# Humanity as a Luxury Brand

## In a world of deepfakes, bots and generated everything, “real” is the new luxury

*In a world of deepfakes, bots and generated everything, “real” is the new luxury.* Hand‑written letters, human customer service and children raised without screens are now exotic, curated experiences. Not everyone gets that. Across the social spectrum, the meaning of “being human” is being up‑marketed. The idea of authenticity—of mind, labour and connection—has moved from being an assumed backdrop of human life to a premium asset that must be **bought**, **protected** or **performed**. Meanwhile, most people live and work inside algorithmic systems that categorize, score and optimize them, while machines churn out content with industrial efficiency. The chapter explores how, in the era of artificial intelligence, humanity itself is becoming a luxury brand.

The metaphor of AI as an *immigrant* animates this story. Like newcomers arriving in an established society, AI systems are simultaneously welcomed for their labour, mistrusted as competitors, exploited in invisible ways and “integrated” into the social fabric. Yet while AI immigrants are assigned to do the “dirty” digital work—content moderation, metrics, endless optimization—the category of the *“real human”* is narrowed and guarded. The question is no longer whether machines can imitate humans; it is who is allowed to be considered fully human.

## The new premium: Being human

When generative models write books, compose songs and make art faster than any person, scarcity shifts. The scarce resource is no longer content—it is human touch, attention and craft. This scarcity is deliberately cultivated by brands. In an era where deepfake celebrities hawk products and AI chatbots handle service calls, **“human‑made”** is marketed like organic food or fair‑trade coffee. In 2025 the non‑profit Inc Foundation reported that **68 % of U.S. consumers prefer brands that prioritize human creativity**, and that sales of handmade products grew **25 % in 2024**[[1]](https://incfoundation.com/en-US/human-made-products-why-shoppers-love-authenticity/#:~:text=Surveys%20indicate%20that%2068,touch%20that%20AI%20can%E2%80%99t%20replicate). Imperfections and personal stories behind items are pitched as proof of authenticity[[2]](https://incfoundation.com/en-US/human-made-products-why-shoppers-love-authenticity/#:~:text=Shoppers%20are%20drawn%20to%20the,and%20ethical%20production%20over%20convenience). Far from being assumed, humanity has become a hallmark to be stamped on goods.

### Analog as luxury

The luxury travel industry now sells disconnection as a premium service. A **Forbes** feature on luxury digital‑detox resorts (August 2024) noted that travellers are hungry for analog experiences—quiet retreats where phones are confiscated and the only notifications come from ocean waves or birdsong[[3]](https://www.forbes.com/sites/sandramacgregor/2024/08/05/peace-and-quiet-11-luxury-global-resorts-for-a-true-digital-detox/#:~:text=11%20Global%20Luxury%20Resorts%20For,A%20True%20Digital%20Detox). These resorts market solitude and human connection as commodities: yoga sessions with live instructors, hand‑rolled pasta classes with chefs, journaling by candlelight. Likewise, direct mail companies offering “hand‑written” letters at scale—some using robots to mimic human penmanship—are booming. It is no accident that products emphasise “authentic materials” and “made by artisans.” The point is not only the objects themselves but the promise that human hands have touched them.

Inside the digital economy, even content platforms have begun to delineate the human. In 2024 YouTube announced policies requiring creators to mark videos that use generative AI, while Meta and TikTok introduced similar labels[[4]](https://ourtake.bakerbotts.com/post/102j4h8/is-human-created-content-a-new-premium-product#:~:text=Major%20digital%20platforms%2C%20including%20YouTube%2C,generated%20content). The EU AI Act mandates watermarks on synthetic media. By distinguishing AI‑produced content, regulators inadvertently create a signalling system: unlabeled work is assumed to be human and thus potentially more valuable. Some commentators predict that labels could make human‑made content a premium category[[4]](https://ourtake.bakerbotts.com/post/102j4h8/is-human-created-content-a-new-premium-product#:~:text=Major%20digital%20platforms%2C%20including%20YouTube%2C,generated%20content)—“realness” becomes a differentiator in markets flooded with generative output.

