

# Behind the returns



78+ million online purchases in Sweden, Norway and Finland reveal how products and customer behaviors shape the return

# Return data is an untapped business signal



*"Used correctly, return data is a practical tool for tailoring the customer journey and hitting the mark long before the customer has even clicked buy."*

Returns are often treated as something that merely happens after the purchase — a pure logistics issue for customer service to solve. However, for merchants, return data reveals something far more business-critical. Working closely with Nordic merchants every day, we see how returns can be managed more proactively.

That is the starting point of this report. We are sharing these insights because return data, when used correctly, is one of the most underutilized business signals in Nordic e-commerce. We simply believe that more people should have access to these insights.

Kustom's analysis of 78.6 million orders in Sweden, Norway and Finland between August 2025 and April 2026 shows that returns do not happen by chance. It is primarily a fashion phenomenon driven by the nature of the product, fit and customer behavior. This turns return data into a sharp business signal rather than just an operational metric. Used correctly, return data is a practical tool for tailoring the customer journey and hitting the mark long before the customer has even clicked buy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jesper Eriksson'.

Jesper Eriksson, Chief Commercial Officer, Kustom

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78.6M

Orders analyzed

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1 551

Merchants

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2.9B SEK

In fashion returns/year

# Five quick insights from the report

## Returns peak in fashion

While beauty, groceries and electronics maintain stable return rates under 5 percent, the number for fashion is often over 25 percent.

## The type of product determines everything

Return behavior is entirely driven by what is in the cart. This becomes obvious when comparing items that require an exact fit with accessories like bags, within the same market.

## A higher price doesn't lower returns

In both Sweden and Finland, the premium segment has the highest return rate of all — in Finland a full 12 percentage points above mid-market.

## Young women return the most

Women aged 18–29 send back more than a third of the value they spend — and are at the same time one of fashion merchants' most valuable customer groups.

## Loyalty and returns go hand in hand

In most industries, returning customers have the lowest return rates. In fashion, it is the exact opposite, with loyal customers consistently returning a larger share of their purchases than new customers.

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Returns are a  
fashion phenomenon

01

# Fashion return rates are almost four times the average




## 22.8%

The return rate in fashion highlights a big gap compared to other industries.

Every year, fashion items worth almost 3 billion SEK are returned through Kustom's infrastructure across Sweden, Norway and Finland. If you remove the fashion category, the rest of e-commerce stabilizes at low and predictable levels.

While the average return rate across all combined categories sits at a modest 5.9 percent, the fashion industry averages 22.8 percent.

## Return rate by category and market

Market	Fashion	Hobby & DIY	Furniture	Electronics	Groceries	Pharmacy & beauty
 Sweden	24.9%	4.8%	4.8 %	3.5 %	1.1 %	0.8%
 Norway	19.5%	7.4%	4.2%	3.2%	2.0%	1.5%
 Finland	21.9%	5.3%	4.1%	3.6%	2.9%	1.3%

# 31x

higher return rates for fashion than in pharmacy & beauty in Sweden.

