

The Memory Economy

The new standard for how we capture, experience and forget in 2026

Executive Summary

Our greatest life moments are, more often than not, just one click away.

Never before have we had the ability to document so much of our lives, effortlessly capturing everything from milestones to everyday moments as they happen.

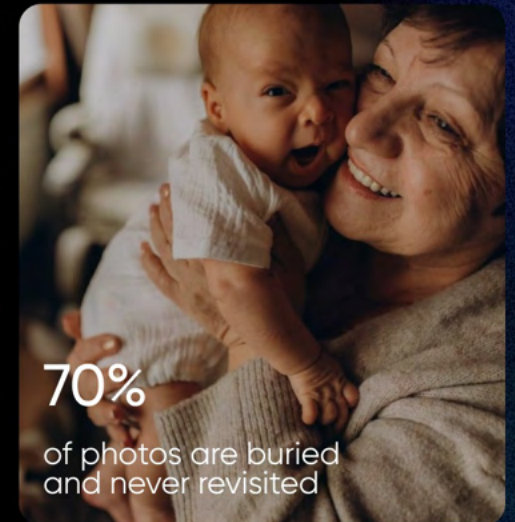
But this accessibility has come at a cost. As the volume of photos we take has grown, so too has the distance between what we capture and what we meaningfully experience later. These rich, personal records of our lives have become unstructured and increasingly difficult to navigate. While we care about our photos more than almost any other possession, we exercise less control over them.

We capture, but don't reflect. We accumulate, but allow meaning to be buried. And we hold onto everything, but remember almost none of it.

People want to feel in control of their memories, to decide what matters and revisit them easily. But the scale, effort and complexity of doing this manually has made it unrealistic for most.



5.5 billion
photos are
taken globally
every year

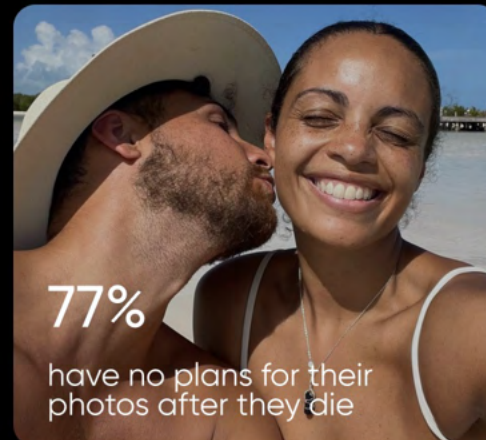


70%
of photos are buried
and never revisited

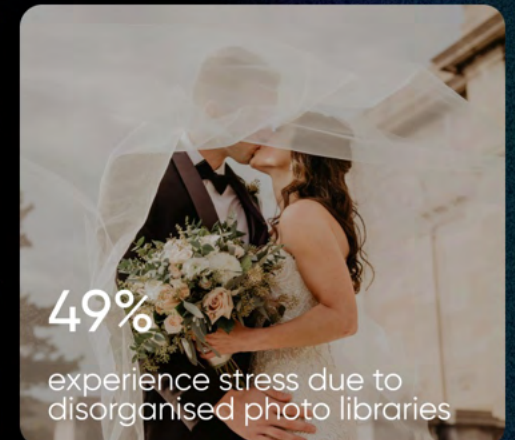
Methodology

8,000 global consumers were surveyed to understand the psychology driving their photo behaviours: when and why they capture memories, pain points around curation and attitudes towards technology. The research was conducted by Censuwide and surveyed a sample of respondents across the USA, UK, France and Germany.

The data was collected in February 2026.



77%
have no plans for their
photos after they die



49%
experience stress due to
disorganised photo libraries

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The world's photo volume problem

We are, undeniably, the most 'photograph-first' generation in history. Consumers across the world take an average of 5.5 billion photos every year, spurred on by social media culture and made possible by always-on access to smart technology. Photographing life's moments – whether milestones, highlights, lowlights, everyday activities or as a system of record – has become a reflex for the modern consumer.