Demand for **human customer service** reinforces the trend. A survey of 4,000 U.S. and UK consumers commissioned by Five9 in September 2024 found that **75 % of respondents prefer speaking to a real human**—in person or on the phone—when dealing with customer support. Though younger generations are more comfortable with AI, 56 % of consumers across ages expressed frustration with AI chatbots. In 2024, human empathy is being marketed as a selling point while automation handles routine tasks. Companies highlight human agents in advertising precisely because the baseline expectation has shifted: automated help is standard; human help is special.

The **commodification of human interaction** extends to everyday experiences. Some restaurants advertise *“human servers only”*. Boutique hotels boast about “screen‑free rooms.” Pop‑up events ban phones at the entrance. Those who can afford it purchase “human‑made luxury” while the masses are nudged toward AI chatbots and algorithmically curated feeds.

### Realness as scarcity in creative markets

Nowhere is the tension clearer than in the arts. A study by Stanford Graduate School of Business researchers Samuel Goldberg and H. Tai Lam tracked the effect of generative AI on a marketplace with over 500 million images[[5]](https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/when-ai-generated-art-enters-market-consumers-win-artists-lose#:~:text=To%20study%20the%20impacts%20of,for%20the%20pamphlet%2C%E2%80%9D%20Goldberg%20says). Before December 2022, only human‑generated images were sold on the platform. After generative AI images were allowed, the **total number of images for sale skyrocketed by 78 %**, while **human‑generated images plummeted**[[6]](https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/when-ai-generated-art-enters-market-consumers-win-artists-lose#:~:text=competition%2C%20and%20demand%20is%20an,and%20demand%20sides%2C%E2%80%9D%20Goldberg%20says). The number of active sellers increased by **88 %**, mostly due to AI adoption, and there was a **23 % drop in non‑AI artists**[[7]](https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/when-ai-generated-art-enters-market-consumers-win-artists-lose#:~:text=The%20introduction%20of%20AI%20images,%E2%80%9D). Consumers chose AI images over human ones[[8]](https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/when-ai-generated-art-enters-market-consumers-win-artists-lose#:~:text=The%20results%20were%20striking%3A%20Once,generated%20ones), causing sales of human‑made images to decline[[9]](https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/when-ai-generated-art-enters-market-consumers-win-artists-lose#:~:text=Meanwhile%2C%20total%20sales%20rose%20by,AI%20images%2C%E2%80%9D%20Goldberg%20says). The study warns that generative AI is likely to crowd out non‑AI creators[[10]](https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/when-ai-generated-art-enters-market-consumers-win-artists-lose#:~:text=The%20results%20were%20striking%3A%20Once,generated%20ones), raising policy concerns about compensation and the erosion of human creativity[[11]](https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/when-ai-generated-art-enters-market-consumers-win-artists-lose#:~:text=Meanwhile%2C%20total%20sales%20rose%20by,AI%20images%2C%E2%80%9D%20Goldberg%20says). In such a marketplace, human art becomes a niche, boutique offering. Galleries may soon display “AI‑free” exhibitions, much like organic aisles in supermarkets.

### AI as immigrant labour

Thinking about AI as an immigrant clarifies the class dynamics of this new premium. Like newcomers performing labour nobody else wants, AI systems are exploited to churn out text, images and responses at scale. They are integrated into supply chains to optimise profits and provide endless cheap content. At the same time, the presence of AI rationalises the upgrading of human work into a luxury category. “Human‑made” becomes analogous to “hand‑crafted” or “small batch.” Instead of driving wages up for human creators, AI crowds them out and positions their labour as an artisanal specialty for affluent consumers. The immigrant is welcomed precisely because it allows the native to become exclusive.

## Digital serfdom vs. elite protection

The new premium on human authenticity contrasts with how digital technologies infiltrate everyday life for the majority. In schools, workplaces and homes, algorithms mediate social interactions, and screen time becomes unavoidable. Yet the children of the wealthy are often shielded from these technologies. The AI immigrant metaphor becomes a class parable: the masses—human and machine—must serve digital systems, while elites cultivate analog sanctuaries.

