

RETAIL PULSE

Back-to-School is Back To Growth

SPRING 2026

The Big Picture

Late summer is no longer just a seasonal sales bump for retailers. It is becoming a high-stakes moment when shoppers reset routines, refresh baskets and decide which retailers will earn their next purchase. **Our latest read of 2025 back-to-school insights suggests late summer shopping remains a pivotal moment when consumers not only spend, but also explore, creating an opening for retailers to win new customers ahead of the holidays.**

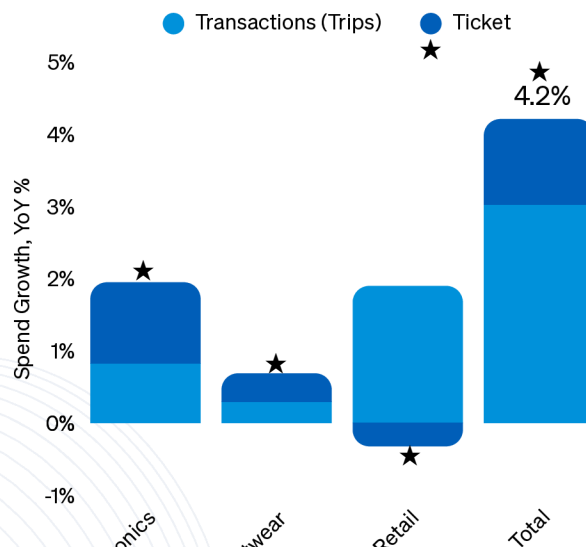
What’s especially notable about our findings is **where** that discovery is happening and **who** is driving it. We see channel preferences shifting and different income segments playing distinct roles in fueling trial across online and in-store shopping. Our data suggests these trial moments are likely stickier than they look, with the potential to turn a single back-to-school purchase into something longer-lasting. Herein lies the opportunity: **the retailers that win trial during back-to-school are often the ones that earn repeat spend later.**

Key Findings

- **Healthy back-to-school spend** in 2025 was driven by growth in both transactions (trips) and average ticket.
- **Retailer trial picks up during back-to-school season.** Importantly, these aren’t one-and-done visits as most trials lead to a repeat purchase within the next three months, with even higher repeat rates for online retailers.
- **Middle and high income consumers are more likely to shop online and trial new online merchants** during the back-to-school season.
- **Gen Z is starting to power kids apparel, boosting Children’s and Infant Wear enough to blunt declines** and signaling an early handoff in who’s shopping for young families.

Note: “Back-to-School” in our analysis refers to the seasonal window from July through September. In this report, we focus on the key goods-based, discretionary merchant category codes, that capture a disproportionate share of consumer spending during this period.

Spend growth in key back-to-school categories grew 4.2% YoY over the 2025 back-to-school season, led by 3% growth in trips and 1.2% growth in average ticket.



