THE FUTURE OF FASHION WEEK

Human Value in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

From couture salons to 2036: a research investigation into fashion's institutions, economics, technology, and the meaning of gathering

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Research-led analysis for designers, brand founders, executives, fashion students, and industry institutions

> **The central question**
> In a world where fashion can be created, presented, and distributed more easily than ever, what makes coming together for fashion valuable—and what should that experience become over the next decade?

Publication status. This is a complete desk-research edition, not an original field experiment or a claim to have obtained confidential show economics. It synthesizes verified historical and institutional records, original reporting, peer-reviewed consumer research, and transparent strategic inference. Interviews, controlled consumer tests, and brand-level financial attribution are identified as future validation work—not misrepresented as completed research. This distinction is part of the findings.

Executive summary

The apparent paradox. In 2026, fashion imagery travels instantly; AI can produce persuasive simulations of garments, models, and even runways; creators and games invite audiences to participate in styling; and brands can reach consumers without waiting for a seasonal presentation. Yet Fashion Week has not vanished. For London Fashion Week in September 2026, the British Fashion Council reported that accredited buyers rose **19%** year on year and international accredited buyers **41%**; its programme included **47 catwalks, 23 presentations, 10 digital activations, and 53 evening events** [1]. Separately, an October 2026 Vogue analysis of Lefty data estimated **$1.24 billion of earned media value** across Spring/Summer 2027 fashion month [2]. Neither buyer attendance nor modeled media value proves profitability. But both contest the argument that Fashion Week is already irrelevant.

Final-edition update (November 3, 2026). Vogue's July 7 review documents Mabille's return to a live couture runway with actual garments that could transform into second looks [35]. This complements—not overturns—the January AI case: the two shows explored different creative and material propositions, and neither published review proves relative profitability. After the original October 22 research cut-off, Lefty published a further SS27 report on October 23, stating approximately $1.2 billion in modeled earned media value and 41% year-on-year growth [36]. Different comparison periods explain why the 41% figure should not be confused with Vogue's 64% season-on-season growth figure [2].

Meanwhile, Eventbrite reported that **79%** of surveyed US and UK 18–35-year-olds planned to attend more live events in 2026 [3]. The Vogue Business/Archrival research reported that **74%** of surveyed US Gen Z respondents regarded in-person experiences as more important than digital ones [4]. And experimental fashion research has found that consumers may react negatively to AI-designed fashion when they infer reduced human effort and care [5]. These findings motivate a hypothesis—not a settled causal story—that the proliferation of synthetic creativity could heighten the importance of visible human intention and meaningful encounters.

Our provisional verdict: Fashion Week is best understood as a *bundle of interdependent functions*, not a single runway format. Those functions include professional trade, collection inspection, creative legitimacy, cultural signaling, media distribution, city-scale coordination, industry governance, talent development, and human relationships. Some can be performed digitally; others remain dependent on physical objects, context, or trusted relationships. Their mix differs profoundly for couture houses, young designers, commercial labels, and public-facing fashion festivals.

It is therefore more useful to ask *what each format ought to accomplish, for whom, at what cost, and with what evidence*, than to ask whether one medium will replace another. Fashion Week could become more selective, more transparent about economics, more hospitable to public participation, more technologically assisted backstage, and more accountable to the people who make fashion. Or it could remain a publicity-intensive ritual whose costs are absorbed disproportionately by fragile businesses.

Seven findings anchor this report.

1. Fashion Week did not begin as a mass consumer spectacle. Modern fashion presentation grew out of the need to show garments and assert authorship; New York's 1943 Press Week was built to secure editorial recognition for American design and was restricted to editors, with buyers attending separate showrooms [6].
2. Fashion Week has adapted repeatedly. See-now-buy-now in 2016 tested timing; the pandemic tested digital access; virtual-fashion events tested online gathering; and AI in 2026 tested whether a collection needs to exist physically at all [7–11].
3. Publicity is not commercial proof. The cost of even modest New York runway productions has been reported at roughly $100,000–$300,000 in a 2023 investigation, but evidence linking individual show budgets to incremental gross profit is scarce [12].
4. The enduring trade layer matters. The Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode's SPHERE combines a physical showroom with digital wholesale infrastructure for emerging brands [13].
5. Younger participation is changing the institution's cultural meaning. Styling games, streetwear communities, creator-owned brands, and integrated Chinese fashion ecosystems show that audiences can be co-producers of fashion culture—not merely viewers [14–18].
6. Technology and human value may be complementary. Surveys show demand for both AI-enabled convenience and transparency/human fallback; experimental evidence suggests that perceived human care matters in some fashion contexts [5, 19].

7. Institutional relevance must include externalities. Sustainability screening, accessibility, labor conditions, geographic concentration, and representation determine who benefits from Fashion Week—not only how many people watch it [20–22].

FBB recommendation: Preserve the physical practices that create demonstrable value; digitize friction rather than assuming digital substitution; allow distinct business models to choose different presentation formats; and publish better event economics and human-impact evidence. These are recommendations conditioned on the current record, not claims that an ideal future is inevitable.

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1. Why investigate this now? The 2026 diagnosis

1.1 A spectacle, a market, and a gathering

The modern viewer can watch Paris within minutes, see a creator interpret a look the same day, ask a shopping assistant to locate alternatives, and sometimes buy an inspired product instantly. Image production is also changing. In January 2026, Alexis Mabille staged an actual audience gathering at the Lido theater in Paris to screen a couture runway video that, according to Vogue's on-site report, was entirely AI-generated. The garments did not exist as completed physical objects, although elements of the process included drawings, toiles, and scanned textiles [11].

This is the opening contradiction of our investigation: guests assembled physically to witness the simulation of a fashion show. Did they come to evaluate garments, to witness experimentation, to participate in a cultural event, to meet one another, or to experience institutional fashion-week status? The answers are not mutually exclusive. But they have different business implications.

