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**The Place To Be**



Francesco Morace

Sociologist and writer, Francesco Morace has been working for over 30 years in the sociological and market research field and is the President of Future Concept Lab, a research and strategic consultancy institute with extensive activities in Europe, USA, Asia and South America.

Strategic consultant for companies and institutions on an international level, he has since 1981 held conferences, courses and seminars in 20 countries worldwide.

A Professor of Social Innovation at Politecnico di Milano and of Culture & Lifestyle at the faculty of Sociology of the University of Trento, he is the author of over 20 books including the recent *Italian Factor. Come moltiplicare il valore di un Paese* (2014) and *Crescita Felice. Percorsi di futuro civile* (2015), both published by Egea, whose themes are discussed within ‘Il Consum-autore’ each Sunday on the Radio24 show ‘Essere e Avere,’ hosted by Marialuisa Pezzali.

He is also a regular columnist on the subject of trends for *Adv*, *Dove*, *Interni*, *Mark Up*, *Millionaire*, *You*, *Style* and other specialized international magazines and journals.

# The Challenge of X-Change People

by Francesco Morace

**PREFACE**      Trends are those phenomena that provide new elements in a society and its variables regard less of how rapidly they evolve. They are social facts.

To understand and interpret people’s behavior, one needs to observe and analyze the real life of individuals. They are no longer little parts of a homogeneous mass, nor are they a patchwork of segments organized by categories (such as age, class, etc.). Rather, the people we observe are multiple and dynamic subjects, who do not just consume but also create our society. They do not just absorb the message of a medium; they claim to be the medium themselves. They are x-Change People. Analyzing fashion and retail trends has demonstrated that consumers regard themselves as the protagonist of the market. As consumers ‘evolve’ into the role of producers of trends – becoming ‘Consum-Authors’–, the new priority is to define techniques and instruments that support advanced research in terms of methods integration while responding effectively to clients’ customer centricity strategies. The challenge of *coolhunting*, or the spotting of trends, needs to be placed within this dynamic evolution as regards both quality and credibility of research. Big data,

normally employed to provide hypotheses about the consumer brand experience (both *pain points* as well as *delights*) to be tested through qualitative research, will be increasingly used as a factual support to a social analysis of the world, enriched with previously made scientifically-weighted observations. Numeric data will be useful to weight the relevance of an experience that can be an act of consumption, a behavior, a feeling, and anything that comes from

**People are multiple and dynamic subjects who do not just consume but create our society and are the medium themselves**

‘below,’ constituted by the sum of many single individuals who share a preference, or who make a choice. Data will no longer be a measurement of market segments, but will give voice to groups of ‘unclassifiable’



The Consum-Authors, people as producers of change, recording and broadcasting fragments of their lives

Fashion and accessories that feature new playful and regenerating forms of experience; Florence

Connectivity and access to information and knowledge, everywhere and for everyone; Berlin

people, whose actions are driven by the relationships with their inner selves, with their bodies and their personal energies. From this perspective, the ‘Street Signals’ methodology applied to fashion and retail trends acquires a strategic role.

## Trends as Social Facts

Trends are those phenomena that provide new elements in a society and its variables, regardless of how rapidly they evolve. As the father of empirical sociology Emile Durkheim claimed, they are ‘social facts.’ For example, the centrality of the family in Italy is not a trend because it is a solid and highly structured phenomenon. Gay relationships and their legitimacy can be considered as trends because of the fairly recent, unstructured and still ongoing evolutionary process that they represent. Trends exist and find expression at different degrees of innovation and popularity. Only ten years ago, light food was a trend that developed in specific parts of the population and then spread throughout different levels of society.

Few foresaw, however, the emergence of the opposite phenomenon: that of indulgent food, capable of combining palate pleasure with a health promise. The very existence of trends implies the individualization of a path. An increasing number of business people have become aware of the relevance of studying trends in this integrated way. It offers a whole new perspective for product and service innovation and for rethinking their brand communication strategies. Indeed,

**An increasing number of business people have become aware of the relevance of studying trends in an integrated way**

their deep understanding offers proprietary insights for designing new and differentiated experiences and customized solutions.

It goes without saying that new trends are not explicit, as they still have to be identified.

Over time, new trends’ breeding grounds appear across different cultures, targets, social networks and theatres of consumption, like the street as the expression of advanced distribution. People who work with trends deal with the task of ‘sensing’ the trend, capturing what really matters and inserting it within an interpretative structure that will then be applied to the world of strategic marketing. The instruments employed by the most advanced companies are part of a multi-methodological approach and therefore include: ethnography, which studies real-life phenomena directly from fieldwork; participant observation within the contexts of consumption where the trend setters operate; qualitative and quantitative methods to check the relationship between a product/ brand and its targets; and desk analysis primarily used to conduct communication analysis through a semiotic approach.

## Fashion, retail and street life

Fashion, retail and street life have been gradually converging towards a fusion.





