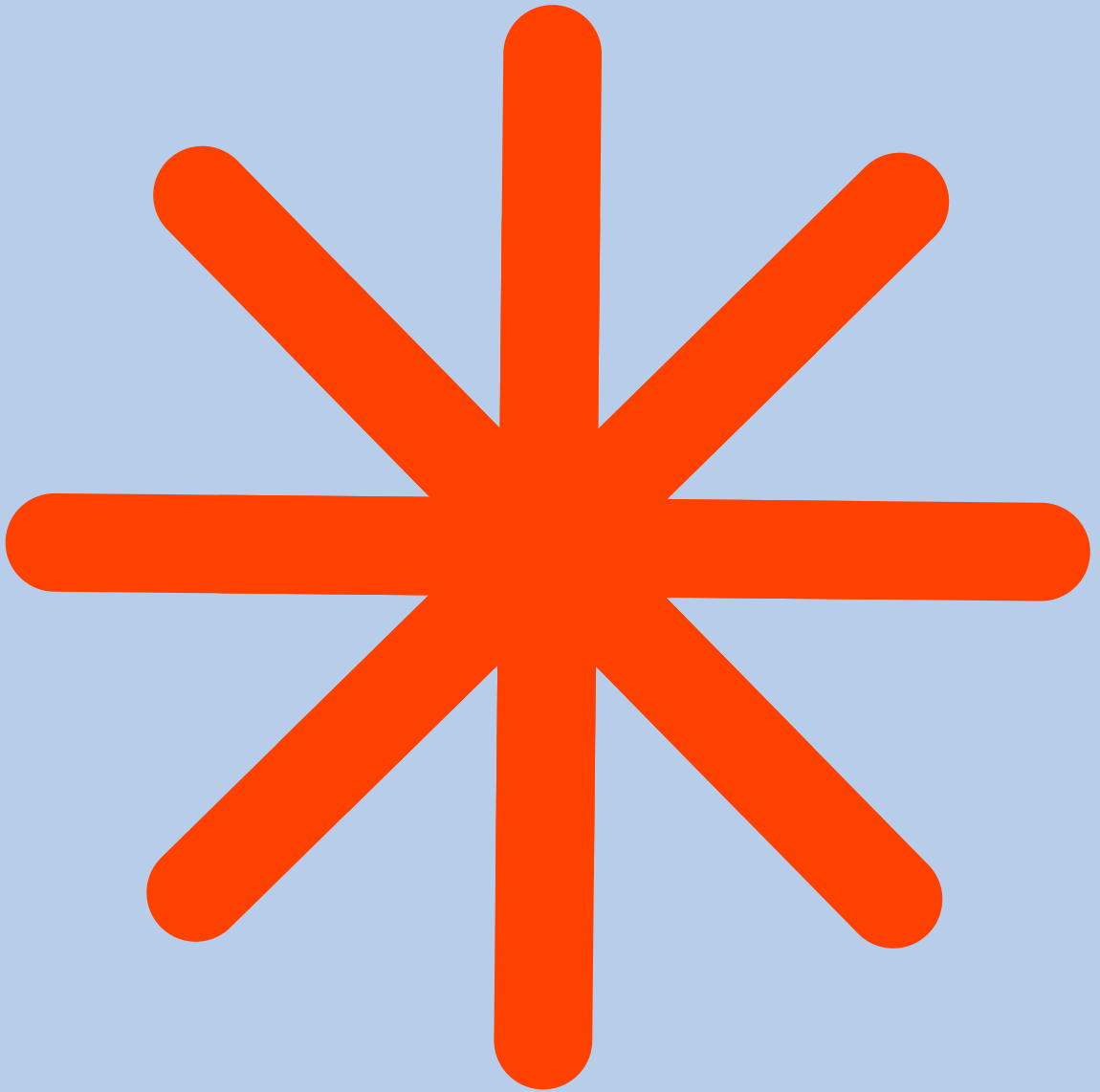


explore

more



HOW TO RESEARCH TRENDS

/ Els Dragt

Move beyond trend watching
to kickstart innovation

Intro

WHY THIS BOOK?

