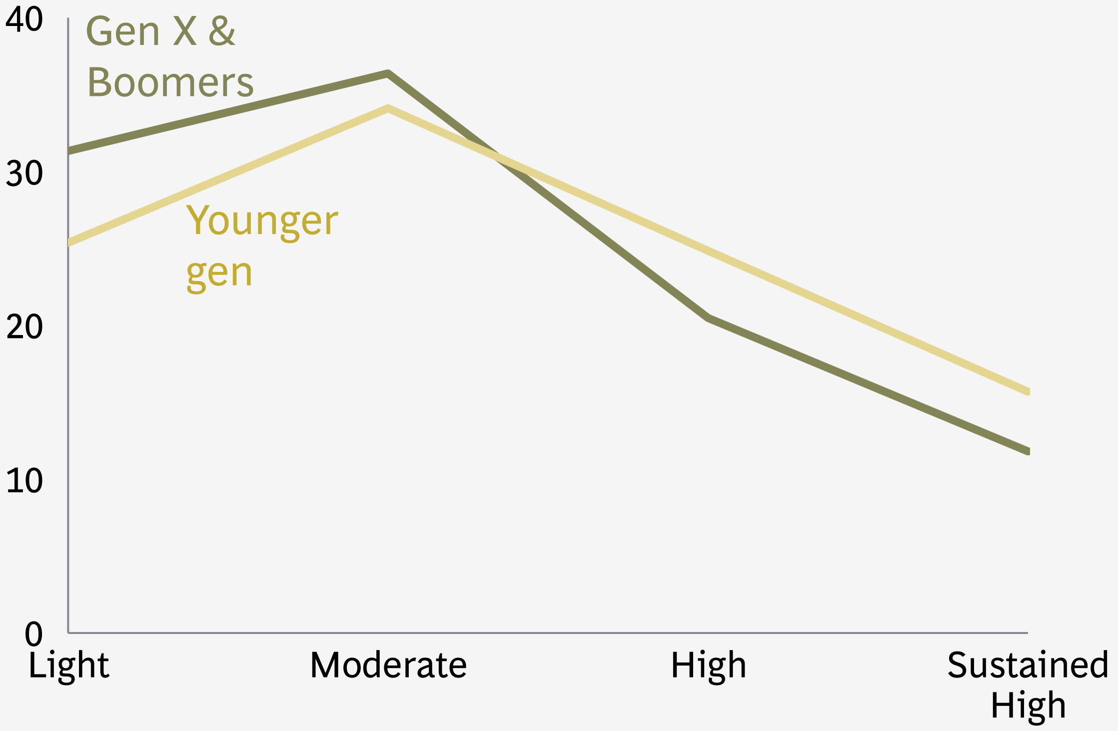
Older adults are nearly as active as younger ones, with over half working out 4 or more times a week …

Exercise frequency across generations (%)



