Chapter # 15

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS A CATALYST FOR FASHION'S DIGITAL FUTURE
Insights from university-company collaboration

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ABSTRACT
Since the Industrial Revolution, six essential innovation waves have been widely acknowledged as having significantly transformed the world economy and society. Today, we are witnessing the emergence of the sixth wave, characterized by breakthroughs in artificial. In the fashion sector, AI has already emerged as a game-changer. It can enhance trend forecasts and design processes, optimize supply chain management, and boost personalized customer engagement. These innovations collectively lead to significant improvements in efficiency, profitability, and sustainability within the sector. The rapid convergence of fashion and technology has created a pressing need for individuals possessing strong digital skills. Fashion companies must rapidly adapt to this changing environment, while fashion education must simultaneously evolve to provide students with the essential competencies they need. This paper presents a case study of a collaborative workshop between a university and a company, designed to provide students with hands-on experience in advanced AI applications within the fashion sector. This effort enables students to gain a deep understanding of the industry's digital transformation while cultivating a passion for emerging technologies. The authors hope that the experiences presented in this paper will be a valuable resource for researchers and practitioners investigating the convergence of fashion, design, and technology.

Keywords: AI fashion, digital fashion, fashion design education, university-company collaboration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Innovation has consistently had a substantial impact on the global economy throughout contemporary history. Experts have attempted to categorize these cycles of invention using the hypothesis of the "Six Waves of Innovation." This concept originated in the early 20th century, with Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter establishing the intellectual groundwork in his seminal work, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (1942), wherein he posited that capitalist economies progress through cycles of creative destruction—intervals during which clusters of innovations disrupt existing frameworks and engender new economic paradigms.

As of today, six significant waves have been broadly recognized. The initial wave was driven by the mechanization of the textile industry and the adoption of hydraulic power in the late 18th century. During the mid-19th century, the second wave was driven by the emergence of steam power and the proliferation of railway networks. The third wave emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, coinciding with the expansion of electricity, steel manufacturing, and chemical industries. The fourth wave emerged in the mid-20th century, characterized by the mass production of automobiles and airplanes, as well as the extensive use of fossil fuels. The fifth wave, beginning in the late 20th century, marked a revolution in

information and communication technology, characterized by the emergence of computers, the internet, and digital media (Freeman & Louca, 2002). Currently, we are witnessing the emergence of the sixth wave of innovation, defined by the convergence of artificial intelligence (AI), sophisticated robots, the Internet of Things (IoT), and a significant societal transition towards sustainable energy solutions (Silva & Di Serio, 2016).

In the fashion industry, AI has already become a transformative force. It can improve trend predictions and design processes, optimize supply chain operations, and enhance tailored consumer interactions. These advances collectively result in substantial efficiency, profitability, and sustainability within the sector. AI is now considered more of a creative partner than a mere engineering tool. Designers emphasize that AI can animate and accelerate the creative process, generating ideas, patterns, and variations at a pace far faster than one could achieve by hand. Far from limiting creativity, AI can be considered an aid that helps foster creativity by providing designers with numerous options to experiment with in a short amount of time. This opens up an interesting way to view AI as an inspiration tool, enabling creative minds to take approximately days from conception to prototype, as opposed to weeks, and spend time digitally fine-tuning the very spirit and essence of their artworks.

Following such an analysis, the potential of AI extends beyond supporting various forms of creativity and remains a decisive factor in accelerating production throughout the entire fashion workflow. Partnered with 3D design technologies, it facilitates the precise visualization of garments, such as determining whether a Dresden pleat will drape properly across the shoulder before the fabric has even been cut or stitched. This simultaneously diminishes the need to create physical samples innumerable times, saving time and resources. Reducing waste and streamlining production cycles will enable brands to implement sustainable initiatives without compromising on quality or speed. For a significant portion of the industry, this fusion of AI and 3D design is remembered as a cost-saving measure and is inextricably linked with a forward-looking strategy to meet the global demand for eco-conscious innovation. Transitioning from the prevailing traditional production paradigm to a more streamlined model by embracing digital AI technology has become an urgent requirement and the next normal (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018; Gonzalo et al., 2020).

