

Making The Most

How Americans are
Maximizing Money
and Life in 2026

SoFi 



Table of Contents



3	Methodology
4	Introduction
5	The Ambition Gap
7	Lifemaxxing
10	Financemaxxing
13	Emotional Return on Investment
15	The Entrepreneurial Edge
18	Conclusion and Key Takeaways



Methodology

Survey results are based on an online survey conducted by YouGov from July 6 to July 14, 2026, among 4,090 U.S. adults ages 18 to 65. Respondents were drawn from YouGov's panel and selected using nationally representative quotas based on gender, age, education, race, and region. Throughout the report, aggregate findings offer a national view of the attitudes, behaviors, and financial decisions

shaping Americans' relationship with money today. Demographic comparisons explore how those experiences vary across generations, genders, and marital status. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. For questions where respondents could select more than one response, totals may exceed 100%. Some findings are based on smaller respondent subgroups.

Generational Cohorts

The report compares the following generations:



Gen Z
1997-2012
n=798



Millennials
1981-1996
n=1506



Gen X
1965-1980
n=1279



Baby Boomer
1964 or earlier
n=507

Men n = 1,891

Women n = 2,199

Married n = 1,861

Single n = 1,419

This content is provided for informational and educational purposes only and should not be construed as financial advice. References to "Americans" throughout the report reflect the nationally representative sample of U.S. adults ages 18-65 surveyed.

Introduction

If there is one thing on Americans' minds today, it's money—and how to make it stretch further. Thanks to higher living costs, wild economic swings, and the lightning-fast rise of AI, managing day-to-day expenses while trying to invest for the future is uncharted territory for many. It's no longer as simple as balancing a checkbook, throwing some cash into a 401(k), and saving for a rainy day. New financial hurdles and opportunities are popping up in real time, and the old rules of money no longer apply.

Still, younger generations share a lot of the same big-picture goals as the people who came before them. They want to land a fulfilling career, buy a home, raise a family, retire comfortably, and leave the world a little better than they found it. But they also want to maximize life today, not just stash everything away for distant

milestones. After watching the pandemic upend life overnight, and now seeing the workforce completely reimagined by AI, they know it's just as important to prioritize life now, not just build for what's next.

The result is a new philosophy toward the American Dream—one that embraces a more progressive outlook on financial progress and leans on innovation to achieve it.



1 The Ambition Gap

The American Dream is both evergreen and evasive. Self-made success wrapped in a white picket fence hasn't gone out of style, but for many, it's further on the horizon than it was in the past.

The majority of Gen Zers and millennials say foundational elements of the American Dream, like owning a home (67%) and retiring comfortably (62%), are still major milestones shaping their ambitions in adulthood. Fewer are confident they will reach these goals, however: Only 62% are confident they will be homeowners and just 46% believe they will be able to retire comfortably.

Other quintessential markers of the American Dream are also on the fence: Just over half of young Americans are confident they will enjoy a better quality of life than their parents (56%) or be debt-free (55%).

Ambitions Versus Confidence Among Young Americans

Gen Zers and millennials embrace traditional elements of the American Dream but question whether these ambitions are still attainable.

Retire Comfortably

62% Aspire to retire comfortably

46% Confident that they will **-16%** gap

Debt Free

63% Aspire to be debt free

55% Confident that they will **-8%** gap

Own a Home

67% Aspire to own a home

62% Confident that they will **-5%** gap



69% of Gen Zs and 63% of millennials say they feel pressure to look more financially successful than they are.

Social media has fueled this gap. As money conversations have moved from the kitchen table to group chats, podcasts, and social feeds, financial transparency has amplified ambitions alongside comparison. YouTube tutorials on investment strategies inspire new financial ideas, but at the same time, Instagram posts of friends on a lavish vacation can trigger financial anxieties for those trying to land an interview. 69% of Gen Zers and 63% of millennials say they feel pressure to look more financially successful than they are, and 38% of Gen Zers point

to social media as the primary source of this pressure, right after family.

However, rather than doomscrolling on social media, the next generation is adopting a new philosophy toward the American Dream—one that embraces a more progressive outlook on financial progress and leans on innovation to achieve it.

2 Lifemaxxing

Many Americans are rethinking conventional notions of success and are focusing instead on maximizing moments in the present. Lifemaxxing is a new take on adulthood milestones that lives alongside the traditional American Dream but is more dialed into “the now.” While retiring comfortably may feel like a 50-50 shot, spending a life-changing month in Italy working remotely might be more feasible.

Lifemaxxing leverages the assets young people uniquely have rather than doubling down on what they don't.

More than just a YOLO mindset that throws long-term goals to the wind, lifemaxxing leverages the unique advantages young people often have, such as workplace flexibility, rather than doubling down on what they don't (i.e., job security and pension plans).

