

ATHLEISURE: A NEW CATEGORY EMERGES

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Abstract

Over the last couple of years, a new trend that has taken the apparel and accessory market by storm is - Athleisure. A fusion of two ends of the spectrum, athletics and leisure, the trend successfully balances form with functionality and comfort with 'chik'. The Athleisure market worth \$97 billion worldwide comprises of wide array of players ranging from Lululemon, Yogasmoga to traditional sportswear giants Nike, Puma & Adidas as well as luxury marketers like Louis Vuitton, H&M, Gap & Dior. Changing lifestyles across the globe that stress on looking good at the same time being comfortable have fueled the trend worldwide, at the same time cultural shifts in workplace dressing brought about by new companies particularly the startups also made sneakers and sweat pants the ideal office wear. The trend is so ubiquitous that the word 'Athleisure' has been included in the year 2016's update of the Merriam – Webster dictionary. According to New York Times, Athleisure will be defined as 'casual clothing designed to be worn both for exercising and general use". This case attempts to study the emergence and growth of 'Athleisure' as a category as well as the strategies of various players to ride this trend.

Keywords: Apparel & Accessory and Athletic and Leisure, Athleisure.

Introduction

We are surrounded by fascinating fusions and technological advancements. Whether its health or lifestyle – technology has intermingled into the various elements of our lives resulting in the emergence of a new category “Athleisure”. With roots in two polar opposites, athletics and leisure this new trend has taken the world by storm. It was the athletic track pant that actually propelled the fad, as people began wearing the comfortable fabric to movies, spas and even to work. So much so that the yoga pants have become the ‘new jeans’. With fitness becoming a way of life, fitness gear that was previously limited to gyms has now made inroads into other settings. The growing preference for clothes that provide a feel of luxury and at the same time have performance attributes that support an active lifestyle has further fueled the growth of the athleisure category. The high tech moisture – absorbing performance fabrics allow the wearer to multi task without the need for

switching outfits to suit an occasion. Moreover, relatability of the athleisure concept has ensured its acceptability by a larger segment of society and hence creating its international appeal. The trend makes great sense monetarily for marketers as more and more people with no inclination towards sports are also buying athleisure gear. This all-encompassing trendy, transitional active wear clothing for non-active users as well includes athletic inspired leisure wear – leggings, sweatshirts, jerseys and jackets made of wrinkle free, breathable and innovative fabrics, that have given workout gear a stylish twist. In a Survey conducted by digital agency Deep Focus’ Cassandra Report (2015) on health and wellness in the US with a sample size of 1700, over one third of millennial’s admitted to reducing their expenditure so that they could spend more on health related purchases. Around 46% of women in the age group 19-34 years revealed that they have become more interested in athleisure wear in last few years¹. Across the globe the athleisure trend has been

adopted by millennials as well as Gen Z providing them clothing that is functional and at the same time apt for street wear.

Major Players

As society is getting more fitness conscious, the athleisure trend has provided consumers with a perfect solution to their dressing up woes. The relatability of the trend allows its acceptance with a wider section of society across the globe. Another trend that has fuelled the growth of this category has been the wide acceptance of yoga across the globe. Over 200 million people around the world practice yoga, going by these estimates the market for yoga apparel is the US alone is more than \$26 billion (2016), while the world market for yoga is about \$60 billion². It is no wonder that a number of companies both old and new are attempting to mint this opportunity. Vancouver based Lulu Lemon is the market leader in the leisure cum sportswear category followed by PrAna,

Yoga Shmoga, GAP Athleta, Nike, Reebok etc.