Perhaps the most significant transformation brought about by AI is the collaborative nature of internal operations within fashion organizations. It was formerly slow, sequential, and one-sided, as design was separate from merchandising and marketing. However, the use of AI has combined all three functions much earlier through shared data, simulations, and predictive insights. Thus, teams have a higher accuracy in predicting consumer needs and adapting the design way before production. Hence, the entire setup becomes highly responsive and agile to actual cultural and market shifts. At the end of the day, the view is that AI will not replace human talent, but rather augment it, making it smarter, quicker, and more cost-effective in the realization of creative ideas.

The rapid convergence of fashion and technology has created an urgent need for professionals possessing digital expertise and skills across all fields. A global survey by MOTIF, which gathered insights from 900 professionals across the value chain, reveals that 57 percent of respondents encounter difficulties in filling positions that require digital skills, particularly in digital creation (Alvanon, 2020). The discovery indicates that conventional skill sets are inadequate in this rapidly evolving landscape. It is essential to reconfigure the talent development pipeline and provide upskilling initiatives, particularly in digital competencies, to reconcile the disparity between business demands and existing educational offerings.

Nonetheless, integrating advanced AI technologies into fashion curricula encounters significant challenges, especially for traditional public universities. Unlike private schools, which exhibit superior adaptability and stronger connections with commercial partners, state universities often face cumbersome and protracted procedures for curriculum updates, implementing essential technology advancements more challenging. Establishing collaborative educational pathways between private enterprises and public universities may provide a viable and pragmatic solution to this issue (Ingaramo, 2022). This paper presents a case study of a joint workshop activity between Style3D and POLI.design, founded by Politecnico di Milano, examining how university-company partnerships might leverage AI technology to foster innovation in fashion design education. The authors hope that the insights and experiences detailed in this paper will serve as a helpful reference point for other researchers exploring digital fashion and design practices in relevant areas.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AI, CREATIVITY, AND FASHION DESIGN EDUCATION

The application of artificial intelligence, along with its potential in creative fields, has opened up new discussions regarding the relationship between human creativity and computer-based systems. The literature already highlights the potential for AI to serve as an ideation partner, thereby assisting creative professionals in tasks such as generating alternatives, enhancing visual representations, and facilitating rapid replays (Shneiderman, 2020). In the creative sector, generative AI has been viewed through the lens of co-creativity, where the human designer's intent and the algorithmic output are the two forces that together dictate the design directions (Boden, 2016). This kind of interpretation highlights that the role of AI is not limited to replacing human creativity but rather to augmenting it and also opening up paths of exploration that would be nearly impossible to achieve without human assistance.

