AlixPartners

FDRA

U.S. CONSUMER FOOTWEAR SURVEY

Back-to-school anxiety

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It's already back-to-school season for worried shoppers.

According to the AlixPartners U.S. Consumer Footwear Survey, conducted in partnership with Footwear Distributors & Retailers of America, the BTS season kicked off early as parents attempted to beat expected price increases and low inventory in fall: A quarter of consumers planned to start back-to-school shopping before June 15. Another 22% said they will have crossed it off the to do list before July 4. Altogether, 48% planned to have **finished** back-to-shopping by July 4.

Compare that to behavior in 2022, when 40% of respondents to an NPD survey planned to delay BTS purchases *as late as Labor Day* in the hopes of shopping sales. Even in 2024, there was not the same urgency we see this year: the 61% of parents in a JLL survey planned to shop in July, while 92.2% of parents expected to shop BTS supplies that September.

As a bigger-ticket item, shoes are a particular pain point for parents. This year, some stockpiled thrifted shoes or shopped last-season sales to ward off fall and winter purchases as their children grow.

Price is the top concern as household debt marches upwards and anticipated tariff-driven price hikes push costs onto the consumer. Interest in all product attributes **except price** dropped in 2025 (an important or very important driver for 81% of respondents, up from 75% in 2024). Pricing research was the top shopping strategy, and brand loyalty has again taken a hit: 54% of respondents said they were likely or very likely to switch to a cheaper brand.

At the same time, consumers are resigned to spending more. The share of respondents who expected to spend $100-$150 decreased 5 percentage points year-over-year, while those expecting to spend $150-$200 per child increased 4 pp—their wallets are squeezed, and it could look worse for sales in fall than it did in spring. "While consumers know they will need to spend more per pair, they also have flat or reduced wallets, which we expect will translate to fewer pairs this season," said Bryan Eshelman, Managing Director in AlixPartners' footwear practice.

The anxiety is not limited to consumers. In the FDRA Quarterly Executive Sentiment Survey for the second quarter of 2025, more than 6 in 10 respondents reported lower sales than six months earlier—a record. "The marketplace has been fragile, and footwear companies now face a perfect storm—consumers are second-guessing purchases, costs are rising fast, and uncertainty around tariff policy is heightening all the effects," said Matt Priest , President and CEO of FDRA. Our consumer research shows that producers not only face higher import costs and volatile supply dynamics, but a wary customer who is reassessing which purchases are a true "need" versus a "want."

There is not much time left to allay BTS fears, but this window into consumer thinking suggests there is an opportunity to benefit from strong inventory management and design: The rattled consumer increasingly wants an all-purpose shoe. The athletic/athleisure category saw a projected 28% year-over-year increase in spending over 2024. Given the potential shortage of inventory, it will be important for retailers to have accurate and timely inventory visibility in order to fulfill consumer needs through omni-channel methods (store-to-store transfer, shipping from store, shipping from distribution center) otherwise they risk disappointing the customer, which can have a lasting impact.

Second, as retailers think about pricing and promotional strategies, it will be important that they have a view of what their competitors are doing so as not to stand out in a negative way from a pricing perspective.

Footwear manufacturers and retailers will need to design to value as consumers look at trading down and seek quality and versatility in fewer purchases: they are scrutinizing what they get in a shoe for the given price, and the best features might be the ones with the cheapest import codes attached.

The big problem—tariff-driven inflation—does have some remedies, provided manufacturers are willing to go deep into sourcing and do the work to achieve more flexible supply chains. Kids might already be walking toward fall, but footwear companies need to pick up the pace.

About the research

Survey administered online
June 3-10, 2025

Respondents
1,042 adults
aged 15 and above U.S. footwear consumers who intend to shop for back-to-school footwear for children of all ages across all regions, demographics, and income levels.

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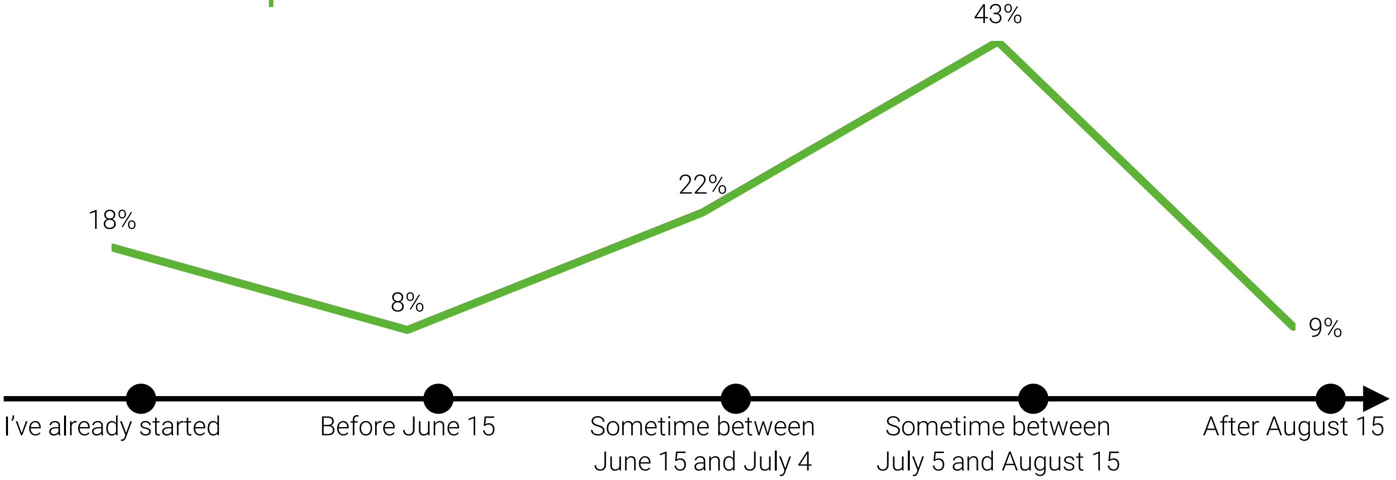
Consumers shopped back-to-school early, spooked by tariffs and inventory gaps

Nearly half of respondents planned to finish BTS footwear shopping before July 4. This represents an early kickoff to school shopping, typically thought to peak in July and August, driven by concerns over rising prices– Nike announced price hikes in May—and potential inventory shortages as the import cycle faced uncertainty.