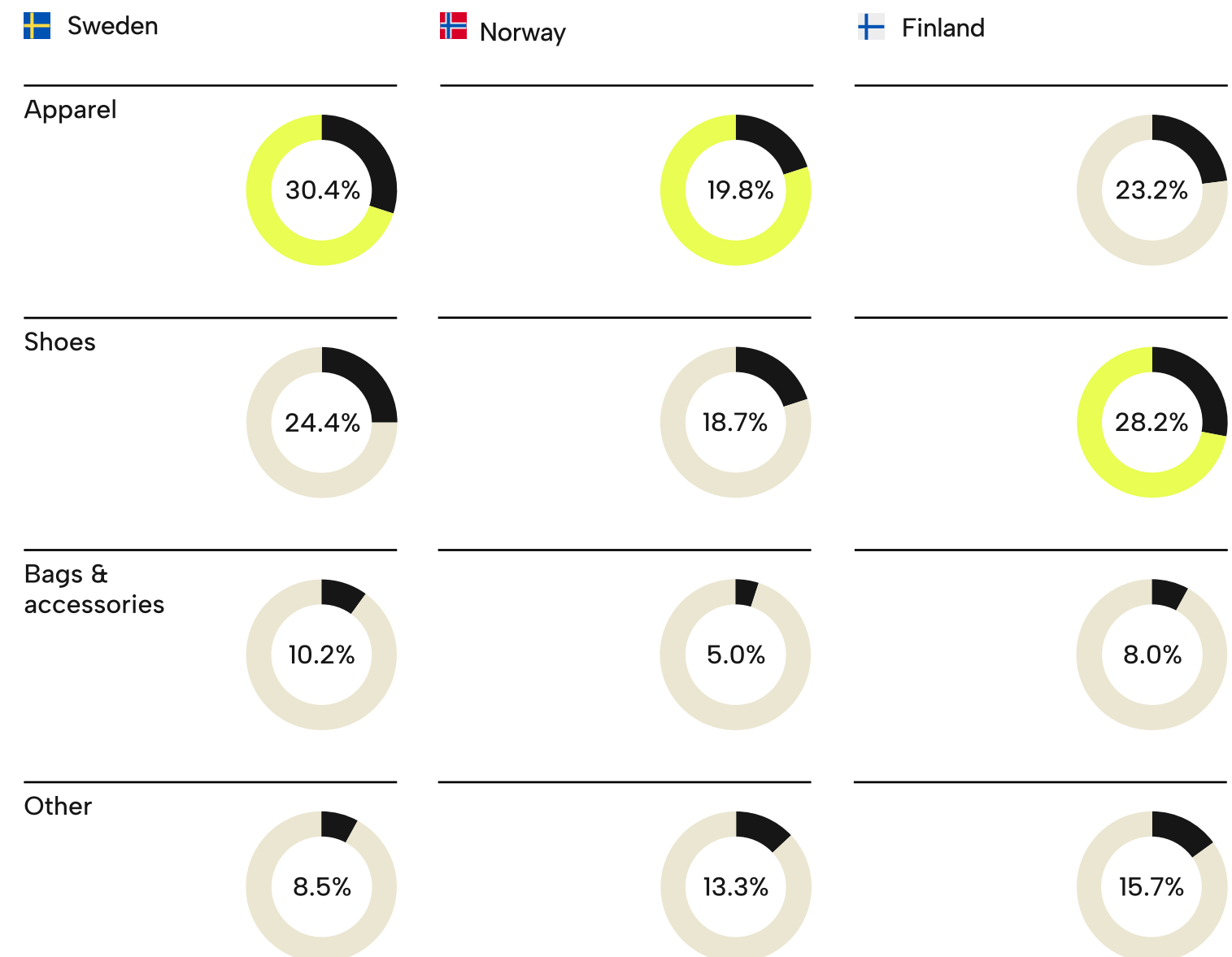
# Why does fashion stand out?

The difference is most likely rooted in the nature of the product. Most electronics and beauty products are highly standardized, meaning the customer knows exactly what will be delivered. In fashion, garments must be evaluated at home for the customer to know how they fit, drape and feel.

Fashion purchases are also frequently driven by inspiration and self-expression rather than pure necessity. This creates a naturally higher need to evaluate the purchase once the package has arrived. The fact that open beauty packaging cannot be returned also contributes to the low return rates in that specific category.

## A closer look at fashion subcategories

Digging deeper reveals that fit is the ultimate determining factor. In Sweden, apparel purchases carry a return rate of 30.4 percent, whereas bags and accessories land at a relatively low 10.2 percent. This structural pattern repeats consistently across Norway and Finland.



Young customers  
return the most

02




# A consistent pattern across all markets

## 45%

lower return rate among the oldest customers compared to the youngest in Sweden.

Data shows that the younger generation have largely turned their homes into fitting rooms. Returns decline almost linearly with age across all markets, peaking in the 18–29 demographic at 31.5 percent in Sweden, 29.0 percent in Finland and 24.8 percent in Norway. Customers over the age of 60 return roughly half as much, with the Swedish gap being the widest.

## Return rate in fashion by age group

Market	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
 Sweden	31.5%	25.7%	24.9%	22.3%	17.3%
 Norway	24.8%	21.0%	20.5%	19.1%	15.2%
 Finland	29.0%	23.9%	22.6%	20.6%	18.3%

# *Not used to returns or more considered purchases?*



The lower return rate among customers over 60 can point toward a more mature and deliberate purchasing behavior where older customers tend to have a clearer purchase intent. They often have a better grasp of their own style and sizing, meaning their baseline assumption is to keep what they order.

Alternatively, it may stem from being less accustomed to navigating digital return flows. Historically complicated processes like printing return labels or booking couriers can cause older customer groups to avoid returns entirely.

At the same time, younger consumers have grown up alongside e-commerce, treating the home as an extension of the physical fitting room. They shop more spontaneously and leverage the flexibility of digital flows to test products. For merchants, this means that the exact same product category requires different levels of contextual support and reassurance depending on the target demographic.










