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In This Economy

How Indonesians cope when money runs short, and what it means for brands

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A combined reading of the IRIS Indonesia Confidence Survey 2026 (n=503) and a semiotic analysis of 8,064 public posts on how Indonesians make sense of coping.

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Key takeaways

Indonesians have spent 2026 bracing for a recession that most of them say has already arrived. The survey tells us how hard they are cutting. The online talk tells us what the cutting means: the decent Indonesian absorbs the squeeze at home, quietly, and the voices that refuse that duty are the ones that travel furthest.

82%
say a recession has arrived or is coming

37%
say the country is heading the right way (70% in 2025)

55%
say their household is struggling to meet daily needs

25 of 25
spending categories are flat or down

1. **People are bracing before they are breaking.** 82% expect or feel a recession, yet 55% say their own household is struggling. Even among those who are coping, three in four (76%) still expect a recession. Much of the cutting is prevention, driven by fear of what is coming.
2. **The national mood fell faster than household finances.** Belief that Indonesia is on the right track halved in a year, from 70% to 37%, while household difficulty barely moved (52% to 55%). People feel the country is slipping before they feel it at the dinner table.
3. **Visible spending goes first, the basics stay.** Snacks and dining out are cut hardest (both net −45), while cooking ingredients hold flat. Online, thrift is described as going back to 'factory settings': cooking at home and swapping brands inside a category rather than dropping it.
4. **The squeeze is absorbed at home, and the body pays last.** Most of the coping talk is about absorbing the cost personally or carrying the family. Four in ten Indonesians call themselves the sandwich generation, and 62% of them are struggling. Medicine and doctor visits are being cut while people talk about faking good health to keep working.
5. **The posts that get the most reaction refuse to endure, yet none points to a fix.** People joke, plan to leave the country or blame the state. Almost none of it names a demand or a next step. Even the emerging talk about knowing your labour rights teaches more than it organises.
6. **Brands still speak a language of cheerful thrift that people no longer live.** The opportunity is to protect dignity: be the brand people trade down to without feeling poorer, give small treats a reason to exist, and look after the body that earns the household's income.

1. Why put numbers and meaning side by side

A thermometer tells you a child has a fever. It doesn't tell you whether the family is calling the doctor, buying jamu at the warung, or waiting and praying it passes. Each of those responses says something different about money, trust and duty, and each calls for a different kind of help.

This paper combines two lenses for the same reason. The **IRIS Indonesia Confidence Survey 2026** measures how confidence, spending and attitudes have shifted since 2025. The **coping semiotics study** reads the public talk around those shifts: the words, jokes, hashtags and complaints Indonesians use when they discuss getting by. One gives the size of the change, the other gives its meaning.

The two sources

	IRIS Confidence Survey 2026	Coping semiotics study
What it is	Online survey of 503 Indonesian adults, part of the IRIS global tracking study	Cultural analysis of public posts using Illuminate's AI-assisted semiotics engine
When	Fieldwork 3–11 November 2026	Posts in 2026
Coverage	Economic confidence, spending across 25 categories, health perceptions	8,064 public posts from Threads, X and TikTok
Strength	Comparable over time (2023–2026), weighted to the BPS 2026 adult population	Shows the shared rules and meanings behind behaviour, in people's own words

The cultural question

The survey asks how much people are cutting. The semiotic reading asks a different question: **what does it mean to be a decent Indonesian when money runs short?** Our answer, in one line: a decent Indonesian absorbs the squeeze at home. The posts that get the most reaction refuse that duty by joking, leaving or blaming, but none of them points to a fix. The rest of this paper builds that argument from both sides.

2. The numbers: a country braced for worse

Optimism halved in a year

In 2025, seven in ten Indonesians said the country was heading in the right direction. In November 2026 it is 37%, the lowest point in the four years IRIS has tracked, and 57% now say the wrong direction. Nearly three in four (73%) say the economy is weaker than last year, up from 40%. Part of that jump reflects a finer answer scale in 2026, which pushed some ‘about the same’ answers to either side, but the direction is unmistakable.

