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# Elizabeth Holmes's Trial Attire—Yes to Diaper Bags, No to Turtlenecks

The former Theranos CEO has adopted a soft new look—which diverges from her previous black-turtleneck uniform—as a defendant in her criminal trial



Elizabeth Holmes arrives for the opening arguments of her criminal trial on Sept. 8 flanked by her mother Noel Holmes and her partner Billy Evans.

PHOTO: PETER DASILVA/REUTERS



By

[Rory Satran](#)

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**IN 2014 AND 2015**, Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes appeared on the covers of *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Inc.*, *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, *Bloomberg Businessweek* and *Glamour*. The photographs on these magazine covers are almost identical. On each, she wears her

signature black turtleneck, inspired by her late idol Steve Jobs, who'd long favored a version by designer Issey Miyake. Her blonde hair is in a chignon, and her gaze is steady. Ms. Holmes's look was so recognizable that it's still a popular Halloween costume, and it has even spawned ironic merch with her visage on it. (One T-shirt says, "Fake it 'till you make it.")

Ms. Holmes stuck rigidly to that self-serious personal branding during most of her time running Theranos from 2003 to 2018. The Wall Street Journal first reported on problems with Theranos's blood-testing technology in 2015, and the company shut down in 2018. Since then, Ms. Holmes has ditched her all-black CEO uniform, adopting a more subdued wardrobe heavy on athleisure (when she's not at Burning Man, where she was photographed in 2018 wearing rose-tinted sunglasses and a fuzzy white coat). It befits her new status as a former tech titan facing criminal charges for defrauding investors and patients. But the turtlenecks have proved indelible: During the jury selection process, as the Journal reported, all that one potential juror remembered of the coverage about Ms. Holmes was her "penchant for turtlenecks."



Elizabeth Holmes, pictured here in 2015, was almost always photographed in a black turtleneck like this one while she was running Theranos.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

In her court appearances leading up to her criminal trial in San Jose, Calif., which started Wednesday, Ms. Holmes has introduced a soft, professional yet accessible look that bears little in common with her turtleneck period. She was mobbed by photographers at the courthouse when she arrived for the opening arguments in a cream pin-tucked blouse underneath a grayish blue knee-length skirt suit. (Among the crowd at the courthouse was a group of blonde women who appeared to be dressed like Ms. Holmes in her former all-black uniform, sparking a Twitter trending topic.) On Aug. 31, for the jury selection, she wore a dark V-neck dress and fitted blazer. In the place of her no-nonsense chignon is now a hairstyle with soft waves around her face. The outfits she's chosen recently might look more at home at a Midwestern insurance office than in a Silicon Valley boardroom.

What Ms. Holmes wears to the courtroom could be integral to her defense. Dr. Geri E. Fischman, a senior trial consultant at Focus Litigation Consulting in Miami, who is not part of Ms. Holmes's team,

said, “Trial attire, personal branding, these kinds of things, are part of really effective litigation. The most effective trial attorneys, criminal and civil, are storytellers, so they want to paint a picture for jurors in a narrative form, and then they want to supplement that story with confirming evidence.” The way Ms. Holmes presents herself is part of that confirming evidence. Lawyers for the prosecution and the defense didn’t respond to requests for comment.



For his 2017 trial for securities fraud in Brooklyn, Martin Shkreli, second from right, replaced his arraignment hoodie with a button-up.

PHOTO: MARK LENNIHAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Throughout the years, other high-profile, white-collar criminal defendants have used the courtroom to telegraph a strategic image to bolster their defense. In 2009, when Bernie Madoff pleaded guilty to defrauding investors, he ditched his whimsical \$400+ Belgian Shoes loafers for more staid shoes in the courtroom. As Dr. Fischman said, “Particularly in cases

involving financial fraud, all of the expensive accoutrements need to go.” But one must be reasonably polished. In 2017, when the former pharmaceutical executive Martin Shkreli went on trial for and was ultimately convicted of securities fraud, he notably replaced his go-to hoodie and jeans with a button-down and slacks.

Court filings show that part of Ms. Holmes’s defense may be to claim abuse by her former business and romantic partner Sunny Balwani, indicating that he allegedly controlled what she ate, when she slept and how she dressed. Mr. Balwani’s lawyer has denied any allegation of abuse. In Wednesday’s opening statements, one of Ms. Holmes’s lawyers, Lance Wade said that “relying on Mr. Balwani as her primary adviser was one of her mistakes.” Dr. Fischman explained how her previous style could undermine such testimony: “She’s known for her signature black turtleneck, and that was her uniform, as this entrepreneurial tech genius in her 20s, and that uniform kind of comes off as a bit alpha and domineering, which does not comport with who she is presenting herself as in terms of her defense,” the outside trial consultant said.

Although many of the court attendees in San Jose appeared to be wearing black face masks, Ms. Holmes along with her new partner, the

hotel heir Billy Evans, and her mother, Noel Holmes, have chosen conspicuously light-blue ones. Mr. Evans also wore a coordinating pale-blue tie, and Noel Holmes was wrapped in a baby-blue twinset. Some commentators said the shade might be a subtle nod to her and Mr. Evans's son, born in July. In the opening statements, Ms. Holmes's lawyers noted that she had a baby son at home and that her mother was present in the courtroom.

Last week, Ms. Holmes was photographed entering the courthouse wearing a leather diaper bag by the company Freshly Picked. The backpack-style diaper bag—which retails for \$175—will be recognizable to some parents. By contrast, Ms. Holmes was rarely photographed with a bag or purse of any type in her high-flying Theranos days, except for a small satin clutch for black-tie events.



On Aug. 31, Elizabeth Holmes carried a Freshly Picked diaper bag to the San Jose courthouse for the jury selection process.

PHOTO: ETHAN SWOPE/GETTY IMAGES

One key word is “accessible,” noted Ethan Bearman, a Los Angeles attorney and the co-host of the Law Junkie Show podcast, which recently discussed Ms. Holmes's trial. The diaper bag would be preferable to “Hermès or Balenciaga,” he said. “It’s about the jurors being able to relate to her now, as opposed to her being this untouchable youngest self-made female billionaire ever.”

Leading up to the trial, just how much of Ms. Holmes's lifestyle would become part of the proceedings was contested. U.S. District Judge Edward Davila ruled in May that while “the government may introduce evidence that Holmes enjoyed a lifestyle as Theranos CEO that is comparable to those of other tech company CEOs, [including] salary, travel, celebrity, and other perks and benefits commensurate with the position,” they may not refer to specific purchases or brands of clothing or “other personal items.” Regardless of how much of this

detail is referenced in court, each appearance offers Ms. Holmes an opportunity to counter an image of excess.

What should we expect as the trial progresses? That baby-blue mask may eventually come off, as Ms. Holmes's lawyers have stated that she has a "strong preference" to go maskless in the courtroom. And Amy Bearman, a Los Angeles educator and coach and the co-host with her husband Mr. Bearman of the Law Junkie Show, said that Ms. Holmes's "jumping-the-shark moment would be if she pulled out glasses or a headband, because those seem to be the court accessories that are just classic." She pointed to actress Winona Ryder wearing a headband during her 2002 trial for shoplifting, which she was found guilty of. Ms. Bearman said that those librarian-type accessories communicate "trust, intelligence, innocence."

Whatever Ms. Holmes chooses to wear, it likely won't be accidental. As Dr. Fischman explained, "Trial attire should never be what you are focusing on primarily, but it shouldn't be completely overlooked either. It's just one more piece of the puzzle."

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