… with a preference for lower impact workouts

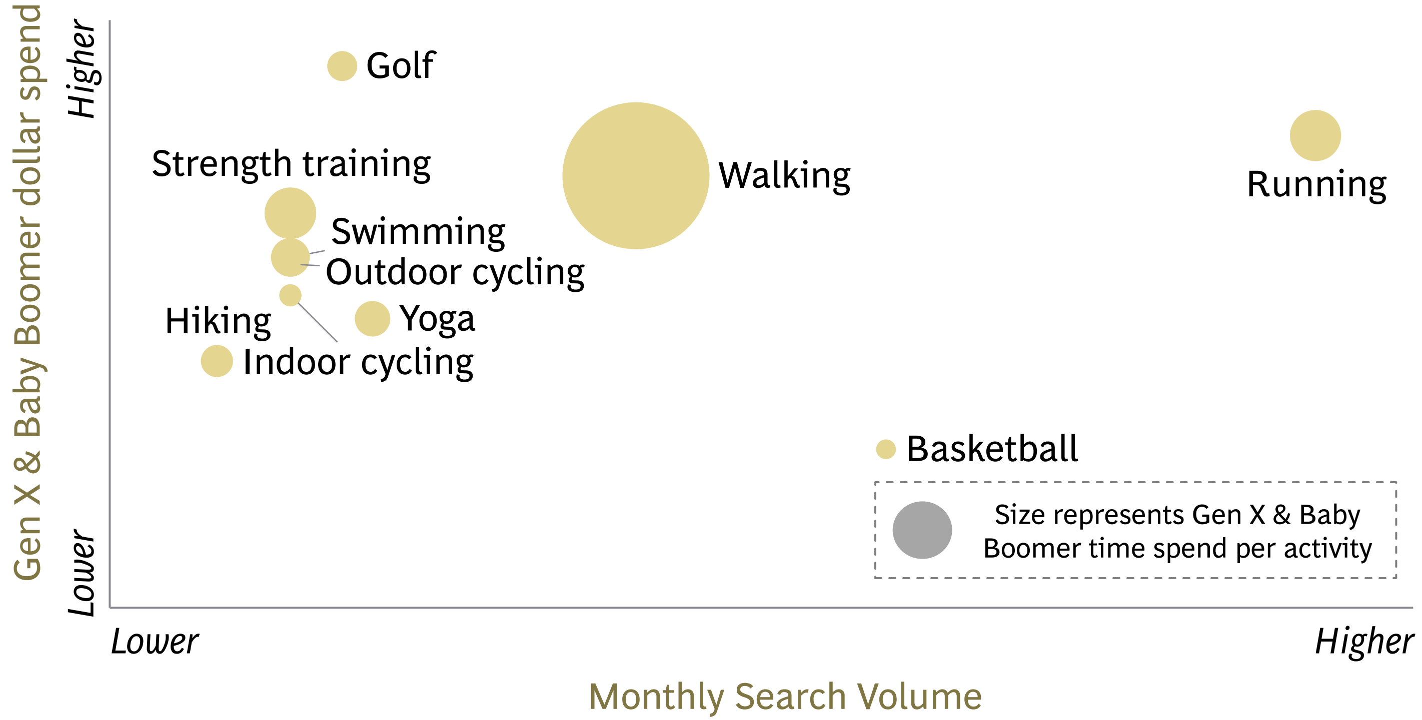
Exercise intensity across generations (%)



Q18. Pick the statement that best describes the frequency of your exercise; Q19. How would you describe the intensity of the exercise? Allocate the % of the exercising that could be described by the following.
Source: BCG Activewear Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025)

Gen X and Boomers prioritize low-intensity activities, especially walking

Low-intensity activities drive both spending and engagement for Gen X and Baby Boomers



Note: Search volume represent searches for "shoes" in each category (e.g., "walking shoes) except yoga and swimming; Q45. Approximately how much money did you spend to participate (e.g., class fee, ski lift ticket) in the following types of exercise in the last 12 months? And how much money did you spend on any equipment (e.g., skis, running shoes) needed to participate in the same time period?; Q43. Approximately how much of your time was spent across the following exercise types in the last month and the last 12 months?
Source: Google trends; BCG Activewear Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025)

