

The future of UK retail: Trust, returns, and the AI shift

Our latest report summarises the **most vital trends** for **UK retail leaders in 2026**. Insights are drawn from Trustpilot's proprietary review dataset of over **267,000 consumer voices**.



Trustpilot is the world’s largest open customer feedback platform, with **over 361 million active reviews**. To identify the most influential trends in the UK retail industry, we analysed 267,737 reviews written by UK consumers, examining topics, trends, and sentiment – here are the key findings.

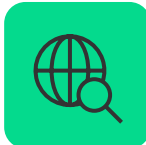


Report Methodology

- Analysis of **267,737 reviews** written on Trustpilot by UK consumers for retailers including clothing stores, online marketplaces and high-end retail between 2023 and 2025.
- Research conducted in **February 2026**.
- The sentiment model used identifies emotions behind customer feedback, studying reviews sentence by sentence rather than giving a single overall score.
- Analysis uses a specialised, multilingual AI model to **categorize feedback into specific topics at a detailed level**.



Key Takeaways



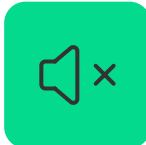
The “hassle-free” benchmark:

Mentioning “returns” in a UK review correlates with a drop of 1.5 to 1.7 stars; for UK consumers, refund speed is now the primary trust signal.



Market cooling requires trust-led conversion:

With review activity in clothing stores falling 22% in 2025, retailers must use trust signals to win over more selective shoppers.



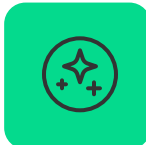
Broken promises carry a heavy cost:

Next-day delivery failures result in an average rating of just 1.74 stars, the lowest-rated fulfilment service in the UK.



The January carry-over:

82% of December’s feedback volume continues into January. This isn’t just new shopping; it is the critical window where consumers review their holiday returns and refund experiences.



AI sentiment is divided:

60% of AI-related retail reviews are 1-star, primarily driven by consumers feeling trapped in automated loops during service failures.



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Introduction

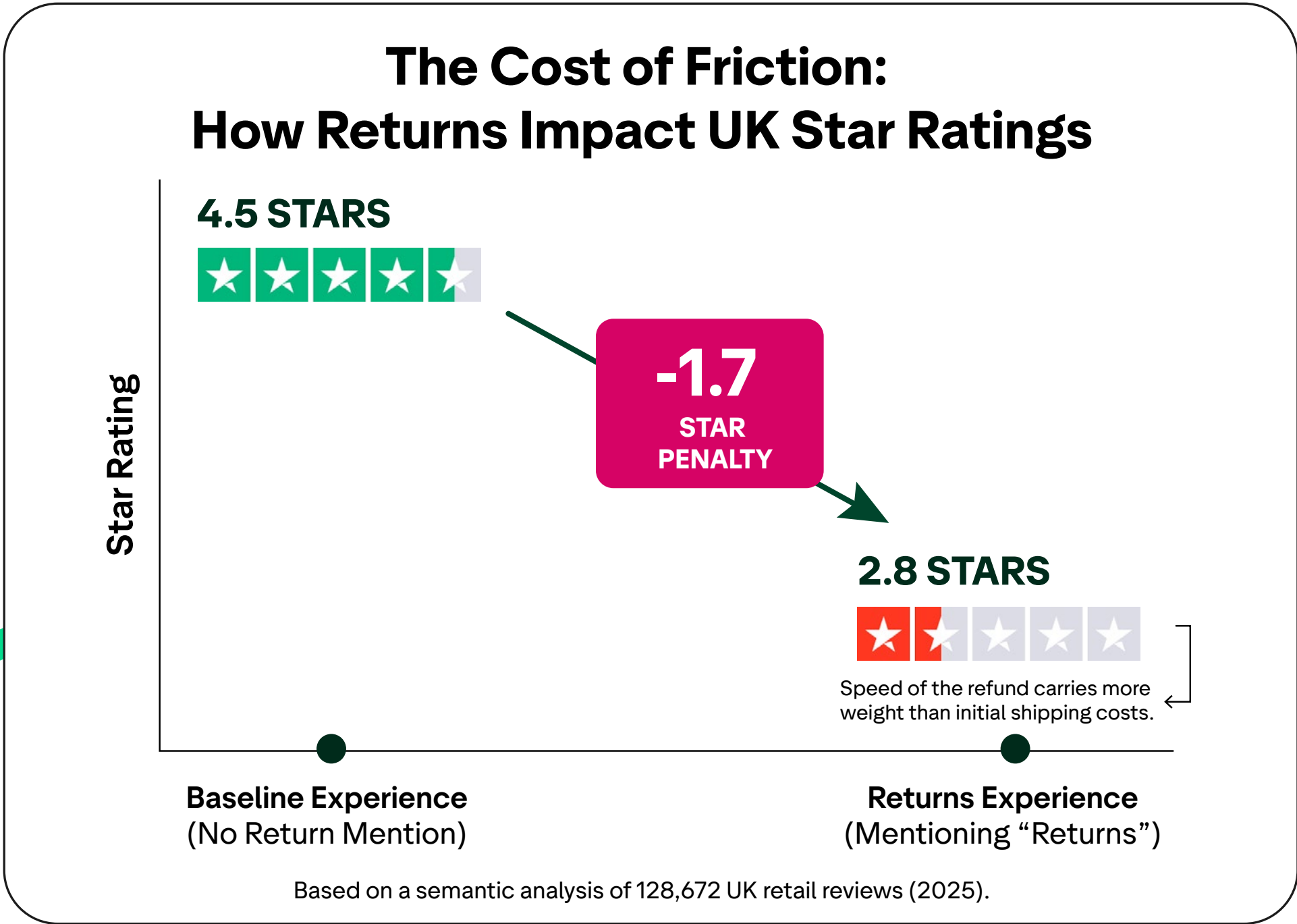
The UK retail market enters 2026 under significant pressure. As consumer spending becomes more selective, trust has transitioned from a service detail to a commercial requirement. It's no longer enough to compete on price alone; UK retailers must prove reliability across every touchpoint, from AI-led discovery to the post-purchase returns window. This report provides the roadmap for navigating this increasingly unforgiving landscape.