The profession of trend researcher is still highly charged with stereotypes. Many think it's mainly about hip and trendy fashion styles or following hypes and fads. But the scope of a trend researcher's job extends far beyond that. My mission is to demystify the trend process, so that you'll understand how it works and have the tools to conduct trend research yourself.

This book will show you how to study change and understand emerging shifts in people's needs and wants. These trend insights are essential during any innovation or transition process and serve as the foundation for making decisions that improve your quality of life and that of others. Understanding trends empowers you to shape more responsible futures.

Education is key in training your trend muscles. This means practice, practice, practice and experiencing the process in-depth. These are things that buying a yearly trend report or using generative AI tools can never replace. When I started out in trend research there weren't many books explaining the process. Sure, there were loads of reports presenting next year's trends, and plenty of books with a more academic approach. But where was the book explaining the process of applied trend research for use in a day-to-day organisational context? Eventually I decided to write one myself. And that's the book you're reading right now.

WHO'S IT FOR?

If you're looking for vague trend guru talk, then you might as well put this book down and keep looking. But if what you're looking for is a transparent, down-to-earth approach to trends, look no further. Understanding trends, the emerging values and needs of groups in society, will provide you with a springboard for innovating and creating change. That's something that students and teachers, beginners and professionals, marketers and policymakers, designers and analysts, entrepreneurs and executives, and researchers and strategists can all use.

WHAT'S INSIDE?

For the past twenty years I have immersed myself in trend research, worked as a trend lecturer and trained professionals in the trend research cycle. I've collaborated with numerous public and private organisations and brands with a local and international scope, across a wide variety of sectors, ranging from finance to fashion and from telecom to food. The lessons I learned on this journey I am now sharing with you. This is the revised version of my book, which I decided to update in view of the growing number of professionals integrating trends into their daily work by tailoring the format to be more helpful in incorporating trends within organisations. With this in mind I selected specific professionals to interview, added relevant theories and provided practical suggestions on establishing a trend practice within an organisation. Updating also means deleting, so I've scrapped all the interviews, quotes and case studies from the previous edition.

Each chapter includes the following elements:

- Theoretical information regarding the subject at hand, collected, analysed and synthesised from various sources in combination with experience by practice.
- Learning points from professionals who actively engage with trends in their company.
- Activities and worksheets to get going right away individually or in a team.
- Suggestions for further reading, watching and clicking.

WHAT'S NOT INSIDE?

No numbers: this book is about qualitative trend research and does not shed light on the quantitative approach of trend forecasting. It won't explain how to use spreadsheets and computer models to extrapolate numerical data from the past and present into the future.

No science: although I have used some academic sources for this book, I won't be offering a scientific approach for exploring the future. We won't be focusing on the complete field of futures studies, but rather on the fundamentals of applied trend research.

No next year's trends: this book does not double as a trend report or showcase what is hot or not. It also doesn't include many trend descriptions, because I would like you to keep an open mind and not get too stuck on one specific way of reporting trends. You can find many free trend reports online for inspiration, and I'll be referring to some of these throughout the book.

HAPPY READING

Trend research is a field that is always developing, which is why this book is also a work in progress and permanently in beta. You are more than welcome to contribute, add, suggest or ask anything. You can find more information and material at www.studio-elsewhere.com.

Now let's start our trend expedition!

Els Dragt

Studio Elsewhere

Your guides

Along with sharing my own expertise on researching trends, I've invited six other professionals with different backgrounds to be your navigators of the trend landscape. They openly share their insights on scanning, analysing and applying trends in their workplace. You can find their experiences in the "In Practice" sections of each chapter. Let's get to know your guides!*

Simone Mutsaers

Innovation Researcher at NPO

Simone is part of the innovation team at NPO, the umbrella organisation of the Dutch public broadcasting system. She holds a master's in media psychology and has extensive knowledge and experience in the media research field. On the innovation team Simone is the voice of current and future audiences. She conducts trend research and feeds the trend insights into innovation processes and projects at NPO.