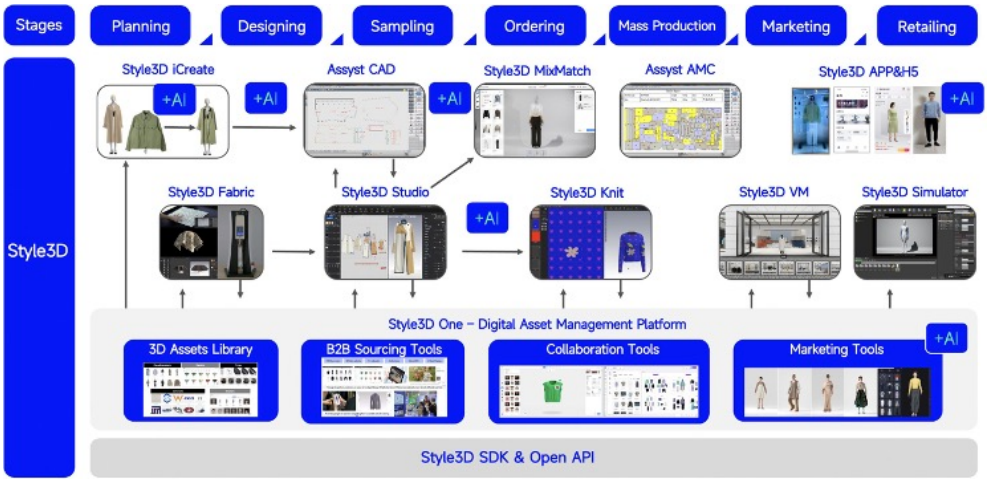
In the realm of design education, the introduction of AI has led instructors to rethink the teaching methods they use, which heavily rely on traditional, analogue processes and studio-based critiques. According to Kolb (1984), learning through projects and experiential learning frameworks remains the primary method in the design curriculum. However, the introduction of AI tools necessitates a reinterpretation of these methods, which should include digital literacy, prompt engineering, and critical evaluation of machine-generated outputs. Recent research in AI literacy emphasizes the importance of students acquiring not only the skills for using tools but also for questioning algorithmic biases, understanding model limitations, and expressing their creativity in the design process (Long & Magerko, 2020). The AI-ness in creative education raises the issue of a possible decline in distinct visual languages due to the overlapping of different styles, ideation consuming less human time, and concerns about an entire machine being the author of a piece of creative work, simply generating originals. The academic community has differing opinions regarding the fact that AI can, at times, accelerate the creative process. However, an insufficient pedagogical structure may result in superficial exploration of ideas, less critical adoption of algorithmically produced styles, or a shallower understanding of concepts (Holmes & Porayska-Pomsta, 2022). Hence, it is essential for instructors to create learning environments that allow students to experiment and reflect on their experiences, thereby making AI a creative catalyst rather than a replacement for the intentional design thinking process. Collaboration between universities and industries is an effective method for addressing such challenges. The parties involved in this collaboration not only have access to the most advanced tools, but also students get a chance to practice in real-world workflows.

Finally, the institutions receive support in making changes to their curricula that have been slow to adapt (Perkmann et al., 2013). The case study discussed in this chapter is an example of how AI tools can be effectively utilized in the fashion industry through joint experimentation.

3. STYLE3D DIGITALIZATION ECOSYSTEM

Style3D is a science-driven enterprise offering a comprehensive digital infrastructure tailored to the fashion industry. By seamlessly integrating advanced 3D modeling and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, Style3D facilitates the creation, visualization, and collaboration of digital assets, thereby driving the digital and innovative transformation of the global fashion industry (Figure 1). Its digitalization ecosystem spans three primary domains: 3D tools for fashion (Studio, Fabric, MixMatch, Cloud), AI tools for fashion (iWish, iCreate), and 3D tools for computer graphics (Atelier, Simulator).

Figure 1.
Style3D 3D+AI digitalization ecosystem. Source: Style3D.



Their AI tools, Style3D iWish and Style3D iCreate, exemplify the application of AI in accelerating and enhancing fashion design processes. Style3D iWish enhances creative efficiency by generating lifelike virtual models with diverse age ranges and skin tones, enabling AI-powered scene swapping for seamless integration into various contexts and allowing for detailed garment refinements to achieve photorealistic output. Complementing this, Style3D iCreate leverages deep learning to expedite the creation and modification of apparel, accessories, and design concepts. It lets designers quickly visualize garment combinations on digital models, generates high-quality product images from text, sketches, or references, and precisely modifies product components, including color harmonization and graphic detailing.

According to Eric Liu, founder and CEO of Style3D, the traditional fashion supply chain—a mechanism long dominated by a rigid, linear, step-by-step progression—is undergoing a profound transformation. As advanced digital tools come into place, such as those offered through Style3D for digital product creation, the industry is slowly drifting

away from siloed working and towards a much more dynamic, interconnected web that calls for more agility and collaboration (Isatou, 2023). At the 2024 China Fashion Forum, organized by the China National Garment Association, Liu proposed AI+3D as a triggering new platform to rethink fashion's future. He believed that the AI would further streamline production models, as well as craft custom AI solutions for enterprises to reinforce a brand's creative DNA and establish its identity in the market (Fashiontopnet, 2024). AI-enhanced 3D technology is a powerful combination that can significantly speed up design cycles, optimize production efficiency, and bring sustainable practices into the mainstream across the entire industry. Through Style3D's ecosystem, designers can rapidly generate, iterate, and visualize their concepts while cohesively collaborating in a virtual environment.