At the same time, the London buyer figures suggest that trade relationships remain active [1]. And the Lefty/Vogue figure for Spring/Summer 2027 fashion month suggests intense online circulation [2]. These metrics point to **different outputs**. Buyer growth is evidence of professional participation; estimated media value is a modeled publicity valuation; neither quantifies sales attributable to a particular show. Treating them as equivalent would be a category error.

Source reconciliation, verified November 3, 2026. Vogue's October 13 report described approximately $1.24 billion of Spring/Summer 2027 Fashion Month earned media value, 64% above Fall/Winter 2026, a consecutive-season comparison [2]. Lefty's later October 23 report described approximately $1.2 billion and 41% year-on-year growth, comparing with the corresponding earlier-year season [36]. The two amounts are rounded and may reflect reporting scope or precision; the disclosed growth rates have different baselines. Neither measure is audited event revenue, incremental sales, or profit. Their most defensible use here is as a measure of modeled publicity, with its provider and comparison period explicitly named.

1.2 Why this is an economic question—not only an aesthetic one

Fashion Week attracts and distributes capital. Designers fund production and samples. Organizers invest in venues, security, accreditation, sponsors, and logistics. Editors and buyers allocate attention and travel. Cities benefit from spending but absorb crowding and environmental costs. Creators gain content and visibility. Some cultural authority is produced collectively, yet its rewards are unevenly distributed.

A show that costs $200,000 could be rational for a house with a global client network and extensive lifetime customer value, and destabilizing for a small designer with thin gross margins. The same visual format is therefore not the same business decision.

We should not assume that large brands optimize for immediate direct sales or that all independent designers show for orders. Nor should we allow vague claims of 'long-term brand building' to excuse spending without milestones. The correct question is whether a show's intended strategic effects are credible, economically proportionate, and eventually observable.

1.3 The researcher's starting position

My starting question was whether Fashion Week still makes sense when fashion's images and narratives can travel without the runway. I became interested in a second possibility: the more easily technology produces convincing images, the more deliberately people may value material craftsmanship, human judgment, and experiences shared with others.

This is an intuition worth testing, not a predetermined finding. Many people valued handmade things and gatherings long before generative AI. The pandemic, social isolation, screen fatigue, changing disposable incomes, tourism, and status competition may all affect live-event demand. A sound investigation must compare these explanations rather than assigning the entire shift to AI.

The paper therefore asks two linked questions: **What is Fashion Week for now?** and **What will a fashion gathering need to offer by 2036 that images alone cannot deliver?**

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2. Scope, questions, and evidence rules

Unit of analysis. The term *Fashion Week* covers distinct institutions and practices: official city calendars, individual collection shows, business-to-business showrooms, press presentations, public cultural programming, and industry networking. We do not assume every format shares a single purpose or customer.

Time horizon. Historical context runs from nineteenth-century couture to 2015. The core analytical period is 2016–October 2026. The forecast period is 2027–2036.

Geography. New York, London, Milan, and Paris form an important institutional baseline, but Copenhagen and Shanghai are substantive comparison cases—not decorative evidence from outside the traditional capitals. The paper recognizes limitations in available English-language and independently audited data for other regions.

Seven core questions

1. What problems did couture presentations, Press Week, and formal Fashion Weeks originally solve?
2. Which of those problems persist, and which new needs have appeared since 2016?
3. Under what conditions does staging a fashion show create incremental value relative to other uses of the budget?
4. Is the perceived value of physical gatherings and human creative work changing, and what could explain any change?

5. How are creators, gaming communities, resale, local ecosystems, and younger audiences transforming fashion participation?
6. How can fashion institutions adapt without losing commercially and culturally valuable functions?
7. Which 2036 scenarios fit the evidence, and what signals would cause us to revise our conclusions?

Evidence hierarchy. Highest weight goes to primary historical records, official event documentation, financial statements, carefully described consumer experiments, and verified quantitative datasets. Original reporting and informed interviews are important but not automatically representative. Vendor estimates of media impact, organizer-reported attendance, self-reported consumer intentions, and broad market forecasts are described as what they are. FBB interpretation and 2036 scenarios are labeled separately.

Causality and missing data. A successful show cannot be credited with all subsequent brand growth; products, store distribution, pricing, creative leadership, celebrity partnerships, product availability, and economic conditions intervene. Where show-level P&L, wholesale orders, or incremental customer value are undisclosed, the finding is **not established**, not zero. The absence of evidence is an analytical limit, not a license to invent a result.

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3. Historical forensics: what did Fashion Week originally do?

3.1 Couture salons: seeing the object and making the designer visible

Nineteenth-century couture houses developed a system in which living models, fittings, exclusive salons, and personal client relationships made garments legible as crafted objects and as expressions of a named creator. Charles Frederick Worth's Paris house, founded in 1858, is routinely associated with the rise of designer-centered fashion presentation. The precise origins of modern runway practice should not be reduced to a single inventor: live presentation practices evolved across couture and retail over decades. The important economic mechanism was the combination of **visible product, recognized authorship, exclusive access, and personal selling**.

The institutional frame followed. The Paris couture trade association traces its origins to a chambre syndicale founded in 1868; twentieth-century rules more tightly formalized the protected haute couture designation [23]. These arrangements were not simply artistic. They coordinated professional legitimacy, production standards, and access to a prestigious market.

3.2 New York's 1943 Press Week: the strategic problem was recognition

In 1943, wartime restrictions disrupted American editors' customary orientation toward Paris. Eleanor Lambert organized New York Press Week to bring American designers before influential journalists. A Smithsonian historical account notes that these early shows admitted editors, while buyers made separate showroom visits [6].

This detail is central. The event was initially an instrument of **editorial distribution and national creative legitimacy**, not a universal buyer marketplace or consumer festival. Editors were gatekeepers to readers; press access helped turn domestic design activity into a recognized industry. This is

especially relevant now that creators, digital platforms, and AI-mediated discovery challenge who controls visibility.