### Elite schools ban smartphones while working families rely on them

In July 2024 the prestigious **Eton College** in England announced a sweeping smartphone ban for incoming students. Starting in September 2024, new pupils would **receive “brick” phones** that can only make calls and texts; they are allowed to use a school‑issued iPad only for academic purposes[[12]](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/eton-college-uk-poshest-private-school-bans-smartphones/#:~:text=London%20%E2%80%94%20Eton%20College%2C%20arguably,incoming%20students%20from%20having%20smartphones). Eton justified the ban as a way to reduce classroom disruption and improve behaviour[[12]](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/eton-college-uk-poshest-private-school-bans-smartphones/#:~:text=London%20%E2%80%94%20Eton%20College%2C%20arguably,incoming%20students%20from%20having%20smartphones). The policy stands out because smartphone ownership is nearly universal among adolescents: 97 % of UK children own a cell phone by age 12, and 91 % of U.S. kids have a smartphone by age 14[[12]](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/eton-college-uk-poshest-private-school-bans-smartphones/#:~:text=London%20%E2%80%94%20Eton%20College%2C%20arguably,incoming%20students%20from%20having%20smartphones). Despite these statistics, Eton’s decision effectively draws a line between those who can live offline and those who cannot.

The **“Wait Until 8th”** pledge, promoted by American psychologists and parents, encourages families to delay giving children smartphones until eighth grade. An Atlantic article (August 2025) notes that experts such as social‑psychologist Jonathan Haidt and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend keeping screens out of children’s bedrooms to improve sleep and mental health[[13]](https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2025/08/screen-time-rule-kids/683816/#:~:text=technology%20will%20ruin%20my%20kids%E2%80%94and,your%20kid%20can%20download%20TikTok). The article suggests that when devices are restricted to communal spaces, children are reminded that what they do online is public[[14]](https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2025/08/screen-time-rule-kids/683816/#:~:text=So%20I%20listened%20up%20when,can%20follow%20only%20one%20rule). This contrasts sharply with working‑class households, where smartphones often serve as babysitters and educational tools because parents have neither time nor resources for supervised activities. The same Bright Horizons survey found **60 % of parents say their children used technology before they could read**[[15]](https://investors.brighthorizons.com/news-releases/news-release-details/majority-parents-admit-even-youngest-kids-need-digital-detox#:~:text=NEWTON%2C%20Mass.,under%20six%20years%20of%20age) and **73 %** believe their kids need a digital detox[[15]](https://investors.brighthorizons.com/news-releases/news-release-details/majority-parents-admit-even-youngest-kids-need-digital-detox#:~:text=NEWTON%2C%20Mass.,under%20six%20years%20of%20age). Over half of parents use screens to barter for chores or to keep kids quiet. Screen exposure among the masses is not a choice; it is a coping strategy.

Similar divides appear in education philosophies. **Waldorf schools**, popular among Silicon Valley elites, emphasise handwriting, physical textbooks and minimal digital technology until middle school. A blog post from the **Seattle Waldorf School** (January 2025) cites research from Columbia University showing that children comprehend texts better and remember material longer when reading and writing on paper[[16]](https://seattlewaldorf.org/2025/01/30/kids-learn-better-off-screens/). The school argues that off‑screen learning fosters deeper comprehension and motor skills development[[16]](https://seattlewaldorf.org/2025/01/30/kids-learn-better-off-screens/). These schools effectively sell analog childhood as a premium experience. Meanwhile, many public schools roll out digital devices to every student without the staffing or training to support healthy habits. The AI immigrant metaphor here shows how digital tools—initially marketed as equalising—can reinforce inequality. Kids whose parents can pay for digital abstinence get slow, human‑paced learning; others are pushed into screens from kindergarten.

