

HOW AI'S IMPACT IS RESHAPING FASHION

A Strategic Playbook for 2026 and Beyond



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Executive Brief

The headline: AI is no longer a "tool layer" for fashion. It's becoming a **system layer**: it compresses cycle time, expands creative search, and rewrites how demand is sensed and supplied.

\$2T

Global fashion market size

\$275B

GenAI profit potential

35%

Fashion AI CAGR

30–40%

Inventory marked down/yr

What's Changing — Signals → Implications

- **Creativity:** Generative systems increase **creative throughput** while raising the premium on curation, taste, and brand codes.
- **Merch + Planning:** Forecasting shifts from seasonal to near-continuous. Assortments become more adaptive.
- **Content economics:** Content becomes abundant; **distribution + trust + brand clarity** become scarcer.
- **Supply chain:** The biggest gains come from **decision quality** — not flashy front-end experiments.
- **Customer experience:** Personalization evolves from "recommendation" to **guided choice + styling + intent capture**.
- **Sustainability:** AI can reduce overproduction, but only if incentives, governance, and measurement are aligned.

The Strategic Punchline

Brands win by building an **AI flywheel**: 1) capture data → 2) train/augment decisions → 3) shorten feedback loops → 4) redeploy gains into better product + CX.

What to do now (90 days): Pick **3 use cases**: one revenue, one cost, one learning. Set up a **single source of truth** for product, customer, and inventory data. Establish **AI governance** before scaling. Build a simple **KPI tree** to prove ROI quickly.

► KEY TAKEAWAY

AI is a **system layer**, not a tool. The winners will be organizations that treat AI as operating infrastructure — not a series of experiments.

I. The New Landscape: Why AI in Fashion Is Different Now

SECTION OVERVIEW

- Foundation models reached production quality in 2023–2024
- Data infrastructure matured: CDPs, unified commerce, composable architectures
- Cost structures collapsed: image generation from ~\$150 to under \$0.10
- Fashion sits at the intersection of AI's strongest capabilities

I.1 From Experimentation to Infrastructure

Fashion has flirted with AI for a decade. Recommendation engines, chatbots, image recognition — useful, but peripheral. What's changed isn't the technology alone. It's the convergence of three forces:

1. Foundation models reached production quality.

Large language models (GPT-4, Claude, Gemini) and image generators (Midjourney, DALL·E, Stable Diffusion) crossed the threshold from novelty to commercial-grade output in 2023–2024. By 2025, fine-tuned models trained on proprietary brand data began producing work indistinguishable from human output in narrow domains.¹

2. Data infrastructure matured.

Cloud-native CDPs, unified commerce platforms, and composable architectures gave brands — for the first time — something resembling a single source of truth for product, customer, and inventory data.²

3. Cost structures collapsed.

The cost of generating an image dropped from **~\$150 to under \$0.10**. The cost of translating a product page into 40 languages fell from thousands of dollars to cents. This isn't incremental — it's a structural shift.

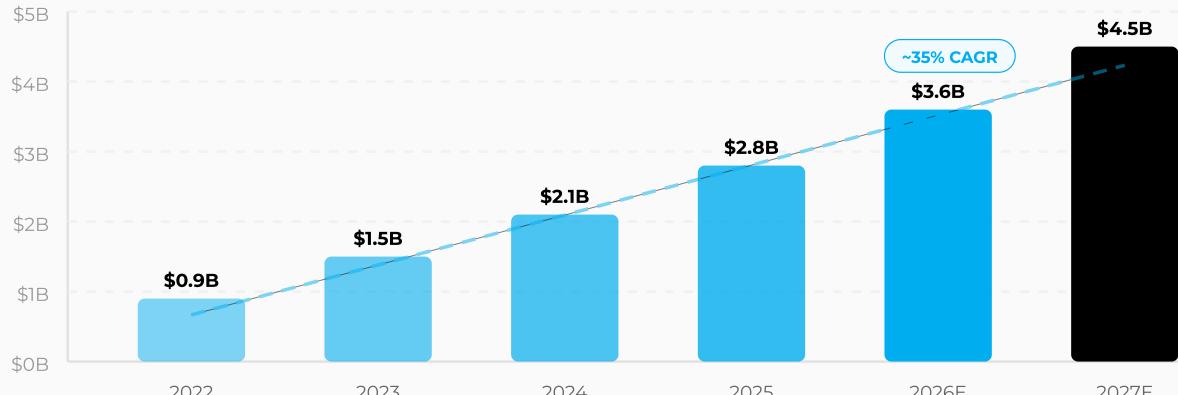
"McKinsey estimates generative AI alone could add \$150–275 billion in operating profit to the apparel, fashion, and luxury sectors."³

I.2 The Scale of the Shift

- **\$2 trillion:** Global fashion market size. Even marginal efficiency gains compound to billions.⁴
- **30–40%:** Share of fashion inventory marked down or destroyed annually. AI-driven forecasting could cut this by 20–50%.⁵
- **12–18 months:** Typical design-to-shelf cycle. AI-assisted workflows compress this to 6–8 weeks for fast-fashion; 4–8 months for premium.