# Urban areas drive the highest return volumes

Return rates within fashion are systematically higher in urban locations. In Sweden, urban areas show a return rate of 27.9 percent, compared to 23.5 percent in suburban zones and 20.0 percent in rural areas. Norway and Finland exhibit identical trends, but with tighter margins. For high-volume merchants centered in major cities, this means dealing with structurally higher baseline return volumes.

7.9

percentage point is the drop in Sweden's return rate from urban to rural areas.

## Return rate in fashion by urbanization

 Urban	27.9%
 Suburban	23.5%
 Rural	20.0%
 Urban	21.9%
 Suburban	18.8%
 Rural	17.4%
 Urban	23.9%
 Suburban	20.9%
 Rural	19.7%

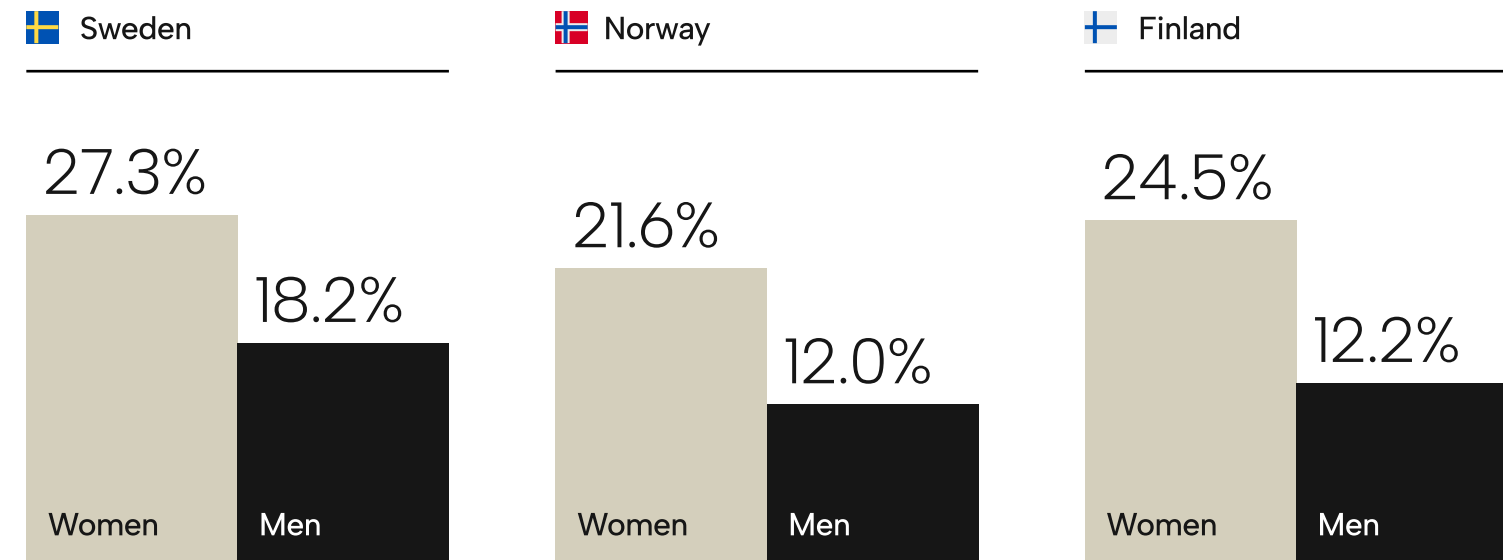
# Can physical stores become a return filter for e-commerce?

# Women return the most — and drive the most value

Within fashion, women return a significantly higher portion of their purchases than men. Swedish women return 27.3 percent of their orders compared to 18.2 percent for men, with a similar gap appearing in Norway (21.6% vs 12.0%) and Finland (24.5% vs 12.2%).

Despite this volume, women remain the primary engine of fashion growth, generating an average of 75 percent of merchants' total net order value after returns are deducted. This proves that elevated return volumes and high commercial value can coexist seamlessly.

## Return rate in fashion by gender



## Net order value after returns



For omnichannel merchants, the high return rates in cities offer a great chance to connect different channels. Letting customers browse items online but try, pick up or exchange them in-store is an effective way to cut down on uncertainty. This turns physical stores into a strategic asset for managing returns, leading to more confident buying decisions and fewer unnecessary returns.



# Young women top the charts

## 8.2%




return rate in fashion for Norwegian men over 60 — the lowest figure across all markets.

In Sweden, women aged 18 to 29 have a 34.5 percent return rate in fashion. More than a third of what they spend is returned.

Yet, they represent one of e-commerce's most valuable segment; they purchase frequently, engage heavily and strategically utilize the home as a fitting room by ordering multiple sizes.

