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Trends and Design

Relating literature to industry practice

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Abstract

In a crowded market place, where technology and functionality are not enough to differentiate a product from its competitors, the product's appearance is a major driver of consumer preference. But preferences change over time, and product forms need to reflect this in order to stay relevant. This paper addresses the usage of trends by designers to inform the design and evolution of their products.

Published theory regarding trends in product form exists in the fashion and consumer behaviour domains, but not in direct relation to the design of consumer products. This paper is preceded by a synthesis of literature in adjacent fields and compares the literature understanding with real industrial practice. Interviews with 9 professionals in trend research, design consultancy, furniture, fashion and architecture, were undertaken to explore the value and usage of trends across a variety of creative fields. The interview data were used to corroborate and enhance the literature understanding.

In addition, the study also provides some emerging comparisons between design disciplines. The product designers interviewed were unlikely to use formal trend research methods: inspiration, tacit knowledge and experience accounts for much of their creative output. However, trend consultancies have developed methods of identifying and using trends to develop products for 5-10 years in the future. The fashion industry also has established ways of to rapidly identify or predict trend information.

Keywords

Product form; trends; fashion; foresight

Technology and functionality are not enough, appearance is a key driver of preference in consumer products (Cappetta, Cillo, & Ponti, 2006). In order to compete in an often crowded marketplace, companies look to designers to style their products so that they are attractive and relevant to the target consumer at the time of release and for the duration of the product's shelf life. This task is by no means easy since product forms: combinations of colours, shapes, materials, textures, and decoration periodically go in and out of fashion (Robinson, 1975).

This study will primarily examine how trends contribute to the evolution of product form. According to Marseille and Roos (2005, p. 68), trends are shaped by "changes in the behaviour of societies, markets and the consumers who drive them". Woudhuysen (2006, p. 21) argues that trends are "more than identifiable patterns of events", and that they are "deeply rooted in society". Whereas Lloyd Jones (1991) explains that this depends on the trend's lifespan, ranging from a short term, superficial "fads" of as little as a few weeks to a long term societal "custom" that exists for decades (Lloyd Jones, 1991).

Consultancies such as Seymour Powell, Ziba and IDEO have established themselves as successful trend researchers and product design strategists. They have developed methods of predicting, identifying and responding to patterns of behaviour across culture and society, resulting in a proven track record of successful and often seminal product forms. These methods include global networks of experts, keeping an evolving bank of contextual information, ethnography, and desk research, then processing the information from these sources using their own internal procedures which include matrices, diagrams and mood boards (Gornick, 2006).

Over the past 50 years, there has been substantial literature coverage of trends with respect to fashion and material culture. This paper readdresses the literature in relation to the design of consumer products. Can the same theories be applied to, or modified to be relevant? An initial literature understanding will be corroborated and enhanced through case studies with design and trend professionals in different product categories and consultancies.

Background

The lack of literature directly relating to trends in product design meant sources were consulted from adjacent areas such as fashion theory (Eckert & Stacey, 2000; Robinson, 1958; Sproles & Burns, 1994), taste (Lloyd Jones, 1991), foresight (Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2006; Costanzo, 2004), technology forecasting (Klopfenstein, 1989; Phaal, Farrukh, & Probert, 2004), consumer behaviour (Bloch, 1995; Crilly & Clarkson, 2006), marketing (Palmer, 2000; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971), and product design (Molotch, 2003). A more complete review can be found in (Muir Wood, Moultrie, & Eckert, 2008), but the key findings relevant to this paper are reviewed below.

In order to better understand the role and value of trends in product design, Muir Wood, Moultrie and Eckert (2008) interrogated the literature to identify the origins of trends; how they spread across consumers and markets; how they behave during their lifetime; and how designers might respond to the trends through the form of their products.

Trend Drivers

Where do trends originate, and what shapes them during their lifecycle? The most obvious manifestation of trends is in products and markets, where the popularity of forms, colours, textures, styles etc. can indicate the rise and fall of a design trend. Sproles and Burns (1994) agree that commercial activity can lead to the creation and distribution of new product forms and the

resurgence or rejection of old ones. According to Miller, McIntyre and Mantrala (1993), people, such as influential subcultural groups, social classes, or individuals such as celebrities and innovative consumers, can increase the popularity of a product by associating with it. Finally, entertainment, the arts, activities and events in domestic and foreign cultures can lead to the emergence and popularity of associated product forms e.g. the costumes, or objects in a film; or the colours, or sports brands associated with a large sporting event (Sproles & Burns, 1994).

