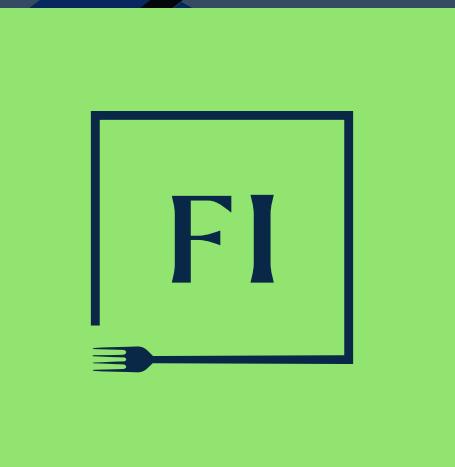


The Food Institute Report

The 2026 Social Media Breakdown

JANUARY 2026





Social Media Trends F&B Companies Need to Know

BY GEORGE HAJJAR

A **comprehensive, cohesive social media strategy** is the key to business success in today's market. CPGs, retailers, and food-service establishments can all benefit from organic online growth, and a deeper consumer connection.

To harness the powers of social media, and ensure they are working best for your brand, it's important to understand the underlying trends that go into building a compelling digital narrative.

"Platforms like TikTok and Instagram aren't just where food trends show up, they're where trends are born," Shannon O'Shields, VP of marketing, Rubix Foods told *The Food Institute*.

These platforms give brands the opportunity to better communicate their story and market position, and show off some of their "authenticity," an aspect that resonates deeply with social media users. Consequently, "showing up without pretense" is a theme that motivates today's top strategies.

Industry stakeholders noted that user-generated content, influencer- and creative-led recommendations, and "behind-the-scenes," unpolished looks into the brand can be particularly effective for today's social media users, and potential F&B customers.

"Polished brand videos can't compete with authenticity," noted Lauren Patterson, CEO of PR firm That Random Agency.

There is an apparent emphasis on videos, in this statement. Executives agree that a vertical video-first strategy is what The Food Group SVP Catherine Dazevedo calls the "Lingua Franca."

60%

Of social content aims to entertain, educate, or inform without direct promotion for **nearly half of organizations**

80%-100%

Of social content is entertainment-driven for a **quarter of organizations**

41%

Of organizations have been testing out **proactive engagements**

1.6x

1.6x higher engagement when the original creator **replies to a brand comment**

Source: [Hootsuite](#)

THE 2026 SOCIAL MEDIA BREAKDOWN

"It's the only medium that truly captures the texture, motion, and sensory drama of food," said Dazevedo.

It serves to also consider why users turn to social media in the first place. Sure, it has become a routine for most Americans, it is entertaining, and it is an infallible middle-of-the-day, or before-bed dopamine hit. But it is also replacing other online processes, such as traditional search engines.

Michael Moeller, founder of Kentucky Hop Water, noted that brands cannot take for granted the fact that consumers are turning more to social media for recommendations, with younger generations even preferring it to other services.

Beyond these macro trends, there are also more targeted movements shaping the F&B scene. Stakeholders warn that brands should only participate in these transient trends if they make sense for one's brand, as it can prove costly, and lead to customer confusion if inadequately integrated into one's brand.

Following is a snapshot of some of the most salient trends scouted on today's platforms by industry leaders:

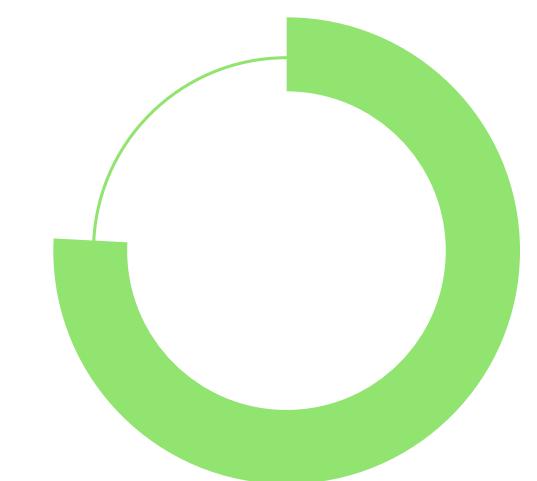
Texture, Reimagined

Trigeminal sensations, those that trigger sensations such as cooling, warming, tingling, and numbing are in, with younger generations looking for more unique flavor experiences.

