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The Hemline Index – if skirt lengths could talk

Posted on October 31, 2017July 9, 2023 by [fuselagefashion](#)

Today's post is about the lengths of skirts, a topic that came up during a conversation at the university where I lecture. Have you ever heard about the "Hemline Index"?

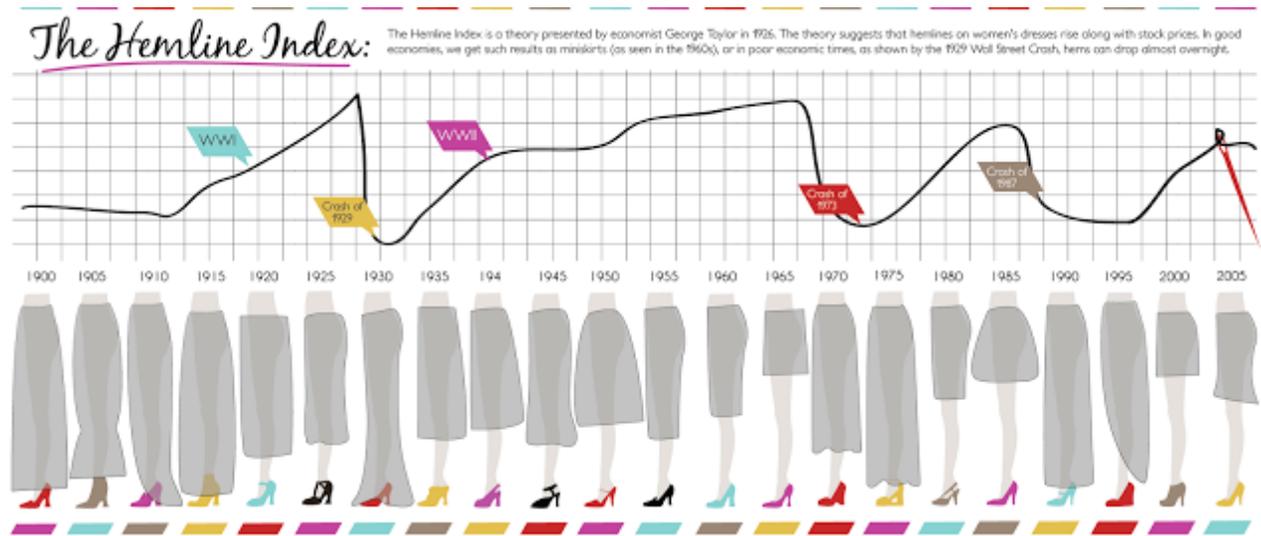


(<https://fashionblogga.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/miniskirt.jpg>).

This index, originally from the 1920s insists that skirt lengths increase or decrease depending on the social, political and financial state in the world (or a part of the world, mostly Western). This theory was brought forward by the economist Prof. George Taylor who was at Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.

It postulates that when the economy does well, hemlines move up to match the feel-good vibe of the period, only to drop down with recessions, reflecting the somber mood of empty bank accounts. (Komar, 2020 (<https://www.instyle.com/fashion/clothing/what-is-the-hemline-index-real/>))

Below is a graphic, trying to connect the theory to the different decades between 1900 and 2005.



(<https://fashionblogga.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/c83da6eb626d45a6d78ce5906106e02c.png>)

Many researchers have challenged the index to prove it or disapprove of it and I'd say that the results are inconclusive.



Image: A woman in a Victorian dress with a floor-length skirt.

The Women's History Network (2013) states that "according to the 1927 Hemline Index, the length of our ancestors skirt or dress could actually indicate a country's wealth, prosperity and general wellbeing of the time. Here's a run through of the ups and downs of hemlines throughout the 20th and 21st century."

From long Victorian to short Flapper skirts:

 Flappers - HISTORY

Image: A typical Flapper in the 1920s

In the 1920s, and WWI, women were still wearing Victorian and prudish skirts of ample lengths, only to switch to much shorter "Flapper" hemlines and a wild lifestyle.



Image: 1930s outfit with longer skirt. An African American woman posed next to car on Mulford Street, Homewood (Pittsburgh, PA), c. 1937 Photo Credit: Teenie Harris Archive, 1920-1970 © Carnegie Museum of Art.

In the 1930s, with the Great Depression, modesty was back in style, as represented by Hollywood's leading ladies Garbo, Jean Harlow and Bette Davis.

Delayed austerity and long skirts of the 1940s to 1950s:



Image: 1940s outfit with a skirt just down below the knees

The 1940s were an interesting moment, because skirts were capped at the knee in order to save fabric for the military but this was dictated by the governments and not a liberal choice of women. It was scandalous when, from 1947 Dior brought out his “New Look” (courtesy of Ms Snow) that featured long skirts, full of volume and against the WWII austerity rules. In an interview with the American press, Dior defended his “New Look” by stating: “We want to forget all about the war. Fashion comes from a dream, and a dream is an escape from reality.” (Jones & Pouillard, 2018) Thus, the lengthy skirts stood in contrast to the austerity of the wartime.

 Fashion Theory: Christian Dior's New Look – Rarely Wears Lipstick

Image: The Bar Suit by Dior which was the launch of the “New Look”



Increasingly shorter skirts in the Swinging 60s:

As the Western world recovered from the post-war austerity measures, the skirts creped up again to a minimal length in the swinging 60s.