Diffusion of Trends

Diffusion is the mechanism by which innovations permeate across markets and consumers. There is a significant body of research into diffusion of products and technologies in marketing literature (e.g. (Midgley, 1977; Rogers, 2003)). Some explanations of how diffusion occurs focus on the internal motivations of individual consumers or groups of consumers such as desire for conformity, uniqueness or individuality in the products they buy (Greengrove, 2002; Miller et al., 1993; Sproles & Burns, 1994). Others focus on external forces from society that may also influence consumer taste such as the economic situation, legislation, religion, war etc. (Miller et al., 1993).

Evolution

This section concerns the dynamics of product form trends as they are shaped by the forces and behaviours described above. *Continuity* is a popular fashion theory that holds that most successful product forms are an “evolutionary outgrowth and elaboration of previously existing fashions” (Robinson, 1975; Sproles & Burns, 1994, p. 32). Lowe and Lowe (1985) argue that “most fashion flops have flaunted the principle of cultural continuity”. Convergence is another phenomenon that has been observed in fashion, and occurs when competing manufacturers adopt the same forms (Cappetta et al., 2006). Coates (2003) identifies products as *icons* when they are very recognisable and culturally relevant for a finite length of time, whereas *classics* have a timeless, enduring style – such as the pin stripe suit, or the London hackney carriage taxi.

Design Strategy

No reference could be found that explains how designers respond to trends once they have been identified as relevant to their target segment. How do they effectively channel contextual information into the form of their products? In his book on design, Molotch (2003, p. 45) explains how designers can perform an audit of existing products in similar and adjacent markets so that they can relatively position their concepts: ignoring the other products completely, evolving them, or copying them directly. Is the same approach be applied to trends?

This literature review provides a conceptual understanding, but comes from sources that are largely outside the product design domain, and some of which are over 30 years old and have not been adapted to product design. This provides a foundation for further research through interviews with design

and trend professionals, in order to test whether the literature review reflects real, contemporary industrial practice.

Approach

This paper reports on the exploratory phase of a wider study that uses multiple research methods (Blessing, Chakrabati, & Wallace, 1995). A preliminary literature review addressing the origins and behaviour of styles and trends was generated (Muir Wood et al., 2008). Using this review as a conceptual foundation, semi-structured interviews with 9 creative professionals from Cambridge and London were conducted in 2007/08 to explore the way in which trends contribute to their design processes. The candidates were approached either through speculative emails and phone calls or via introductions from mutual contacts. They were opportunistically selected to represent a "maximum variation" (Patton, 1990, p. 182) of both product categories that include architecture and fashion, and work experience which varied from 1 to 30 years. Alternative approaches were considered: extensive contact with a single person or company was ruled out because it would not provide an understanding across different product categories; and questionnaires are unable to adapt to capture the individual depth and language of each respondent.

Table 1 shows the details of the interviews and candidates; they have been given codes to identify them so that quotes and references later in this study can be related to their design discipline.

Code	Position held	Location	Interview duration	Interview date	Transcribed
ID01	Industrial Design Manager at a medium sized consultancy	Cambridge	31 minutes	29/03/07	Verbatim
ID02	Industrial Designer at the same medium sized consultancy	Cambridge	21 minutes	17/08/07	Verbatim
ID03	Industrial Designer at a small consultancy	Cambridge	22 minutes	27/03/07	Verbatim
D01	Furniture Designer at a small consultancy	London	85 minutes	28/02/08	Verbatim
D02	Senior Architect whose practice specialises in sustainable public buildings	London	43 minutes	07/03/08	Verbatim
D03	Fashion Designer of bespoke outfits for individual clients	Cambridge	24 minutes	20/03/08	Verbatim
D04	Textile Designer at a large global high street retailer	London	~20 minutes	22/10/07	Field notes
TR01	Senior Trends Researcher at a large design and foresight consultancy	London	42 minutes	04/10/07	Verbatim
TR02	Freelance Trend-spotter working for fashion brands and magazines	London	~25 minutes	19/10/07	Field notes

Table 1 – Interview details

The interviews were intended to be around 30-40 minutes long, but a great deal of variation was experienced between interviewees as some were quite guarded or less articulate about their work, while others talked extensively about adjacent topics or past projects. They were firstly asked open questions about their background, products, markets, competitors, then to elaborate on specific projects, and finally more closed questions on any areas that hadn't been covered. 7 of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded with the candidate's permission and later transcribed. The remaining 2 were conducted over the phone with field-notes taken, producing a total of over 25,000 words of text-based data.

