

## SYSTEM SHAKE-UP – POST-PANDEMIC TRENDS IN THE CHINESE TEXTILE MARKET

With textiles no exception, the pandemic has impacted industries and lifestyles on an unprecedented scale. It has led to the global emergence of new ways of doing business, and turned several pre-existing inclinations into widespread trends. Since Chinese consumers are embracing and driving many of these worldwide movements, players operating in the country's textile field have had to adapt. For some firsthand knowledge of the Chinese market's trends, pandemic-related and otherwise, Messe Frankfurt (HK) Ltd spoke to several prominent international and domestic exhibitors at the recent Spring Edition of Intertextile Shanghai Apparel Fabrics. Key highlights from these discussions include the rise of sportswear and athleisure, the rebounding demand for luxury fabrics, and the growing importance of green fashion.



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### *A noticeable shift towards athleisure and sportswear*

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All over the world, consumers have been increasingly demanding multifunctional clothing – one outfit in which to go to gym, meet a friend for coffee, and do some work. The pandemic, and more people working from home, was a significant driving force behind athleisure's rapid acceleration. In certain places, the trend is still growing.

“During Covid there was a big spike in athleisure, and I think the trend is continuing. Especially if you look outside the US, such as here in China,” said **Jamie Haseltine, Business Director of Ascend Performance Materials**. “The US was probably one of the first regions where the athleisure trend became apparent. It could be that Chinese consumers are looking to US consumers and seeing that certain work standards are more relaxed, and wearing something other than a suit and tie every day is more acceptable.”

**Ms Jeanie Hu, Marketing Director, Greater China of HeiQ**, had a slightly differing opinion: “The sports or outdoor movement is a general trend, with or without the pandemic. Common outdoor activities have become less extreme, and activities such as glamping and skateboarding fall under this category. More people are focusing on healthier lifestyles, and young people especially are willing to try different sports. The athleisure and sportswear trend is showing more growth in China, as the markets in Europe and the US are already quite mature. This is reflected in increased sales for domestic brands such as Anta and Li-Ning, as well as international brands, for example our partners Patagonia.”

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## *Is the athleisure and sportswear trend here to stay?*

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Particularly in China, more people are adopting healthier and more active lifestyles, and for this reason sports and outdoor-friendly functional clothing is increasingly in demand. While some manufacturers and brands have been playing in this space for some time, many companies have accordingly adapted their offerings to cater to this growing trend, signalling that more active lifestyles are a long-term movement.

**Ms Xie Yi Zhen, General Manager of Yu Yuang Textile**, explained why this is the case, and outlined her company's focus: "Since the pandemic, more customers have been purchasing functional clothing because they are more aware of the importance of exercise, and there is also now a wider variety of accessible activities, such as gym, running, and hiking, with people especially eager to get closer to nature. This has been good for our business, and we have had to increase our attention on durability. Our biggest focus has been to combine functional fabric with aesthetic qualities to enable our downstream brands to create fashionable, well-performing athleisure. More and more customers are preferring nice outfits with good performance, and so I think the trend will continue to grow."

Athleisure's main appeal is its adaptability to different activities. **Ms Alice Zhao, Sales Manager, Sales Department 5 of Henglun Textile**, stated that her company is taking that a step further, and integrating jeans as athleisure products: "With more demand for versatility and movement, our fabrics have to be more comfortable and stretchy, and combine the traditional with new trends. For instance, jeans are usually made of cotton – now we can make these products from nylon or polyester to increase their functionality, allowing people to run, do yoga, or walk their dog in jeans, straight after working in an office or having a meeting."



Functionality is one of buyers' key considerations when sourcing for athleisure products.



## Well-known luxury fabric suppliers altering offerings to align with changing trends

Over the past few decades, China has gone from an emerging economy to one of the world's economic powerhouses. Accompanying that has been an increase in the country's upper and middle classes, and a high rise in spending power. However, coinciding with the pandemic-assisted upsurge of athleisure, demand for luxury fabrics decreased. Despite their markets now showing signs of recovery, high-end fabric-makers have taken the chance to adapt.

**Mr Bob McAuley, President of HMS International, the parent company of Huddersfield Fine Worsteds**, has noted this long-term rise across many professional visits to China, commenting: "I have been coming to China for over 25 years, and I have seen a dramatic change from the beginning – there's a lot of wealth that's been generated here. Many of our products are in the higher end luxury category, and around the world, people are still spending in this segment. However, it's in the medium range, where we also aim to be, in which people are being more cautious. At Intertextile Apparel, we've received many client visits, especially on the first day, but it might take slightly longer to get back to pre-pandemic highs. Because of the pandemic, casual clothing has been more prominent, so we are reintroducing more cotton and linen fabrics for semi-casual, comfortwear, and other related categories, in alignment with our customers who are making more of this type of clothing."

