

Rise of the machines

In a world where every purchase counts, there is no question that technology is beginning to compete in the fashion stakes – particularly among male consumers. As well as Prada and Armani phones, there are Lamborghini laptops and Chanel bikes. To go with a Savile Row suit or Hermès tie, you can now buy minimalist Zai skis for €3,700 or a high-tech, high-aesthetic bike by Biomega – about €6,389 for a model created by designer Marc Newson.

But it is in audio-visual home entertainment products that the concept of luxury technology is most advanced. “Design can be an important component of high-end electronics – think Apple and Bang & Olufsen. Consumers are prepared to pay a premium for this,” says Luca Solca, luxury products analyst at Bernstein Research.

Moving further up the scale, technology group Meridian manufactures high-end audio-visual equipment that retails for up to £150,000. “This kind of equipment used to be for hi-fi experts in their attics or garages but now it’s very much entering the mainstream,” says the company’s Bob Stuart. “The appeal is less about specialist knowledge and more about who has this kind of money to spend and who appreciates this kind of quality.”

Those words could just as easily have been uttered by any number of high-fashion brands that have long touted the importance of quality.



Above: A laptop made by Lamborghini, the luxury carmaker. Technology is beginning to compete in the high fashion stakes

Indeed, the Meridian products are, in many ways, as luxurious as any limited edition ostrich handbag or bespoke suit, their high price tag due to labour-intensive, highly-skilled workmanship, rather than any ostentatious label.

“Having one of these systems is very aspirational – it goes alongside having a Bentley in the driveway and an Armani suit in the wardrobe,” says Fraser Stride, marketing director of home entertainment designer Finite Solutions. Its customers are less likely to be techno anoraks with no fashion sense than wealthy consumers who want the best in both apparel and technology.

“Fashion items make statements about the wearer, but so do gadgets and accessories,” says John Hall, managing director of brand strategy agency Curious. “So in exactly the same way as the watch you wear often says far more about you than your clothing, so the gadgets you possess will increasingly fulfil the same role.”

Likewise, customisation is also important in the technology sector. “There is a cachet amongst luxury customers when it comes to owning a piece of technology that most people have never seen before,” says Will Brocklebank, of Face to Face Digital, which advises on and installs high-end technology.

“The real opportunity may well be with the new audience of people who in the past have not been so fashion conscious,” says Richard Hill, planning director at advertising agency Touch DDB. “The rise of the geek is well documented, and his technological fashion accessories are likely to be a big part of his uniform.”