At this explorative stage, qualitative analysis was performed manually by a single researcher looking for comparison with the literature. The interviews were coded based on the themes introduced in the background section to examine their relevance to design practice, to identify contradictions or provide new insight. Consequently, the structure of the paper will loosely follow the literature themes of trend drivers, diffusion, evolution and design strategy. The resulting synthesis will then be discussed and will lead to conclusions and opportunities for further research.

Results and Analysis

In this section when a quotation is used to illustrate a point, the codes from the left hand column of table 1 will be used to identify the source. Where relevant, the product being described will also be included to provide some context e.g. (ID02, mobile telephone).

Drivers of Trends

The data were analysed to look for evidence of designers identifying trend drivers, and if so how were they identified, and were they of value in the design process?

Products and Markets

The first trend driver to be considered is activity in the market place. Sproles and Burns (1994) describe trends emerging from the activities of brands, manufacturers, designers, marketers and retailers. The product designers certainly look at the latest products on the market by exploring the web, shops, exhibitions and trade fairs. Existing products provide an established style or form which often sets a precedent that consumers can understand and designers can use as a reference.

“So although the products that are second to market may have a similar format, it’s not necessarily copying that format, it’s because that format is working, and consumers expect that format” (ID01, GPS system)

Referring to (copying/avoiding/modifying) existing products and styles also speeds the development process, and according to Molotch (2003, p. 45), allows designers to position their products relative to their competitors. In addition, the interviews found that contemporary products in adjacent or foreign markets and historic products are also referenced by designers if the product to be designed does not have an established format, or if a novel format is needed.

“UK architecture has always imported ideas from mainland Europe, so UK architects are interested in Dutch architecture, ... Spanish architecture, Portuguese architecture ... There used to be an interest in Japanese architecture, that has slightly subsided recently” (D02, large architectural projects)

Advances in technology and materials can also enable, or create a need for new forms in products.

“technology changes as well and we have to adapt, for example we designed furniture for (hotel chain) ... They came back to us and they

want to change those (CRT) TVs for thin TVs so ... we have to design a new unit" (D01, furniture for hotels)

The influence of existing products on design is well established in fashion. Many clothing retailers base their entire commercial strategy on rapidly copying styles as they appear, and this has been enhanced by rapid communication of information via the media and the Internet.

"within twelve hours of the show going down the catwalk, every single outfit will be photographed and put onto Vogue's web site so the high street can just copy them three months in advance of when they'll actually go into the stores" (D03, high street fashion design)

Influential People

Lead consumers: Influential people such as celebrities and the social elite can drive trends by endorsing products and clothing through formal contracts with brands or purely by association (Lloyd Jones, 1991). These were not cited as an influence by any of the interviewees, although this is not necessarily typical of the fashion designer, as they do feature in fashion trend publications, magazine articles and websites.

"I am intrigued by it (celebrity culture), I scour through Heat World (.com) and all the magazines just to know what's going on, because I think it is important to know what's going on, but I wouldn't say it influences me." (D03, bespoke fashion design)

Innovative consumers can be incredibly influential on the people around them, and a valuable source of fashion inspiration; the cool-hunter (TR02) described searching the streets, shops, clubs and bars around the world to photograph people wearing innovative or underground styles that might be incorporated into a new collection – working freelance, directly for a single retailer, or for subscription fashion aggregation services like WGSN. "Cool-hunting" has been going on since the 1980s in the fashion industry (Gladwell, 1997). Innovators can be identified in other product categories - Von Hippel (1986) describes how "lead users" use their skills or expertise to modify or personalise existing products or create new solutions to fulfil their needs, but these were not mentioned by the design interviewees.

Lead designers: Behind the scenes are the designers, some of whom have a great influence on the styles in their product categories (Lloyd Jones, 1991). In large scale architecture, there are a few "hero designers" such as Frank Gehry and Norman Foster whose exterior forms are widely known and aren't often challenged. The industrial designers interviewed mentioned contemporary, high profile designers such as Marc Newson and Philippe Starck, their designs certainly contribute as inspiration.

"One of Karim Rashid's famous bookcases, he's got this wire which has points coming out of it, it's just like a wire with perpendicular bits ... this is a design classic. So we looked at that and then we thought how can we develop it" (D01, bookcase design)

In fashion, high profile designers such as Karl Lagerfeld and John Galliano are also very influential and probably more known to the average consumer

than product designers and architects. Their designs are also the ones that trickle down the market to be imitated by retailers at lower price points.

