

## Style

## The hem is plunging: will the market follow?



Jo Ellison

## Fashion

First identified in 1926 by the economist George Taylor, The Hemline Index draws an anecdotal association between economic prosperity and shorter skirt lengths. It has since become a popular marker for an industry keen to draw parallels between the current fashions and the world's general financial health.

In subsequent years, the theory has been roundly dismissed, by feminists, by academics, and by Martin Wolf, the Financial Times' chief economics commentator, who insists he "has never seen any research substantiating it". It's perhaps mere coincidence then, that in the week the Conservative government prepared to usher in a new wave of austerity cuts and the world watched Greece play brinkmanship with the IMF over the deadline to repay €750m, the maxi skirt emerged as 2015's most significant trend.

It started in Palm Springs, at the Louis Vuitton cruise show, where Nicolas Ghesquière introduced a "new fluidity and lightness" to the tribe of women who swept his desert catwalk in long, flowing gowns and skirts. At a party the next weekend, the majority of women I spoke to had opted to "go long". At Dior Cruise, in Cannes on Monday, the *pièce de résistance* was a simple cream silk maxi dress (right) which just grazed the ankle. Whether or not skirt length is the



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harbinger of some ghastly financial meltdown, it is an interesting trend. For one, it has been a triumph of consumer choice rather than catwalk direction. Yes, the new length (which, height depending, hovers somewhere between the lower shin and ankle, rather than trails the floor) was much in evidence on the spring catwalk, but it was more a subtle presence than a star trend. The style's subsequent success, therefore, has been largely generated by consumers who simply like the new length.

There are currently 150 full-length skirts available on Net-a-Porter, three times as many as last year. Maxi-length skirts made up 25 per cent of this season's buy, and their sales have doubled this year. Next season, the longer length will become even more dominant — especially at Gucci, where new designer Alessandro Michele announced a dramatic new era at the house with a collection of skirts and dresses that fell far below the knee.

Surprisingly versatile, the long look follows two aesthetics. The first is feminine and romantic: as at Chloé (pictured, far left), where the maxis are all billowing, sheer and sherbet-shaded (perfect for twenty-something moon children seeking inspiration for festival wear), and at Valentino and Erdem, where length was also unashamedly nostalgic.

"I think the longer length creates a modern silhouette, and it works as well for day as for night," explains Erdem

Moralioğlu, who took inspiration from Victorian adventurers and botanists for his SS15 collection, "I like this idea of covering one thing and revealing another; there's something about the leanness which makes it feel chic."

In the other camp are the minimalists, who have adopted the sinuous length as a modish alternative to the trouser/culotte trend of recent seasons. Here, the look is encapsulated by whispery stealth luxe labels like The Row and Céline — houses for grown-up women who abhor anything too girly. Crucially, both styles cover up unsightly knees, unshaven shins and all those ugly leg bits we'd rather not worry about; they work best with flat shoes — a blessing for anyone hoping to avoid a season wherein one's footwear double-duties as a lawn aerator — and they're deliciously comfortable.

Vogue fashion features director Sarah Harris explains: "There is a definite ease to the new longer lengths, which sounds like an oxymoron with all that fabric to handle, but the exacting length works perfectly with flats — be they a gladiator sandal or a pair of Stan Smith trainers. There's something quite sensual and dramatic about a maxi skirt, but pairing it with flats is the requisite foil: it suggests an element of nonchalance."

Harris, who has already invested in a white Rosetta Getty maxi shirtdress with apron skirt "which will take me everywhere this summer, from work, to evening events to holidays; it will

even work on the beach over a bikini", insists the key to the longer line is to avoid dressing it up too much. And, if a dress seems too overwhelming, then start with a skirt. "The most modern way is to wear it with a simple tee or white or blue pressed shirt," advises Harris. "The second it looks over-thought, it's dead."

Which is all very glamorous and lovely. But should so many plummeting hemlines be cause for financial consternation? Probably not. In 2010, a paper written by Marjolijn van Baardwijk and Philip Hans Franses, for the Econometric Institute at the Erasmus School of Economics, challenged the index by examining monthly data on the hemline between 1921-2009 and evaluating them against the National Bureau of Economic Research chronology of the economic cycle. The pair concluded: "The main finding is that the urban legend holds true but with a time lag of about three years. Hence, the current economic crisis predicts ankle length skirts around 2011 and 2012."

In other words: we're already out of the dark. Most likely, the 2015 hemline is a more accurate expression of a global market in which skirt lengths must appeal to broad cultural dress codes. But in the unlikely event this article does presage a major economic downturn, I called it here first — in a jersey maxi dress by Bottega Veneta.

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# Blues brothers

Given the sprightly cadence at which fashion operates, the striving for uniformity is not usually a designer's end game. Over the past few years, however, men have embraced a smart-casual uniform defined not by shape or silhouette or deferring to their wives' better judgment, but by one single colour: blue. In particular, one specific amalgam has gained prominence in men's wardrobes: the pale blue shirt and navy blazer or sports jacket (where the latter is sometimes transplanted for a navy crewneck sweater).

It's an understandable *gestalt*. Faced with a wardrobe of different options, the coupling of pale blue and navy is an easy and largely inoffensive one.