At the other end of the spectrum, men over 60 exhibit the lowest return rates in the entire dataset.

## Return rate in fashion by gender and age

Market	Women 18-29	Men 18-29	Women 60+	Men 60+
 Sweden	34.5%	22.7%	19.6%	9.8%
 Norway	26.6%	16.5%	17.2%	8.2%
 Finland	31.5%	15.4%	20.3%	8.6%

*A sign of uncertainty or a deliberate buying behavior?*












The fact that young women return more than a third, confirms that the home has become the new fitting room. Large variations in sizing and fit across products and brands encourage customers to order multiple sizes to try on at home.

It can also be a buying pattern driven by social media and spontaneity, where returns work as a natural tool to handle uncertainty.

# Cart size vs. return rate




Data reveals that women naturally order a higher number of items per transaction than men. Swedish women average 4.53 items per order compared to 3.93 for men.

## Number of items per order by gender

Market	Women	Men
 Sweden	 4.53	 3.93
 Norway	 4.53	 4.06
 Finland	 5.17	 4.76

It's worth noting that the spike among the age group 18–29 is not caused by oversized carts but rather by their conscious decision to reject a far greater percentage of what they purchase.

## Number of items per order by age group

Age group	 Sweden	 Norway	 Finland
18–29	4.0	4.2	4.8
30–39	4.9	4.5	5.2
40–49	4.8	4.3	5.1
50–59	4.4	4.3	5.2
60+	4.0	4.3	4.9

# *Are all returns really the same?*

Returns in fashion serve multiple purposes at once by lowering the customer's perceived risk and encouraging them to try new things, but they also create direct costs. The real challenge for a merchant is not to try and stop all returns completely, but to smartly find and reduce the ones that could have been avoided.



Premium products  
stand out

03



# A higher price doesn't protect against returns

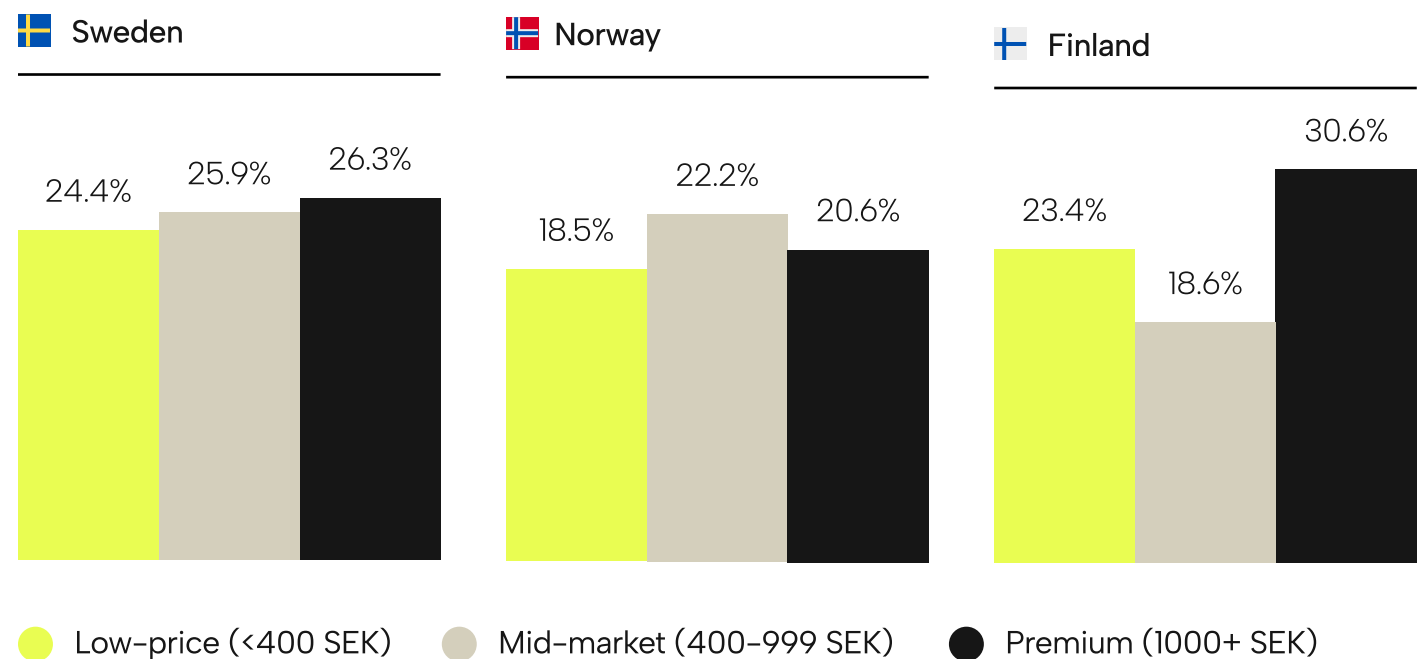
## 65%

higher return rate for premium fashion compared to mid-market in Finland.

