

Fashion CSI 2026

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How agentic shopping,
the GLP-1 revolution,
and Y2K nostalgia
are rewriting the
consumer playbook



Introduction

Jean waistlines may rise and fall, but today’s consumer shifts run deeper than fashion cycles. “Haul” culture is fading. GLP-1s are reshaping wardrobes. Agentic shopping is redefining discovery.

And while brands can buy influencers and attention, credibility is in retreat.

The relationships shoppers have with stores themselves are changing as consumption bifurcates into frictionless online in one realm and highly experiential in-person trips in another.

As consumers evolve, so, too, must the decisions made in boardrooms. The challenge is understanding which shifts represent lasting changes in behavior and which are simply the latest turn of the trend cycle. From investing in AI-enabled decision-making and experiential retail to reshaping sourcing strategies in the face of disruption, retailers are making decisions with far-reaching implications for growth, cost, and competitiveness. The best decisions start with a clear understanding of the consumer and the forces changing how they live, shop, and spend.

The AlixPartners Consumer Sentiment Index gauges over 9,000 U.S. consumers, coast to coast, on their preferences and priorities across the spectrum of apparel. We split the data by generation to pinpoint cultural inflection points. Pay attention to Gen Z’s hyperawareness around materials, their near-universal embrace of social shopping (92% have made a social purchase this year), and their blank stare in response to social promotion (influencer partnerships rank last in importance). We also trace movements in retailer rankings from year to year.

In outdoor & active, Dick’s “House of Sport” interactive store formats are not only winning on consumer sentiment (up from #6 to #1), but have lifted basket size 3.4% year over year. Some of the other winning stories look like the beginning of a recovery. Gucci’s cultural reset (welcome, Demna) could see Kering’s largest house begin to perform; the brand climbed up one spot in luxury.

At the top of the charts, the through-line is substance. Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein hold premium and classic specialty at a moment when shoppers are reading labels for polyester and mining those same names for “vintage.” Both also show how bold-name casting (like Calvin Klein’s new face Sadie Sink) now works where influencer reach no longer does: as a halo, not a hard sell. What protects a leader in 2026 is the same thing lifting the movers: a reason to believe that survives a second look.

We unpack both forces; the new rules of influence and the quality reckoning, in the chapters ahead:

- 01 AI COMMODIFICATION** | Agentic AI has come for discovery, and we predict a sharp uptick in adoption that rewards those with the right metadata, who understand which items have been commoditized
- 02 A WOBBLY SIZE CURVE** | GLP-1s have introduced volatility into the size curve, forcing retailers to place bets on the before and after
- 03 PAY FOR PLAY** | Influencers offer a diminishing ROI, but novel and fitting partnerships create a powerful halo for brands
- 04 FIBER FRAUD WATCH** | The most important label might not be brand; Gen Z in particular are vigilant about looking for quality materials and construction in a garment
- 05 IN-STORE VIPS** | Consumers see retail as a “third space,” and express a need to feel part of the store experience—not just flattered with promo

You will find that this report is 100% handcrafted (no polyester, and no skimping) to give you a full read on where the retail consumer is, and what executives need to do to tailor offerings and operations to a fast-moving fashion scene.

First, let’s set up market fundamentals. Then, let’s get into the data.

State of the market

Inside the consumer are two wolves. One reports being pessimistic about their future finances: in July, the University of Michigan consumer sentiment index sat about 11% below a year earlier; still depressed after the spring's record low. But there is also a consumer urge to pounce on good deals, on need-to-haves, and on treats through a long stretch of financial uncertainty. Consumer spending intent keeps rising, per our 2026 [State of the Consumer](#) survey, and has decoupled from sentiment (in fact it only loosely tracks macro conditions), tethered only to the jobs report. Consumers say they shouldn't spend, but they are doing so anyway.

This isn't just the K-shaped economy at work; we see adaptive behavior from low- and middle-income cohorts.

The consumer is trying to reconcile sustained financial uncertainty for the foreseeable future with the fatigue they feel from being on budgetary high alert. In response, they are rationalizing purchases even as they keep spending, stretching budgets by trading down, buying fewer items, and leaning harder on credit and buy now, pay later (BNPL) (for the heaviest users, Gen Z, these bills will eventually bite).

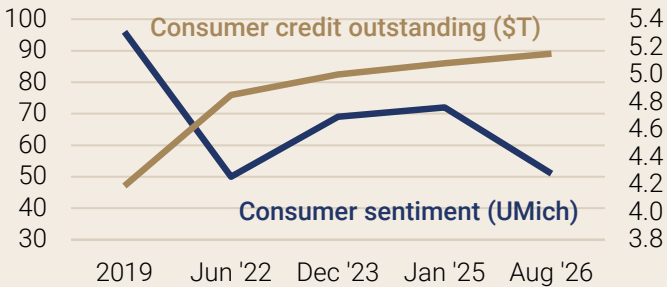
In fashion, that rationalization shows up as a focus on pieces that last, finding genuine joy in the store visit rather than viewing the trip as a chore, and handing off the basics to AI and search ... an interface that strips brand identity from the buy decision. For now it reads as intent, not exhaustion, but self-discipline eventually frays.

A forward indicator from our 2026 Holiday Survey: more than half of consumers report negative sentiment and 37% intend to cut spending, even as [more than a third](#) of BNPL users plan to lean on it harder—a risk to flag as policy tightens.

Among the additional macro factors shaping the market, GLP-1 adoption is a genuine watershed moment in health. The Ozempic effect is reshaping bodies and buying behaviors, with effects on fit and demand we take up in [chapter 2](#). Supply chains remain unsettled, with the chokepoint at the Strait of Hormuz raising the cost of cheap inputs like polyester and forcing a harder trade-off between affordability and quality. And tariffs stay hard to predict, with new layers of uncertainty added faster than old ones are resolved, leaving retailers planning against a moving target. We turn these into a plan in [Putting the CSI to work](#).

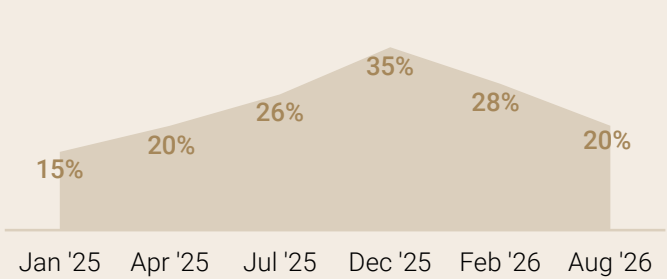


Consumer dissonance



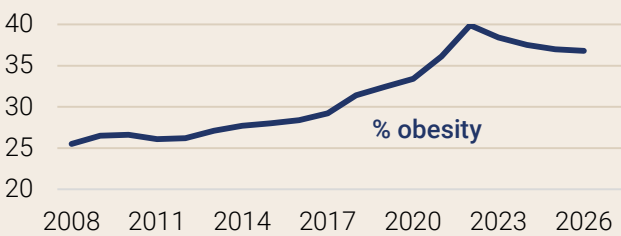
Source: University of Michigan Consumer Sentiment Index; Federal Reserve (FRED)

