

is to design a casual shoe that still retains the spirit of Roger Vivier," the designer added.

The Italian brand Casadei has employed this new way of thinking about heels into its latest bridal collection – a project spearheaded by Arianna Casadei, the daughter of creative director Cesare and the brand's new global marketing and communications director.

The idea is to offer women the opportunity to stay true to themselves on their big day, with a broader offer of flats, sandals, mid-height-heel slingbacks and even white cowboy boots.

"The bridal market is getting more complicated in terms of demand. If you look at what brides are wearing today, it has nothing to do with what our mothers or grandmothers were wearing. In the past, if you were getting married you'd wear plain satin pumps but now it's not up to us to choose which box to put a bride in," Casadei said. At the same time she is also holding onto tradition, including a special, made-to-order version of the brand's signature Blade stiletto featuring real diamond dust.

Newer labels are also seizing the moment, and building businesses on low-heel foundations.

Midnight 00 designer Ada Kokosar has been one of the pioneers in the field. "We, as women, have so many things to handle, we are multitasking more and more, so comfort shouldn't just be considered a trend or an option, but a standard," said Kokosar, whose collections of fantasy, modern-day Cinderella slippers feature easy-to-walk-in heels. They have been quickly embraced by big luxury retailers globally. Most recently, they also made an appearance at the Met Gala's new camp-themed exhibition.

"Never would I have imagined that we'd have a set of trainers in the collection, but that's where fashion...is at the moment. You can't ignore that."

SANDRA CHOI, JIMMY CHOO

"It's fundamental for us to make the heels as comfortable as possible," added Kokosar, pointing to the cushioning that is often added into her shoes and the process of creating multiple layers using draped silk and PVC over leather that act as padding and help mold the shoe to the foot.

Jennifer Chamandi, another up-and-coming name in footwear, has built her brand around her own experiences: She went from wearing towering heels on trading floors to visiting factories.

She put all her efforts into creating a comfortable stiletto. It comes with a 100-mm heel and a strap that wraps around the foot: "I've worn heels for half of my life and know exactly where it hurts, so we adapted our shoe molds accordingly. My highest heel, without a platform, is 100-mm as this is the highest women can wear without arching the foot too much and having lower back pain. A high heel will never be a sneaker, but there are ways to make it comfortable and that has been my mission."

Chamandi has since translated her signature shape onto mid-heels and flats.

"I introduced flats just 18 months

after launching my brand, as it became apparent very quickly that there was strong demand. Since then, buyers have increased the number of flat styles and quantities they have bought into each season," she added.

A flurry of other, young contemporary brands have been flooding the market with elegant, modernist designs featuring mid-heels, which often come in architectural shapes ranging from glass spheres to wooden cones. Neous, Rejina Pyo, Reikenen and Jacquemus have been among the most popular names, while a number of contemporary handbag labels are also entering the market, namely Wandler and Manu Atelier, whose flair for color-blocking, modernist square-toe silhouettes and luxe leathers offered at appealing price points got customers hyped up long before launch.

For more established names with a reputation in making glamorous high heels, transitioning into this new era doesn't mean ditching heels or famous signature styles altogether, but making them available in a bigger variety of heel heights.

"Part of the winning formula is when the customer can get the same silhouette in anything from a 100 mm heel down to 45mm," said Ida Petersson, women's and men's wear buying director at Browns. "Manolo Blahnik, Gianvito Rossi and Jimmy Choo have always had an amazing selection of lower heels."

"When it comes to very special, fashion-forward high heels, there is definitely a specific customer for them," von der Goltz said.

That rings particularly true at Moda Operandi, which is best known for its roster of wealthy clients: "The more special or emotional the shoe, the faster it sells," said Lisa Aiken, the retailer's fashion director.

Sneakers remain big business, especially as they are now establishing themselves as core parts of any luxury wardrobe rather than niche products reserved for streetwear aficionados.

"The biggest shift in the luxury sector is the move toward sneakers. What was previously 'borrowed from the boys' or primarily reserved for the young streetwear clientele is now a thriving business with category-specific brands such as Common Projects or Golden Goose," said Petersson, adding that for brands like Alexander McQueen and Balenciaga, sneakers are now the main drivers of footwear sales.

That's why Browns wanted to stand behind the booming category in a big way, with the launch of Sneaker Beast, a monthlong celebration of sneaker culture highlighting its broader offer, as well as new partnerships with reseller Stadium Goods.

Selfridges has also dedicated a gallery in its famous shoe department to showcase "the full spectrum of sneakers" in its offer and to cater to its customers who are now also looking for sneakers for work, as dress codes become less refined.

"Heels remain desirable but what's shifted is that classic court heels and more conservative styles are no longer necessarily the key styles customers go for when it comes to shoes for work. The traditional formal approach to workwear is changing and sneakers are more acceptable," said Eleanor Robinson, head of accessories at Selfridges.