In the following sections, the authors focus on the functionalities and applications of the Style3D iCreate software. The illustration is framed through a case study of a collaborative workshop designed to provide students with hands-on experience in advanced AI applications. By engaging directly with such a tool, students gain practical insights into the digital transformation of the fashion industry while fostering a deeper interest in emerging technologies.

4. CASE STUDY: AN IMMERSIVE AI EXPERIENCE

The one-day immersive AI experience workshop in March 2025 is a collaborative activity between Style3D and POLI.design, founded by Politecnico di Milano. This workshop primarily introduced students to the problems, advancements, and trends currently shaping the fashion industry, as well as how Style3D's innovative AI technologies can enhance the capabilities of designers and marketers in multiple ways. Company representatives presented a comprehensive overview of two newly developed software solutions: Style3D iWish and Style3D iCreate (Figure 2, left).

The workshop involved 57 master-level students, who were permitted to investigate and evaluate the various functions of Style3D iCreate beforehand (Figure 2, right). Despite these tools being in development, interaction with cutting-edge technologies in the industry greatly benefits students. The rapid advancement of technological innovation underscores the need for collaboration between corporations and academic institutions. These contacts and experiences enable students to stay aware of evolving market demands, equipping them with the attitudes crucial for their future careers. The following section outlines students' immersive experience with Style3D iCreate, providing a comprehensive overview of its capabilities and applications.

Figure 2.
Style3D Representatives presented the software, students tried the functions beforehand.

Style3D iCreate is an inspiration accelerator for designers that utilizes the sophisticated features of Artificial Intelligence Generated Content (AIGC). This program streamlines the development and refinement of design concepts, enabling designers to operate more efficiently (Dong, 2024). The Style3D iCreate functionalities are categorized into two modules: StyleNext (previously called AI Editor) and InnoStyle (previously called AI Creator); each module is specifically designed to address different stages of the design process (Table 1).

Table 1.
Two modules of Style3D iCreate: StyleNext and InnoStyle.

StyleNext	Designers can fine-tune details such as garment features, proportions, ensuring the result aligns with their vision. This iterative editing process enables users to achieve further customization and refinement, facilitates virtual try-ons with suitable virtual models and renders high-quality visual outputs of the pre-defined designs.
InnoStyle	Enables designers to generate initial design concepts rapidly. By inputting textual descriptions as prompts, uploading an image or a design sketch, users can direct the AI to create corresponding designs and partially modefy the designs. This feature simplifies the ideation process, offering designers various options from which to start.

During the workshop, the company experts provided students with hands-on guidance to explore the functionalities of Style3D iCreate. This was achieved through four workflows, each designed to showcase a different entry point for initiating the design process.

- Workflow 1 Starts with a sketch

Upload a sketch and ask InnoStyle to generate garments accordingly, then partially replace the detail and color.

- Workflow 2 Starts with a textual prompt

Type a precise textual description as a prompt and ask InnoStyle to generate garments accordingly, then generate a pattern. Finally, back to StyleNext to fabricate the pattern to style.

- Workflow 3 Starts with images

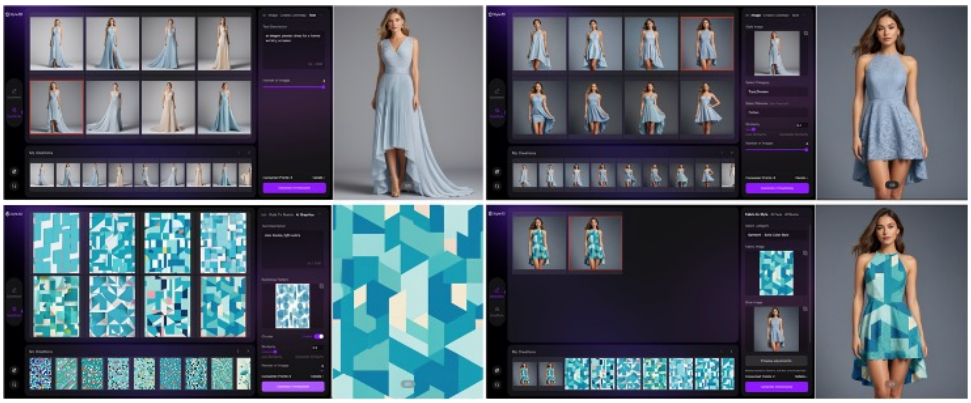
Upload two garment images and ask InnoStyle to combine and generate a new garment accordingly, then partially replace the details and color.

