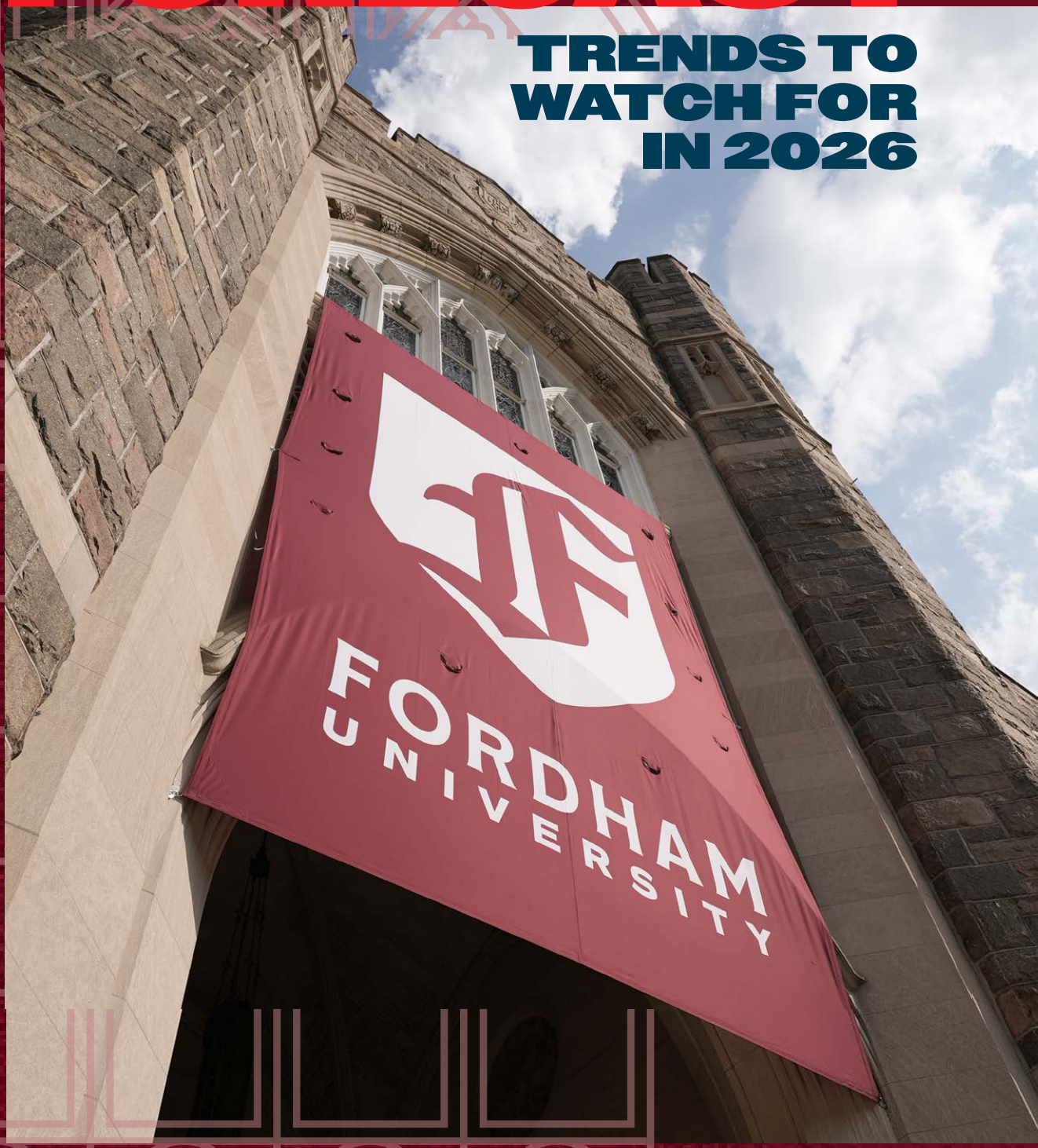
FORDHAM FORECAST

TRENDS TO WATCH FOR IN 2026



From how we work out and watch movies to how we borrow money, build housing, and raise our children in an AI-saturated world, the year ahead will be shaped by fast-moving change—technological, social, economic, and cultural.

Drawing on analysis from Fordham scholars and experts across a wide range of disciplines, the *Fordham Forecast* places today's trends in context, illuminating where we've been and where we're headed next.