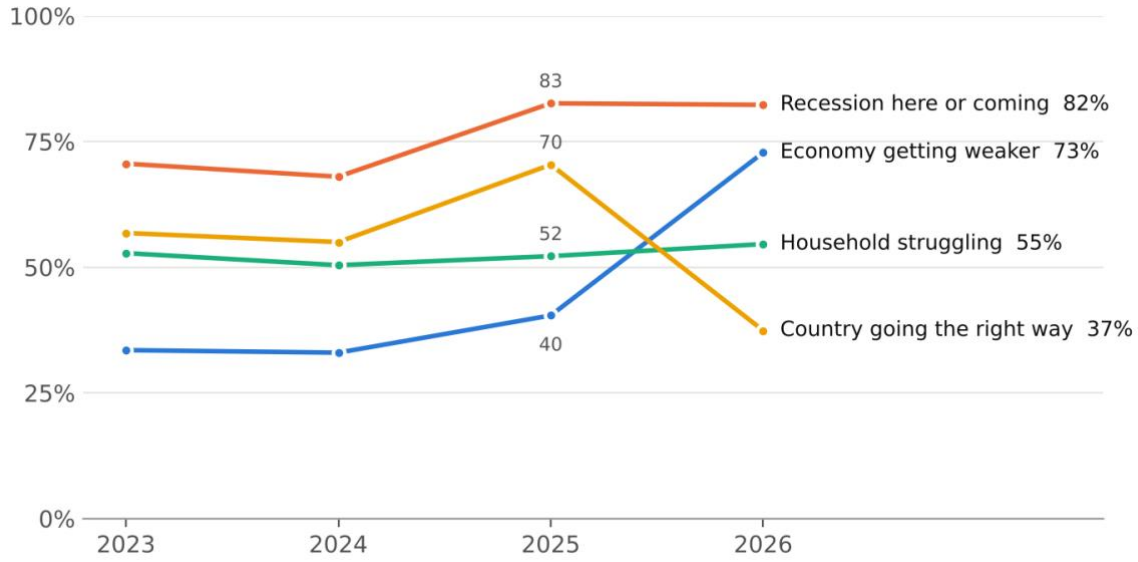

Figure 1. National mood has fallen sharply; household difficulty has not. Base: 2026 n=503, age-weighted to BPS 2026 adults; 2025 n=500, unweighted and younger-skewed. The 2026 economy question used a five-point scale (three points in earlier waves).

Recession fears have stayed high rather than grown: 82% say a recession has arrived or is coming, the same as 2025. The household line is the striking one. At 55%, household difficulty is within the margin of error of every year since 2023. **People feel the country slipping before they feel it in their own kitchen.**

Gloom is not only a low-income story. 82% of the highest-spending households say the economy is weaker, against 69% of the lowest, and only 28% of upper-spending households think the country is on the right track. The middle and upper classes feel exposed, a point the online talk makes loudly (see Section 3).

Cuts are deeper and now reach the essentials

Every type of cut we track rose against 2025. Clothing, travel and dining out are cut by more than eight in ten. The bigger shift is in the essentials: half now cut daily groceries (51%, up from 35%), half cut electricity, water and gas, and 28% missed or were late on rent or a mortgage.

Experienced as a result of the economic situation	2025	2026	Change
Spending less on clothing	71%	84%	+13
Cutting travel, tourism and holidays	73%	83%	+10

Experienced as a result of the economic situation	2025	2026	Change
Eating out less	76%	83%	+7
Cutting paid sports, fitness or hobbies	56%	76%	+20
Cutting daily groceries and staples	35%	51%	+16
Cutting internet or mobile credit	40%	48%	+8
Giving less to charity or donations	26%	30%	+5
Cutting back on medication or treatment	24%	30%	+6
Missing or late on rent or mortgage	24%	28%	+4

Base: 2026 n=503, age-weighted; 2025 n=500. Changes under about 7 pts are within the margin of error.

Retrenchment across all 25 categories

Net spending sentiment (the share spending more minus the share spending less) is negative or flat in every category we measured. Treats and out-of-home spending fall hardest. Snacks and dining out both sit at −45, ready-to-drink beverages at −36 and takeaway at −34. Cooking ingredients (0), health insurance (−3) and baby products (−4) hold up best.