It's a common assumption that expensive fashion purchases mean fewer returns because the buying decisions are more considered. Our transaction data proves the exact opposite.

In Sweden and Finland, the premium tier displays the highest return rate. This is most prominent in Finland, where premium fashion hits 30.6 percent compared to 18.6 percent for mid-market goods. Norway stands as the lone exception, where mid-market returns slightly exceed premium.

### Return rate by price segment in fashion



# *Do expectations scale with the price tag?*



The fact that luxury and premium items are sent back more frequently reinforces that a higher price tag does not guarantee an accurate purchase. Customer expectations may amplify alongside the cost. A customer paying premium prices is less forgiving of minor fit or fabric mismatches, prompting a return if the item fails to deliver on its premium promise.

Consequently, returns cannot be simplified as a low-price or discount-driven problem. The premium tier demands exceptional precision in pre-purchase alignment — creating opportunities for hyper-accurate product information, rich material specs and realistic sizing guides to digitally replicate the tactile feel of an item before the transaction occurs.



# Three buying behaviors that shape the return

## Personas

### The explorer

Returns are a natural part of the purchase journey.

Items are ordered in multiple sizes to be evaluated at home. This results in a high return rate, but also a structurally higher purchase frequency and loyalty.

This group includes, for example, younger women shopping mid-range and premium products.

## What does it mean for merchants?

1. Support customers with styling inspiration, realistic fit guides and visual content that sets the right vibe on the product page.
2. Focus on repurchase frequency and customer lifetime value rather than fixating on return rate alone.
3. Offer delivery and payment options that support the customer's need to try at home.

### The planner

Confidence and precision are key before purchasing.

This group has a lower return rate because purchases are more considered. The customer typically knows what they are looking for when placing the order.

This group includes men in general and mature consumers.

1. Make sure product images, measurements and material descriptions give customers the correct information and reduce uncertainty before checkout.
2. Build confidence through customer reviews, guides and certifications.
3. Establish trust at checkout through familiar, reliable payment options and clear guidance.

### The pragmatist


Ease and convenience outweigh perfection.

This group has a higher tolerance for fit discrepancies, but a low tolerance for friction in the purchase journey.

This group includes middle-aged consumers who primarily shop mid-range products.