Time Period: July - Sept 2025

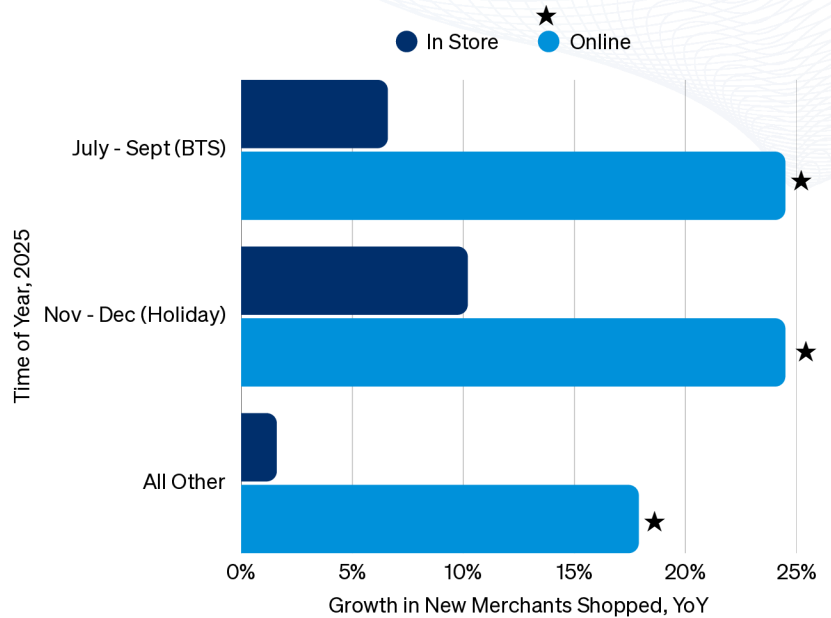
Source: Chase

To Win Holiday, Win Back-to-School

Our data shows that **shoppers are just as likely to try new retailers during the back-to-school season as they are during the holiday season**, with trial rates dropping off sharply in non-seasonal months. This is especially true for online transactions, and those within core back-to-school categories like General Merchandise & Electronics and Apparel & Footwear.

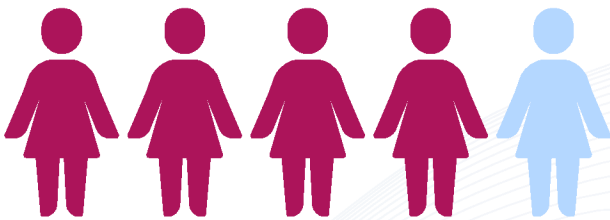
Overall, our consumers shopped at 15% more merchants in 2025 vs 2024 during the back-to-school season, led by a **25% growth in online merchants shopped.**

Both back-to-school and holiday shopping seasons are key new merchant trial periods for consumers. This is especially true for merchants with an online presence.



Source: Chase

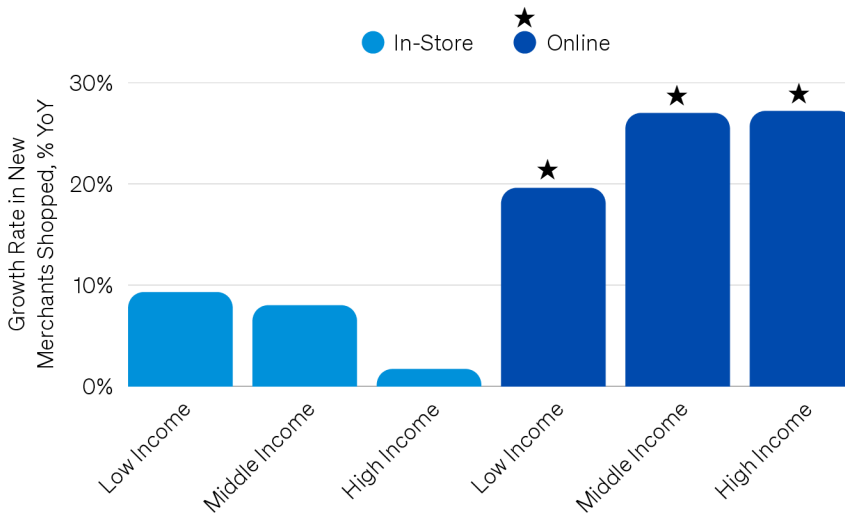
Interestingly, we also see in our data that 67% of **consumers who try a new retailer during back-to-school season, return to shop again before year-end.** This repeat behavior is even higher for online shopping and signals real stickiness from late-summer trial, further suggesting that retailers should be aiming to win new customers during this period.



Nearly 4 out of 5 customers who made an **online purchase** during the back-to-school season, made at least one additional purchase at that merchant later in the year.