Sean Durkan

Global Insight Manager at Royal Swinkels Family Brewers

Sean works in the global marketing team and holds a bachelor's (hons) in Design Management. He is a seasoned marketing and brand manager and has experience with working in private and public organisations. At Swinkels he is responsible for getting the outside in, making sure that everyone in the company is up to date on current and emerging consumer values and needs.

Eva Burm

Port of the Future Advisor at Port of Antwerp-Bruges

Eva is part of the innovation enablement team and has a master's in Communication and Media Studies as well as a degree in International Relations. She is dedicated to creating an innovation culture at Port of Antwerp-Bruges by introducing creativity, ideation, design thinking, systemic design and trendwatching techniques. She facilitates her colleagues in picking up new skills and integrating them into their daily work.

Maud Donga

Lecturer in trend research at Fontys University of Applied Sciences

Maud teaches students how to research trends at the bachelor's program in Trend Research & Concept Creation in Lifestyle (TCL). She has a bachelor's in Fashion Communication and a master's in Crossover Creativity. Throughout the four-year program at Fontys, Maud gives students their foundation in trend research. She knows how to activate young people and introduce them to the trend field.

Bas van de Poel

Co-Founder & Innovation Director at Modem

Bas is co-founder of Modem, an office for design and innovation working at the intersection of the physical and digital. He holds a bachelor's from the Willem de Kooning art academy in Rotterdam. After a stint in the field of communications and at Space10 he started Modem. Modem works for clients like Chanel, Nike, Google, Ikea and The Barbican.

Anna Lena Götzmann

Cultural Strategy Director at Protein Agency

Anna Lena is part of Protein Agency, a global brand consultancy specialising in cultural insight, strategy, and community-led activation. She has a bachelor's degree in Fashion & Branding from Amsterdam Fashion Institute AMFI. She is driven by an inexhaustible curiosity and eagerness to understand people's behaviour. At Protein Agency she helps brands such as Nike, Calvin Klein and Google make sense of the world and make more culturally progressive decisions.

** For the first edition of this book I interviewed over thirty professionals and their knowledge is incorporated in this edition. You can find their names in the appendix in the back.*

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Intro

Why research trends?

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Want to know more?



We are all futurists. We can think and plan ahead in some way or another. You probably thought of something in the future today? From checking the weather forecast and deciding on what to wear and which activity to do in a couple of hours to thinking forward career-wise five years from now to imagining life when pensioned in forty years. This tendency to be curious about the future and trying to anticipate it is not a specific symptom of current modern times. For centuries there has been a constant search for ways to get a hold of uncertain futures. From the ancient Greeks visiting the oracle of Delphi to the current computer based algorithms trying to model and predict the future.

Isn't it amazing that we, as humans, can imagine something that is not there yet and take concrete actions in the present to block or accelerate this potential future? We sometimes seem to forget we have this talent. Engaging in future related activities will help you to activate this innate skill. One of these activities is trend research.

In this chapter you will hit rewind and take a first step into the world of trend research. You will read about the effects of researching trends and how past, present and future are interconnected. You will also be updated on the history of research into the future, read about predicting versus exploring futures and pick up on the status quo of the trend profession. This will help you to navigate the trend research domain and understand its roots.

Why research trends?

Research in general is aimed at finding new knowledge. It is the systematic investigation of a certain topic in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions. But when everything in our interconnected, complex world is in a state of flux and there is a lot of uncertainty to deal with daily, is it even possible to research this?

CULTIVATE THE LONG VIEW

In the context of an ever-changing world, the field of futures studies encapsulates various approaches to researching, anticipating and shaping multiple futures. Futures studies is the art and science of taking responsibility for the long-term consequences of our decisions and actions today (Gidley, 2017). To ensure a high quality of life for current and future generations, you need to think about the long-term impact of the decisions you make today. This is especially urgent in a world where short-termism thrives. It requires a long-term mindset, consideration of the needs of those who are yet to be born and the will to care for the world beyond our lifetimes. Indigenous communities, such as the Native American community of Haudenosaunee, have long practised intergenerational justice in the form of the Seventh Generation Principle. It is based on their philosophy that all our present decisions should be decisions that will keep the world sustainable seven generations into the future. Approaches like forecasting, scenario planning, strategic foresight and trend research, which fall under the umbrella of futures studies, also cultivate the long view. By incorporating these approaches into your work and decision-making processes, you can break free from the cycle of short-term thinking and become more future literate.