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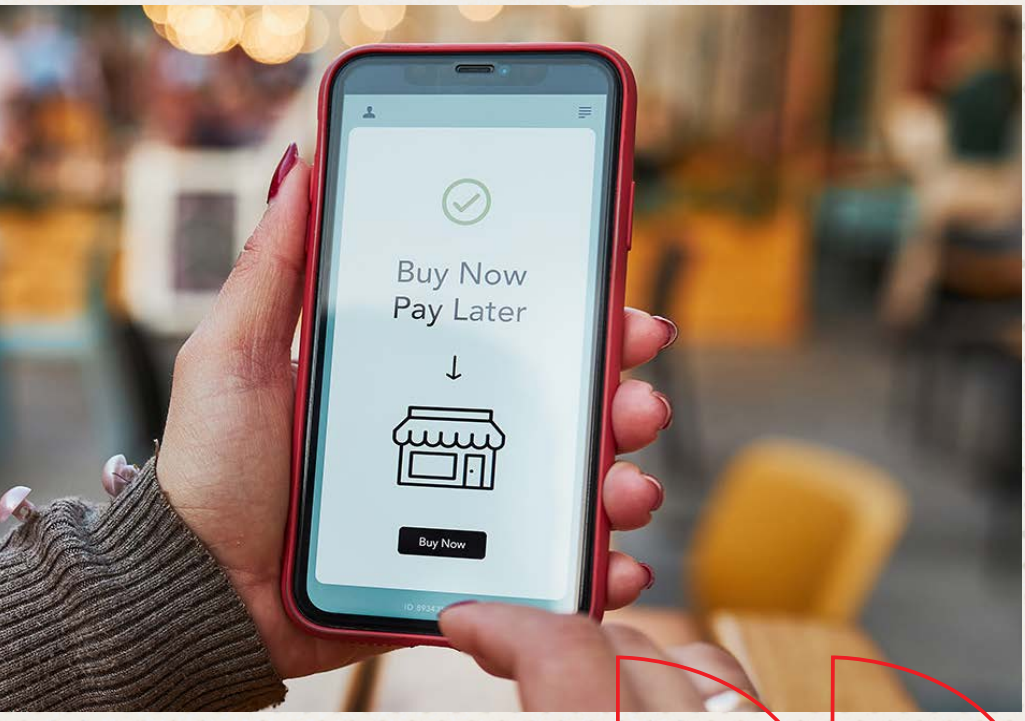
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Buy Now, Pay Later Services Lead to Overblown Debt

Americans are increasingly turning to buy now, pay later services like Klarna and Affirm as financial pressures grow. High debt and unemployment levels, coupled with significant inflation, suggest the trend will persist, says Fordham's Giacomo Santangelo—until it becomes unsustainable.

"I expect the continuation of normalizing the idea of renting and buying on credit over spending money that we actually have," said Santangelo, senior lecturer in economics and an expert on affordability and inflation.

He said that although buying on credit is not new, developments such as Klarna's recent partnership with DoorDash, which allows consumers to pay for takeout and groceries on credit, are taking things to another level.



"Then you're making interest payments on things like Thanksgiving dinner. You're going to be making payments on that in January, February, March, maybe all the way to next Thanksgiving," he said. "You are literally borrowing from the future."

More borrowing will lead to untenable situations for many Americans, he said, "whether it's because their credit runs out or their patience runs out."

"At some point, people will be looking for refinance 'options' to deal with their overblown debt. We are already seeing defaults, and that will continue, if not grow."

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Classrooms 'Going Medieval' in an AI World

As generative AI becomes adept at drafting essays, some universities are turning to a centuries-old method to assess what students truly know. Professors are "going medieval" by reviving the *viva voce*—the oral exam that once dominated universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of Paris in medieval times. In these settings, students demonstrated their knowledge by debating, defending, and interrogating ideas in real time.

The shift underscores an enduring need for skills AI can't easily replace: thoughtful communication, flexible reasoning, and the ability to apply knowledge on the spot. Employers in many fields—from policy to consulting to health care—continue to value these human capacities, perhaps even more so as AI levels the playing field for other routine tasks.

At Fordham, several faculty members are implementing oral exams and presentations. Matthew Caulfield, assistant professor of business law and ethics, has replaced his final essay with group oral exams and handwritten, in-person blue book tests.