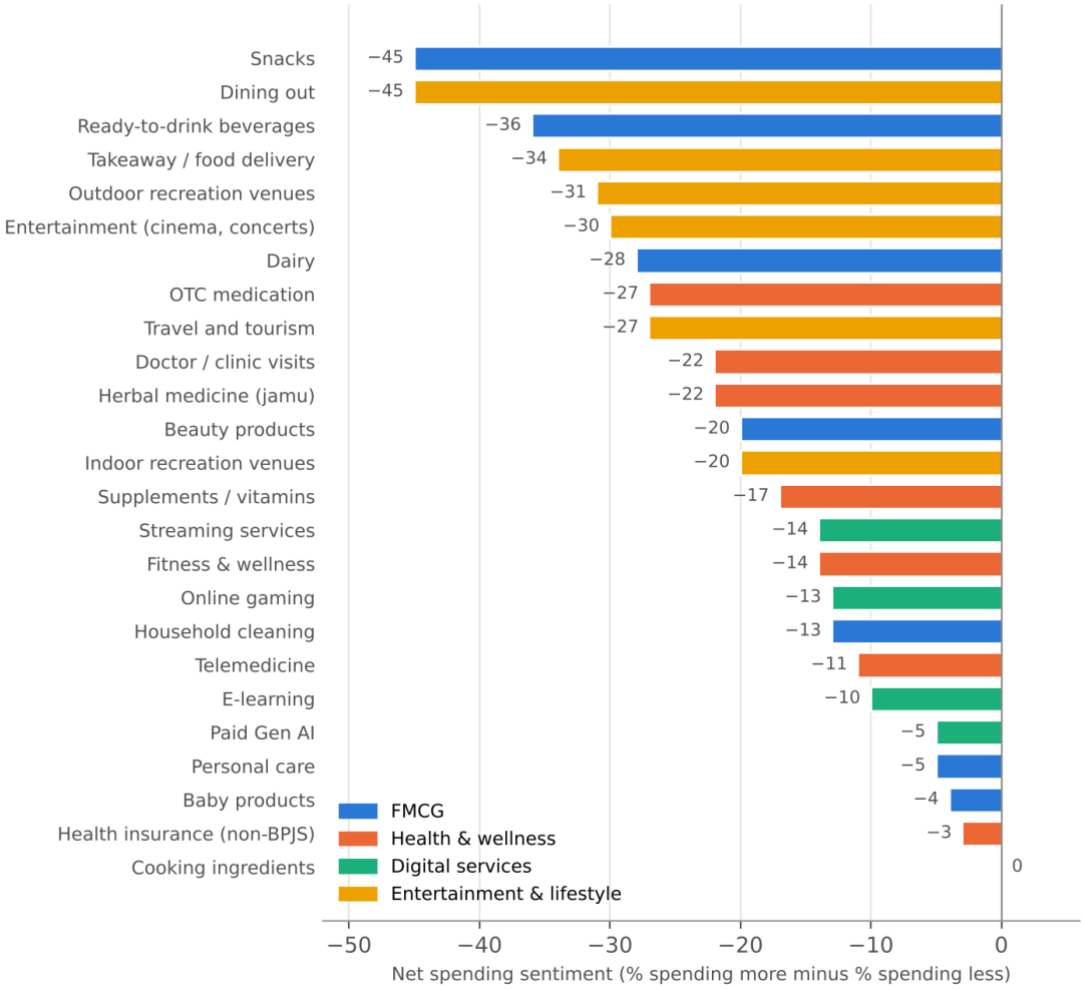

Figure 2. Net spending sentiment vs last year, all respondents (n=503, age-weighted).

Gen X, the generation most likely to be supporting both children and parents, cuts back hardest: an average net of −39 across lifestyle categories and −25 across FMCG.

Feeling healthy, spending less on health

Seven in ten (70%) rate their own health as good or better, up from 58% in 2025. Prevention, though, is mostly do-it-yourself: 67% ate healthier and 59% exercised more, while only 16% saw a doctor for a check-up or screening. Net spending on doctor visits fell to −22, from −11 in 2025, and OTC medication is down −27. Section 4 shows why that matters.