- **60–70%:** Share of purchasing decisions now influenced by digital touchpoints.⁶
- **\$3.6 billion:** Estimated spend on AI by fashion companies in 2025, growing at 35% CAGR.⁷

Figure 1 — Global Fashion AI Market Size (\$B, 2022–2027)



Sources: McKinsey & Company; Statista; BoF Insights⁷

But the real shift isn't in aggregate spending. It's in **who captures value**. Shein's algorithm-driven model — testing **5,000+ new styles per day** with small initial runs, reading real-time demand signals, and scaling winners within 72 hours — isn't just fast fashion. It's a different operating system.⁸

I.3 Why Fashion Is Uniquely Exposed

High-dimensional creative search. A single product involves dozens of variables: silhouette, material, colorway, trim, sole, lacing, sizing, fit. AI excels at exploring this combinatorial space.

Demand uncertainty. Fashion is a prediction business operating under radical uncertainty. ML models trained on sell-through, search, social, and resale data narrow the cone significantly.

Visual-first, content-heavy. Fashion lives on images, video, styling, and storytelling. Generative AI's strongest modalities map directly to fashion's core outputs.

Fragmented, data-rich value chain. From fiber to consumer, fashion's supply chain generates enormous data. Most of it goes unused. AI can turn this latent data into actionable decisions.

Emotional + functional product. A handbag is simultaneously a functional object, a status signal, an identity marker, and an aesthetic choice. AI can optimize the functional layer while humans own the emotional layer.

I.4 A Framework for Reading This Report

1. **Where is AI being applied?** (Section II — the value chain)
2. **How does it change what fashion *is*?** (Section III — creative impact)
3. **What does it mean for your competitive position?** (Section IV — strategy)
4. **What should you do about it?** (Section V — roadmap)

► KEY TAKEAWAY — SECTION I

AI in fashion passed the tipping point in 2024. Three converging forces — production-quality models, mature data infrastructure, and collapsed cost structures — mean the question is no longer **whether** to adopt AI, but **how fast** you can build the flywheel.