Tariff fluctuations



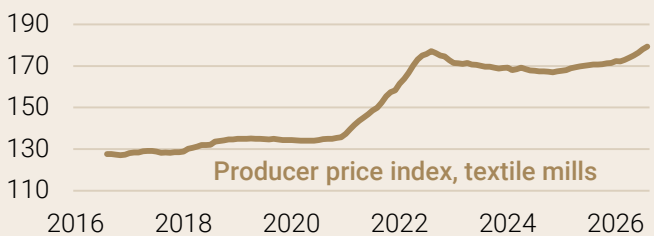
Source: USITC HTS

Post-GLP-1s, obesity has peaked



Source: Gallup

Material costs hit a new high in Aug 2026



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via FRED. Dec 2003 =100



Understanding the consumer

This was the year when emergent behaviors hit a saturation point. Social shopping has gone mainstream and continues to grow as a share of retail. Consumers are starting to use AI agents to source goods. Obesity in the U.S. has peaked and is in decline, as GLP-1 use continues to grow in U.S. households. Fast fashion, long forecast to be going out of style, has seen a stronger backlash from an educated consumer (and increasingly stringent [regulations](#) in countries like France).

We tease out each of these effects in depth in the thematic chapters, but these five numbers tell the clearest story ...

81%

of consumers made a social purchase in the past year

Social buying is now table stakes, even as the most frequent buyers ease off (down from 85% in 2025)



10%

of consumers start discovery with AI

This rises to 14% of Gen Z and Millennials, showing AI is a real, and ascendent, discovery channel for consumers

-33%

importance of “inclusive options” for activewear, 2024–2026

GLP-1s are bending the demand curve; extended-size demand is softening and alterations are rising

30%

lift in the importance of transparent pricing

Quality is under new scrutiny, with shoppers price- and fabric-checking across brands and resale, at every age



-33%

importance of “influencer partnerships” among specialty consumers since 2025

Gains in social capital come from elite and niche collaborations that borrow from powerful “bold name” celebrities and artists

Fashion's front runners

Retailers at the top of the rankings, with momentum

The movers

If you only read the financial headlines, you're liable to miss the cultural shifts happening at ground level as pivots, reformats, and investments begin to hit with everyday consumers. Many of the brands that made the biggest moves in the CSI from 2025 to 2026 are still flying under the radar at the investment level, but have implemented successful strategies in their corners of the market.

Gucci climbed up one spot in luxury as shoppers rewarded a visible cultural reset that began with Demna's maximalist arrival as creative director, and continued with the revived 1980s Play Watch and a bold bet on Formula 1 with the 2027 Gucci Racing Alpine deal. The brand is deep in a multi-quarter decline, but **men** and women seem horsebit. It's Kering's largest house, and the one cylinder that has yet to fire, so the market will be watching for flawless execution and sustained relevance as 2028 approaches.

Macy's #1 rank in department stores is the most counterintuitive: the retailer is still closing stores under its "Bold New Chapter" plan, but its 125 reimaged locations posted 2.7% comp growth and the ingredients are there for the fun, in-store experience consumers are craving (Macy's holiday shows are the original event). Meanwhile, **Bloomingdale's** logged its best comp quarter in three years (+9%); proof that shrinking the footprint and sharpening the remaining fleet can squeeze more value from the square footage.

Theory's rise to #5 in premium specialty rewards a materials story—cotton, wool, linen—that's landing at exactly the moment shoppers have gotten forensic about fiber content.

As lab-grown diamonds have lowered the entry point for consumers looking for the real thing, **Zales**, **Kay**, and **Jared** have each climbed in the rankings. Up five places in the CSI from 2025, Zales offers a line of diamond stacking pieces starting around \$30, which has boosted self-gifts (accounting for **67% of purchases**, per Signet).



The winners

Coach's Tabby bag, an archive-inspired 1970s silhouette relaunched with interchangeable straps, has become Tapestry's proof that focus on heritage products is working: brand sales surged roughly 25%.

The jump for **Dick's Sporting Goods** to #1 in outdoor (+5 positions) and **The North Face's** climb to #2 (+2 positions) share the same playbook: retail experiences that make good on the "try before you buy" promise stores have spent a decade training consumers to expect. In Dick's, that looks like batting cages, golf greens, climbing walls, and "request your size" monitors by the cleats.

Fabletics' climb in active (+5 positions) reflects a membership model that's stopped being a discount gimmick and become the whole business: VIP members now drive roughly 95% of revenue, the brand crossed \$1 billion in 2025 on 18–20% growth, and the company is in the process of opening 40 more stores in 2026 on the strength of that loyalty.

American Eagle held onto its #1 spot in young adult, doubling down on its core Gen Z customer with streetwear drops such as the FIFA World Cup tie-in. The brand is now joined in the top 5 by **Urban Outfitters** (up four slots), which halted 11 quarters of decline at end 2026 and is now running on four quarters of growth, thanks in part to in-store retail lounges launched with Nike as its first partner, and the company's "Vintage + Remade" platform of curated secondhand and upcycled apparel designed to appeal to the nostalgic Gen Z shopper.

Ralph Lauren's #1 in premium specialty is the clearest "elevate, don't dilute" story in the rankings; revenue crossed \$8 billion for the first time (up 15%), average unit retail rose 15% across its direct-to-consumer network, and the brand bought cultural credibility the old-fashioned way—outfitting Team USA at the Milano Cortina Olympics and anchoring Wimbledon and the US Open.

Top 5 consumer-ranked retailers per subcategory, with year-over-year rank change

Accessories

1	Coach	+1
2	Michael Kors	-1
3	Pandora	+6
4	Kate Spade	+1
5	Kendra Scott	+3

Department stores

1	Macy's	0
2	Kohl's	+2
3	JCPenney	-1
4	Nordstrom	-1
5	Dillard's	+2

Active footwear

1	Nike	0
2	Skechers	+1
3	Adidas	-1
4	New Balance	0
5	Reebok	0

Fashion footwear

1	Timberland	+2
2	Vans	0
3	Crocs	-1
4	UGG	+5
5	Birkenstock	+1

Multi-brand footwear

1	Foot Locker	+1
2	Dick's Sporting Goods	+4
3	Famous Footwear	+2
4	DSW	-1
5	Shoe Carnival	+3

Jewelry

1	Tiffany & Co	0
2	Kay	+4
3	Zales	+5
4	Jared	+6
5	Cartier	-3

Luxury

1	Louis Vuitton	0
2	Gucci	+1
3	Chanel	+1
4	Dior	+1
5	Versace	+2

Mass & club

1	Walmart	0
2	Amazon	0
3	Target	0
4	Costco	0
5	Sam's Club	0

Off-price

1	T.J. Maxx	0
2	Marshalls	0
3	Ross	+1
4	Burlington	+1
5	Nordstrom Rack	-2

Active

1	Nike	0
2	Under Armour	+2
3	Adidas	-1
4	Lululemon	0
5	Fabletics	+5

Outdoor

1	Dick's Sporting Goods	+5
2	The North Face	+2
3	Bass Pro Shops	+2
4	Academy Sports & Outdoors	+4
5	Columbia	-2

Classic specialty

1	Calvin Klein	0
2	Tommy Hilfiger	0
3	Ann Taylor	0
4	LOFT	0
5	Lands' End	0

Modern specialty

1	Old Navy	+2
2	Gap	+2
3	Levi's	-2
4	J.Crew	+3
5	Express	0

Premium specialty

1	Ralph Lauren	0
2	Banana Republic	0
3	Hugo Boss	0
4	Brooks Brothers	0
5	Theory	+2

Young adult specialty

1	American Eagle Outfitters	0
2	H&M	+1
3	Abercrombie & Fitch	+3
4	Urban Outfitters	+4
5	Zara	-3

01

Agentic doesn't care about your brand

Reading between the rows of metadata, how good is your apparel?

