



Essay

The Curiouser Nature of Trends: A Process Thesis of Sociocultural Trend Developments in Iterations of Mindsets and Practices

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Abstract

This essay aims to address the development of sociocultural trends within the scope of Trend Studies. It puts forward a thesis for a conceptual model that lays new foundations to understand the development of trends in terms of the articulations between mindsets and associated representations, practices and artifacts that are made tangible in the visible world. The model takes an initial inspiration from semiology, focusing on cultural information, meaning and idea transfer to underline that changes are always in flux. This contribution can be applied to better understand a trend's nature, based on its current iteration and considering former mutations, and in a futures exercise to extrapolate short and medium-term evolutions or reactions to its nature.

Keywords

Trends, Trend Studies, Trend Evolution, Culture, Mindsets

Introduction

There is a growing number of approaches and works related to the study of trends, as “few terms have caused so much confusion in the context of foresight, strategy and management as the term trend” (Liebl and Schwarz, 2010: 314). Trends are also approached within the context of Future Studies as Sardar (2010) described them. Studying trends and the future is, at the same time, thinking about what is coming next and how the present is structured and can possibly develop. In Future Studies, as a field of inquiry, trends often fall in the scanning/environmental moment (Bengston, 2019, p. 1102; Liebl and Schwarz, 2010) of the process, supporting a larger foresight perspective, or trend forecasting exercises in terms of trends development and future projections. Through different methods, research and conclusions are drawn to strengthen organizational resilience and enhance planning and decision-making (Bengston, 2019). There is also a line of research that emerged from business practices (Kongsholm and Frederiksen, 2018; Mason et al., 2015; Kjaer, 2014; Raymond, 2010; Higham, 2009; Vejlggaard, 2008) — in tune with technics like coolhunting/signaling, urban immersions and others, and with eyes set on the concept of future and future-proofing (Zaidi, 2020; Dragt, 2017; Cramer et al, 2016) —¹, later developing itself in articulation with Culture Studies or addressing the potential relation (Gomes et al, 2021; Powers, 2019). Our work follows in the footsteps of this latest path within a scope of Trend Studies. In this sense,

¹ It is interesting to consider the perspectives of Liebl and Schwartz that, in a way, highlight the beginning of Trend Studies and marks the roots on how we understand this approach: “At least two segments can be differentiated: On the one hand the ‘pop futurists’ [9], for instance Naisbitt [14] or Popcorn [15] who mainly sell trend labels like ‘cocooning’ to both a larger audience and the business community without a deeper scientific background. Here the term “trend” is mainly used to address the intuitive feeling that something is of importance. On the other hand, there is the segment of practitioner books which claim to help managers implement environmental scanning and strategic issue management in their organizations” (Liebl and Schwarz, 2010, p. 314).

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this work aims to contribute first, and mainly, to highlight the more conceptual and theoretical research on the nature and evolution of trends that is developed specifically within the framework of Trend Studies, understood here as an approach that articulates methods and concepts in a specific way and in close relation to cultural analysis; but it also contributes to an understanding of the role of trend analysis within the scope of Future Studies, an important part of futures research and applied exercises, specifically at the level of a trend's nature, its evolution and even "storyline".

Addressing sociocultural trends (SCT) in cultural dynamics demands a good grasp on the concept of trend, so that we may work with an operational concept that generates no misinterpretations. This is the starting point of our research, but not our objective. A literary review of Trend Studies, within this sociocultural context, has revealed a gap on the processes of trends evolution and development. The specific protocols are still a matter that requires much debate, although there are some mentions on how a trend develops (Gomes et al., 2021). There is also vast literature regarding Future Studies and their close relation to trends. Although both emerge within the same curiosity of the researcher (to know what is coming next), we see differences in terms of methodological protocols and final results (Henchey, 1978; Gordon, 1992). The objective of this essay is to highlight a theoretical process by which trends change, focusing on inherent meanings, ideas, objects, and associated behavior patterns. For this, we consider the works of Trend Studies/research authors and propose a model inspired by the semiology work of noted author Roland Barthes (1991; 1986).