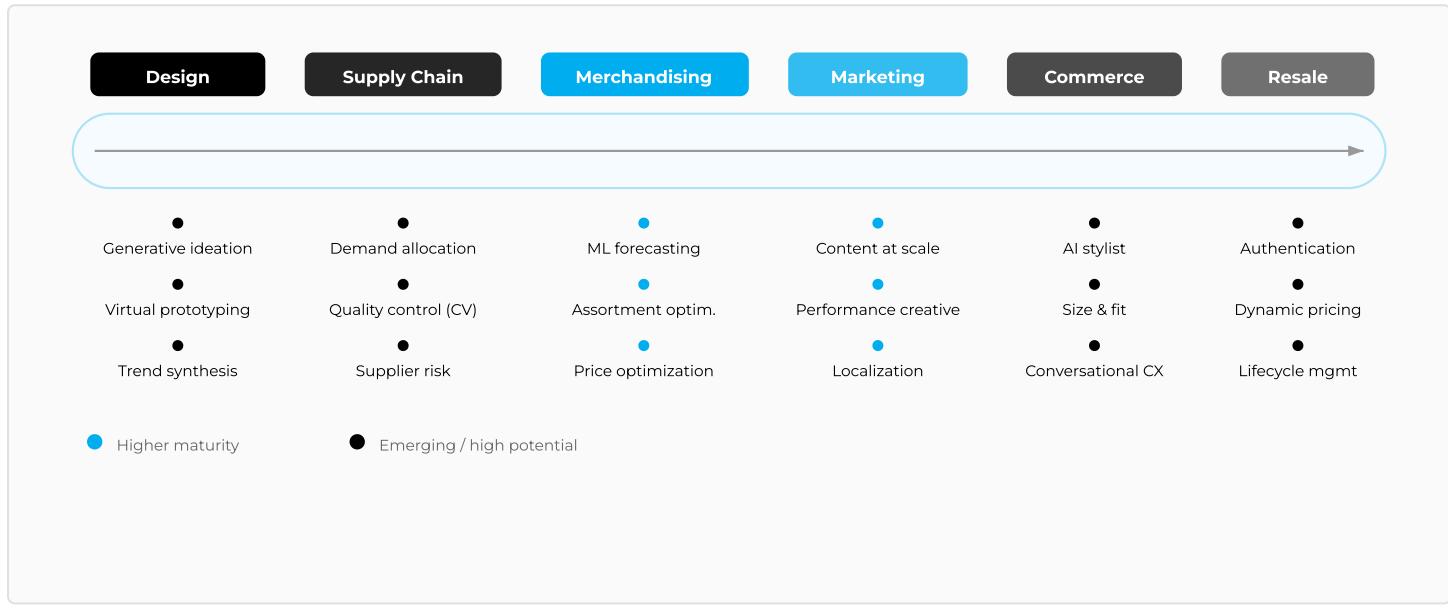
II. AI Across the Fashion Value Chain

SECTION OVERVIEW

- Six domains mapped: Design, Supply Chain, Merchandising, Marketing, Commerce, Resale
- Merchandising & marketing are most mature; design & resale have highest disruption potential
- Supply chain is least glamorous but highest-impact for margin improvement

AI's impact is not evenly distributed. Some functions are already being transformed; others are barely scratched.

Figure 2 — AI Applications Across the Fashion Value Chain



Source: Author analysis

II.1 Design & Product Development

What's Working

- **Ideation acceleration.** Designers at Nike, Adidas, and Acne Studios use Midjourney, DALL-E, and custom Stable Diffusion models to generate concept boards in hours rather than weeks.⁹
- **Virtual prototyping.** CLO3D, Browzwear, and Style3D enable digital-first sampling. PVH Group reported a **60% reduction in physical samples**.¹⁰

Material and print generation: Maison Meta created collections for Collina Strada using generative tools, pushing aesthetic boundaries that would have been cost-prohibitive manually.¹¹ **Trend synthesis:** Heuritech and Trendalytics use computer vision to scan millions of social images. LVMH has invested in Heuritech.¹²

What's Not Working (Yet)

- **Technical design.** AI still struggles with construction details and manufacturing constraints.
- **Brand code enforcement.** Most generative models produce generic output unless heavily fine-tuned.
- **Cross-functional integration.** Design tools remain siloed from PLM, ERP, and supply chain systems.

Leverage point: The highest ROI isn't in replacing designers. It's in **compressing the exploration-to-decision cycle** — generating more options, evaluating them faster, and killing bad ideas earlier.

II.2 Sourcing, Manufacturing & Supply Chain

Current state: The least glamorous area — and arguably the highest-impact one.

- **Demand-driven allocation.** Inditex has spent **€2.5B** on integrated digital systems using real-time sell-through data across 5,700+ stores.¹³
- **Supplier risk management.** Nike and H&M deploy AI systems monitoring supplier health across financial, compliance, and delivery dimensions.¹⁴
- **Quality control.** Computer vision systems from Inspectorio and Optitex detect defects in real time.

II.3 Merchandising & Demand Planning — Most Ready for Transformation

What's Working

- **Forecasting accuracy.** ML models outperform traditional methods by **20–50%**. EDITED, Centric Software, and o9 Solutions integrate external signals with sell-through data.¹⁵
- **Assortment optimization.** AI enables "cluster-of-one" strategies. Stitch Fix built its entire model on this principle.¹⁶

- **Size and fit prediction.** Returns due to poor fit cost the industry **~\$50B annually**. True Fit, 3DLOOK, and Fit Analytics use body-scan data to predict optimal sizes.¹⁷
- **Price optimization.** Tools from Revionics, Competera, and Blue Yonder deliver 3–8% gross margin improvement.

A **10% improvement in forecast accuracy** at a **\$1 billion fashion brand translates to \$20–40 million in reduced markdowns, fewer stockouts, and less excess inventory**. This is the use case to fund everything else.

II.4 Marketing, Content & Brand Communication

The function experiencing the most visible disruption:

- **Content production at scale.** Zalando generates thousands of product descriptions using LLMs.¹⁸ Brands produce social media variants at **10–50x the volume** at a fraction of cost.
- **Performance creative optimization.** Tools like Pencil, AdCreative, and Jasper generate and test ad creative variants programmatically.
- **Visual search and discovery.** Pinterest Lens, Google Lens, and ASOS Visual Search shift discovery from keyword to visual.¹⁹

Leverage point: AI handles the long tail (variants, localization, performance creative); humans handle the peak (campaigns, storytelling, cultural positioning). Brands that confuse the two will damage their equity.

II.5 Commerce & Customer Experience

- **Recommendation engines (evolved).** Leaders move toward context-aware recommendations factoring in occasion, weather, and style affinity. Kering's client advisors use AI copilots.²¹
- **Size and fit tools.** Brands deploying robust fit tools report **10–25% reductions** in fit-related returns.
- **Visual try-on.** AR-powered virtual try-on is improving substantially for accessories and eyewear.

The next frontier: The **AI stylist** — a system that understands intent ("I need something for a gallery opening in Berlin"), knows the customer's style profile, pulls from real-time inventory, and delivers curated options. The brand that builds it owns next-generation loyalty.