Retailers are getting ready to be shopped by machines ... but most aren't ready. Everyone's still optimizing the storefront for a human with a thumb on a phone, while AI is quietly becoming the front door for discovery. And the machine doesn't read your beautiful imagery or your persuasive copy—it reads structured data: attributes, availability, price. If your product data is thin or messy, the agent either can't surface you or describes you badly, and you go invisible in the fastest-growing channel there is. Those pathways are being laid right now and the retailers getting out ahead will have an advantage when the volume scales. That's the watch-out for everyone.

For fashion specifically, there's a sharper trap. The reflex is "brand always matters, a machine can't replace taste," and at the top of the market, that's true; nobody's delegating a considered, emotional purchase to an agent. But a huge share of apparel is already a commodity buy in the shopper's head: the basics, the replenishment, the "black leggings, TTS, under \$30." For those, the mass consumer will happily let an agent decide, and they won't care about your logo. This is somewhat the basis of ["LCD" style](#); it means lowest common denominator, and it's a fancy way of saying "homogenous" in fluent Gen Z. Instead, the buy decision will be filtered through an algorithm that scrapes user reviews, affiliate content embedded with key terms like "best black leggings," mentions on social, garment materials, and metadata derived from celebrity photos.

So agentic commerce won't hit fashion evenly—it will cleave it. We see the top end remaining brand-led, where luxury in particular will have to strategize around the risk of being copied by [site scrapers](#), and keep taste at the center of the brand positioning. The bottom of the market will conversely turn spec-and-price driven. Of course, most brands live in the middle and will need to navigate both forces.

So the real question isn't whether, it's when. And on the "when," our data is clear: today, the majority of consumers tell us they would not hand a fashion purchase to an AI agent, or even use it as a discovery channel—among Gen X and Boomers, "easy human support" beats "innovative shopping tech" by 28 pps (51% vs. 23%), per the CSI, while the AlixPartners [Spring 2026 Footwear Survey](#) found AI

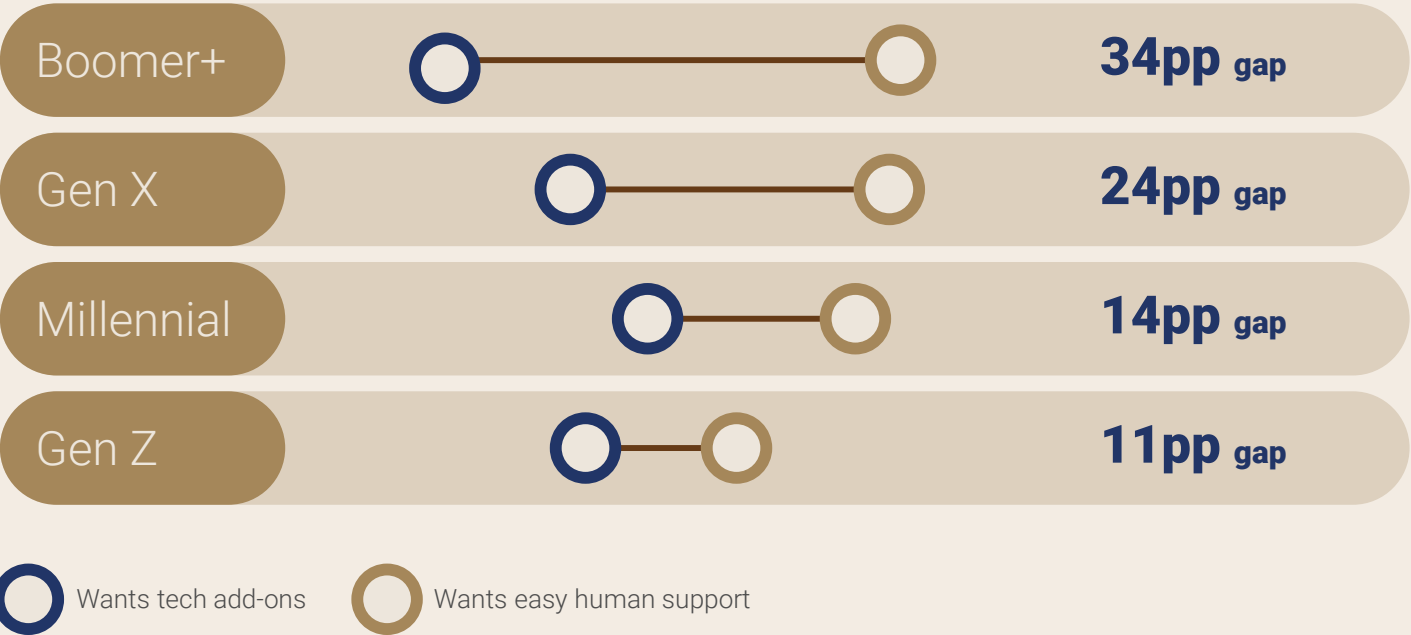


tools ranked behind brand size charts, in-person devices, and the metal Brannock foot measurement devices you remember from childhood.

If you just read our numbers, you'd say relax, you've got years. But be careful—everything with AI is moving faster than the data can update. Think back to 2025; few were using AI every hour of the day, and now most can't imagine working without it. That shift took months, not years. Consumer resistance to agentic shopping could collapse the same way. When it does, it will break in two directions: At upper-income levels, it will look like an AI concierge (nearly seven in ten consumers earning \$150k+ say innovative shopping tech (AI stylist, curated recommendations) is an important purchase driver), while just over half of consumers earning under \$45k agree. For the masses, it will look like a more powerful price and decision-making tool. The data tells you when consumers are ready; it doesn't tell you when they'll flip. Plan for the flip.

Consumers prefer simple human assistance to tech add-ons

Importance of human help vs. innovative tech, by generation, 2026



10%

share of consumers that start discovery with AI ... slightly more with younger cohorts, 14% of Gen Z and Millennials

68% vs 53%

Innovative shopping tech is an important driver for 68% of shoppers earning \$150k+ but only 53% of those earning under \$45k—a ~15pp income split

28%

Even among Gen Z, innovative shopping technology is a "very important" purchase driver for barely more than a quarter. The flip hasn't happened yet, but it's coming

02

GLP-1 side effects include a wild demand curve

Alterations needed: The biggest impact of GLP-1s is unpredictability

Let's start with returns. Wrong size or fit is already the top reason for returns (cited by 42% of consumers) per [Narvar](#). At the very least, widespread adoption of GLP-1 medications (used in 2026 by 11% of Americans according to [Gallup](#)) creates a moving target for apparel companies (who were already contending with “bracketing” behaviors, in which consumers order multiple sizes and return the ill-fits).