3. The meanings: how Indonesians talk about coping

A crisis with its own vocabulary

Economic pressure has stopped being a private worry. It now has a public vocabulary that is political, funny and anxious at once. **In this economy**, **tanggal tua** (old date, end of month, before payday), **turun kelas** (drop a class), **generasi sandwich** (Sandwich generation) and **jangan sakit** (don't get sick) are shared shorthand. Hashtags such as #IndonesiaGelap (Dark Indonesia) and #KaburAjaDulu (Just leave first) turn private frustration into a public stance. Fuel prices, taxes, layoffs and the free-meal programme (MBG) give the anger an address. And people argue over whether the crisis is even real, pointing to full malls on one side and empty wallets on the other.

Five oppositions organise the talk

Semiotics starts from pairs of ideas that give each other meaning. In each pair below, the left-hand term is the culturally expected one, the way a decent person is supposed to respond. The codes that are rising all lean right.

Expected	Rising	What signals it
Private: a household problem	Public: a political problem	family, savings, scrimping vs parliament, taxes, dark Indonesia
Endure: stay and bear it	Exit: leave, by any route	patience, acceptance, gratitude vs #justleavefirst, a salary in dollars
Looking fine: the spending you see	Being fine: the strain you don't	full malls, keeping up appearances, self reward vs living off savings, pretending to be healthy
Saving: money set aside	Owing: money borrowed	savings, gold, just in case vs online loans, paylater, buying on credit at the warung
Body as self: health as wellbeing	Body as asset: health as income	healthy, healing, rest vs the family breadwinner, don't get sick

Fifteen codes in five territories

We grouped the meanings into 15 codes. Each code is a recurring way of making sense of hardship, backed by many distinct voices. Codes that answer the same question form a territory.

Territory	The question it answers	Codes
1. Absorb it yourself	Who pays for the squeeze? I do.	A1 Back to factory settings A2 From savings to debt A3 A treat needs a permit A4 Hedge against the system
2. Find another way	Where does more money come from?	B1 One job is not enough B2 Work is scarce and underpaid B3 Exit is an option
3. Carry the family	Who carries the household?	C1 Salary just passes through C2 Breadwinning renegotiated C3 The body is the last asset
4. Leave it to God	Why is this happening?	D1 A test, not a punishment
5. Contest it	Whose fault is it, and is it even real?	E1 The state is the cause E2 The middle is sinking E3 A crisis you can't see E4 Laugh to stay sane E5 Know your rights

Four of the five territories keep the burden private. Only 'Contest it' points outwards, and even there much of the energy goes into doubt and humour.

The semiotic square: most people bear it

The square maps the codes on two axes: whether people accept or refuse the hardship, and whether they stay and engage or let go. That gives four positions: **Bear it** (accept and stay), **Contest it** (refuse and stay), **Surrender it** (accept and let go) and **Exit it** (refuse and let go).

