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CATEGORY TRENDS 2026

TOP 5
TRENDS

1 **FUNCTIONAL EVERYTHING**
Our first report in this series covers how shoppers respond to
functional positioning across four product categories

2 Clean Label is Maturing

3 Purposeful Indulgence

4 Home as a Performance Hub

5 Micro-Targeted Benefits

INTRODUCTION

This report examines how shoppers respond to functional positioning across consumer categories using large-scale review and discussion data, all sourced via Harmonya's Insights Agent.

Functional claims now appear across most major categories. Shoppers expect products to address specific needs tied to daily routines, physical states, and household contexts. Review data shows that functional language alone does not consistently correlate with positive sentiment. Instead, shoppers respond selectively, with repeat purchase driven by performance that is easy to evaluate and outcomes that are experienced directly.

Across food and beverage, personal care, household cleaning, and pet care, review language follows a consistent structure. Experience-related terms appear more frequently than functional or ingredient-specific language. Taste, texture, comfort, ease of use, and visible results are the most common drivers of positive sentiment. Ingredient names and advanced claims appear less frequently and are typically secondary.

The analysis focuses on how shoppers describe products after use, what they reward with positive sentiment, and where skepticism emerges, with particular attention to gaps between functional claims and lived experience.

SCOPE

This report analyzes shopper behavior across four categories:

- Food and Beverage
- Personal Care
- Household Cleaning
- Pet Care

Findings reflect how functional positioning performs across different product contexts rather than category-specific tactics.

METHODOLOGY

Insights are based on analysis of consumer reviews and Reddit discussions collected between October 2025 and January 2026.

Review data captures post-purchase evaluation, including sentiment drivers, attribute mentions, and outcome descriptions. Reddit data captures earlier-stage evaluation, where shoppers discuss use cases, ingredient concerns, performance expectations, and tradeoffs.
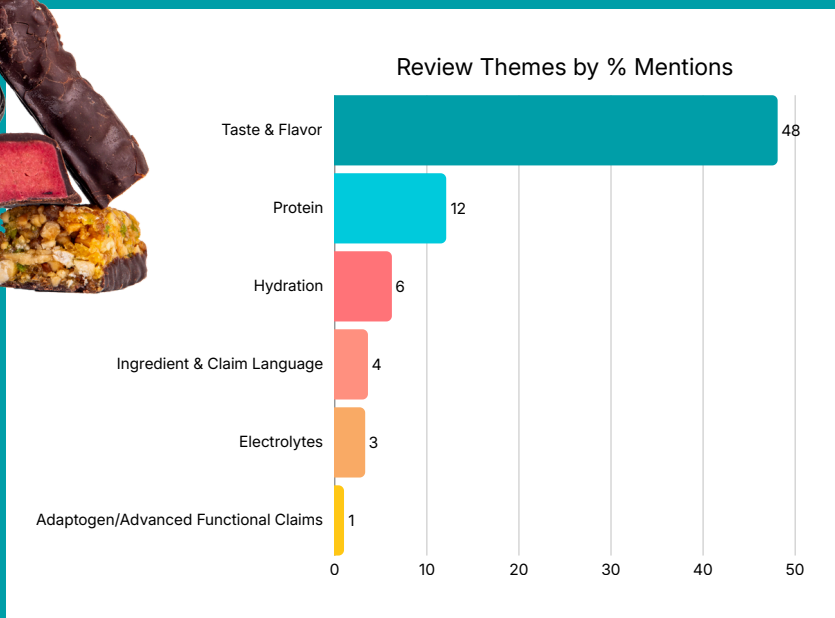
FOOD AND
BEVERAGE

EXPERIENCE DOMINATES FUNCTION

In functional food and beverage categories, taste is the dominant driver of positive sentiment.

Negative sentiment is most often associated with artificial aftertaste or reported side effects, appearing in 2.5% of reviews.

Across sports drinks, hydration powders, snack bars, and nutrition bars (44,519 reviews, last 3 months), taste and flavor appear in 48.1% of reviews. Protein appears in 12.1% of reviews, primarily within snack and nutrition bars. Hydration appears in 6.2% of reviews, while electrolytes appear in 3.3%. Ingredient and claim-related language appears in 3.6% of reviews. Adaptogen and advanced functional claims appear in 1.0% of reviews.

Reddit discussions reflect the same prioritization seen in reviews:

Approximately 60% of hydration-related threads focus on sports and endurance use cases, while 30% focus on daily wellness.

Artificial sweeteners are frequently cited as a reason for rejection.

Review Themes by % Mentions

Theme	% Mentions
Taste & Flavor	48
Protein	12
Hydration	6
Ingredient & Claim Language	4
Electrolytes	3
Adaptogen/Advanced Functional Claims	1

Source: 44,519 reviews, October-December 2025

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PERSONAL CARE

In personal care, shoppers describe product performance primarily using **outcome-based language rather than ingredient terminology**.

Across 49,731 reviews for ceramide moisturizers and barrier balms, ceramide itself appears in just 1.4% of reviews. Barrier repair themes appear in 1.5%. Ingredient mentions are present but infrequent relative to experience-based descriptions.

49,731
Reviews for ceramide moisturizers and barrier balms

1.4%
Ceramide appeared in just 1.4% of reviews

1.5%
Barrier repair appeared in just 1.5% of reviews

Outcomes Over Ingredients

Positive sentiment clusters around hydration, soothing, and relief for sensitive or eczema-prone skin. Texture-related terms such as non-greasy, fast absorbing, and lightweight appear consistently in positive reviews. Fragrance-free positioning is frequently cited as a benefit.

Negative sentiment is limited and typically tied to products that feel sticky or fail to moisturize sufficiently.

Reddit discussions frame barrier products as recovery solutions, often following irritation from activities or environmental exposure.