Rapid weight loss has obvious demand effects. To begin with, consumer investment in the reward of a brand-new wardrobe once goal weight is achieved; an uptick in athletic apparel (running footwear is [sharply up in 2026](#)); and the need for adjustments to fit models. On the latter phenomenon, a WAIR body scan analysis from 2026 found weight loss can cause non-proportional changes in waist and hip sizes, as well as an elevated [risk of muscle loss](#). These can all make fit an increasingly complicated ask: “Consistent fit and sizing” has nearly doubled in importance for activewear from 2025 to 2026 (from 29% to 54% of respondents). In response to the “big recomp” in apparel, companies will have to get agile, cutting the fat from their inventory and building some AI forecasting muscle.

The Ozempic effect also raises more open-ended existential questions: will size inclusivity retreat? Are brands aligned with body-positivity going to keep that positioning? Our data show that “inclusive product options” dropped by a third in importance from 2024 to 2026 (from 55% to 37%) among activewear consumers.. EDITED data analyzed by AlixPartners finds a reduction in plus sizes being offered for spring 2026 by retailers such as H&M (-5% on two years prior), ASOS (-32%), and Reformation (-60%), while Anthropologie had increased plus-size inventory. One potential result of this trend may be that plus-size consumers find themselves excluded from up-market brands, while brands with a size-inclusive mission stand to lose customers as they shrink—in the 2026 CSI, Lane Bryant dropped a spot from #6 to #7 in classic specialty—or to fill the gap created by drift. We find a +29% increase in consumers who say added services such as alterations matter, and the effect is more pronounced in categories affected by GLP-1 use: outdoor and active, and leisure.

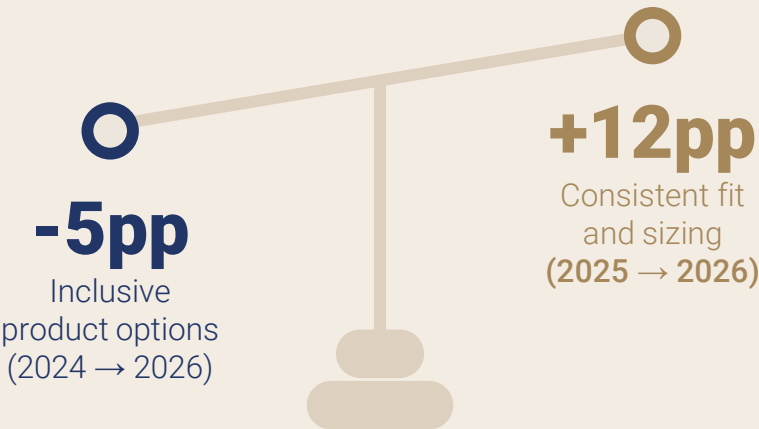
Finally, what happens in two years when rebound effects start to show more widely? TikTok users are already documenting their journeys off GLP-1s, and a [2025 JAMA study](#) of 125,000 people with obesity or diabetes found 65% of people without type 2 diabetes had discontinued use of GLP-1s by the one-year mark—the caveats being that most who stop do so very early after starting treatment, and that those who see significant weight loss are less likely to discontinue use. Cost and insurance coverage remain key barriers to access, though Medicare access is set to open up GLP-1s to a wider swath of consumers, and the introduction in 2026 of pill formats could further widen the realm of potential users.

For now, as different parts of the industry shrink and expand, the brightest spots are accessories and jewelry. These are the only two sectors in which consumers expect to spend more this year (50% and 54% say so)—both are categories without a size curve that allow enjoyable retail experiences while bodies are in flux.



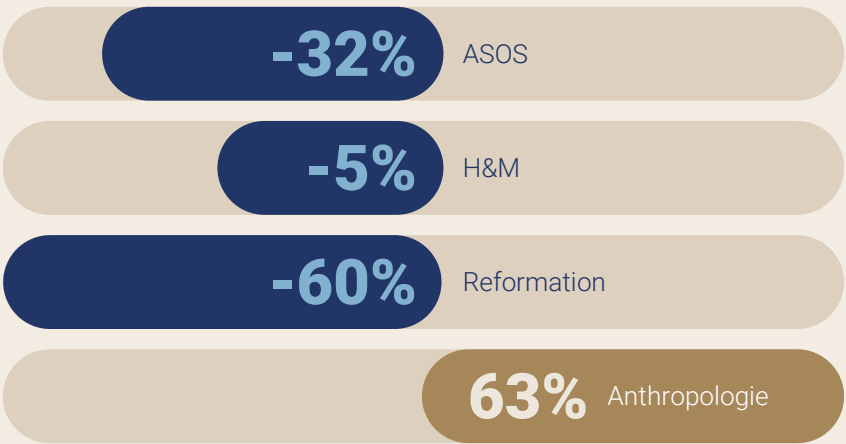
Fit is gaining ground while inclusivity loses it

Percentage-point change in share calling each a very important purchase driver



Women's plus size new-ins are declining at some retailers

Change from Aug 2024 to Jul 2026



90%

Boomer+ and Gen X women who call “consistent fit and sizing” an important purchase driver vs. 78% of Gen Z and Millennial women—a 12 pp gap that tracks with where GLP-1 adoption is concentrated

55%
2024

37%
2026

Importance of “inclusive product options” to activewear consumers declined a third from 2024 to 2026

+29%

Increase in consumers who say added services such as alterations matter, rising fastest in the two categories most exposed to GLP-1 effects: Outdoor & Active and Specialty

03

Influence is cringe but working to build a halo is smart business

How AI discovery and declining influencer trust have created a new mission for fashion on social

The old paradigm that launched a thousand ShopMy pages was simple: an influencer posted a link to a product, and consumers bought it. Eventually, brands joined them on social. Today, [credit card data](#) show that TikTok Shop transactions for all retail are bigger than those of mega retailers like Target and Costco. We find that 81% of consumers have purchased through social at least once this year (only 6% say they start discovery there). But the game has changed.

Younger generations in particular find it “cheugy” (dated or uncool) to post online, and are increasingly skeptical of sponsored content—freebies—with the trustworthiness of influencers suffering from perceptions that they are out of touch (while consumers live through stagflation, influencers aren’t paying for the luxury hauls they post). As Clay L., a member of the Berns & Co. [Z Suite](#), told us, “If I see a paid partnership post, I will immediately scroll past it, and it often worsens my perception of the promoted product.” Sixty-four percent of social media users aged 18-40 surveyed by Pew had unfollowed or muted an influencer in the past year specifically over excessive luxury content.

