NIQ and World Data Lab: Gen Z Spending Nears $12 Trillion by 2030, But Age No Longer Predicts Behavior

VIENNA, AUSTRIA, August 12, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The biggest shift in consumer spending isn't generational; it's behavioral. New research from NielsenIQ (NYSE: NIQ) and World Data Lab finds consumers across every age group are increasingly making the same calculation: where is a premium worth paying, and where can they save money instead? The result is a growing divide between premium and value products, while traditional middle-market offerings face mounting pressure.


A Tale of Two Consumers by NIQ and World Data Lab

The findings come from NIQ and World Data Lab's latest report, [A Tale of Two Consumers]: The Polarized Mindsets Reshaping Global Consumption. While Gen X accounted for $15.2 trillion in spending in 2025 and Gen Z is expected to reach $12 trillion by 2030 (projections drawn from World Data Lab's forecasting models), the report finds that age alone no longer explains purchasing decisions. Consumers across generations are increasingly alternating between premium and value-seeking behaviors depending on category, occasion, and need.

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>
> *Wolfgang Fengler*

Key findings include:
The global consumer economy is splitting in two. In advanced economies, the core middle-class population has stopped growing and is projected to shrink by 7% over the next decade, as more core consumers enter the affluent class. Emerging markets tell the opposite story: core consumer populations are expected to grow by 65% in Africa, 37% in Emerging Asia, and 16% in Latin America.

In 2027, Emerging Asia will overtake advanced economies in total consumer spending for the first time ever, driven by the rapid expansion of its middle-class population.

Though outnumbered six to one, 657 million affluent consumers now spend more than 4 billion core middle-class consumers, a historic tipping point that began after COVID.

Across advanced economies, category spending is shifting toward affluent consumers. By 2036, they will drive the majority of spending in four of five select categories, up from three today: their share rises from 49% to 54% in soft drinks, 56% to 60% in alcohol, 62% to 66% in healthcare and OTC, and 68% to 72% in consumer tech and durables. Even confectionery and snacks will move close to parity, with the affluent share increasing from 42% to 48%.

Gen X is expected to remain the world's highest-spending generation through 2033 and a key driver of global consumption trends
Gen Z's spending power is projected to reach $12 trillion globally by 2030

Across all age groups, consumers are increasingly alternating between premium and value-seeking behaviors depending on category, occasion, and need state

This shift is accelerating a "barbell effect", with demand concentrating at premium and value tiers while the middle market comes under increasing pressure
Building on NIQ's generational spending research in collaboration with World Data Lab, including Spend Z and The X Factor, the report finds that consumers across all age groups are increasingly moving between "upgrade" and "price-constrained" purchasing mindsets, carefully choosing where a product deserves a premium and where value alternatives are sufficient.

"Consumers haven't stopped spending; they've become more selective," said Ramon Melgarejo, President of E-Commerce at NIQ. "Age still matters, but it no longer explains the full purchase decision. Whether it is a Gen X parent managing multiple households or a Gen Z shopper building lifelong consumption habits, both are asking the same question: do I really need this in my basket?"

"Any brand that wants to be truly global now has to serve two consumers at once: a fast-growing affluent tier, concentrated in North America and parts of Europe, and a fast-rising mass-market consumer in emerging markets. Today's 657 million affluent already outspend all four billion in the core middle class, a trend which is set to continue into the next decade." Wolfgang Fengler, Co-founder & CEO, World Data Lab

While younger generations continue to gain economic influence, the report challenges the notion that age alone defines consumer behavior. Instead, shoppers across generations are making similar trade-offs between premium and value, creating new challenges and opportunities for brands and retailers.
As a result, traditional middle-market offerings are facing increasing pressure as consumers

gravitate toward products that either clearly justify a premium or deliver strong value at a lower price point.

Consumers are not necessarily spending less; they are spending more selectively. A single household may choose premium products in one category while actively seeking savings in another, creating new opportunities for brands that clearly communicate value while increasing risk for products positioned in the middle.

For the spending forecasts behind this release, Download the full Report
www.worlddatalab.com/a-tale-of-two-consumers

About NIQ
NielsenIQ (NYSE: NIQ) is a leading consumer intelligence company, delivering the most complete and trusted understanding of consumer buying behavior and revealing new pathways to growth. By combining an unmatched global data footprint and granular consumer and retail measurement with decades of AI modeling expertise, NIQ builds decision systems that help companies turn complex data into confident action.
With operations in more than 90 countries, NIQ covers approximately 82% of the world's population and more than $7.4 trillion in global consumer spend. Through cloud-based platforms, advanced analytics and AI-driven insights, NIQ delivers The Full View™—helping brands and retailers understand what consumers buy, why they buy it, and what to do next.
For more information, please visit www.niq.com.

About World Data Lab
World Data Lab is a data science company delivering projections of where global spending power and consumer demand are heading. By combining authoritative demographic and economic data with a proprietary, peer-reviewed forecasting methodology, World Data Lab converts long-term population and spending shifts into a single, forward-looking view of the future consumer, helping organizations identify where growth will emerge before it does.
Modeling consumer trends and demographic change through 2050, World Data Lab covers 99.5% of the world's population across 190+ countries, 9,000+ cities, and 200+ spending categories. Its core methodology, cited by Nature as one of the 50 most influential papers of the decade, underpins both its enterprise platform, World Data Intelligence www.worlddatalab.com

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