Fitness Culture: Rise of Athleisure Fashion

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OBJECTIVE

An attempt to understand the trend of ‘fitness’ culture which has, over a period, of time led to ‘athleisure’ fashion. Also to understand the reasons for this shift and code it visually.
INTRODUCTION

The gap between fashion and fitness, in today’s world is marginal. From running gear to yoga apparel to training accessories, sports products with a stylish edge are emerging from brands and department stores alike. However, the sportswear market has recently witnessed the development of an off-shoot branch called – Athleisure Fashion. This is a combination of casual wear and sportswear where one piece of clothing serves multiple purpose, thus making it more functional and therefore more desirable¹.

What started as a male centric activity through development of ‘Gymnasiums’ in the ancient Greek period, has now evolved into an essential lifestyle element targeting both the genders. The fitness industry is on a track of innovation to make working out fun and lucrative. The trend towards healthier habits, emergence of new sports, adoption of an active lifestyle, increasing incomes in developing countries and popularity of physical fitness activities amongst women are factors driving the sports and fitness clothing market.

The growing trend of casual wear in the workplace and rising demand from teenagers and pre-teens alike, also serve to fuel market growth. In order to design new styles of clothing and widen their product lines, sports clothing companies are collaborating with fashion designers.

Fashion and sport continue their profitable relationship, with sports clothing becoming more thoroughly designed to be acceptable for everyday wear. Community workout activities, like the recent ‘Raahgiri’ in New Delhi, spark a new competitive spirit, while technology makes users achieve their goals through fitness tracking wearables.

This document is an attempt to understand the trend of ‘fitness’ culture which has over a period of time led to ‘athleisure’ fashion, understand the reasons for this shift and code it visually.

¹ (WGSN, 2014)
HISTORY OF GYMNASIUM

Meaning

As per the New World Encyclopaedia Gym, a shortened form of gymnasium, refers to facilities intended for indoor sports and exercise².

Etymology

The word Gymnasium is derived from the Greek word γυμνάσιον (gymnasion) from gymnos which means ‘naked’³. The gymnasium in ancient Greece functioned as a training facility for competitors in public games⁴. It was also a place for socializing and engaging in intellectual pursuits. Athletes competed in the nude, a practice which encourage aesthetic appreciation of the male body and as a tribute to the Gods. From its very inception, gymnasium has been portrayed as a place for men.

Evolution

After the ancient Greeks, gyms disappeared for centuries. Medieval and Renaissance life was physically laborious, and people got all the exercise they needed by working on lands and carrying out chores.

Gymnasia as we know them today evolved from The Turner Movement in Germany during the early 1800s, with a belief that a healthy mind and body would infuse patriotism, a belief in liberty, and unify Germany into one country. This political movement was an effort to liberate the German states from Napoleon's rule. It combined patriotic and liberal principles with an emphasis on physical training⁵. Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, a gymnastics teacher at the Gymnasium zum Grauen Kloster, Germnay is said to be the founder of this movement⁶. Jahn felt that Napoleon has humiliated his native land and thus conceived the idea of restoring the spirits of his countrymen by the development of their physical and moral powers through the practice of gymnastics.

² (New World Encyclopaedia, 2008)
³ (Chaline, 2015)
⁴ (Luke, 2015)
⁵ (The Mind Body Moderate, August 9, 2011)
⁶ (Do, November 2008)
Large numbers of Germans migrated to the US in the mid 1800’s, the Turners included. Their focus shifted to establishing Turnvereins – community centres that mixed social consciousness and fitness. Organizations such as the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) that was established in 1855 in Boston, were inspired by Turnvereins.

By the 19th century, though, schools and colleges were building gymnasiums. The YMCA also built gyms for physical exercise and social sports and games. With the Industrial revolution and a growing economy, Americans liked the idea of fitness, leisure exercise, and clubs to occupy more free time.

Gold’s gym chain, still going strong today, was founded by Joe Gold in 1965 in Venice, California, which became a landmark for bodybuilders. More and more gym chains were founded during the 1980s, including 24 Hour Fitness (1983) and LA Fitness (1984). 1980s was also the time when Corporate Gyms became a trend as employers took greater responsibility for their employee’s health.