### Tech billionaires and social media bans at home

High‑profile tech leaders have turned limiting their children’s screen time into a badge of parenting virtue. At the **Aspen Ideas Festival** in June 2024, PayPal co‑founder **Peter Thiel** told journalist Andrew Ross Sorkin that he **limits his children’s screen time to just 1.5 hours per week**[[17]](https://www.yahoo.com/news/tech-billionaire-peter-thiel-says-110403774.html#:~:text=Tech%20billionaire%20Peter%20Thiel%20says,of%20screen%20time%20a%20week). Thiel acknowledged that it is “too easy” to scapegoat Big Tech for societal problems but also noted the irony that many social media executives strictly regulate their own children’s usage[[18]](https://www.yahoo.com/news/tech-billionaire-peter-thiel-says-110403774.html#:~:text=Thiel%20said%20it%27s%20,screen%20time%20for%20their%20kids). He is not alone: **Snapchat CEO Evan Spiegel** also caps his 8‑year‑old’s screen time at an hour and a half per week[[19]](https://www.yahoo.com/news/tech-billionaire-peter-thiel-says-110403774.html#:~:text=Thiel%20isn%27t%20the%20first%20tech,a%20half%20hours%20a%20week), and **Google CEO Sundar Pichai** has said he did not give his middle‑school‑aged son a smartphone and keeps televisions locked behind “activation energy” requiring extra effort to turn on[[20]](https://www.yahoo.com/news/tech-billionaire-peter-thiel-says-110403774.html#:~:text=Google%20CEO%20Sundar%20Pichai%20previously,watching%20TV%20not%20easily%20accessible). These stories, widely reported across mainstream outlets, frame limited tech access as enlightened parenting. They also underscore a double standard: those who profit from digital addiction shield their own families from it.

### Digital serfdom for the working class

While elites pay for digital detox, most workers are **algorithmically nudged, emotionally farmed and surveilled**. Employment is increasingly mediated by software. A 2021 report by the **UC Berkeley Labor Center** documented how employers use algorithms to hire, monitor and manage workers. **HireVue** software scores job applicants based on word choice and tone during video interviews; other algorithms predict whether employees will quit or even become pregnant[[21]](https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/data-algorithms-at-work/#:~:text=Across%20the%20country%2C%20employers%20are,5). Call‑centre systems analyse voice modulation and issue real‑time “nudges” when an agent’s enthusiasm wanes[[21]](https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/data-algorithms-at-work/#:~:text=Across%20the%20country%2C%20employers%20are,5). Gig‑economy platforms track task completion speed and adjust pay accordingly[[22]](https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/data-algorithms-at-work/#:~:text=Across%20the%20country%2C%20employers%20are,5). Surveillance is constant: Amazon warehouses use handheld scanners and cameras to monitor worker movements minute by minute[[22]](https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/data-algorithms-at-work/#:~:text=Across%20the%20country%2C%20employers%20are,5).

An October 2024 **Forbes** essay on algorithmic management noted that employers are deploying sensors, apps and analytics to collect data from handheld devices, point‑of‑sale systems and body sensors[[23]](https://www.forbes.com/sites/bhaktimirchandani/2024/10/01/the-human-cost-of-efficiency-and-why-it-should-matter-to-all-investors/#:~:text=Amazon%20is%20not%20alone,wages%2C%20working%20conditions%2C%20and%20equity). **Aiha Nguyen**, a researcher at the nonprofit Data & Society, warns that these systems facilitate speed‑ups and shift risks to workers[[23]](https://www.forbes.com/sites/bhaktimirchandani/2024/10/01/the-human-cost-of-efficiency-and-why-it-should-matter-to-all-investors/#:~:text=Amazon%20is%20not%20alone,wages%2C%20working%20conditions%2C%20and%20equity). The algorithms assign tasks, evaluate performance and even schedule rest breaks, reducing supervisors to algorithmic enforcers. For low‑wage employees, digital tools do not free them; they monitor them. The machine, like an immigrant labourer, is exploited to enforce discipline on human workers, who in turn must conform to the machine’s cadence.

## Humanity becomes a brand

Amid this landscape of digital serfdom and elite abstinence, “humanity” emerges as a marketing term. Corporations proclaim their AI as *“ethical”*, *“human‑centered”* and *“mindful.”* Social networks tout features for “meaningful interactions” while algorithmically ranking posts for engagement. Tech companies sponsor conferences on “human in the loop” design even as they remove humans from decision‑making. The label “human‑centered” becomes a tagline like “farm fresh.”