"The combination is rightly considered a classic," says Bruce Pask, Bergdorf Goodman's men's fashion director. "Neither of these components is ever going to become extinct."

Which may be true. But when one out-

**Trend** | Once a surefire smart-casual

solution, the pale blue shirt and navy jacket

approach is beginning to look a bit tired.

Ryan Thompson introduces the new hues

fit becomes a default setting — as seen on every metrosexual man on an evening out — could it be time to move on? "The classic cotton poplin shirt worn with a navy sweater or blazer might be a bit tired, but it's still relevant," argues Dean Gomilsek-Cole, head of design at shirt-maker Turnbull & Asser. "I think men just need to evolve the idea somewhat."

Recent menswear collections are

proving that such an evolution is gaining traction. First, designers have been keen to usher in a blue period that is altogether brighter and bolder (read cerulean, royal, powder, ultramarine, azure, cornflower and so on). While last year Italo Zuccherelli channelled artist James Turrell for Calvin Klein, featuring all of the aforementioned tones and often all at once, Issey Miyake took over the palette for SS15, incorporating hues of rich royal blue and azure from which he played with gradations, pinstripes, tropical prints and ink splats. Similar spectrum shake-ups were seen at Burberry, Dior and Louis Vuitton — which showed a cerulean double-breasted suit worn with a royal blue polo.

Of course, no one is expecting anyone to adopt the looks wholesale, but the introduction of a slightly bolder blue is one change that might make a big impact. "A brighter colour can certainly make classic menswear pieces feel more modern," says Toby Bateman, Mr Porter's buying director. "The trick is to ensure that the silhouette is clean and that there is no additional bulk or detail." It's advice not lost on Prince William, who was turned out neatly in a crisp white shirt and cobalt-blue V-neck sweater as he left the Lindo Wing of St Mary's Hospital two weeks ago (as opposed to the pale blue shirt he

For evening blues, look to George Clooney, who frequently opts for a midnight-blue suit and shirt

wore for Prince George's birth). Elsewhere, Junya Watanabe's SS15 collection was almost exclusively blue, featuring his signature patchworks in a beautiful collision of bold patterns and rectangular panels.

Stepping out like an Yves Klein canvas might not, however, be everyone's idea of unassuming elegance, particularly for evening engagements. "If I was invited to an elegant evening event, I would most definitely wear a midnight blue," says Italian designer Brunello Cucinelli. "But if the occasion was more informal, and perhaps in the daytime, I would opt for a more coloured blue, perhaps even mixing different hues." For a lesson in



how to wear evening blues, look to George Clooney, who frequently opts for a midnight-blue suit and shirt.

Darren Skey, head of menswear at Harvey Nichols in London, believes the success of a monochromatic look rests on the ability of the wearer to layer well. "Many brands are concentrating on a three-tiered layered look that incorporates technical and design-led details. So a mix of short and long hemlines, fabrications and textures will create a much more interesting variation," he says. "Navy on navy is a really sharp and sophisticated look, too, provided you define the layers with different tones and textures."

Thom Whiddett, one half of the bespoke tailors Thom Sweeney, agrees careful selection is key. He believes blue on blue "can still look good if you've got a beautiful sweater with an interesting weave, or a shirt with a sharp collar, or a sports jacket in a luxury fabric and that fits immaculately. But if there's nothing special about any of these elements, then you just look like a sloppy school teacher."

But it's about more than simple suiting. The second march of change is being led by the influence of "sports luxe", the aesthetic ushered in by designers such as Alexander Wang, Riccardo Tisci, and Dao-Yi Chow and Maxwell Osborne of Public School NYC, all of whom are now at the helm of big houses (Balenciaga, Givenchy and DKNY, respectively). Together, they have helped transform not just smart-casual attire but also tailoring. "When you compare what men were wearing 25 years ago to what they're wearing today, there has been a remarkable relaxation of the sartorial rules," says Pask. "We might cycle in and out of smaller trends, but generally speaking we are moving in a more casual direction."

One such casual invasion that appears destined for the mainstream is the polo shirt worn with a suit or sports jacket, first spotted in earnest last June at Pitti Uomo, the Florentine trade show of menswear where fashions often steer dangerously close to self-parody. "Polo shirts in luxury fabrics are without doubt one of the styles that are really dominating at the moment," says Pask.

While a navy polo from Lacoste errs on the side of being too casual, Bateman recommends brands such as Berluti and Loro Piana, whose fine-gauge merino-wool styles work well beneath an unlined and unstructured summer jacket. For the younger man, Skey suggests seeking out sportswear-influenced fabrics. "Lanvin's neoprene and cotton polo shirts, or Givenchy's printed panelled polos really stand out," he says.

With menswear, small adjustments make a big difference. And whether it be a periwinkle polo shirt, a midnight blue evening suit or simply an update on the classic navy sweater. All you have to do is find your hue.

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From top, left to right: SS15 looks for Dior, Louis Vuitton and Fendi; David Cameron votes in the blue shirt and navy jacket look; George Clooney in the blue shirt and navy jacket look; Prince William in white shirt and cobalt-blue sweater

Catwalking: Getty