Cultural Activities

Sproles and Burns (1994) suggest that events, national celebrations, leisure activities, sports events, the arts and movies influence the tastes of an era. The imagery associated with such media can find its way into products.

"I can be inspired by things like pokemon cartoons, X men comics" (D03, bespoke clothing)

It is the nature of designers to take in their surroundings and, with a trained eye, observe forms, colours and textures that could be applied to a product (Eckert & Stacey, 2000).

"You have to go out there in the real world and you have to look at nature, look at everything, architecture, you know, pick up lines" (ID02, consumer product)

The product designers interviewed do take inspiration from products and other influential designers from the market place, they see them as static references, or an established format. For the fashion industry, WGSN, Vogue, Drapers and other subscription based, online services display photos of the latest styles from the catwalk, trade fairs and the street, along with relevant industry and technology news. Similar online services and blogs also exist for product design but were not mentioned by any of the product designers – suggesting that they are not established as a formal source of information.

Diffusion of Trends

Did the interviewees think about the way that trends spread across societies and markets and the factors that influence their distribution? They weren't asked this question explicitly; the relevant answers have been drawn out from their general discussion.

Internal Motivations

The internal characteristics of consumers can influence their adoption of new products and styles (Miller et al., 1993). Some of the designers use probing techniques like focus groups and ethnographic studies to provide an understanding of the consumption behaviour of the target consumer – identifying "extroverts" or "introverts" (ID01), "assurance seekers" and "perfectionists" (ID02). Also when designers are separate from the social or cultural group for which they are designing, they must find ways to understand the needs of that consumer.

"a cookware project where I was designing cookware for the Asian, Korean market and the Korean 30-40 year old housewife, for me to predict what they like and dislike is almost impossible unless you go and find out about them. Whereas, say Jonathan Ive, designer of the iPod, his target market is pretty much his design team, that demographic – kind of young, 20-somethings, very, very into gadgets" (ID01, cookware for Korea)

The fashion trend spotter (TR02) described how one client would create dynamic visual representations of personas to reflect target segments such as "Suzy from New York". The persona would reflect Suzy's influences, aspirations, tastes, attitudes, cultural surroundings etc. and would be constantly updated, or split up into multiple personas. Methods of consumer research and segmentation are well documented in marketing literature (Midgley & Dowling, 1978; Rogers, 2003; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971).

External factors

The target consumer exists within a complex, changing environment in which a multitude of interwoven forces shape the adoption of product forms across society (Molotch, 2003). In large scale architecture for example, changing government regulations are driving a change in the form of commercial buildings:

"If you go along the Bank side behind the Tate modern, you see a collection of buildings, built over a series of years, and you see the first one is completely glass, but as you walk down the road you see less and less glass, and more and more terracotta panelling ... this is the regulations starting to take hold, but they are already very much more glassy than they will be able to be in the very near future." (D02, large architectural projects)

Building regulations in the UK are starting to clamp down on the overuse of glass, as it is very energy inefficient. This is leading to a change in the form and symbolism of commercial buildings – in the past, "glass buildings became associated with corporate financial success (and) international strength" (D02), but now regulation and environmental awareness is changing the accepted norms, and new styles are diffusing out across the market as big corporations want to appear more mindful of environmental issues. Trends are also driven by the changing symbolism that reflects the social, economic and political climate, in this case defining the spending and styles of an era:

"when I was a student it was a recession, and this is early 90s, and the grunge feel was in. And low cost cheap chic was the way to go. At the end of the 90s, (the) economy was picking up ... and all of sudden, more value came into young people's lives ... so that the money they were paying for education, the loans they were taking out ... they then had control of this capital and were spending it, that's a distinct fashion change based on economics, as well as culture. So students from the late 90s are very different from the early 90s in terms of the way they dress and their attitudes." (ID01, consumer products)

Long term, widespread cultural tastes exist in different countries. Identifying these makes it possible to translate them into product forms intended for that market. But a deeper understanding would uncover the underlying causes for these tastes and how they might change in the future.

"like 'surprising response': the idea of something happening that you're not expecting, is relevant in Japan, (but) might not be for a more conservative market like Korea at that time ... whereas the Middle East might be more interested, for example, in something like 'micro-finish' or 'delightful detail' or something" (TR01, consumer electronics)

Many of the consumer research methods used by the product designers can only identify past and existing consumer knowledge and taste. The persona methods used by some companies can help with understanding and predicting the shared motivations of a target consumer segment by linking them with the external socio-cultural context within which they exist. It appears that experience and intuition are needed to translate external factors, deep rooted in society, into meaningful design needs and forms. The majority of the interviewees (and much of literature) were only able to make such connections between factors in the past tense.