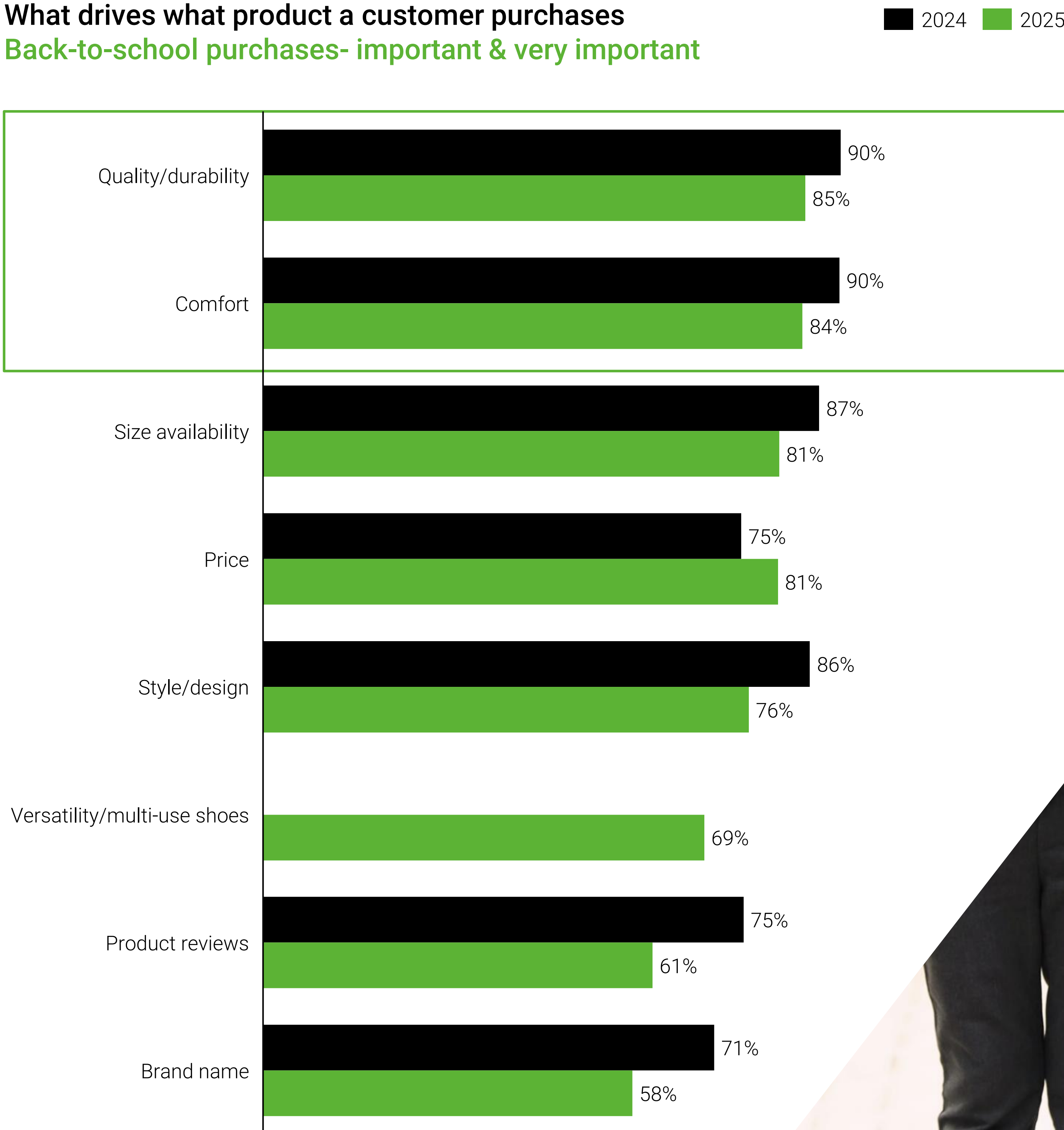
When consumers intend to start shopping
Back-to-school purchases

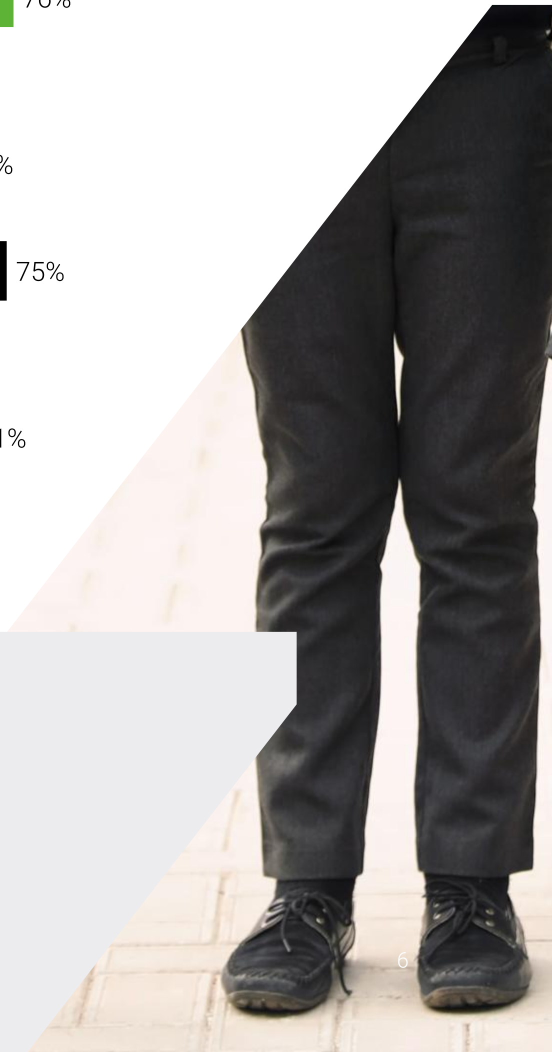


That spending pulled forward could in turn cut into holiday spend. Concern over budgets was evident: price showed up as the top driver of a purchase (and the only factor to see an increase in interest over last year) as well as one of the top determining factors for where consumers will shop. Seventy-seven percent of respondents said "absolute lowest prices" was a major factor in their choice of store (online or in person), up from 74% in 2024.

What drives what product a customer purchases

Back-to-school purchases- important & very important





The top driver for where to shop was **quality of items**

87% followed by size and product availability (85%).