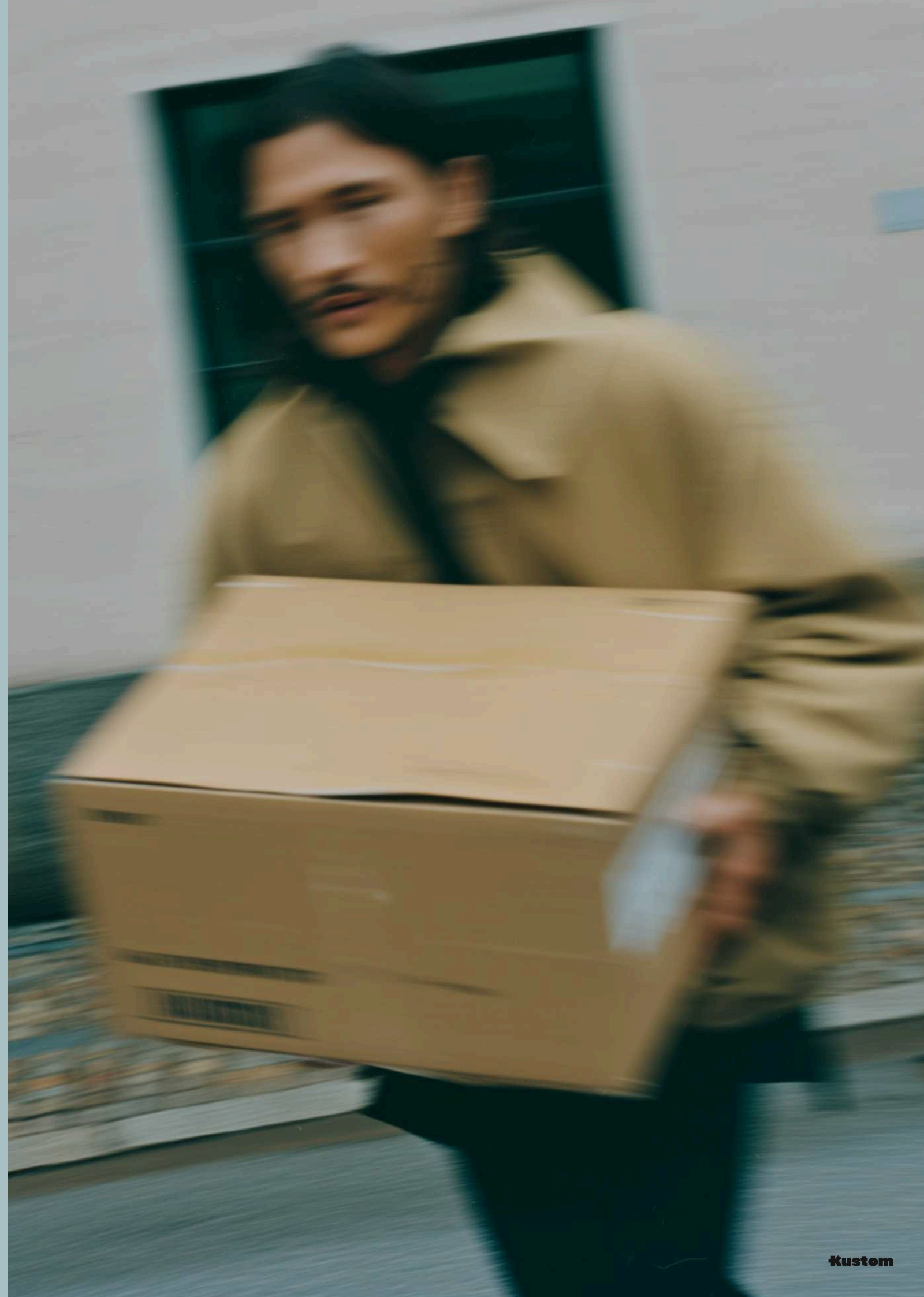
1. Prioritize simplicity on the product page by making it clear what choices the customer has and what the next step is.
2. Lead with what matters most: price, delivery and availability early in the purchase journey.
3. Reduce friction at checkout by offering express checkout, guest purchase options and as few steps as possible to complete the purchase.

# *Can a more predictable customer journey stabilize return patterns?*



The same return rate can mean completely different things depending on the customer. For customers who like to explore, a predictable return process drives loyalty and actually increases the chances of repeat purchases. For more selective customers, a return is often a direct sign that the product or the size guide failed to meet expectations.

The challenge for the merchant is to design a customer journey that provides enough support before the purchase and keeps the entire return process transparent afterward.



The loyalty paradox

04

# Returns and loyalty go hand in hand

Fashion is the only category where repeat customers return more than new ones — in Sweden the gap is 28.3 vs. 21.1 percent.

## 7.5

percentage points higher return rate among returning customers compared to new customers.

While repeat customers usually return less because they know the brand well, the exact opposite is true in fashion. The data shows that this is a steady pattern across all three Nordic markets, making fashion the only category where returning customers return more than new ones.

In Sweden, new fashion customers have a return rate of 21.1 percent, while the return rate of repeat customers jump to 28.3 percent. This pattern repeats in both Norway and Finland, and for the markets as a whole, the difference is 26.5 percent compared to 19.0 percent. The data points to an established behavior among customers — the more satisfied they are with the purchase and return experience, the more likely they are to come back.

This does not mean the customer is less loyal — quite the opposite. Returning fashion customers can be loyal and return more at the same time because they shop more often and see returns as a natural part of the purchase. Over time, a customer who returns a lot but buys frequently can be just as profitable as a sporadic customer who never returns anything.

In categories where customers feel more uncertain about fit, size and style before delivery, a great return process can increase customer value rather than drain it.

And this is reflected in the numbers — repeat customers return more items than new customers, but at the same time account for a large share of the actual net value. In Sweden, the net order value is nearly on par with that of new customers, despite higher return rates.

For fashion merchants, this means loyalty needs to be measured more broadly than just looking at repeat purchases. In the end, it is all about long-term profitability and how well the checkout experience helps customers choose the right item from the start.

Return rate for new vs. returning customers in fashion

Market	Customer type	Return rate	Share of net order value
🇸🇪 Sweden	New	21.1%	49.9%
	Returning	28.3%	50.1%
🇳🇴 Norway	New	15.4%	52%
	Returning	23.5%	48%
🇫🇮 Finland	New	18.9%	57.6%
	Returning	25.7%	42.4%
Total	New	19.0%	51.4%
Total	Returning	26.5%	48.6%



Future opportunities  
for merchants

05

# From insights to actions

By understanding the drivers behind customer behavior, checkout can be transformed from a place where you simply take payment to a strategic tool for long-term profitability.