II.6 Resale, Circularity & Sustainability

- **Authentication.** AI-powered services (Entrupy) verify product authenticity with **99%+ accuracy** for luxury categories.²²
- **Price intelligence.** Vestiaire Collective and StockX use AI to dynamically price resale items.
- **Demand forecasting for circular models.** Rent the Runway uses ML to predict rental demand and manage garment lifecycle.²³

Leverage point: AI-enabled product lifecycle management — tracking individual garments from production through multiple use cycles and optimizing for total lifecycle value.

► KEY TAKEAWAY — SECTION II

The biggest ROI is in **merchandising & supply chain** (decision quality), not in flashy front-end experiments. Start where the margin impact is clearest.

III. The Creative Impact: How AI Reshapes Fashion's Core

SECTION OVERVIEW

- AI redistributes creative labor — from generation to curation
- Digital fashion's real value is design R&D, not revenue
- Convergence pressure vs. human premium creates strategic choice

III.1 Augmenting vs. Replacing the Designer

What's happening is a **redistribution of creative labor**, not a replacement.

What AI Does Well

- Generates high volumes of variations on a theme
- Explores adjacent aesthetic spaces
- Synthesizes reference material into mood boards
- Translates 2D sketches into 3D renders

What AI Does Poorly

- Originating genuinely new aesthetic directions
- Understanding cultural context and timing
- Maintaining brand coherence across a collection
- Making taste judgments — choosing the one that **matters**

The designer's job shifts from **generation to curation**. The scarce skill becomes judgment.

CASE STUDY

Coperni. The Parisian house integrated AI into its design process while maintaining a distinctive creative vision. Their approach: use AI to pressure-test ideas early while keeping final creative decisions in human hands. The technology expands the aperture; the designer controls the lens.

III.2 The New Design Workflow

AI is compressing and parallelizing the traditional linear sequence (research → sketch → develop → sample → fit → approve → produce). PVH Group (Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger) reduced pre-production samples by **60%** through digital-first workflows.¹⁰

The risk: Over-optimization. When AI makes iteration cheap, brands may produce a "perfect average" that lacks conviction. The most distinctive fashion comes from constraints and strong points of view.

III.3 Digital Fashion & Virtual Garments

- Balenciaga's Fortnite collaboration and Gucci's Roblox garden proved luxury brand equity translates to virtual contexts.²⁴
- Nike's .SWOOSH platform sold **\$185 million** in virtual sneakers by late 2024.²⁵
- AI removes manufacturing constraints entirely — enabling impossible geometries, materials, and physics simulations.

The contrarian view: Digital fashion's real value isn't revenue. It's **design R&D**. Every virtual garment is a free experiment — no material cost, no inventory. The smartest brands use digital fashion as a low-cost testing lab.

III.4 The Evolution of Aesthetics

Convergence pressure. When thousands of designers use the same tools with similar prompts, output drifts toward a homogeneous "AI aesthetic." The risk: a visual monoculture.²⁶

Counter-pressure: the human premium. As AI content becomes ubiquitous, the market premium for demonstrably human-made, hand-crafted work rises. Hermès, Brunello Cucinelli, The Row, and Loewe benefit from a halo of authenticity AI cannot replicate.

New aesthetic vocabularies. Iris van Herpen, Coperni, and GCDS used AI tools to explore forms and textures impossible through traditional techniques.²⁷

The trend acceleration problem. AI-powered trend detection + AI-powered production means the half-life of a trend shrinks. For luxury brands trading on timelessness, this is a threat.

Brands must choose: lean into AI-augmented aesthetics and own the speed game, or lean into human-centric, craft-forward positioning and own the scarcity game. The middle ground — using AI but pretending you don't — is the most dangerous position.

► KEY TAKEAWAY — SECTION III

AI doesn't replace the designer — it shifts the scarce skill from **generation to curation**. Brands must make a strategic choice: own the speed game (AI-augmented) or own the scarcity game (craft-forward). The middle is death.

IV. Strategic Market Implications for Brands

SECTION OVERVIEW

- AI capabilities split into table stakes vs. potential moats
- Data quality determines AI ROI — most fashion brands have terrible data
- Operating models shift from sequential/seasonal to parallel/continuous
- Winners: data-rich platforms + heritage houses with archives. Losers: mid-market with weak data