Democratic and compact solutions for the city that allow people to reinvent their urban paths

A new awareness of urban mobility involving people in a playful way

Low-impact mobility alternatives facilitating family activities in Amsterdam



New eating behaviors inspiring consumers towards greater freedom; Berlin

Informality and socialization thanks to 'on-the-go' proposals; Berlin

Consumers participating in the game of creativity applied to fashion products

The urban territory becomes a scene for aesthetic stimulation; Milan



Fashion statements for experimentation and expression; Milan

Convivial moments and pleasant everyday rituals for seniors; Seoul

Catwalks and people's personalization of their look finally merge, as do the projects designed by famous stylists and the single ordinary person's creativity, that now mix different epochs and aesthetic codes. This convergence is so intense that tracing back the evolution of fashion styles becomes hard work. In the past few years, the media have dedicated much attention to those professionals who are capable of spotting new street fashion-related phenomena. Described as 'cool hunters', 'trend spotters' and 'trend setters' their job titles are often used synonymously but, in fact, mean different things. Legitimizing these disciplines are new courses and learning experiences in universities and ad-hoc master's courses related to the work of catching the trend. The goal of market research has therefore moved from controlling and monitoring different types of consumers, to exploring and revealing these synergies, suggesting and implementing people's own experience.

When reflecting upon the world of market research and its methodological

challenges, it is important to propose innovative research paths, rather than striving to identify new models. This is also the view followed in the attempt to transform fashion trends into new paths that have given life to social and consumption trends. While qualitative and quantitative research techniques are now consolidated and remain an important ground for research and development, in the last few years we have witnessed

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the emergence of more experimental methodologies that are close to the world of anthropology and ethnography. The contribution of these disciplines applied

to data-mining techniques (big data) has allowed researchers to draw from a wide range of material, testing and combining empirical data with observatory research. Even though this multi-disciplinary platform has contributed to a more fertile ground for social-cultural investigations, its use needs to be balanced to avoid confusion and chaos that are not always creative. Being able to motivate – besides choosing – a certain research technique is therefore compelling, if not necessary. The design of a methodology should prioritize the accuracy and the completeness of results, rather than being anchored to habits or following the latest fashion trend in the world of research. *Coolhunting*, for example, risks belonging to one of the many appealing and fashionable research tools unless it is placed within a wider methodological framework that implies the researcher's critical data re-interpretation. Future Concept Lab, for example, was one of the first institutes in the world to launch *coolhunting* in 1992, and believes in its potential as long as this method



Open-air and wellbeing occasions to share with the community. International Yoga Day; Brussels 2014



PHOTO: PACIFIC PRESS / GETTY IMAGES





Plein-air occasions and city discovery; Paris

Playfulness and easy-going attitudes for people of all ages; London

Colorfulness and fun accessories to enjoy and share with friends; London



In search of quality life occasions that go beyond the private environment and reach the urban reality; Turin

Taking a break and enjoying a leisurely moment in the urban territory; Barcelona

Time investment and expertise for consumption choices; San Francisco



The needs of the new families give birth to solutions that enhance the experience both in the private and public; New York

The new seniors in the center of cultural life and consumption; Paris

Embracing new proposals and the unexpected interpretation of the public environments; San Paulo



is integrated with other systematic and consistent sets of parallel research and interpretation activities. In this way it is possible to seriously practice *coolhunting* and achieve extraordinary results, providing the sociological basis to credibly support marketing strategies and the work of creative people.

**Permanent observatories and ad-hoc research**

We need to start by reading social change and people’s consumption behavior by combining base research, characterized by a medium-long term perspective, with ad-hoc research that by its nature, either qualitative or quantitative, responds to tighter schedules and a more precise focus. Base research is a source of inspiration on which to brainstorm, deepen and develop new ideas and, as a result, on which to confirm or reject theoretical hypotheses built on the observation of a socio-cultural context.

The results of the observation satisfy the following needs: **(1)** To clarify

and prioritize the research objectives, guiding the Company in its first strategic hypothesis; **(2)** To support ad-hoc research in all its steps, in the definition of its goals and its questions, and in the interpretation of its results within a wider sociological scenario.

In this respect, cool hunters and fashion trends become crucial to the final result. This is why we believe that research is a practice that, given the reliability of its methods and interpretation, primarily invests in the observation and analysis of the contexts within which people act. In this way, we will be able to affix the consultancy provided by the researcher with the ever-changeable behavior of those who buy, consume or simply live in relation to the social productive market and its global culture. Doing integrated research is much more than simply applying qualitative and quantitative methods to a project. The term integration implies the evaluation of what contexts we want to observe, answering the questions: ‘What stories do we want to collect (in order to design

the sample)? What life and consumption occasions do we want to observe?’

By doing so, we break the rigid barriers of the often competing qualitative versus quantitative worlds, thinking critically across the single research methods, which will have to deal with their numeric and qualitative aspects more flexibly. For example, doing a focus group makes sense only if we have clearly in mind what kind of ‘story’ we want to be told. Similarly, quantitative research acquires a role that goes beyond the validity of a numeric sample and the formulation of a questionnaire. Quantitative research also allows the definition of structured occasions that can easily be analyzed and reinterpreted by other research methods. For example, it is too generic to interview 300 consumers of beer or soft drinks independently of the contexts where these products are consumed (e.g. eating, reading the newspaper first thing in the morning, when the weather is hot, etc.). In conclusion, we must note that, starting 20 years ago, fashion and retail opened the way to a completely different method to observe, listen and analyze the consumer trends.