The proposed model can act at a conceptual basis to look at trends from a diachronic perspective, at the very theoretical beginning, understanding their present DNA and mutations and even present a blueprint for exercises of empirical future mutations prospection.

Trend Studies and the Evolution of Trends

As Gomes et al. stated, "Trend Studies are an approach – a vision and an analytical process about sociocultural dynamics – that aims to understand changes in mindsets and large behavior patterns related to representations, practices and objects [...] proposed in a close articulation with Culture Studies, meaning that the first ones are an approach with specific objectives within the field of inquiry of the second" (Gomes et al., 2021, p. 232). It is also important to underline that Devon Powers and Suzana Cohen have also addressed the articulation of trend research with Culture Studies (Cohen; 2021; Powers, 2019, p.20, p. 94).

In terms of the analytical process in Trend Studies, Gomes et al. reviewed the different protocols and found many similitudes: "It is clear that the identification and monitoring of trends, or rather, the analysis of trends, has characteristics that are disseminated and recognized by different agents, emphasizing a process that involves observation and data collection; the systematization and proposal of the definition of trends; applying the results that emerge from the two previous points. In relation to this issue, there is a clear consensus, which is limited to the specific practices which were mapped here" (Gomes et al., 2021, p. 270).

For Trend Studies and this essay, our main operational concept is, naturally, "trend". When we review the main authors associated to this line of research, we see that there is a general agreement that "change" is associated to the nature and definition of a trend (Powers, 2019, p.5; Kongsholm e Frederiksen, 2018, p. 25; Dragt, 2017, p. 14; Higham, 2009, p. 48; Vejlgard, 2008, pp. 2, 15). It also underlines an anomaly a shift in direction, as a meme, propagating virally (Raymond, 2010, pp. 13-15).

Kongsholm and Frederiksen give us an important note that will be important for our model:

it must be a present and observable change, which excludes trends that first pop up far in the future (which are merely forecasts, estimates, scenarios or imagination), or trends that have died out; there must be a change that can be described and put into perspective, i.e., something that gets bigger or smaller, more relevant or less relevant hotter or colder; the change must have some form of power and persistence, -there must be a reason to believe that the trend is going to continue for a while and is not over in a short space of time (Kongsholm and Frederiksen, 2018, p. 47).²

In an important work that articulates trends and Future Studies, Liebl and Schwarz see trends “as (sociocultural) innovations” (Liebl and Schwarz, 2010, p. 313) and this raises two aspects about its nature: invention and diffusion (Liebl and Schwarz, 2010, p. 316). The authors also highlight that trends can’t be seen only as a “quantifiable phenomenon” (Liebl and Schwarz, 2010, p. 316) and that context is very important, as it influences “human perception, structure expectations, and evoke new forms of interpretation and new ways of using things. Trends therefore are not a merely one-dimensional development in a given direction, particularly a quantitative more or less, but rather they represent a hitherto nonexistent combination of a number of different contexts” (Liebl and Schwarz, 2010, p. 318-319).

This raises the topic of the difference between trends and their manifestations (Liebl and Schwarz, 2010, p. 319). It is important not to confuse the signals and objects of trends (their materialization into a representation, and artifact/object or a specific practice) with the actual trends (Gomes et al., 2021, p. 236). The objects and associated patterns of meanings and behaviors are part of the composition of a sociocultural trend – they represent their expressions in a tangible way. However, we must also consider the mindsets behind the objects and the process of interaction between mindsets and objects. As Gomes et al. added: “a pattern of behavior or replication of a trend object is an indicator of the proliferation of adherence to a certain practice, presentation, or artifact. These patterns related to trend objects reveal the mindsets behind them associated with the sociocultural trend” (Gomes et al., 2021, p. 236).