SPOTLIGHT ON WALES

In 2015 the Welsh government passed the Well-being of Future Generations Act, which requires public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of their decisions. The goal of the act is to help these bodies work better with people, communities and each other, and to address persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change. Alongside the act, the government created the Future Generations Commissioner role to advise the government and other public bodies in Wales. To ensure a collective focus, the act sets seven wellbeing goals for the future that all listed public bodies must work towards.

TRAIN YOUR FUTURES CONSCIOUSNESS

Engaging in future-related activities, such as trend research, helps develop your futures consciousness. The concept of “future consciousness” was developed by researchers at the Finland Futures Research Centre (University of Turku and University of Geneva). It describes and

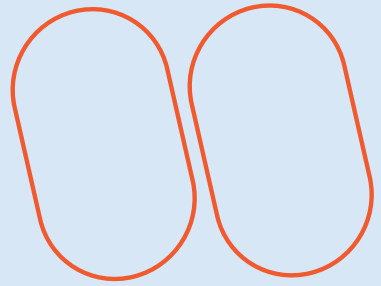
measures the human capacity to understand, anticipate, prepare for and embrace the future. It consists of five dimensions: time perspective, agency beliefs, openness to alternatives, systems perception and concern for others. You can develop these five dimensions through practice to help you to make better long-term decisions. For example, agency belief relates to the extent to which we feel our actions influence the world. Stimulating this belief can empower people, especially the younger generation, and show they can contribute to change, from their neighbourhood to the global stage. Acquiring the tools to engage with the future early in life will better equip you to navigate uncertainties and challenges and become a change agent rather than a victim of change.

ROLE OF TRENDS

This book focuses entirely on trend research. It is a method for identifying and understanding change in a structured way and gaining insights into potential directions of change. Trend research can be applied to both public and commercial challenges. A trend is a change in values and needs being driven by forces and manifesting itself in various ways within certain groups in society. Chapter 2 will give you more information on the definition of a trend and the framework of trend research. The research itself is a means to an end and should be action-oriented. Trend insights help you to see various pathways into the future and reflect on and prioritise which trends you would like to see become a daily reality. Trends provide inspiration for strategic decisions and actions. Trend research works best when integrated at the very beginning of exploratory challenges and open-ended projects, for example creating new visions and strategies or developing new services and products. Along with stimulating your long-term thinking and futures consciousness, what other specific uses does trend research have? Engaging in trend research has a threefold effect: it enables you to detect change, understand change and act upon change. Let's explore each of these effects:

- **Detect**
Trend research is firstly about detecting manifestations of change happening right now. By immersing yourself in trend research you become more attuned and receptive to change and able to detect signs of change more easily and earlier. It helps you to develop an outside-in perspective instead of an inside-out one. You can detect shifts by doing specific scanning activities, which are detailed in chapter 3 of this book.
- **Understand**
Secondly, trend research is about understanding change. By analysing the detected signals of change and interpreting their underlying drivers you will understand them from a wider, cross-industry perspective. You then move beyond mere observations and really get a feel of what lies beneath. Understanding the underlying values and needs driving change is at the core of any trend analysis. You can analyse change using clustering and validating tools, which you can read about in chapter 4 of this book.
- **Act**
Trend research serves as a foundation for vision building, strategy development and decision making. It draws your attention to potential opportunities and challenges. This creates a sense of urgency and influences what is on your political, organisational or personal agenda for the years to come. You can act on trends to improve people's quality of life using prioritising and translation tools outlined in chapter 5 of this book.