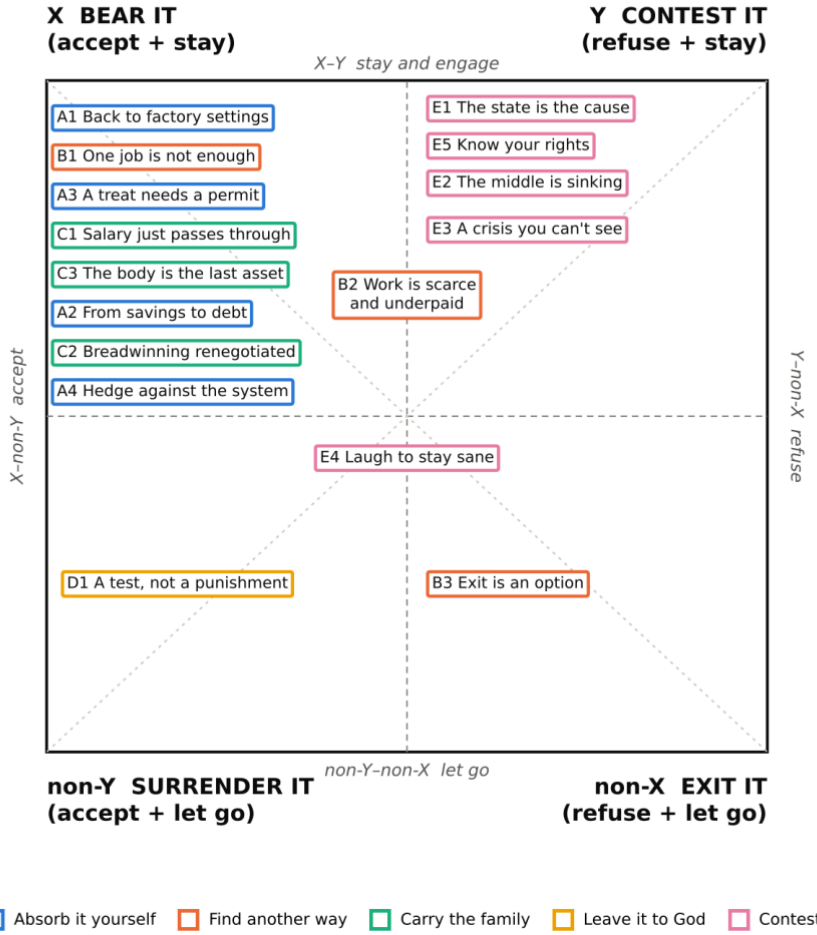

Figure 3. Semiotic square of coping codes. Edges name the shared term of each pair of corners; dotted diagonals join contradictions. B2 straddles Bear and Contest; E4 sits at the centre, used from every position. Placement is the analyst's reading; border colour shows territory.

Most of the talk falls under **Bear it**. Very few people let go entirely: faith-based surrender (D1) is a residual code, and exit (B3) is more often a statement than a plan. Humour (E4) sits at the centre of the square, because people joke from every position. That is its role: a joke releases the pressure, and it can also make the pressure feel normal.

Volume and reaction tell different stories. Most people bear it, yet the posts that draw the most reaction are the ones that refuse the duty: jokes, plans to leave and blame on the state. Debt and hedging stay quiet. People keep fear and owing to themselves.

The myths that keep hardship private

Barthes used 'myth' for a meaning so familiar it passes as common sense. Three myths hold the Bear it position in place, and one counter-myth is pushing against them.

Myth	What it treats as natural	Who it suits
"Hardship is a household matter."	The right response to a national squeeze is private: cut, carry, don't complain.	Institutions, whose role disappears from view
"Patience is a virtue, not a cost."	Bearing it is moral; asking for more, even the legal minimum wage, is greed.	Employers and anyone asking for restraint

Myth	What it treats as natural	Who it suits
“The middle class is the nation.”	The strain only counts once it reaches the middle, and looking fine means being fine.	Leaves the poor out of the story
Counter-myth: “I don’t owe anyone my suffering.”	Hardship is not a duty. Leaving, spending on a treat or refusing the provider role can be legitimate.	Rising in the exit, treat and breadwinning codes

Codes on the move: from enduring to negotiating

Reading the codes as residual, dominant and emergent shows where meaning is heading. Faith-based patience is fading. Absorbing the cost at home is the mainstream answer. The emergent codes all bargain: people borrow, plan to leave, argue over who provides, dispute whether the crisis is real and start to learn their rights.

Status	Code	The shift in meaning
Residual	D1 A test, not a punishment	Prayer as hope becomes prayer as the only option left
Dominant	A1 Back to factory settings	Thrift as a virtue becomes thrift as a reflex that no longer works
Dominant	C1 Salary just passes through	Family duty as honour becomes family duty as a burden
Dominant	C3 The body is the last asset	Health as wellbeing becomes health as income insurance
Dominant	E4 Laugh to stay sane	A joke as escape becomes a joke as shared testimony
Emergent	A2 From savings to debt	Savings as the buffer become debt as the buffer (‘Mantab’ to ‘Matang’)
Emergent	A3 A treat needs a permit	A treat as reward becomes a treat that needs a reason
Emergent	B3 Exit is an option	Migration as a last resort becomes exit as a statement
Emergent	C2 Breadwinning renegotiated	‘The husband provides’ becomes ‘who provides is negotiated’
Emergent	E2 The middle is sinking	The middle class as aspiration becomes the middle class as victim
Emergent	E3 A crisis you can’t see	The crisis as fact becomes the crisis as an argument
Emergent	E5 Know your rights	Gratitude for any job becomes knowing what the law owes you