In this sense, a sociocultural trend highlights a process of change in mindsets that impact the sociocultural plane in terms of producing new artifacts, representations and practices that will generate behavior patterns that highlight new movements and directions. In turn, all the dynamics of the visible plane will generate an exchange of information and ideas, which will impact mindsets in a constant flux.

Sociocultural trends (SCT) are a complex system that surrounds daily practices and generate new meanings each second. This system is composed by a visible and an invisible component. Gomes et al. have already addressed this composition between the invisible and the visible in its relation to Culture Studies (Gomes et al., 2021, p. 235).

In the invisible component, we have the mindset trend(s) (MT). This corresponds to a set of articulated meanings into a composed idea that is shared collectively at the levels of both conscious and unconscious collective mindsets – it is a structured mindset that is shared and common to several individuals. The different particles and meanings that compose this idea, this structure, are always changing due to social contact and connections with other ideas – this promotes a process of viral exchange and change with a parallel to what Dawkins (2006) proposed with the “cultural meme”. We have chosen the concept of mindset/mentality to better illustrate specific ideas – complex concepts – in the collective mindset. This was based on two criteria. First, as we will see, mindset/mentality is a common and rooted concept in Trend Studies tradition; and second, we find that the concept of worldview is more encompassing as a broad cultural perspective – as Morgan explains, “worldviews are our perceptual and cognitive maps of the world. Something feels “right” if it matches our worldview and “wrong” if it does not. We use these values-based heuristics to evaluate information, situations, options, and decisions. Worldviews are our subconscious mental model of how the world should work” (Morgan,

² When contemplating sociocultural trends in this context, we are always talking about big structures. Either we are addressing macro trends as larger structures that influence almost everything (from sectors to demographics) in an international level; to micro trends that also have an important impact but can be more specific in terms of the number of impacted individual and the geography they affect, or even their more specific niche nature (Gomes et al., 2021, p. 237-238; Higham, 2009, p. 87-88).

2020, p. 83)³. In fact, it could be perceived that a worldview articulates different mindsets/mentalities or mindset/mentality trends – that structure specific ideas associated, for example, with identity or sustainability.

In a Trend Studies tradition, Peter Gloor (2011) uses the term mindsets and Els Dragt (2017) interviewed different experts, also underlining the idea of mentalities and mentality groups. Carl Rohde (2011), an expert from the Netherlands, specifically uses the term mentality trends. We can see here how the Dutch perspective has impacted our conceptual basis for research in Trend Studies. Laininen (2019, p. 167) highlights the concept of mental models and we can articulate them with mindset/mentality trends as a basis for the interpretation of the cultural world – in these mental models we find patterns and trends. The author adds that “groups, organisations and societies develop shared mental models which shape our thinking and behaviour” (Laininen, 2019, p. 166). Also, as an example, by presenting a map of mindsets based on worldviews, Kjaer presents the following concepts: author New Urbanities, Green Sustainers, Mindful Idealists, Mobile Millenials (Kjaer, 2014, p. 171). This highlights the close relationship between both concepts and their possible application.

On the other level, there are the visible components. They represent the visible and tangible objects of trends: the artifacts, the representations, and the practices/rituals (ARP) that are linked to mindsets. The reproduction of a mindset in different artifacts and representations and the growth of a specific practice (many times associated to specific artifacts and representations) reveal patterns in behavior, taste, consumer culture and lifestyles in general. It is these visible components and their patterns that make it possible to understand and study mindsets. Between these visible and invisible planes there is a translation process (TP) that takes emerging mindsets and transforms them into trend objects. Our daily lives are composed by a set of objects that, at one time, were signals and translations of emerging changes in mindsets. Sociocultural trends are a composition of both mindset trends, their objects, and associated patterns, as well as encompassing all the translation processes.

Our cultural landscape is a tension stage between tradition and the more solid objects (that which is already established in convention) and the more avantgarde objects, the ones that represent change and can have a cool DNA. A compromise between status and cool, as McCracken (2011) put it, in this current “liquid” (Bauman, 2000) and “hyper” (Lipovetsky, 2007) modernity that we are experiencing.

