

IBM points to lower heels, bucking economic trend

An IBM computer-based analysis of billions of social media posts has predicted an intriguing change on the horizon in women's shoe fashions, with heel heights currently in nosebleed territory poised to decline.

By [Zeenat Moorad](#) 21 Nov 2011



Sky-high heels are in decline. [Image:](#)
[Maggie Smith / FreeDigitalPhotos.net](#)

"Usually, in an economic downturn, heels go up and stay up as consumers turn to more flamboyant fashions as a means of fantasy and escape.

"This time, something different is happening - perhaps a mood of long-term austerity is evolving among consumers sparking a desire to reduce ostentation in everyday settings," said Trevor Davis, a consumer products expert with IBM Global Business Services.

The IBM project highlighted the predictive capabilities of social media analysis as a source of valuable insight that can help drive business strategies and results.

A look back at the last 100 years of shoe fashion trends reveals that heel heights soared during the most prominent recessions in US history.

Low-heeled flapper shoes in the 1920s were replaced with high-heel pumps and platforms during the Great Depression.

Platforms were again revived during the 1970s oil crisis, reversing the preference for low-heeled sandals in the late 1960s.

And the low, thick heels of the 1990s "grunge" period gave way to "Sex and the City"-inspired stilettos following the dot-com bust at the turn of the century.

In a potential deviation from the long-term trend, an analysis of the last four years of social media showed that discussions increasing heel height peaked towards the end of 2009, and declined after that.

For example, key trend-watching bloggers between 2008 and 2009 wrote consistently about heels from five to eight inches but by mid-2011 they were writing about the return of the kitten heel and the perfect flat from Jimmy Choo and Christian Louboutin.

This is not to say that the sky-high heels have gone, rather that, as the economic downturn has worn on, they are discussed as glam-wear and not for the office or shopping trip, Davis commented.

But while heels on women's shoes are still high the IBM analysis pointed to a change in trend.

IBM determined the median heel height discussed online by those identified as important shoe mavens in the social media universe - it peaked at seven inches in 2009 and declined to two inches this year.

"This data could be used by shoe manufacturers and retailers looking for insight into the kind of shoes to, respectively, manufacture and sell in the coming season.

"It could also help a city or government better serve its constituents by having the ability to analyse social conversation in real-time, officials can see how constituents are responding to policy decisions or how outreach could be varied across different channels to get the word out about specific events," Davis said.

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