



Small Fashion Brands Adhering to Economic Pressures and Social Trends

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, tariffs, inflation, gasoline prices, etc. have soared exponentially. In the midst of all this chaos, how are smaller fashion brands able to adhere to economic pressures and social trends, especially when fast fashion brands are on an upward trend at the expense of the environment and ethics?

I have always been interested in starting my own brand, so reaching financial success while simultaneously creating garments that will be treasured and adored by many have been a looming concern of mine.

I strive to uncover the best way to maximize customer satisfaction and profits for my future clothing brand.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

- 1) Send a survey to 111 consumers to evaluate their spending habits, preferences, and financial circumstance.
- 2) Send a survey to 5 businesses to evaluate their commitment to adhering to social trends/consumer expectations and the economic challenges that impacted their products.
- 3) Cross-examine statistics from 2015 and 2025 regarding tariff rates, minimum wage, inflation rate, average gasoline prices, median annual income, and median house prices. This data will help prove/disprove my hypothesis and reach a concise conclusion.
- 4) Research a couple smaller fashion brands who have shown success in adhering to both economic pressures *and* social trends to conclude the best foundations to start my own brand

DISCUSSION, ANALYSIS, AND EVALUATION

1. Consumer Survey

- This data shows that while a majority of people are willing to spend more on sustainable clothing, price is a huge factor for them in the decision making process. Price might be the only thing getting in the way of a person's values.

2. Business Survey

- Costs have greatly increased for fashion brands since they first started. This aligns with the subsequent table. The majority of brands start to incorporate cheaper-to-produce fibers for their garments than when they first found their company. Any commitments or values they had to the environment had to be rethought because costs were increasing along with their prices.

3. Comparing 2015 v. 2025 (U.S.)

- While the median annual household income increased about 9.86% from 2015 to 2025, the median house price sold increased about 46.30%. Additionally, the CPI increased 35.82% in the same amount of time. As the years go by, discretionary income is decreasing. Buying a house is almost unthinkable for the average American today, so caring for the environmental impacts of the clothes they wear is simply out of the equation.

DATA AND FINDINGS

1. Consumer Survey

- The following questions have answer choices based on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always):
 - Would you spend a little more on clothes you know are sustainable [eco-friendly (natural fibers), ethically produced (fair wages, safe working conditions), etc.]? **Average: 3.4**
 - Do you usually price compare among different stores from buying clothes? **Average: 3.46**

2. Business Survey

- The following questions have answer choices based on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (greatly):
 - To what extent have tariffs affected your costs? **Average: 4**
 - To what extent has your cost of goods increased since you first started your brand? **Average: 4.6**

eco-friendly in the middle worst for the environment	Fibers used when first starting their brand	Fibers used now
Anja Jay (bags, accessories)	natural	natural
WillBo (apparel, accessories)	natural	natural, man-made cellulosic, synthetic
AMENAH (clothing, jewelry, home goods, accessories)	natural, man-made cellulosic	natural, man-made cellulosic, synthetic
Deepa Gurnani (women's accessories)	synthetic	natural
HAUS of TRADE (vintage apparel and accessories)	natural	natural, man-made cellulosic

3. Comparing 2015 v. 2025 (U.S.)

	2015	2025
Median Annual Household Income	\$56,516	\$62,088 (9.86 % Increase)
Median House Price Sold	\$289,200	\$423,100 (46.30% Increase)
Consumer Price Index (CPI)	237.0	321.9 (35.82% Increase)

4. Small(ish) Fashion Brands That Are Successful in Adhering to Economic Pressures and Social Trends

- Quince
 - sells hero products: timeless products, high-end/luxury quality, affordability
 - downsides: adheres less to trends
- Alohas
 - made-to order: less waste, usually higher quality + sustainable fabrics
 - downsides: a little on the expensive side, takes longer to arrive

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND NEXT STEPS

The Psychology of Consumerism and Spending

- Both consumers and business owners care about their social image
 - Some responses to the surveys contradicted each other. While most might say that they'd be willing to spend extra on clothes they know are sustainable, saying and doing are two very different things.
 - Greenwashing is not reserved for businesses; consumers can greenwash themselves by lying about their spending habits
 - White lies may be subconscious delusion: some consumers may fear doing deep research into a brand because "ignorance is bliss"
 - This shows that they understand the environmental impacts of the fashion industry, but rather choose to stay ignorant of the origins of what they're buying

The Complexity of Gen Z

- Gen z has taken the initiative to value vintage, second-hand pieces more than other generations.
- This generation is also known for their environmental consciousness
 - However, they are also infamous for their obsession with dupes (i.e. affordable knock-offs (usually of lower-quality) that are made to replicate expensive products from higher-end brands)
- Gen z is also the youngest generation (second to Gen Alpha), and most have not completely entered the workforce or gained enough experience to have a livable income. Their values are moving forward at a faster rate than their financial standpoint.

The Three Types of Small Fashion Brands

- 1) A brand green washes their practices to *appear* that they are adhering to social trends, meanwhile making profits
- 2) A brand is forced to prioritize profits over social trends, even if they had made an initial commitment to them (size inclusivity, eco-friendly, ethical labor)
- 3) On the rare occasion, they are able to balance both profits and social expectations in practice
 - a) Why? Because of systems such as made-to-order and hero products; although, the latter tends to disregard trends and goes for more timeless wear (more popular among millennial and older)

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