Caulfield says his students enjoy discussing their work with an expert. "My students often say it's edifying and, perhaps to a lesser extent, somewhat fun," Caulfield said.

Expect to see more instructors adopting this analog approach to help students stand out in an AI-driven world.

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Getting Fit: The Rise of Zone 2

One of the most notable shifts in fitness culture is a growing embrace of "Zone 2 training," or low-intensity, steady movement performed at a pace where you can still hold a conversation. This more moderate approach to working out is gaining recognition for its wide-ranging benefits, particularly for heart health, the joints, and long-term sustainability.

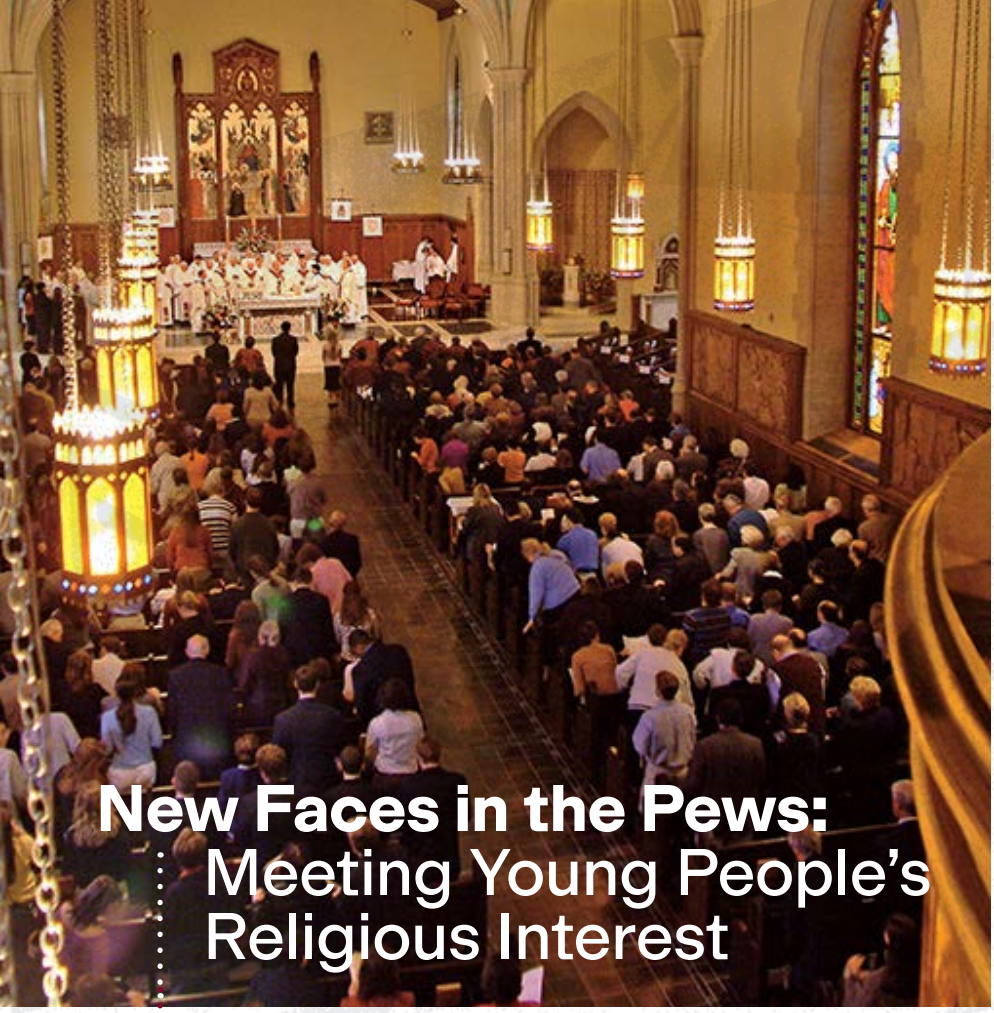
According to Stephen Georgio, a strength and conditioning coach at Fordham, the Zone 2 trend reflects a broader move away from extremes and toward a more balanced understanding of fitness. While high-intensity workouts remain popular for those who enjoy pushing their limits, Georgio notes that consistent, lower-stress movement—such as brisk walking, easy cycling, or light jogging—can deliver meaningful benefits without excessive strain, especially as the body ages.