IV.1 AI as Competitive Moat — or Table Stakes

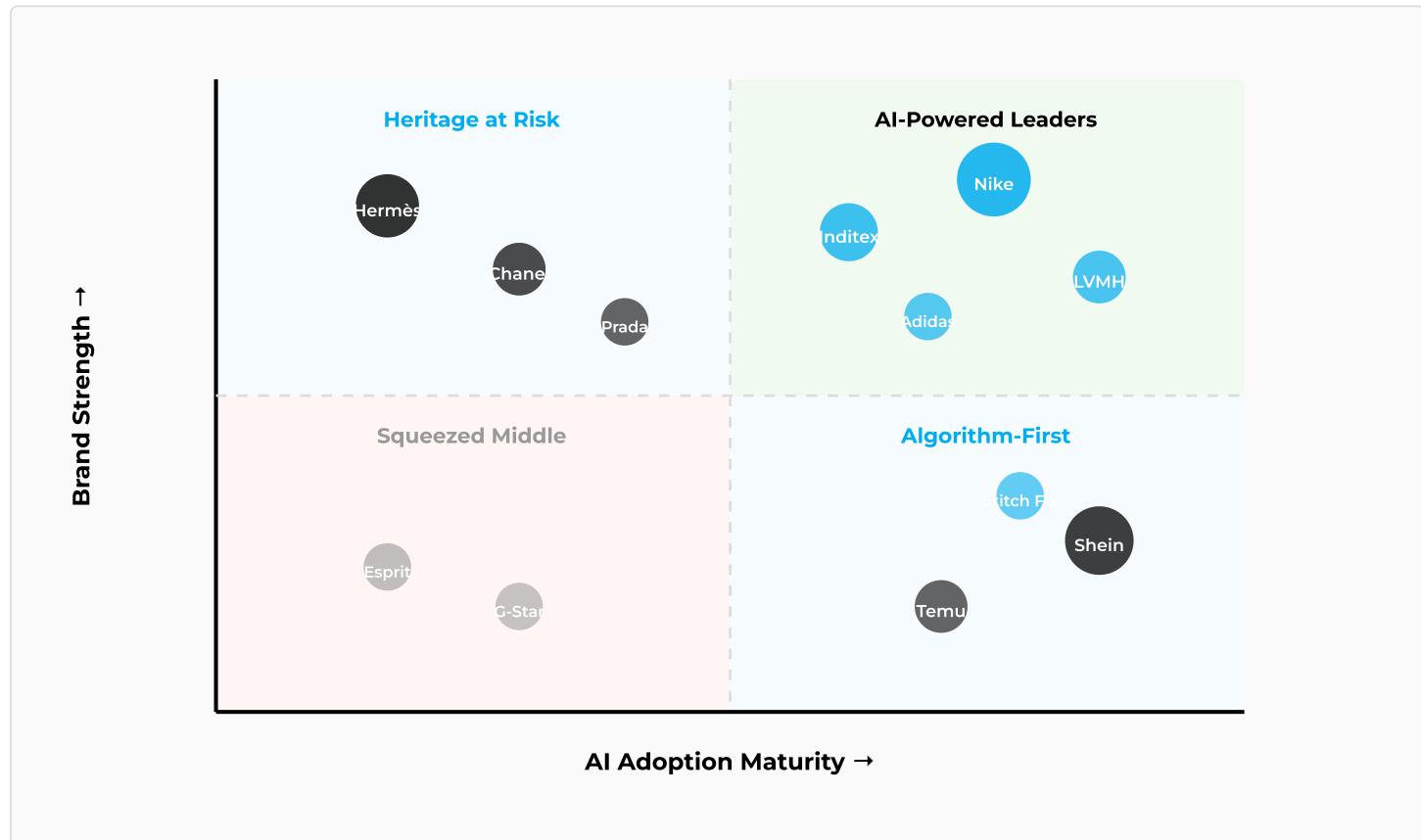
Table Stakes (Parity): Product recommendation engines, basic chatbots, automated content production, standard demand forecasting, visual search. Available via off-the-shelf platforms — necessary to compete but won't differentiate.

Potential Moats

- **Proprietary data loops.** Nike's connected ecosystem generates first-party data on **300M+ members** — data no competitor can replicate.²⁸
- **Brand-specific AI models.** Burberry's work digitizing its archive creates the foundation for a generative model trained on 50 years of brand DNA.²⁹
- **Decision speed advantage.** Weekly assortment adjustments vs. seasonal cycles compounds over time.
- **Customer relationship depth.** AI-powered styling + sizing creates switching costs through accumulated preference data.

The acid test: Can a competitor replicate this by buying the same software? If yes → table stakes. If no (because it requires your data, expertise, or organizational capability) → potential moat.

Figure 3 — Competitive Positioning: AI Adoption vs. Brand Strength



Source: Author analysis. Positions are illustrative.

IV.2 Data as the New Core Asset

The uncomfortable truth: **most fashion brands have terrible data**. AI doesn't fix bad data — it amplifies it.