Evolution of Trends

The interview data were examined to identify evidence of the designers thinking about how forms change over time. For the product designers, the use of existing products as a reference in design will logically lead to convergence resulting from a "shared cultural context" – a concept observed in fashion designers by Eckert and Stacey (2000). This in turn suggests that continuity will occur over time as product forms evolve. Comments such as this one suggest that such convergence often happens subconsciously.

"I know it's my drawing and I just thought that would be kind of cool, but this isn't brand new, I'm sure I've seen this somewhere, maybe I've seen a few things and I just thought that would be kind of cool. So it's hard to pinpoint exactly what influenced me" (D01, furniture)

Certain products have such a striking, sustainable appearance that they create their own format. Cited by several of the interviewees, the iPod is a prime recent example of a highly recognisable product whose form diffused across into many adjacent product categories:

"There's that iPod effect, the fact that it had such a trail down in every possible way, when that appeared, for example, it created an entirely new visual arena for products. Everything from consumer electronics to perfume bottles, the soft, minimal aspects kind of became apparent, I think everyone piggy backed that." (TR01, consumer products)

According to Coates (2003) this kind of "seminal form" is a quality of a design classic. Design icons, on the other hand, have a product form that is synonymous with an era, but as that era passes the relevance of the form diminishes, except as a "nostalgic design cue" (Crilly, Moultrie, & Clarkson, 2004, p. 567).

"Some of these hotels are out to make a statement, sometimes when you make a big statement, it is a statement of that time, of that era. In the moment it will feel great, but the bigger statement you make, you just won't like it in a year, in a year or two it will be dated" (D01, furniture design)

While evidence was found to support some of the literature theories of trend-evolution, unprompted, the designers did not discuss the longevity of the trend, its future relevance, or predicting drivers of the future, while the trend researchers (TR01 and TR02) appeared to have a much more dynamic view of "context" and "trajectories".

Design Strategy

The strategy of the brand or company will define where it wants to position itself relative to existing products and trends. This may be because of a desire for continuity within the brand: textile designer D04 describes how her company has an internal trend group who are responsible for setting the trends for whole brand, then each department will adapt the trends to suite their target consumer. Or the company may be keen to avoid the risk of totally missing the mark with a completely divergent style.

"Some people, like (innovative Dutch furniture design firm), are all about taking risks, we could never launch that, we just couldn't, with our markets and our showroom, we could never launch an angle as weird and wacky as this" (D01, furniture)

Whereas, if a company's strategy requires them to stay ahead of the market then a degree of risk taking is required.

"There are clients we work for that are clearly ahead of the market and they've got to stay ahead so they've got to be able to have an understanding of where things are going and be willing to take a risk – which often means leaving the existing trend area and trying to do something completely different." (TR01, consumer products)

The architect positively encouraged the copying of his practice's architectural forms in order to promote energy saving innovation in large commercial buildings. They are trying to lead the trend rather than follow it – promoting imitation and evolution by others.

"that's part of the idea, they are meant to be prototypes, we publish everything, everything is in the public realm." (D02, sustainable architecture)

Direct copying of a style can also be used to profit from the symbolism or prestige with which the original object is associated.

"for example they (a large supermarket chain) might do a very successful own-brand shampoo range or something, if you're thinking of packaging, that looks like something you'd see in a high-end boutique. It doesn't damage them at all to create something that's already on the market, because the price points are much lower and you know you're getting a good product and they look really up-to-date and modern." (TR01, packaging design)

Discussion

The absence of literature relating to trends and product design led to the synthesis of existing literature in adjacent areas of fashion, taste, consumer behaviour and so forth. In order to test and strengthen the theoretical understanding of the literature review, a series of semi-structured interviews with design and trend professionals in a variety of different product categories and consultancies were conducted. The transcripts from these interviews were analysed to verify the themes identified in literature. The key findings from this process are discussed here.

Trend Drivers

None of the product designers interviewed would say that trend research regularly contributes to their projects. Formal trend research methods such as ethnography, focus groups, surveys, cool hunters and expert panels take time and resources but were available to the designers when managers/clients requested them. Moreover, several of the interviewees were quite cynical about the value of trends and forecasting, but then it turned out that they do keep up with market developments for their own interest, and they do draw on other objects in the market place, and they do look at their cultural surroundings for inspiration.

