

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.

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.

The New Landscape: Why AI in Fashion Is Different Now

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

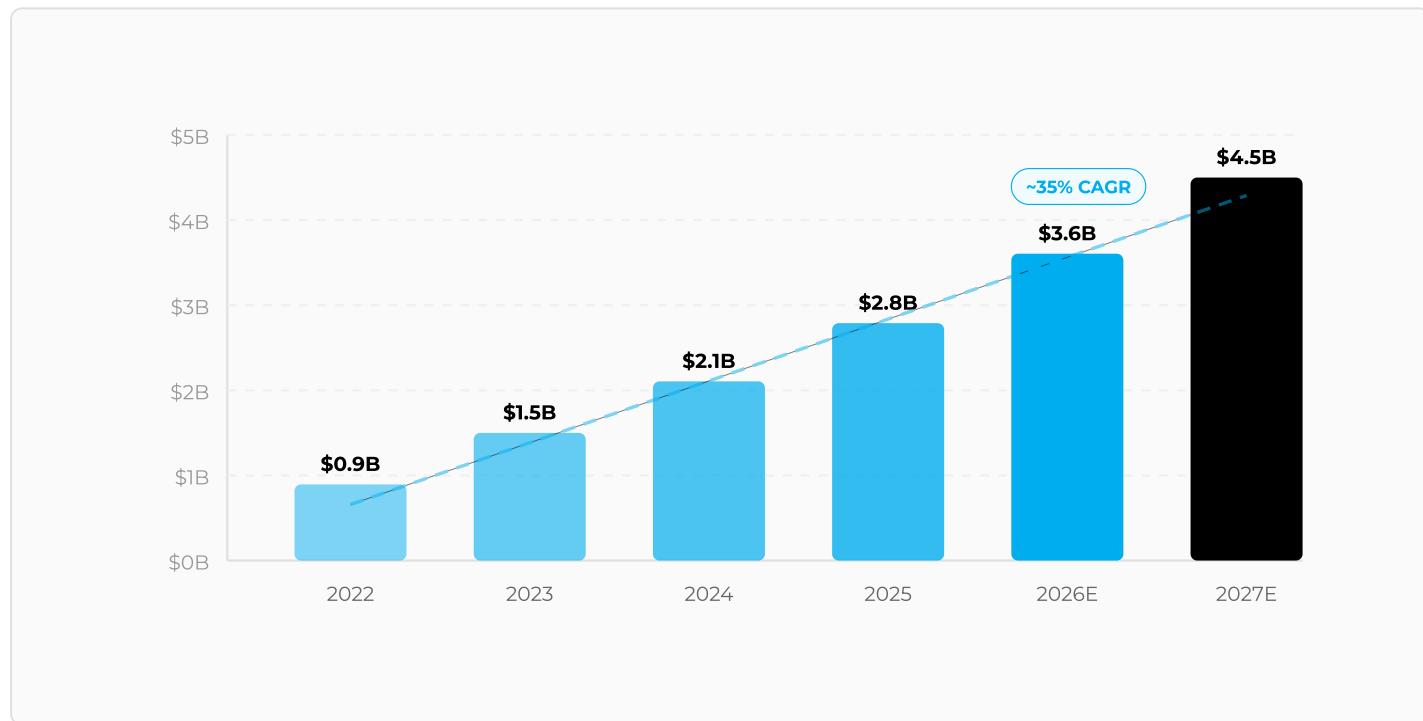
The Scale of the Shift

I.2 The Numbers That Matter

- **\$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 demand forecasting could cut this by 20–50%.⁵
- **12–18 months:** Typical design-to-shelf cycle. AI-assisted workflows are compressing 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

Estimated market value, 2022–2027 (\$B)



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

Why Fashion Is Uniquely Exposed

I.3 At the Intersection of AI's Strongest Capabilities

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)