The Data Hierarchy for AI

1. **Clean product data** — enables search, recommendation, assortment planning
2. **Unified customer data** — enables personalization, LTV modeling
3. **Real-time inventory data** — enables allocation, fulfillment optimization
4. **Feedback data** — enables product improvement, fit optimization
5. **External data** — enables trend sensing, competitive intelligence

Before spending \$10 million on AI tools, spend \$2 million on data infrastructure. This determines whether your AI investments generate returns or waste.

CASE STUDY

LVMH. The luxury conglomerate has been quietly building a centralized data platform across its 75+ maisons, balancing shared AI infrastructure with each brand's autonomous creative identity.³⁰

IV.3 Human-AI Collaboration: The Operating Model Shift

- **From sequential to parallel.** AI enables design, merchandising, and supply chain to work on the same data simultaneously.
- **From intuition-first to data-informed intuition.** Senior buyers shift from "I decide the buy" to "I override or validate the AI's recommendation."
- **From large teams → small teams.** Fewer people producing, more people curating and deciding.
- **From seasonal → continuous.** AI-driven demand sensing is always on.

The talent implication: Fashion needs the "AI translator" — someone who understands both the domain and the technology. Not a data scientist. Not a fashion executive. Someone at the intersection.

IV.4 Three Horizons of AI-Driven CX

Horizon 1 (Now): Friction Reduction

Chatbots, size tools, personalized email. Optimization of the existing experience.

Horizon 2 (2025–2027): Intent-Driven Commerce

Customers describe needs, not products. An AI stylist processes intent, style profile, inventory, and context.

Horizon 3 (2027+): Anticipatory Commerce

The system predicts needs before they're articulated — proactive replenishment and styling.

IV.5 Sustainability: From Narrative to System

- **Overproduction reduction.** AI-driven planning could cut overproduction by **20%**, dwarfing any recycled-material capsule collection.³¹
- **Material optimization.** AI cutting algorithms reduce fabric waste by 3–8%.
- **Supply chain emissions.** Maersk's AI-driven logistics reports **10–15% emission reductions**.³²
- **Risk:** AI could **increase** total consumption (Jevons paradox). Computational footprint is non-trivial.³³

Strategic implication: The EU's Digital Product Passport (mandatory from 2027) will require the supply-chain data infrastructure AI can help build.³⁴

IV.6 Who Wins, Who Loses

Winners

- AI-first platforms (Shein, Temu)⁸
- Luxury houses with archives (Hermès, Chanel)
- Data-rich athletic brands (Nike²⁸, Adidas)
- AI-native startups

Losers

- Mid-market brands with weak data
- Wholesale-dependent brands
- Brands treating AI as an IT project rather than business strategy

► KEY TAKEAWAY — SECTION IV

The acid test for AI investment: **can a competitor replicate this by buying the same software?** If yes, it's table stakes. If no — because it requires your data, expertise, or organizational capability — it's a potential moat. Invest in the moats.

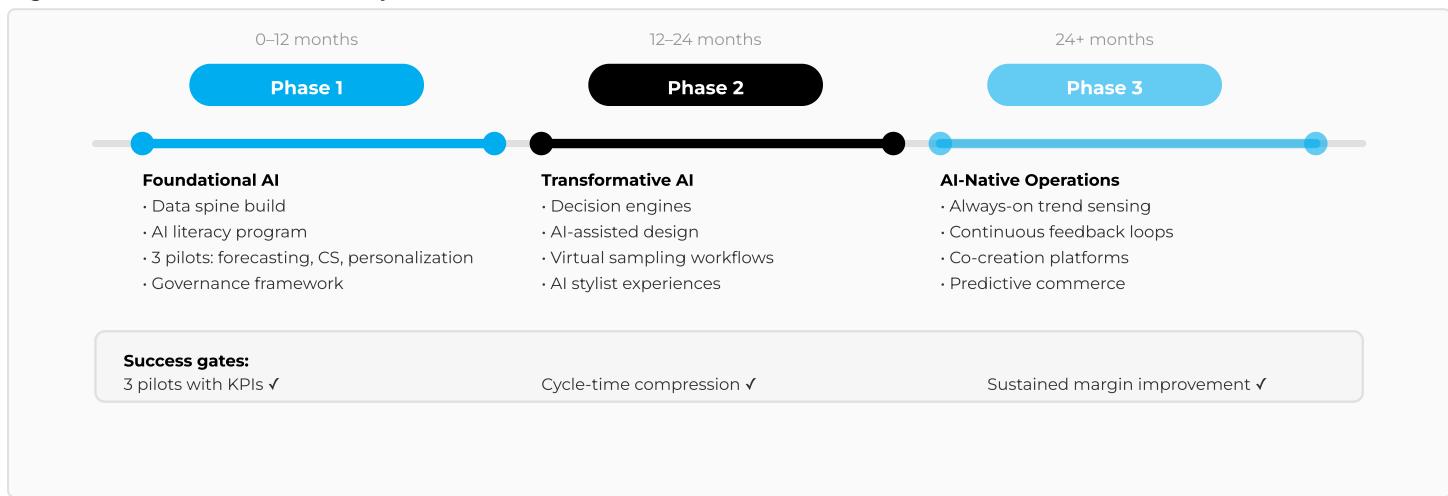
V. Actionable Opportunities: The Path Forward