In this scheme, it is important to understand how trends evolve in a perpetual system where there is nothing new, except for small articulations that come to be in particles in mindsets that change and sift ideas affecting the visible plane and sometimes can have a big impact, visibly altering enough a trend DNA. To understand this, we propose the following exercise.

Table 1: The Trend Evolution Elements.

MT	Mindset Trend
SCT	Sociocultural Trend
ARP	Artifacts, Representations and Practices
TP	Translation Process
SR	Signifier
SD	Signified

First, we must understand a mindset trend (MT) in a precise moment. This our analytical starting point with MT0. We already know, from the visible and invisible discussion, that $SCT = MT + ARP + TP$ and, in turn, $MT = SCT - (ARP + TP)$. So, following our reasoning, MT will produce a new set of ARPs to compose a full SCT.

³ Again, this raises the perception of a macro map that goes beyond specific ideas/mindsets regarding different topics. In a sense, in our operational and conceptual perspective, a worldview would be a full set of mindset trends that translates, to a degree, the spirit of the time. Which is a complex exercise do address. As Kearney adds, “since world views are culturally organized systems of knowledge, a fundamental problem that must be examined is the extent of cross-cultural differences in how people come to know about the world” (Kearney, p. 248). As we can see, it is a more encompassing macro perspective, going beyond the boundaries of organized mindset trends: “Worldview provides a nonrational foundation for thought, emotion, and behavior. Worldview provides a person with presuppositions about what the world is really like and what constitutes valid and important knowledge about the world. [...] A worldview is dynamic colocation of mostly implicit fundamental presuppositions on which these conceptions of reality are grounded” (Cobern, 2015, p. 1111).

MT0 will then produce ARP1 and create SCT1. This is the first iteration of this mindset/mentality, the first full trend body that comes from these structured ideas and mindset⁴. However, a specific mindset, although it may give rise to a more visible and impactful SCT, can have multiple paths. It can generate different ARP and produce different trends. It may grow in a sense of evolution, harnessing more meanings and a greater impact in the cultural landscape, or help to produce a reaction and counter-movements, or countertrends in opposite directions (Fig. 1).

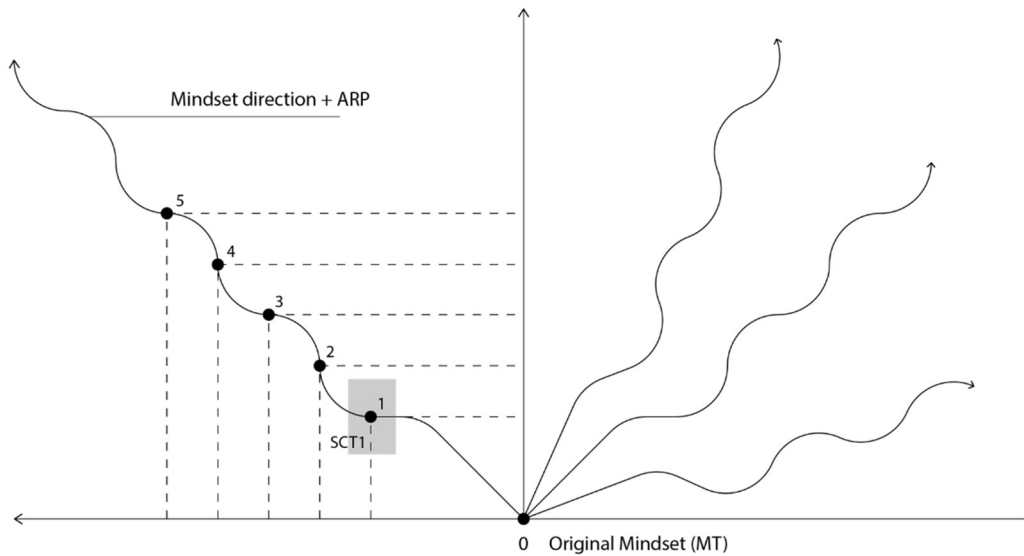


Fig. 1: The possible evolution path(s) of Sociocultural trends.

