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INTELLIGENCE

# In London, Fashion Takes a Break from Brexit

BY SARAH KENT AND ZOE SUEN

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Leaving the European Union could have a disastrous effect. But even with the Halloween deadline for a deal looming large, the subject is decidedly out of fashion.



**LONDON, United Kingdom** — This London Fashion Week could be the last for the country as a member of the European Union. Yet as models stomped and sashayed down runways and across showrooms, Brexit was decidedly old news.

Ethereal puffs of tulle at [Molly Goddard](#) and a pearl-drenched riff on Irish folklore at [Simone Rocha](#) left little room for political navel-gazing. Even Halpern and [Victoria Beckham](#) — who showed their collections just a stone's throw from Parliament — made no reference to the subject.

That's in stark contrast to February's shows, when — with Brexit's original March deadline looming — the fractured politics of the day seemed a focal point. Months of delay, enacted after the UK's parliament refused to back a deal negotiated by former Prime Minister Theresa May, seem to have dulled interest.

And yet complacency is dangerous. After three years of negotiations, the UK is careening towards the current October 31st deadline to leave the EU with no deal on the table, an intransigent parliament and a leader who maintains he is determined not to seek another extension.

The uncertainty has [already affected businesses](#), who have had to contend with currency fluctuations and question marks over how to manage getting goods in and out of the country when and if Brexit happens. Experts say that's just a taste of what's to come if the UK crashes out without a deal, bringing with it a sharp increase in import and export costs and uncertainty over immigration policies.

[British Fashion Council](#) Chief Executive [Caroline Rush](#) has emphasised how challenging Brexit is for the industry, but said it wasn't affecting Fashion Week. "It is, as much as it can be, business as usual," she said in an interview with BoF.

In interviews, and over canapés and cocktails, industry insiders mainly shrugged when asked about politics, despite the looming deadline for the UK to leave the EU on October 31.

"All they want to do is scare us of course," said London-based designer Marta Jakubowski. "I hope it's going to bring us closer together and not apart."

Many say they have already done what they can after months, and even years, of preparing for an exit before the original deadline to leave the EU was extended from March. Others are just sick of thinking about how to prepare for something as ill-defined and difficult to anticipate as Brexit.

“The sector needs to understand that just because you’ve switched off and don’t want to talk about the nasty bogeyman in the room, that’s not the answer,” said Tamara Cincik founder and chief executive of Fashion Roundtable. “We have to deal with it.”

To be sure, keeping up with the endless cycle of Brexit drama is enough to give anyone whiplash. In the last month alone, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has controversially prorogued parliament, essentially forcing it into a prolonged recess that significantly limits MPs ability to debate any Brexit deal negotiated over the coming month. MPs, in turn, have legislated against a no-deal Brexit and removed the prospect of a snap October election, making it much harder for Johnson to deliver on his commitment to leave the EU on October 31st, no matter what.

And yet for all the drama, the fundamental situation remains unchanged: how, when, and even if, the UK will leave the EU are completely unresolved. That leaves businesses in a nightmarish limbo of uncertainty.

To be sure, there are opportunities here too, with international brands continuing to open new stores in the UK despite the uncertainty. Over the last few months, sustainable luxury brand [Gabriela Hearst](#), Danish contemporary player Ganni and LA-based Reformation have all launched new stores in the UK.

“The pound is so low that there are more shoppers than ever,” said Hearst during an interview at her [new London store](#). “We haven’t had a bad day.”

There’s no denying that a worst-case-scenario no-deal Brexit would be disastrous for the Fashion Industry. According to the BFC, a switch to World Trade Organisation rules, along with the tariffs and other associated expenses that entails, would [cost the industry nearly £900 million](#) (\$1.1 billion).

Assuming no change to the Brexit timeline, collections showing in London this September will hit stores after the UK has left the EU, leaving companies to second-guess how best to manage potential changes to trade and immigration rules.

Some 63 percent of clothing designers and 55 percent of UK-based luxury goods makers are involved in exports, and around 10,000 EU citizens are employed in the UK fashion industry, according to BoF and McKinsey's latest [State of Fashion report](#). Current trade in finished fashion goods between the EU and the UK is worth \$23 billion, or around 5 percent of the total European fashion market, the report found.

Earlier this year, companies like [Kering](#), LVMH and Harrods said they were stockpiling goods to mitigate any Brexit-related disruptions. Others have looked to move their warehousing and adjust their supply chains in an effort to reduce the risk of higher tariffs and customs-related delays.

The "logistical challenges are endless," the BFC's Rush said during the opening of London Fashion Week on Friday, before shifting the focus back to fashion itself. "At times like this though, it's the creativity and ideas that you're about to see over the next five days that will be a reassuring constant."

Indeed, far more attention was given this week to the [photogenic protests run by environmental activist group Extinction Rebellion](#) than to the looming challenges related to Brexit.

"To be honest one is more immediate than the other; one is business could be gone by Christmas," said Cincik. "In Whitehall, they're preparing for no deal, in Westminster they're preparing for a General Election, and in the fashion world, they're preparing for Extinction Rebellion."

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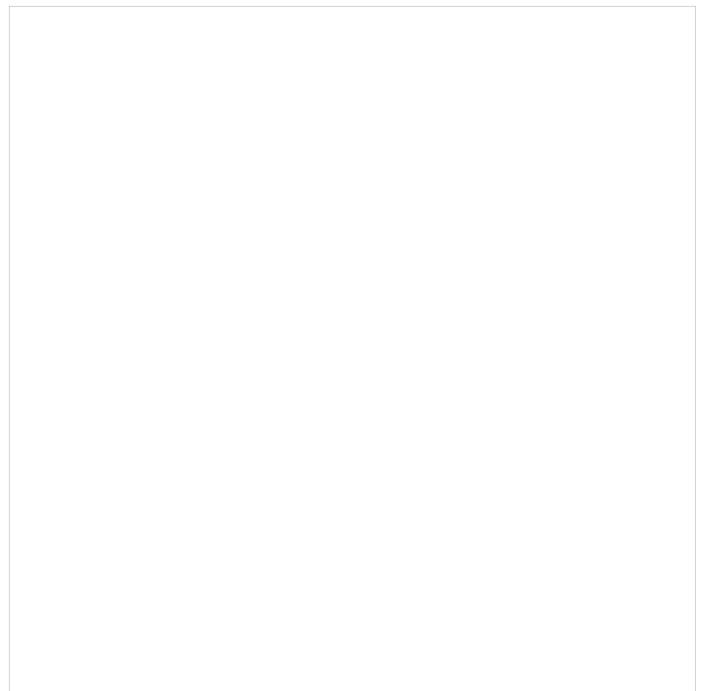
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