"This generation's consumption is immersive. They're looking for food moments that "pop" on camera, whether through sound, contrast, or surprising textures," said Michael DiBenedetto, CEO of Golden Waffles.

Wellness Culture

In 2025, the industry was abuzz with personal health value propositions. In the fore, consumers and governments challenged brands to



76%

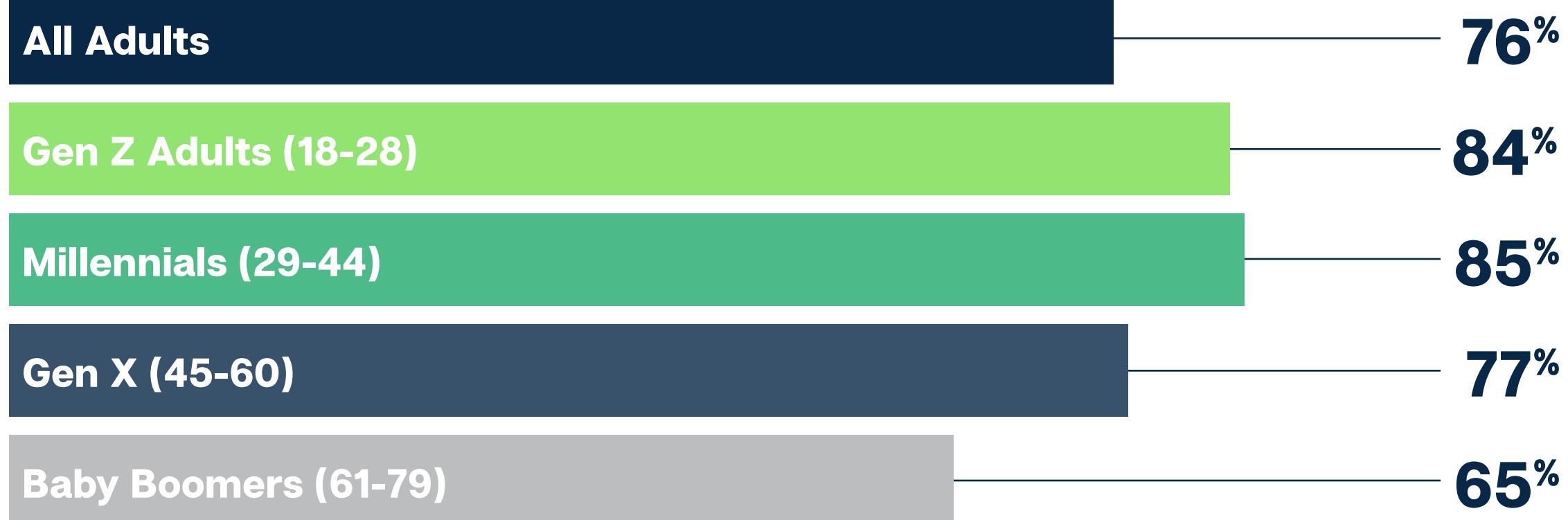
Of shoppers
still begin with
traditional search



24%

Say they now rarely
use search engines,
opting for **social
media or GenAI
Chat Bots**

Social Media Is A Good Way To Learn About Restaurants In Your Area



Social Media Is A Good Way To Learn About Food That You Haven't Tried Before





"Be authentic! Instead of chasing trends, understand what makes your brand stand out and stay true to that,"

—Liz Dickey, Integrated Campaign and Brand Manager, Piada Italian Street Food

improve the quality of inputs, and get rid of [artificial dyes](#). Moreover, interest in “casual athletics” and GLP-1 drugs have inspired markets for macronutrient dense offerings. Plus, protein and fiber are finding their way into more products.

TikTok and Instagram are fueling demand for high-protein snacks, non-alcoholic beverages, and other ‘better-for-you’ items,” said Amanda Oren, VP of grocery industry strategy at RELEX.

'Newstalgia'

Consumers are craving familiar-feeling foods with a twist, whether that be the inclusion of a globally-inspired flavor, or innovative format for a classic flavor or combination.

“We’re starting to revisit the old and make it new,” said Brian Pham, Influencer’s VP of strategy, media, and production.