The overall market is growing and customers are buying into both: "When looking at overall sales, it looks more like an increase in demand for shoes as a whole has taken place, with heels remaining steady. But when you break it down, high heels have taken a hit in sales from the rise in demand for heels that are 70-mm and below, driven by Dior, Prada or Manolo," Petersson added. ■



White and blue Louis Vuitton sneakers.

Study: Women's Sneaker Sales Outgrowing Men's

The women's market grew five times faster than men's from 2016 to 2017. BY OBI ANYANWU

Are women sneakerheads overtaking the men?

A new study from ForwardPMX found that women's sneaker sales growth is outpacing the men's sneakers market and has grown five times faster from 2016 to 2017.

The study – "The Here. The Now. Tomorrow. Sneakers." – analyzes sneaker consumption, brand and buying trends, and found that female sneaker buyers tend to have stronger opinions about sneakers.

Gen Z buyers – 69 percent of women versus 63 percent of men – "don't like wearing the same sneakers that a lot of other people are wearing." Generation X women buyers feel the strongest – 90 percent – about having a unique style compared to other groups.

Women's increased general interest in sneakers could be the result of a more active lifestyle or pop culture influences, or the two together. The latter in this case is supported by athletic companies like Nike, Adidas and Puma making pop stars and top influencers their brand ambassadors.

Puma started the trend through its partnership with Rihanna that birthed the Fenty Puma Creepers, which won Shoe of the Year at WWD sister publication Footwear News, and later tapped Kylie Jenner to front its campaigns before she jumped ship to Adidas. The German company also received promotion from Jenner's sister, Kendall, who became a brand ambassador in 2017, and Kim Kardashian, who continues to wear Yeezy sneakers to support her husband, Kanye West's, venture.

Nike – more specifically Jordan – increased their product focuses. Jordan collaborated with Aleali May on the Air Jordan I, VI and X, and partnered with Vogue to produce the first collaboration to be offered only to women.

Chris Paradyz, ForwardPMX chief growth

officer, believes the growth came from the rise in streetwear and the increased interest began as far as two years ago.

"The streetwear thing happened, and streetwear for women is not like streetwear for guys. But in women's fashion, streetwear showed up before men's non-streetwear clothing," he said. "The manufacturers realized that women want unisex styles and want some for their own."

Nike turned its attention to women with the launch of its Unlaced concept shop and online destination in early 2018 and tapped Martine Rose, Sarah Andelman and Yoon Ahn for collaborations. Some male shoppers also argue that Nike is saving better colorways for women's sizes. For instance, the women's version of the Nike Air Max 270 React in Bauhaus had been asked for by male shoppers at Kith in New York City on the July 3 launch date and at Sneakersnstuff.

"I think 2020 is the year of women in sneakers," he said. Paradyz doesn't foresee the women's market overtaking the men's market because, "so much of the volume is driven by sport and the top sports," but he added, "I think the growth rate will be stronger than men's for as far out as we can see. We're past the tipping point and barely rolling downhill and we're going to see interesting collaborations."

Though the global brand performance agency found higher growth in the women's market, its research found that men and women sneaker buyers, sneaker fans and sneakerheads think alike across generations. Male Boomer sneaker buyers and Millennial women sneaker buyers feel strongest that sneakers are more popular today than when they were young, and 80 percent of all sneaker buyers believe sneakers have a more positive perception than in the past.

Sneaker fans feel nostalgic about sneakers, are more

confident about their style and want their sneakers noticed before their outfit, while sneaker buyers care more about their perception on social media.

Millennials are the biggest sneaker enthusiasts, with the most male respondents in that segment believing sneakers are culturally important today and identifying with the statement, "When I am going out at night, I dress so that I'll look good on social media." Only 42 percent of sneaker buyers collectively agree with this statement. Also, Millennials were among the most to visit sneaker web sites every day.

The study also found that sneaker customizers and resellers influence consumers the most over brands, celebrities, influencers, designers, "community" and bots. Resellers are most popular with Millennial men and women and Generation X men.

Vans is the only sneaker brand to increase in search interest between 2016 and 2018, with Gen Z female sneaker buyers and fans believing most that Vans are "on the way up." The brand was also purchased most by Gen Z men and women. Fila showed the most year-over-year volume growth at 170 percent, followed by Allbirds at 66 percent and Greats, the recent Steve Madden acquisition, at 41 percent. As for all of the sneaker brands purchased in the last 12 months, Nike was purchased by more than two-thirds of all respondents, Adidas was purchased most by Millennial men and Gen Z women.

The research, conducted in partnership with National Research Group, categorized its respondents by purchase frequency. Sneaker buyers are people who bought two to four pairs of sneakers of the last year, sneaker fans bought five or more pairs over the last year, and sneakerheads are people willing to camp out for limited releases.