

THE FASHION MARKET IN KAZAKHSTAN AND CENTRAL ASIA 2026–2027: KEY TRENDS THAT ARE CHANGING THE RULES OF THE GAME

The Central Asian market continues to grow rapidly and open up new opportunities for business growth and development. As part of the business conference at the 38th Central Asia Fashion Autumn-2026 International Fashion Exhibition, experts discussed key consumer trends, promising categories and changes in sales channels, and shared their forecasts and practical advice for the coming years.

The session's moderator, communications and personal branding expert, and independent PR adviser to business and politics, Madina Ruzmatova, began the discussion with the speakers by addressing the most pressing issues: «Looking specifically at the Central Asian region, what do you think is currently the biggest challenge facing the fashion industry?» .



Madina Ruzmatova, an expert in communications and personal branding,
and an independent PR adviser for business and politics

Olga Strygina, founder of the Strygina brand «Rubashkino Tsarstvo», replied that the most pressing issue is staffing and highlighted the shortage of qualified specialists: *«Qualified staff are practically disappearing because the standard of training in colleges remains extremely low. At the same time, the state is actively investing in the development of the vocational education system, including through participation in the international WorldSkills movement, which aims to promote blue-collar professions. So, from the state's perspective, all this has been implemented: huge sums are being allocated, and the colleges are superbly equipped – it's simply amazing! And very often the question arises: what's the point of all this? It really isn't needed in this form. For example, why provide a college with an industrial machine worth \$50,000? Such machinery is designed to run non-stop. But here it just sits in the colleges because nobody can operate it. To be precise, those who sold it are fine – they can do it – but in reality, practically nothing works. As a result, the industry isn't getting the trained staff it needs. I've been working with students since the early 2000s and can say that the situation is gradually getting worse; there's a lack of basic knowledge in technology, materials science and design. And this is a problem not only for Kazakhstan, but for the whole region – Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Students arrive with varying levels of experience, but the general trend is clear: there is a*

lack of a systematic professional foundation. It is important to discuss these issues honestly so that the industry has a chance to bring about meaningful change».



Olga Strygina, founder of the Strygina brand «Rubashkino Tsarstvo»

Olga Strygina admitted that she is distressed by the fact that even talented young people are often unable to realise their potential because of certain ways of thinking, a lack of basic education and the absence of systematic support: *«It's a pain in the truest sense of the word, a daily pain. I'm sorry, but whilst at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union people had that very basic potential – specialists capable of organising production – now, given how rapidly technology is developing, the younger generation can, in essence, only be trained as operators. Nothing more. Even the few talented young people who strive to get ahead still fall behind and fail to develop further due to their short-sighted thinking and the lack of a quality education. I would, however, like to add something positive to my comment. The only hope at the moment lies in individual educational initiatives. For example, in terms of the calibre of students and the desire to provide a more or less coherent education, there is a college affiliated with the Kazakh Leading Academy of Architecture and Civil Engineering. Judging by the students who have come from there, I can say that over the years this has indeed looked like a positive trend, a real plus».*

Yaroslav Klochkov, Creative Director at Glyph, artist and curator, agreed with the assertion regarding the shortage of staff, and added that the issue is often not limited to this: *«There is also a lack of willingness to embrace new ideas. When it comes to personnel, there are very few creative directors and art directors who are genuinely open to experimentation. Plus, there are a few small, proactive groups that are creating things, trying to keep the momentum going – towards experimentation, towards something that's not yet fully understood. After all, that's what shapes the future, isn't it? Not everything is clear to everyone at first, and only with time does it develop into an idea that then shapes our future or becomes its foundation. That's why, as someone who works with visual form, I see the problem precisely in the lack of sufficient experimentation. It's very rare to see experimentation with visuals or with the conceptual side. Those groups and brands that truly create something new and aren't afraid to showcase groundbreaking work – unfortunately, there aren't enough of them to form a fully-fledged movement».*