Looking at when we choose to revisit our photos, perhaps unsurprisingly, sharing memories with friends or family ranks highest (just over a third of the time, at 34%). However, there is a significant minority who have no active relationship with their photos at all, with one in 10 reporting no particular scenario when they most often look back. This speaks to the growing trend of individuals using their camera roll as a filing system (cited by 13% of respondents) – reassured by its presence, but with no clear plan for what comes next.

Most taken photos

People/family/selfies

49%

Travel & vacations

33%

Special events

28%

Everyday moments

27%

Most revisited photos

50%

32%

26%

23%

Simultaneously, a paradox has emerged:

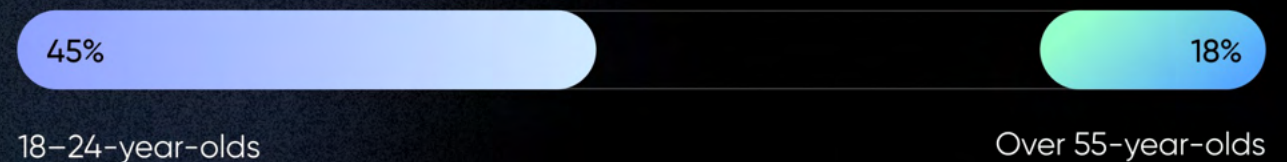
The more we now photograph, the less we seem to recall and re-experience, as the vast majority (70%) of photos are left buried in device storage and never revisited.

Our relationship with our own images has become increasingly passive, to the point that only 16% of consumers surveyed say they have looked back at more than a quarter of the photos they have taken in the past year.

The moments people choose to photograph are, by and large, the moments they would most want to remember. But as this number has increased, the sheer volume of photos we're left with has become a barrier to how often we connect with the memories that mattered most.

The emergence of a photo overload

Over a quarter (29%) of consumers agree that having an overloaded camera roll actively contributes to valuable memories being overlooked. But there is a stark generational divide:



It all comes down to volume. The younger generations take an average of 1,468 photographs per year, which is nearly three times more than the 491 photos taken by those over 55. With photos in abundance, these individuals are effectively drowning in their own archives.

Gender and photo overload

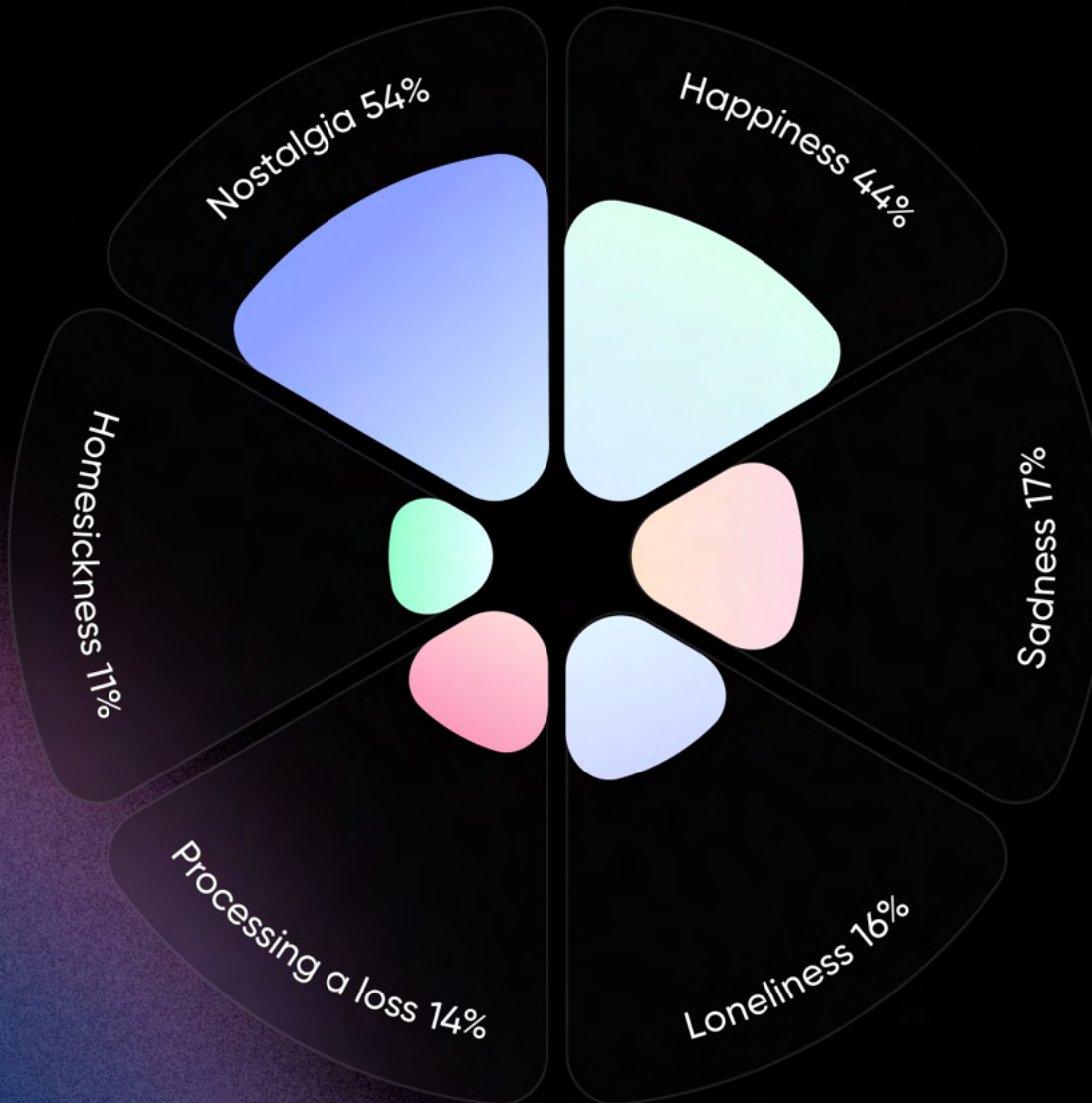
The data finds that:

men overlook memories due to photo overload more than women (32% vs 27%).

But why are consumers overlooking – and ultimately forgetting – more, despite having both the means and desire to capture meaningful moments? For over a third (37%), the primary reason is that important photos get lost among the rest, and the same number state that having too many photos makes it harder to focus on individual memories.

Emotion in our camera rolls

The primary emotions that drive us to look at old photos:



The scale of the problem is clear, but there's a significant emotional weight that comes with it. Photos have so many ties attached, and while nostalgia leads the way, the research tells us there's a whole host of complex feelings related to our visual memory records.

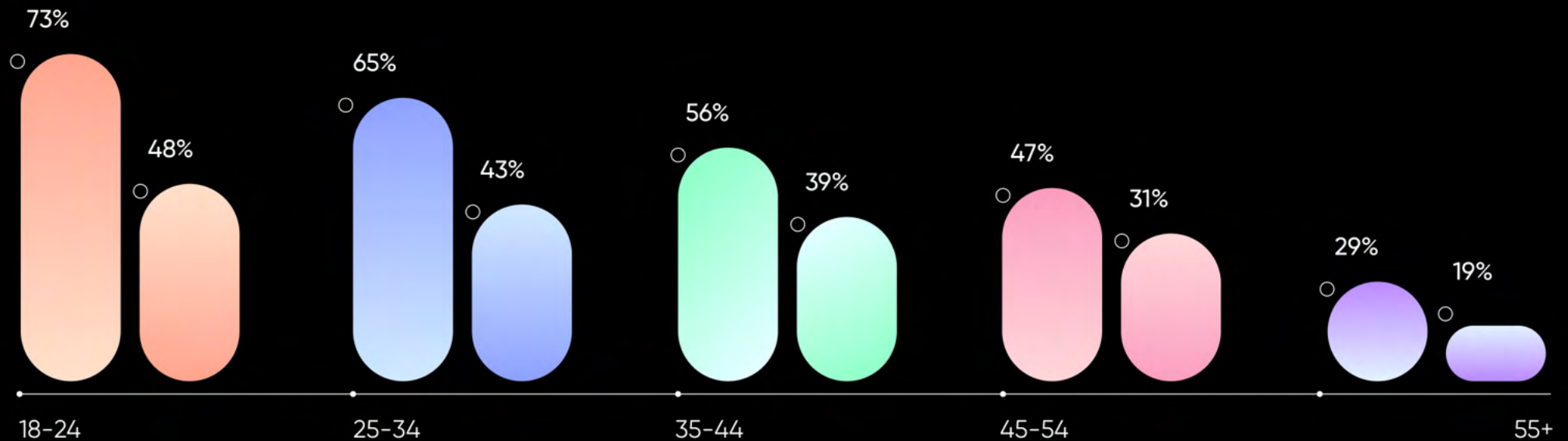
The reports of loneliness are particularly prevalent among younger generations, with 21% of 18–24-year-olds saying they look at photos when feeling lonely, compared to 12% of over-55s.