3.3 Paris and the 1973 institutional turning point

The Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode traces the creation of ready-to-wear and menswear chambers to October 8, 1973 [23]. In November that year, the Battle of Versailles staged a transatlantic fashion presentation and fundraiser that helped redefine perceptions of American designers and Black runway models, among other legacies [24]. The event should not be conflated with the precise date of the creation of Paris Fashion Week's official structures. Its relevance lies in showing that **performance, status, cultural diplomacy, and the politics of recognition** were already part of the show format.

London Fashion Week's emergence in 1984 and New York's later attempts to centralize runway scheduling show a further development: the calendar became shared industry infrastructure. It helped emerging designers encounter buyers, editors, and resources that would otherwise be prohibitively difficult to coordinate independently.

3.4 The historical lesson

There never was a purely functional, non-spectacular Fashion Week that became distorted only after social media. Fashion presentations historically mixed commerce, power, social hierarchy, and performance. What has changed is *which function leads*, how information circulates, who can participate, and how outcomes can be observed.

This distinction matters for 2036. If images no longer need one geographically concentrated event, the calendar may still serve coordination, physical product verification, cultural legitimacy, and human networking. But those claims must be tested separately.

Comparison: earlier purpose versus 2026 requirements

Question	Earlier configuration	2026 condition	Investigative implication
Who sees the work?	Selected clients, buyers, editors	Physical guests plus global online audiences and platforms	Reach is less scarce than qualified attention
Who confers authority?	Houses, magazines, retailers, trade bodies	Institutions plus creators, communities, platforms	Legitimacy is contested and distributed
When is product evaluated?	Before retail availability, by professionals	Before and after digital exposure; AI imagery may precede production	Material verification matters
How is commerce organized?	Orders, salons, department stores	Wholesale, direct retail, drops, marketplaces, social commerce	No universal conversion model
What is the experience?	Product access, exclusivity, social ritual	Viewing, entertainment, networking, craft, community, content	Purpose-specific success measures required
What is scarce?	Physical access and distribution	Trust, qualified attention, distinctive product, time, credible relationships	Opportunity to redesign the event

4. Ten years of experimentation: 2016–2026

4.1 2016: see-now-buy-now challenges the delay between show and sale

In 2016, Burberry and Tom Ford announced collection formats that aligned runway exposure more closely with retail availability [7]. Burberry's September 2016 Makers House incorporated live craft demonstrations and immediate retail access [8]. This is an important early case because it combined **commercial immediacy with witnessed human making**; the supposedly new opposition between technology and craftsmanship was already being negotiated.

The strategic question was plausible: why stimulate global desire months before consumers could buy? Yet the model also moved risks upstream. Production had to be committed earlier; products needed reliable availability; press and buyer activities had less separation; and the underlying wholesale calendar remained complex. We should not claim the format universally failed or succeeded without comparable profitability and adoption data. Its lasting lesson is that the **timing of storytelling, manufacturing, and consumer purchase must be designed as a system**.

4.2 2020–2021: the pandemic tests the institution without physical presence

London Fashion Week launched a freely accessible digital-only platform in June 2020, incorporating presentations, designer profiles, podcasts, and digital showrooms [9]. This established that scheduled fashion communication could continue when physical congregation was impossible. It also exposed the distinction between *seeing a collection* and conducting the interpersonal, material, and commercial work of an event.

The digital-only experiment did not provide a clean causal test of future preference: its adoption occurred during extraordinary mobility restrictions. Digital viability under lockdown does not imply people would choose exclusively digital fashion weeks when free to travel. Equally, returning to physical events afterward does not prove the digital format was worthless. A hybrid model may create greater reach and lower transaction costs for certain interactions.

4.3 2022–2023: virtual fashion weeks meet the engagement test

Decentraland reported approximately 108,000 unique guests for Metaverse Fashion Week 2022 and 26,000 for the 2023 edition; a separate data provider arrived at substantially different audience estimates for 2023 [10]. Reporting identified more traction for interactive experiences and gamification than for conventional virtual runway imitation.

This does not establish that digital fashion culture failed. It establishes that **one platform-specific event did not build consistent repeat attendance**, and that measurement definitions matter. Gaming spaces with existing communities may offer stronger reasons to participate than virtual spaces created primarily to imitate real-world industry ritual.

4.4 Technology as show content versus technology as business infrastructure

Coperni's 2022 spray-on dress and subsequent technology-led presentations made technical experimentation a recognizable creative identity. Such moments produce editorial discussion and social distribution. They may also demonstrate material innovations. But estimated media value cannot be converted directly into incremental sales or cash [25].

Compare this with the behind-the-scenes approach described by Google in September 2026: designers Jane Wade and Sergio Hudson used custom Flow tools for styling and runway previsualization [26]. This is less visually sensational, but closer to a testable operational hypothesis—whether improved planning reduces time, rework, sampling, or production expenditure. The announcement is a company case study, not independently audited cost savings.

The distinction should structure every technology case: **Does the technology merely give viewers something to talk about, or does it change cost, access, product quality, decision-making, or conversion?** Some innovations can do both, but both effects require evidence.

4.5 2026: AI puts the reality of the garment on trial

Alexis Mabille's AI-generated couture presentation creates a decisive conceptual question [11]. A film can convincingly communicate a creative world without yielding an available product. That can be legitimate artistic exploration—provided the medium and material status are transparent. But a buyer evaluating fit, drape, manufacturing capacity, or delivery risk needs evidence beyond a simulation.

This suggests that a future event could separate three layers: *the artistic proposition* (what the collection imagines), *the material proposition* (what physically exists and can be produced), and *the commercial proposition* (what is orderable and deliverable). Not all events need all three, but they should not blur them.

The July 2026 follow-up changes the interpretation. On July 7, Mabille presented a physical Fall 2026 couture runway in Paris. Vogue's on-site review described a fully realized collection in which each garment transformed into a second look, using reversible construction or onstage assistance [35]. The Fédération de la Haute Couture et de la Mode also documents the July 7 presentation [35]. The January AI show was therefore an experiment within the house's practice, not evidence that it permanently replaced physical couture. The comparison also reveals distinct forms of technical expertise: January required extensive human direction and iterative digital work, which Mabille told Vogue was not especially economical [11]; July made material transformation and construction part of the performance [35]. This is a within-house sequence, not a causal test of artistic, financial, or client outcomes: no publicly disclosed comparable show-level order, cost, or contribution data establishes which format performed better.