Lululemon: Vancouver (Canada) based Lululemon has been the first mover in athleisure category. Founded in 1998 by Dennis J. “Chip” Wilson, it reported overall sales of \$453 million in 2015 up 16% from the previous year. Unlike its counterparts Lululemon has attempted to change the way pants are sold, rather than traditional sizing it retails pants in categories like ‘hugged’, ‘relaxed’, ‘tight’ and ‘held’. Each style serves a specific purpose in the consumer’s life from fitness to casual wear 3. Nike: Among the traditional sportswear manufactures it is Nike that is leading the charge to gain maximum traction from the ‘athleisure’ trend. It is locked in heated battle with Lululemon and Under Armour in this fashion forward category that can be worn both to the office and gym with equal ease. Sales in apparel, footwear and accessories have seen year on year increase largely due to the active wear segment. Women in particular have taken to fashionable active wear with great enthusiasm. This has been one of the important reasons fuelling Nike’s continued expansion of athleisure offerings, the company’s stated goal is to increase sales to women and it hopes to reach \$7 billion in women’s apparel sales by 2017, a 40% increase from current levels. Nike paid attention to the growing trend for many years developing successful products like Flyknit sneaker, thermosphere max that comes with a men’s hoodie, men’s pant and women’s training vest 4. Nike also created a digital marketing campaign “#BetterForIt” that featured everyday women as opposed to models or professional athletes. Its online community comprising of 70 million women has given the company a sizeable audience to pitch its athleisure products. Nike conducts round table discussions with athletes to gain better understanding of their requirements and much like ordinary people athletes too desire apparel that mix form with functionality. Boxer Marlen Esparza’s told the Nike design team ‘If I look good, I feel good, and when I feel good, I fight good.’ For now, the company is

poised to take full advantage of the trend 5. Yogasmoga: Yogasmoga started operation in the year 2013 in USA, selling yoga gear online. The company has expanded to include 12 brick and mortar stores and plans to increase number. Yogasmoga’s shirts and pants are made from high end fabric called Aurum which is a blend of Lycra and Supplex. The company has its manufacturing facility in United States which allows it to respond to changing trends in real time. The company has also developed a unique Carbon 6 black dye for pants to improve quality of its products. The company claims it is committed to social causes, it has set up a non-profit organization that finances women’s health, education and microfinance projects in India.7

The wide success of the ‘athleisure’ trend has also attracted luxury brands like Dior, Louis Vuitton, Givenchy and Alexander McQueen. These luxe brands have given the gym staple a more designer look mixing fabrics merging patterns and playing with texture. Retailing at \$1,150 and \$550 respectively, brands like Brunello Cucinelli and Donna Karan have even launched designer cashmere leggings. Dior launched beaded jumpsuits and dresses with slip on Velcro sneakers bejeweled with embroidery and colorful rubber soles. Chanel’s Karl Lagerfeld introduced chiffon wrapped couture sneakers, with athletic soles and embroidered with lace, pearl and tweed, all embodying a sense of comfort and freedom a sign of these times and the women that live in it. 8

Taking care of Athleisure gear

Experts believe that athleisure will be one of the fastest growing segments by 2020, many marketers now believe that more than a trend it is a cultural and lifestyle shift reflected by obsession for healthier lifestyles and well-being. Ariel (detergent from P&G) along with Giles Deacon, renowned designer and fabric care fashion consultant with P&G explored the athleisure trend and the fabrics associated with it. A global survey commissioned by the company

for Ariel & Downy to explore popularity of the athleisure trend revealed the following:

- a) Nearly 71% consumers considered active inspired clothes as part of their ‘normal’ everyday clothes.
- b) Over 27% said that leggings were their most favored clothing for daily wear.
- c) Many wear active inspired gear to run errands (56%), while travelling (47%), shopping (41%) and even while going out for dinner (16%).

Trends like athleisure have introduced fabrics like knitted, polyester, lycra etc to the laundry load. P&G saw considerable opportunity for its fabric care brands Ariel and Downy with the emergence of this category. The company launched Ariel advanced clean formulation to provide clothing care for natural and synthetic fiber mixes in athleisure wear.9