But walking is an underserved activity

3X

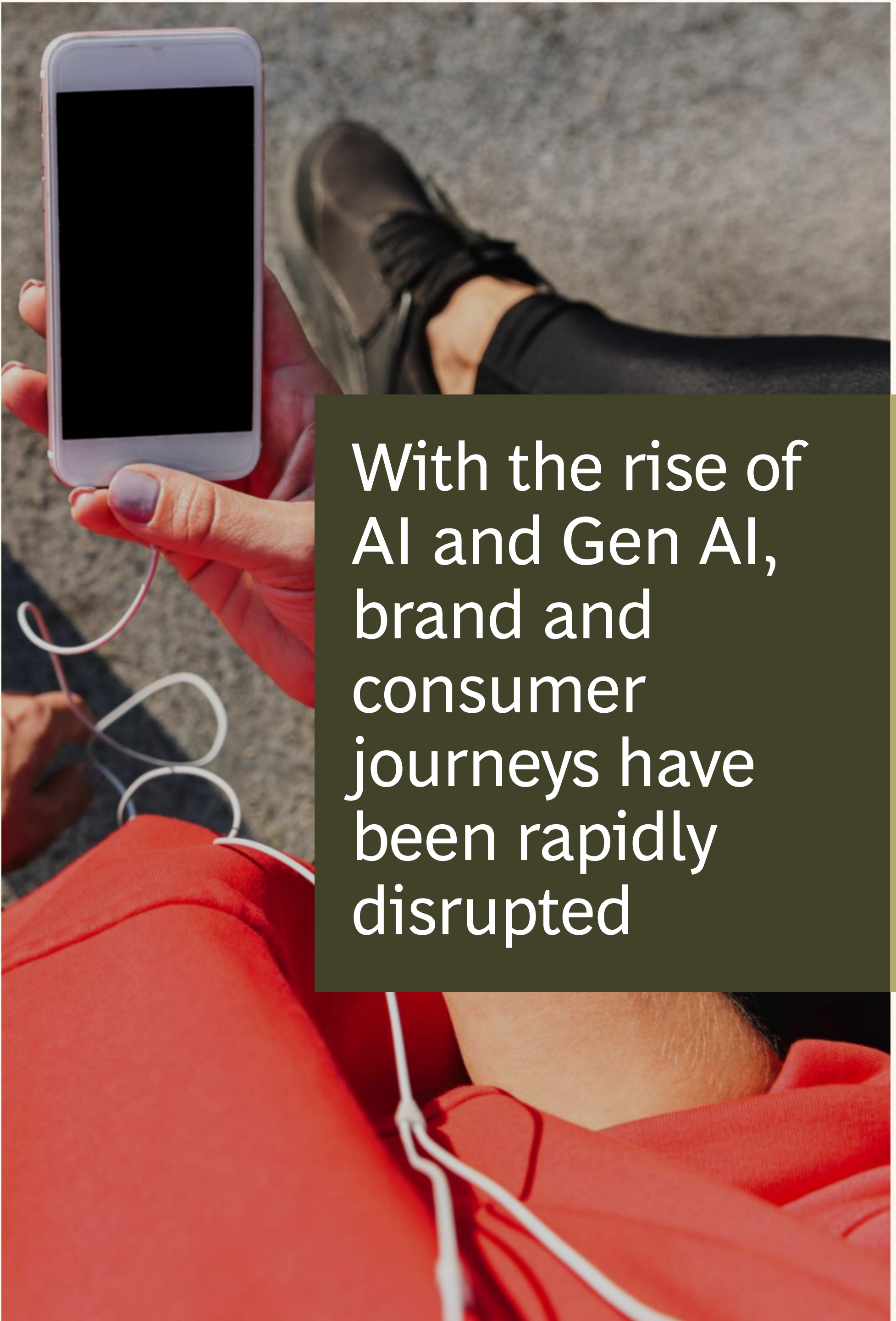
More time spent walking versus running for Gen X and Baby Boomers

However …

1.6X

More running shoes compared with walking shoes in the lineup of top brands

The evolution of influence



With the rise of AI and Gen AI, brand and consumer journeys have been rapidly disrupted

Consumer journeys are becoming increasingly complex …

of consumers use multiple channels in their shopping journey

Consumers are turning to new sources of influence

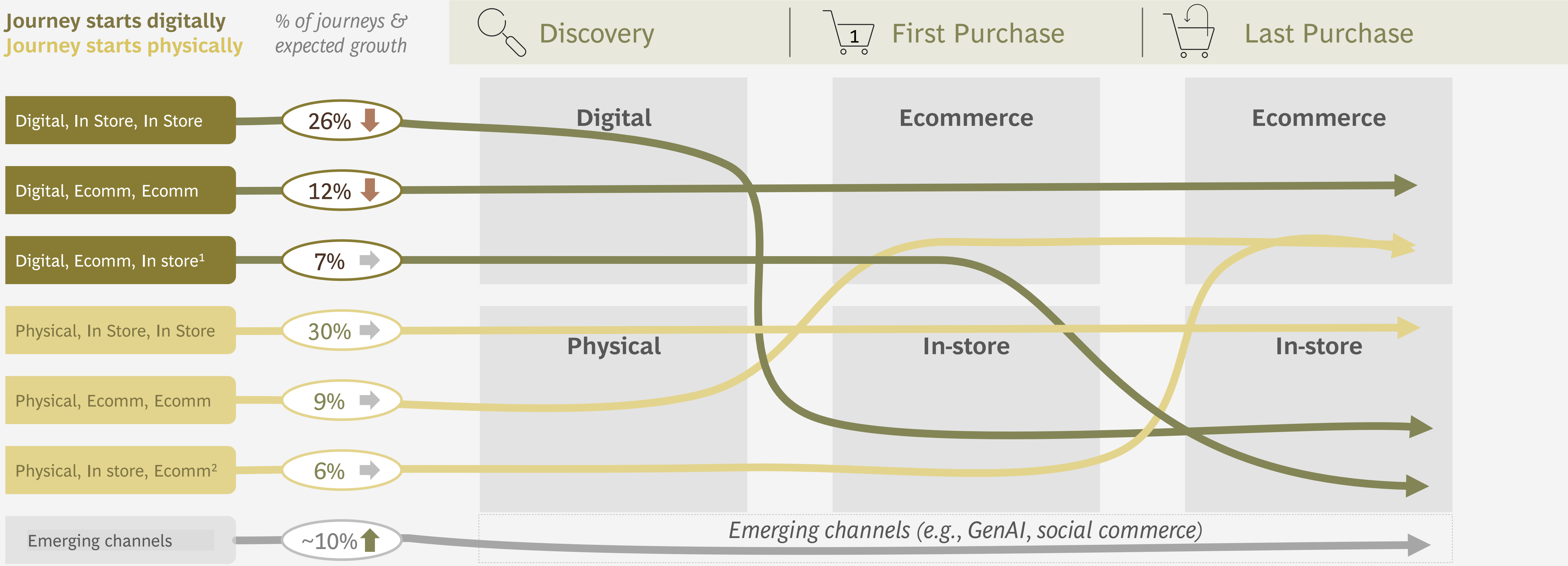
of consumers reported to have used GenAI when shopping online