While the majority of consumers experience positive emotions when revisiting old photos, a substantial and often overlooked minority do not. A third (34%) describe mixed emotions, and 7% as mostly negative. A further 6% say that looking at old photos makes them feel disconnected as though they are looking at a stranger's life. As people change and identities are shaped, the camera roll captures it all, so for some, this can lead to a disconnect between who they once were and who they are now.

The avoided archive

The true extent of this emotional complexity runs deep, and we can see it clearly when looking closely at which photos people actively avoid. Nearly half (47%) of consumers steer clear of photos from certain life periods; of those, 31% keep those photos but never open them. Only 16% have taken the more decisive step and deleted the photos entirely.

The age gap



Actively avoid photos [left]
Kept but never open [right]

Reports of an avoided archive vary significantly across the generations. Among 18–24-year-olds, nearly three quarters (73%) say they actively avoid certain photos, whereas only 29% of over-55s do the same. Perhaps this is a reflection of the intensity of early adulthood and the speed at which identity changes across those years. After all, a photograph taken at 20 can feel like it's from an entirely different person's life by the time they're 23. Younger individuals may also lack the life experience to process certain moments, while older generations may be more accepting of their past. But even then, so many still actively avoid their photos.

18–24-year-olds avoid revisiting photos of past relationships or breakups (27%), while 55+ avoid reminders of difficult personal periods, including grief, illness or bad mental health (26%).

Past relationships/breakups



Difficult personal periods



23%



Times when life looked very different

19%



Periods of family conflict or loss

Rising levels of anxiety

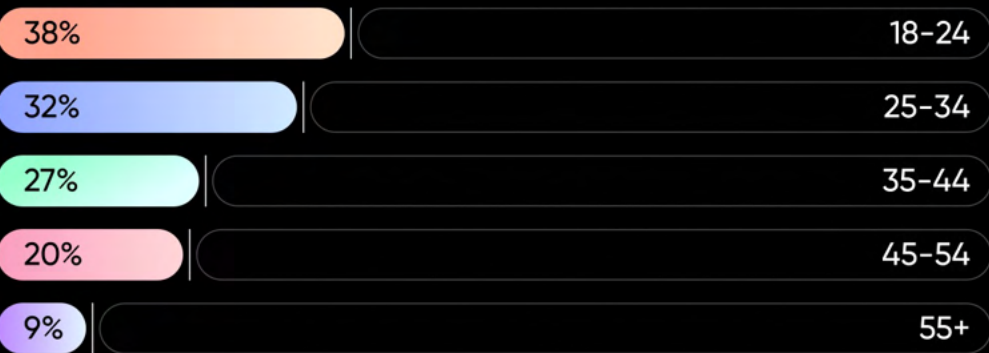
Where the avoided archive is one source of photo anxiety, a disorganised camera roll is another. Half of all consumers (49%) experience stress as a result of having a disorganised photo library, and 42% are left feeling guilty. There’s clearly an emotional burden that comes with an overloaded and disorganised photo library, and younger consumers tend to feel it the most.

Photo anxiety across the generations

Feel stress



Feel guilt



Here we can see a pattern emerging: the generation taking the most photos is also the most stressed by the state of their camera roll, and the ones suffering most from the cost of photo overload.

However, despite the clear cases of being overwhelmed, the true value found in photos remains strong across the board, and there’s a real desire to turn what are now predominantly digital systems of record into a physical keepsake. Nearly half (48%) of consumers say they feel more emotionally connected to their memories after creating a physical photo product. The act of selecting, curating and finalising a set of memories helps restore meaning.