The “hassle-free” returns requirement

Returns have become the single largest trust penalty in UK retail. Our analysis of 128,672 UK reviews shows that mentioning “returns” correlates with an average drop of 1.7 stars.

For the UK consumer, “no-hassle returns” are the benchmark for excellence. Interestingly, the data suggests that the speed of the refund carries more weight than the cost of initial shipping. Retailers that treat January – which retains 82% of December’s feedback volume – as a wind-down month miss the chance to convert return-related friction into long-term loyalty.



Discovery vs. deflection: The AI trust gap

AI is reshaping the UK retail journey, but the sentiment is split. Roughly 60% of AI-related reviews result in 1-star ratings, while 26% result in 5-stars.

Consumers reward AI that assists in discovery, such as “fit” visualisation or smart search. However, sentiment turns sharply negative when AI is used for deflection. When delivery or refund problems happen, UK consumers view automated bots as a barrier to human support. To maintain trust, AI must be a tool for marketing and discovery, not a wall between the consumer and a solution.



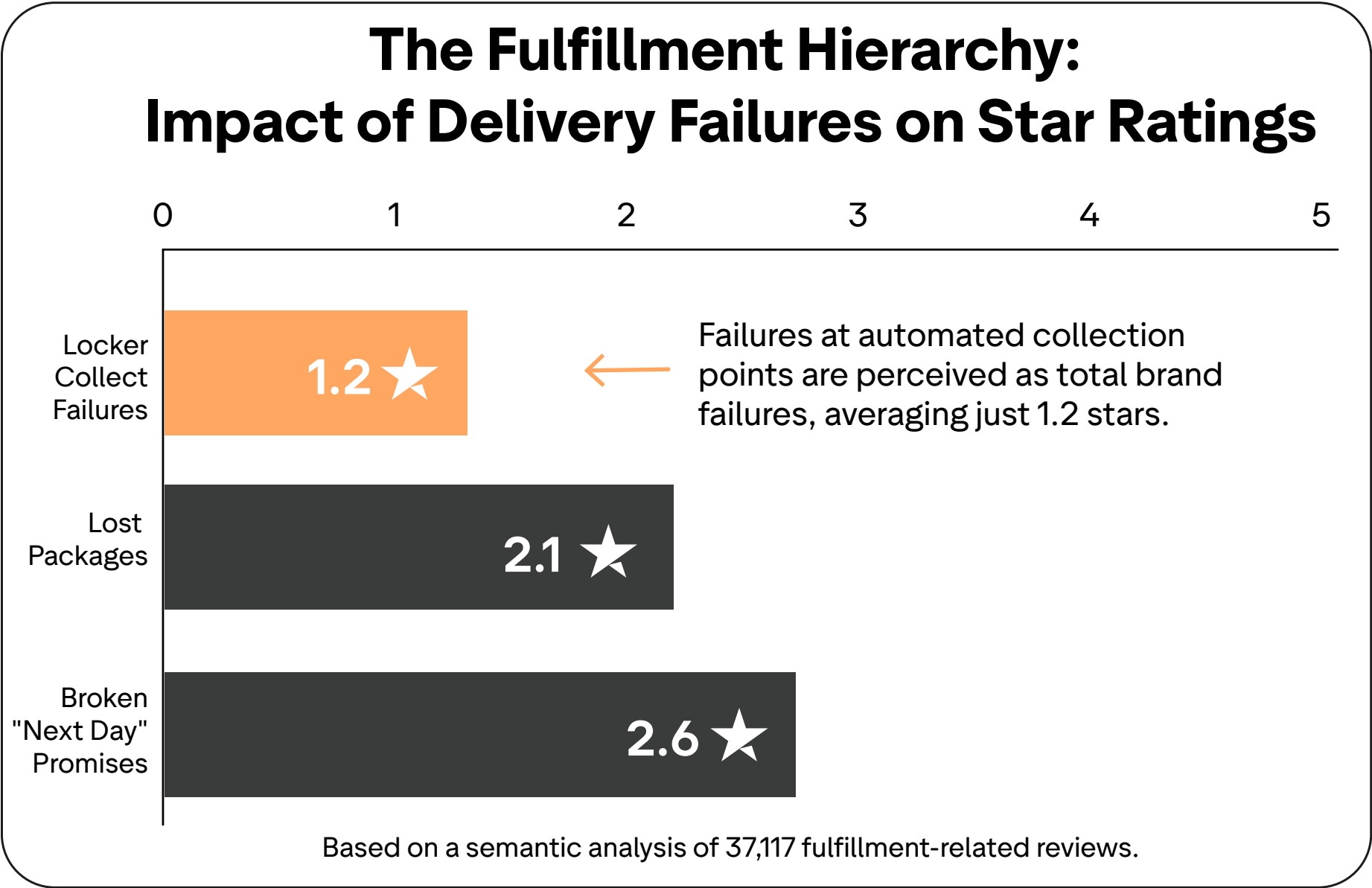
The fulfilment hierarchy: Speed vs. reliability

Fulfilment failures inflict outsized reputational damage. Our analysis of 37,117 fulfilment reviews reveals that lost packages lower star ratings by nearly 1.0 point more than delivery-speed complaints.

In the UK, failing to meet a Next Day Delivery promise results in significantly lower star ratings compared to standard shipping, highlighting that UK consumers value accuracy over optimistic speed.

Furthermore, failures in automated collection points – such as Locker Collect – result in the lowest average rating (~1.2 stars) globally. This suggests that when a physical automation fails, customers perceive it as a serious failure of the brand’s commitment, rather than a simple transit issue.

The data is clear: UK consumers are more forgiving of a standard delay than they are of an over-promised, broken fulfilment window.



Price confidence and the post-purchase breakdown

The UK is the most positive of our focus markets regarding price. As our data shows, UK consumers reward brands with high star ratings when they feel the deal is fair.

UK consumers show high baseline confidence in price and value, with Price Fairness and Value for Money both averaging nearly 4.5 stars.

Critically, when customers discuss price and quality together, sentiment reaches its highest levels. This indicates that despite cost-of-living pressures, UK consumers are happy to pay when the product matches or exceeds their expectations.

However, this confidence is fragile. Perceived value disappears the moment a return or service failure occurs. When price is mentioned alongside returns, sentiment turns deeply negative. This suggests that for UK retailers, value is a post-purchase metric; the lowest price on the market cannot save a brand from a service failure.