Nonetheless, whether it is a matter of evolution or reaction, the development process is the same as we will see next. MT0 will generate ARP1 and effectively give birth to SCT1, the first iteration of the trend. In turn, SCT1 will affect and impact MT1, generating an update on this “new” mindset (by the experimentation of ARP in daily lives, MT changes). Every new iteration of SCT will impact and generate a new MT, and so the process continues in perpetuity until greater articulations and mergers come about, producing something apparently new.

Since we are dealing with ideas and meanings that generate and/or are imprinted in ARPs, we took inspiration from Roland Barthes and his semiology models for myth and connotation (1991, pp. 113-114; 1986, pp. 89-90). In his models, a sign (S) in a first level, or denotative level, is composed by a signifier (SR, the vehicle of meaning) and a signified (SD, the meaning, the mental idea), so $S1=SR1+SD1$. In a second level, connotative or mythical, the former sign becomes a new signifier for a new meaning: $S2 = S1+SD2 = SR1+SD1+SD2$. However, here we have a different setting, and our process begins in mindsets, meanings. So, the evolution of a trend follows a different path (Fig. 2):

First level: $SCT1 = MT0 + ARP1 + TP1$ (MT0 gives rise to ARP1 and to SCT1 in general).

Second level: $SCT2 = MT1 + ARP2 + TP2 = SCT1 + ARP2 + TP2 = MT0 + ARP1 + TP1 + ARP2 + TP2$

Third level: $SCT3 = MT2 + ARP3 + TP3 = SCT2 + ARP3 + TP3 = MT1 + ARP2 + TP2 + ARP3 + TP3$

And so on to other level while the trend evolves. The “birth” and evolution of a Sociocultural Trend (SCT) comes from evolution and reaction “iterations” (the experience of the trend and its exchange and growth generates a set of revisions), where TSC(s) will always be the result of $MT+ARP+TP$ and the signifier fruit(s) of the initial

⁴ It is important to underline that MT0 is an abstract concept. Since mindsets don’t come from nothing, this MT0 comes about, naturally, from previous trends (ideas, meanings, and objects), but we always need a starting point for our analysis and review. For this, let’s consider 0 an abstract starting point, keeping in mind that it is a perpetual system going back to the first emergence of ideas and objects.

MT that will imply the production of new meanings and changes in ideas in the further mindset trends (MT). All new MTs will be a set of ideas and meanings, in a structured fashion, for the creation of new signifiers (objects).

SCT1	MT0	ARP1+TP1	
SCT2	MT1		ARP2+TP2
SCT3	MT2		ARP3+TP3

Fig. 2: The Iterations of Sociocultural Trends. Structure adapted from Barthes (1991; 1986).

This process is useful in understanding the development of sociocultural trends, especially in a system that recycles meaning, ideas and objects and promotes articulations to generate structures and outputs that appear, many times, to be new. However, the bigger sociocultural system that trends inhabit is more complex than a simple linear process, even if we are considering the divergent path the mindset trends (MT) may follow. Trends can appear to be born and new if there is a major change in their DNA due to a specific context, but trends are not specific boxes in people’s minds and their social dynamics cross to promote specific ARPs – they are drivers of one another. It is important to address the connections between trends, drivers, and cultural directions. Karlsen (2014), among others, has articulated a listing of drivers and trends. The former changes in particles of ideas/mindsets/mentalities we discussed may come specifically from other trends, or from other forces and drivers of change that “brought it [the trend] about” (Raymond, 2020, p. 270). ARPs associated to different trends cross in the visible plain and an object may rise from the articulation of different trends, impacting them and, if other occur, generating connections in mindsets that may fuse or change the direction and evolution/reaction of a mindset and sociocultural trend. Future knowledge crosses week signals, drivers, and the trends themselves (Kuosa, 2010, p. 46). Higham also underlines that “there are a number of factors outside the trend itself that act as drivers or barriers to its growth” (Higham, 2009, p. 169)⁵. Kuosa (2010, pp. 42-48) adds the topic of pushing and pulling drivers. The first are elements that can be triggers for change (new technology, new opportunities, new ideas) that can “be a trigger of change” and the second are demands on something. So, objects, ARPs and needs can act themselves as drivers that impact both the visible and invisible aspects of trends in a complex system of exchange between mindsets/mentalities and patterns/objects. When addressing drivers, Bengston also highlights that “people and ecosystems interact in complex ways that ensure the inaccuracy of traditional forecasting methods” (Bengston, 2019, p. 1108). In fact, drivers can promote the development of a trend but can also put a break on it (Liebl and Schwarz, 2010, p. 316), or even drive it in a different direction. In this sense it is difficult to guide trends in a conscious effort, due to the already mentioned complexity, so the focus could be on how to analyze or “influence the trend drivers” (Cramer et al, 2016, p. 52).⁶