4.6 2026: evidence of continued professional demand and institutional plurality

The BFC's September 2026 schedule combined catwalks, presentations, digital activations, and an unusually broad event programme [1]. Paris's SPHERE continues integrating physical buyer meetings with invite-only digital showrooms [13]. Shanghai Fashion Week/Labelhood links presentations, neighborhood activities, craft displays, retail openings, and a 24-brand emerging-designer showroom, according to the Shanghai municipal report for October 2026 [18].

These are not interchangeable event models. They reveal a menu of commercial and cultural functions coexisting within or alongside the fashion-week calendar. This is one reason that a sweeping verdict of replacement would be analytically weak.

5. The economics: who pays, who earns, who carries the risk?

5.1 The funding architecture

Fashion Week is an economic network rather than a single business. Relevant payers may include participating brands, federations, governments, sponsors, production partners, and invited guests' employers. Relevant beneficiaries may include brands, wholesalers, media, influencers, service providers, workers, and host-city businesses. These groups incur different costs and capture different returns. One party's successful event can coexist with another's financial loss.

Business of Fashion's 2023 investigation reported that an entry-level New York show could cost approximately **$100,000–$300,000**, with high-end productions costing far more [12]. These are reported examples and ranges, not a universal 2026 budget benchmark. Venue, safety, fittings, models, personnel, production, hospitality, content, insurance, travel, and post-show commercialization all matter. Smaller brands can reduce cash spending via grants and in-kind partnerships, but 'free' services often create dependencies.

5.2 What counts as return?

For each event, FBB recommends recording the **incremental counterfactual**: what changed because the event occurred, relative to a plausible alternative allocation of resources? The comparison might be a static showroom, a targeted buyer dinner, digital collection assets, an in-store event, or no fashion-week participation that season.

The conceptual economic calculation is:

Incremental economic contribution = attributable gross profit from incremental business + defensible long-horizon contribution from relationships – total incremental event and follow-up costs.

This is not a ready-to-use accounting identity for every kind of value. Institutional legitimacy, workforce development, cultural learning, and public benefit may be important without an immediately observable price. They should be reported in their own units, not quietly assigned invented dollar equivalents.

Illustrative sensitivity case—not a real designer result

Assume a hypothetical emerging brand spends **$150,000** in total on an event and achieves a **60% contribution margin** on incremental revenue after variable selling costs. To cover that expense **from incremental contribution alone**, it would need approximately **$250,000** of attributable incremental revenue. This simple threshold excludes financing costs, timing differences, non-sales benefits, and fixed operating overhead. It shows why a media-value estimate of $1 million does not, by itself, satisfy the business case.

An emerging designer may rationally accept below-break-even returns in a learning or market-entry year if the risk is affordable and milestone evidence improves; but repeated investment without improved access, conversion, or product economics should be scrutinized.

5.3 The Fashion Week Value Audit: a proposed FBB extension

This whitepaper introduces the **FBB Fashion Week Value Audit**, a *proposed*, not academically validated, event-specific analytical tool. It preserves the logical separation in FBB's earlier Creative-to-

Commercial work between attention and sustained economic results, while recognizing that events also create non-transactional value.

Commercial value: qualified appointments, orders, new accounts, full-price purchases, customer retention, incremental contribution, and cash economics.

Cultural value: creative distinctiveness, critical reception, authorship, impact on creative practice, and durable rather than transient relevance.

Human value: physical verification, witnessed craft, meaningful interaction, professional relationships, belonging, trust, and participant agency.

System value: emerging-talent access, working conditions, coordination efficiency, knowledge exchange, inclusion, and verified environmental improvement.

Each dimension requires its own evidence. We should not add four heterogeneous scores to create a spurious single index. More fundamentally, there is a stakeholder question: value for whom? A glamorous event might deliver considerable cultural value to the host house while paying young freelance participants poorly. A strong audit must surface this distribution.

5.4 Time is part of the model

A show, a product's delivery, and repeat customer behavior occur on different clocks. Useful evaluation windows might include: **0–7 days** for qualified reach; **30–90 days** for buyer follow-up and preorders; **90–270 days** for retail conversion when products land; and **12–24 months** for repeat customers, buyer retention, and organizational effects. These are illustrative windows requiring adjustment to the brand's production calendar—not universal deadlines.

We should also study brands that skip a season, switch to presentations, or return after an absence. Selection bias is a serious danger: strong brands may be better able to show *and* more likely to grow, so a comparison of 'show brands versus non-show brands' cannot by itself establish the show caused their advantage.

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6. The human hypothesis: what becomes valuable when creation is abundant?

6.1 Clarifying the proposition

The hypothesis is **not** that consumers will reject technology or automatically pay more for anything labeled handmade. It is that, under some conditions, synthetic-media abundance may increase the salience of **authorship, traceable effort, trust, physical verification, social participation, and memorable experience**.

These are different constructs. A person can feel belonging in a digital game and loneliness at a crowded runway. A designer can use AI intelligently while retaining strong human authorship. A handcrafted object can be poorly made; a technologically assisted garment can be exceptional. Research must separate format, provenance, quality, and meaning.

6.2 What consumer evidence actually shows

Vogue Business and Archrival surveyed **750 US Gen Z respondents and 250 millennials** for a 2024 report. It found 74% of Gen Z respondents rated in-person experiences above digital ones; 68% preferred trying products before purchase [4]. These data concern a US sample and general shopping attitudes. They do not establish that Gen Z consumers will attend luxury Fashion Week, or that AI caused the preferences.

Eventbrite's 2026 Social Study surveyed **4,051 people aged 18–35 in the US and UK** in July 2025 and found 79% planned to attend more events during 2026 [3]. As an event platform's commissioned survey, it is a useful directional signal subject to stated-intention and sampling limits. 'I intend to go' is not ticketing or attendance behavior.