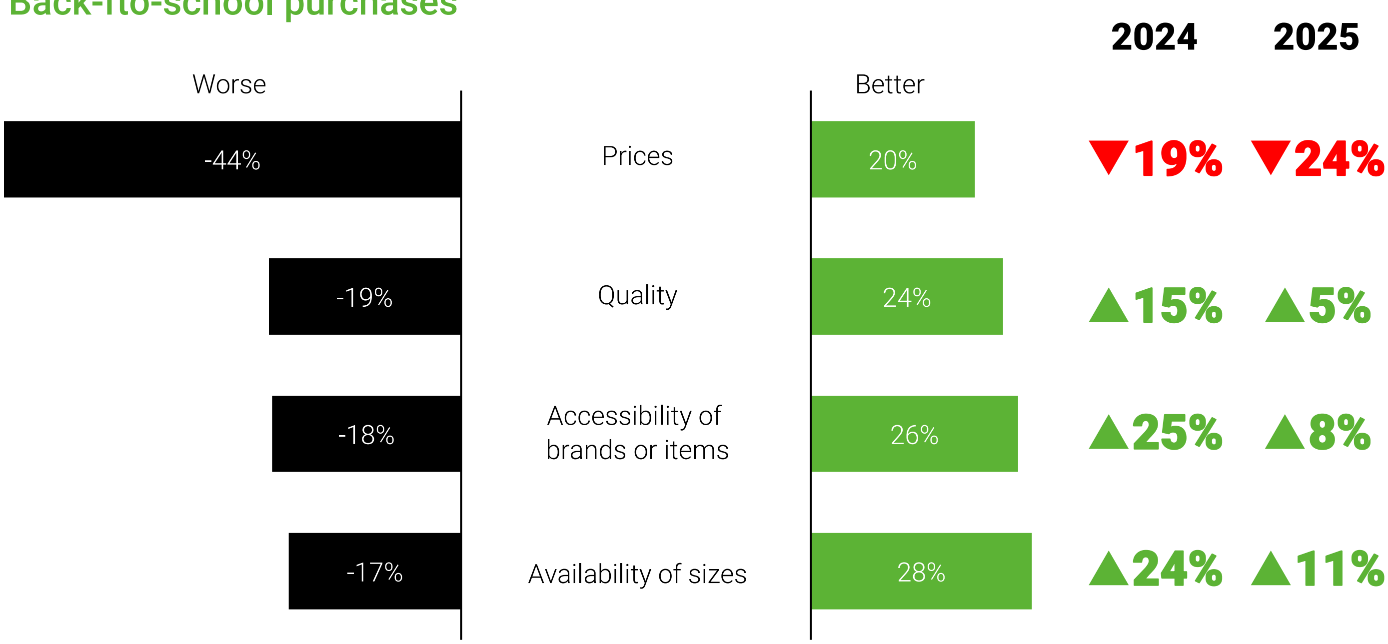
Loyalty programs were important to 58% of consumers, a drop from 2024, and service was also less of a priority in 2025.

What drives where a consumer decides to shop
Back-to-school purchases

Consumers believe prices are more unfavorable than ever: 44% say prices are worse than a year ago; on net, prices are 24% less favorable than in 2024. Availability of sizes showed modest improvement in the eyes of the consumer, a possible win for retailers who can deliver on in-stocks.

Consumer perception on products in the last 5 years
Back-fto-school purchases

Net more or less by category



What retailers and footwear executives can do about it

The late-summer and early-fall consumer will have less spending still to do, and a heightened focus on getting what they need. To meet demand where it does crop up, manufacturers and retailers can integrate their inventory planning and forecasting. Going forward, manufacturers may need to consider smaller production runs or even near-shoring of production to serve a more fickle consumer (and one who may have stocked up already for winter).

Bryan Eshelman
Head of Footwear in the AlixPartners Retail practice

"Back-to-school season happened in the heat of early summer, rather than the dog days of August, as consumers balked at likely price hikes in fall. Manufacturers in particular now need to do careful demand planning and forecasting, and potentially invest in chasing demand through smaller production runs. Retailers need to focus on inventory management and surgically applied promotions to convert that traffic that does come in fall."

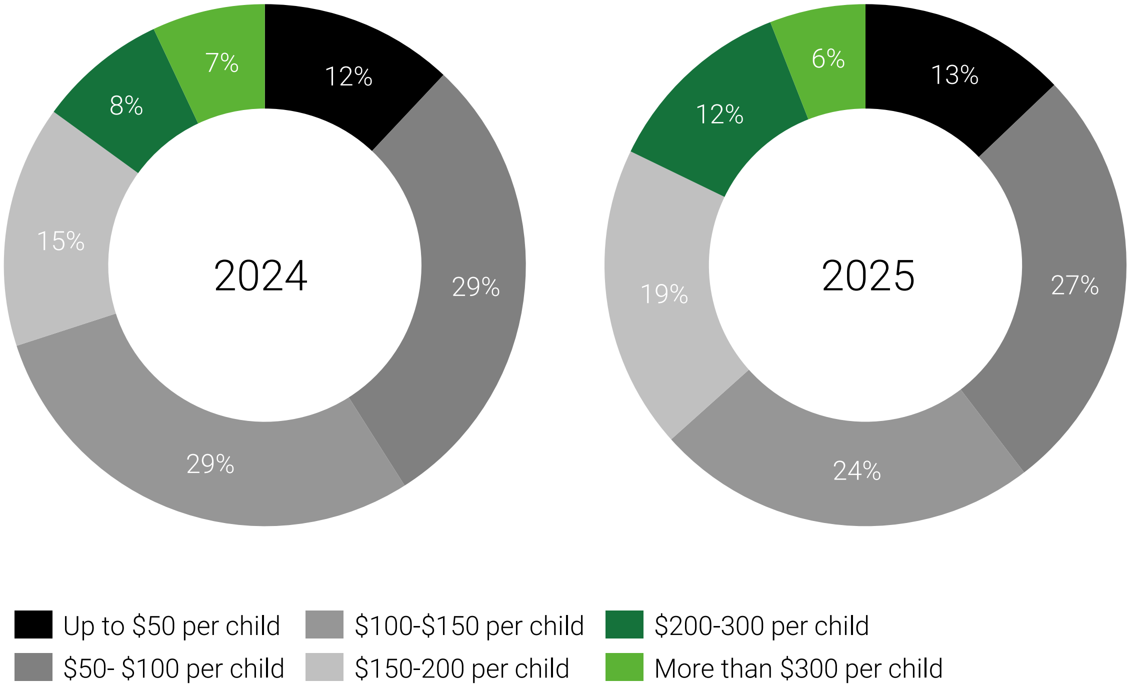
Key Finding 02

Wallets are squeezed by debt and price hikes

Our research shows that consumers are prioritizing budgeting and paying off debt, and they're thinking longer and harder about what is a need versus a want.

At the same time, they are resigned to spending more. The share of respondents who expect to spend $150-$200 per child increased from 15% to 19% or 4 percentage points year-over-year, while those expecting to spend $100-$150 decreased 5 ppts.