CLEANING: FUNCTION IS USE-CASE SPECIFIC

In household cleaning, functional claims are evaluated almost exclusively against specific messes and outcomes.

Review and Reddit language consistently associate enzyme-based cleaners most strongly with pet urine, food spills, and laundry odors. Shoppers express higher confidence when products explain enzyme function and application clearly.

Skepticism increases when enzyme claims are vague or unsupported. Products with clear use instructions and visible results generate more consistent positive sentiment than broadly positioned alternatives.

PET CARE

In pet care, functional performance is evaluated alongside ease of administration.

Review and Reddit discussions concentrate on mobility and digestion, particularly for aging pets and sensitive stomachs. Ingredients such as glucosamine, chondroitin, omega-3s, and probiotics are frequently referenced in recommendations.

Positive sentiment depends on both visible improvement and whether pets willingly consume the product. **Soft chews and powders mixed into food receive more favorable discussion than formats requiring forced administration.**

Review and Reddit language play complementary roles in how shoppers evaluate functional products.

REVIEW LANGUAGE
AND REDDIT SIGNALS

Reviews primarily capture post-purchase assessment. Shoppers describe whether a product met expectations, focusing on taste, texture, comfort, ease of use, and visible results. This language reflects confirmation. Products that deliver clear outcomes generate consistent experience-based descriptions, while gaps between claims and performance surface quickly through negative sentiment.
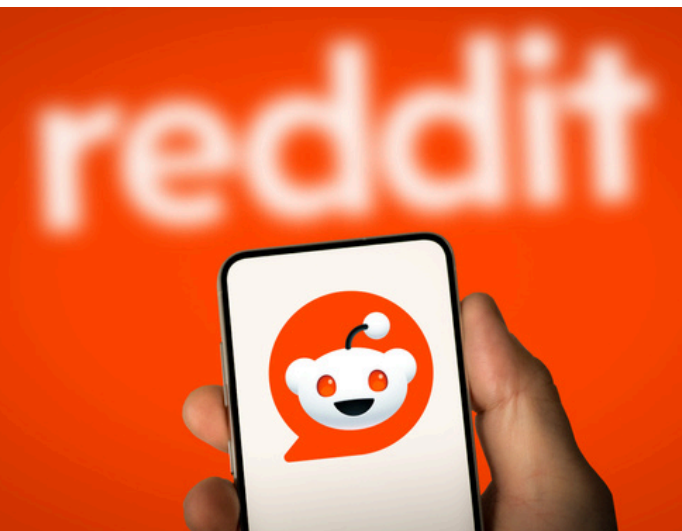
Reddit conversations surface earlier in the decision cycle. Shoppers use Reddit to test assumptions, compare alternatives, and seek guidance on ingredient choices, appropriate use cases, value tradeoffs, and efficacy. Questions around artificial sweeteners, enzyme effectiveness, dosage, and compliance appear frequently before purchase decisions are made.

Together, these signals illustrate how functional expectations form, evolve, and stabilize. Reddit reveals emerging concerns and unmet questions. Reviews show which products ultimately satisfy those expectations in real-world use.

This dynamic highlights the value of connecting early-stage shopper language with post-purchase outcomes. **Understanding where questions originate and how they resolve allows teams to identify gaps between positioning and performance, surface emerging needs earlier, and track which functional attributes actually sustain positive sentiment.**
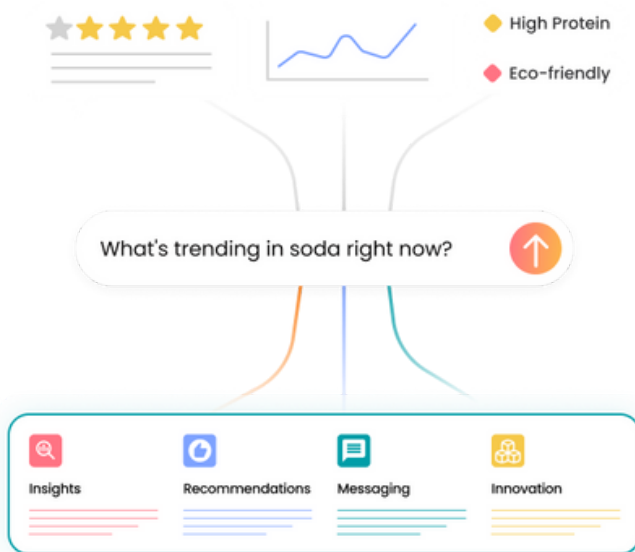
WHAT WE DO

Harmonya

Harmonya helps teams analyze review and discussion language together, linking early shopper signals to validated performance outcomes.

By structuring and quantifying shopper language across sources, we reveal which functional attributes generate interest, which claims are tested during evaluation, and which experiences ultimately sustain positive sentiment after purchase.

YOY Growth +51.7%

Avg. Rating ★★★★½

Summary Authentic, premium, nostalgic, great taste

High Protein

Eco-friendly

What's trending in soda right now?

Insights | Recommendations | Messaging | Innovation

Legacy product data wasn't built to reflect how shoppers browse, search, or decide what to buy. As a result, critical signals around emerging needs, sentiment shifts, and functional tradeoffs often remain hidden.

Harmonya enriches product data with the language consumers actually use.

We add depth, structure, and shopper context to every product, so your team sees what's happening and why it matters.

WHAT THIS SIGNALS FOR 2026

Functional positioning will continue to expand across categories.

Data shows higher engagement and repeat purchase where functional benefits are paired with clear use cases and consistent experience. Broad wellness language and stacked claims show lower mention frequency and weaker sentiment alignment than specific, outcome-driven positioning.

Products that align functional benefits with everyday experience maintain stronger positive sentiment over time.

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