Yaroslav Klochkov, Creative Director at Glyph, artist and curator

Daulet Zimanov, Commercial Director at JKS Entertainment, also commented on the pressing issues facing the fashion sector in Central Asia. In his view, the most challenging aspect is the high cost of goods: *«For me, buying clothes in Kazakhstan is very expensive. I have the opportunity to travel abroad, and whilst I'm there I usually stock up for the season, because items there are, on average, half the price. This applies to everything: trainers, socks, underwear, outerwear and everyday clothing – literally everything. For example, I'm wearing an Adidas T-shirt right now. I bought it for about 23,000 tenge. Meanwhile, in an Adidas shop in Almaty, a similar T-shirt – often of lower quality – costs around 32,000 tenge. And this raises the question: how does this work in terms of logistics, customs clearance and all the associated processes? I suppose that's where this price difference comes from. But in reality, for me as a consumer, the conclusion is clear – buying clothes in Kazakhstan is expensive».*



Daulet Zimanov, Commercial Director of JKS Entertainment

Olga Strygina replied that the problem lay in landlords' demands—which are often beyond the means of entrepreneurs—and a strict tax policy. Sultan Alisultan, CEO of Almatymerch, continued the discussion on high costs, speaking about brands and their policies: *«In my view, it is in Central Asia in particular that people are beginning to forget what a brand is and why it is called that in the first place. If we disregard global phenomena and focus on ordinary local brands – not the foreign ones that have held their market share for over 50 years – then we face another problem: people lack patience and are focused on making a quick buck. Why is it that our local brands can sell a T-shirt for 23,000 tenge, when we know that its cost price, roughly speaking, is comparable to what can be imported from China? But many want to make a quick profit, and, as a result, they burn out the market. And then they themselves say: «Here's a domestic brand; we manufacture in China; we're actually launching in a completely different segment». And at some point, customers simply lose trust. At the same time, there are others – those who genuinely manufacture here, produce high-quality goods and try to keep prices in line with quality. But it's becoming increasingly difficult for them: it's hard to keep developing the product, creating beautiful collections – those same dresses, for example. I have colleagues and brands I know who end up suffering because of those who are just riding the trend for the hype. Over the last ten years, we've been approached time and again with ideas like: «It's a trend right now, let's make it quickly and launch it». I'd agree, look at the production costs and see how much they wanted to sell the product for. Even if you take out taxes, rent and wages, there's still a desire to simply «skim the cream» quickly and burn out the market. And then we, as consumers, ask the question: why is everything so expensive here? Because we ourselves support this and allow it to happen. If it's a truly decent brand, it survives in the market for 10, 15, 20 years or more. Take Zara, Inditex and Uniqlo, for example – they exist not because they create hype or pour millions of dollars into marketing, but because they maintain a consistent presence in the market and build a systematic approach to their operations. Here in Kazakhstan, however, there are literally only a handful of brands that have been firmly established for more than 10 years».*



Sultan Alisultan, CEO of Almatymerch

Lilia Mamiyeva, entrepreneur, founder and designer of the Kirpi brand, continuing on the topic of production costs and expenses, noted a significant decline in purchasing power in 2026: *«The cost of living is rising, and people on average incomes often can no longer afford products from local manufacturers, including, unfortunately, my own brand. That said, I would frame the issue of pricing*

slightly differently. For my part, I would say this: if we manufacture a product in Kazakhstan, given the current cost of living and the level of the consumer basket, I cannot pay my sewing workshop staff too little. The main component of my production costs is not fabric or trimmings, but labor. And in order for my staff to earn a decent living, this inevitably results in a corresponding price tag for the products. This year has been a real rollercoaster for us: at times sales were at a normal level, at others they plummeted. The tax crisis also had a significant impact, forcing us to take rather radical decisions. That said, I fully realize that we always have the option of relocating production, for example, to China. But it is fundamentally important to us to create jobs here, pay taxes here and develop local production. Therefore, it is precisely these factors, unfortunately, that prevent local brands from operating within a price range that would be accessible to a wider range of customers».



Lilia Mamiyeva, entrepreneur, founder and designer of the Kirpi brand

Madina Ruzmatova invited the experts to suggest ways of resolving the issues raised. Olga Strygina spoke about the need to revitalise the upbringing of young people: *«I would travel around the regions and visit educational institutions across the country, because the foundations are not laid within the fashion industry itself; they begin at school and even earlier, within the family. Specialised education comes into play later, but the foundation is laid precisely there. If a distorted system of values is established within the family from the outset, if children are not guided towards hard work, responsibility and personal development, then it becomes extremely difficult to build on this foundation later on. Without a transformation of the value system within the family and in society, it is impossible to achieve sustainable change. At the same time, it is important to understand that this is not about radically overhauling the system. I am more in favour of a measured and consistent approach. That is why my first step is not to seek quick fixes, but to immerse myself deeply: travelling around the regions, engaging in dialogue with people, and working with the educational sector – from schools to colleges and further along the entire chain. And only after this phase, which may last roughly six months, can we formulate specific steps for change».*