The strongest direct test of AI authorship in this evidence set is the Han and Xu experiment, published online in 2025 and in the January 2026 issue of *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*. Using an eight-cell experimental design with **400 respondents**, it found that aversion to AI fashion design was mediated by lower perceived effort and 'love'; complexity moderated some responses [5]. This indicates a psychological mechanism, not a universal market-level premium for human-made garments.

A 2026 study by Min, Baek, and Jin ran three experiments comparing information from AI and human fashion sources, finding that evaluations depended on information type and temporal focus, with a human advantage for some creative information [27]. Meanwhile, Adobe's 2026 consumer survey of **4,000 customers globally** found both perceived AI benefits and trust boundaries: approximately one-third said they would stop engaging with a brand upon discovering apparently human-made content was AI-generated; respondents also valued the ability to reach a human [19]. The combined picture is conditional acceptance, not technological rejection.

6.3 Alternative explanations

Even if demand for live events rises, at least six explanations must be considered before attributing it to AI: recovery after pandemic isolation; social-media saturation; status seeking and exclusivity; the experience economy; real-world interest groups and loneliness; and spending shifts between products and experiences. None requires a specifically anti-AI reaction. Cultural preferences differ by age, income, market, and product category.

The hypothesis would weaken if controlled tests showed no sustained authorship premium after visual quality and price were held constant, or if real-event participation grew no faster among heavy synthetic-media users than among comparable low-exposure groups. It would strengthen if longitudinal studies showed growing demand for verifiable human input, stronger paid conversion for genuinely participatory events, and consistent cross-market effects after controlling for income and other factors.

6.4 Craft visibility as an experience mechanism

Hermès's *Hermès in the Making* brought artisans and demonstrations to Istanbul in October 2025; visitors could observe skills, participate in activities, and learn about durability and repair [28]. Loewe's *Crafted World* in Tokyo presented an immersive account of the house's creative and craft identity [29]. These experiences suggest that an event can make otherwise abstract product claims tangible.

But these exhibitions did not begin as a response to 2026 AI adoption, and their effect on actual purchases is not publicly established. We should examine whether visitors gain *knowledge, trust, attachment, or willingness to pay*—and which of those persists after the novelty of the visit fades.

6.5 A more promising binary: friction and meaning

Instead of 'AI versus humanity', the productive distinction may be **automation that removes friction** versus **automation that removes something consumers actually value**. For example, backstage planning, accessibility assistance, transcription, digital product documentation, and buyer follow-up may become more efficient without weakening a craft demonstration. Conversely, an undisclosed digital replica presented as a real garment may erode trust precisely because physical authenticity is part of the expected value.

The boundary is contextual and needs transparent disclosure. A creative film can be compelling even without tangible products, but it should not be confused with a commercial sample review.

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7. The next generation is participating in fashion differently

7.1 Gaming changes the role of the audience

In *Dress to Impress* on Roblox, players style characters within themes, present their looks, judge others, and share results. Vogue reported **more than six billion cumulative visits** as of May 2025 [14]. Visits are not unique people, and player activity is not evidence of physical garment purchases. The significance is structural: the audience becomes stylist, performer, evaluator, and distributor at once.

Coach has experimented with branded virtual accessories and outfits through Roblox experiences including Fashion Klossette [15]. This does not imply game participation will replace buyers' physical evaluation of garments. It reveals a separate fashion value system centered on **play, authorship, social feedback, and identity**. The research should ask if a brand can participate without appropriating a community's culture or reducing it to sponsored inventory.

7.2 Streetwear communities reorganize access and legitimacy

Corteiz built a distinctive system of password-protected online access, community-based drops, and physically coordinated events; its jacket exchanges and pop-ups generated gatherings outside the official fashion-week model [16]. Those events did not erase the usefulness of press or retail, but they demonstrate that the sequencing can invert: a brand may build community legitimacy before seeking institutional recognition.

The business risks should not be romanticized. Scarcity can produce excitement but also artificial exclusion; resellers can capture value; unpredictable drops may create customer frustration and operational strain. Community authenticity should be evaluated through retention, product satisfaction, accessibility, and fair treatment—not only crowds or resale premiums.

7.3 Telfar shows why 'replacement' is the wrong frame

Telfar's New York flagship, opened in November 2024, combined a store, live content infrastructure, and social gathering [17]. Yet Telfar also returned to a major runway presentation in June 2025 for its twentieth anniversary [30]. This reversibility matters. A brand can find a more useful retail/community rhythm for daily operations and still employ a live runway selectively when a cultural moment warrants it.

The right forecast is therefore not a linear migration from physical to digital. It is a **portfolio of formats** whose use depends on objective, resources, and audience.

7.4 Shanghai: the event as a city-scale industry ecosystem

An October 2026 Shanghai government account of Labelhood's fashion programming described exhibitions of work and textile samples, newly opened designer stores, neighborhood events, and a LABSHOWROOM bringing together **24 emerging brands** for professional connections [18]. Vogue's October 2026 Shanghai reporting also emphasized designers investing in standalone retail and closer relationships with customers [31].

The case is particularly valuable because it integrates craft, local cultural identity, trade, and direct retail without relying solely on one catwalk's media moment. We should, however, avoid assuming that a model supported by Shanghai's manufacturing networks, retail density, and digital infrastructure can be copied unaltered by a small city or startup.

7.5 Culture outside Fashion Week still informs its future

Miu Miu's 2025 Literary Club convened literature, music, and conversations about women's experiences [32]. This is not a replacement for runway production, but it demonstrates that fashion houses can host meaning-centered encounters in which direct product demonstration is secondary. Resale, vintage curation, and repair events similarly turn existing objects into social and interpretive experiences. Together these cases help identify what people value when *participating* in fashion rather than only observing it.

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8. Twelve cases tested through a consistent lens

The following comparative register separates demonstrated activity from unanswered outcome questions. Case selection intentionally includes institutions, challenger formats, consumer experiences, and a counter-case to simple technological optimism.