## The fitting rooms are everywhere

For many, returns are a completely natural part of shopping for fashion online. When customers cannot feel the fabric or try on the garment in person, the fitting room effectively moves to the living room. This does not mean that customers generally return items to exploit the system — they are trying to make the right decision with limited information.

This is why a return is often decided long before the item has even been shipped. It is shaped by product images, size guides, material descriptions and delivery information. Checkout therefore cannot simply be a place to take payment — it must be an environment that proactively guides the customer in the right direction.

## Returns as a profitability signal

The most important insights in this report concern what happens after the return. Our transaction data shows that the customer segments driving the most returns are paradoxically often the same segments generating the greatest long-term value.

Women return almost twice as much as men, yet account for 75 percent of fashion merchants' net order value. Returning customers return more than new customers, but shop more frequently and build a deeper relationship with the brand.

This means returns can never be assessed in isolation. The challenge lies in understanding which returns are a natural part of active buying behavior, and which stem from uncertainty, unclear information or mismatched expectations.

## The return experience matters

The returns process itself is a loyalty issue. A smooth process with a clear return label, flexible drop-off options and fast refunds determines whether the customer comes back — three in four Nordic customers report having switched retailers after a poor returns experience.

The stakes increase in June 2026, when EU regulations requiring a mandatory cancel button in checkout come into force. As it becomes even easier for customers to change their mind, the pressure on fashion merchants to manage their return patterns strategically increases — and data-driven optimization moves from advantage to necessity. By turning return insights into concrete actions, merchants can improve the customer experience, protect their margins and make more data-driven decisions across the business.



# 01

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## Identify return patterns

The first step is understanding which customer groups, products and buying behaviors are most strongly linked to returns. With Kustom's new insights tool, merchants get a complete picture of their return patterns over time. Return rates can be analyzed by factors such as age, gender and market, while trends are tracked at segment level.

Combined with insights around payment methods, product categories, order values and campaigns, it becomes easier to spot patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed — such as how return propensity shifts during sale periods or among specific customer groups.

# 02

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## Turn returns into improvements

Return data is one of e-commerce's most valuable sources of direct customer feedback. Properly analyzed, it can quickly reveal recurring issues linked to sizing, product descriptions, imagery or mismatched expectations.

These insights can be used to continuously improve product pages, size guides and marketing communication. Over time, this helps minimize avoidable returns while making the purchase experience more precise.

# 03

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## Tailor the purchase experience to the customer

