

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Luxury activewear shows no signs of a cooldown

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Prada has collaborated with Adidas on two limited-edition accessories. Image credit: Prada

By SARAH JONES

High-fashion houses are kicking their sportswear collaborations into high gear as casualization continues to grow its hold on the apparel market.

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In just the last month, Missoni, Balmain and Prada have all rolled out partnerships that bridge athleisure and performance activewear. Luxury activewear appears able to keep up the pace, but as more brands look to get into the game, how can labels decide if athletic wear is right for them?

"When you look at a number of lines in fashion, what people are wearing whether they are people in your circle or celebs and more athletic wear continues to dominate what people are wearing," said Kimmie Smith, cofounder/creative and style director of [Athleisure Mag](#). "These styles are being worn regardless of the actual intended activity and allow people to have comfort as well as to enjoy the benefits of this style as well as technical fabrications.

"Due to their popularity, brands want to be able to find ways to get into the space, whether it is creating items internally or collaborating with those that are known for this portion of the market," she said. "It's a great way for brands to position themselves in a new way as well as capturing additional demographics that they may not have previously reached. It's a win for both brands that come together."

Competition heats up

According to NPD Group, athleisure currently represents about 24 percent of the total U.S. fashion market, and this share is projected to grow through this year.

Technavio predicts that the global athleisure market will grow at a compound annual growth rate of 7 percent through 2023, adding \$122.66 billion in sales. Asia Pacific is expected to be the fastest growing region for fashion activewear.

"I'm often asked if the athleisure trend is going to fade away, and the answer is no," said Marshal Cohen, chief industry advisor for retail at NPD Group, in a statement. "When you have comfort and function combined with

fashion it's difficult to go back to anything else on a regular basis."

Seconding this idea, **Fashionbi's** chief operating officer Yana Bushmeleva said that she expects growth for the category over the next five years.

"Overall, the activewear and sportswear market segment is growing, thanks to the athleisure trend we wear sporty clothes and sneakers outside the gym," Ms. Bushmeleva said. "For premium and luxury brands it's a chance to increase the product offer, client base and satisfy the demand on luxury-athletic products since we still want to differentiate ourselves from others through branded products.

"For example, many premium footwear brands that were specialized on a high-heel shoe, have launched a few seasons ago a sneakers category and are growing thanks to this new launch," she said.

Among the drivers of the trend of activewear leaving the gym are more casual office dress codes and a desire for comfort. Beyond apparel, consumers are even seeking functionality in their handbags, picking fabrics such as nylon over leather.

"Activewear has gone beyond attire that one wears. It's also a state of mind, whether it's about engaging in fitness or sports, being able to stay on the go effortlessly without a concern about restrictive wear or being able to incorporate pieces into their style to create a look all of their own," Ms. Smith said. "This need to have transitional wear is something that will only increase as people's lives continue to get busier and as pieces continue to blur the lines between being designated for specific activities.

"In terms of making it luxury branded, this will continue as people want to ensure that they are getting the best performance fabrications, finest materials, etc. which matches other portions of their closet that have this in it as well," she said.

Luxury labels are leaning into this trend.

Missoni recently unveiled its second collaboration with Adidas. Inspired by running, the alliance celebrates founder Ottavio Missoni's competition in the hurdles during the 1948 Olympic Games.

Sneakers, running leggings and shorts have been refashioned in Missoni-style knit patterns.

Missoni x Adidas

Also partnering with Adidas, Prada has chosen to pay homage to the sports brand's own heritage rather than focusing primarily on its own design language. A Prada-branded version of the Adidas Superstar sneaker is designed to be paired with a Prada Bowling bag that includes touches that call to mind an Adidas gym bag.

Both styles are made by Prada in Italy, using materials such as the luxury brand's calf leather mixed with sporty nylon. The Superstar sneaker features the design's signature rubber toe.

Prada x Adidas

In another activewear-meets-luxury mashup, Balmain creative director Olivier Rousteing worked with model Cara Delevingne on a collection for Puma, marking the house's first collaboration with the activewear label. Ms. Delevingne has been the face of both Puma and Balmain, serving as the tie that binds the two brands together.

There will be two Puma x Balmain limited-edition collections, which feature styles inspired by boxing. The first release includes a sequined kimono that would be worn pre-fight, sports bras, leggings and shorts.