Theme	Avg Star Rating	Avg Sentiment
Price Fairness	4.50	0.70
Value for Money	4.48	0.68
Discounts	4.12	0.44

Peer reviews as the new due diligence

Peer influence has become a reality check against brand marketing. Reviews mentioning peer influence average just 2.0 stars, compared with a 3.0 average for those that do not.

In the UK, reviews mentioning peer-influence keywords (e.g., “should have read the reviews”) carry a significantly lower average star rating, highlighting the gap between social media promises and customer reality.

This shift is most evident in the divergence of sub-sectors. Online marketplaces have seen a steady, continuous decline in volume since 2023, while high-end retail is an outlier showing consistent year-on-year improvement in sentiment. Consumers are increasingly using peer feedback as a due diligence tool to move away from disposable marketplace goods toward durable, high-quality purchases.

A recurring theme is the “Lesson Learned” narrative. Consumers who were drawn in by social media advertising (Instagram/TikTok) often return to Trustpilot to express regret for not checking peer feedback first. UK retailers must recognise that reviews are now an essential decision-making tool that consumers use to mitigate the risk of brand promises – not just a way to measure reputation.

PEER REVIEWS AS THE SOCIAL MEDIA REALITY CHECK (UK RETAIL)

The Social Media Reality Check

Reviews Mentioning
Peer Influence
Keywords



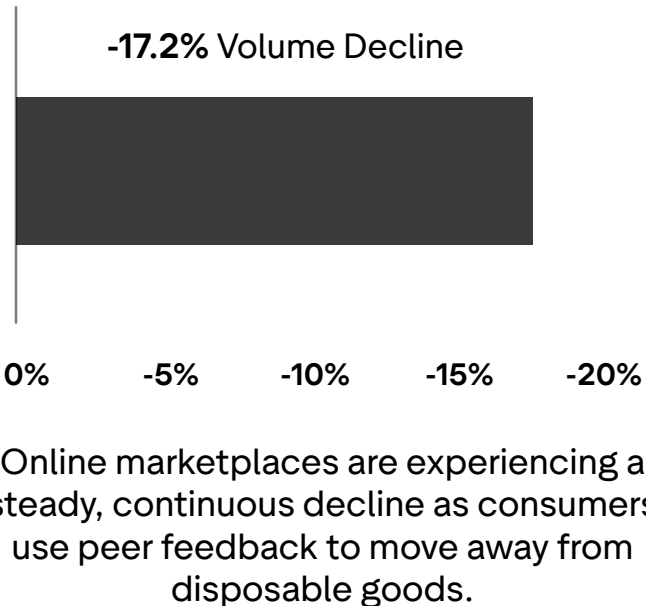
Reviews Without
Peer Mentions



The 1.0-Star Gap: Consumers consult peer feedback as a critical reality check against attractive social media marketing promises.

Market Trajectory Divergence (Relative Change 2023-2025)

Online Marketplace Volume Trend



Strategic fixes for UK retail companies

1

FIX THE RETURNS WINDOW:

Treat the January returns surge as a retention opportunity. Staff up to ensure refund speed matches consumer expectations—reliability here is worth more than free shipping.

2

HUMANISE AI SUPPORT:

Deploy AI for product discovery and “fit” confidence, but ensure every service-related bot has a “one-click” escalation path to a human agent.

3

ALIGN PROMISES WITH REALITY:

If you can't guarantee next-day delivery during peak periods, don't promise it. UK consumers reward accuracy over optimistic timelines.

4

BRIDGE THE PRICE-TRUST GAP:

Value is defined by the full journey. Ensure your post purchase experience (tracking, refunds, service) supports your initial price point.

Conclusion

In an era of widespread automation, the retailers that win will be those that master the two sides of the AI transition.

First, leaders must use AI-assisted tools to scale human connection – closing the feedback loop to ensure every consumer feels heard, without losing the human touch that only a real person can provide. Second, businesses must recognise that AI is now the primary gatekeeper for brand discovery. By building a foundation of transparent, third-party reviews, UK retailers provide the high-authority signals that AI search needs to recommend a brand.

Trustpilot helps retailers turn delivery, returns, refunds, and service into visible trust signals that strengthen AI visibility, build buyer confidence, and support repeat purchase. In the age of AI-driven discovery, that proof helps your brand get found, get chosen, and keep improving.

[Book a demo](#)

