Normality of the future: Trend diagnosis for strategic foresight

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Normality of the Future:

Trend Diagnosis for Strategic Foresight

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Abstract

Foresight processes and activities are confronted with the task of making sense of the present, in particular by interpreting weak signals of change in the organisational environment. Although trends are considered to be important drivers of environmental discontinuities which may lead to strategic surprises, there is no operationalization from a strategic point of view. In this paper we are going to conceptualize trends as (socio-cultural) innovations. This leads to important implications. If the nature of innovation is taken seriously, then strategic trend diagnosis has to deal with two different aspects, invention and diffusion. First, we are going to present a framework for identifying the invention aspect of a trend (i.e., "the new") which is based on the fact that "the new" results from a transgression of contextual boundaries. Second, we are going to operationalize the diffusion of "the new" as a threefold process of normalization – i.e., an unusual practice becomes social convention. Taken together, these two aspects provide a theoretical link between trends and market creation. In addition, by relating the above operationalizations to an entrepreneurial strategy-making framework, strategic issue diagnosis can be improved and more seamlessly linked to strategy formulation.

Key words: strategic foresight, weak signals, trends, socio-cultural innovation, normalization

1. Introduction

For four decades, management research has been dealing with the question of how organisations in increasingly unpredictable environments can manage for today while preparing for the future. With the groundbreaking works of Aguilar [1] and Keegan [2], Bright [3,4], Ansoff [5,6] and Dutton et al. [7] management tools and systems labelled as "environmental scanning", "strategic issue management", "trend monitoring", and "early warning" were introduced – later followed by "foresight" in the late 1980s [8] which ended up as "strategic (/corporate/organizational) foresight" in a management context in the late 1990s (e.g. [9]). The underlying principle of these concepts is to detect those weak signals of change, also referred to as trends, which are likely to influence the future of an organisation and its environment.

While in the past these activities were primarily related to avoiding crises and securing the status quo, top management today sees the early identification of trends as a factor of gaining and sustaining competitive advantage [10]. Consequently, Becker and Freeman [11, p. 17] point out the relevance of trends for the creation of new business opportunities: "An executive's ability to read trends accurately in a rapidly changing business environment can make all the difference between riding the currents of opportunity and paddling upstream against them." Thus a deep understanding of the nature of trends is essential for strategic foresight [12]. If trends are not thoroughly understood, businesses risk implementing inadequate strategies due to disinformation.

However, a review of the literature shows that there is a lack of analytical frameworks for conceptualizing and analyzing trends. Definitions are either unclear, contradictory or even missing; and most approaches that relate to the dynamics of trends can be regarded as purely descriptive and based on standard lifecycle curves. In this paper we propose an alternative:

We are going to conceptualize trends as (socio-cultural) innovations and elaborate the implications with respect to strategic issue diagnosis. If the nature of innovation is taken seriously, then strategic trend diagnosis has to deal with two different aspects, invention and diffusion. Therefore, we are going to identify relevant theoretical approaches for analyzing the invention aspect of a trend (i.e., "the new"). Then we are going to draw on theories that had not been used so far for analyzing the diffusion aspect of a trend: The diffusion of "the new" will be conceptualized as a threefold process of normalization – i.e., an abnormal practice becomes social convention – which leads to an elaboration of the drivers of diffusion.

2. Conceptualizations of Trends: I Know it When I See it?

2.1 The Missing Link in the Literature

Few terms have caused so much confusion in the context of foresight, strategy and management as the term "trend" has. It has been used widely in the practitioner's literature in the fields of marketing and general management, for instance in "megatrends", fashion trends, youth culture etc. [13]. 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 who claim to help managers implement environmental scanning and strategic issue management in their organizations. Even there, some authors do not attempt to give a definition of what they mean when they speak of a "trend" (e.g. [16,17]). This leaves an important potential of foresight and strategic insights untapped.

On the other extreme, the term is very precisely defined in the context of statistics, particularly in time-series analysis. Representing the – linear or non-linear – long-term component of a time series, trends have always been part of forecasting models in marketing, management and economics (e.g. [18,19, p. 177]). However this quantitative approach to the future is not appropriate for strategic issue management based on weak signals. Ansoff [5] points out that there is an important difference between uncertainty on the one hand and ignorance on the other: in the latter case there is only ambiguous and fragmentary information which is open to alternative interpretations [7,20,21,22,23,24]. This is the "weak signal" problem that is far too unspecific with respect to content in order to allow forecasting. This point is also supported by Ackoff [25] who proposes an interactive, issue-oriented management paradigm in an increasingly unpredictable business environment which makes the traditional "predict-and-prepare" approach – forecast the future environment and then optimize your business strategy with respect to this prediction – obsolete.