Influencers, too, have been burned by [battles](#) over who gets the affiliate commission, and the deluge of AI slop and GenAI models on social platforms has further undercut consumer trust. The CSI finds “exciting influencer partnerships” rank last in experience in all nine sectors, and dropped 13 pp from 2025 across the specialty cohort. Where marketers once focused on impressions and went after influencers with the biggest followings, they’re pivoting to brand-right partnerships that can win “share of voice.” Simply put, eyeballs on content don’t equal conversion anymore, and in fact might undercut the cultural value of a product.

Zeitgeisty consumers and brands alike have moved to more indirect forms of brand interaction. Unexpected or synergistic partnerships with content creators can create a halo for brands—think Gucci’s

partnership with a nerdy TikTok train enthusiast for its North Face launch (North Face climbed to #2 in Outdoor). “I love to see fashion brand collaborations!” fellow Gen Z-er Nicole D. said. “These tend to be some of my most favorite moves that companies can make: to step out and take that risk of pairing with another company. I enjoy seeing what two companies can bring to one another.” Nicole cited Sandy Liang’s collab with Gap; the it-girl designer has also collaborated with Salomon, Baggu, Cou Cou, and Vans.

Rather than a straight impressions-to-purchase proof point, the ROI for social partnerships might show in the slow elevation of brand identity through association—see: Gap’s partnership with cultural tastemakers like [Cosmopolitan’s editor-in-chief](#), as well as its 38-item drop with Victoria Beckham; Audemars Piguet x Swatch’s “Royal Pop” collab, which prompted a warning about long lines; and [fashion’s use of novels](#) and [authors](#) to signal the cool factor. As *Outlander* magazine put it, J.Crew’s perceived hike in social capital in the past year has a lot to do with its careful partnerships with young creatives and [“meaningful” collabs](#). Our data back this up: strong interest in collabs (brand x artists or celebrities) nearly tripled among Millennials in jewelry and luxury, and jumped 10 pp overall (Gen Z also reflected this trend).

There’s also a pragmatic side to the indirect social boost: buy-in from niche content creators helps create authoritative metadata, keyword associations, and consumer value statements that AI search engines process to provide search results. Authenticity might be a played-out word on social, but it’s a key algorithmic input: legit recommendations from those with large and specialized followings are good for GEO business.



-33%

Down a third since 2025, “influencer partnerships” now rank dead last among specialty’s experience attributes

+200%

Millennial interest in brand collaborations nearly tripled in luxury and jewelry—up from 14% to 42% in a single year

6% vs 81%

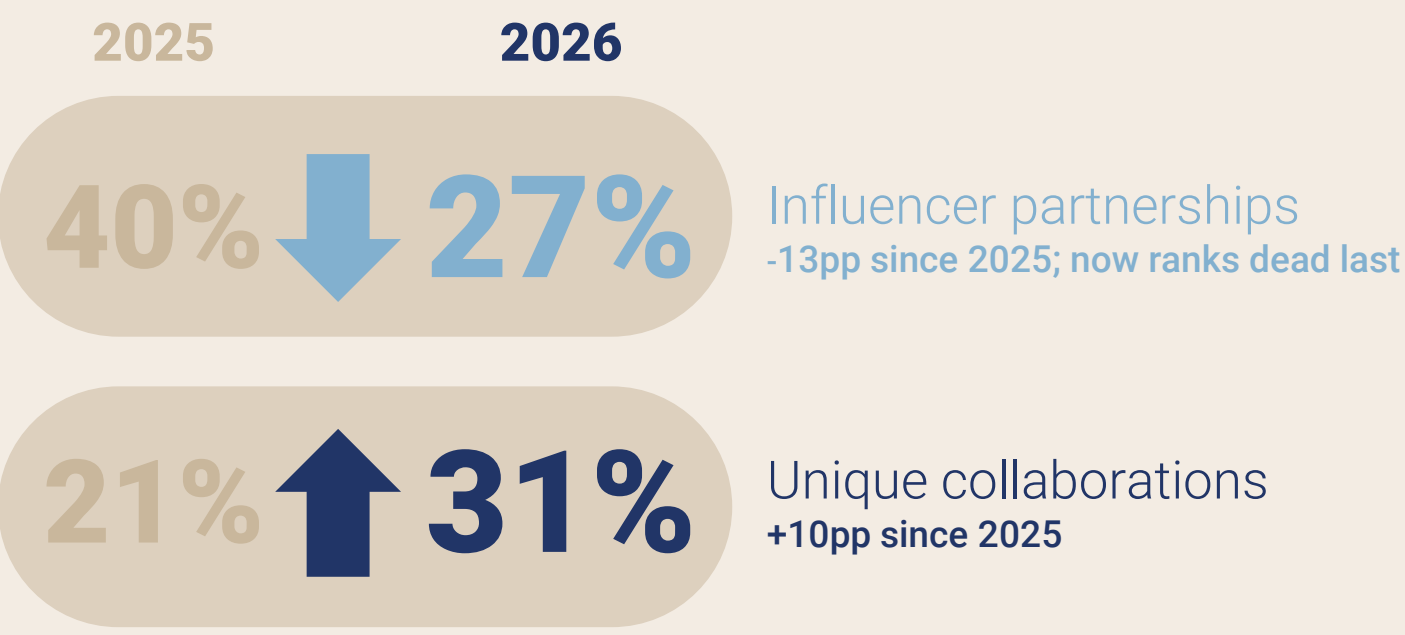
share of consumers who start discovery on social channels vs. how many have purchased through social channels at least once this year

56% vs 61%

Gen Z now cares less about influencer partnerships than Millennials do — a sign that “peak influencer” has passed

Collaboration overtook influence in a single year

Share calling each a primary purchase driver, specialty shoppers (n≈1,000/wave)



04

Polyester lifestyles and the quality recession

The label Gen Z is most interested in is the tag listing a garment's materials

Carolyn Bessette Kennedy's style was simple, minimalist. But getting the CBK look in 2026 is [tough](#). Why? The quality isn't there. Source a vintage '90s Calvin Klein slip emblematic of CBK's style and you find a garment that is 100% silk. Today's equivalent is 75% silk and 25% polyester (price tag: \$2,000). A vintage Talbots pencil skirt from the '90s: 100% wool. A Talbots pencil skirt today: 68% Lenzing™ Ecovero™ viscose, 28% nylon, and 4% spandex. It's what young consumers call "fiber fraud"; saying it's wool when it's a wool-blend. The fraying of craftsmanship and quality materials is real: An AlixPartners analysis of EDITED data shows that polyester overtook cotton as a share of new arrivals back in June 2025, yet average garment prices in late 2026 are higher than ever.

In response, consumers have gotten forensic about reading labels. A \$200 dress that turns out to be polyester is "criminal" to the savvy Redditor and wasteful to the eco-conscious consumer. Online, the biggest dis that Gen Z can confer is "[polyester](#)"—read: cheap; an imitation. The CSI finds that transparent pricing ranks #1 among price attributes (cited by 88%), followed by alignment of quality and price (86%). Accordingly, fashion Substackers are steering toward Y2K-era pieces from brands like J.Crew, Abercrombie, and Calvin Klein on the logic that the older garments were simply better made.