A few voices show the texture of these codes:

> “Orang" balik ke setelan pabrik. Masak dirumah makan mie tahu tempe”
> *People go back to factory settings: cooking at home, noodles, tofu, tempeh*
> A1 · Threads reply, 2026
>
> “dulu bs menabung.. skrg boro boro nabung duit 200 rb z kudu pinjem bank keliling”
> *I used to save; now even 200k means borrowing from a door-to-door lender*
> A2 · TikTok comment, 2026
>
> “tahun ini atau tahun depan bisa ikut #kaburajadulu udah muak banget sama ini negara”
> *This year or next, I hope I can join #kaburajadulu. I’m fed up with this country*
> B3 · TikTok comment, 2025 · 12,344 likes
>
> “NYESEL BANGETTT DI USIA PRODUKTIF GA TAU HAK NORMATIF PEKERJA □”
> *I regret not knowing workers’ basic legal rights in my most productive years*
> E5 · X post, 2026 · 33,810 likes

4. Where the numbers and the talk meet

Put side by side, the survey and the talk agree on a pattern: **people cut before they are hurt, and they guard the basics.** Four findings stand out.

Finding 1: People fear hardship before it arrives

82%
expect or feel a recession

55%
say their own household is struggling

76%
of those not struggling still expect a recession

The gap between national fear and household strain is where much of the coping happens. People hedge (A4) with gold, land and cash under the pillow, and they argue over whether the crisis is real (E3) because the strain is private and the spending is public. Coping, for many, starts as prevention.

> "Serem bgt 2030 katanya bakal resesi gede²an 😱 kudu beli emas ataukah properti yak"
> *Scary: they say 2030 brings a huge recession. Gold or property?*
> A4 · Threads post, 2026 · 4,395 likes

Behavioural science explains the move. Loss aversion makes an expected loss feel larger than an equal gain, so people act on the forecast long before the bill arrives. For brands, this means the pullback is partly anticipatory, and reassurance can move people as much as a price cut.

Finding 2: People cut what others see first and keep the basics

Even among people who say their household is coping, 70% still cut eating out. Cooking ingredients hold flat (net 0) while snacks and dining out fall to −45. The talk explains how: households keep the category and swap the brand (A1), and a treat now has to be cheap, earned or justified (A3).

> "tanggal tua aku beli kecap manis nya bukan bango, tpi kecap sedaap krna lebih murah"
> *At month's end I buy Sedaap, not Bango, because it's cheaper*
> A1 · TikTok comment, 2026

This is good news for brands that stay easy to find and easy to afford. Marketing science shows that when people trade down within a category, they pick from the brands that come to mind and sit within reach. Mental and physical availability decide who catches the switcher. Beauty (−20) is holding better than snacks (−45): a treat survives when it earns its place.

Finding 3: People only treat illness when it stops them working

OTC medication (−27), doctor visits (−22) and herbal medicine (−22) are all being cut, and only 16% saw a doctor for prevention. Yet 70% say their health is good. The talk shows why these two facts sit together. The body is what earns (C3), so falling ill is a cost the family cannot carry, and admitting to feeling unwell feels like a luxury.

> "dulu pura" sakit biar libur sekolah, sekarang pura" sehat biar tetap kerja."
> *I used to fake illness to skip school; now I fake health to keep working*
> C3 · TikTok comment, 2026

The self-rated health figure should be read in that light. Some of the improvement may be real, and some may be people who cannot afford to say otherwise.

Finding 4: People cut family and faith last

Four in ten Indonesians (39%) describe themselves as the sandwich generation, supporting parents and children at once. They are under clearly more pressure than everyone else.