In practice



Let's hear what your guides have experienced on the topics addressed in this chapter:

Simone Mutsaers

Innovation researcher at NPO

"The ultimate goal of trend research is to enable people to implement trend insights in their work so they can adjust their policies or create new solutions. When you understand the changing values and needs of your audience or target groups you will always be able to align to these needs in a better way and thus create better innovations. It's quite hard for most people to rise above the here and now. In our organisation people are mostly concerned with existing media content and titles, current services and platforms. It can be very hard to detach from the present and create space for the long view. Hearing about trends helps to break out of the now, even if it's just for a moment."

Sean Durkan

Global Insight Manager at Royal Swinkels Family Brewers

"Most of my colleagues have an annual plan and make decisions that basically improve the chances of success for the current year. You've got to get it right this year, and then think about the following year. I feel it's really important for me in my role to be that person who takes a step back and looks into the future and shares what they are seeing. And I think the more I do that, the more it influences other colleagues to have one eye on the future as well. I'm trying to create a culture of curiosity and longer-term thinking. Okay, we see these trends at the minute, where do we think they're going to go? And is that in three, five, or ten years' time going to have a big impact on our business? If you stick to the vision of your industry that you're familiar with, you're not going to learn anything new."

Maud Donga

Lecturer in trend research at Fontys University of Applied Sciences

"There is a looming danger of tunnel vision or having blind spots when you don't engage with changes happening around you and the uncertainties that they bring. I'm convinced you can't predict the future, but you can sketch out multiple futures. You need to broaden your frame of reference and put your imaginative powers to use to create future visions. Working with trends provides the space to open up, to explore, to stretch your mind and fuel your imagination. Being aware of trends can give you a lot of insights, on a personal level as well as on a societal level."

Eva Burm

Port of the Future Advisor at Port of Antwerp-Bruges

"My goal is to create an innovation culture where people have the skills to get from a challenge to a solution. Training and facilitating my colleagues in doing trend research enables them to explore wider and spot changes inside and outside of their own industry. It pushes them to think in a future-minded way. Our management is stimulating long-term thinking, which inspires us all to focus more on sustainability in all our activities and processes. I'm convinced that when you are more aware of all the changes that are coming at you, you will be able to handle them in a better way."

Bas van de Poel

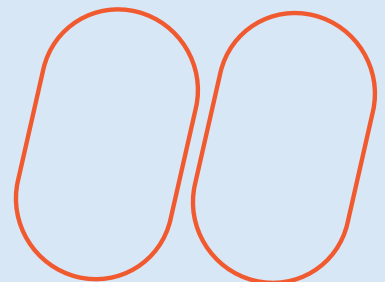
Co-Founder & Innovation Director at Modem

"Conventional design studios are very output-driven, not taking input from the outside world into account. Modem is a bit different in this regard. Working as the hybrid of a think tank and design studio, we anticipate and respond to new and emerging technological futures. I believe that the future is a verb, that it is malleable and can be shaped. As we are researching the future, we are at the same time also designing the future. In that sense it is kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy or a flying wheel. Our research papers show plausible technological futures that shape the agendas of different trend-driven agencies and organisations."

Anna Lena Götzmann

Cultural Strategy Director at Protein Agency

"I'm cautious about rigid predictions of the future. There are so many factors playing a role in making a future possible. Companies are working with timelines and need to make some sort of calls about where they are going to invest their resources in. If you investigate this by looking at forward-heading audiences you can get a bit of assurance and validation instead of just acting on your own personal hypotheses. I'm mostly interested in understanding people's perceptions of the future. Are they optimistic or pessimistic, and how are they responding to shifts? To research trends you have to be very curious and kind of nosy. Always observing people and being very aware."



Summary

- People have been fascinated about the future since the dawn of humanity.
- Futures studies cultivate the long view and stimulate futures consciousness.
- The purpose of trend research is to detect change, understand why change happens and act upon it to create change.
- Thinking about the future has evolved from prophecy to philosophy to business strategy to a life skill.
- How you perceive the past affects your present behaviour and this influences your take on the future.
- Trend research is not about predicting the future but about exploring current changes and the paths they show to alternative futures.
- Trend research as a profession has roots in various disciplines and is continuously developing.
- Trend researchers have a specific skill set that allows them to detect, understand and act on change.

