

# ATHLEISURE THE NEW SMART CASUAL

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Crowne Plaza Hotel, Nottingham

Athleisure is here to stay. The trend has transformed the fashion landscape with its blending of function, comfort, and style, and it is still growing. Speakers at the ASBCI's conference into the Athleisure juggernaut all agreed: Athleisure is an evolution in fashion that has transformed the way we think of clothing and has given us something we are not prepared to give up – comfort.

The last few years have seen sales of women's trainers overtake high heels and sales of leggings surpass jeans. Fashion norms are changing, but Athleisure is more than just a fashion trend. Like the brands that are doing it best, Athleisure is a magic mix of fitness, fashion, and social media that reflects the themes of our busy, modern lives. It is both aspirational and practical, stylish and functional, but above all it is about lack of restriction – the ability to transition effortlessly between activities and seasons, between home and the office, the gym and the bar, and to look and feel good while doing it.

Innovation in both style and functionality is essential for the continued success of

Athleisure and the brands within it. While the trend is here to stay, the proliferation of players will inevitably lead to market saturation, so differentiation and the ability to deliver the whole package, not just the right garments, will determine the winners and losers. The experience is becoming as important as the clothes, and the brands that can deliver both look set to have a healthy future.

The roots of Athleisure lie in a confluence of cultural, social, and fashion factors, **Graeme Moran** from **Drapers** told delegates as he opened the conference. Culturally, the wellness lifestyle is a trend that transcends genders and generations. And as exercise has become cool it has gone social, with

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**Left:**  
Top row left to right: Graeme Moran, Terence Senford, Angela Cody, Dr. Julie King, Claire O'Neill  
Bottom row left to right: Jovita Balseviciene, Helen Colebourn, Jutta Vo Quang and Anne Davies

**Below:**  
Graeme Moran, head of content: fashion and features at Drapers



celebrity adherents and social media influencers driving the trend on. At the same time dress codes have relaxed and fashion has become more casual and versatile. And so activewear meets fashion in 'the perfect storm' - the more people exercise, the more they post about it, and the better they want to look while doing it. And it's not slowing down. Both the specialist brands and the newcomers are cashing in on the Athleisure market. 'It's not a trend anymore, it's a lifestyle shift that fashion has capitalised on,' said Graeme. And while the market might become saturated, fabric innovation will give a competitive edge to brands as functional fabrics go mainstream, and sustainability and diversity offer opportunities for differentiation.



**Terence Senford** from **Boss Menswear** took delegates on an 'emotional journey' through the evolution of Athleisure since the 1970s. From the workout craze of the 1980s, which birthed the Reebok Freestyle trainer, to the adoption of premium sports brands by subculture in the 1990s and the rise of the sports star as fashion icon in the 2000s, the alignment of sportswear and streetwear has a long history. It was the addition of social media into the mix that kick-started Athleisure, however. Glued to our phones, we have been given a window into other people's lives, and we have also turned the camera on ourselves. Influencers are now at the helm, and it is no longer enough to just put the clothes out there - thanks to social media, the experience is just as important. And the generation just coming to adulthood - Generation Z - who were born connected to the digital world, will soon have the biggest spending power. Athleisure is embedded in youth culture, said Terence; this trend is just getting started.

Athleisure feels like it is at the beginning of its lifecycle, agreed **Angela Cody**, designer



**Above:**  
Angela Cody, designer of the active range at M&S

**Left:**  
Terence Senford, head of men's athleisure at Boss Menswear

**Bottom:**  
The Bureau Veritas team

of the active range at **M&S**. 'Athleisure is the evolution of clothing and it is too comfortable to go away because it enhances lives.' There is, she added, no turning back the trend for comfort, and more casual and versatile apparel is blurring the lines between clothing departments as the technology and innovation of sportswear finds its way into everyday wardrobes. It is also influencing other clothing categories, with thongs and non-wired bras the underwear of choice for the legging generation. Therefore, retailers need to take a different approach to design and evolve the everyday in collections, focusing on trans-seasonal functionality and performance-inspired essentials. Understand the lifestyle of your consumers, talk to them, and find out how they are wearing Athleisure. And rethink the rules. Use design solutions to enhance the customer experience, keep innovating, and communicate how technology can make your customer's life easier.