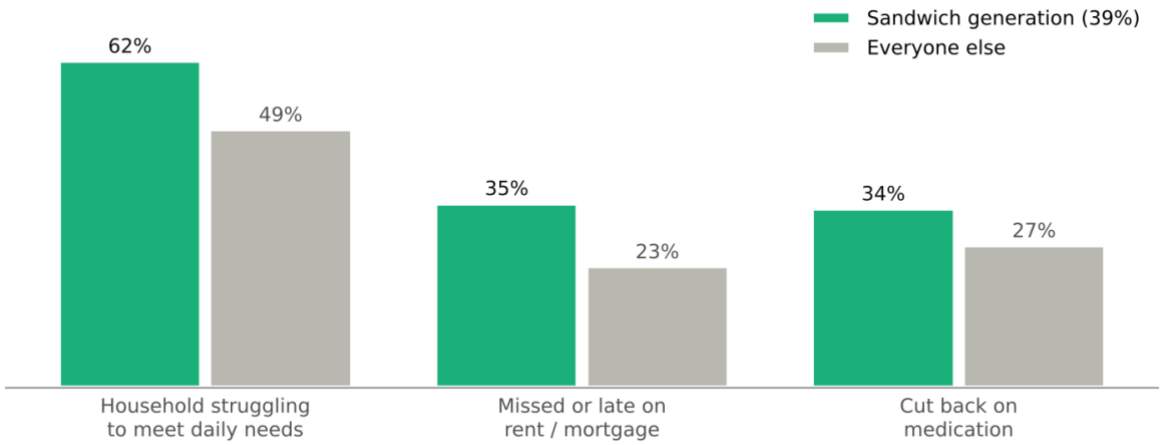

Figure 4. Pressure on the sandwich generation vs everyone else, 2026 (age-weighted). Subgroup bases are around 200, so read the gaps as indicative.

Money for parents, siblings and giving is treated as untouchable. Charity is cut by only 30%, against 84% for clothing. In behavioural terms, this is mental accounting: the salary is split into separate pots before it arrives, and the family and faith pots are not up for negotiation. The talk captures how little is left once they are filled (C1).

> “Gaji masuk, 20 detik kemudian sisa 100 ribu □”
> *Salary comes in; 20 seconds later, 100k is left*
> C1 · TikTok video, 2026 · 29,000 likes

5. What it means for brands

Brands still sell thrift as a skill; people live it as a loss

Much category advertising still speaks the residual language of cheerful, clever thrift. Set against what people say and do, the gap is wide.

How brands tend to talk	How people live it	What backs it up
“Hemat itu pintar”: thrift as a clever skill	Thrift is a reflex that has stopped working	Cooking ingredients hold (net 0) because people swap brands, not because saving feels smart
“Untuk keluarga tercinta”: family as warmth	Family is also the biggest fixed cost	39% are sandwich generation; 62% of them are struggling
“Naik kelas”: premium as progress	The fear is falling a class, not rising one	Even among people not struggling, 70% cut eating out
“Diskon! Flash sale!”: spend now, think later	A treat now needs a reason	Beauty falls less (−20) than snacks (−45)
“Cicilan 0%, paylater”: credit as convenience	Debt is becoming the new savings	‘Mantab’ to ‘Matang’: from eating savings to eating debt, mostly discussed as a joke

The market has already started to move. Sellers now use hardship slang such as ‘ramah gaji UMR’ (friendly to a minimum-wage salary) and ‘versi BPJS’ (the cheap version). The language of the squeeze is becoming a selling language.

Stop praising thrift; start protecting dignity

Stop	Keep	Start
Thrift as cheerful heroism	Respect for family duty	Dignity in trading down: be the brand people switch to
Telling people to ‘turunkan gengsi’ (“lower your pride”)	Pack sizes and refills that protect the basics	Treats with a permit: ‘murah tapi nampol’ (cheap but powerful)
Credit sold as relief, with the cost unsaid	Month-end humour (‘tanggal tua’)	Care for the breadwinner’s body
Upgrade talk that ignores ‘turun kelas’ (sliding down a class)	Sedekah and giving as part of the story	Humour that laughs with people and punches up, carefully

Moves by category

Category	Signal	The move
Food and everyday FMCG	Snacks −45, RTD −36; cooking ingredients 0	Be the brand people trade down to. Smaller packs, honest value and wide distribution, with no ‘smart saver’ lecture. Switchers choose from the brands that are present and easy to recall.
Personal care and beauty	Beauty −20, holding better than snacks	Be the permitted treat. Talk about results per rupiah, ‘murah tapi hasilnya gong’ (“cheap but the result is great”), rather than indulgence. Give the purchase its reason.