Technology is evolving how and where consumers shop

of apparel consumers say they have made a purchase on social commerce

Q110. How did you first learn about <last_trip_brand>? Q115. In which specific stores/websites have you made your most recent purchase of <last_trip_brand> from?
Source: BCG Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); Activewear Consumers N = 2652; Adobe; BCG analysis

50%+ of journeys start on a digital channel, with rapid emergence of GenAI-enabled end-to-end shopping

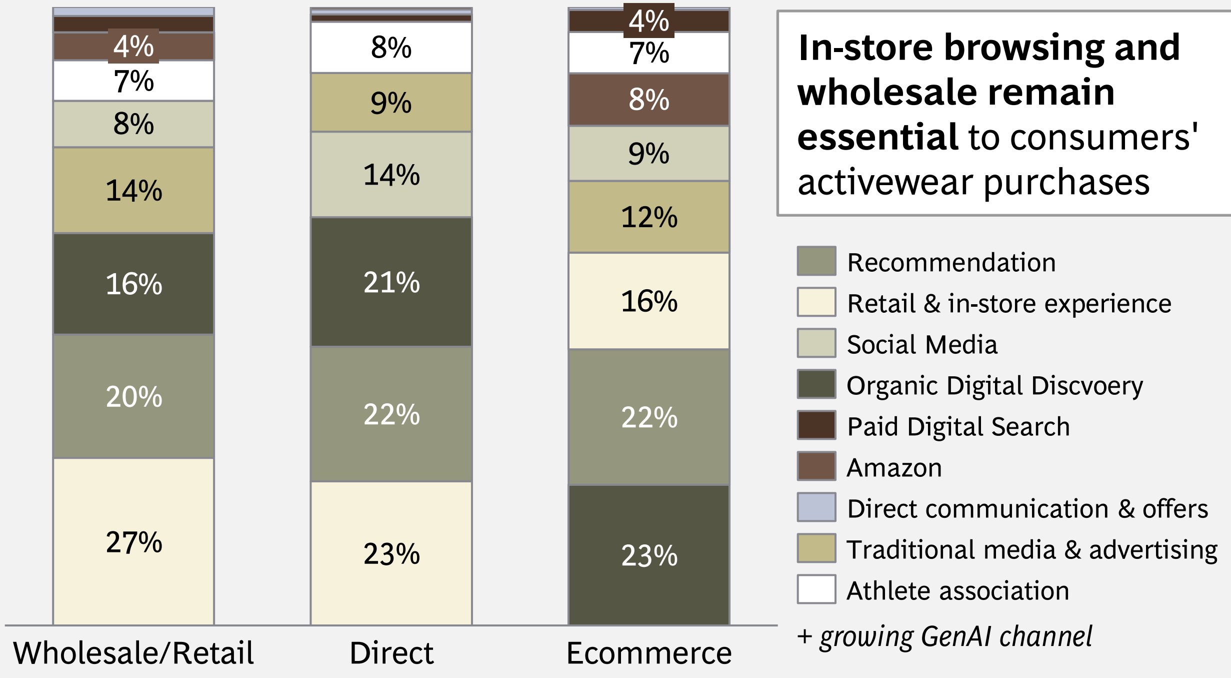


[1] Two consumer journeys with digital, in-store and ecomm touchpoints; [2] Two consumer journeys with physical, in-store and ecomm touchpoints
Q110. How did you first learn about <last_trip_brand>? Q115. In which specific stores/websites have you made your most recent purchase of <last_trip_brand> from?
Source: BCG Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); Activewear Consumers N = 2652