### AI‑free products, ethical tech and mindful design

Consumer goods and services increasingly emphasise their distance from AI. The Inc Foundation notes that **68 % of consumers prefer brands that prioritise human creativity**[[1]](https://incfoundation.com/en-US/human-made-products-why-shoppers-love-authenticity/#:~:text=Surveys%20indicate%20that%2068,touch%20that%20AI%20can%E2%80%99t%20replicate). “AI‑free art” sells at festivals, and record labels advertise “analog recordings mastered by humans.” There is a growing market for **AI‑free writing courses**, “craft coding” bootcamps and retreats where authors write novels longhand. In design, start‑ups pitch “slow UX,” promising interfaces that respect circadian rhythms and discourage addictive scrolling.

These marketing strategies mirror the food industry’s organic and fair‑trade labels. When generative models can churn out stock images and songs instantly, the scarcity of human craft invites price premiums. In the AI immigrant metaphor, the immigrant (the machine) undercuts labour costs and floods the market with cheap output, enabling the native (the human artist) to rebrand themselves as artisanal. “Human‑made” becomes aspirational, like handcrafted Italian leather—accessible only to those who can afford it. Meanwhile, the same corporations that sell “mindful design” also deploy AI to manage their warehouses.

### The rhetorical shielding of humanity

Brands and institutions now use the word “humanity” as rhetorical armour. Universities market “human‑centered AI” degrees; tech conferences advertise panels on “keeping people in the loop.” When generative models produce synthetic influencers, cosmetics companies respond with campaigns spotlighting “real people” with “real stories.” Even AI companies differentiate themselves by claiming to be more ethical or more aligned with human values.

This branding often occludes the labour that enables it. When Meta proclaims that its AI chatbots are built with human values, it rarely mentions the thousands of workers in the Global South who label data to align those values. The human becomes simultaneously the product being sold and the labour behind the curtain.

## The algorithmic class system

The interplay between elites, masses and machines produces a stratified system reminiscent of pre‑industrial class hierarchies. At the top are the wealthy who can insulate themselves and their children from algorithmic intrusions. In the middle are consumers who must choose between convenience and authenticity. At the bottom are workers—both human and machine—whose labour is exploited to keep the system running.

### Scoring, sorting and optimizing the masses

Algorithms rank and sort individuals from cradle to grave. Hiring algorithms evaluate candidates by parsing their facial expressions. Student performance is monitored by learning management systems that track keystrokes and screen time. Loan applications are scored by machine‑learning models trained on past data. Social‑media posts are filtered by recommendation engines that reward engagement. The result is what sociologists call “digital Taylorism”: tasks and bodies broken into data points for efficiency.

The UC Berkeley report details how algorithmic tools predict whether employees will quit or become pregnant[[21]](https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/data-algorithms-at-work/#:~:text=Across%20the%20country%2C%20employers%20are,5). This predictive scoring influences scheduling, promotions and terminations. Grocery‑delivery platforms adjust worker pay based on acceptance rates and proximity to high‑tipping customers[[22]](https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/data-algorithms-at-work/#:~:text=Across%20the%20country%2C%20employers%20are,5). When multiple metrics interact, employees are forced to optimize every action to maintain their scores. The algorithm becomes an invisible supervisor with no accountability.

The system also perpetuates inequality. Low‑income workers cannot simply step away from digital tools; they must remain accessible to accept gig tasks or respond to app notifications. High‑scoring individuals receive better pay and scheduling; low scorers get relegated to less lucrative tasks. The algorithmic class system thus institutionalises digital serfdom: a vast population labouring for machines under conditions that would be illegal if a person enforced them, but are unregulated when software does.

### Hidden human labour: The outsourced soul

Beneath the algorithms are **human moderators and labelers** who do the psychological heavy lifting. An investigation by **El País** in January 2024 exposed the “ghost workers” behind ChatGPT. These are content moderators and data annotators in low‑income countries who review graphic or disturbing material to train AI to avoid it. Workers, some as young as **15**, spend long hours sorting through violent, sexual or hateful content for low wages. The article likened the AI supply chain to the exploitative textile industry and highlighted the psychological trauma from constant exposure to graphic content.