Category	Signal	The move
Health and OTC	Doctor −22, OTC −27, herbal −22; 16% preventive check-ups	Protect the body that earns. Fast, affordable relief, prices people can trust, and framing that treats care as protecting the family's income.
Financial services	Paylater and pinjol (online loan) in the talk; savings buffer gone	Name the cost. Help people out of debt and towards safety, and avoid pushing the next instalment. Trust is scarce and will reward honesty.

6. Looking ahead to 2027–28

Three emergent codes could become mainstream. What happens to wages, prices, credit rules and jobs will decide which ones do.

Code	Goes mainstream if…	Fades if…
B3 Exit is an option	Layoffs and fuel shocks continue, and officials keep dismissing #KaburAjaDulu	Domestic jobs recover, or routes abroad get harder and costlier
A2 From savings to debt	Savings stay thin while paylater stays easy	Wages catch up with prices, or regulation tightens credit
C2 Breadwinning renegotiated	More dual-income households and male job losses push the debate into the open	Religious framing reasserts the provider role

Two directions

Quiet absorption. Prices settle and households keep absorbing. Bear it stays dominant and the humour softens. Value delivered with dignity wins.

Loud exit. Layoffs and price shocks continue. Exit and Contest grow, debt spreads and trust thins. Brands get read politically whether they like it or not.

In both directions the language of thrift heroics loses ground. The question for brands is whether they meet people in dignity or in dissent. We will track the share of exit and contest talk, mentions of 'Matang' and paylater, 'pura-pura sehat' (pretending to be healthy) and nafkah (financial support / maintenance) debates ahead of the 2027 IRIS wave.

7. A closing reflection

Indonesians have a phrase for carrying a load together: gotong royong. What stands out in this year's talk is how rarely it appears. Across the codes, the same things go unsaid: who sets the prices, what the state owes, how people might act together. The load is carried at home, by the breadwinner and the sandwich child, while the public conversation laughs, threatens to leave or points at the government.

The numbers say people are bracing. The talk says they are bracing alone. Brands can't fix the economy, but they can choose whether they add to the weight or help carry some of it. In a year when looking fine and being fine have drifted apart, the brands that notice the difference will be the ones people remember when things turn.

Appendix: Method and limits

IRIS Indonesia Confidence Survey 2026

- Online survey of 503 adults aged 18+ across Indonesia, fieldwork 3–11 November 2026, as part of the IRIS global confidence study. Global comparisons will follow once all markets complete fieldwork.
- Data weighted by age to the BPS 2026 adult population.
- Net spending sentiment = % spending more minus % spending less, among all respondents. Sandwich-generation and ‘not struggling’ cuts are Illuminate analysis of the weighted data; subgroup gaps are indicative.

Coping semiotics study

- **Collect.** Illuminate’s AI semiotics engine collected 8,064 public posts from Threads, X and TikTok, covering 2025 to November 2026.
- **Anonymise.** Usernames were replaced with anonymised codes before saving, in line with UU PDP.
- **Filter.** Every item was read; non-Indonesian posts, wrong word senses, ads and off topic posts were set aside.
- **Read the signs.** For each kept item, we noted the signifiers (words, hashtags, emoji) and what they signify.
- **Code.** Meanings were clustered into 15 codes in five territories.
- **Structure.** The codes were read for oppositions, the semiotic square, myths and trajectory.

Limits

- Public posts show how hardship is talked about in public. They describe shared meanings, and are not a measure of how many people hold them.
- The residual, dominant and emergent labels are the analyst’s reading of where each code is heading.
- The survey is online, so digital adoption and spending are likely higher than in the offline population.
- Quotes are verbatim with English glosses; usernames are withheld.