As the consumer journey becomes more complex, consumers gravitate toward experiences that feel intentional, exclusive, and personalized

Purchase influences are more diverse than ever …

Sources of influences by transaction channel



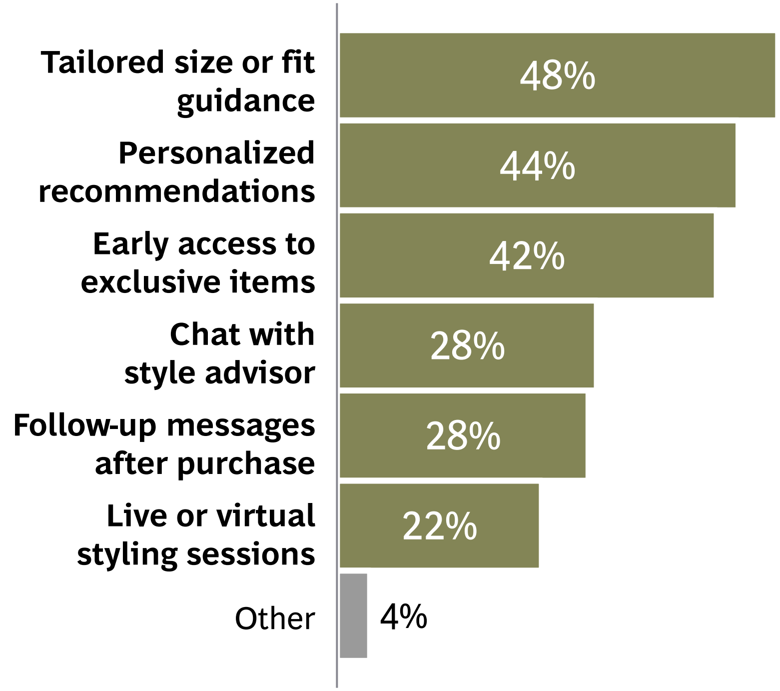
In-store browsing and wholesale remain essential to consumers' activewear purchases

	Wholesale/Retail	Direct	Ecommerce
% of all purchases	**68%**	**17%**	**14%**

N = 1633

… and consumers expect value add from purchase experience

Share of consumers expecting the following services as a brand standard



Note: Wholesale includes Sporting Goods store, Mass retailer/Big box, Value channels, Department Store, Resale/Secondhand; Direct includes Brand stores; E-commerce includes Amazon and Social Media Shops; Q115. In which specific stores/websites have you made your most recent purchase of <last_trip_brand> from?; Q89: Which of the following services would you expect as standard from a focus_category brand?
Source: BCG Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); Activewear Consumers N = 2652

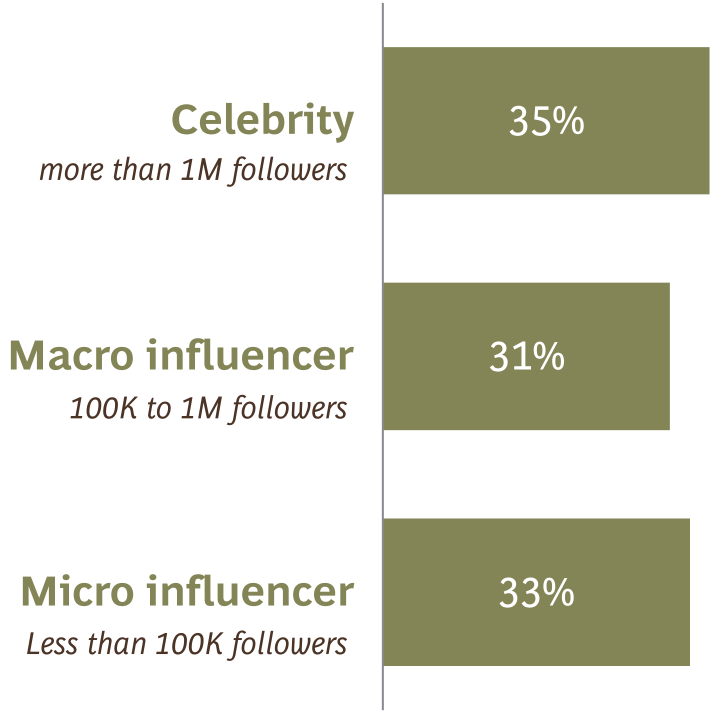
Influencers are increasingly important, and brands need to choose the ones that best align with their strategy to build brand heat

1 in 4

Gen Z and Millennials have made a purchase based on an influencer's recommendation

