

As part of a wide range of discussions and seminars taking place on the show floor at Intertextile Shanghai's Functional Lab in the autumn of 2017, WSA editor, Stephen Tierney, led a debate on athleisure. Guest speakers were Pierluigi Berardi, vice-president, global marketing and research and development, at specialist nylon 6.6 developer Nilit, and Chris Chiang, overseas business director at Taiwanese polyester yarn producer Singtex.

Can the appetite for athleisure last?

by Stephen Tierney

The first mention of the term athleisure on WSA's news website, sportstextiles.com, came earlier than you may have imagined. It didn't come into wide use until 2015, but our first reference to it came as long ago as September 2006*. A research firm called Leisure Trends Group said then that athletic shoes had become as common in US wardrobes as denim jeans and that athleisure shoes were starting to encroach on sales of street shoes. How prophetic. At a trends presentation in Milan in 2015, forecasting agency WGSN said: "Athleisure is now a mainstream part of lifestyle fashion. This gives sports and outdoor brands scope for using fun colours and bold shapes in their collections." And returning to shoes, by early 2017, footwear industry analyst Peter Mangione was quoting NPD Group as saying that it's wrong to refer to athleisure as a mere trend. Instead, the research group insists, athleisure represents "a fundamental shift in US lifestyles", with the implication that there will be no turning back.

Impact on suppliers

During a debate on this subject at Intertextile Shanghai's Functional Lab event last October, Pierluigi Berardi of Nilit and Chris Chiang of Singtex made it clear that growth in demand

Shirt, trousers and shoes from adidas originals.



for products that people can wear for work and weekends, for formal and fun occasions, has had an impact on upstream suppliers, including their companies.

"Athleisure is a great challenge to our companies," Chris Chiang said, "because for consumers to have garments they can wear to the cinema, to the office and to a yoga class, clothes that will survive summer and winter, designers have to have special fabric to work with and this, in turn, means there has to be very good raw material." The clear message from both the raw material suppliers represented at the debate is that they have been thinking carefully about this and working hard to add athleisure-appropriate products to their offerings for a number of years, perhaps with one eye on their immediate customers in the apparel supply chain, but with the other eye very much on the end consumer.

Consumer expectations

Pierluigi Berardi placed considerable emphasis on the need for producers of yarns, fibres and fabrics to help clothing companies meet the needs of consumers. He insisted that Nilit seeks to carve out opportunities to speak directly to consumers about their expectations, while in the background it also carries out research on what consumers are buying. Towards the end of 2016, the Israeli company conducted what he called "a deep analysis of the market" to understand where things are moving to and, if necessary, to reposition itself. The most noticeable effect of this repositioning is probably in the work Nilit has done to bring its own products to the attention of brands and consumers. For example, it has built up substantial publicity in recent months around its Sensil premium nylon 6.6 performance and fashion yarns. It's still a fibre company, but now it's trying harder than ever to build connections all along the value chain to help apparel companies give consumers what they are looking for.

Take the strain

Athleisure is part of this. Pierluigi Berardi believes athleisure, today, is about endowing the clothes we wear every day with performance characteristics. Compression socks are a good example, especially at a trade show. Standing at his company's booth for ten hours a day, he says the socks help him avoid or reduce foot pain. "This is performance apparel," he told the audience at the debate. "You take technology that has been created for sporting activity and put into everyday wear." He talked about looking through his wardrobe for a second example and finding there a suit, which he wore to the debate, that is 48% wool, 47% nylon and 5% spandex (for comfort and



freedom of movement). He explained that the high nylon content helps keep the suit fresh and wrinkle-free. "If you look at it, it's just a boring dress suit," Pierluigi Berardi said (it actually looked very smart), "but it has a lot of performance characteristics."

To stretch a point

To prove the same point, Mr Chiang removed the elegant suit jacket he was wearing and invited a fellow participant to hold one of the sleeves, while he held the other. Without letting go, he began to move backwards across the stage, stretching the garment like an elastic band. This jacket was made from high-stretch fabric that had Singtex yarn as its "good raw material", with flat-stitched seams to reduce abrasion.

Many clothing brands work tirelessly to appeal to younger consumers, believing that popularity with this market segment can deliver fast and fierce growth. Specific to the debate about athleisure, Pierluigi Berardi said he believes the millennial generation has a keen interest in having performance characteristics in a lot of the everyday clothes they wear. He explained: "Millennials are no longer children; they are around 30 years old and their spending power is increasing. They want garments that they can wear to meet an important customer in the morning and, later, to go clubbing. They will leave home early, get home late and accomplish many different tasks in the course of the day and they want multi-tasking garments, garments that can perform throughout the day. So the fabric has to contain a certain level of performance: stretch, antibacterial, moisture management or thermoregulatory." He confirms that in the last

A Foot Locker store in Arizona. The athletic shoe retailer has said the traditional model for selling shoes to the public now faces "tremendous disruption" because of the ongoing rise in online shopping.