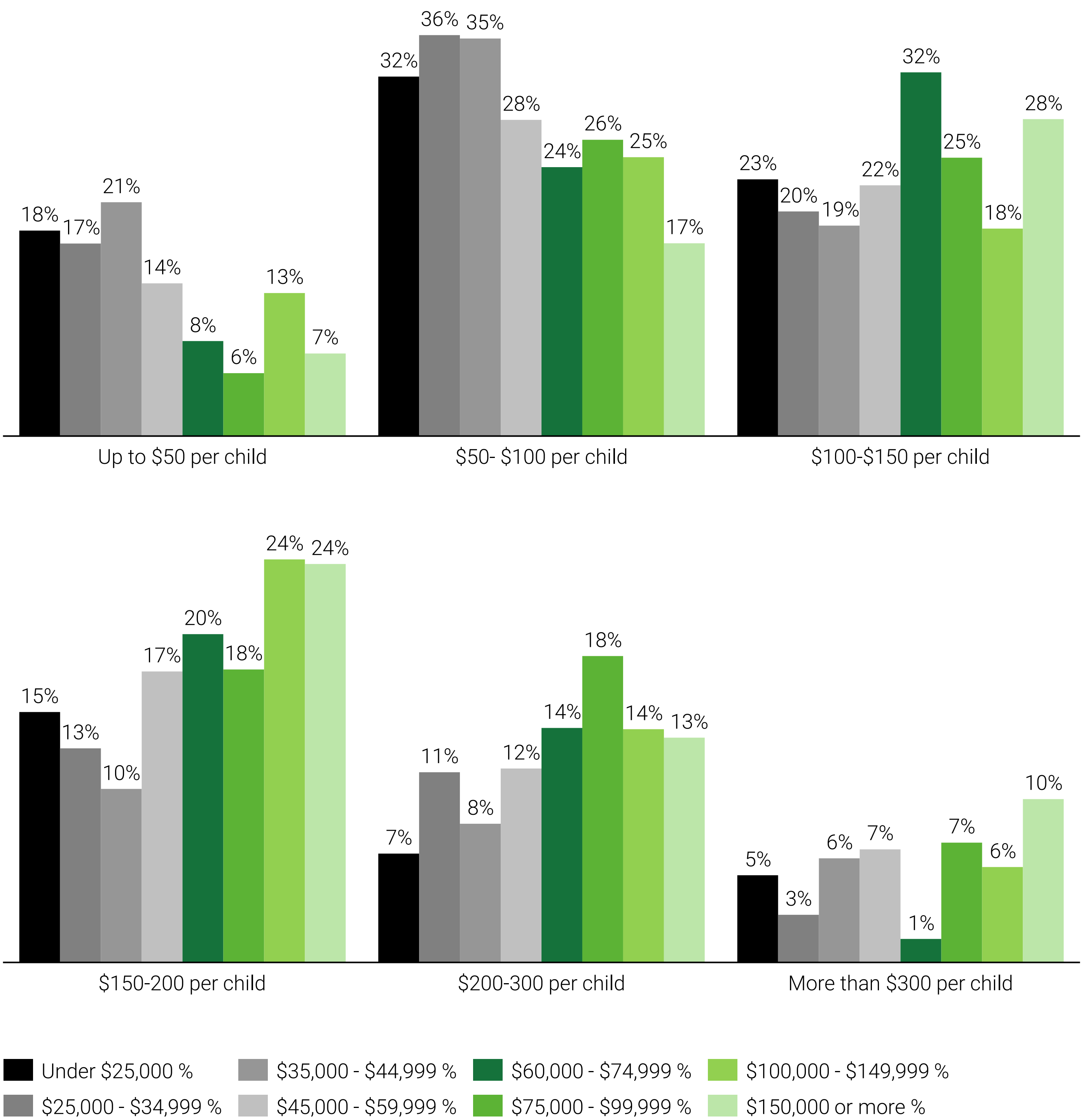
Estimated spend per child: 2025
Back-to-school purchases



Zooming into expected spend by income levels, there is a predictable split in price points. We see a higher share of households making over $100,000 a year looking to spend $150-200 per child, while the largest share of households making less than $100,000 a year anticipate spending $50-100 per child. Still, around 30% of lower-income households expect to spend upwards of $150 per child. That will crunch wallets.

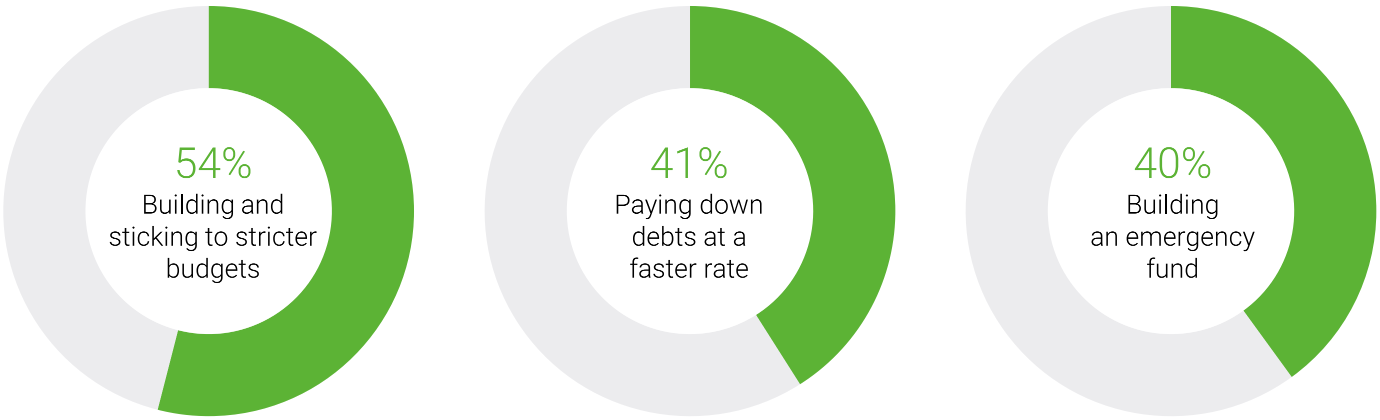
Estimated spend per child: by income level

Back-to-school purchases



In current economic conditions, consumers are planning stricter budgets (54%) and are focused on reducing debt (41%) and building savings (40%), indicating discretionary categories could struggle to drive growth. While gym shoes are a must-have, imagine a customer hitting an affordability wall considering secondhand cleats from the sports bin.