This was the era of entrepreneurial rush in the fitness sector as more and more gym chains were opening. However, the most successful fitness entrepreneur has been a woman – Jane Fonda. Her aerobics classes and videos not only opened up a new form of exercise but also acted as a form of emancipation for women’s bodies. This was possible due to the technological advancement of having a video disk player.

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7 (Chaline, 2015)
8 (Luke, 2015)
Between the 80’s and the 90’s, the gym had increasingly become a shared space between men and women. This is well documented in the 1985 film ‘Perfect’ featuring John Travolta – one of the early movies to exploit the world of fitness to tell a story about love and success. It was reviewed in The New York Times suggesting that “body-fitness” had been presented “as a form of self-promotion”.

**Rise of Gym Culture**

The gymnasium and its accompanying meanings of fitness has served a number of functions, including the shaping of personal identities. Gyms have been tightly associated with the notion of ‘fitness’, and old labels have been replaced in professional texts such as ‘fitness centres’ and ‘fitness clubs’, and more recently as ‘health centres’ or ‘wellness clubs’. These terms have a more luxurious feel attached to them, as well as diverting attention from the competitive, harsh and often very masculine world which was originally associated with the term ‘gymnasium’.

Sports are no longer divided by gender: women seek strength from the gym weights, and men achieve the flexibility of ballerinas. Strength and agility are more important than slimness as being fit for life is the key message.

Gyms as places of consumption, where producers and users contribute to the fitness culture. Today, a number of activities are coded as “fitness”, including established sports such as swimming, oriental techniques such as yoga, leisure activities such as orienteering, walking, gardening and dancing jogging and fitness exercise at home.

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(Sassatelli, 2010)
**Fitness Culture of the 21st Century**

In most cultures throughout history a variety of body decoration practices – in the form of clothing and adornment, or even tattooing and piercing – are fundamental to mark social identity. A fit body has, in many ways, replaced body decoration as a potent symbol of status and character, both for men and women. As clothes are ever more revealing, what is fashionable is the sculpting of the body itself.

Not only has the toned, fit body become a commercial image, but also fitness gyms and health centres have become highly visible as the sites where such a body is produced. Numerous factors have led to this transition:

- In this fast paced life, people are in the pursuit of happiness and thus seek solace in some form of activity.
- Consumers are realising the value of comfort. Everything that is being made today is making the life easier for people to live. Clothing too has become a reflection of this comfort ideology.
- The culture of a five-days a week job that ends around 6 pm for most people in most of the countries have led to more time being created for leisure and has thus led to the increase in an interest in health and sports. Therefore fitness is now considered as a lifestyle trend.

*The Spornosexual Male*

The Greek ideal of masculine beauty remains the basis of western male fitness and a new term of ‘Spornosexual’ has now been developed for the men. The word ‘Spornosexual’, as coined by Mark Simpson (creator of ‘metrosexual’) essentially means men who strive to look sporty and sexual at the same time.

Visually, it is a lean, buffed, chiselled look of a man who has striated abs, well defined calves and muscular biceps. He is someone who is ogled at and admired for the kind of clothes he wears. Low V necks, shorts, casual but fitted clothes are what distinguishes this sporno man.

Some important examples of this new trend are David Beckham, Hugh Jackman, Chrithian Bale, Channing Tatum, Matt Damon, Hrithik Roshan, Ranveer Singh etc. Interestingly, the James Bond movie ‘Quantum of Solace’ starring Daniel Craig shows Craig with abs and a sculpted body which was never an important factor in the earlier movies.

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10 (WGSN, 2014)
Figure 8: Christian Ronaldo for Armani innerwear
Source: WGSN Report – Fit for Life

Figure 9: Daniel Craig
Source: www.pinterest.com

Figure 9: Hugh Jackman as Wolverine
Source: blog.cmdstore.com

Figure 10: Actor Channing Tatum
Source: GQ
**Sneaker culture**

Another significant aspect of the gym cultures can be seen through the kinds of sport shoes that are in trend.

What started from modest origins in the mid-19th century is today seen as an urban icon. *The Rise of Sneaker Culture*, an ongoing exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, showcases the complex social history and cultural significance of the sneaker.\(^{11}\)

\(^{11}\) (WGSN, 2015)

*Figure 1: Some of the displays form the exhibition titled ‘Rise of Sneaker Fashion’*

*Source: WGSN Exhibition Feature – The Rise of Sneaker Culture*
Delving into the 1970s-1980s, high-end sneakers and the growth of fitness culture are showcased. Sneakers moved beyond basic athletic use and evolved into a fashion item as relevant on the street as in the gym. Contemporary sneaker culture as we know it was in full effect by 1980, and consumers begin seeing synergies between hip-hop and basketball. Introducing colour and pattern into men’s style, fashion kicks became synonymous with urban masculinity, and furthermore a symbol of status and taste.