Want to know more?

Eager to learn more about futures studies and trend research? Here you can find some suggestions for further reading, watching and clicking. This is a selection of a vast array of futures-oriented networks, universities and books.

Networks

Currently, networks of futurists are more common than networks specifically oriented towards trend researchers. There are several events organised around the world dedicated to futures and trend research. Check the event calendars of the following networks to stay updated on them.

- **Association of Professional Futurists (APF).** The APF is a global community of professional futurists aiming to advance the practice of professional foresight. They are dedicated to promoting professional excellence and demonstrating the value of futures thinking.
- **World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF).** The WFSF is a non-profit global NGO that is independent, non-commercial in focus and geared towards strengthening scholarship on futures research.
- **The Millennium Project (TMP).** The Millennium Project is an independent non-profit global participatory futures research think tank aimed at improving humanity's prospects for building a better future. It has local nodes around the world.
- **UNESCO Global Futures Literacy Network.** This network is a diverse community of futures researchers, practitioners, and supporters. Spanning the globe, the network shares design practices, resources, ongoing work and progress updates with the goal of advancing Futures Literacy.
- **Regional futures networks.** Examples of regional and local initiatives include the Asia Pacific Futures Network (APFN), Red Iberoamericana de Prospective (RIBER), Foresight Europe Network (FEN) and Dutch Future Society (DFS). In all of these, professionals who work with futures and trends come together to exchange views on future-related topics. If you're interested in such initiatives, why not start by finding out if there is a community in your country, too?
- **Speculative Futures Chapters.** The Design Futures Initiative connects designers, strategists, engineers, scientists, artists and futurists from around the world. Their international network of Speculative Futures chapters brings communities together through a variety of events.
- **La Futura.** A global trend network that aims to bridge the gap between trends, innovation and tomorrow's opportunities. La Futura connects industries and trend experts and is mainly business-oriented.
- **Trend Atelier.** Trend Atelier is a community and education hybrid platform where future forecasters and futuring creatives can connect and exchange approaches.