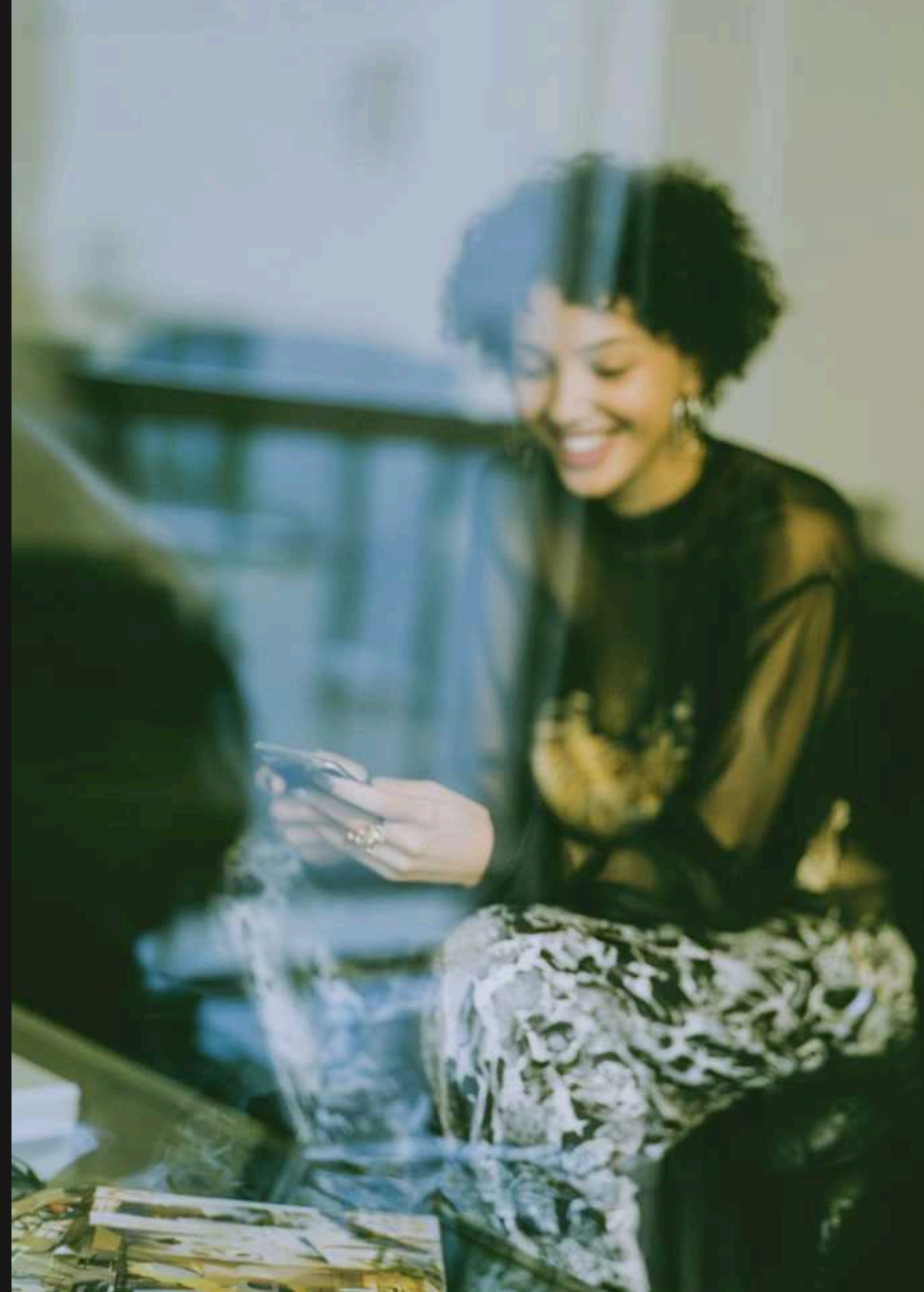
Segment your customer base by actual behavior rather than demographics alone. By using return insights strategically, merchants can optimize the purchase experience for their most important customer groups.

Understanding how return behavior correlates with product segment, purchase frequency, price and persona makes it possible to design checkout where it makes the most difference.

The most successful merchants no longer treat returns as an isolated post-purchase process.

Instead, they use insights from across the entire purchase journey to identify patterns, improve decision-making and protect their margins.

With the right tools and transaction data in place, every return stops being a loss — and becomes a direct opportunity to optimize the next purchase.



About the report

06

# Methodology and data

Behind the returns 2026 is created by Kustom and is based on aggregated, anonymized transaction data from Kustom's checkout infrastructure in Sweden, Norway and Finland between August 2025 and April 2026.

- **Data size:** A total of 78.6 million orders from 1,551 connected e-commerce merchants.
- **Filtering:** To make sure smaller brands or temporary sales peaks do not distort the results, the analysis only includes merchants who have been continuously active for at least four months and had over 6,000 orders during the period (about 670 orders per month).
- **Definition of return rate:** The actual returned amount divided by the total order value for each specific order.
- **Categorization:** Industry classification is based on the merchants' primary MCC codes during registration. Broad categories have been broken down to product level (apparel, bags and shoes) when needed.
- **Demographics:** Demographic data is based on verified personal identity numbers in the payment flow. Gender has been mapped using the buyer's first name against a demographic name database.
- **Customer categories:** Returning customers are defined as customers who have made at least one previous purchase with the same merchant during the last 12 months.
- **Price segments:** The analysis of price segments is based on 284 fashion merchants. The segments are defined by the average price per item (total sales divided by the number of items): low-price (under 400 SEK), mid-market (400 to 999 SEK) and premium (1,000 SEK and up). This division is based entirely on actual order data, not on how brands position themselves.
- **Statistical validation:** All main differences highlighted in the report (the gender gap and age differences) have been quality-checked using a two-proportion z-test and are statistically proven ( $p < 0.001$ ). This means the chance of these patterns happening by accident is practically zero. The differences between price segments are also statistically proven but small in absolute numbers (2–7 percentage points) and should be interpreted with some caution.

## About Kustom

Kustom is the Nordic market leader in checkout solutions, helping merchants across Europe grow through a high-conversion, low-complexity and highly customizable setup.

By making the checkout process seamless, transparent and adaptable to local markets and shopper preferences, Kustom supports stronger, long-term customer relationships. Today, Kustom serves more than 24,000 merchants across 170 markets and has converted more than 25 million shoppers.