Levis- Feeling the Heat

One of the brands that has suffered the most with the advent of the athleisure category is Levi’s. The brand that is practically synonymous with jeans has faced stiff competition from numerous avenues the latest salvo coming from athleisure. This is evidenced by rise in the number of people who now are comfortable wearing leggings or yoga pants anywhere. Compared to denims, leggings are cheaper more versatile and comfortable to wear. Lower prices have also encouraged purchase of leggings, while a jeans costs at least \$40 or more, a pair of leggings may cost as little as \$10. While cheap leggings will always fit, cheap denim will not fit as well. Levi’s reported a 2 per cent drop in sales globally in 2014, the company also declared it would cut 800 jobs. 10 Women are increasingly preferring more elastic jeans, Levi’s attempted to gain back some lost ground in 2015 with a host of new launches, first was Lot 700, a revamped line of jeans with new styles using a new fabric with up to 90% stretch this was followed by the launch of Commuter brand positioned for comfort, mobility and durability. 11

However both these launches failed to provide relief to the company.

Athleisure and India

Wearing sportswear as casual wear went mainstream in Bollywood in the late 1990s, with leading actors like Shah Rukh Khan and Karishma Kapoor sporting Polo Sport hugging shirts and tank tops. In the recent years' Indian designers like Anand Bhushan have used neoprene and scuba fabrics to create new silhouettes which have made sportswear covetable as casual clothing. Amazon India Fashion Week for Spring/Summer 2016, saw Anamika Khanna showcasing an ethnic take on athleisure, her collection comprising of cotton, silk and chiffon fabrics were inspired by sportswear and also included the three stripes from Adidas, reinterpreted across dupattas and pyjama pants. 12 In India, brands such as Proyog, Bhusattya, Moral Fibre, Forever Yoga, Do U Speak Green and Urban Yoga have lined up to offer both the domestic and international market organic breathable yoga wear that merges comfort with fashion. Fuelling this trend in India are celebrities like Ranveer Singh, Deepika Padukone, Anushka Sharma, Kangna Ranaut, Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor Khan. Proyog: India based yoga startup Yogawear Pvt. Ltd that owns the brand Proyog was incorporated in 2013. The Proyog brand was launched officially on June 21, 2015 its birth coinciding with World Yoga Day. It counts amongst its founders Malika Baruah former head of design, Levi's Strauss, Priyanktha Iyengar, Sanjay Nayak former India president McCann Erickson Worldwide and serial entrepreneur Dave Banerjee. According to the founders, over 90% of the exiting yoga wear market comprises of polyester and nylon products which are not conducive for practicing yoga. The startup spent two years conducting extensive research for developing the ideal fabrics and styles of their yoga wear line. They consulted yoga teachers, textile engineers as well as yoga practitioners from 11 nationalities. Proyog claims to be the only company in the world that uses core – spun

technology that wraps the lycra yarn with organic cotton prior to knitting, ensuring that lycra doesn't come close to the skin.¹³ Currently Proyog carries only women's line comprising of dhoti style shorts and pants, tank tops, capris, tunics and wraps. Since the yoga market in India is not that specialized and is a combination of both leisure wear and sportswear the company is expecting 90% of its revenue from outside India, with US and Canada being the primary markets. The brand intends to retail through e-commerce platforms both in domestic and international markets, and high end chains like Neiman Marcus, Saks 5th Avenue and Nordstorm in US. The company operates in the price range of Rs.1900 – 3900 and is expecting to reach revenue of Rs.300 crores by 2018.¹⁴ Other Indian yoga wear manufacturers have also ventured into this space with unique offerings. Mumbai based Fusion Clothing's flagship brand Do U Speak Green is made using fibers of bamboo and organic cotton, Ahmedabad based Bhusattva manufactures yoga pants and tops using fibers of bamboo, banana, milk and soybean protein.

Conclusion

Compared to other numerous trends that have come and gone, athleisure is more about endurance and permanence, as it centers on the body and accordingly requires the user to make better decisions – about time and money. It encourages healthy habits in eating, exercising, adequate sleeping. Also, athleisure is aspirational, it presents the consumer with a version of themselves that they would aspire to be. How long the trend or 'cultural shift' is able to sustain itself or what more innovations it brings forth is yet to be seen but for now its ubiquitousness has earned it a place in the Merriam - Webster dictionary where it has been defined as "casual clothing designed to be worn both for exercising and general use".¹⁵

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