Across the price ladder, consumers are sorting premium pricing from quality sourcing. Sustainable options available increased 5% YOY in importance—with a bigger jump in jewelry (+21% YOY) and luxury (+13%). Theory rose to #5 in premium specialty on its strength in fabric and fit claims—the company's most-used materials are cotton, wool, and linen—while Reformation slipped to #10. Lab-grown diamonds are the cleanest proof: not a trade-down, but a rejection of a heritage markup nobody can justify anymore. Meanwhile, fast fashion is contending with monoethylene glycol [shortages](#) due to the Strait of Hormuz closure, causing polyester prices to spike. As Asian buyers look for alternatives, apparel manufacturers will need to decide how to play with price and positioning.

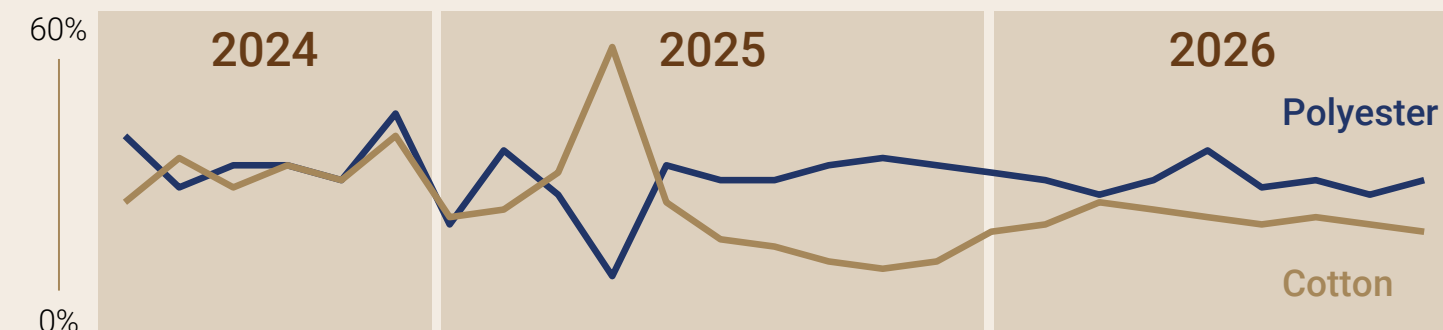


The consumer's laser beam focus on materials is starting to reach luxury too: criticism once reserved for fast fashion—calling out unfinished seams, uneven top-stitching, and plated rather than solid metal—is increasingly aimed at major luxury handbag and jewelry houses, not just accessible brands. Zales, Kay and Jared all rose in the rankings, on the strength of lab-grown diamond sales, while BVLGARI fell to #10 as aspirational buyers traded down.

Even specialty-premium brands are responding: Sézane has said its [next chapter](#) will slow its release cadence and refocus on quality after visible community pushback over declining construction.

Polyester overtakes cotton as share of new arrivals

Monthly share of new-in womenswear arrivals by fabric, Aug 2024 to Aug 2026



Source: Powered by EDITED, analyzed by AlixPartners.

39%

Footwear consumers who say they will cut the number of pairs they buy before switching to cheaper brands—quality and durability are the top factors driving their spend

30% vs 33%

transparent pricing vs. price-quality alignment
YOY lift in the importance of transparent pricing and price-quality alignment

63% vs 34%

Gen Z interest in "dupes" vs. everyone else
Gen Z isn't rejecting cheap materials; they're rejecting cheap materials sold as premium (the only attribute where Gen Z outscores every other generation)

+15%

Two-year increase in average advertised full price, women's apparel to Aug 2026

The price tag for new arrivals has steadily climbed

Monthly average advertised full price, U.S. womenswear Aug 2024 to Aug 2026



Source: Powered by EDITED, analyzed by AlixPartners.

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Consumers see retail as a ‘third space,’ and expect to be welcomed accordingly



Retailers taught shoppers to be self-sufficient, and need to deliver on access they’ve dangled

Outside of the home and work, Americans want to find connection and community. For this, they have “third spaces”: coffee shops, bars, and, increasingly, retail stores. “I find online shopping so anti social!” said one consumer asking for good in-store service recs. Gen Z are even positioning a trip to the mall as [good for their mental health](#). Accordingly, they are making themselves at home in their favorite stores (they’re even fixing the merchandise displays).

Coach has won big with Gen Z in 2026 thanks in part to immersive experiences like its Coffee Shops and Coach Play stores: geared toward self-expression, the latter let consumers customize their Tabby bags with charms across the U.S. and UK ([where the Selfridges layout includes a giant dinosaur slide](#)), and bring in the next generation of luxury shoppers, as Coach CEO Todd Kahn has emphasized. Coach’s ParentCo. recorded a pro forma **25% YOY jump in revenue** in the third quarter of 2026, and within the CSI, Coach was the top-ranked accessories company across every generation this year (moving up a spot overall from 2025). When we analyze basket size, we find an increase for those companies like Coach (+8% YOY), Dick’s (+3% YOY), and Ralph Lauren (+7% YOY; also known for its cafe concepts) investing in experiential shopping journeys.

But it’s not just about dazzling consumers—it’s about serving a sophisticated shopper who feels a sense of ownership in-store. The modern consumer has been trained as a para-store associate by retailer innovations like BOPIS, request-the-item-you-want screens in-store, and “find at a store near me” inventory search engines.

