

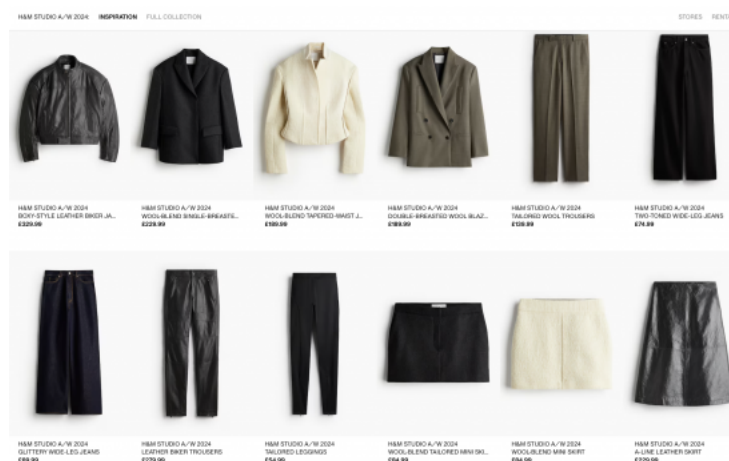
The economics of fashion

Published: January 13, 2026, 7:31 am

I think it fair to say that this blog does offer a slightly male-biased view of the world. That is unsurprising: I am male, and this blog is about how I see things.

That said, I do take an interest in fashion. I actually subscribe to the online version of Vogue (it's £12 a year). I don't do so because I buy such fashion. I suspect that is pretty obvious. I have, however, for decades thought that fashion reflects the public mood. Looking at where it is going is a very strong indicator of where the economy might be following. Danny Blanchflower would call this a part of the 'economics of walking about'. For that same reason, I observe people in the street: their collective style says a lot about how we feel.

In this context, an email arrived in this household from H&M yesterday, advertising its latest, more upmarket collection. This is a screenshot from that mail:



The message is surprising. Of the three skirts on view, two are short. That might suggest a degree of optimism not yet apparent in the economy. I have long believed that there is a marked correlation between the distance between the hems of skirts and the ground and the economic mood of people. They go higher together. And on the street, they are very long right now.

On the other hand, look at the colours. They are dark, sombre, depressing and downbeat. That's the message I am taking from this. There really is very little optimism in the economy if colour has disappeared from the palettes of fashion chains.

This proves nothing, of course, except for one thing. These fashion houses spend a great deal of time trying to work out what colours to offer. H&M seem to be reflecting a wider view on this issue. The mood is decidedly downbeat. I have no idea where Rachel Reeves thinks growth is going to come from in that case: the signs of it happening are not out there.