As a result, we must consider that a SCT, when generating a new MT, will bring with her the experiences of

⁵ Following the reasoning of Higham, “these are the environmental or social factors that will act upon a trend as it develops. These passive drivers can accelerate a trend by encouraging uptake. They can also slow it down or even stop it altogether. A trend might occur at a time when conditions are not ready, or it might run contrary to traditionally held beliefs. If so, it is likely to stall. Alternatively, it might be perfectly suited to the current social or technological environment, in which case it is likely to grow. Passive drivers can be grouped into four categories. I call them the 4 Cs. They are constants, cycles, calculables and chaotics. Constants are those environmental factors that do not change. Cycles are behaviours or attitudes that run in established patterns. Calculables are those things the outcome of which is unknown, but that an estimated calculation can be made about. Chaotics are unexpected events that can have an enormous impact on trends but cannot be planned for. Anything that is a constant or part of a cycle can typically be predicted accurately. Calculables can be predicted, but with less accuracy. The arrival of chaotics cannot be predicted, but their outcomes can” (Higham, 2009, p. 169).

⁶ These relations point for an always presents dynamics of change between emergence and growth and normalization, “a development from abnormality to normality. However, in order for deviance to move into the mainstream – thereby becoming a social convention – value schemes and standards have to change” (Liebl and Schwarz, 2010, p. 319). The authors underlined this process from diffusion to normalization, but the complexity of this cultural system of trends and their evolution point clearly not to a linear process but to a constant one of iterations that encompass both emergent-stable elements, growth-stability, and normalization-change.

these articulations in the visible plain that will also transport different meanings and particles of ideas present in the former MT. It is not just the natural development of the ARPs as if they are in a box set apart from all cultural life and dynamics, they are influenced and crossed with others, bringing new meanings to the next iteration that are going to be collectively negotiated to generate changes, mindsets, and the rest of the system.

Final Considerations

Following the overall Future Studies approaches and methods, trend analysis has been developing its own processes and protocols, underlining specific operational concepts that gave birth to a specific approach of sociocultural analysis. This essay underlines a gap in scientific literary review within the scope of this approach regarding the definition of the specific processes by which trends grow and develop. This is an interpretative perspective based on meaning – in a semiology take on signifier and signified – production and exchange within visible and invisible planes of society and between different individuals, groups, and objects. It proposes a model that goes from mindsets to specific sociocultural objects – representations,

practices, and artifacts – and their associated behavior patterns, in a flux where both planes influence and impact one another. With this theory, it becomes possible to explore the present nature of a trend, based on its different mutations and iterations until its current “form”. Also, it broadens our scope to see the possible pathways for trends development in the future. Based on this analysis of the past and of its nature and mutations, we can extrapolate short- or medium-term developments based on former evolutions/reactions and the current emerging societal topics and themes. It provides a new theoretical base to develop protocols on it for specific analytical exercises in future research. With this, in future works, it is important to define the specific techniques for the protocols that can compose an analytical process to review trend iterations in their past and present, as well future paths for development.

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