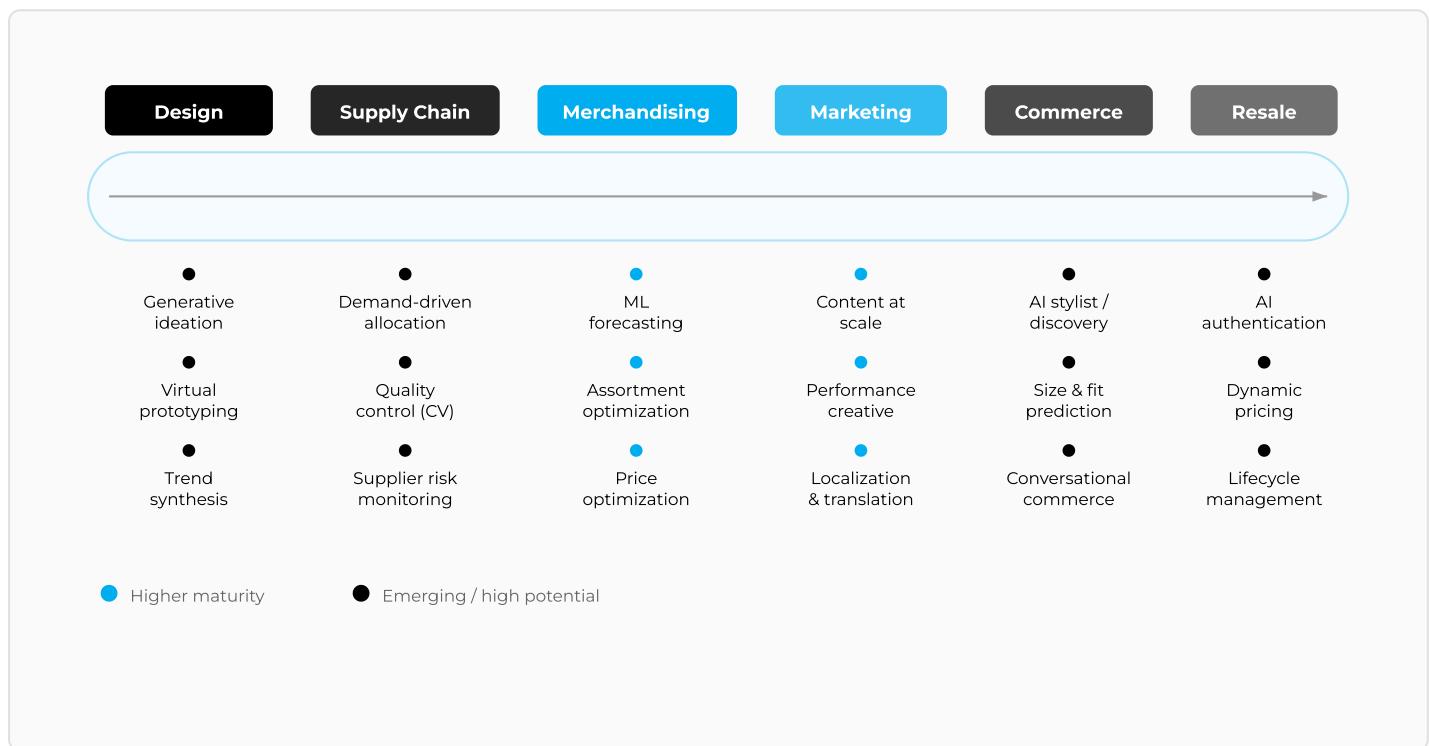
Each section is designed to be read independently or in sequence. The goal is not comprehensiveness for its own sake, but decision-useful insight for leaders who need to act.

AI Across the Fashion Value Chain

AI's impact is not evenly distributed. Some functions are already being transformed; others are barely scratched. This section maps the current and near-term state across six domains.

Figure 2 — AI Applications Across the Fashion Value Chain

Mapping AI impact by function, from design to resale



Source: Author analysis

Design & Product Development

II.1 Where the Hype Is Loudest

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 and colorway explorations 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 through 3D workflows.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 media images, surfacing emerging trends weeks to months before traditional methods. LVMH has invested in Heuritech.¹²

What's Not Working (Yet)

- **Technical design.** AI still struggles with construction details, tolerance stacks, 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.