In keeping with this shift, Georgio says many people are recognizing that fitness doesn't start and stop in the gym, but is shaped by how we care for our bodies throughout the day. In 2026, the focus is moving from how far you can push yourself in a single workout to how well you can sustain movement over time, with a greater emphasis on proper form, range of motion, and recovery.



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New Faces in the Pews: Meeting Young People's Religious Interest

Church attendance was a hot topic in 2025, with observers noting more young people in the pews—particularly young men—sometimes motivated by politics or social media personalities. Fordham's John Cecero, SJ, vice president for mission integration and ministry, said he has seen more young people attending church at Fordham as students look for "opportunities to belong," a trend echoed at other Jesuit universities.

And more people are attending Orthodox Christian churches, a trend that is likely to continue, said George Demacopoulos, co-director of Fordham's Orthodox Christian Studies Center. Despite the media attention on "Orthobros," he said the growing interest goes far beyond conservative young men who associate the church with masculinity. He noted the church's appeal for people of all backgrounds who seek the kind of community, stability, and healing found in Orthodoxy. "The more chaotic our world is … the more an ancient faith tradition like Orthodox Christianity is appealing," he said.

Whatever it is that brought new church members through the doors, Father Cecero said, in the coming year church leaders will be challenged to engage them "in a way that sustains participation."

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Menopause: Less Silence, More Science

Menopause is having a moment. Drew Barrymore opened up about her symptoms on her talk show. Halle Berry took the message to Capitol Hill, declaring, "I'm in menopause," as a leading advocate for awareness. Hashtags like #menopauseawareness were used by thousands on social media. A key change came in November when the U.S. Food and Drug Administration removed warning labels from hormone therapies used to treat the symptoms of menopause, saying the warnings had been based on research that distorted the risks. These developments have led to far greater public discussion of menopause and a shift away from stigma and silence.

In the coming year, Fordham biology professor Marija Kundakovic is pursuing a groundbreaking study of the human brain that could lead to better treatments for mental illness related to the menopause transition. While women's health remains generally under-studied, she sees momentum toward more research into menopause and women's health in the year ahead.

She also sees women continuing to inquire about managing their symptoms rather than just suffering through them."They're reaching out for more information," she said. "I love seeing that because there are many options, from hormone replacement therapy to lifestyle changes, that can help."

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Kids and Phones:
Safeguarding Childhood as Technology Marches On



As concerns grow about the impact of technology on young people, 2026 is likely to bring stronger guardrails for kids. Meanwhile, technological advances will continue their integration into everyday life.

Around the world, governments are experimenting with age restrictions on digital platforms. Australia's recent law barring children under 16 from social media has already inspired similar proposals in Denmark and Malaysia, while U.S. school districts continue to expand bell-to-bell cellphone bans.

According to Elizabeth Stosich, associate professor of educational leadership and policy at Fordham and co-chapter leader of Brooklyn's Mothers Against Media Addiction, these efforts are promising. With school phone bans, early research suggests students are more focused and even achieving at higher levels. In 2026, expect to see more grassroots advocacy to protect kids from the most disruptive aspects of digital life.

At the same time, technology itself isn't going anywhere.

Paul Levinson, professor of communication and media studies at Fordham, says concerns around new technologies are a recurring feature of media history. He points to a 1910 *Good Housekeeping* article that warned movies would become "a training ground for criminals," echoing later fears about video games and the internet. With safeguards in place for kids, Levinson expects newer technologies to become normalized as well, and for the benefits to outweigh the risks.

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A Return to the Movies—and More Indies

Netflix's potential acquisition of media conglomerate Warner Bros. Discovery could have big implications for the film and television industry, from job losses to movie theater closings. But Brandy Monk-Payton, associate professor of communication and media studies, sees audiences responding to the industry's volatile future by leaning into its past.

"Audiences will find renewed energy to go to the movie theater for cinematic experiences and make concerted efforts to preserve the physical media that means the most to them," she said.

At the box office, she predicts that reboots, franchises, and adaptations will still reign—including reimaginings like *Wuthering Heights* and familiar blockbusters like *Toy Story*.

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On the small screen, the "era of prestige TV is over," she said. "While there will always be series that are big budget and make use of complex storytelling"—think *Game of Thrones*—"we will also see a return to tried and true formulas," such as medical dramas like *The Pitt*.