Planning changes in financial behavior
Back-to-school purchases

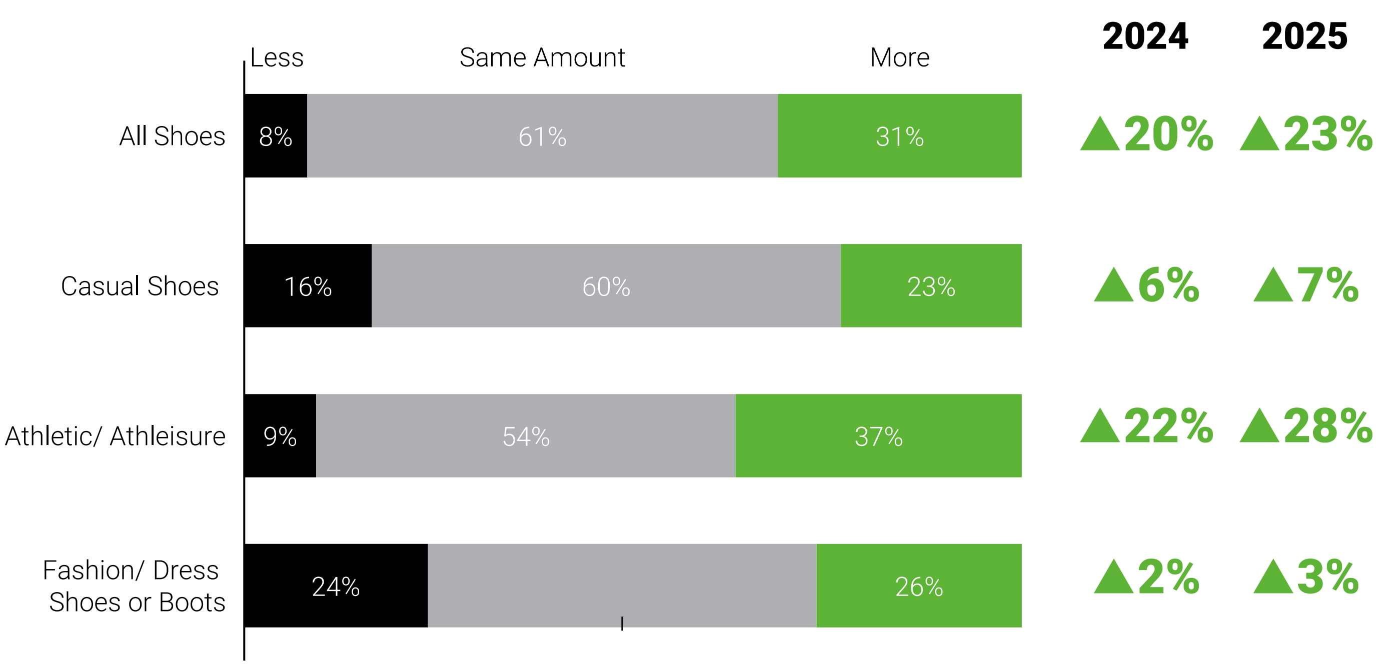


Expectations by category bear this out. There is a pronounced difference in intention to shop for general-purpose shoes (fashion, casual) over multi-use or sports-specific shoes. This is the reign of the necessary.

The athletic/athleisure category saw a 28% jump in estimated spend over 2024, while casual and fashion footwear saw single-digit gains.

Estimated spend by category
Back-to-school purchases

Net more or less by category



What retailers and footwear executives can do about it

The increase in budgeting activity is a flag for footwear retailers: it suggests a hard ceiling beyond which consumers may abandon a purchase due to price. Purchases are being carefully planned—pricing research is still the most likely behavior by consumers—and a second pair of shoes might be out of range, though accessories that help consumers get more mileage from their footwear could help build the basket.

Andrew Hogenson
Retail Transformation Expert in AlixPartners Retail practice

"Consumers are feeling even more pressure on their discretionary spend as they prioritize paying off the sins of the past. At some point, the bill comes due. We expect fall sales to show retrenchment from spring—an early warning for retailers and manufacturers to move now to look at finessing the cost story."

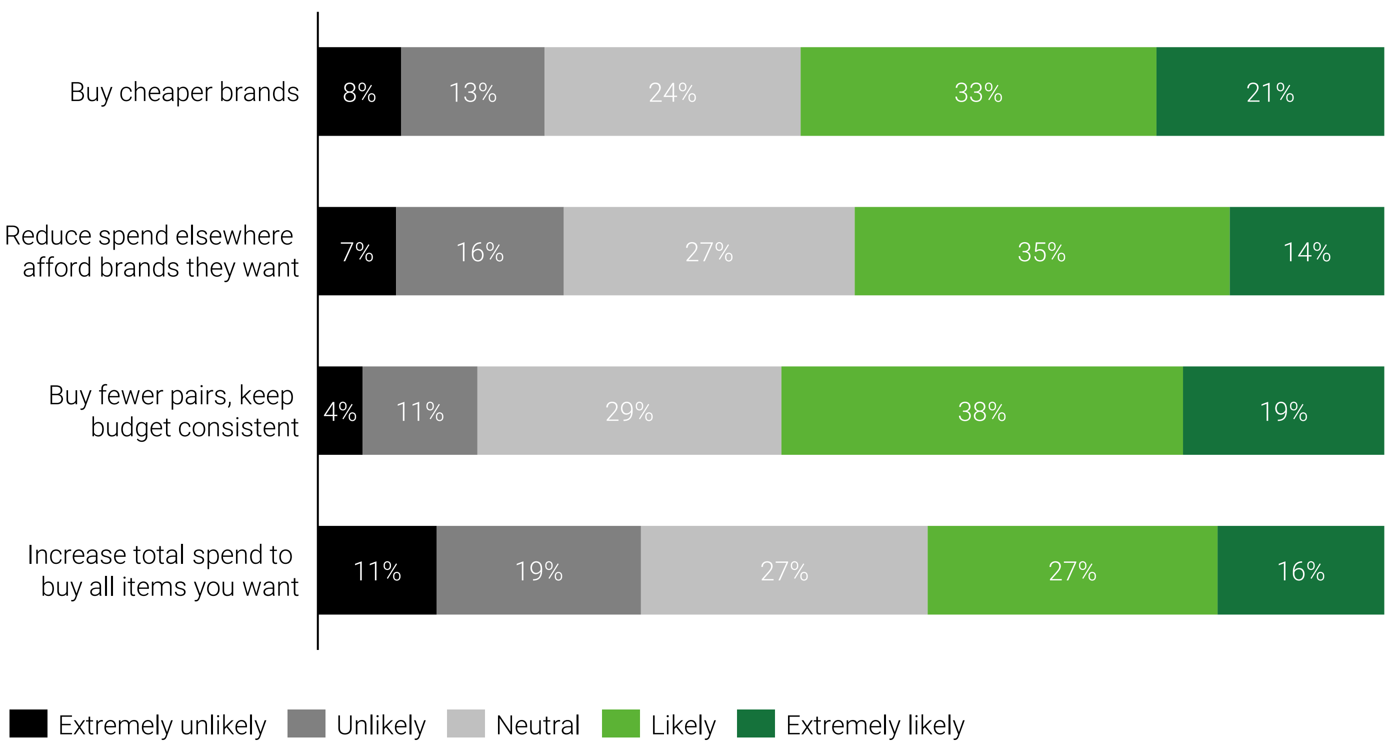
Key Finding 03

Consumers' focus on value could see them trade down

They're trading down and seeking quality and versatility in fewer purchases. Faced with a prospective price hike of 25% or more, 21% are "extremely likely" to buy cheaper brands; over half are "likely" or "extremely likely" to trade down.