Consumers respond similarly across different levels of influencer reach

Share of Gen Z & Millennials influenced by each figure



Although each influencer tier holds trade-offs between cost, engagement, and credibility

Celebrities offer **broad reach and fast awareness**, but **may lack the authenticity** or credibility needed to drive trust

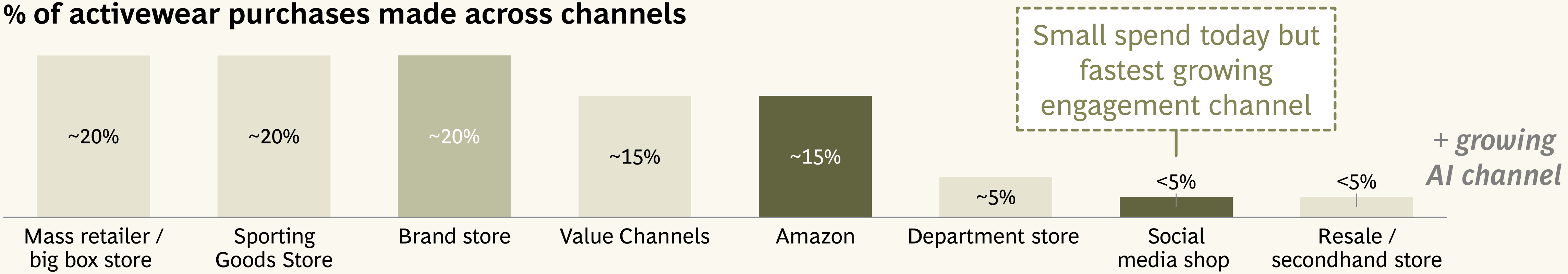
Macro influencers **balance scale and relatability**, delivering strong engagement but often at a **high cost and with varied** trust

Micro influencers bring **niche relevance and high credibility**, but **reach is limited** and requires careful selection to scale impact

Q25. You mentioned researching across the following touchpoints for category. Of these, please select any touchpoints that were particularly important or useful in making your decision to purchase category?
Source: BCG Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025)

Consumers are increasingly shopping by channel, not just brand

% of activewear purchases made across channels



Wholesale

- Drives volume and provides access to wide customer base
- Enhances brand visibility through reputable, established retail partners

Important channel for **Gen X** who like to shop where prices are favorable (37%) and have a wide selection of brands (33%)

Direct

- Provides direct control over brand experience
- Enables deeper consumer relationships and loyalty-building

Important channel for **Millennials** who prefer shopping at places where they have emotional connection (57%)

E-commerce

- Allows brands to build consumer relationships and personalization
- High margin channel, eliminating intermediary costs

Important channel for **Gen Z** who like quick delivery (23%) and have the highest propensity to purchase in social marketplaces

GenAI (emerging)

- Helps guide product discovery through conversational engagement
- Surfaces hyper-personalized recommendations

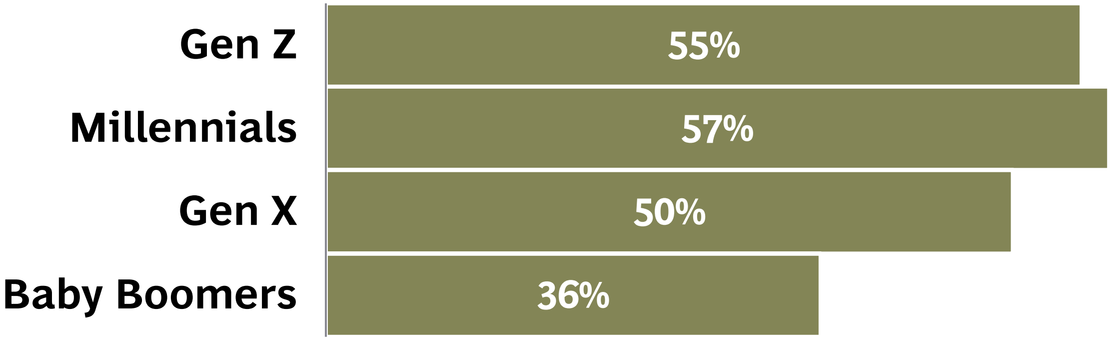
Important channel particularly for **Gen Z and Millennials**, where over half have purchased items recommended by GenAI

