

# Who Gets to Wear the Future?



## Digital Inequality in the Age of Luxury Fashion Tech

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### 1. Introduction

The integration of augmented reality (AR), artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual fashion into the luxury sector is reshaping consumer engagement. While these technologies offer new forms of immersion and customisation, their adoption risks deepening digital exclusion among marginalised groups, particularly Gen Z consumers in lower-income, minority-majority boroughs of London. Digital innovation in luxury fashion must be evaluated not only for its creativity and utility but also for its inclusivity. Without critical reflection, such innovation may reproduce the elitism luxury was once criticised for shedding.

### 2. What Is Digital Inequality in Fashion?

Digital inequality encompasses disparities in device access, internet connectivity, digital literacy, and algorithmic visibility (Ragnedda, 2018). Within luxury fashion:

- AR/VR retail tools require advanced devices and high-speed connections.
- Luxury brand algorithms tend to reflect Eurocentric and heteronormative assumptions (Benjamin, 2019).
- Fashion avatars and AI stylists often underrepresent diverse body types and ethnicities (Noble, 2018).

“Technological innovation in fashion can reproduce the very elitism it claims to disrupt.” (Noble, 2018, p. 65)

### 4. Luxury Tech Innovations – Who’s Left Out?

These innovations, though progressive, are often inaccessible to those in digitally deprived communities.

### 3. Data Snapshot: Digital Exclusion in East London

- 38% of households in East London lack access to full-fibre broadband (Ofcom, 2023).
- 22% of 16–24-year-olds in Tower Hamlets and Newham do not have reliable digital access for study or online shopping (Trust for London, 2022).
- Ethnic minority youth face compounded exclusion in digital fashion platforms due to both socioeconomic and representational factors (Good Things Foundation, 2022).

#### Theoretical Frameworks

- Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989): Adoption relies on perceived usefulness and ease of use—both affected by inequality in access.
- Digital Capital Theory (Ragnedda, 2018): Digital access and competence are emerging forms of social capital that impact participation in consumer culture
- Cultural Capital and Fashion (Crane, 2012): Digital platforms become new spaces of distinction, reinforcing symbolic boundaries.
- Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989): Multiple marginalities—class, race, and digital skill—intersect in access to fashion tech.

Brand	Innovation	Exclusionary Risks
Gucci	AR try-ons via Snapchat	Requires app fluency and high-end smartphone
Balenciaga	Virtual runway, Fortnite skins	Gamification assumes gaming access and literacy
Burberry	Google AR, AI-powered chatbots	Interface may alienate low-literacy or multilingual users
Drest	Gamified luxury styling app	Limited access for low-income or low-spec users

### 5. Educational Reflections & Practice-Based Research

Teaching digital fashion in a diverse urban institution reveals first-hand inequalities:

- Students from low-income backgrounds often lack devices or fluency with platforms like CLO3D.
- Digital projects favour those with existing tech exposure, disadvantaging late adopters.
- Peer-led workshops, inclusive design briefs, and low-tech alternatives have been used to promote equity in classroom innovation.

#### References

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### 6. Toward a Fairer Digital Fashion Future

#### Recommendations:

- Inclusive co-design of fashion tech tools with underrepresented consumers.
  - Greater UX diversity in digital fashion platforms (language, body shape, cultural visuality).
  - Community partnerships between brands, education providers, and digital inclusion charities.
  - Accessible education that de-centres elite, Eurocentric narratives of luxury.
- As McKinsey (2023) notes, digital luxury engagement must now be matched with digital responsibility.**

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