**"BOTH THE SPECIALIST BRANDS AND THE NEWCOMERS ARE CASHING IN ON THE ATHLEISURE MARKET."**



**Above:**  
Claire O'Neill, marketing manager, Lycra

**Top right:**  
Jutta Vo Quang, global strategic marketing,  
Freudenberg

**Bottom right:**  
Helen Colebourn, softlines technical  
consultant at Bureau Veritas CPS UK



Athleisure is the defining fashion trend of the 21st century, **Jutta Vo Quang** from **Freudenberg** told delegates, and performance apparel is leading the way. The urban lifestyle is increasingly time-poor, work life and leisure frequently overlap, and people are prioritising experiences over ownership. In response, wardrobes are becoming less segmented, with consumers seeking garments that will straddle different activities. Meanwhile social media and fitness apps inspire greater participation and performance, and so the need for Athleisure grows and with it the demand for comfort. Comfort is now the most sought-after quality in fashion and consumers are willing to pay more for it. This means performance features that contribute to comfort are desirable, and of these, Jutta identified elasticity and lightness and stretch in thermal insulation as the features that, once discovered, consumers don't want to lose. To make the most of this demand, apparel brands need to evolve function and style together and make the technology a selling point.

If function is becoming a selling point, brands and retailers can capitalise on the inherent and engineered performance characteristics of fibres and fabrics through point-of-sale marketing, said **Helen Colebourn** from testing house **Bureau Veritas**. But any claims need to be verified and delivered on, which means testing and certifying garments for their performance characteristics. Helen provided delegates

with an explanation of different functional properties common to Athleisure garments, from stretch and thermal resistance to moisture management and UV protection, and the standards and test methods used to certify claims. She also looked ahead to potential future concepts for technical Athleisure in the ongoing alignment of function and comfort, such as micro encapsulation. Traditionally used in medical textiles for drug delivery, this has been adopted by fashion for moisturising tights and even garments with in-built insect repellency, one example of the way Athleisure is opening up new avenues of innovation and differentiation for brands and consumers.

Athleisure is practical fashion with such broad appeal that almost anyone can be an Athleisure consumer, said **Claire O'Neill** from **Lycra**, one of those invisible technologies that has become visible through marketing. And that means that people are buying the garments for different purposes. 'Our research shows it is not just for fitness fanatics - there is an even split between those buying for leisure and active use.' Therefore, garments must be multipurpose, functional, and, first and foremost, comfortable. Stretch is fundamental to comfort, and stretch, of course, is what Lycra provides, but the brand's developments for the Athleisure sector are designed to enhance comfort through more than just stretch. From the Lycra Sport fabric range, which grades fabrics against indexes of power, comfort,

**Below:**  
Q&A session





and energy, to fibres designed to maximise moisture-management, colour retention, and fit, the Lycra portfolio caters to the diverse requirements of the Athleisure consumer. There's even a true-black fibre that eliminates elastane grin-through and is ideal for leggings, the ultimate Athleisure garment.

Athleisure represents huge opportunities, but it also comes with challenges. Technical fabrics are expensive, and the market is heading increasingly towards more customised products and smaller, faster production runs. 'Speed is the name of the game in fashion,' said **Jovita Balseviciene** from **Lectra**. At the same time, Industry 4.0 is as much about mass customisation as it is about mass production. Jovita talked delegates through new Lectra apps designed to speed up decision-making, maximise fabric use, and pave the way for larger-scale personalised production. The cloud-based solutions include Quick Estimate, which enables pattern makers to calculate and forecast fabric consumption, while Quick Nest can process an unlimited number of marker lists simultaneously for production teams. Finally, Lectra's Cutting Room 4.0 digital solution facilitates greater customisation by enabling businesses to handle high numbers of small orders and optimising made-to-order processes to allow them to make less, but more of what the customer wants.

Finally, delegates heard how fashion students will have a chance to flex their

Athleisure design muscles with the introduction of a new category in the **Fashanne Awards 2019**. Set up by BBC presenter and journalist **Anne Davies** to celebrate the wealth of up-and-coming design talent in the Midlands, the Fashanne Awards are all about connecting students with the industry they will work in. 'The reality is that most of the students who enter the awards will never show their collections on a catwalk again, but they will become part of the backbone of this industry for many years to come,' said Anne. 'The awards provide a forum where employers can see the next generation of talent under one roof.' Athleisure is one of a number of new categories, including sustainability, introduced to reflect current trends, and Anne is also hoping to expand the judging panel and offer winners appropriate internships by inviting industry involvement in the event.

Ultimately, Athleisure is not just about clothes, and that's why the bubble isn't going to burst any time soon. Underpinned by a fundamental shift in how we live our lives and fuelled by a culture of selfies and celebrities, Athleisure has done what few fashion trends have managed and crossed gender and generational divides as part of a lifestyle that values health and wellness and prizes comfort, functionality, and versatility. Athleisure is about breaking down barriers and blurring lines, and the opportunities are immense.

**Above:**  
Anne Davies, founder of the Fashanne Awards

**Top right:**  
Jovita Balseviciene, solution consultant, Lectra