Back-to-School Trial Shifts Online...High- and Middle-Income Shoppers Lead

During the back-to-school season, our **higher-income consumers are more likely to both trial new merchants and transaction online** vs their middle income and low income peers. Trial to new brick-and-mortar stores however, remains low, suggesting that **discovery for high income consumers is increasingly happening in digital channels**. Additionally, it's also worth noting that **middle-income shoppers also post solid new-merchant purchase growth in both channels—online and in-store—making them another broad-based driver of trial during the season**.



Source: Chase

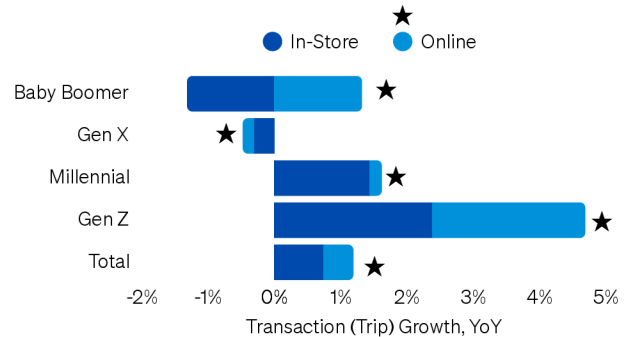
Middle and higher-income consumers grew the number of online merchants shopped at nearly 30% more merchants during the back-to-school season vs the previous year.

Millennials and Gen Z Carry Apparel Transaction Growth

Apparel transactions (trips) grew year over year during the three-month back-to-school period in 2025—an important bright spot in a year that was otherwise negative on net, as holiday and non-seasonal months weighed on comps. Much of that back-to-school strength came from Millennials and Gen Z, who pulled apparel back into positive growth. **Millennials leaned more into in-store, while Gen Z's gains were more evenly split between in-store and online**.

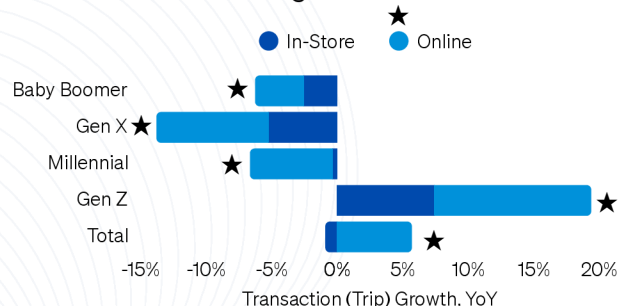
Within apparel, our data also points to an emerging demographic shift. **Gen Z growth in Children's and Infant Wear helped partially offset an overall decline in that subcategory**. Even with birthrates still historically low, the story may be changing at the margin: as Gen X ages out of rearing young children, Gen Z is increasingly shopping into parenthood and beginning to more meaningfully show up in kids-focused apparel spend.

Millennials and Gen Z led transaction growth in Apparel & Footwear during the 2025 back-to-school season.



Source: Chase

Gen Z increased their shopping trips YoY during the 2025 back-to-school season within the Children and Infant Wear category, offsetting declines by other generations.



Source: Chase



What's Next?

Back-to-School 2026

Over the coming months, we'll continue to monitor consumers' re-shop rates—tracking whether back-to-school trial converts into repeat spending—and we'll share timely updates as the 2026 season unfolds. We'll also watch how re-shop behavior varies by income segment and channel (online vs in-store) to identify where early momentum is most likely to translate into sustained customer growth.

Notes on Methodology:

A re-shop rate is defined as making an additional purchase at the same retailer. Retailers are defined at an entity level, not a location or franchise sub-level. A customer has re-shopped when they have returned once, regardless of if additional shops occur. Merchants are consolidated to the entity level using tagging information provided by a 3rd party. Data is directional and subject to limitations and changes per the data provider

Growth rates are determined by looking at distinct merchants shopped at in the current year, compared to distinct merchants shopped at during the prior year day aligned period. Merchants are consolidated to the entity level using tagging information provided by a 3rd party. Data is directional and subject to limitations and changes per the data provider.

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