Today, the sneaker has entered the high-fashion realm with designer sneakers prevalent across labels such as Lanvin, Hussein Chalayan, Jimmy Choo and Yohji Yamamoto.

Figure 12: Some of the displays form the exhibition titled ‘Rise of Sneaker Fashion’
Source WGSN Exhibition Feature – The Rise of Sneaker Culture
ATHLEISURE FASHION – THE WAY AHEAD

Athleisure can be defined as a trend where clothing designed for workouts at gymnasiums is worn outside of the gym for leisure activities and social occasions\(^\text{12}\). It's a term that both the media and fashion industry have started to use without hesitation, but its root words, athletic and leisure, are in fact polar opposites.

![Figure 13: Example for Athleisure clothing](http://www.womenshealthmag.com/)

Athleisure is gaining popularity due to the following reasons:

- Can be worn on multiple occasions
- No need to carry ‘Gym-wear’ if one has to go to the gym directly from workplace
- Convenient and comfortable
- Functional without compromising on the style quotient

![Figure 14: Men’s Athleisure Fashion](http://www.womenshealthmag.com/)

\(^\text{12}\) (WGSN, 2014)
This cultural shift toward casual dressing, gym-to-street clothes evolved as an official clothing category today and is a perfect example of the trickle–up theory. It has been showcased on the runway in 2014 by renowned designer Alexander Wang, who launched his sporty line for H&M. He says “I live in gym clothes. When you go out on the street, it’s the uniform now.”

Figure 15: Alexander Wang Collection 2104 for H&M
Source: www.vogue.com/13283622/athleisure

13 (Studeman, October 28, 2014)
Not very long ago, it was considered quite a faux pas to be seen running around town in your workout pants and sneakers. It just wasn’t chic. But, today you can go just about anywhere in your leggings. The popular marketing message being delivered right now is that we are just so busy, that we need clothes that transition from one activity to the next.

The effects of athleisure can be seen in and around our society as well. Following are some images that prove the same.

Figure 16: Priyanka Chopra going for an event  
Source: www.missmalini.com

Figure 17: Juhi Sodani (left) and Arpita (right) enjoying a casual outing in yoga pants teamed with tunics  
Source: Juhi’s Facebook account. Used With permission

Figure 18: Tanim Khosla, freelance stylist in Mumbai going for a movie date  
Source: Tanim’s Facebook account, with permission

Figure 19: Travelling in Yoga pants  
Source: Rukmini’s Facebook account. Face cropped on request
Figure 20: Anju Sharma, 54, Sightseeing in Belgium. Layered workout leggings with denim skirt Source: Facebook account, with permission

Figure 21: Khushbu Kapur (MFM Student NIFT Delhi) with friend on a casual outing Source: Picture sent by Khusbhu on request

Figure 22: Shikha Prasad, admin executive at Pavilions and Interiors wearing leggings at work Source: Self clicked

Figure 23: Payal Sharma, MDes student, NIFT Delhi teaming up leggings with top for college wear Source: Self clicked

Figure 24: Manya Arora, DU student and dance enthusiast wears gym wear to college as she has dance practice in the evening Source: Facebook, with permission
CONCLUSION

The world had seen various changes in the gym culture and the various fashion trends associated with it. At present times, the 1990s heroin-chic look is long gone, replaced by a new breed models that trains, eats healthily and looks strong. ‘Healthy is the new sexy’ is the buzz all over the fashion world for now. Even forecasts prove that the Athleisure fashion will remain in trend for the next few years to come.

The trickle up factor of the fitness culture is allowing mass-market brands to cash in on the acceptability of sports clothing in contemporary fashion. In a fast paced world, where one needs to shuffle between different roles from morning to evening, comfortable yet stylish clothes are the way forward.
REFERENCES


Vogue, 1977, Apr 01. Vogue's point of view: What has fitness to do with fashion...and why make and issue out of it?. *Vogue*.