Half of consumers feel more emotionally connected to their memories after turning digital photos into a physical product.

Determining which memories matter

With consumers struggling to manage the volume of their photos, some of the most important and meaningful moments in life are left unseen and unprioritised. The majority of consumers (62%) feel confident they can identify their most meaningful photos among thousands, but nearly a fifth (18%) feel paralysed by the scale of their collections.

Men are more confident (68%) than women (57%) in their ability to identify their most meaningful photos.

So much of this depends on the emotional relationship consumers hold with their photo collection. Four in 10 (42%) describe their photos as personal but not especially sensitive, while 12% don't feel emotionally attached to most of their camera roll.

But for a quarter of respondents (26%), photos hold an enormous amount of meaning, and they treat their albums as a deeply private collection – like a diary.



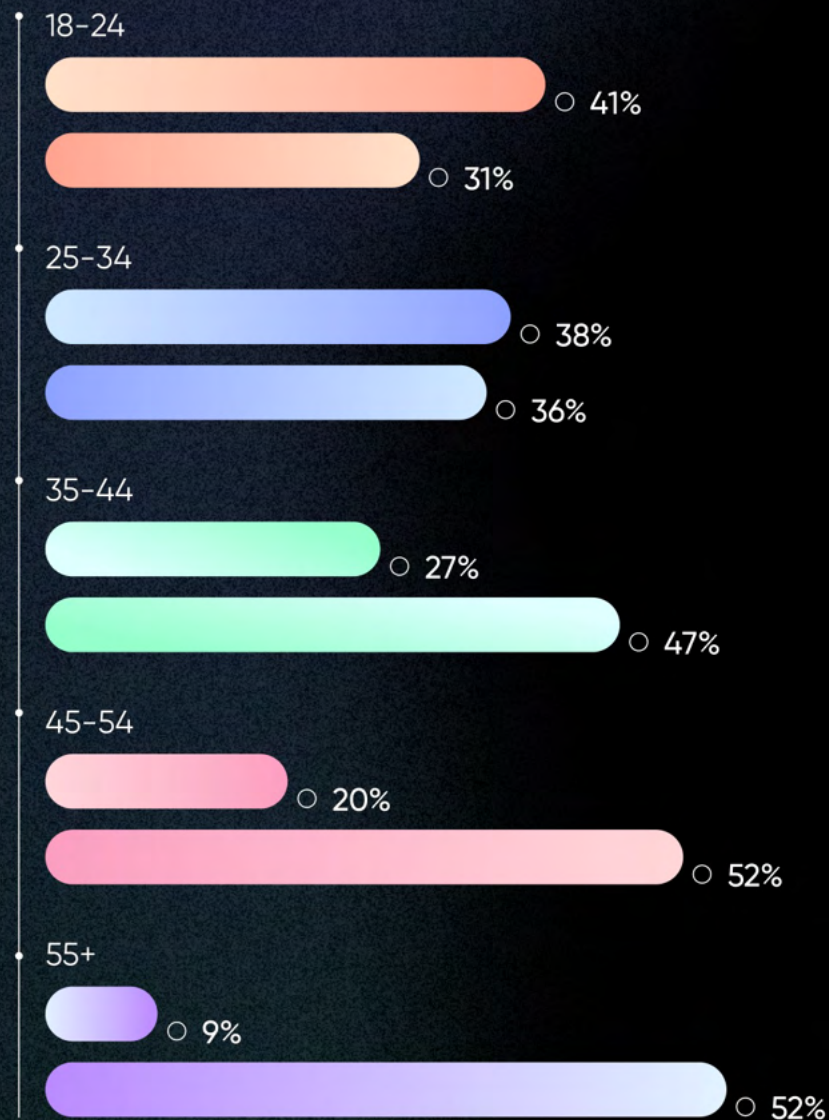
The digital legacy crisis

Seven in 10 consumers have made no plans for what happens to their digital photographs after they die. For the vast majority of people, thousands of irreplaceable personal images are abandoned, with no instructions, no designated recipient and no way for the people they loved to access them.

77% have no plans for their digital photos after death.