**Ms Helena Cui, Sales Director of Vitality Superfine Cloth, and agent for Vitale Barberis Canonico (VBC)**, commented on the state of the Chinese market and its current effect on VBC: "For the past few years there has been more of a drive for Chinese consumers towards high-end clothing. Younger consumers are more interested in Chinese brands. VBC also sells a lot of fabric to domestic brands, so this trend has not affected us negatively. In response to the athleisure trend, we have been developing more sport and outdoor fabric, giving rise to our new label OFFLIMITS. VBC's products are made using wool, a very natural raw material. In addition, we reuse waste fabrics as an important sustainability initiative, and we utilise natural dyes for our wools."



Intertextile Apparel's Premium Wool Zone is a popular destination for fabric sourcing.

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## *Rising sustainability important for domestic and international markets and brands*

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All over the world, sustainability has emerged not just as a trend, but as a fundamental requirement for a habitable planet. With consumers demanding action, and governments changing regulations, multiple industries are changing their approach to business. The textile sector, although adapting, has much work to do for it to become a more circular industry. However, many companies are making strides in the right direction.



Functional fabrics have a wide range of end uses in the apparel sector.



“To integrate sustainability into functional fabrics, we use bio-based materials as our products’ main feature, and all of our growth products are sustainable,” said Ms Hu. “You need to invest a lot into R&D for eco-friendly innovation. Consumers in China are more willing to buy products with sustainable roots – I believe more companies will offer these kinds of products, but we remain the leader. For one example, we use mint oil as a raw material. For another, we convert recycled jeans into a cellulosic yarn, AeonIQ™, which is a completely biodegradable polyester and nylon substitute.”

Mr Haseltine, meanwhile, commented that the industry should be approaching sustainability from a holistic perspective: “Textiles is one of the top polluters in the world, so absolutely the industry needs to improve its sustainability. The question is, what are the right paths forward? I think you have to do a number of different things. Not only recycling, not only bio-based materials; you have to really do everything all together to reduce the waste that the textile industry produces.”

To read a recent in-depth Intertextile Apparel case study specifically pertaining to transparency, sustainability, and social responsibility in the textile industry, [click here](#).

## What other key trends have emerged since the pandemic?

A socially distanced public led to novel challenges for textile producers and fashion brands, with mass gatherings put on hold, and the internet and social media playing an even larger role than usual.

“Compared to the generation of the late 80s and early 90s in China, when we were more interested in foreign brands, the younger generation is more accepting of domestic brands,” remarked Ms Zhen. “One reason is improving quality, and another is changing culture and customer behaviour, with the internet having a strong effect over the past few years. Online sales channels have increased since the pandemic, and are convenient for helping customers understand key concepts. If they only go to the store, customers may not fully grasp the products’ benefits, whereas on social media brands need to grab the audience’s attention by communicating specific stories and characteristics. Advertising on social media is also much more targeted.”

Meanwhile, the tolling of long-delayed wedding bells has had its own effect on the industry. “Business is in the recovery phase. A lot of the fabrics we have been selling are wedding-related, in many countries – even in China,” said Mr McAuley. “Our bamboo fabric especially, which is more targeted towards weddings, is doing very well globally. I was just talking to a customer here from Shanghai, and he said a lot of his business has also come from weddings. This boom is a worldwide phenomenon after the two-year pause from the pandemic, and we anticipate it to continue for another year. We only supply the fabric, but clients are lining up and supposedly all the venues are fully booked.”

Ascend, HeiQ, Henglun, Huddersfield, VBC, and Yu Yuang all exhibited at this year’s Intertextile Shanghai Apparel Fabrics – Spring Edition. The fair took place from 28 – 30 March 2023 at the National Exhibition and Convention Center (Shanghai), and was held concurrently with Intertextile Shanghai Home Textiles – Spring Edition, Yarn Expo Spring, CHIC, and PH Value.

The fair is co-organised by Messe Frankfurt (HK) Ltd; the Sub-Council of Textile Industry, CCPIT and the China Textile Information Centre.

For more details on this fair, please visit: [www.intertextileapparel.com](http://www.intertextileapparel.com). Information regarding the international textile sector and Messe Frankfurt’s textile fairs worldwide can be found at: [www.texpertise-network.com](http://www.texpertise-network.com).

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Two mannequins showcasing athleisure’s balance between form and function.