
The Hemline Economy

THE shorter the skirt the stronger the economy, at least that's how the theory goes. So maybe it's no wonder that lower hems have emerged as the theme of this year's international fashion shows



1950s - The time of Marilyn Monroe skirts began to rise

Perhaps it was his way of giving economics a wider appeal but in 1926 US economist George Taylor coined the theory of the hemline index. It was a kind of frock exchange using skirt lengths as a signal of the state of the economy so that lower hemlines coincided with a falling market.

Anyone applying this theory to the New York autumn/winter 2008 shows, which ended at the weekend, would predict that we are hurtling towards a recession. Hemlines at Marc Jacobs, Jonathan Saunders and Phillip Lim were all resolutely below the knee – a clear indication of belt tightening, both fashionable and not so fashionable.

Looking back over the decades it is easy to see why the connection has been made: a glimpse of leg gives a sense of independence and confidence; a sweeping skirt is a sign of modesty and austerity.



1990s - Plummeting house prices and Kate Moss starts modelling

In the Twenties, hemlines rose along with stock prices. Sonnet Stanfil, fashion curator of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, says: “The decade spelled economic freedom. Women threw off the shackles of the heavily-corseted Edwardian period and hemlines became dramatically shorter for the first time.”

DON'T MISS

POWERED BY  **manti**

In 1929 the Wall Street Crash brought boom time to an abrupt close and hems dropped almost overnight. During the Depression, mass unemployment meant it was not the time to experiment with cutting edge designs so skirts remained reassuringly long and subtly feminine. In 1939 the outbreak of war and subsequent fabric shortages, bucked the trend and brought a need for a practical skirt length – on the knee.

**The decade spelled
economic freedom**

Sonnet Stanfil

In 1947, Christian Dior's New Look, with its lavish use of material in the full skirts, mirrored the new sense of optimism. Through-out the Fifties, the time of Marilyn Monroe, skirts slowly began to rise, reflecting the steady upward path of share prices.

In the mid-Sixties, Mary Quant's brash mini, made famous by Twiggy, marked a booming economy and a new-found freedom, whereas the onset of feminism and a slumping market in the Seventies meant that skirt hems dropped to the floor once more.

By the mid-Eighties, and sported by Cindy Crawford, they were shorter than ever when shares reached new heights, until the recession of the early Nineties when rising interest rates and plummeting house prices gave birth to grunge and Kate Moss started modelling.

As the 2000s dawned and computer systems coped with the new millennium, markets stayed up and so hemlines followed. But the first decade of the 21st century has generally been defined by uncertainty and fluctuation, from the return of the mini, courtesy of Christopher Kane, to the more austere midi showing on catwalks now.

Is this a sign of economic downturn? Or maybe constantly changing what is fashionable is the industry's way of forcing us to spend more.