

## South African consumers reset the rules for FMCG

South African consumers entered 2026 with a mindset shaped by prolonged uncertainty. Years of rising living costs and constant adjustment have fundamentally changed how people shop, plan and prioritise. A perfect storm of economic volatility, new consumer expectations and rapidly evolving lifestyle choices will redefine the FMCG sector in the year ahead. For FMCG retailers and brands, this moment requires a clear-eyed understanding of how value, affordability, convenience and lifestyle choices are being redefined across income groups and categories.

By [Zak Haeri](#), issued by [NielsenIQ](#) 5 Feb 2026



Our latest insights point to a consumer who is pragmatic yet cautiously optimistic, digitally enabled but anchored in physical retail, and highly responsive to further price shocks. For retailers and manufacturers alike, the challenge is to adapt quickly, using insight-led strategies to stay relevant in a market where consumer sensitivity is high and expectations are rising. This piece looks ahead to the consumer trends that will matter in 2026 and beyond, and what they mean for FMCG decision-makers.



Zak Haeri, MD for NIQ in South Africa

## Learning to live with volatility

NIQ's [Consumer Outlook](#) research shows that nearly two thirds of South Africans expect their household situation to improve as of the beginning of this year. But the reality is that this apparent confidence disguises how consumers have readjusted their expectations after years of economic stagnation and price rises. They have learned to live with volatility and have come up with a range of strategies to manage everyday expenses as borrowing costs and inflation continue to squeeze their wallets.

***Actions for brands and retailers:*** It is more important than ever for brands and retailers to understand how consumers across different income groups are responding to ongoing economic pressures. Their strategies and tactics will need to accommodate a world where consumers are planning purchases more carefully, willing to switch brands, and splitting baskets across retailers and channels to maximise value and convenience. Promotions and loyalty programmes remain among the most effective ways to encourage repeat purchases and nurture customer loyalty.

## Consumers lose tolerance for further price increases

With consumers facing steep price increases for day-to-day essentials over the past five years, shoppers are very sensitive to price hikes, especially in discretionary categories. Even the tactic of reducing pack size is becoming less effective as consumers push back against 'shrinkflation'. Our research shows that affordability and low pricing rank as the single biggest reason for brand choice among South African shoppers, highlighting that keeping prices down is important for brands that want to be competitive in a difficult market.

***Actions for brands and retailers:*** Brands will need to find more innovative ways to preserve their margins, falling back on price increases as the last resort - and only where brand strength can sustain. One powerful tactic is to focus on capturing more trips and baskets through better product assortment and private label offerings. In the longer term, market leaders are focusing on managing their input costs by reformulating products to minimise dependency on expensive ingredients like cocoa.

## Seamless commerce is the new frontier

Consumers expect instant, personalised shopping pathways, creating the expectation for retailers and

manufacturers to be able to deliver everywhere, all at once. In response, social commerce, quick commerce and offline stores are converging into a single ecosystem. Our data for Africa and Middle East shows social shopping gaining traction through WhatsApp and Facebook Shops, but physical retail still accounts for 95% of FMCG sales.

***Actions for brands and retailers:*** Brands must innovate across digital and physical touchpoints, balancing convenience, personalisation and cost efficiency to remain competitive. Now is the time to modernise the media mix by balancing digital acceleration with traditional channels, leveraging Retail Media Network (RMN) efficiencies to offset lower-converting high value channels, and maintaining full funnel coverage across the consumer journey.

## Convenience redefined

Consumers' perception of convenience is being rapidly redefined by customisation, e-commerce and experiential value. Convenience is now part of a broader value equation that includes quality, personal relevance and experience – not just price. In personal care, this might mean products tailored to individual skin and hair needs. For home care, it might refer to multi-functional products and refillable solutions. And food and beverages, ready meals and near-instant home deliveries are booming.

***Actions for brands and retailers:*** Brands will need to focus on remove friction from every part of the consumer experience, starting with discovery and purchase. Those that invest in data integration and artificial intelligence will have an edge in connecting and understanding signals about consumer behaviour and expectations. Building unified, centralised data systems to create a single source of truth will enable brands to make faster insight-driven decisions.

## Lifestyle changes reshape the consumer landscape

Lifestyle changes will continue to accelerate throughout 2026, bringing trends that were once on the periphery to the mainstream. Shoppers are prioritising simplicity, health and minimising waste. Anti-obesity medication, especially, is bringing widespread disruption to the food and beverages category, while alcohol consumption trends downwards in younger generations and eco-conscious consumption keeps rising.

***Actions for brands and retailers:*** Our data shows 68% of consumers in Africa and Middle East are willing to pay more for fresh, preservative-free, organic products, while 70% are prioritising healthier food and drink options. Brands that were not among those catering early to these demands will need to accelerate efforts to address consumer expectations around healthier consumption and more ethical production.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zak Haeri is the MD for South Africa at NIQ.

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