Q20. Which of the following are most important to you when deciding where to shop for the following categories? Please select up to 3 for each category; Q115. In which specific stores/websites have you made your most recent purchase of <last_trip_brand> from? Q128: Now we would like to understand a little bit more about who you are. You will see a list of statements. Which of the following statements do you agree with, on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree?
Source: BCG Activewear Consumer Survey (U.S., N = 4377, June 2025); Activewear Consumers N = 2652

Looking ahead, brands have an opportunity to evolve with changing consumer journeys as GenAI and social commerce influence discovery

Gen AI is shaping how consumers are researching and discovering products…

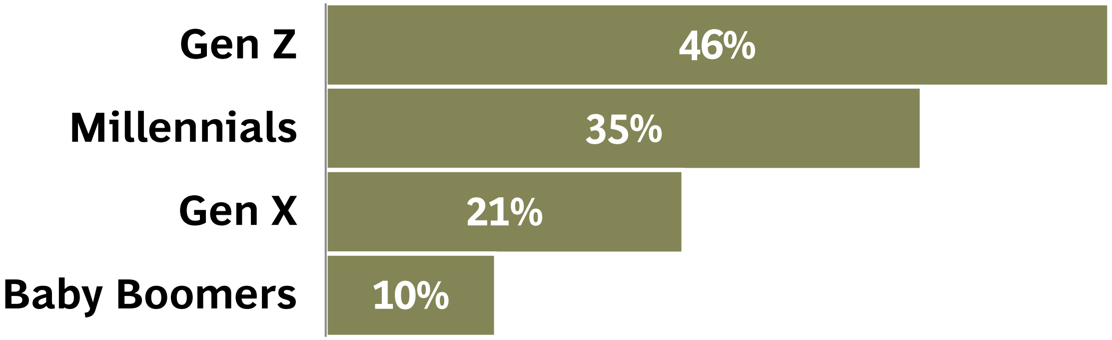
% of consumers who have purchased products recommended by GenAI



Over half of Gen Z and Millennials have purchased items recommended by GenAI, using these tools for research (55%), product recommendations (47%), and deal-hunting (43%). Users look to GenAI for **personalized, context-aware suggestions through product recommendation, chat bots, and reverse image searches**

…while social commerce is rapidly transforming how consumers are purchasing

% of consumers who have bought a new product/brand through social commerce

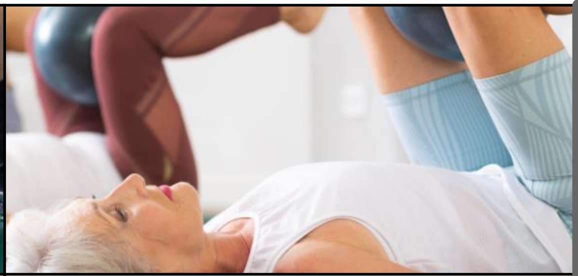


Nearly half of Gen Z have bought products through social platforms, driven by content, creators, and real-time interaction. Most consumers preferring to shop on **Instagram (71%) or YouTube (68%), and TikTok (68%),** both using the platforms to discover brands, engage with their community, and shop without leaving the platform

Sources: Adobe; Capgemini; eMarketer; BCG analysis

How brands are winning the next wave of activewear






Gen Z	Millennial	Gen X+	Influence
Investing in Gen Z to lead cultural relevance, as their preferences increasingly influence broader consumer behavior	**Making performance part of identity,** positioning gear as a badge of ambition, discipline, and belonging	**Winning by meeting them where they move,** designing for low-impact activities where comfort, ease, and fit matter most	**Reimagining consumer journeys in context of AI** e.g., social, GenAI, marketplaces, to capture intent at the source
Elevating with authentic style by using subtle branding and design elements to connect with Gen Z's individuality	**Expanding into wellness & longevity,** by offering products that support wellness, recovery and energy	**Focusing on premium quality and age-inclusive design,** converting fragmented loyalty into lasting brand preference	**Leading with purpose and bold storytelling** that instantly connects—across formats, platforms, and audiences
Anchoring in what the product is known for by focusing on clear, credible product strengths–comfort, quality, and function–that matter most to Gen Z	**Building activity-based collections,** designed to impact performance for each exercise	**Targeting unmet needs in everyday performance**, especially in under-served categories like walking	**Turning buyers into believers** by extending the experience with tailored service, perks, and post-purchase touchpoints