Looking across the generations, it's interesting to see that 41% of 18–24-year-olds have made some form of plan for their digital photos after death, more than four times the rate of over-55s (9%). There's a clear sense of digital self-awareness among younger people, having grown up with greater consideration around their online identity and presence. So it makes sense that planning for digital inheritance is a natural extension of that. Digital memories are becoming heirlooms – but without systems for preservation, they risk being lost.

Digital legacy planning across the generations

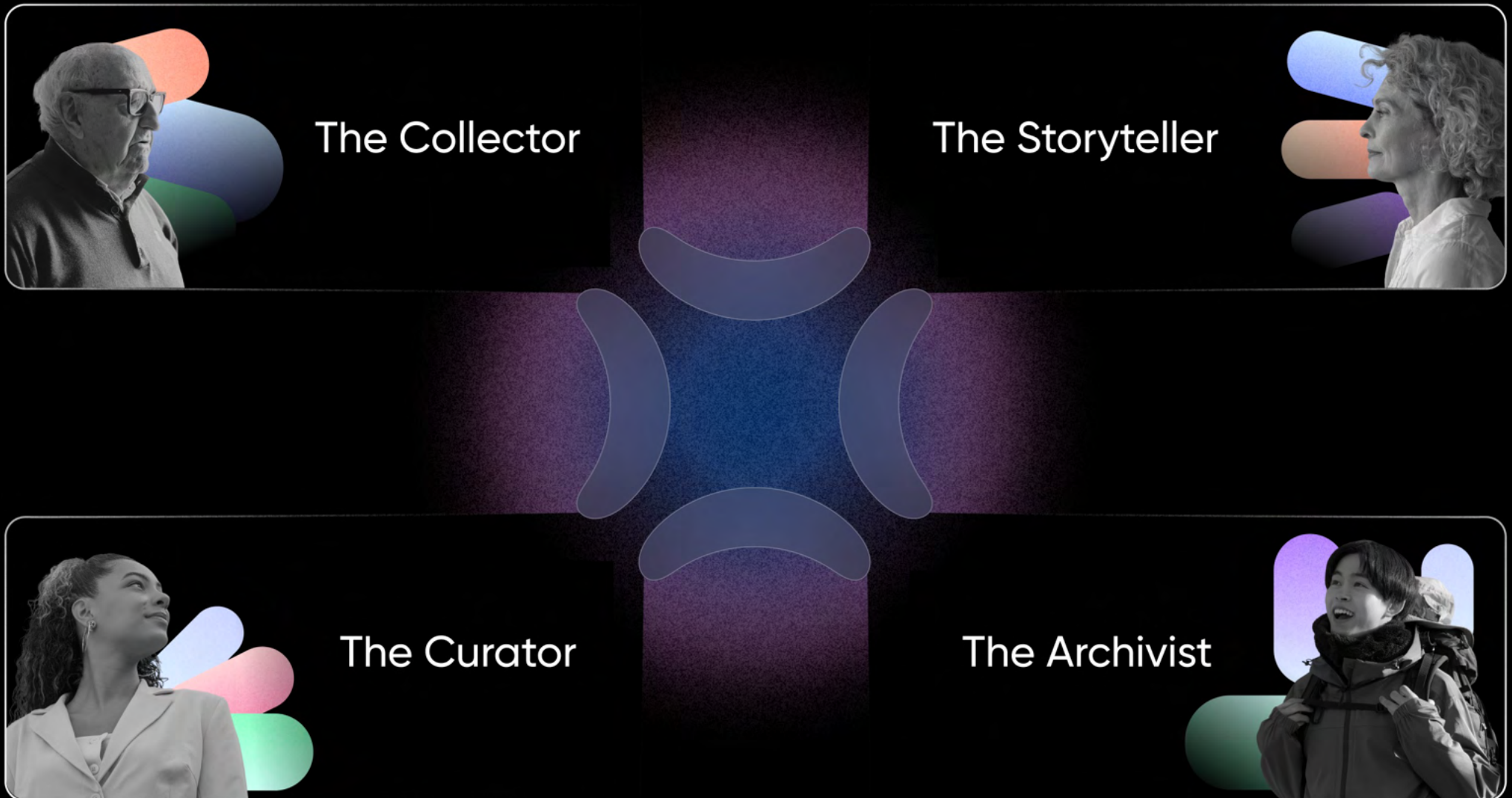


Have made plans [top]

Never thought about it [bottom]

The memory profiles

The discrepancies in attitudes towards photos and the role they play in capturing and shaping our identities reveals five distinct emotional profiles.