SECTION OVERVIEW

- Phase-gated 24-month implementation roadmap
- The AI Flywheel: Sense → Decide → Execute → Learn
- 12 prioritized use cases across the value chain
- KPI tree, governance framework, and 90-day sprint plan

V.1 Phase-Gated AI Implementation

Figure 4 — Phase-Gated AI Adoption Timeline



Source: Author framework

Phase 1 — Foundational AI (0-12 months)

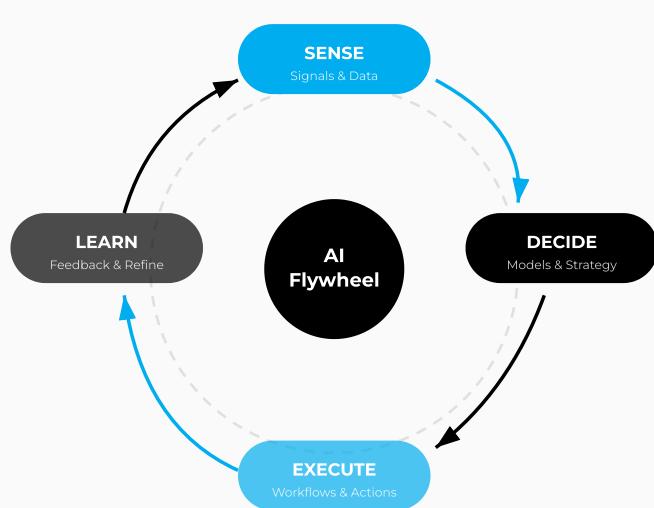
Objective: build capability, clean data flows, ship low-risk wins.

High-ROI Use Cases

- Demand forecasting + size/fit forecasting
- Customer service copilots
- Basic personalization (PDP/PLP ranking, email)
- Content acceleration with guardrails