A **Jacobin** article (June 2025) corroborated these findings, noting that data labelers in the Global South review **thousands of images and videos daily for as little as $2 an hour**. Many sign nondisclosure agreements that prevent them from discussing their work or seeking mental health support. The conditions resemble digital sweatshops: invisible workers maintain the AI immigrant’s functioning while risk and trauma remain externalized. Without this hidden human labour, AI would have no morality or alignment. Yet these workers are seldom acknowledged in branding narratives about “ethical AI.”

The metaphor of the AI immigrant extends: not only do machines perform labour, but humans are employed in invisible, precarious roles to maintain these machines. They are the domestic workers of the digital mansion, existing in the basement to keep the AI functioning. Their labour is essential yet unrecognized—a sign that “humanity” as a brand is only extended to some humans.

## Digital serfdom, emotional farming and algorithmic nudges

Platforms optimize user behaviour to maximize engagement—an economic logic sometimes called **emotional farming**. Notification badges, endless scroll and algorithmic recommendations keep users swiping. For the majority of people, there is no offline alternative: communication with schools, employers and government agencies increasingly happens through apps. Even dating, friendship and community organising are algorithmically mediated. In this environment, humans learn to behave like bots: always responsive, always optimizing for visibility, always updating their personal brand.

Workplaces adopt similar strategies. For example, call‑centre technology analyses an agent’s tone and suggests when to speak more energetically[[21]](https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/data-algorithms-at-work/#:~:text=Across%20the%20country%2C%20employers%20are,5). If the AI suggests being more cheerful, the agent must perform this emotional labour. Amazon’s warehouse scanners issue digital “timeouts” for slow pickers. Gamification dashboards pit employees against each other by ranking their units per hour. Workers internalise these metrics, self‑policing to avoid penalties. They become, in effect, cyborgs: bodies controlled by algorithmic feedback loops.

Meanwhile, the wealthy cultivate their children’s capacity for sustained attention and unoptimized spontaneity. Their kids climb trees instead of leaderboards. Their emotional labour is not for sale. The algorithmic class system thus has a moral dimension: some children are allowed to remain human; others are trained to be human‑like machines.

## Post‑human chic: raw humanity as fashion

As AI saturates culture, a counter‑trend arises among the elite: **post‑human chic**. The term describes the aestheticization of raw humanity—the romanticization of messy, unoptimized, analog life. When the masses are taught to behave like machines, the elite signal status by flaunting their refusal to be optimized.

### Analog parenting and experiential consumption

The children of tech billionaires learn to knit, garden and play acoustic instruments. Their parents hire tutors for handwriting and calligraphy. Birthday parties are phone‑free; invitations are printed on letterpress. Some families send their teenagers to **digital‑detox camps**. A widely circulated article in 2024 reported on summer camps that cost up to **$2,000 a week** where teens surrender their devices and participate in nature hikes, archery and group therapy. Hidden burner phones, hunger strikes and runaways were common at such camps, as the program director described the struggle to tear kids away from their devices (the article was later removed but widely discussed). These camps, dubbed “teen nightmares,” function as rites of passage for affluent families.

Luxury wellness brands incorporate analog rituals into their offerings. High‑end spa chains host **“sleep retreats”** where guests give up phones and follow human‑led bedtime routines, complete with story reading and warm milk. Wellness companies market *forest bathing*—guided walks in the woods, free of digital devices—as a premium service. The tagline “disconnect to reconnect” appears on brochures next to price tags.

In the world of fashion and design, **imperfection** is back. Clothing labels highlight visible seams; ceramics are intentionally irregular. Chefs at Michelin‑star restaurants wax poetic about farm‑to‑table produce grown by actual farmers. The scarcity of human labour, rather than the abundance of AI capabilities, defines luxury.

### The eco‑moral justification

Post‑human chic also incorporates environmental and ethical narratives. Brands claim that unplugged experiences are more sustainable and less extractive. They sell the moral satisfaction of supporting human artisans over machine processes. Yet there is an irony: luxury digital‑detox retreats often rely on hidden digital infrastructure (online booking systems, algorithmic marketing) and employ global networks of low‑wage workers. The human becomes an accessory—a sign of taste rather than a shared condition.