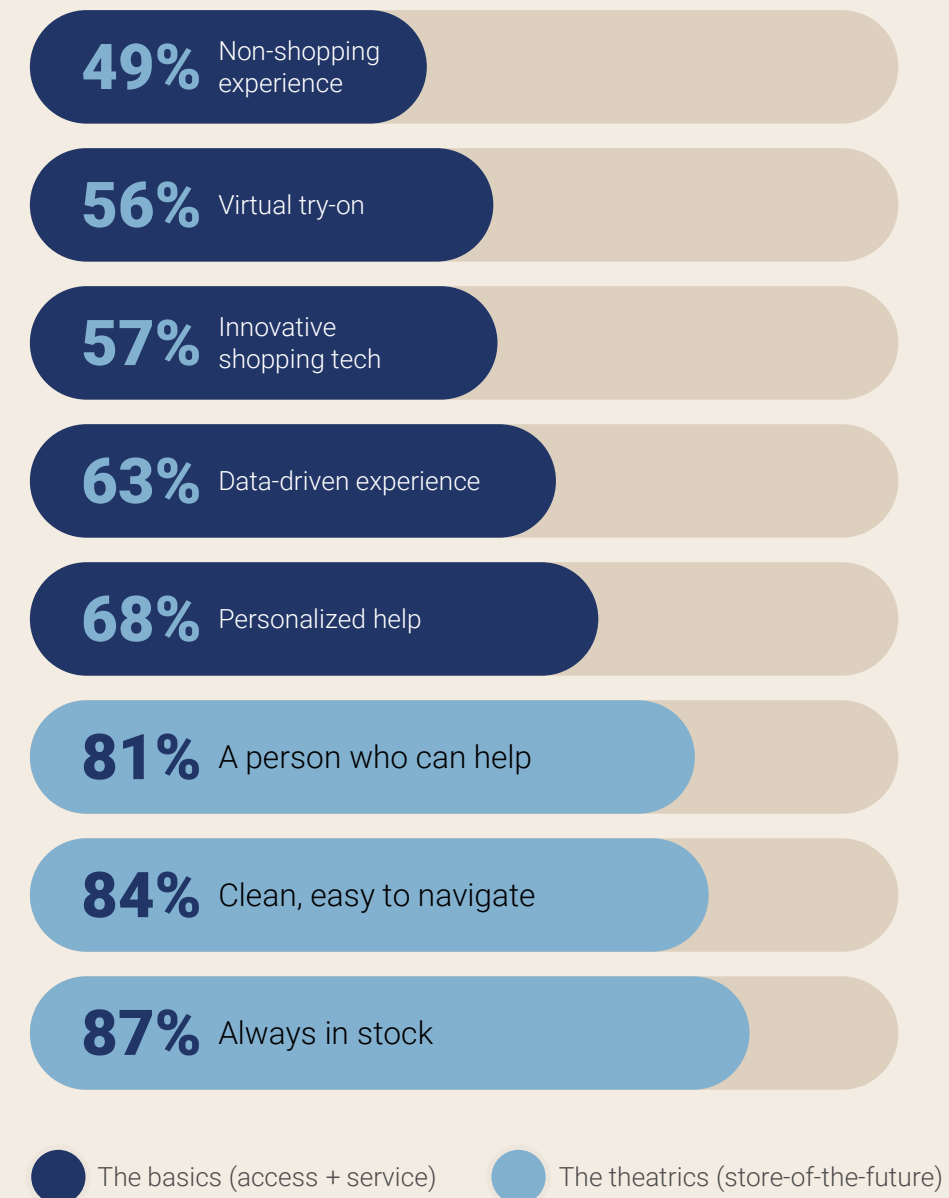
The shift to letting consumers go halfway to fulfillment on their own has had a clear impact on expectations—it shows in the facets of access that consumers value most. The CSI finds that being in stock is the #1 attribute (cited as important by 88%), a clean, easy-to-navigate store is #2 (84%), and a person who can actually help is #3 of 10 in service (81%). Meanwhile, more dazzling store-of-the-future features (in-store tech, virtual try-on, non-shopping experiences) rank #7, #8, and #10, respectively. It also shows up in their sense of entitlement where brand exclusives are concerned: 59% of consumers say early access to products/experiences is important—even more so in luxury (70%), accessories (66%), and specialty (61%). Millennials care most at 66%, ahead of Gen Z and Gen X (59%), and Boomers (52%).

Retailer rankings also reward the companies that provide ample space to explore and get hands-on with products. Dick’s House of Sport model took the retailer from #6 to #1 in sports & outdoor, with wide aisles for bike riding, batting cages to test new gear, and a customer-driven system for trying on cleats—shoppers don’t go into the stock room, but they’re right outside requesting sizes and models, and being directed to next-best fits by the system.

This may partly explain Zappos’ fall from #1 to #7 in multi-brand footwear—innovations at Dick’s ate away at the convenience advantage that defined Zappos’ entire proposition. Meanwhile, Dick’s best rival, REI, fell from #1 to #9, after closing its Soho and Boston flagships and eliminating its “Experiences” program.

Shoppers want the shelf stocked, not the song and dance

Share calling each an important purchase driver, all apparel, 2026 (n=9,069)



-13%

YOY drop in innovative shopping technology as consumers tune out tech advancements

>80%

of consumers put the basics first—in stock, clean store, and a person to help are #1, #2 and #3 in their respective pillars

Coach
+8%

Dick's
+3%

Ralph Lauren
+7%

YOY basket size growth | Retailers experimenting with experiential stores are finding success getting people to spend more per purchase (Q2 2026, Indagari)

Generational capsules

A close read of priorities by age group

Gen Z

Age: 14-29

*We surveyed consumers 18+

Likes:

- ✓ BNPL
- ✓ Using AI to scout
- ✓ Resale markets
- ✓ Strong brand ID
- ✓ Malls



Don't bother with:
Influencer hauls,
cheap imitations
of the real thing

Cheat sheet:

They're getting really real about sourcing quality brands, driven by nostalgia core

TOP BRANDS

- Coach
- Crocs
- Urban Outfitters
- Old Navy

Millennials

Age: 30-45

Cheat sheet:

The Y2K originators are breaking up with fast fashion

Don't bother with:
Polyester
(Zara & Shein fell from #2 and #4 to #5 and #7 in 2026)



Likes:

- ✓ Ethical brands
- ✓ Ratings & reviews (especially from peers)
- ✓ Durable construction

TOP BRANDS

- Louis Vuitton
- Vans
- Ralph Lauren

Cheat sheet:

Former "riot grrls" and grungeheads see a gap in the market as they age out of brands, and have more to spend than ever

Gen X

Age: 46-61

Don't bother with:
"brand resonance,"
"personalization"



Likes:

- ✓ Good service
- ✓ Gen-aligned offerings

TOP BRANDS

- Banana Republic
- T.J. Maxx
- Nike
- Ralph Lauren
- Calvin Klein

Boomers+

Age: 62-100

Likes:

- ✓ Comfort (Skechers)
- ✓ Product-price alignment (Kohl's)
- ✓ Quality (Gucci)

Don't bother with:
Experiential extras,
limited drops



Cheat sheet:

They don't want the theatrics or activations, they want a fair price and still love the department store

TOP BRANDS

- Skechers
- Famous Footwear
- Kohl's

CSI

Putting the CSI to work

As consumers confess their declining trust in influencers, increased skepticism over quality, and dissatisfaction with sizing, apparel companies are due for fit check.

They need a business model that delivers on the fundamentals: a solid price-to-quality alignment, in-stocks and a clean, easy-to-navigate store, and a creative edge. In 2026, brands aren't just competing against each other, but against the consumer's nostalgic view of the brands, cuts, and fabrics of Y2K, and against an agentic journey primed to recommend dupes.

The new winning model is taking shape in the open-source and influence-free halls of Reddit, in the fit recommendations of AI stylists (increasingly adopted by all generations), in the stores that are bringing the fun back to shopping excursions and to designer collabs, and—perhaps most critically—in those able to verify the mill, the material composition, and the factory behind the garment. No amount of brand cool or affordable pricing is worth it if the garment shrinks into dolls' clothing on the first wash.

Retailers have yet to nail it the new rubric. The brand that stitches fit intelligence, verified sourcing, and real human judgment into a single experience will be the one that gets to say, credibly, "trust us" at a moment consumers would rather not.

To get there, brands have several hurdles to clear

Fashion's winning brands in 2027 won't be the ones with the biggest campaign. They'll be the ones the consumer no longer has to double-check.