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Ultra Boost X4 running shoes from adidas, a popular choice for work and play among the audience at the athleisure debate at Intertextile Shanghai.

 adidas

few years, Nilit has found itself working in partnership with mills to make fabrics with these “multi-tasking” attributes.

Loss of gloss

With this, and with NPD Group’s assertion that athleisure has gone beyond a mere trend, it seems likely that the demand for performance attributes in mainstream apparel will continue to grow. Then again, it is possible that things are already less clear than NPD has suggested.

If Leisure Trends Group’s first direct reference to athleisure all those years ago was specific to footwear, it seems fair to wonder out loud if some recent developments in athletic footwear may be a precursor of a bigger shift in consumers’ willingness to present a sporty look on all occasions. With full-year results still some weeks from being published, it’s clear that companies making and selling athletic shoes have had easier years than 2017.

Figures for the first half of 2017 from Under Armour showed that the company’s overall revenues for the six-month period were up by 7.7%, reaching \$2.2 billion. Apparel sales accounted for more than half of this and increased by 9.1% to almost \$1.4 billion, Under Armour also achieved impressive growth in sales of accessories, which rose by 17.3% to \$211 million. But footwear revenues were flat compared to the same period in 2016 at just over \$500 million (and taking the second quarter of 2017 in isolation, Under Armour’s footwear sales fell by 2%).

Founder Kevin Plank said immediately that he still regards footwear as Under Armour’s largest opportunity for growth, but he acknowledged that it’s a fast moving marketplace, saying: “The

landscape is evolving quickly. Therefore, we too must evolve quickly.” To be fair to Under Armour, the Lighthouse fast-prototyping and design centre it opened in Baltimore in 2016 ought to help. With the advanced knitting, cutting, sewing, 3D printing and footwear construction technology it has installed there, the brand should be able to bring new design ideas, for apparel and for footwear, to market faster than ever before.

Tremendous disruption

On the retail side, Foot Locker presented even weaker numbers for athletic footwear sales in 2017. In the course of the first nine months of that year, Foot Locker registered sales revenues of almost \$5.6 billion, a decrease of 1.4% compared to the same period in 2016. However, the fall in earnings from those revenues was much steeper, declining by 30% year on year to \$333 million. In his comments on these figures, Foot Locker chief executive, Richard Johnson, spoke about the “tremendous disruption” facing the athletic footwear-buying public at the moment; he added that this disruption is affecting the whole of the retail sector. This is a reference to the increasingly dominant position of online retailers over bricks-and-mortar. Shops and shopping-malls have ceased to be the main places to go to buy new products and consumers in most markets are not only becoming used to buying online instead, they are embracing the new retail reality enthusiastically.

At the centre of sneaker culture

Halfway through 2017, Amazon began selling new shoes from Nike (for whom Foot Locker has long been a key, and sometimes exclusive, retail partner) directly to the consumer. Richard

Johnson said of this development that it would affect sales of “lower-price, largely undifferentiated shoes”, but that Foot Locker faced no “imminent threat” from it because most of its sales of adult shoes are still more than \$100 per pair. He added: “Our eyes are wide open. The athletic footwear retail game has changed. The overarching issue revolves around premium product and the speed with which innovation comes to market.”

After announcing Foot Locker’s results for the first nine months of 2017, Mr Johnson said the company is “creating new initiatives” with Nike and other key athletic footwear brands in an attempt to remain “at the centre of sneaker culture and, more broadly, youth culture”. Nevertheless, towards the end of last year Foot Locker took the “difficult decision” to “reduce and reorganise” its staff numbers.

Sports dates and what to wear

In an interactive conclusion to the Shanghai discussion, members of the audience were able to say if they would be willing to wear a variety of athletic garments and shoes to work, to an industry exhibition, on a date or to a wedding. Products that audience members said they would be happy to wear to work, to an exhibition and to go on a date included adidas Ultra Boost X4 running shoes and the same brand’s shirt,

jogging trousers and Stan Smith shoes. Also on the apparel side, some younger women among the participants said they would be happy to wear a yoga top or yoga pants from Lululemon to go on a “sports date”, not only because those garments would be comfortable and function well during the sports activity but would also combine well with a jacket or shawl in a coffee shop or ice-cream parlour or bar afterwards.

Weddings were the big exception; it seems that wherever people draw their particular line in the sand on dressing down or dressing up, weddings are still an occasion for which most people want to and expect others to dress formally. It was clear there is still plenty of appetite among the people in this particular audience in Shanghai for garments that provide the benefits of performance without necessarily making us look as though we are going to or coming from the gym, clothes that may not look like sports clothes, but still have a lot of sports content. There are signs that the gloss may be starting to come off, but, for now at least, athleisure lives on. 

** In 1995, textile consultant David Rigby, writing for WSA, had already split the sportswear market into four: basic, performance, sports-related leisurewear and sports-related fashion, with some of them overlapping into what is now athleisure.*



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