The Seamless 'Shoppable' Moment

The extension of the digital shelf to social media websites is a powerful tool for CPGs to consider. Creating authentic moments that can easily direct a user to a purchase call-to-action is today’s best kept secret.

“Social platforms are now formidable sales channels,” said Catherine Dazevedo, SVP of MarCom for The Food Group. •

Trend Alert: Trigeminal Sensations Deliver 'Feelable' Flavor

BY ANNA KINDER

At one point, flavors were simple: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, umami, etc. However, today's consumers are hungry for food and beverage experiences that are far more complex – and immersive.

These cravings have given way to an influx of products offering cooling, warming, tingling, and numbing sensations, which are known as trigeminal effects.

In the beverage space, these "feelable" flavors have begun to show up in functional drinks, as well as alcohol-free cocktails and spirits.

[Arkay Beverages](#), for example, infuses its non-alcoholic gin, rum, vodka, whisky, and tequila alternatives with capsaicin, the active compound that gives chili peppers their characteristic heat, to help mimic the kick of traditional alcohol and also add a tingling sensation to the mix.

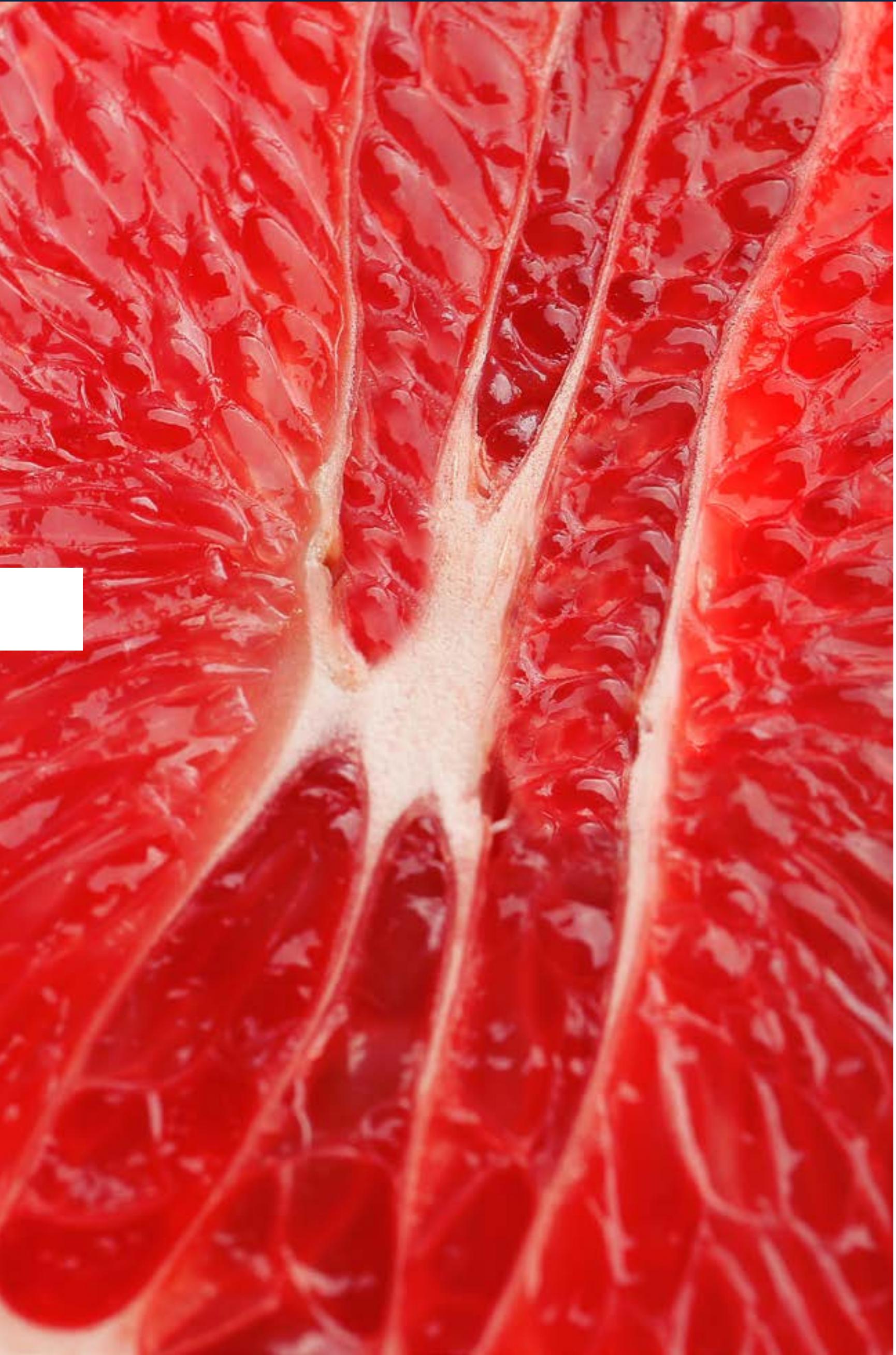
"One day, I had back pain, so I put a patch on my back, and then, I put my hand on my mouth, and it burned," Arkay founder Reynald Grattagliano told *FI*.