A Progressive Take on Progress

Lifemaxxing isn't one-size-fits-all. It's multidimensional and meets people in the moment. A memory-filled weekend in New York City with family, a luxury handbag to celebrate a promotion, or a milestone birthday dinner with friends not only create core memories but also mark financial progress—a key metric being redefined by young people today. “The ability to enjoy life” tops Americans’ list of how they define financial progress, with 59% saying it’s a meaningful marker, twice that of those who said owning a home defines progress (27%). This more open-minded attitude toward progress is empowering. Americans are measuring progress in meaningful moments, not just mainstream milestones.

This isn't to say the next generation isn't saving or investing. Gen Zers and millennials agree their top two financial wins for

the year would be “ending the month with money left over” and “building an emergency fund.” And Gen Z is particularly investment-minded: 37% hope to invest more consistently this year compared to 28% of millennials and just 14% of older generations. Lifemaxxing prioritizes time alongside money, not instead of it.

Americans are 2x more likely to say “the ability to enjoy life” is a marker of financial progress than “homeownership” (59% versus 27%).

A woman with long reddish-brown hair is sitting on a large wooden swing that hangs over the ocean. She is seen from behind, looking out at the water. The swing has blue vertical slats and is made of thick wooden planks. The ocean is calm with a few small waves. In the distance, there are some rocks and a small boat on the water. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting sunset or sunrise. A white line with several white dots curves across the image, starting from the bottom left and ending near the woman's head. The text 'Lifemaxxing prioritizes time alongside money, not instead of it.' is written in a bold, sans-serif font in the top left corner. The word 'not' is in a lighter blue color, while the rest of the text is dark blue. The background of the top left corner has a pattern of light blue circles of varying sizes.

Lifemaxxing
prioritizes
time *alongside*
money, not
instead of it.

3

Financemaxxing

At the core, this new philosophy toward finances isn't about maxing out credit cards but about making every dollar work harder. Americans are taking a more active role in their finances, combining everyday habits, digital tools, and creative strategies to make their money go further. Apps like

PocketGuard help users know what they can safely spend after bills and savings. Flashfood offers steep discounts on fresh foods and Dressify recommends the most economic wardrobe choices for your closets. Taken together, these new digital tools democratize access to budgeting, investing, and general financial information potentially giving lean-in "optimizers" an edge. Insights come faster, cleaner, and are easier to act on.



The financemaxxing philosophy isn't about maxing out credit cards but about making every dollar work harder.



Apps aren't the only answer to maximizing budgets. 75% of Americans—and 80% of Gen Zers and millennials—say they are using one or more financemaxxing strategies to not only make ends meet but also to live life to the fullest. These strategies range from sharing the cost of premium streaming subscriptions to bartering housesitting for a vacation stay.

Three-quarters of Americans—and 80% of Gen Zers and millennials—report having used one or more financemaxxing strategies within the past year.

Financemaxxing Strategies

	Total	Gen Z	Millennials	Gen X	Baby Boomers
Used a Buy Now, Pay Later service to spread out payments	27%	29%	31%	23%	1%
Used a friend or family member's password to access a subscription service	24%	37%	28%	15%	8%
Threatened to cancel a service or subscription to get a better deal	22%	18%	23%	24%	21%
Moved money to new accounts to take advantage of promotions	19%	21%	21%	17%	15%
Used the local library to rent media or access entertainment	19%	23%	23%	14%	9%
Utilized a local Buy Nothing group or similar initiatives	13%	16%	17%	8%	6%
Tried to get a discount that you don't actually qualify for	12%	19%	15%	8%	3%
Canceled/rotated streaming services based on when shows air	25%	24%	28%	24%	19%
Cut back on dating/going on less extravagant dates to save money	23%	29%	27%	18%	9%
Split the cost of a premium subscription tier with friends or family	15%	25%	17%	8%	6%
Moved in with/continued living with parents/family to save money	13%	25%	15%	6%	3%
Used AI to help create a budget	9%	17%	11%	3%	2%
"Churned" or moved balances to new credit cards for sign-up bonuses	8%	7%	9%	7%	7%
Stacked airline miles	7%	8%	8%	5%	5%
Used a travel layover to visit an extra city/country	5%	8%	6%	3%	1%
Signed up for housesitting/work exchange instead of paying for lodging	4%	8%	4%	2%	0%
None of these	25%	18%	22%	30%	40%

4 Emotional Return On Investment

Beyond apps and hacks that help Americans get more from their money, lifemaxxing helps people level up their quality of life when the “emotional return on investment” is more meaningful than the financial one. 72% of all generations agree, “I’m willing to make slower progress on goals to show up for family, go on vacations, etc.”