Case	What is established	Mechanism at issue	What remains unproven
Worth and couture salons	Living presentation and client relationship central to couture history	Product inspection and authorship	Relative historical effect on sales
1943 New York Press Week	Editors targeted as national design gatekeepers [6]	Recognition and earned editorial legitimacy	Independent causal value to each designer
1973 Versailles	Fashion as staged cultural diplomacy and recognition [24]	Institutional power, performance	Generalizability to modern events
Burberry Makers House, 2016	Immediate buying and visible craft [8]	Timing and experience	Incremental long-term return
LFW Digital, 2020	Public digital access and industry profiles [9]	Distribution without gathering	Preference in normal conditions
Metaverse Fashion Week, 2022–23	Declining reported attendance, measurement disagreement [10]	Digital social participation	Viable long-term category economics
Coperni technology	Strong publicity and design	Innovation versus media	Attributed gross profit or

Case	What is established	Mechanism at issue	What remains unproven
spectacles	experimentation [25]	attention	cash
Alexis Mabille couture, Jan–Jul 2026	January: synthetic runway and unmade garments [11]; July: live transformable physical couture [35]	Reality, technical authorship, material proof, complementary formats	Comparative costs, orders, client response, profitability
FHCM SPHERE	Physical/digital showroom for emerging labels [13]	Wholesale coordination	Incremental buyer value across cohorts
Hermès in the Making	Live demonstrations and workshops [28]	Witnessed effort and trust	Incremental willingness to pay
Dress to Impress / Coach	Large virtual participatory fashion community [14–15]	Audience co-creation	Conversion to real-world brand outcomes
Shanghai / Labelhood	Retail, public programming, and buyer showroom [18,31]	Integrated local ecosystem	Long-term comparative brand survival

Reading the register: A case study is strongest when it has a comparable alternative, clearly specified outcomes, and follow-up data. The more visually memorable a case is, the more careful we should be not to confuse publicity with proof.

9. An institution also has responsibilities

9.1 Environmental impact cannot be an afterthought

A global schedule implies flights, hotels, freight, samples, temporary venues, hospitality, and waste. There is no single reliable universal carbon-footprint number for a runway show: boundaries vary, and transport is often omitted or difficult to attribute. Vogue's earlier reporting highlighted the sector's shortage of standardized event emissions data [33]. The appropriate response is to require scope definitions and comparable accounting—not to repeat an unverified average.

Copenhagen Fashion Week offers one institutional intervention. It introduced its Sustainability Requirements framework in 2020 and made compliance with minimum standards part of official schedule eligibility from January 2023 [20]. But it also suspended enforcement of two material-related standards for Spring/Summer 2027 amid uncertainty about shared material criteria [21]. This is evidence of institutional learning and constraint, not proof that shows have become independently certified sustainable.

The most credible 2036 developments would include consistent measurement of travel and logistics; reusable installations; less wasteful sampling; public reporting of labor conditions; and procurement standards. Digital substitutes are not impact-free either: compute, devices, and production still have footprints. Comparisons need consistent boundaries.

9.2 Access, bodies, labor, and who gets recognized

Fashion Week creates an image of the industry, but that image does not necessarily represent the customers it serves. Vogue Business's Spring/Summer 2027 runway audit counted **9,283 looks across**

219 shows, with **97.5% straight-size, 2% mid-size, and 0.5% plus-size** under its stated definitions [22]. This is a runway-sample measurement, not an estimate of consumer body distribution. Still, it raises a commercial and social question: why are available product sizes, physical fit, and public visual representation so disconnected?

The same inquiry should extend to backstage workers, craftspeople, models, freelancers, emerging designers, regional creators, and people who cannot afford invitation-only access. If human connection becomes the organizing principle of an event, **whose humanity counts?**

9.3 Legitimacy is governed, not simply earned through applause

Official calendars, access credentials, funding decisions, press relations, and sponsorship requirements all influence who becomes visible. A future institution should disclose clear selection criteria and appeal processes where practical. Technological participation can broaden access but can also shift gatekeeping to platforms and opaque recommendation systems. A more open event is not automatically a more equitable one.

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10. Fashion Week 2036: four plausible futures

Forecasting should begin with mechanisms, not science-fiction imagery. Four scenarios can coexist across cities and brand types.

Scenario A — The selective luxury ritual

Major houses continue investing in a small number of exceptional physical presentations. The event becomes more curated, more culturally consequential, and more closely linked to craftspeople, key clients, ambassadors, and professional buyers. Digital media extends access, while high-touch service and authentic product encounters remain scarce. This future is plausible if physical attendance continues conferring trust and cultural legitimacy that synthetic production cannot readily duplicate.

Failure mode: Experience expenditure grows faster than customer value; staging overwhelms product substance; gatekeeping alienates new audiences.

Signals: Repeat high-value-client attendance, qualified appointments, show-related product conversion over multiple seasons, and customer trust scores—not simply front-row reach.

Scenario B — The modular independent designer calendar

Emerging labels increasingly choose among appointment-only showrooms, small craft presentations, selective runway seasons, shared production infrastructure, digital wholesale systems, and local customer gatherings. Calendar participation becomes optional and justified by stage-specific business goals.

Failure mode: Fragmentation reduces buyers' ability to discover labels efficiently, while smaller brands lose the cultural halo of the shared calendar.

Signals: Show- versus no-show cohorts, new wholesale accounts per dollar spent, runway grants' effectiveness, follow-up order rates, and brand survival.

Scenario C — The participatory city festival

Fashion Week expands public programming around designers' studios, material demonstrations, cultural forums, neighborhood retail, community styling, repair, youth experiences, and shared events. Professional trade activities continue in parallel rather than being displaced. Shanghai/Labelhood offers a present-day reference case, not a universally scalable blueprint [18].

Failure mode: Events become branded tourism and sponsorship festivals with little durable support for designers or local communities.

Signals: Repeated local attendance, meaningful participation, maker compensation, merchant conversion, non-extractive partnerships, and local economic retention.

