Skirt Length Theory: the Impact of Perceived Financial Status on Skirt Length Preference

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ABSTRACT
The belief that there is a relationship between skirt length and the state of the economy is strongly established among laypeople. In this paper, we examine the impact of the perception of financial status on skirt length preference. Using the “Environmental Security Hypothesis” as a theoretical framework, we predict that people will prefer short to long skirts when they perceive their financial status as good. Two experiments demonstrate that consumers’ preference for short (vs. long) skirts is systematically changed by different perceptions of financial status. Furthermore, this preference occurred due to their perceived need for security.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
BACKGROUND
The belief that there is a relationship between skirt length and the economy is strongly established among laypeople. The “Hemline Theory” was introduced by the economist George Taylor in 1926. This suggested a relationship between the length of hemlines on women’s skirts and the status of economy (cited in Baardwijk and Franses 2010). According to the theory, which is still followed by many stock brokers today, when the economy is flourishing, skirts get shorter, and when the economy is performing badly, skirts get longer.

Interestingly, in the fashion industry the opposite belief has been also commonly held. Some designers in the fashion industry believe that women’s skirt lengths would be shortened when their economic status is bad (Diderich 2009; Finneran 2008). One of reasons behind this belief is that in a bad economic situation, designers and retailers create and display unique styles of clothing in order to attract consumers’ attention (Jones 2008; Nichols 2010). Short skirt length is therefore one way to increase consumers’ attention.

While such often controversial beliefs exist among laypeople and practitioners, empirical and academic studies on this issue are scarce. Mabry and Koyama (2005) found the opposite relationship to exist – as economic conditions declined the appeal of body-revealing images in fashion advertisements increased. Drawing on emerging theory in evolutionary psychology we provide a theoretical explanation and empirically investigate this causal relationship between economic conditions and skirt lengths in two experiments.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
Pettijohn and her colleagues have shown that perceptions of environmental security influence fashion magazines’ preferred facial and body features in women (Pettijohn and Tesser 1999; Pettijohn and Jungeberg 2004). They developed the “Environmental Security Hypothesis” which is based on evolutionary theory and posits that the “specifics of attractiveness may in part depend on how secure people feel in their surroundings” (Pettijohn and Jungeberg 2004, 1187). Pettijohn and Jungeberg (2004) found that when economic and social conditions were threatening, mature facial and body features (e.g., older, taller, less curvy) were predominantly presented in famous magazines. This phenomenon occurs because individuals in threatening situations are attuned to the heightened need for security and assurance, and thus prefer mature features to satisfy this need.

Building on the Environmental Security Hypothesis, we propose that the perception of environmental security can explain preference for women’s skirt length. When people perceive their financial status to be bad they will tend to prefer long skirts because long skirts emphasize the maturity of the wearer, whereas people will prefer short skirts when they perceive their financial status to be good because there is no imperative to look mature.

H1: Women will prefer short (long) skirts to long (short) ones when their perception of financial status is good (bad).

H2: Women who have a strong need for security will prefer long skirts to short ones.

PRETEST
We conducted a pretest to verify our assumption regarding the relationship between the desire to look...
mature and skirt length. Specifically, we assumed that when people have strong motivation to look mature, they would prefer a long (vs. short) skirt. Ten female undergraduate students (average age = 21.4) were first asked to imagine that they wanted to come across as “mature.” They were then exposed to the choice task of the two pleated skirts. The description and images of the skirts was identical; however only skirt length was manipulated as either short or long. The results supported our assumption. Those people who wanted to appear “mature” chose long skirts over short ones (% of long skirt = 90.0%, \chi^2(1) = 10.83, p < .01).

**Study 1** Drawing on the notion that people prefer short skirts to long ones when their perception of their financial status is good, we investigated consumers’ preferences for skirt length by manipulating their perception of their own financial status. Forty-six female undergraduates (average age = 20.6, range = 19–23) participated. The perception of economic status was manipulated by changing the individuals’ perception of their current financial status (adapted by Morewedge, Holtzman, and Epley 2007). Participants in good financial situations were asked to estimate their *monthly* spending, whereas those in bad financial situations were asked to estimate their *daily* spending. Specifically, they were asked to write down their estimates of their average spending in five categories (i.e., food, transportation, entertainment, clothes, and books). Then participants were asked to choose either short or long skirt for two types of skirts (denim skirts and pleated skirts); each type of skirt looked identical except in the area of length.

The results supported H1. Those people who estimated their monthly spending preferred short denim skirts (% of short skirt = 17/22, 77.3%) more than those who estimated their daily spending (10/24, 41.7%, \chi^2(1) = 6.00, p < .05). Similar results were found for the pleated skirts (15/22, 68.2%, vs. 8/24, 33.3%, \chi^2(1) = 5.58, p < .05). These results showed that women prefer short skirt (vs. long skirt) when their perception of their financial status is good.

**Study 2:** The purpose of Study 2 was to examine whether the need for environmental security influences preference for long or short skirts. Participants’ need for security was manipulated by employing a procedure that has been used in “self-regulatory focus” research (e.g., Higgins 1997). Higgins (1997) suggested that individuals differ in the degree to which they are either “promotion-oriented” or “prevention-oriented.” Individuals who are prevention-oriented are concerned with security (or minimizing negative outcomes), whereas individuals who are promotion-oriented are concerned with achievement (or maximizing positive outcomes).

Thirty-two female undergraduate students (average age = 20.6) were first asked to write down either their goals and hopes (promotion condition) or their duties and obligations (prevention condition), in an attempt to prime need for security. After their regulatory focus had been primed through the writing exercise, they were exposed to the same choice task of pleated skirts as Study 1.

Those people who wrote their duties and obligations preferred the long pleated skirt to the short one (% of long skirt = 12/17, 70.6%) more than those who wrote their goals and hopes (5/15, 33.3%, \chi^2(1) = 4.44, p < .05). This result supported H2, showing that people who have a strong need for security preferred long skirts to short ones.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

This study examined the impact of the perception of financial status on skirt length preference. Study 1 demonstrated that consumers’ preference for short or long skirts can be systematically changed by different perceptions of financial status. Study 2 showed that difference in the preference for skirt length occurs due to the need for security. In sum, this research can contribute to providing empirical support of George Taylor’s “Hemline Theory” first suggested in 1926. Finally, this study helps to explain long-lasting beliefs concerning the relationship between skirt length and economic conditions.

**REFERENCES**