Rebuilding for the body of now

Sizing and fit data are lagging a population whose bodies are changing faster than any product cycle can track. This is a forecasting problem. Brands that rebuild demand models and size curves around the customer as she is now, rather than with a three-year-old snapshot, will free up the working capital currently sitting in mis-sized inventory and put it into an assortment that actually sells.

Replacing influence with evidence

Trust in influencer recommendations has cracked, and it isn't coming back through better creators—it comes back through material proof: verified reviews, transparent sourcing, and genuine synergy with brand partners. The brands still pouring budget into reach, without measuring whether it moves trust, are optimizing for a channel the consumer no longer believes in.

Paying the consumer back for the labor they're doing

Shoppers are already doing the job of the store associate—they're researching, comparing, and self-serving through checkout. The opportunity isn't to reverse that, it's to redesign the floor around it, with fewer bodies doing the wrong tasks, and more on hand to smooth the path to conversion.

Making the label tell the truth

Price-quality trust is now a purchase driver in its own right. Brands that can substantiate material quality end-to-end—sourcing, QA, chain of custody—convert skepticism into loyalty; the ones that can't will keep losing to private-label and off-price competitors who never promised more than they deliver.

Owning the relationship before an agent does

Agentic commerce optimizes for price and spec, and treats brand reputation as just one input. The brands that hold their ground are the ones treating this as a data and technology problem, structuring product feeds, loyalty terms, and first-party data so an agent transacting on a consumer's behalf still routes value back to the brand, not the platform standing between them.

Spending the experience dollar where trust is thinnest

Not every category needs a flagship activation, and not every brand has the capital sitting idle to fund one. The brands getting this right have already done the harder work of freeing up cash—trimming cost elsewhere in the P&L—so the experience spend that follows lands exactly where distrust is highest, instead of being spread thin across everything.

The method

AlixPartners relaunched the historic Consumer Sentiment Index in 2024 to provide a tool for retailers to evaluate and prioritize resources, operational and technological advancements, and growth initiatives to stay ahead of the fast-evolving consumer. The Index, first launched in the 2000s, provides data on consumer prioritization of five key pillars: access, experience, service, product, and price.

The value statements they ranked correspond to the five pillars of excellence:

- ✓ Access: Ease and convenience in shopping, entailing reliable inventory, location of stores, early access to deals, and mobile apps
- ✓ Experience: Connectivity to the brand, including customer engagement, personalized experiences in-store and online, and store layouts
- ✓ Price: Baked into the price point are beliefs about realized and perceived value, and competitiveness
- ✓ Product: Details around the goods themselves, including quality, craftsmanship, trendiness, sustainability, and inclusivity
- ✓ Service: Tangible services that happen before, during, and after the sale; and additional value-added services such as styling and customization

Once we understand which pillars consumers prioritize in different settings, we can look at how these drive purchase behaviors. Importantly, consumers don't see pillars in isolation; they trade off price versus product or service when budgets tighten. In most cases in this report, we refer to "important drivers," which include any responses where consumers consider attributes as "important," "very important," or the "#1 driver of shopping decision." The term "primary purchase driver" is used when discussing responses where consumers deemed attributes as "very important" or the "#1 driver of shopping decision."



We polled over

9,000

U.S. consumers on their preferences and priorities across 140 retailers and nine sectors: Accessories, jewelry, luxury, footwear, outdoor & active, specialty, department store, mass & club and off price.



Our team



Sonia Lapinsky | Global Lead of Fashion, Partner & Managing Director

Sonia brings over 25 years of global operational experience to help retail and fashion clients achieve margin enhancement, cost reduction, and greater speed and flexibility, drawing on deep expertise in sourcing, product development, merchandising, and organizational design across apparel, accessories, footwear, and hardlines. Prior to AlixPartners, she directed sourcing, manufacturing, and product development across Asia, South Asia, and Europe, including as an expatriate in Shenzhen, China. Sonia holds a mechanical engineering degree from Queen's University in Canada.



Justin MacFarlane | Partner & Managing Director

Justin is a senior fashion retail executive who brings deep experience and analytical rigor to solving complex client challenges, having served both in executive leadership roles and as a trusted adviser to boards and management teams. He brings over 30 years of experience in company transformation, growth strategy, marketing effectiveness, operations improvement, AI and analytics, and eCommerce optimization. Justin holds an MBA from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and a Bachelor of Science from Babson College.



John Samuel | Partner & Managing Director

John is a Partner & Managing Director in the Retail practice, focused on DTC and wholesale companies and leading operational transformation programs across process, organization, strategy, and analytics. He leads the firm's AI Profit Engine initiative, which helps retailers integrate internal and external data to forecast demand and optimize pricing, inventory, and marketing through machine learning. John has partnered with C-suite leaders across specialty, department, luxury, mass, and value retail on complex analytics and growth strategy engagements, and holds a Bachelor of Science in Operations Research and Information Engineering from Cornell University.



Filip Nemeth | Partner

Filip specializes in the retail industry, focusing on holistic company transformation, organizational design, and end-to-end process improvement to help retailers and brands improve operational and financial performance. He has worked with a broad range of retailers, brands, and department stores, driving large-scale transformation and integration programs across cross-functional, multi-region teams in North America, Europe, and Asia. Filip holds a master's degree from London Business School and completed the Program for Leadership Development at Harvard Business School.



Meghan Hayward | Director

Meghan is a seasoned retail leader with almost twenty years of experience enhancing profits and sales for direct-selling organizations, specialty retailers, and department stores, working across functions to integrate customer data into marketing and merchandising, streamline product categories, and improve digital marketing strategies. She currently heads the consumer insights function at AlixPartners, developing a comprehensive understanding of the consumer by merging client data, third-party spending data, and primary research to analyze consumer psychographics.



Meredith Sachs | Senior Vice President

Meredith brings over a decade of experience driving strategic transformation and operational excellence across global markets, having managed multi-million-dollar portfolios and led marketing strategies at a leading e-commerce company that delivered 30% year-over-year top-line growth. Meredith holds a Master of Science in Operations Research from Columbia University and a Bachelor of Arts in Mathematics and Economics from the University of Virginia.



Abby Sattler | Senior Vice President

Abby brings nearly a decade of experience within the retail industry and leads business intelligence for the firm's Retail practice, translating consumer, market, and competitive data into insights that inform strategic decision-making, with particular depth in beauty, health and wellness, and fashion. Prior to AlixPartners, she held merchandise planning and strategy roles at Walmart and Abercrombie & Fitch. Abby holds a bachelor's degree in finance from The Ohio State University.

About Us

For more than forty years, AlixPartners has helped businesses around the world respond quickly and decisively to their most critical challenges—circumstances as diverse as urgent performance improvement, accelerated transformation, complex restructuring, and risk mitigation. 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. But it's not what we do that makes a difference, it's how we do it. Tackling situations when time is of the essence is part of our DNA—so we adopt an action-oriented approach at all times. We work in small, highly qualified teams with specific industry and functional expertise, and we operate at pace, moving quickly from analysis to implementation. 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. Our approach enables us to help our clients confront and overcome truly future-defining challenges. 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.

AlixPartners

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