V.2 The AI Flywheel for Fashion

Figure 5 — The AI Flywheel: Sense → Decide → Execute → Learn



Search · Social · Sell-through · Returns · Reviews · Resale · Weather · Macro

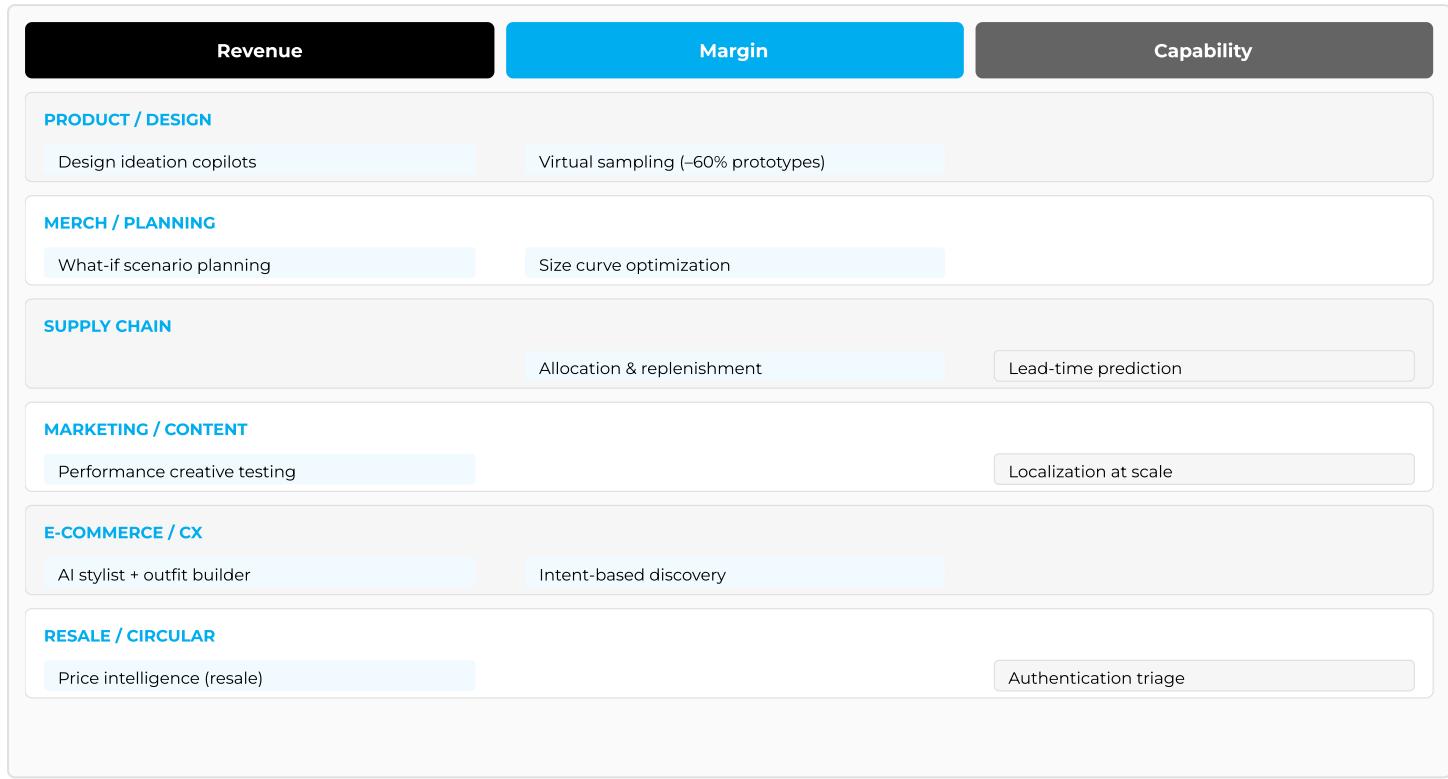
Source: Author framework

Key insight: the compounding advantage comes from **feedback-loop speed**, not model novelty. The brand that closes the loop in days outperforms competitors with better models but slower loops.

V.3 Use-Case Portfolio

A simple rule: **1 Revenue use case + 1 Margin use case + 1 Capability use case.**

Figure 6 — The 12 AI Moves: Use-Case Portfolio by Function



Source: Author framework

V.4 KPI Tree — North-Star Outcomes

REVENUE

- Conversion rate
- Repeat purchase rate
- Customer retention

MARGIN

- Gross margin
- Markdown rate
- Returns rate

SPEED

- Time-to-market
- Time-to-replenish
- Content cycle time

EXPERIENCE

- NPS / CSAT
- Support resolution time
- Fit satisfaction

Rule: every AI initiative must declare: **baseline metric, target lift, measurement window, owner, and rollback plan.**

V.5 Build the AI-Ready Workforce & Culture

Operating Model

- **AI Studio (core):** product lead, data/ML, analytics, domain expert, legal/compliance
- **Embedded champions:** design, merch, supply chain, marketing, CX

Skills to Build

- Prompting isn't the skill; **problem framing + evaluation** is.
- Train teams to: define success metrics, curate datasets, validate outputs.

Human-AI Synergy

- **Humans own:** brand taste, ethics, claims, strategy.
- **AI owns:** search, variation, prediction, optimization.

V.6 Governance

Non-negotiables before scaling:

- **Privacy:** consent, retention, access controls
- **IP:** rules for training data, vendor rights
- **Brand safety:** tone-of-voice, claims, prohibited categories
- **Bias & fairness:** size/fit, representation
- **Auditability:** log prompts/outputs

V.7 90-Day Sprint Plan

Weeks 1-2: Setup

- Pick 3 use cases + define KPI baselines
- Inventory data sources + access
- Choose tooling and governance rules

Weeks 3-6: Build Pilots

- Ship MVPs in production (not demos)
- Create measurement dashboards

Weeks 7-10: Scale What Works

- Expand to second market/channel
- Document playbooks, automate evaluation

Weeks 11-12: Decide

- Keep/kill decisions
- Convert winners into roadmap + budget

► KEY TAKEAWAY — SECTION V

Start with **3 use cases** (1 revenue, 1 margin, 1 capability). Build the data spine first. Establish governance before scaling. The compounding advantage comes from **feedback-loop speed**, not model novelty.

The New Competitive Edge

AI doesn't replace fashion's human core: taste, cultural intuition, and brand meaning. But it **amplifies** the organizations that already know who they are.

The winners in 2026+ will:

- Build faster feedback loops than competitors
- Use AI to reduce waste and increase relevance
- Treat data as a strategic asset, not an IT byproduct
- Build trust: with customers, creators, and regulators

In a world where content is infinite and trends are noisy, advantage comes from **clarity + cadence + compounding systems**.

The brands that master the human-AI partnership — using technology to amplify judgment, not replace it — won't just survive the AI transition. They'll define the next era of fashion.

\$275B

GenAI profit potential
in fashion & luxury

60%

Sample reduction
via digital workflows

90

Days to your
first AI sprint

3

Use cases to
start with

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LET'S TRANSFORM INSIGHTS INTO ACTION

Need more analytics or deep dives into the fashion,
luxury and sportswear industry?

Let's work together to uncover actionable insights
and drive strategy forward.

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