Trend Diffusion

The literature suggests that successful product forms respond to the deeper, underlying individual, social and cultural forces that cause widespread future tastes to be established. When a company requires this foresight, and can afford it, trend consultants have the resources, tools and experience to identify and predict these long term trends and can translate them into design opportunities. The structured methods that trend researchers use can easily be replicated by product designers given time and resources, but it seems that trend researchers have an extra degree of intuition that cannot be taught or systematised. Likewise, the trend researchers might not have the ability of the designer to turn the trend information into a delightful product.

Trend Evolution

From the evidence identified in the literature and interviews, it is apparent that trends are evolving contextual forces that influence consumers, designers and hence product forms to different degrees and over varying durations. Consequently this study sees the aesthetic implications of trends falling between 3 major categories of duration and influence (adapted in part from Sproles and Burns (1994) and Lloyd Jones (1991, p. 222)):

- **Details** – transient surface characteristics, rapid growth, short lifespan, narrow influence
- **Fashions** – the silhouette, form, shape, proportions – slowly evolving
- **Cultural Movements** – long term trends, tastes and customs, with a wide ranging influence

Figure 1 is an illustration of how these different types of trend interact over time, with fashions emerging from long term movements, and details fluctuating on the surface of fashions. It suggests that this view might be projected into the future to understand the context in which a new product might exist after it has been developed and released.

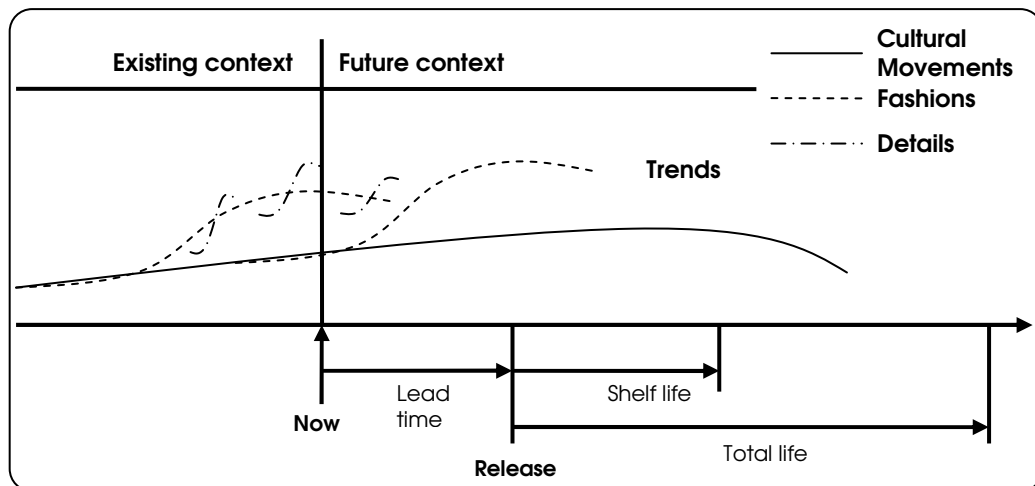


Fig 1. Trends in existing and future contexts

Design Strategy

The range of foresight varied greatly between interviewees. At one extreme, the trend researcher (TR01), developing 5-10 year strategy for a major global client which culminated in a design language across the whole corporation that aligned all aspects from product appearance, to user experience to the mission and goals of the company. This requires all the experience and tools available to work at such a scale and so far into the future. At the other extreme from the trend researcher is a design consultant, developing an individual functional product for a small client with a short timescale – the strategy here is of course to differentiate from the competition, but less consideration is given to future context. A third extreme is the bespoke fashion designer (D03), who deliberately avoids trends to create art pieces that are a reflection of his clients and his own unique influences.

Limitations and Further Work

This paper presents the explorative part of an ongoing study. Its intention is to present the study's findings so far, improve the understanding of trends and design, and promote discussion on the area. Its breadth is limited at present to a small number of interviewees, but this number is increasing and the study will be continued with further interviews with design professionals in order to build stronger theory through deeper analysis of the data. Cases will be established through further interviews within each of the existing product categories in order to provide some more comparison between direct competitors and companies operating at different strategic points. Emerging theories will be further enhanced by revisiting past interviewees to validate the new understanding. Also, since the interviews have so far been limited to the Cambridge and London area, a selection of future interviews will be made abroad in order to understand the international perception of trends, and their application to consumers in a global market.

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