Scenario D — The digitally assisted trade infrastructure

AI supports forecasting, styling previsualization, scheduling, multilingual access, product data, virtual catalogues, and buyer follow-up. The physical event concentrates functions that depend on material inspection, negotiation, creative debate, and relationships. Digital infrastructure extends the event's usefulness between seasonal gatherings.

Failure mode: Disintermediation by a few platforms; loss of brand-owned customer and buyer data; undisclosed synthetic imagery; weak security and rights protection.

Signals: Measured workflow savings, lower return/rework rates, informed buyer satisfaction, protected data ownership, and attributable order conversion.

Why no single scenario 'wins'

Different formats optimize different objectives. For a couture house, rarity and personal access may be central. For a digitally native label, customer co-creation might already be its strongest cultural asset. A city's fashion council may be accountable for talent development and the local economy, not just brand revenue. The intellectually responsible forecast is **pluralism under economic pressure**, subject to observable change.

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11. What should change: a strategic agenda for 2027–2036

For fashion-week organizers

Specify the event's value proposition. Divide trade, public experience, media, talent, and institutional programming into explicit services rather than one undifferentiated schedule. Report qualified buyers and repeat participation separately from guest counts. Design lower-cost tracks for emerging labels and publish eligibility criteria and grant conditions.

Build post-show infrastructure. An organizer that helps a brand secure buyer follow-up, verify materials, coordinate samples, and access international commercial opportunities may deliver more durable value than an additional show. Explore opt-in data standards and privacy-respecting outcome reporting.

Make the event accountable. Adopt comparable carbon-boundary methodologies, production-waste disclosure, fair-work standards, accessibility provisions, and evidence-backed inclusion measures.

Measure experiences by meaningful participation and sustained relationships—not solely volume of social posts.

For established houses

Choose spectacle with discipline. A live show should express product and creative strategy, not substitute for it. Distinguish artistic installations from orderable collections. Experiment with craft visibility, client interaction, and material education without presenting intimacy as a marketing costume.

Use AI where it creates operational value. Previsualization, logistics, accessible content, and verified product data may be sensible starting points. Clearly distinguish synthetic presentation from actual product. Protect creators' consent and intellectual property.

For emerging brands

Do not buy legitimacy indiscriminately. Start by identifying whether the goal is a stockist, direct customer, creative positioning, recruiting, investor access, or community growth. Calculate what incremental evidence would justify the cost. A small appointment, a showroom, or a selective drop may fit the same business stage better than a full runway.

Protect future options. The expected payoff of a fashion event must be balanced against inventory, working capital, and the next product-development cycle. A great show is of limited strategic value if the business cannot finance a second commercial season.

For technology providers and platforms

Make creation and discovery legible. Show provenance where it matters, disclose synthetic imagery, support creator consent, and preserve buyer access to reliable specifications. Provide measurable cost-saving or conversion evidence rather than relying on novelty claims.

For educators, journalists, and researchers

Separate kinds of success. Write about cultural importance and commercial results as distinct outcomes. Build systematic datasets of designers who show, pause, leave, or return. Interview behind-the-scenes workers alongside founders and celebrity guests. Seek failures and counterexamples as actively as high-profile triumphs.

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12. An evidence-led monitoring agenda through 2036

A forecast should be capable of failing. FBB proposes checking the following indicators in **2028, 2031, and 2036**.

Proposition	Evidence that would strengthen it	Evidence that would weaken it
Physical events become more selective	Stable outcomes with fewer, purpose-built presentations	Loss of buyer access or meaningful cultural authority for brands that reduce showing
Human authorship becomes more economically salient	Controlled willingness-to-pay premiums, paid attendance for craft	No controlled premium once quality and price are held constant

Proposition	Evidence that would strengthen it	Evidence that would weaken it
	encounters, repeat purchases	
Public participation expands	Sustained local turnout, multiple-season retention, paid creative opportunities	Public programmes act mainly as one-off publicity
AI improves fashion-week economics	Audited workflow savings, lower rework, better buyer conversion	Added cost/complexity with little attributable return
Emerging designers gain more autonomy	Better survival, diversified channels, fewer forced-cost commitments	Increased dependence on large platforms and volatile visibility
Institutions become more accountable	Comparable reporting on spending, carbon, labor, inclusivity, and economic outcomes	Continued reliance on unqualified audience and EMV claims

Research agenda required to test these propositions

- **Interviews:** 12–20 semi-structured conversations spanning at least four designers, three retail/wholesale buyers, two fashion-week organizers, two production workers, two craftspeople, and creators/consumers. Sample purposively across business stage and geography; avoid presenting interviewees as statistically representative.
- **Brand case tracking:** Follow eight to twelve brands for at least two seasons, documenting show/no-show decisions, event budgets where consented, buyer appointments, orders, distribution, and delivery timing.
- **Consumer experiments:** Randomize equivalent garment images with truthful human-led, AI-assisted, and primarily AI-generated production descriptions. Separately vary physical participation, passive viewing, and interactive digital participation. Pre-register hypotheses and distinguish stated willingness to pay from incentive-compatible choices where feasible.
- **Historical archive:** Use the Fashion Institute of Technology Fashion Calendar Research Database to examine the evolution of event types and professional networks. The 1941–2014 dataset is available under CC BY 4.0; the post-2015 CFDA material carries **noncommercial research/educational reuse restrictions** that must be respected [34].
- **Economic counterfactuals:** Where possible, use within-brand season comparisons and matched brand studies; report differences in product availability, advertising, macroeconomics, and geographic distribution. Do not claim a causal return without a credible identification strategy.
- **Environmental reporting:** Develop consistent measurement boundaries for venues, freight, travel, power, material fabrication, digital systems, reuse, and waste.

13. Conclusions: a provisional verdict, not a fashionable prediction

The evidence supports rejecting two oversimplifications. The first is that a show must justify itself entirely through immediate sales. Fashion Weeks are also coordination systems, professional markets, and cultural institutions. The second is that their traditional prestige guarantees continued relevance. Their functions can be performed elsewhere, their costs can be disproportionate, and their governance can exclude valuable participants.