Merchandising & Demand Planning

II.3 Most Ready for Transformation

What's Working

- **Forecasting accuracy.** ML models outperform traditional statistical 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.

Commerce, Resale & Circularity

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, Circular & 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. Brands that build this capture the circularity premium consumers and regulators increasingly demand.

The Creative Impact: How AI Reshapes Fashion's Core

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.

Digital Fashion & The Evolution of Aesthetics

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.

Strategic Market Implications for Brands

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.

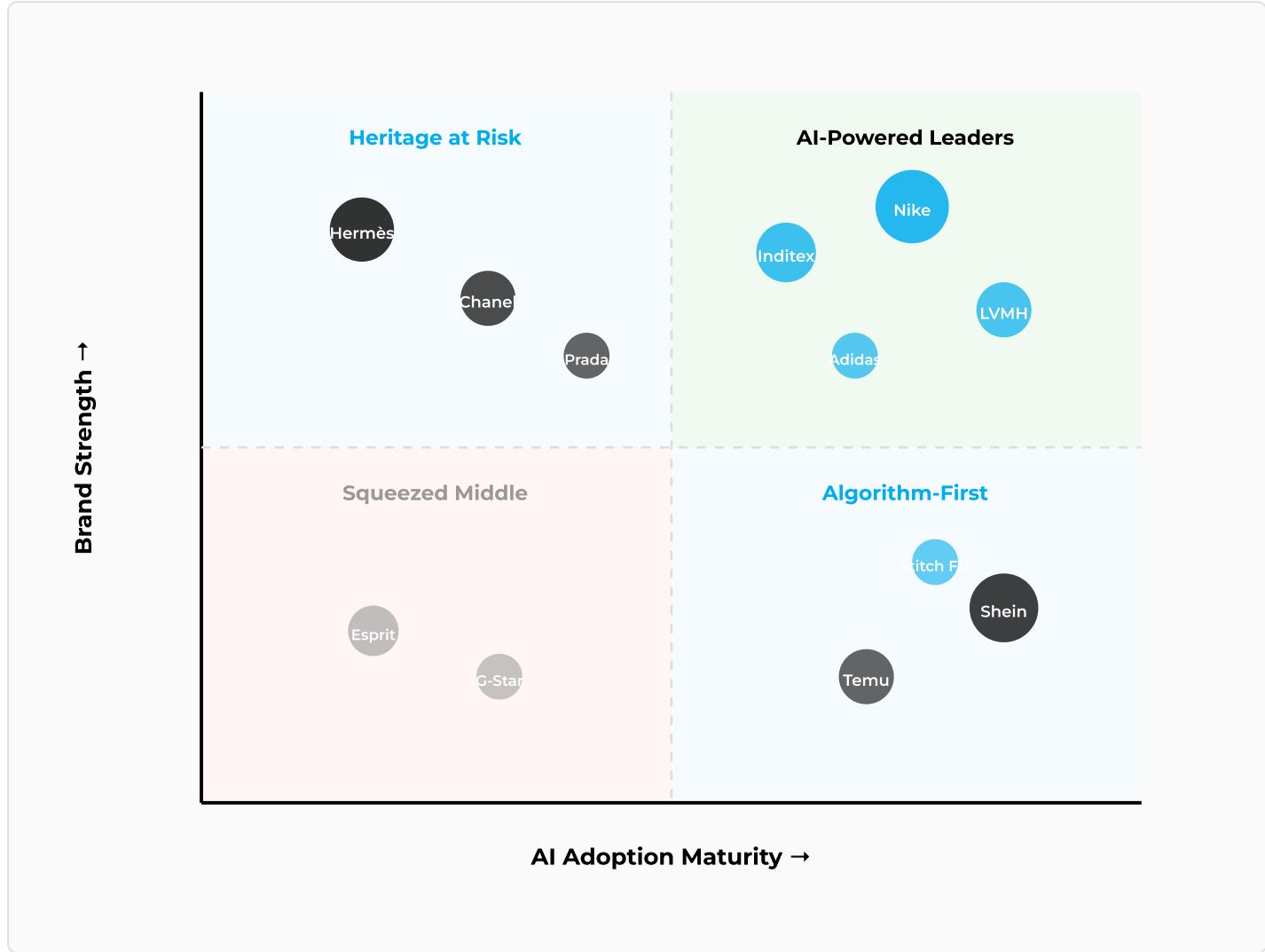
Potential Moats

- **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

Illustrative market segment positioning



Source: Author analysis. Positions are illustrative.