Heidi C. Bordogna, lecturer in the communication and media studies department and a screenwriter, director, and producer, sees quieter, indie productions on the upswing—and not just because they cost less to produce. "That's a trend that's been growing since COVID, and has historical precedent." Following the big-budget films of the '80s came indies such as *Clerks*, she noted. Similarly, the first two decades of the 2000s brought massive franchises like Harry Potter, and now, "audiences are embracing smaller films" like the critically successful *Sorry, Baby* and *Materialists*, produced by A24. Even indie television series could make a mark in 2026. "I think there are smaller, growing companies that are producing lower-budget indie television for streaming," she said. Bordogna also predicts audiences will move away from dystopian films and series. "I think the more hopeful stories will become more pervasive," she said.



More Housing: Removing Roadblocks

With any luck, 2026 will be the year of YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard).

The housing shortage has finally pushed policymakers, including those who tend toward heavier regulation, to take action to increase housing supply, said Joshua Harris, academic director of the Fordham Real Estate Institute.

He says many state and local governments are making real efforts to reduce some of the regulatory hurdles that have slowed building, particularly in the Northeast. It's an argument made in 2025's bestseller *Abundance*, which advocates for reforming rules and promoting innovation.

The need is great. Zillow has estimated that the United States needs 4.7 million new homes to satisfy current housing needs; the Brookings Institution put the number at 4.9 million. What was once a problem primarily for cities like New York City and San Francisco has become a national one. A combination of high prices and low inventory has made it difficult for younger buyers to enter the market; last year, the average age of first-time home buyers reached a record high of 40.

Builders still face challenges from high interest rates and tariffs, but Harris is bullish on initiatives like City of Yes, the NYC plan to reduce barriers to housing.

"I think that the severity of the housing shortage will lead to curing some of the regulatory challenges that have created this mess," he said. "There's more energy and impetus to try to fix things."

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Making Moves in Graphic Design

What might we see when we look around in the new year, taking in all the various messages aimed at us? For one thing, movement—as in, motion graphics everywhere, if recent trends hold, said Fordham graphic design professor Abby Goldstein. "Even posters now, in the subway, they all move," she said.

That's one way that graphic design will continue to drive marketing efforts, with storytelling woven into design elements to form more connection with viewers. "The story behind a color, the story behind an image, the story behind a typeface becomes so important now," she said.

Another trend: more personalization and individuality in company logos, rather than generic, modernist clean lines and functional beauty. Goldstein points to the "NYBG" logo on the New York Botanical Garden's home page as one example.

She noted that fonts are having their moment. "Type has become such an important element in publishing, in marketing, in branding and advertising," said Goldstein, noting the upcoming Type Drives Commerce conference at Fordham. Today, fonts that took years to design can now be done in weeks with computers, and companies everywhere are adopting their own typefaces, which have "become a really important part of brand storytelling," she said.

How to sum it all up? "It's about motion and individual expression," she said. "It's a breaking of rules."

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Fashion Law: Responding to 'Dupe Culture'

As the fashion industry heads into the new year, questions around originality, ownership, and authenticity are once again front and center. According to Susan Scafidi, founder of the Fashion Law Institute at Fordham, the renewed focus on knockoffs shows just how persistent intellectual property issues are in fashion, even as the industry itself continues to evolve. Scafidi, who defined fashion law as a legal field, says copying is still a central issue, now influenced by social media, changing consumer values, and new technology.

One of the biggest forces driving this conversation is the rise of "dupe culture," which has made knockoffs more mainstream and less taboo. Rather than relying solely on public shaming, brands are responding with headline-grabbing lawsuits and creative legal tactics. Ongoing disputes involving Adidas and Hermès highlight how aggressively companies are defending their trademarks, while moves like Lululemon trademarking the phrase "Lululemon dupe" show a more playful and strategic approach to brand protection.

Scafidi points to increased global pushback against cultural appropriation. Countries including Mexico, Ghana, and India are stepping up efforts to protect traditional designs, reflecting a broader cultural shift toward valuing authenticity and craftsmanship.

Lastly, Scafidi noted that AI is rapidly changing how trends are spotted and created, bringing new legal questions around intellectual property and consumer privacy. As designers and brands increasingly rely on algorithms to predict tastes and generate designs, the line between inspiration and infringement is becoming harder to define.

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