Our strongest finding is **functional differentiation**. The functions of Fashion Week are changing at different rates. Broadcasting images is comparatively easy to digitize. Physical garment verification,

professional trust, craft demonstration, the formation of certain relationships, and the symbolic value of being physically present are less straightforward. Some human meaning occurs online; some physical spectacles are emotionally empty. Good analysis starts from the actual experience, not the medium's label.

The human-value hypothesis is promising but remains open. Survey evidence points to continued interest in real-world experiences, and experimental evidence shows consumers may penalize some AI fashion designs when they infer a lack of effort and care. Neither establishes that generative AI is causing a long-term shift toward human-made luxury. That causal chain needs longitudinal and behavioral evidence.

Technology likewise presents neither a simple threat nor a complete answer. AI can improve the work of fashion institutions; it can also make creative imagery abundant and introduce disclosure, rights, and trust problems. The essential strategic question is **what to automate, what to verify, and what human encounter the institution is uniquely positioned to convene**.

FBB's provisional recommendation: Fashion Week should evolve from an occasion justified by inherited prestige into a set of carefully designed services—some commercial, some cultural, some deeply human—with credible evidence for each. Emerging brands should choose participation based on business-stage needs and affordable risk. Large houses should make their physical experiences substantively worth attending. Organizers should become more transparent, inclusive, and outcome-oriented.

This is not a prediction that Fashion Week disappears, nor a declaration that it must remain unchanged. It is a design problem facing the industry. Its future will be shaped by decisions about access, product truth, technology, compensation, institutional legitimacy, and how human expertise is valued.

The unresolved question that should guide our work through 2036 is therefore:

> When almost anyone can produce the *image* of fashion, what kind of fashion world will people still find worth making, seeing, and experiencing together?

Appendix A. Claims discipline and current evidence gaps

Established by direct historical/institutional record: 1943 Press Week's editorial orientation; FHCM's institutional history; digital London Fashion Week in 2020; SPHERE as a mixed physical/digital showroom; Copenhagen's requirements; published schedule and buyer-attendance figures.

Supported but limited by measurement choice or sponsor interest: modeled earned media value; event-planning intention surveys; vendor-reported game visits; platform-reported virtual attendance; organizer-sponsored claims about cultural reach.

Supported by experimental but bounded evidence: preferences concerning perceived AI design effort and creative information sources; response to AI transparency. Generalization across countries, time, luxury tiers, and actual purchases is not established.

Not established in public evidence reviewed: a universal event-level ROI; the exact commercial contribution of a famous runway show after controlling for all brand activity; a causal claim that AI has increased the desire for live fashion; a single representative 2026 fashion-show carbon footprint; proof that any 2036 scenario is inevitable.

Terminology: ‘earned media value’ means a provider’s modeled publicity proxy, not cash revenue; ‘buyer attendance’ is a count of accredited attendees, not purchase orders; ‘visits’ on games are sessions or visits, not unique people; ‘human-made’ is ambiguous unless authorship and production roles are defined; ‘immersive’ is a design description, not an outcome.

Media-value comparability (final-edition clarification). The 64% growth in Vogue’s October 13 SS27 report is relative to Fall/Winter 2026, while the 41% in Lefty’s October 23 report is year-on-year. Do not conflate season-on-season and year-on-year percentages, or assume identical coverage and precision from a rounded $1.2 billion figure and a reported $1.24 billion estimate [2, 36]. Neither measure is realized brand revenue.

Appendix B. Selected source ledger and bibliography

Source periods. References [1]–[34] form the core desk-research source ledger (research cut-off October 22, 2026). References [35]–[36] are the narrowly scoped factual verification/update incorporated into the final editorial edition on November 3, 2026. Organizer, platform, provider, and brand claims are identified as such and are not treated as independently audited economic results.

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Internal FBB methodological antecedents (not independent evidence for the claims above): *The FBB Creative-to-Commercial Test* (August 2026); *Is Creativity Actually Fixing Luxury?* (August 2026); *State of Fashion 2026 Master Audit* (August 2026); *When Creative Value Collides With Enterprise Risk* (September 2026); *The Dress Built Desire. The Fragrance Built Scale* (July 2026). This whitepaper stands independently and does not treat prior FBB inferences as verified external facts.

Appendix C. Field interview and experiment guide

Designers and founders

Ask for the commercial objective at the time the decision to show was made; total cash and in-kind costs; alternative strategies considered; buyer meetings secured; order conversion and canceled orders; post-

show production realities; and whether the decision would be repeated. Invite both successful and financially difficult cases.

Buyers and showroom managers

Ask how physical product review changes confidence in quality, fit, and delivery; how many meaningful new brands are discovered; what digital materials save time; and what outcomes are difficult to achieve remotely. Separate appointments from actual purchase orders.

Consumers and communities

Ask respondents to recall the last fashion gathering they attended and describe what made it memorable, how they participated, whether they formed a relationship or bought anything, and whether disclosure of AI use would affect their judgment. Use neutral wording; avoid asking simply whether they 'love human connection.'

Suggested controlled tests

Authorship test: identical visual garment stimulus, randomized truthful production-process description, then measure perceived skill, originality, trust, and incentive-compatible willingness to pay. **Participation test:** randomly assign a passive film, an interactive digital presentation, and a physically participatory encounter where feasible; measure brand memory, social connection, meaningful actions, and follow-up at 30 days. **Event economics study:** matched brands with and without shows, pre-specified commercial milestones, and documented confounding events.

Research ethics

Obtain informed consent; protect confidential revenues and contractual information; provide appropriate compensation; transparently distinguish user-generated testimony from audited figures; and avoid collecting identifiable customer data without need or permission. For AI stimuli, debrief participants where experimental disclosure involves deception, subject to ethics approval.

FASHION BUSINESS BLUEPRINT
Where we look beyond the fashion and understand the business systems behind it.