Image: Twiggy (and friends) in a mini in the 1960s

Back to the ground with long hippie skirts in the 1970s:

“Social and economic discontent increased by the ‘70s, with the onset of the Vietnam War, unexpected inflation and the embargo on oil in 1973. Stock values begun to slump and floor-length maxi skirts came back into fashion for the first time since the Depression. Laura Ashley was a popular designer with her peasant style smock dresses and tunics.”

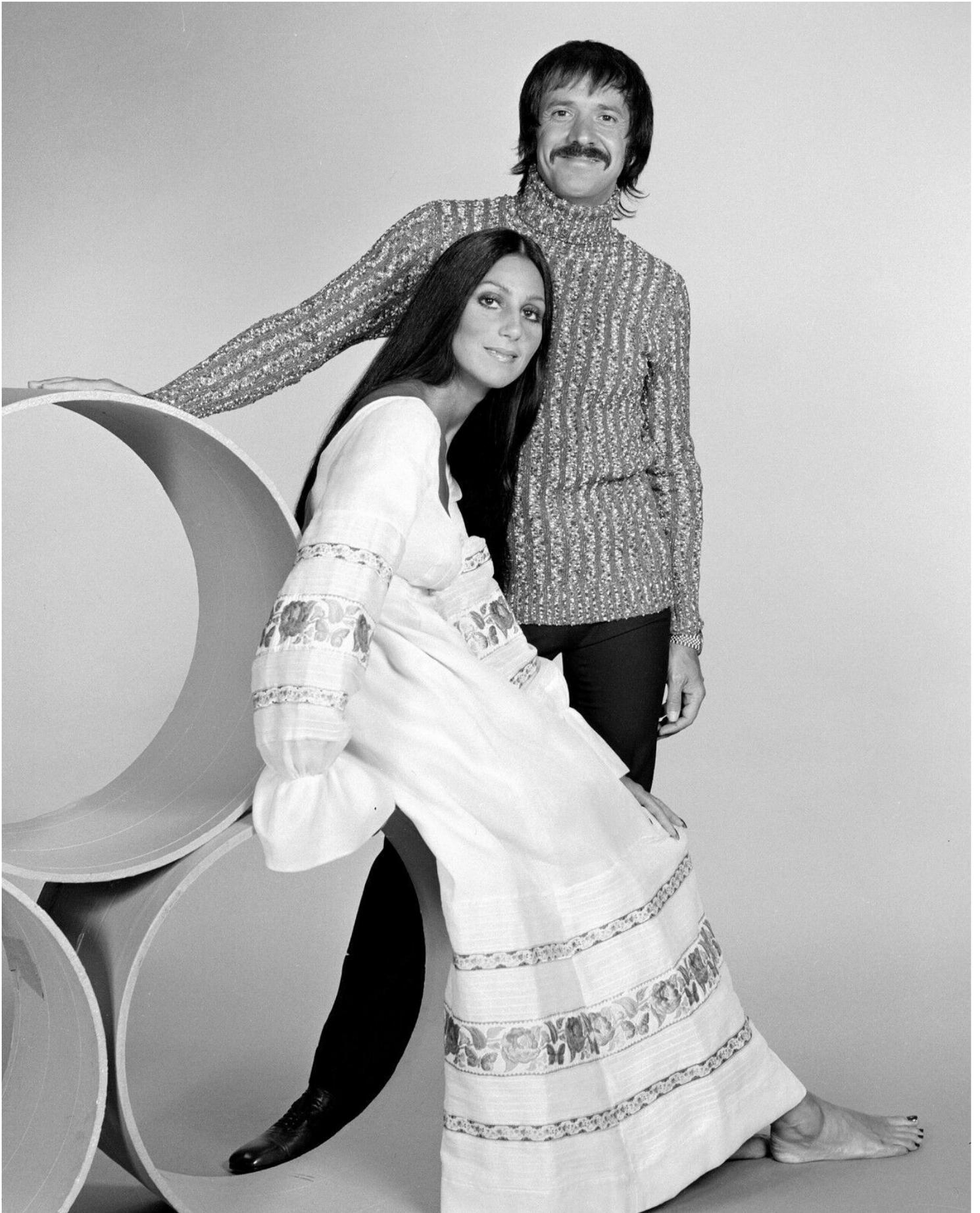


Image: Cher (with Sonny) in the 1970s

Shorter in the 1980s – but not too short!

In the 1980s there was women in business, power, shoulder pads and feminism. “(...) combined with a break away from fashions dictating only one stylish length, meant that skirt lengths differed for the first time and could be anything of your choice.”



Image: Ivana Trump in the 1980s

From the Naughties into the 21st century:

“As the world saw in the Naughties it also saw a major dip in everything from jobs, money, morale and hemlines at the hands of the recession. With the world economy in the grip of uncertainty, the trend for skirt lengths mirrors this ambiguity – whether maxi, midi, mini or anything in-between, it seems anything is in vogue right now.” Nina Koo-Seen-Lin (c) August 2013



Image: Hilary Banks from the Fresh Prince of Bel Air in the 1990s

We are now in the 21st century and our skirts seem to fluctuate with every season. Perhaps this is an expression of the economic instability that comes with our times, but also the freedom of expression and experimentation which new designers show on the catwalks.



Image: Jacquemus skirt after 2020.

What do you think?

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