Data, Talent & Operating Model Shifts

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.

CX, Sustainability & Market Reordering

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.

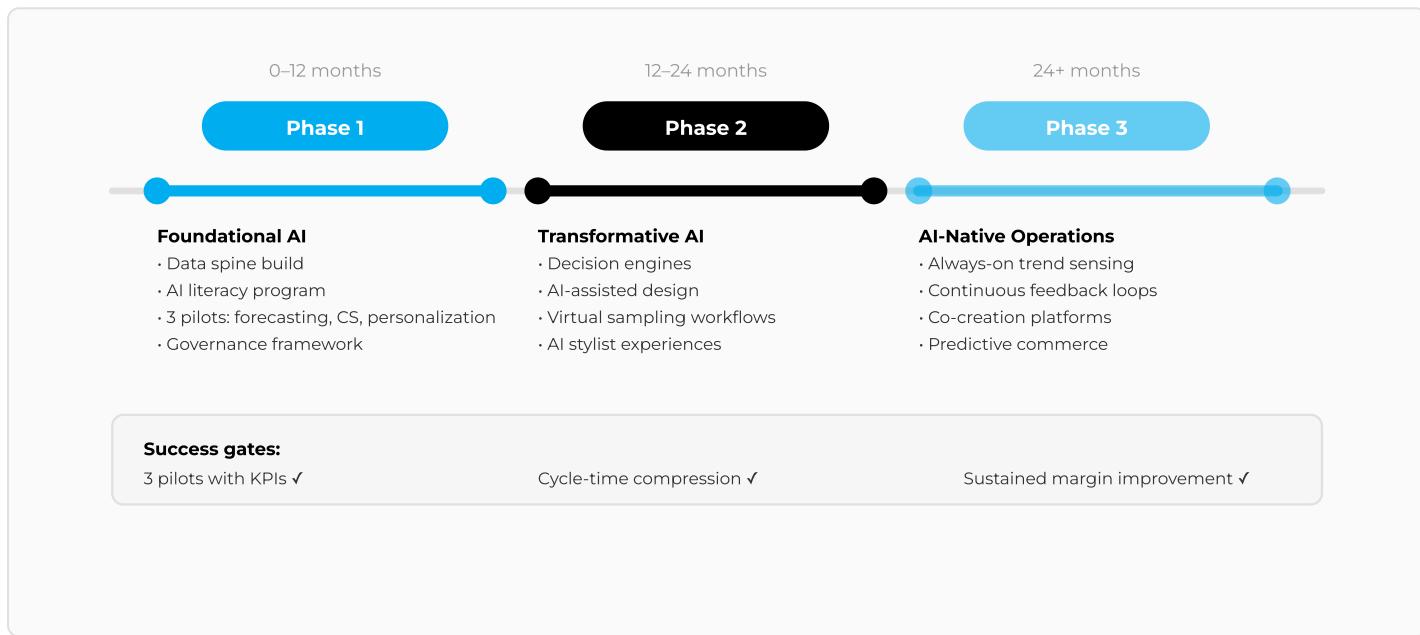
Losers: Mid-market brands with weak data, wholesale-dependent brands, brands treating AI as an IT project rather than business strategy.