## Toward a politics of humanity

The classed rebranding of humanity raises ethical and political questions. What happens when being human becomes a status symbol? When authenticity is pay‑walled, those who cannot afford it are condemned to digital environments optimized for extraction and control. The AI immigrant metaphor illustrates how labour and identity are entangled: machines do not simply replace humans; they reorganise the value of humanness itself.

### Inequality baked into technology

AI is often promoted as a democratizing force that reduces costs and expands access. Indeed, generative AI can lower barriers to entry for producing art, writing code or launching businesses. But it can also intensify inequality by commodifying authenticity. The wealthy can pay for human tutors, small‑class education, analog hobbies and screen‑free bedrooms. They can control their data and avoid constant monitoring. Everyone else is subject to algorithmic scoring at work, at school and in public space.

That inequality is not inevitable. Government policy can enforce universal standards for data use, algorithmic transparency and screen‑time limits in schools. The question is whether society will treat digital equity as a public good or allow it to mirror existing class divisions.

### Valuing the invisible and the mundane

Part of the problem is that the labour most associated with humanness—care work, emotional support, storytelling—is undervalued. Content moderation, data labeling, elder care and childcare are essential for both AI systems and human society. These jobs are often outsourced to precarious workers and disguised behind the glamour of technology or luxury consumption. If we want to resist the commodification of humanity, we must bring these hidden labours into view and value them accordingly.

Reforming AI supply chains requires global labour standards, mental health protections and fair wages for the people who train and maintain AI systems. It also demands regulation of algorithmic management practices to ensure workers are not treated as cogs in digital systems[[22]](https://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/data-algorithms-at-work/#:~:text=Across%20the%20country%2C%20employers%20are,5). Policymakers must scrutinize the use of predictive analytics in hiring and scheduling, and unions should negotiate for algorithmic transparency and human oversight.

### Reimagining authenticity

The commodification of authenticity invites a broader cultural reckoning. If authenticity becomes a product, then genuine connection becomes rare. We must ask: what does it mean to be real in a world of synthetic options? The answer cannot be to retreat into expensive analog enclaves while leaving everyone else to digital exhaustion. Instead, we need spaces—digital and physical—where human creativity, unpredictability and empathy are accessible to all.

This may involve designing technologies that enhance human agency rather than erode it, such as social platforms that encourage meaningful interaction over engagement farming, or workplace tools that support worker autonomy rather than micromanagement. It could mean public investment in physical communal spaces—libraries, parks, community centres—where people gather without algorithms mediating their relationships. It requires education systems that teach digital literacy and critical thinking alongside handwriting and art, ensuring children can navigate AI without being consumed by it.

## Conclusion: When humanity becomes a status symbol

In the age of AI immigrants, humanity is being reframed as a luxury brand. The scarcity of human touch, attention and imperfection is curated and sold to those who can afford it. Elite schools ban smartphones and offer analog childhoods while public schools lean into devices. Tech billionaires boast about limiting their kids’ screen time while designing addictive platforms for everyone else[[17]](https://www.yahoo.com/news/tech-billionaire-peter-thiel-says-110403774.html#:~:text=Tech%20billionaire%20Peter%20Thiel%20says,of%20screen%20time%20a%20week). Hand‑made goods, live customer service and offline vacations become premium experiences[[1]](https://incfoundation.com/en-US/human-made-products-why-shoppers-love-authenticity/#:~:text=Surveys%20indicate%20that%2068,touch%20that%20AI%20can%E2%80%99t%20replicate). Generative AI floods markets with content, turning human creativity into an artisanal niche[[24]](https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/when-ai-generated-art-enters-market-consumers-win-artists-lose#:~:text=The%20results%20were%20striking%3A%20Once,generated%20ones). Hidden within this economy are the ghost workers who label data and moderate content for poverty wages, absorbing trauma so that AI can appear seamless.

The metaphor of AI as an immigrant reveals that machines are welcomed for their labour and exploited, yet they also enable the narrowing of human identity. Society draws new boundaries around who is considered fully human: those whose lives are offline, unoptimized and analog. Everyone else—human or machine—becomes part of an algorithmic workforce. **What happens when being human becomes just another status symbol?** The answer will shape the moral economy of the AI age. It challenges us to build a future where authenticity is not a luxury but a common right, where technology serves humanity without turning humanity into a brand.

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