Grattagliano had been working on his first NA liquor for quite some time but had struggled to replicate the burn at the finish.

"So, I looked at formula and saw capsaicin. Then, I put a little bit of it inside the drink. And boom, I created Arkay Beverages."

And the trend extends well beyond the beverage space.





Fragrance and taste company dsm-firmenich recently announced it had selected Frosted Star Anise as its 2026 Flavor of the Year, highlighting the rising consumer interest in descriptors like “icy” and “frosted” that speak to a cooling effect.

Why Trigeminal Sensations Hit Differently

In contrast with attributes like taste and aroma, which target receptors on the tongue and in the nose, trigeminal sensations activate the trigeminal nerve – a major pathway that’s responsible for perceiving temperature, irritation, and other tactile cues.

These sensations create a multi-layered experience that has the capacity to enhance flavor perceptions while also triggering emotional responses.

“These sensations activate the trigeminal nerve, adding a physical dimension beyond taste and aroma. This creates a ‘flavor kick’ – a sensory response you don’t just taste but feel,” said Christina Wessel, product innovation lead at Plexus Worldwide.

“Cooling notes can make the tongue perceive cold and even make a product seem chilled, while warming spices create a gentle heat that feels cozy and comforting. These trigeminal cues are powerful tools, capable of triggering emotions, memories, and a deeper overall experience,” Wessel told *FI*.

This deeper experience aligns with rising consumer interest in novelty, mood enhancement, and wellness.

Flavors You Can “Feel”

Though trigeminal cues are trending, they’re nothing new, as they’ve been integral elements of products like mint gum and chili-spiced snacks.

However, their expansion into new categories reflects several cultural shifts of late.

According to Wessel, “Social media culture and the rapid growth of functional beverages are pushing brands to deliver more multi-sensory experiences. ‘Feelable flavor’ stands out on shelves and creates moments consumers want to remember and share.”

That aligns with broader consumer behavior, as younger buyers tend to seek out items that can provide sensory intensity, experiential elements, and emotional resonance.

Adding cooling, tingling, and numbing sensations enables F&B brands to both develop and reformulate products that feel new, even when the flavor profiles themselves are familiar.

Even industry giants like Coca-Cola have seen a clear rise in consumer interest in such “feelable” flavors.

“At Coca-Cola, our research and development teams have been tracking this shift for several years as part of our broader work to understand how multisensory cues shape refreshment and emotional response. These sensations can enhance flavor perception, create a sense of intensity, and make beverages more memorable,” said Anila Rajesh, a senior research and development manager at the Coca-Cola Company.

“In our recent work on Sprite Chill, we’ve studied how a controlled cooling sensation can be expressed consistently across packaged and Coca-Cola Freestyle formats, and how consumers respond to that effect. What we consistently see is that cooling is interpreted as refreshing and more immersive, especially among younger drinkers who gravitate toward experiential beverages,” Rajesh told *FI*.

“Platforms like Coca-Cola Freestyle also give us room to explore sensory variation across exclusive varieties, which helps us understand how trigeminal-active ingredients interact with flavor, aroma, and temperature. Looking ahead, we expect more cross-modal design – cooling paired with botanicals, heat with citrus – to create deeper, more dynamic flavor experiences.” ●



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