Actionable Opportunities: The Path Forward

V.1 Phase-Gated AI Implementation

Figure 4 — Phase-Gated AI Adoption Timeline

Structured approach to building AI capability over 24+ months



Source: Author framework

Phase 1 — Foundational AI (0-12 months)

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

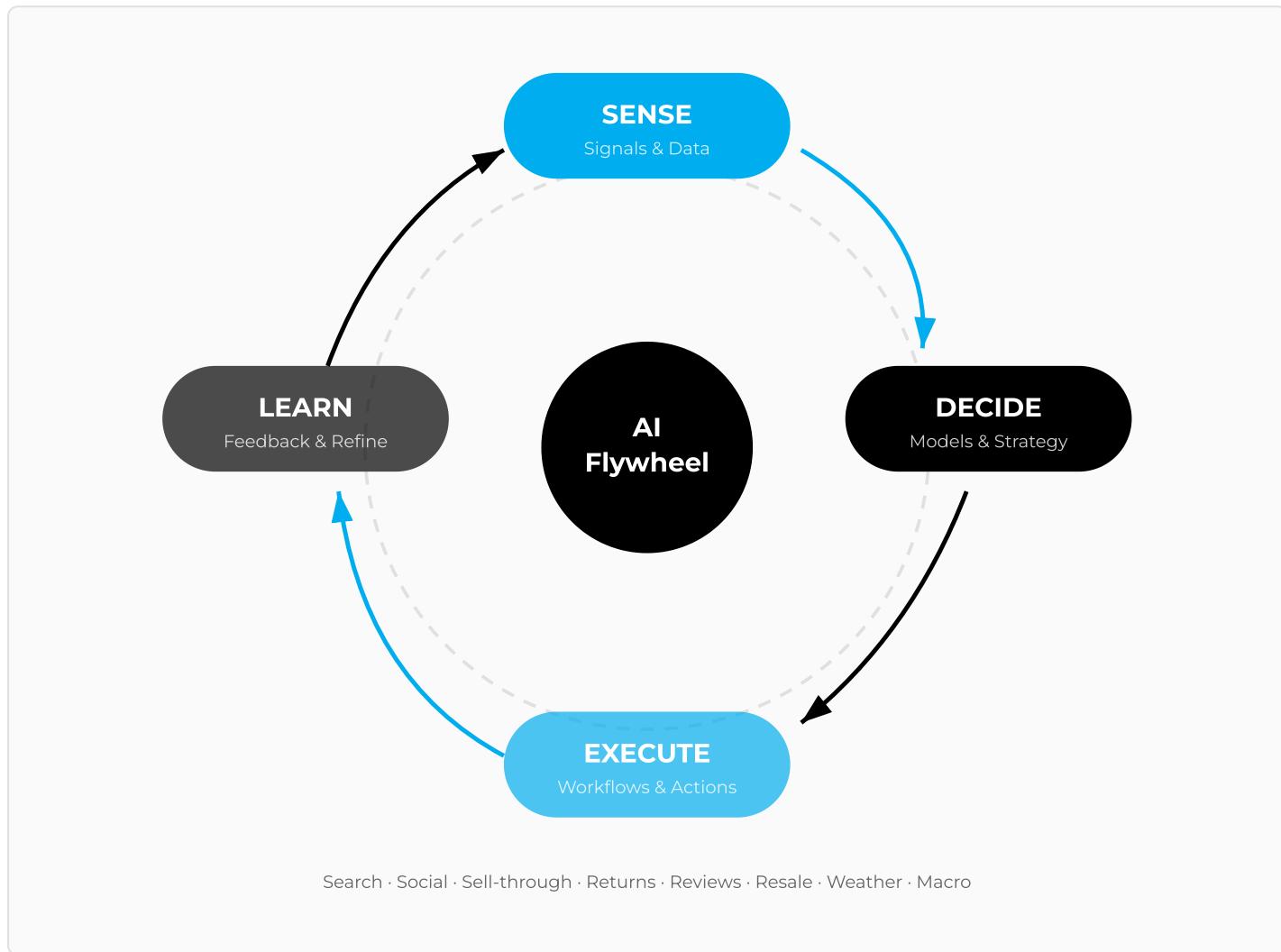
High-ROI Use Cases

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

The AI Flywheel for Fashion

Figure 5 — The AI Flywheel for Fashion

Continuous learning loop: Sense → Decide → Execute → Learn



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.