The Collector



" I know I should probably delete some of my photos, but I really struggle to. What if I need them one day? They feel almost too personal to share, like pages from a diary. Deleting them feels like I'm losing something.

"

The Storyteller

" When I take a photo, I'm already thinking about who I'm going to send it to. The last 10 photos I took were primarily intended for sharing with others rather than keeping. My memories matter, so I want to share them.

"



The Curator



" I'm ruthless with my camera roll. If photos are blurry, boring or meaningless, they're deleted. Keeping my collection organised means every photo I scroll past actually means something.

"

The Archivist

" I could sit down right now and pull my 100 most important photos with ease - I know exactly what's there and why it matters. I've even thought about what happens to them when I'm gone, because these photos deserve to outlast me.

"



Establishing trust in photo technology

It's clear that camera rolls are still seen as a valuable tool for preserving memories, but it can be hard to keep track of the thousands of photos we take, meaning important moments are captured and forgotten. But there is a vital role for technology to play to surface memories and bring calm to chaos.

Artificial intelligence has the capabilities to take on such a challenge, and while there has been a history of data privacy concerns around it, consumer trust in this technology has gone from strength to strength. Seven in 10 (73%) respondents stated they are open to AI assistance with their photos, but naturally, there are still hesitations that need acknowledgement.

At the core of these concerns is control. For half of consumers (48%), the biggest trust violation would be if their photos were at risk of being used in ways they did not intend. Consumers are not inherently afraid of AI – they are afraid of losing control over their personal images.

The biggest trust violations:

Photos used in ways I didn't intend

48%

AI system analysing photos (no humans)

14%

Company accidentally losing photos

13%

Human employee at a company seeing my photos

10%

Gender-specific trust concerns

Men

Used in ways I didn't intend

45%

AI analysing my photos

15%

Company losing my photos

12%

Human employee at a company seeing my photos

12%

Women are slightly more concerned about unintended use than men (50% vs 45%), while the latter are more troubled by the idea of a human employee seeing their images (12% vs 7%). In both scenarios, this sense of control is evident – regardless of whether it's humans or technology that are involved.

Only 27% say they would never feel comfortable under any circumstances – meaning the majority are open to using AI, but under certain conditions.

Women

50%

12%

13%

7%

Conditions for AI access

Photos must never leave my device (19%)

Ability to revoke access at any time (18%)

The tech is used to help preserve meaningful memories (18%)

No humans can ever have access to the photos (12%)

There are some fundamental architecture requirements for consumers to feel confident in using technology – and AI specifically – to bring order to their camera roll chaos.

Taking control of our memories

Today, the most accurate and engaging records of our lives are captured and safely stored away, but while kept under lock and key, the emotion and meaning tied to them gets buried among the thousands of photos we take every year.

Consumers today crave control; to bring order to their growing bank of valuable photos. But this volume is currently causing fragmentation, where these important moments are not surfaced or connected, and they fail to come together into a clear sense of personal narrative.

AI steps forward as a means to bring order to the chaos, but while consumers are more trusting of AI today, they are still afraid of losing control. Concerns around images being used in ways they did not intend, by humans or technology, are still in the front of people's minds. The majority are open to AI assistance, but under conditions that are non-negotiable.

As the volume of personal data grows, so too does the need for new ways of engaging with it, to reconnect with and understand the experiences that were important enough to be captured in time. That is the equal challenge and opportunity that sits at the heart of today's Memory Economy.





Popsa is the memory curation platform developing a new generation of services that harness AI to support a healthy processing of meaningful events.

Serving over two million consumers, Popsa analyses photo libraries, without uploading photos to the cloud, to organise memories, make relevant suggestions, write compelling narratives and create stunning layouts from photos, all whilst protecting consumer privacy.

popsa.com