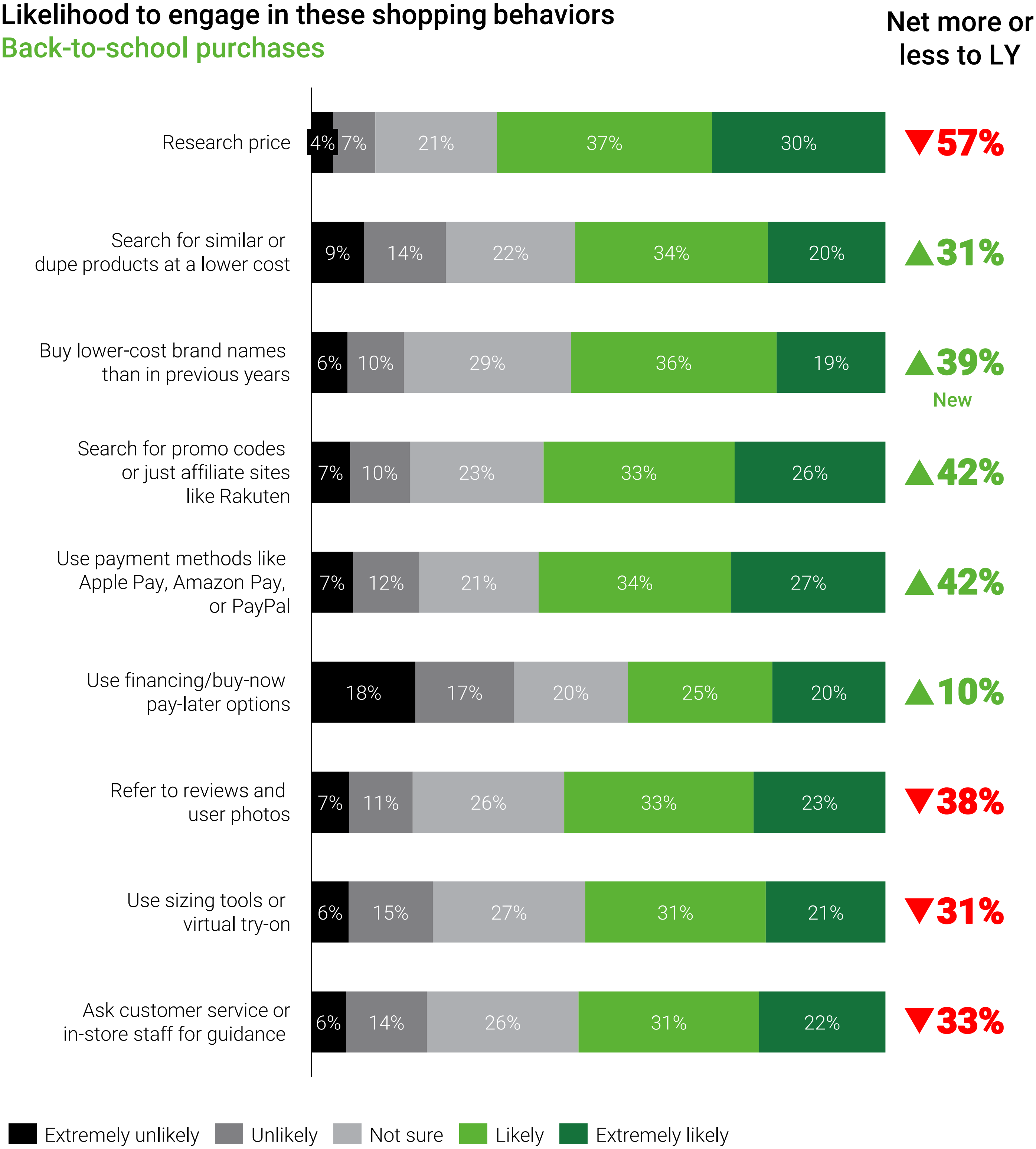
Interestingly, 49% would reduce spend elsewhere to afford the brands they want—this is often a quality story, when non-branded shoes go up against the big names. There is certainly a perception that paying more can stretch the life of a pair and prevent having to buy another pair quite as soon. It also goes to show that even when it's crunch time for discretionary spending, brands matter.

Given a 25 to 30% price increase: anticipated consumer response
All future shoe purchases



The 57% y/y decline in net likelihood to research price (note: it is still the top shopping behavior) suggests limited faith in consumer ability to outrun price hikes. The frugal shopper is 39% more likely to shop lower-cost brands than in previous years, and 42% more likely to hunt for affiliate or promo codes.

Likelihood to engage in these shopping behaviors
Back-to-school purchases



What retailers and footwear executives can do about it

This isn't the time for bells and whistles to be added to child and teen footwear. Consumers are very discerning about price: they show a willingness (and expectation) to pay more for quality and a brand-name promise, but also an eagerness to drop additional purchases where the function is limited. There is an implication for manufacturers, who must truly design to value and keep costs down with any and all levers (tariff engineering, lower-cost sourcing of inputs).

Sonia Lapinsky
Head of Fashion in the AlixPartners Retail practice

> "At the point that consumers outright start buying fewer pairs of shoes, they by definition need those shoes to do more for them. Value is the biggest story of the year, and this is a huge opportunity for lower-cost competitors. It's also a chance for brands to double-down on loyal consumers who are foregoing other purchases for their favorite brands and show them the value."

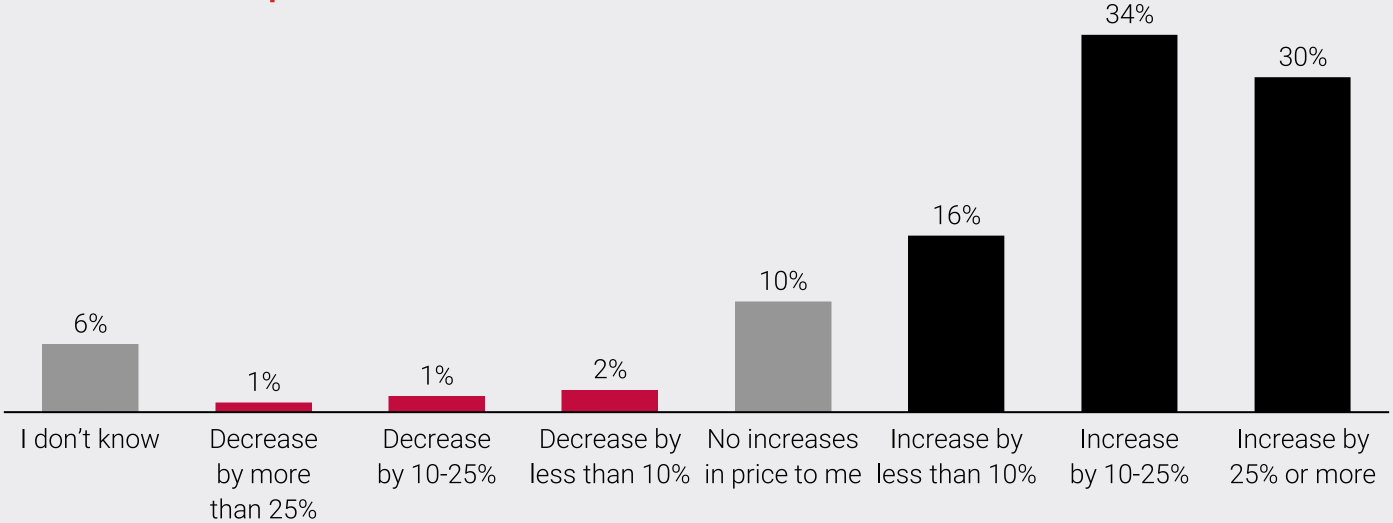
Special Report
Consumer sentiment around tariffs

Footwear is among the most exposed industries to tariffs, with 99% of U.S. shoes imported from low-cost countries.