Daulet Zimanov touched on the subject of integrated marketing in the Central Asian fashion industry: *«Many brands think that if they buy a post from a blogger or launch an outdoor advertising campaign, everything will work out perfectly for them. But in reality, that's not the case. Marketing is always a comprehensive system. It is not a single action, but a set of interlinked tools. I always tell all my acquaintances who run businesses, who are opening boutiques and launching projects: the first*

thing you need to do is hire a strong marketer who can develop a strategy and build a team around them. At the same time, it's important to understand that a marketer cannot simultaneously be an SMM specialist, a copywriter, a videographer and so on. Each specialist has their own role and area of responsibility. It's only with this division of roles that the system begins to function properly. If you want your product to be effectively promoted, you need to invest in marketing – not haphazardly, but in a considered way. And for that, you need a strong specialist. This is where we come up against a separate problem – the quality of training for marketers themselves. Just as the standard of training in technical professions suffers, so too does the standard of marketing education. The reason is that many do not receive a systematic education, limiting themselves to short-term courses which result in a certificate but leave them without a solid foundation. When such candidates come to us, we do not consider them. For me, a university education is particularly important, because it is not just about knowledge, but also the environment: there, a person learns to solve problems, adapt, take responsibility and see processes through to a successful conclusion. Unfortunately, courses do not provide this. More often than not, the formula is simple: you pay the fee, receive a certificate, and then take it to the job market. But that is not enough to build complex marketing systems».

The expert emphasised that working with bloggers is indeed an effective marketing tool, but only if it is used to achieve a specific objective: «There are major bloggers and there are micro-influencers – and these are different tools for different objectives, for different brands, different products and different USPs. In some cases, a major blogger won't work, whilst a campaign targeting micro-influencers will be more effective. In other cases, however, targeted work with a micro-audience won't yield results, and you'll need a single influential blogger with a large following. In reality, there are far more promotional tools available than are commonly used. We, for example, mainly work with large businesses and rarely deal with the small and medium-sized segment, but we understand the specifics. Let me give an example. We had a case involving a blogger with an audience of 300,000–400,000 followers. As part of a series of Stories, he promoted a television set costing around 1 million tenge. As a result, one television was sold. And, in fact, this is a good result, given consumer behaviour: many people aren't prepared to buy expensive items online without seeing them in person. I myself, for example, wouldn't buy anything costing more than 50,000 tenge until I'd seen it with my



At the CAF business conference, experts discussed key consumer trends

own eyes. But the brand was dissatisfied. When we began to analyse the case, it became clear that effectiveness had been assessed solely on the basis of online metrics: clicks and direct purchases. At the same time, at offline outlets, nobody asked customers how they had found out about the product. Consequently, part of the conversion simply wasn't taken into account. It is therefore incorrect to draw conclusions about the channel's ineffectiveness in such a case. And this brings me back to the key point: different tasks require different tools. You cannot focus solely on one approach – for example, relying exclusively on bloggers – and then, having failed to achieve the expected result, claim that marketing doesn't work. You need to combine channels; for example, by organising events. A high-quality event is a very powerful tool: bloggers come of their own accord, create content themselves, often without additional payment, and this generates organic reach. This is precisely what a holistic approach to marketing is all about – it's about the system, not individual actions».

Lilia Mamiyeva introduced the topic of discussion using her brand Kirpi as a case study and offered practical advice to professionals in Central Asia's fashion industry on promotion during a crisis. The brand has been in existence since 2017, and from late 2019 it began to develop systematically as a business, with production and commercial processes being established. Kirpi is currently available in six cities across Kazakhstan and has experience of selling in international markets, though it is now focused on local development. Until 2026, the company grew at a rate of 1.5–2 times annually, which is a strong performance for a niche local brand.