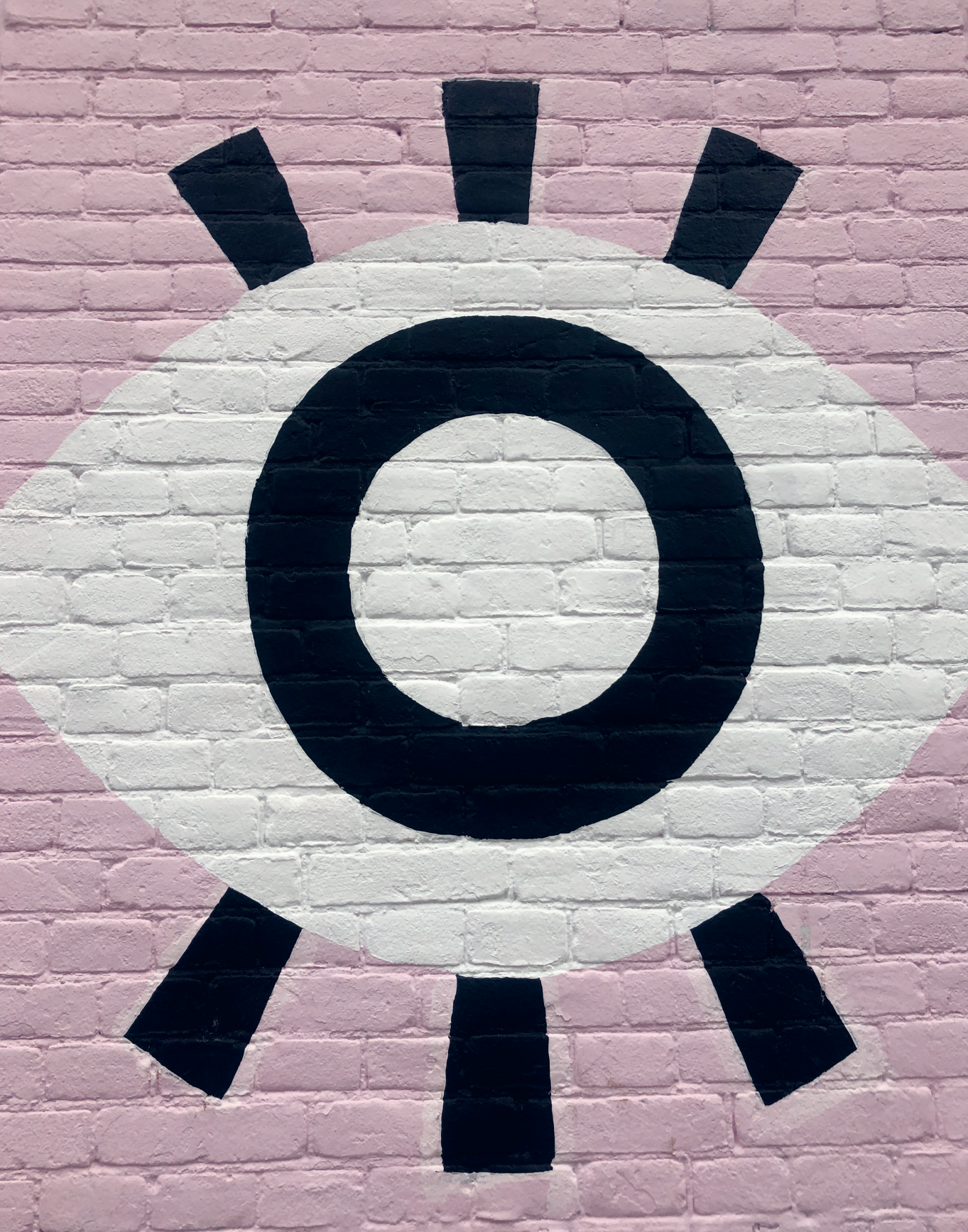
Hype, early adopters, memes, microtrends, diffusion of innovation, consumer trends, laggards? Like every field, trend research has its own jargon and lingo. These are the terms that make it easier for trend researchers to explain, share and discuss their process and findings. However, from an outside perspective it might feel somewhat confusing at first – all the more so because trend research is a profession in development and trend researchers themselves do not always agree on which trend terminology to use. That's why it's important to be transparent and share the underlying framework the research is based on.

The focal point of trend research as explained in this book is understanding humans and the cultural and societal shifts they bring about. You try to uncover changes in values, needs, desires, motivations and behaviours that show the ways into alternative

futures. It leans heavily on social studies and uses qualitative, interpretative frameworks.

In this chapter you'll get to know the basic vocabulary and theories used in trend research, like a definition of a trend, a theory of change, the trend levels and the basics on values and needs. The main point of this chapter is to not get distracted by trend lingo and to become familiar with the various expressions so you will feel confident using them yourself. It will help you understand the foundation on which the investigation of trends is based and give you a framework that will facilitate your own thinking and communication about trends.

Let's shape
the future together!



Understanding trends, the emerging values and needs of groups in society, provides you with a foundation to innovate and create change. This book demystifies the trend research process. It brings a transparent, structured and research-based approach to the table instead of a crystal ball.

We easily get stuck in short-termism, with daily to-do lists and 24-hour news cycles. Trend research bridges the short term and long term, showing potential pathways into the future. Based on trends, you are able to make sense of changes today to make better decisions for tomorrow.

This book presents a three-phased trend cycle for researching trends, synthesising theories and concepts. You will learn in a hands-on way to scan the world for signs of change, analyse your findings and apply your trend insights to kickstart innovation.

This revised edition includes:

- interviews with professionals who share their invaluable experience with trends
- engaging trend activities and worksheets for both individual and team use
- practical advice on setting up your own trend practice

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