Sixteen percent of respondents expect 25% hypothetical tariffs would result in price increases of 10% or less, and 14% expect no or a negative increase, while 30% expect an increase of 25% or more—this suggests there could be pricing shock, even with trepidation around the register .

Half of all consumers expect prices to increase, but that brands and retailers will be absorbing at least a portion of cost increases

Given a 25% tariff: consumer-expected price increases
Back-to-school purchases



Compared to earlier in 2025, when we polled consumers about the potential impact of tariffs on footwear prices, a greater share expects an increase to retail prices of 25% or more. This reflects greater realism and also dread about the price hikes consumers anticipate taking place across summer and fall.

What retailers and footwear executives can do about it

Higher tariffs are a major concern for footwear companies, but there are moves they can make, particularly around developing more flexible supply chains with greater visibility into the pipeline.

Firstly, they can drive more regional/local sourcing and develop a more flexible bill of materials, replacing costlier inputs with lower-duty, locally available components.

Secondly, they can achieve the so-called “glass pipeline,” knowing the precise location and disposition throughout the supply chain through technologies like RFID.

Adoption of AI forecasting and inventory management can reduce the overall end-to-end inventory needed to drive sales in a resource-constrained environment.

Amit Mahajan
Procurement & Supply-Chain Leader in the AlixPartners Retail practice

“What was part of slush is now critical. Trends that have been going on for a while are exacerbated by tariffs. All the things we have talked about for years are no longer are optional, but mandatory: Looking at design-value, reassessing the factory network for fluctuating demand, tariff engineering, and inventory management.”

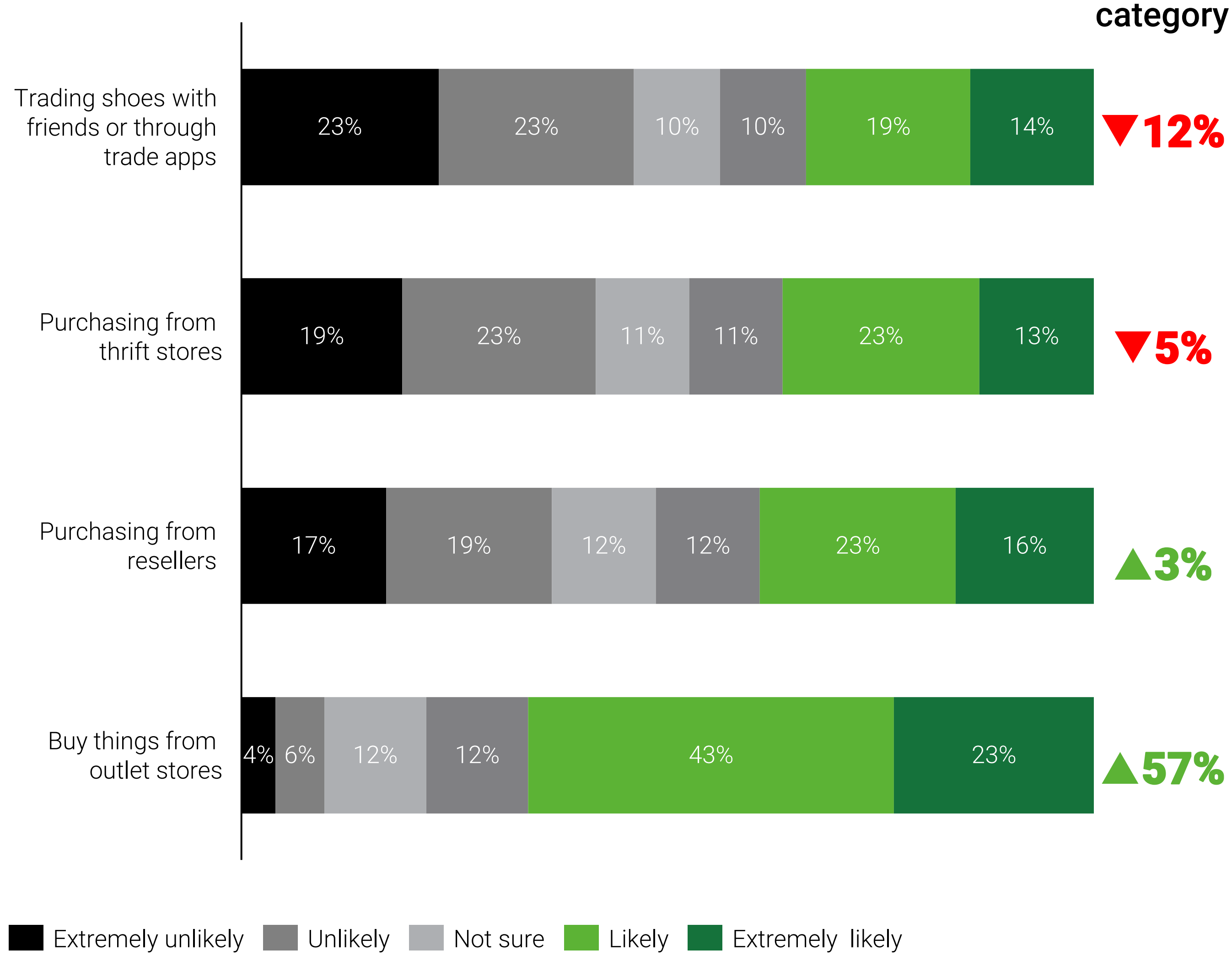
Retention Outlook

How likely is it that retailers will lose customers

In fall 2024, consumers were on net 30% less likely to buy resold or thrifted shoes than the year before—parents can be reticent to shop second-hand footwear given the wear and tear that children exert on their shoes. In 2025, though, we see respondents are on net 3% more likely to buy from resellers as they struggle to balance budgets.