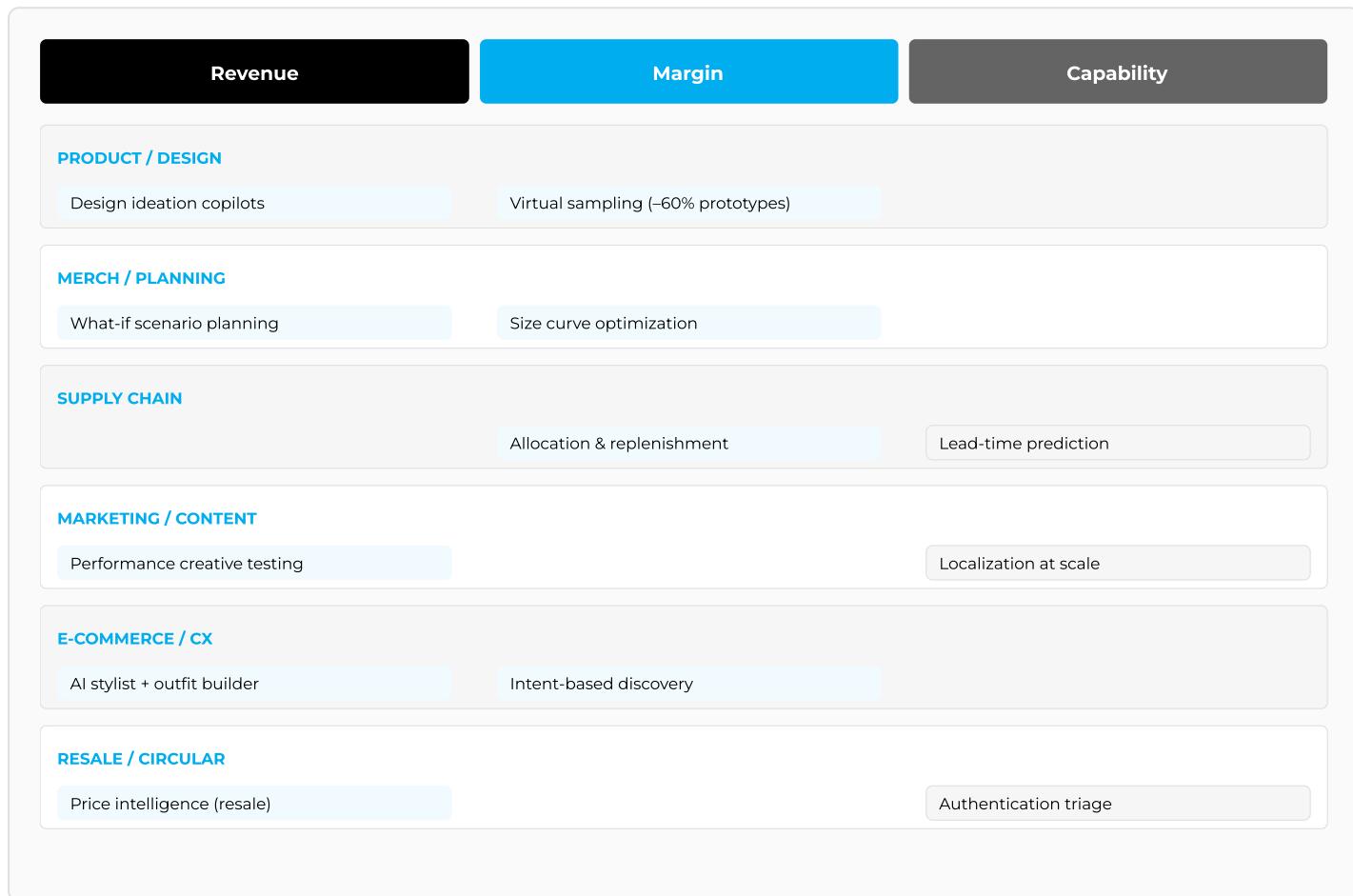
V.3 Use-Case Portfolio

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

The 12 AI Moves & KPI Tree

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

High-impact AI initiatives across the fashion value chain



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**.

Workforce, Governance & 90-Day Sprint

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, internal asset usage
- **Brand safety:** tone-of-voice, claims, prohibited categories
- **Bias & fairness:** size/fit recommendations, representation
- **Auditability:** log prompts/outputs for regulated touchpoints

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

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.

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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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