In a color palette of black, white, red and blue, the collection features both Puma's namesake cat and the Balmain logo.

The collection launched on Nov. 21 with a live-streamed performance from Los Angeles, featuring dance and some playful sparring between Ms. Delevingne and Mr. Rousteing.

[View this post on Instagram](#)

Closing the #PumaxBalmain performance in LA, @caradelevingne and @olivier_rousteing unite to celebrate their collaboration with @puma. The 35-piece collection is now available on BALMAIN.COM and in #BALMAIN stores. Creative direction @original_xerox Choreographer @jasminealbuquerque

A post shared by BALMAIN (@balmain) on Nov 22, 2019 at 3:54am PST

Instagram post from Balmain

During its pre-fall men's show in Miami, Dior unveiled a new sneaker collaboration with Nike's Jordan brand. Rapper Travis Scott got early access to the sneakers and wore them to the show.

[View this post on Instagram](#)

As the first to test out a pair of the limited edition Air Jordan 1 High OG Dior' sneakers being unveiled on the runway - the fruit of a collaboration between DIOR and JORDAN BRAND - @TravisScott got into the #DiorMiami vibe attending the #DiorMenFall 2020 show by @MrKimJones on Tuesday, clad in a look from the collection. Experience the show live on our Instagram Story. #StarsinDior

A post shared by Dior Official (@dior) on Dec 3, 2019 at 10:46pm PST

Instagram post from Dior

Another long-term luxury-activewear tie-up is Stella McCartney's alliance with Adidas. The collaboration includes workout attire for activities ranging from tennis to track.

Stella McCartney has also put her own touch on Adidas' Stan Smith sneakers, making them in vegan leather. The most recent edition features the option of colorful laces.

"Seems that any luxury brand can create an activewear alliance," Ms. Bushmeleva said. "We remember the collaboration between Chanel x Adidas x Pharrell Williams, here Pharrell played an important role since he was working with Chanel and with Adidas already, so his name 'softened' the Adidas and Chanel alliance.

"The problem is that there are very few international sportswear brands: Adidas, Nike, Puma, Under Armour," she said. "As a result, the fashion companies are working with the same brands and they do not always launch unique products.

"Premium and luxury brands can defend their authority only through innovative products and creative campaigns."

Looking ahead

According to new research from BCG and Altagamma, one of the key emerging trends in the luxury business this year is partnerships, as brands seek to bring a sense of newness to consumers.

These collaborations, such as Louis Vuitton's link with Supreme to Chanel's recent Pharrell Williams collection, are particularly finding favor with younger generations and Chinese shoppers. Across age groups and nationalities, luxury buyers show a heavy awareness of tie-ups and 50 percent have invested in special-edition merchandise, a figure that is likely to grow as Gen Z and millennial buyers grow their influence and purchasing power ([see story](#)).

Athleisure fits into the growing streetwear movement within luxury.

The rise of streetwear has blurred the lines between luxury and leisurewear, but the casualization of luxury may not thrive in the long-term, according to a recent report from Fashionbi.

Luxury labels including Balenciaga and Louis Vuitton have found success by diving into streetwear, while other brands have borrowed marketing and sales tactics such as social media drops. Expectations for streetwear remain high as luxury groups continue to invest millions of dollars into the trend ([see story](#)).

"The category of sportswear and activewear is one that I believe a number of brands have to consider when it comes to assessing their product assortment," Ms. Smith said. "When a luxury brand opts to partner with an athletic-focused brand, they need to look at the intersectionality of their demographic and the benefits that exist in bringing awareness to and capturing those that they wouldn't normally reach if they didn't embark on partnership.

"Brands that wouldn't be a fit would be a customer base that doesn't have the values or the interest to embrace the values that they represent," she said. "A brand that is not willing to engage in equally showcasing the partnership, whether it involves storytelling on the heritage of the brand, thinking about how this can be an ongoing partnership or looking at how they can create additional capsules with like minded brands, etc., then these would be conditions where this may not be a great fit for brands to engage with one another.

"Most importantly, looking at the feedback from those who engaged with the brand on whether the current direction is of interest or considering additional ways to forge the partnership should be considered when collaborating in this manner."

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