



photo illustration by Meredith Moderi

Skirt lengths, provocative clothing stitch together meaningless stereotypes, harsh assumptions

By | Meredith Moderi

Speeding down Senior Hall, Georgia McGill ['17] hurries to her class when her phone buzzes. She halts, clicks on a notification from Administrative Assistant Helen Skalniak.

Skirt demerit per Dr. Hull.

She glances down. Her plaid skirt stops just below her fingertips, within the regulated limit. Once again, her long legs single her out. Embarrassed to fight the demerit, she spends her next lunch period serving detention, cleaning tables in the Dining Commons.

ESD's dress codes originally neutralized differences by taking economic status out of attire. Today's women fight these codes that single girls out as objects and distractions.

Last year, administration disallowed shorts for females on free dress days because tight-fitting or "too short" bottoms were not appropriate. So, Ellery Marshall ['18], along with her field hockey team, fought this rule.

"I typed out 'don't judge girls on what they wear,' printed it and hung [it] up," Marshall said. "We posted the signs up around school, and by 2nd period, they were taken down, and the rule was changed."

Head of Upper School Donna Hull altered dress code options to be fair.

"The rule changed because we decided that there were shorts available for girls that cover appropriately," Hull said. "I will add that the word 'appropriate' is in the eye of the beholder; we still have mixed feelings amongst the faculty about girls wearing shorts. And having allowed shorts back into the casual dress day options, we are once again tackling the problem of a few girls wearing too-short shorts."

But, regulations may increase women's objectification. Schools tell students to cover up, it is improper to wear revealing clothing, but social media displays celebrities who use their bodies as symbols of empowerment. Mixed messages confuse women, especially younger more self-conscious ones.

Washington, DC, clinical psychologist Jill Weber studies the impact of gender inequalities and culture on personal identity, confidence and development. She views self-discovery as key in a girl's maturity.

"When girls wear their skirt short, it is part of development—trying to figure out their identity," Weber said. "Women have to experiment and decide what's the right style. It is not a bad thing, but the issue that comes up is people then draw huge conclusions. A girl may go really far in a non-conservative direction, maybe too far, so people see her different-

ly. But to her, it is a way to separate, to be different, to rebel, but people act like it is a bad thing to do."

Victoria Hammett ['17] sports her short skirt at school because it's right for her. Still, a common belief within society is that "scandalous" clothing is a distraction to boys. Not for Hammett.

"A lot of times, when I get a demerit for my skirt, the teacher acts like I was trying to make it short to look good for guys," Hammett said. "They don't realize I am wearing my skirt for myself. Girls have restraints on their clothing in order to not distract other guys, which is not right."

But, McGill acknowledges the notion a skirt can be too short.

"I notice a girl's skirt when she's bending over, and I can notice her spandex," McGill said. "School is a professional environment, so skirts shouldn't be that short because there is a point where it gets inappropriate and a little too much."

Holmes Davis ['17] said the majority of boys don't judge a girl based on skirt length.

"I will notice if a girl's skirt is really long," Davis said, "but not usually if it is short."

Weber, agreeing dress codes have benefits, said they produce more harm than good.

"Generally, I don't feel like dress codes are a good idea because they seem to be prejudicial towards girls," Weber said. "Even if boys and girls are both wearing uniforms, there are very tight rules about the length of the skirt at school. The rules project to the girl that she is the gatekeeper. If her skirt or clothing is not the right length and a boy objectifies her or assaults her, it is her fault."

Limitations on women appear in many cultures.

"If a man is sexually attracted to a woman and he feels weird about it, he will almost blame her by saying, 'oh, she shouldn't be wearing that,'" Weber said. "This is present in some of the less developed countries where a woman wears a burka or covers her face, as if a man sees any part of her he won't be able to control himself. We know men can control themselves, but if we keep enabling them, they never have to control themselves."

Social media judgment is inevitable to Hull.

"While I understand that girls don't want to be judged by their clothing, I think it is unavoidable," Hull said. "Of course, all the images and messages in media get imprinted in their heads. What I want for my girls is that they are modest, treated well, thought of well, respected, and they respect themselves. Clothing, whether we like it or not, is part of that."

Weber sees parents' efforts to protect daughters sometimes too harsh, even demoralizing.

"It is protective nature of a parent to keep a girl safe; they don't want her to get harmed, raped or assaulted, but sometimes they come down too hard," Weber said, "shaming as a way to control."

Areeb Afridi ['16] picked up discrepancies in his house concerning rules for him versus his sister.

"When my sister [college sophomore] was in high school, she had more restrictions than I do: I can go out more, for longer and go on trips with my friends alone," Afridi said. "Part of [this] double standard has to do with dads wanting to protect daughters."

This protection, while often well-meaning, impedes young women developing their own styles.

"Clothing, at least for me, is a big part of how I express myself," McGill said. "If I get constantly scrutinized for how short my skirt is, that is insulting who I am as a person. Girls wear short skirts to show fashion sense and what they feel confident in. If that's a tight shirt or a short skirt, so be it."

Self-expression boosts self-esteem.

"If I went to a party wearing something tight, I would be wearing it for myself," Hammett said. "When I wear something more provocative, it's about looking in the mirror and feeling good."

However, self-confidence can quickly be broken down by derogatory comments referred to as "slut-shaming"—judging a woman for presumed sexual activity by her acts or her outfits. Women are the main aggressors and judge harsher than men.

"There's safety in slut-shaming other girls because it means you are not the slut," Weber said. "There's a lot of fear in these dynamics. Judging others is a way to feel safe, to feel as if your problems aren't as bad."

Over time, insults and restrictions stack up and change a woman's perception of herself.

"People don't realize the effect their words have on others," Davis said. "They just say it thinking that 'oh, she won't care if she hears rude comments,' but she obviously does, and should care."

Harsh comments lead to psychological questions.

"Girls start to think that the comments and rules are all she is," Weber said. "When something bad happens to her, she begins to think that it is her fault and she doesn't deserve to have a good life. In a way, [she] absorbs the negative things."

Abusive jabs prompt pessimistic thoughts. "Any time a person tells a girl her upper thigh is something she should be ashamed of, it is sexist and demoralizing," Hammett said. "A girl's personality should determine her status in society more than her skirt length does."

Measuring the rules

20%
of boys don't
notice skirt
length

6"

ESD's legal
skirt length

19%
believe it could
indicate
something
about her
morals

survey of 132 students, Jan. 29