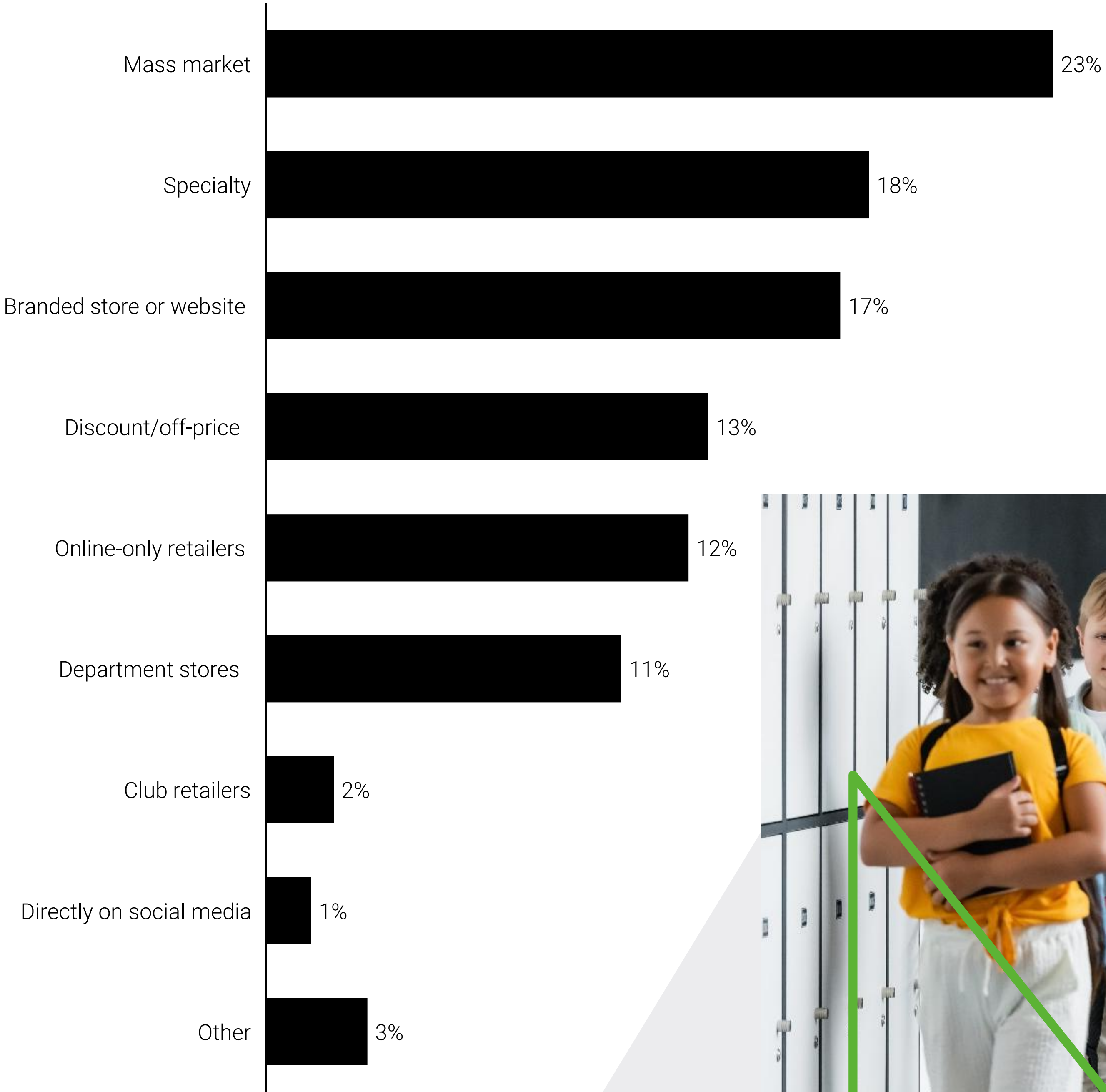
Net likelihood of consumers to purchase
Back-to-school purchases

Net more or less by category



They are drawn to mass market retailers, which have the benefit of brand range and perceived affordability. Even so, specialty and branded stores are the second- and third-top destinations by share, as concerns about quality shape purchases.

Types of retailers that consumers will shop at
Back-to-school purchases



What retailers and footwear executives can do about it

Given the importance of product and size availability, integration between footwear companies and retailers will be more important, as they allocate inventory through the season.

An analysis of vendor partners could also help footwear companies to gain an edge—they should look closely at operations on the technology side (digital product development, automated/robotic production, detailed WIP and quality tracking) and at physical capability (potentially interchangeable factory locations in multiple countries or even regions) to support an agile supply chain.

Meghan Hayward
Head of Consumer Insights, AlixPartners Retail practice

“Shopping name brands at outlet stores is a solid strategy for cash-strapped consumers, since they can save money without sacrificing quality. We see resilience in branded and specialty shops, likely for that reason, but mass market reigns supreme.”

Conclusion

Looking for a resolution

An anxious consumer completes the stress-pipeline this back-to-school season for footwear companies. They have already been managing with constrained budgets, inflation, and supply-chain disruption. Pricing pressure from tariffs, and from expectations around the effect of tariffs, has exacerbated the existing trend.

It's now imperative that footwear manufacturers and retailers go deep into design and sourcing to answer key questions:

- ❑ What are you willing to take out of product?
- ❑ What are consumers willing to pay for?
- ❑ How will you design to value for a rattled consumer?
- ❑ Do you have a factory network to move things around when tariffs go up or down or demand moves up or down?
- ❑ Are you employing tariff engineering—altering sourcing or materials to lower the tariff burden?
- ❑ How are you managing inventory stateside?

These are not new conversations, per se, but the double-whammy of tariff costs and shifting consumer behavior could catalyze adoption of a more innovative approach. Perhaps here is where the story changes, where nice-to-have sourcing strategies become must-haves.

Consumers have already drawn a line in the sand for things they will and won't pay for—as we look beyond fall to the holidays, footwear companies may need to do the same.

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FDRA

ABOUT FDRA

FDRA is governed and directed by footwear executives and is the only trade organization focused solely on the footwear industry. Serving the full footwear supply chain, it boosts its members' bottom lines through innovative products, training, consulting on footwear design and development, sourcing and compliance, trade and customs, advocacy, and consumer and sales trend analysis for shoe retailers around the world. FDRA supports 500 companies and brands worldwide, representing 95% of the total U.S. footwear industry.

ABOUT ALIXPARTNERS

AlixPartners is a results-driven global consulting firm that specializes in helping businesses respond quickly and decisively to their most critical challenges—from urgent performance improvement to complex restructuring, from risk mitigation to accelerated transformation. These are the moments when everything is on the line—a sudden shift in the market, an unexpected performance decline, a time-sensitive deal, a fork-in-the-road decision. We stand shoulder to shoulder with our clients until the job is done, and only measure our success in terms of the results we deliver. We partner with you to make the right decisions and take the right actions. And we are right by your side. When it really matters.