



Fashion and fitness are fusing. With our work-out wardrobes transcending the gym, LUCY APFEL analyses one of 2016's biggest lifestyle trends

# The rise of 'ATHLEISURE'

There are very few ways in which I am remotely similar to Rosie Huntington-Whiteley. I am not, alas, a gorgeous willowy blonde reportedly engaged to Jason Statham, and nor am I the proud owner of bee-stung lips and the recipient of international acclaim. But mere mortals now have something in common with the model and designer, thanks to the recent launch of her active wear range for Marks & Spencer's Autograph collection.

Donning workout attire is a shared pastime for myself and the supermodel, because come the weekend, absolutely any weekend, you will find me in workout clothes. My new ubiquitous sartorial choice has led friends to assume I've kicked up my gym habits, but fear not, fitness-phobes; the truth is, I dress like this regardless of what I'm doing. And I'm not alone.

"Sports-inspired apparel reached global retail sales value of \$22bn (£14.5bn) in 2014, up six per cent from the previous year and in comparison to four per cent growth in the overall

apparel market," says Bernadette Kissane, apparel analyst at Euromonitor International.

To put it in high street terms, the Asics Canary Wharf store saw a 19 per cent increase in its annual sales value during 2015, according to area manager Saulo Ramirez. Why? Quite simply, we're all wearing workout clothes more often.

It began with an increased interest in sports and fitness classes. London's focus on health and wellness means, says Natalie Walker, master instructor at Canary Wharf's trendy spinning studio Psycle, "it has never before been as 'fashionable' to do exercise."

Subsequently, there was increased demand for more stylish gym gear. People who already exercised were upping the frequency of their sessions, and people who had never worked out were trying the new fitness crazes emerging all over London, and realising that a sweaty T-shirt and leggings didn't

make them feel their best while doing so.

And so, brands stepped up their game. “Designers started throwing in more daring colours and now we have everything under the sun including laser cut holes, sheer panels in every possible direction,” says Walker.

And, as gym clothes have become not only functional but fashionable, not to mention flattering, due to the contouring nature of Lycra and Spandex, we want to show them off, and we have taken these attractive, comfortable garments and started to wear them outside of the gym.

Trendy workout clothes are now socially acceptable everywhere from dinner to the cinema. There’s even an amalgamated word for the trend blurring active wear with leisure wear: ‘athleisure’. It entered the dictionary last year.

“On my day off, whether I’m just running to the health food shop around the corner or even going for lunch with friends, I’d much rather sport my new LuluLemon blue snakeskin leggings than put on dull black jeans,” says Walker.

Tamara Hill-Norton, founder and creative director of Sweaty Betty, agrees. “People are wearing their gym clothes all day, adapting [the look] a little bit, and making it look quite cool and funky,” she says.

Fabletics is a sports brand co-founded by actress Kate Hudson in 2013. “The most exciting part is creating looks and pieces for every woman and every body type; things women can feel good in all day,” said

Hudson. “At Fabletics, we believe all women should be able to have hip styles and amazing quality.”

As sportswear brands have begun responding to shifting needs, so too have traditional high-end fashion houses.

Collaborations to date have included the Stella McCartney for Adidas line, Alexander Wang and H&M’s limited-edition sportswear range in 2014 and the S/S 16 activewear collection at Matches, featuring innovative materials such as waterproof velvet.

In 2014, Net-a-Porter,

the multi-billion dollar fashion retail website, announced an extensive collection devoted to athleisure wear to keep up with the evolving market. And the relationship between fashion and fitness, extends to footwear.

Trainers, among them Adidas Stan Smith styles, have become an everyday fashion staple, leading Kissane to speak of “sneaker fever”:

“The market for performance-led footwear grew by a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of seven per cent from 2009-2014, as consumers adopted running shoes for everyday activities.”

Analysts believe our newfound passion for a sporty look is part of our wider cultural aspirations: the outfits aren’t just comfortable, flattering and practical; but rather a statement of success. It’s a declaration of disposable income, of leisure time, of focusing on one’s own health and well-being. Anyone spending £85 on Sweaty Betty leggings is part of an elite, lifestyle-orientated club, whereby if you’re not spending hours toning yourself in the gym, it at least it looks like you are.

While the price for high-end activewear is high, it’s arguably worth it. Not only does the dual functionality of clothing that can be worn for both working out and during downtime justify a certain cost, but for some, workout clothes are purchased

*“The sporty look isn’t just comfortable, flattering and practical, but a statement too”*

over traditional weekend attire, creating space in the wardrobe budget. “I think I only have one pair of jeans now,” says Walker.

Designers explain that it’s the technical specifications of fabric that can be worn for workouts that is adding to the high cost of individual garments, but for good reason. Rose Goldman founded activewear brand Victor + Leap last year. She says the brand focuses on “style and performance, without compromise.”

“Something I hear repeatedly is that women want versatility, to deal with whatever the day looks like – work, coffee, yoga at lunch, picking up food, cycling home. [That] was a guiding principle in how the clothes were developed. We only use luxury performance fabrics from Italy and Switzerland. Our fabrics don’t feel like typical ‘exercise’ fabric... but [they are] also high-performing sports clothes.”

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Fleece Tech Pull Over, £90, Sweaty Betty, Jubilee Place



Leap All Day Jersey Jacket, £120, Victor + Leap, victorandleap.com



Gel Craze TR, £76, Asics, Jubilee Place

As Hill-Norton of Sweaty Betty has said, “[Women will] go to a really cool exercise class with their friends and that’s the beginning of their night out and then, they’ll go party.”

The athleisure trend is showing no sign of slowing down, and if America, where the trend was first seen, is an indicator, it’s set to accelerate worldwide. “Growth in this area is expected to continue, with a rate of two per cent from 2014 to 2019,” says Kissane of Euromonitor, and there’s particular growth in the Asia/Pacific region, she says, which has a predicted market growth rate of four per cent during the same period.

Walker agrees. “It’s only going to get bigger and better. Every time I walk into my studio, I see brighter and bolder prints, I see more risqué shapes.” It may also be that the trend is an empowering one: “Most of all I see more confidence among the individuals wearing these types of clothes.”

There’s continuing demand, increasingly innovative designs and what’s more, additional brands such as The White Company are set to enter the athleisure market. Race you to Jubilee Place. ☺

Images: Fabletics, [fabletics.co.uk](http://fabletics.co.uk) and Rosie for Autograph Active, Marks & Spencer, Jubilee Place; Victor + Leap, [victorandleap.com](http://victorandleap.com); Psyche, Crossrail Place, [psychelondon.com](http://psychelondon.com); Euromonitor International, [euromonitor.com](http://euromonitor.com); Asics, Jubilee Place, [asics.co.uk](http://asics.co.uk); Sweaty Betty, Jubilee Place, [sweatybetty.com](http://sweatybetty.com)