- Workflow 4 Free creation

After completing the previous three workflows, students can freely create their own workflow for their designs.

The following illustrates one participant's trial (Workflow 4) during the workshop as an example of how Style3D iCreate AI-assisted design tools were utilized. The participant began by using InnoStyle, where she entered a textual prompt: "an elegant, pleated dress for a formal working occasion." In response, the AI generated a series of proposals aligned with the prompt. From these, the participant selected a preferred option (Figure 3, top left). To further explore stylistic variety, the participant reinserted the initially selected image into InnoStyle, prompting the AI to generate alternative dress designs with low similarity to the original. This iterative process—repeating the image-to-image prompt with modified criteria of similarity—was carried out several times. Eventually, one satisfactory dress was chosen (Figure 3, top right). Thereafter, the participant employed the AI Graphics function in InnoStyle. By uploading a reference pattern and providing a new textual prompt - "light color blocks" - the AI generated a series of custom textile patterns to be chosen from (Figure 3, bottom left). Finally, using the Fabric to Style feature in StyleNext, the participant merged the selected dress silhouette with the chosen generated pattern, creating a final garment design (Figure 3, bottom right). The entire workflow took the participant several dozen minutes to complete. Naturally, these steps can be repeatedly integrated and iterated in practical use to achieve a fully satisfying design outcome.

Figure 3.
One example of the workshop outcomes.



The analysis of the workshop revealed several recurring patterns in students' interactions with AI-assisted design tools. The first benefit was that the use of AI significantly accelerated the idea generation process, allowing students to create numerous variations of the design in a short time and significantly reduce their initial creative blocks. Monitoring students showed that text-to-image and image-to-image functions were mainly used by students for rapid iterations. The second point was that the use of AI technology lowered the technical barriers, especially for learners who had little talent in drawing or 3D modeling. It made it easier for these students to visualize and, at the same time, more daring in design, to convey their ideas visually. At the same time, a dilemma arose as to whether to view the author as a computer or a human. Many of the participants asked how much of the AI-made products was their own artistic intent, and were worried that they might be turning off their own creative idea if they let AI make up their minds. Last but not least, the workshop showed the benefits of cooperation between the university and the industry: the students were delighted that they were able to use the latest tools and get direct tuition from the manufacturers' experts, thereby reinforcing the importance of the connection between university education and professional workflows in the real world.

The workshop results indicate that there are both opportunities and challenges in the application of AI in fashion design education. Similar to the existing literature about human-AI co-creativity, the workshop revealed that AI not only helps students to find more design options but also removes some of the barriers to the process of quality experimentation. Nevertheless, students may find it challenging to maintain the flow of their creativity and develop deeper conceptual reasoning without the use of prearranged pedagogical models. The workshop's illustration of automation versus authorship reflects broader discussions about the role of AI in creative fields. The plus side of AI is its ability to create visuals quickly. However, students still need to communicate their design intent, reason about the aesthetics of the work, and participate in the critique process to avoid producing trivial results. As a result, educators become increasingly important in helping students develop the kind of use of AI that is both unintentional and critical. Moreover, the workshop emphasizes the importance of university-industry partnerships in equipping students with the latest digital skills through the constant exchange of information. Gaining access to the likes of Style3D iCreate not only enables students to become technologically literate but also requires partnerships between academic and professional fields, accompanied by flexible curricula and proper assessment frameworks, to make the sharing of information truly effective.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Upon trying the software, students were impressed by the efficiency and ease facilitated by today's AI technologies. Company representatives indicate that this software is now undergoing modification; subsequent versions of Style3D software will incorporate an enhanced capability to instantly transform imported photographs into 2D patterns, which may thereafter be effortlessly modified in 3D within the platform. These improvements optimize the design process and augment designers' efficiency.

