

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

Will casual style replace traditional workwear?

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Dressing up for work is expected to continue, but on a situational basis. Image credit: Emma Willis

By NORA HOWE

As work lifestyles continue to shift in response to the pandemic, and flexibility becomes a top priority, professionals are beginning to evaluate the implications of a post-COVID world on traditional office place attire.

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While some may still prefer three-piece suits, skirts and heels, there is no denying the rapid acceleration of casual style that has occurred within the past year. During a session at [FT Business of Luxury Summit](#) on May 20, moderated by Financial Times US financial editor Robert Armstrong, fashion designers Jason Wu and Emma Willis discussed the future of business attire and how wardrobes are shifting with new lifestyles.

"Confidence trumps comfort," said Ms. Willis. "People want to look and feel their best."

New workwear

The combination of the COVID-19 health crisis, social and political unrest and environmental disasters put things into perspective for many individuals, ultimately shifting consumer behavior ([see story](#)).

At the onset of the pandemic and global lockdowns, personal expression through style dipped as most people remained in their homes, resulting in a surge in casual wear and athleisure sales and a focus on wellness and self care, according to fashion business agency Fashionbi.

"Our culture has been slowly become more casual over the last ten years, but over the past year specifically, we have been forced to embrace almost too much comfort in a very short period of time," Mr. Wu said.

According to [Heuritech](#) analyses, one of four COVID-19 posts was about healthy lifestyles during lockdown. In the U.S., online sales of pajamas grew by 143 percent between March and April, according to data from [Adobe Analytics](#).



Jason Wu is most notorious for designing ensembles for first lady Michelle Obama at two inaugurations. Image credit: Jason Wu

While in the U.K., year-over-year sales of activewear rose by 97 percent, leggings making up 50 percent of Q1 sales, according to consulting agency [Edited](#) ([see story](#)).

"I think we will start seeing a new generation that grew up with tons of leisure and casualwear that will discover the art of dressing up," Mr. Wu said. "Women want to look and feel beautiful, so I predict glamour will be a huge theme of the year

"This new wave of revenge dressing will provide an opportunity for a new age to be inspired to dress up and feel confident."

A marriage of elegance and comfort appears to be the future of fashion, for both men and women, as Ms. Willis and Mr. Wu agreed that casualwear is here to stay, but with an emphasis on polish, quality and occasion.

"People seem to be saying that they are going to dress for the day," said Ms. Willis. "In other words, they will be dressing for their clients, rather than for their colleagues

"So I believe formal work attire will survive, but it will be more on a case-by-case basis, as opposed to everyday style."

During the webinar, an audience member posed a question which suggested a double standard for men and women when it comes to workplace style formality. Some people may argue that when professionals dress more casually, women are disproportionately perceived as less professional.

"I actually think men have less flexibility than women when it comes to style and garments," Ms. Willis said. "Traditionally, men are limited to a certain code of dressing that is much more rigid like a uniform."



Since 1989, Emma Willis has been designing luxury dress shirts, ties and boxers for men. Image credit: Emma Willis

According to Mr. Wu, the style expectations of men and women is beginning to even out, using sneaker culture as an example for how women's fashion has given women more freedom in casualwear.

"After a year of having lived in a completely different way, I have appreciated the things I have a lot more," said Mr. Wu. "Quality over quantity is the way to go."

Shifting to circular fashion

Towards the end of their conversation, the fashion designers both noted that regardless of how glamour and leisure are combined, sustainability will remain a top concern for brands and consumers.

"It's about dressing in things that have a timeless elegance to them," said Mr. Wu.

Farfetch has been expanding its circular services, particularly its handbag resale program Second Life, which is now available in 30 countries in Europe and North America ([see story](#)).

The number of bags sold to Second Life increased 348 percent year-over-year. A third of shoppers use their Second Life credit to buy another handbag, while 31 percent purchase clothing.

Through a U.K. pilot of Farfetch Donate, shoppers donated more than 54,000 items and earned credit to shop the retailer ([see story](#)).

In October 2020, Italian fashion house Gucci partnered with resale platform The RealReal to set up an online shop featuring pre-owned Gucci pieces from past collections until the end of 2020 ([see story](#)).

"People should start buying pieces that will live in their wardrobes and can be worn over and over again," Mr. Wu said. "We're moving towards more responsible dressing."

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