Core memory creation is central to maximizing emotional ROI. Americans have grown tired of “more, more, more” and are willing to trade off more memories (another pricey date night) for core memories—the salient moments that provide a long-term emotional return. These investments are often ones that

can’t be replicated later, are shared with others, signify a personal milestone, or simply level up life. It’s about spending money on special moments with your kids you can’t replicate later—or skipping the dive bar and driving up to the ballet.

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Nearly 1 in 3 Americans have taken on debt for an event, and a similar share have said yes to an event, trip, gift, or celebration they could not comfortably afford.

Sometimes finding money for life's big moments means taking on debt. Nearly 1 in 3 Americans surveyed have taken on debt for an event, and a similar percentage have said yes to an event, trip, gift, or celebration they could not comfortably afford. While being debt-free is still a coveted tenet of the American Dream, so is maximizing milestone moments. Lifemaxxing measures these moments' emotional ROI and determines if the return justifies the investment.

Of course, there are also times when debt isn't worth it. In these cases, Americans are dodging debt by opting out of events: 7 in 10 Americans surveyed have privately opted out of something in the past year because of financial constraints. Gen Zers are opting out the most, sometimes ghosting friends in the name of finances. 41% of Gen Z said they were "busy" to avoid a get-together or event they couldn't afford. These moments can be equally strategic ways to manage time and money.

41% of Gen Z have ghosted friends and said they were busy when they actually could not afford something.

5 The Entrepreneurial Edge

Young people are financially savvy and investment-minded, just not necessarily in the same way as previous generations. For Gen Z, starting a business and reaping the rewards of ownership may feel more feasible and rewarding than saving for a down payment on a home—or it may be their primary strategy to achieve homeownership. 77% believe they can start a business (versus 58% of

other generations) whereas just 67% feel they can achieve a stable career. For younger generations, the entrepreneurial path may feel like the more surefire way to achieve future financial success.



The entrepreneurial mindset extends beyond starting a business. Younger generations are embracing the “necessity breeds innovation” adage to mastermind their financial futures.

This entrepreneurial mindset extends beyond literally starting a business. Younger generations are embracing the “necessity breeds innovation” adage to its fullest, finding creative ways to be smart with money and shape their financial futures. For example, Gen Zers are four times more likely than baby boomers to have invested in cryptocurrencies (26% versus 6% respectively). Gen Zers and millennials are also more likely to build a broad financial circle that combines banks and credit unions with digital platforms: 38% of Gen Z and millennials have money invested in digital-only banks or a combination of digital and traditional banks compared to just 17% of baby boomers.

They also cast a wider net on how they source financial advice, leveraging traditional sources like friends, family, and financial advisors alongside creators, financial apps, AI, social media, and more. This “portfolio approach” to financial advice embraces the same lifemaxxing and financemaxxing mentality, tapping into a custom mix of dynamic resources for a more progressive way to achieve financial progress.

Gen Zers are 4x more likely than baby boomers to have invested in cryptocurrencies and 2x more likely to invest in a combination of digital and traditional banks.



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The Financial Resource Gap

One of the biggest divides in money management between generations is where they source their financial advice from, **with younger generations 6x more likely to name social media as a source and 3x more likely to leverage AI.** At the same time, younger generations are also tapping into the tools preferred by older generations. All generations report friends, family, and financial advisors as places where they've sought financial advice.



Source of Financial Advice by Generation



Social Media

Gen Z/millennial **26%**
Gen X/baby boomer **6%**
-20 Difference



AI Tools or Chatbots

Gen Z/millennial **17%**
Gen X/baby boomer **5%**
-12 Difference



Financial Apps

Gen Z/millennial **16%**
Gen X/baby boomer **6%**
-10 Difference



Podcasts

Gen Z/millennial **16%**
Gen X/baby boomer **6%**
-10 Difference

The American Dream hasn't disappeared. It's getting an upgrade. Traditional milestones still matter, but younger generations are also finding ways to make the most out of the moments in between. "Lifemaxxing" pairs the pursuit of meaningful experiences and deeper connection with a smarter approach to money, using digital tools, alternative investments and entrepreneurial thinking to help make every dollar go further. Financial progress is becoming more personal, balancing long-term ambitions with a life people can enjoy today.

Conclusion and Key Takeaways

At SoFi, our philosophy is simple: Spend less than you make and invest the rest to help your money work harder for you. SoFi helps members put it into action by bringing saving, spending, borrowing, investing and protecting together in one place, with access to financial planners, personalized tools like SoFi Coach and educational resources. Whatever financial success looks like for them, SoFi gives its members the tools and guidance to build financial independence and get their money right on their own terms.

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