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THE NEXT CATEGORY OF FASHION BEING DISRUPTED? MEDICAL ATTIRE

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Courtesy of Clove


If you want to break the ice with a nurse, start talking to them about their shoes.

This might sound like questionable advice until you consider that many healthcare providers walk the equivalent of a marathon a week, and have to do so in footwear that's fluid-repellant, slip-resistant and up to uniform standards. (This, as you might imagine, rules out a lot of options.)

One style in particular tends to dredge up memories from those in the field: the first pair of regulation-white shoes they bought for nursing school. "It's typically like, 'Oh my gosh, I had to wear this dad sneaker that was the ugliest thing I've ever worn.' Or, 'I bought these white clogs, and as soon as I was done with nursing school, they never left my closet again,'" recalls Joe Ammon, founder of [Clove](#), a new direct-to-consumer footwear brand aimed specifically at medical workers.


When he and his team conducted their initial customer interviews, they'd always open with this question — and they had it in mind while designing [the brand's first shoe](#), a \$129 slip-on sneaker. Aside from being easy to clean, the shoe comes in four shades (white, black, gray and pink) and features minimal branding so as to not run afoul of any uniform codes.

Clove (which means "with love" in medical shorthand) launched only in late November, but it joins a




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[Figs](#), which launched in 2013, has in recent years [plastered ads across New York City](#) subways and Los Angeles billboards featuring attractive models in form-fitting scrubs next to tag lines like "[We Wanna Be On You](#)." It's opened pop-up shops — first in L.A. (down the street, the press release noted, from fellow buzzy startups Glossier, Away and Outdoor Voices) and then in New York. It generated [an estimated \\$100 million in sales](#) in 2018 and secured \$75 million in funding to ramp up its growth.

[Jaanuu](#) hit the market shortly after Figs "with the idea to become the most disruptive and most contemporary medical apparel brand in the world," says co-founder Shaan Sethi, who started the company with his pediatrician sister, Dr. Neela Sethi Young. The brand added gold zippers and peplum flounces to tops and designed bottoms cut like joggers and yoga pants, developing a signature aesthetic to which fans and [Instagram followers](#) have flocked.

While the company doesn't release revenue information, it [said](#) in 2018 that Jaanuu saw multiple \$500,000 revenue days that year and expected sales to double in 2019. It has also raised more than \$25 million in funding from investors including the Nordstrom family and Cult Capital (formerly JMK Consumer Growth Partners), a growth equity firm whose portfolio includes [sunscreen disruptor Supergoop](#) and clean cosmetics brand Lawless.

As these stakeholders indicate, fashion and e-commerce executives are seeing the potential in medical apparel — a market that's [reportedly worth](#) \$60 billion globally and \$10 billion in the U.S.

At a time of widespread uncertainty and upheaval in retail, the healthcare industry is regarded as a far surer bet than most categories. Registered nurses, home health aides and medical and nursing assistants are all among [the fastest-growing occupations](#) in the U.S. According to projections by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there will be more than 3.4 million RNs in 2028, up from about 3 million in 2018.

While some hospitals and medical institutions provide scrubs to employees, experts say the majority of medical professionals buy their own, opening the door for brands to engage with consumers directly. One place they're doing so is on social media, where doctors and nurses are increasingly active, documenting #medlife on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok and other platforms. Today's brands have the opportunity to reach millions of potential customers through both sponsored and organic posts. (Figs, for instance, has 200 ambassadors that it compensates solely with free scrubs, according to [Refinery29](#), and its hashtag [#wearfigs](#) has been used nearly 40,000 times.)

Companies are also leveraging this virality to reach institutional clients: In June, Jaanuu announced that it had signed a deal to become the exclusive uniform provider for BronxCare, one of the country's largest not-for-profit hospital systems, with more than 4,000 employees. Its focus is still on connecting with individual consumers online, says Sethi, but Jaanuu expects this ground-level excitement to eventually find its way to administrators. "That would allow folks like the chief nursing officer at BronxCare to reach out and say, 'Hey, there's so much demand at the employee level because they're seeing you on social media and seeing you around town. We now want to outfit the entire network,'" he says.

Despite the growing buzz around brands like Jaanuu and Figs, they're still competing against an array of established companies — many of which are likewise doubling down on their design and social media efforts. They also, unsurprisingly, contest the idea that the industry wasn't doing anything innovative until DTC startups came along.



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One of these companies, Barco, has been around since 1929 and licenses the Skechers and "Grey's Anatomy" brands in addition to producing scrubs under its proprietary label. One in three healthcare professionals in the U.S. has purchased Barco-made scrubs, it says, and the company has doubled in size in the past nine years without any outside funding.

"We've always been at the forefront of delivering amazing products that fit the needs [of healthcare professionals]," says David Murphy, Barco's president and CEO. "I think some of the upstarts, what they've done is they've captured the storytelling from a digital perspective and they've done a very nice job with that."

The story these newer brands have sold — of innovation and of serving those who serve others — is also Barco's story, according to Murphy. Its "Grey's Anatomy" brand, a real-life line inspired by a fictional TV show, was indeed a novelty when it launched in 2006. It has since become the top-selling line of premium medical scrubs in the country, the company says. (Barco recently extended its deal with ABC to keep licensing the name of the medical drama — now in its 16th season — through 2027.)

Like most of the industry, however, Barco's business is wholesale-based, and you won't recognize its brand name from quippy podcast ads or subway posters. Figs and Jaanuu have been so successful in part because, by speaking to healthcare professionals directly, they've created brands that consumers identify with and aspire to be a part of. That's a more difficult task when your interactions are mediated by a third-party retailer.

Marketing, though, has also landed Figs in hot water of late. Last February, Strategic Partners Inc. — an industry heavyweight that controls an estimated 40% of the U.S. scrubs market — sued Figs for allegedly making "false and misleading claims" about its products' antimicrobial properties. (Figs did not respond to Fashionista's interview requests.) The case between SPI and Figs is still ongoing, but it illustrates the current tension between the industry's entrenched players and the insurgent brands coming in flush with marketing dollars to spend.

A similar situation is unlikely to unfold in footwear, a market currently dominated on one side by clog makers like Dansko and Crocs and on the other by athletic brands who (with some recent exceptions) aren't specifically catering to their needs.

"You see a lot of health care providers still wearing an athletic shoe, usually out of comfort and habit, because that's what they're used to," says Paulsgrove. "But you don't often find an athletic shoe that is actually suited to be worn in the healthcare industry."

In December, Nike made its first foray into the market with the [Air Zoom Pulse](#), a \$120 sneaker "designed to meet the needs of nurses and doctors who spend long days on their feet." The style quickly sold out, however, and the brand says it has no news yet about whether it will produce more in the future.

As for Clove, Ammon says the company is focused most on listening to its customers — including his wife, who works as a nurse. In her case, scrubs were provided to her at work, so the few items she and her colleagues could express themselves with were water bottles and shoes.

The goal with Clove, says Jordyn Amoroso, the company's chief brand officer, is to give medical professionals something that "gets them excited to wake up and put something on their feet that they're proud to wear."

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