

Inside the UK's rise as the centre of global fashion tech innovation

From AI to virtual reality, the fashion industry and experience is transforming. Head of Innovation at London College of Fashion Matthew Drinkwater explains how the UK has become a trailblazer for innovation in this dynamic space.

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Ever since Thomas Burberry patented his durable, water-resistant trench coat in the mid 1800s, fashion innovation has found a natural home in the UK.

The UK has always pushed the boundaries of fashion, responsible for the innovative minds of Alexander McQueen, Paul Smith, Vivienne Westwood, and Stella McCartney. And more recently, a new generation of fashion tech startups has ridden the UK's tech wave, finding new ways to apply digital technologies to transform fashion and retail. Virtual reality and AI are just as commonplace as stitches and threads.

“The UK has always been blessed with a sense of creativity and experimentation, much more than many other places that are often bound by tradition,” explains Matthew Drinkwater, Head of Innovation Agency at London College of Fashion (LCF). His institute sits at the cutting edge of fashion technology, experimenting with emerging technologies and understanding how they may come to disrupt a trillion dollar global industry.

The global impact of fashion tech

The intersection of fashion and technology is, unsurprisingly, incredibly trend-driven. In both, there are huge opportunities in being able to preempt what will be popular in the future.

In his job at London College of Fashion, Matthew sees his work as “an indicator of where things are going”. “We’re looking at technology that is 3 to 5 years away from commercialisation. We have a neutral view on tech: we’re not trying to sell something in particular, but rather showing what you can and can't do.”

He defines three key areas where technology has the potential to disrupt existing practices in the industry.

Firstly, in how we design. Efficiency is one thing—we’re shifting from pen and paper to digital platforms and 3D tools. AI has the potential to transform this further, as text prompts can generate entire 3D models.

This also has strong links to sustainability. The prototyping phase in fashion is notoriously wasteful, an element of the design process that is ripe for disruption. Fully digital prototypes can potentially reduce much of the waste in the process. One project to emerge from the Fashion Innovation Agency at LCF is a *real-time cloth simulation* built in game engine Unreal—a potential breakthrough that could revolutionise virtual production and fitting.

The creation process is another key area Matthew identifies.

“We can change the nature of business models through tech. If we can create products digitally before you physically produce them, you can begin retailing before you need to start manufacturing—bringing production much closer to the point of retail,” Matthew says. Not just this,

but the development of new materials or even recycled ones creates opportunities for fashion to be far more sustainable.

Finally, technology is changing how we communicate. Storytelling, for Matthew, is key to fashion: “We’re building an emotional connection to products—that if you see something, you fall in love with it.”

Technologies that enable new, immersive environments are finding fertile ground in the UK. The maturity of the UK film industry, particularly with regards to visual effects, as well as the gaming industry has led to bold collaborations with fashion brands looking to engage consumers in immersive ways.

London Fashion Week has often been a showcase for these immersive experiences. 2018 saw Lucasfilm collaborate with designer Steven Tai to create a fully immersive AR experience, transforming Durbar Court within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office into Downtown Macau. Or last year, the Moncler Genius show packed 100,000 people into Kensington Olympia for a light-sound-live performance spectacular to close out the week.

“London’s ecosystem of technology is influencing the culture and creativity of other sectors,” he says.

The trailblazers for UK fashion tech

Of the established fashion houses, Burberry retains its reputation as an innovator and experimenter around fashion tech. The brand pioneered the use of *gaming technology in the clothing design process*, using a software that enables you to place a 2D print onto a 3D design template. In 2021, to launch their new signature Olympia bag, they hosted a series of *VR pop-up experiences with Harrods*. They have been a leader in metaverse experiences, partnering with platforms like Roblox and

Minecraft to create virtual experiences and NFTs for their customers.

Fashion designer Craig Green has more recently gained recognition as one of the great innovators in British fashion, pioneering new techniques for clothing production that has gained him widespread praise and an MBE in 2022.

Newer consumer brands are demonstrating new frontiers for popular fashion and clothing. *Gymshark* and *Castore* have become two of the fastest growing sportswear & athleisurewear brands, applying innovative manufacturing techniques to create affordable performance-level clothing. Pangaia, meanwhile, has become a flagbearer for sustainable, recyclable clothing through the use of smart technology.

UK fashion tech isn't just about the clothing manufacturers. There's a growing number of tech platforms that are transforming how we shop, particularly around sustainability. Circular fashion platforms are increasingly popular—particularly resale, second hand, and rental. Depop has been the leader in the resale space, while platforms like Hurr and Hirestreet have helped the rental market thrive. The latter even launched their own white-label offering, *Zoa Rental*, to help brands launch their own-branded rental offerings.

The future of UK fashion

As technology opens new doors and possibilities for fashion, what does this mean for the UK fashion over the next decade?

Digital experiences are certainly growing, but Matthew expects omnichannel to remain a primary focus. Physical experiences remain just as important for bringing people together around fashion. He points to venues like the Outernet, a new entertainment district in central London with the world's largest LED screen deployment.

The pace of change is accelerating, too, with the proliferation of AI. Where his role was once looking at a three-to-five year horizon, this has become much more challenging. “With AI, three to five weeks feels like a stretch,” Matthew says.

While technologies we use to design, produce, and communicate fashion will rapidly change, Matthew strongly believes the fundamentals will remain the same. “There is a lot to be said about the traditional ways of working—those will never go away and will always be appreciated. But there will always be new ways that we can create and communicate. We’re not looking to replace, we’re looking to enhance.”

The UK’s relationship with technology, combined with its rich heritage of luxury fashion, makes it the perfect place for fashion innovators. “I’ve seen lots of other ways of working, and what we have here is really quite different.”

The Commercial Department of the British Embassy in Paris provides support to French companies wishing to set up in the UK. Click [here](#) to find out more.