Winning the next wave requires agility and relevance

Strategic imperatives for brands

1	2	3	4	5
Reclaim consumer relevance	**Accelerate digital-first engagement**	**Build operational flexibility**	**Strengthen brand heat**	**Double down on value-added experiences**
Anchor assortments in generational needs, from expressive, trend-driven product for Gen Z to performance-and wellness-oriented features for Millennials	Invest in GenAI-enabled discovery, personalized experiences, and seamless social commerce integration	Shorten design cycles to match fast-fashion dynamics, build resilience into supply chains, and anticipate tariff and geopolitical disruption	Leverage influencers, communities, and lifestyle positioning to build trust and loyalty in a crowded marketplace	Differentiate with value-added services like fit guidance, wellness-linked offerings, and exclusive access that deepen consumer connection

Please reach out to the BCG sportswear team for further information

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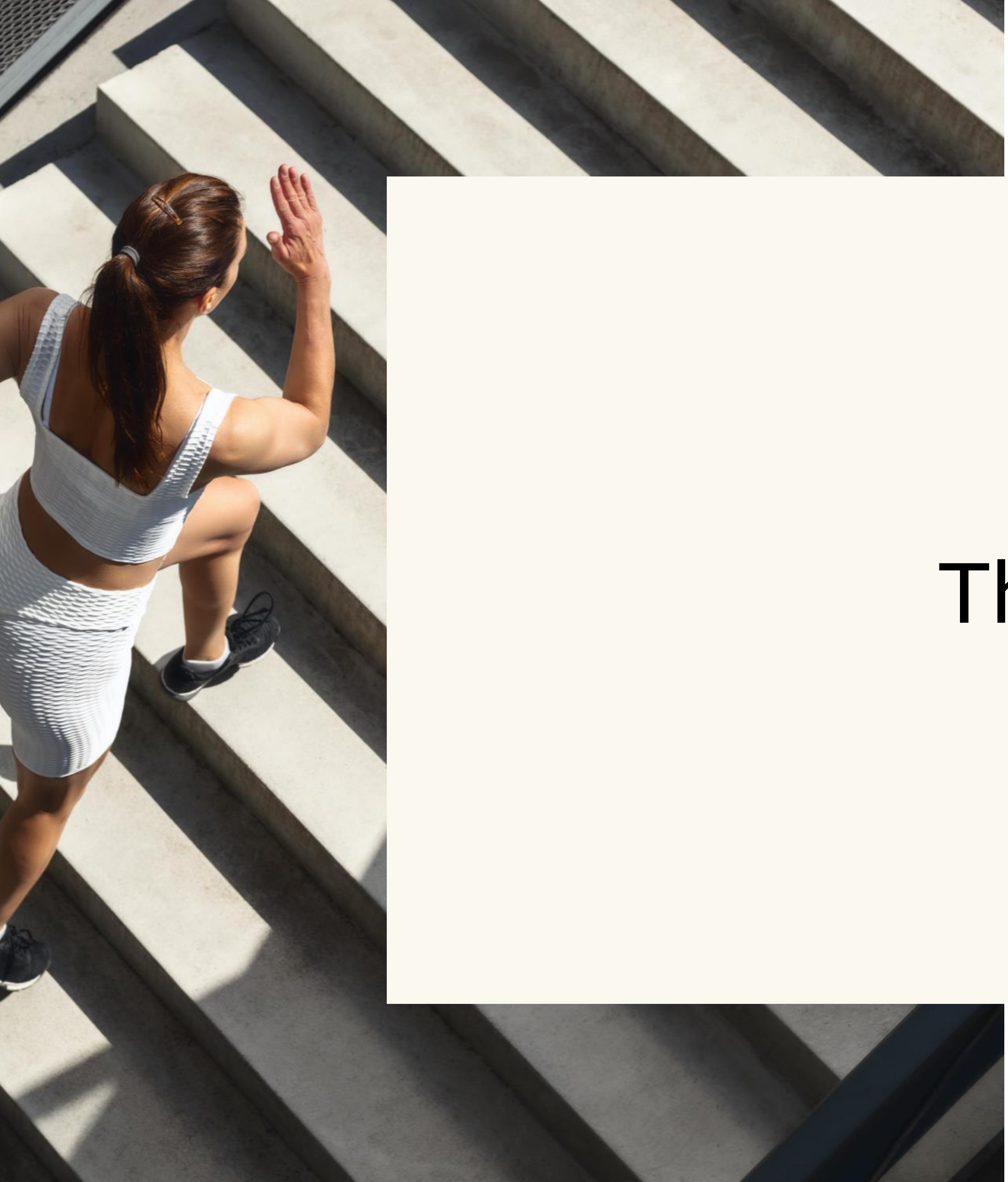

Thank you