However, 2026 proved to be a major challenge. Lilia Mamiyeva noted that the decline in demand had already begun to be felt as early as November 2025: *«Sales have fallen significantly. December, which is traditionally a strong month, turned out to be considerably weaker than expected. Although the changes to the tax system had not yet come into force, the market was already in a state of anticipation, which directly affected consumer behaviour. In January and February, the downturn intensified. We began actively testing various hypotheses, and, as is often the case, not all solutions proved successful. The key mistake was that we did not reduce production volumes at the start of the year. Production continued to run at full capacity, despite the fall in sales. The main reason is clear – the risk of losing our skilled team, as we have built a stable workforce with a high level of expertise. As a result, we were producing around 200 units of products per month whilst sales were below 100. This led to a rise in stock levels and the risk of cash flow shortfalls. By the end of February, it had become clear that urgent measures were needed. We switched to a two-shift system: we split the team into two groups working in rotation. This allowed us to halve production volumes and stabilise our financial situation. Nevertheless, excess stock of products manufactured at the start of the year is still putting pressure on the business».*

The second mistake, according to Lilia Mamiyeva, was launching a broad basic range during a period of falling demand without prior testing. The entrepreneur admits that the decision to develop a basic range was strategically sound, but the timing was poor. Furthermore, production costs in Kazakhstan are quite high, and the current customer base is not yet prepared to pay the same price for basic items as for complex designer pieces. As a result, investment in this range did not pay off to the extent expected.

Following this period, the company reviewed its approach and implemented a series of measures that have had a positive impact. Since May, the brand has managed to stabilise sales and return to its normal performance levels, and in certain periods has even improved its profit margins.

The first decision was a systematic review of the marketing strategy. Lilia Mamiyeva explained that the brand had moved away from sporadic, haphazard collaborations towards planned campaigns

with bloggers: *«We are building a pool of ambassadors and partners, and launching coordinated communications in different cities with a clear set of technical requirements. This approach has led to a significant increase in effectiveness: not only do sales rise immediately, but the effect is sustained in subsequent periods. The second solution is a change in content strategy. We deliberately moved away from an exclusively «perfect» visual presentation towards more lively and accessible content. We added photoshoots in boutiques and product reviews, adapted content into Russian and Kazakh, and featured models of different sizes. This helped to boost engagement and conversion rates. The third solution was to focus on the product. We began to segment our products more actively, breaking dresses down into separate components (top and bottom). This increased the variety available to customers and helped improve stock turnover. Whilst dresses remain the brand's key product, some of them have now been transformed into more versatile outfits. The fourth solution was to launch sales. Previously, the brand did not use discount schemes, but in the current climate this has become an essential tool. Thanks to well-structured communication, we managed to effectively sell off excess stock and return funds to the cash flow».*

As regards current strategic decisions, the brand is currently stepping up its collaboration with China in terms of component manufacturing and branding. It has already developed its own prints, strengthened its visual identity and standardised product elements. *«Our aim is to enhance the perceived value of the product and the quality of its visual presentation without increasing the final price for the consumer. We are already operating in a price segment comparable to that of international brands, and further strengthening the brand's DNA, its quality and recognition whilst maintaining the price will help to build trust among our audience and expand our customer base both in Kazakhstan and across Central Asia. This year has been a stress test for us, but has also provided a clear understanding of which management decisions really work in an unstable market»*, - concluded Lilia Mamiyeva.



Speakers at the CAF business conference (from left to right): Madina Ruzmatova, Lilia Mamiyeva, Sultan Alisultan, Yaroslav Klochkov, Olga Strygina, Natalya Mironova, Daulet Zimanov

Madina Ruzmatova, continuing the discussion on marketing, asked the speakers what trends they might highlight. Yaroslav Klochkov confirmed that today every medium, including the visual one, is experiencing oversaturation: *«Fashion is directly linked to visual perception: it is the first thing a person encounters even before they «touch» the product. Due to information overload and, perhaps, a certain sense of confusion about which direction to take next, a counter-trend is becoming*

increasingly noticeable – a return to the organic, the simple, and the handmade. The visual environment is overloaded, and consumers activate a sort of filter that cuts out the excess. As a result, even a strong product may go unnoticed simply because people «don't let it through» this filter. Today, a new reaction to content is emerging: the simpler it is, the more noticeable it becomes. A natural presentation, a touch of imperfection, and dynamic editing – all of these are beginning to work more effectively than visuals polished to a glossy finish. This does not mean that complex solutions are becoming obsolete. There is a tool for every task. However, the trend towards simplification is evident in many areas of life: right now, it is simplicity that is becoming the most expressive».

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