Nevertheless, this convenience introduces new obstacles. A primary concern is reconciling the use of AI-generated outputs with preserving the designer's creative contributions and conceptual profundity. Although technologies such as Style3D iCreate possess significant potential to transform design workflows, their incorporation into professional and educational settings must be cautiously undertaken. Deliberate tactics are necessary to guarantee that these tools augment creativity rather than serve as substitutes, preserving the distinctive personal and creative vision that characterizes significant design work.

The educational structure must adapt to confront these simultaneous opportunities and difficulties, as this is an inevitable future trend. Students require systematic direction to integrate AI tools while preserving their creative potential. This entails promoting critical thinking, iterative design methodologies, and reflective assessments that guarantee AI-generated ideas only augment their original thoughts. Activities such as brainstorming, concept research, mood board development, and narrative storytelling, carefully overseen by teachers, can guarantee that students possess a distinct and innovative vision for their projects, preventing the AI tool from overshadowing the human design process.

In practice and observations, the authors believe that the following directions are worth exploring for future works:

- Technological Adaptation: Since students have different levels and degrees of familiarity with new digital tools, this can lead to steep learning curves. It is, therefore, essential to evaluate participants' knowledge before the start of the course in order to balance the class. The introduction of digital technologies can be facilitated by simplified workflows, offering practical instruction, and implementing flexible foundational training programs. Peer-assisted learning and frequent feedback sessions can also help students who are having trouble with unfamiliar digital tools.
- Curriculum Inflexibilities: Incorporating critical digital skills into fashion education is sometimes delayed by traditional educational frameworks' inability to adjust quickly to technological changes. To overcome this, universities and companies need to work together to develop flexible programs that adapt to changing industry needs. Structured internship programs, joint research initiatives, and industry-sponsored competitions can also be helpful for long-term advancement.
- Balance between Creativity and Automation: As AI is used increasingly in fashion design and business, there are concerns that this could lead to an over-reliance on automation, potentially affecting originality. Frameworks for education should highlight how AI may enhance human creativity rather than take its place. This can be accomplished by emphasizing concept development and narrative while using AI tools in the creative process. Students can preserve their artistic intent and cultivate a strong creative vision by participating in design projects that blend manual and AI-driven outputs.

- Goal Alignment: It can be challenging to balance the short-term academic achievements with the long-term strategic objectives of industrial relationships. Clear communication, shared goal-setting, and regular check-ins are essential to ensure a productive partnership. Better alignment and the achievement of significant results by both parties are made possible by establishing standard benchmarks and flexibility for in-progress modifications. Stronger, longer-lasting collaborations can also be developed through long-term planning that integrates industry feedback into curriculum changes.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the workshop was short in duration, limiting opportunities for longitudinal observation of learning outcomes. Second, data collection was exploratory, derived mainly from informal feedback and observations rather than formal interviews or surveys. Third, participants represented a relatively homogeneous group of design students, which may restrict generalizability. Finally, the AI tools used were still under development, which potentially affected their usability and influenced students' responses.

In the following year, the insights and experiences gained from this work will serve as the basis for improving current workshop formats and spawning new collaborative projects involving universities and industry partners. This iterative, practice-driven model keeps the educational structure adaptable to the fast technological transformations in the fashion landscape. By continuously engaging in renewed workshop development and stronger academia-company collaboration, the experimental aim is to provide students with advanced digital knowledge, creative problem-solving skills, and hands-on work experience, thereby enabling them to compete in the ever-changing and dynamic fashion world. In addition to the paper's educational impact, the authors also envision it as a contribution to the ongoing discourse concerning the interface between fashion, design, and technology. The authors hope that the ideas and experiences presented in this paper will be a valuable resource for researchers and practitioners investigating the convergence of fashion, design, and technology.

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