Although Ansoff [6] attributes a central role to "trends" in the context of the weak signal problem, a conceptualization of "trend" is not given: "[…] there are three possible sources of information about impending strategic issues: the trends in the external environment, the evolutionary trends within the enterprise, and the trends in its performance" [6, p. 136]. Instead he presents merely lists of current trends and requires to "[…] identify the potential future impact of the trends on the future performance of the enterprise" [6, p. 137]. In contrast, Dutton and Duncan [26] obviously make a difference between trends and developments, but do not elaborate this any further: "[…] organizational decision makers exist in a market for strategic issues where different internal and external trends and developments compete for decision-makers' attention."

The scenario literature does not provide any clarification of this picture. Some authors, like Godet [27], only mention the fact that trends exist, but do not include them explicitly in their methodology: "[…] in a world which is unequal and confrontational, the future is the result of unequal human forces, shaped by human actions, trends, and constraints." Schoemaker's [28] formulations resemble those of Ansoff, also using anecdotal examples: "What political, economic, societal, technological, legal, and industry trends are sure to affect the issues you identified […]?" Schoemaker ([28], similar [29]) adds that trends whose continuation is contested among the participants of the scenario process must be regarded as a "key uncertainty". Van der Heijden [30,31] and Fahey [32, see also 33] regard trends as drivers that have an impact on the scenario descriptors, particularly when they include a number of significant events – without saying what these events should have in common in order to represent a trend. Even more unspecific are Fink et al. [34]: "Trend analysis is an easily usable tool for interpreting future developments – so-called trends. A trend is an early-warning information – in the form of strong or weak signals" (translation by the authors, similar in [35, p. 229]). In a different publication, the same authors imply that trends are to be regarded as the outcome of a scenario-based forecasting rather than be used as an input for building scenarios: "[…] trend projections are a tool for representing plausible scenarios of the future. For this purpose, we are looking for developments who are likely to come true" (translation by the authors, [35, p. 102], similarly in [36, p. 10]). Liebl [37,38] and Postma and Liebl [39] extensively discuss the contradictory and problematic use of so-called "trends" in the context of scenario building.

2.2. The Evolution of Lifecycle Concepts

Despite the lack of operationalization and conceptual clarity there are many descriptive approaches with respect to the dynamics of a trend. They are generally based on the

assumption that a trend – respectively the resulting strategic issue – undergoes a lifecycle. Downs [40] was the first to apply the lifecycle shape to public and societal issues: the "issue-attention cycle" which more or less resembles the typical product lifecycle. At first, an issue or a trend is rarely reported in the media, then attracts more and more attention until it reaches a "take-off point", i.e. critical mass; thus the attention grows further until it reaches a peak after which saturation takes place. This leads to decreasing attention and, finally, the trend or issue dies down. Many researchers in the field of strategic issue management followed this purely descriptive "natural history approach" that goes back to the sociology of the 1930s and 40s [41]; among them are Renfro [42,43], Arcelsus and Schaefer [44], Lyles [45], Starling [46], Buchholz et al. [47], Buchholz [48], Barrows and Morris [49], Crable and Vibbert [50], and Maenhoudt [51].

Significant contributions to lifecycle thinking have been provided by Mathews and Wacker [52] which give deeper insights into the various stages of a trend lifecycle. The first half of the life cycle is exhibited in Figure 1. Mathews and Wacker [52] point out that significant trends – those which result in changing mainstream behaviour – are born on the "fringe" of society in deviant minds of outsiders. The "realm of the cool" follows the "fringe" and requires that these trends have been adopted by groups who see themselves as a marginalized avant-garde (the "edge"). Trend researchers or "cool hunters" commonly attempt to forecast the next stage (i.e., the "next big thing" with mass compatibility) for their clients; this implies that these consultants are relatively late in picking up trends, and the resulting lead times are often too small to make the necessary strategic moves for capitalizing on the identification of trends [53,54,55]. In particular, when it is becoming obvious that the next phase of "social convention" is almost certain to be reached, then the intense competition among the relevant players will no longer allow pioneer advantages by claiming "street credibility". Stated differently, the bizarre phenomena of today are the starting point for the mainstream of the

future. In the final analysis, Mathews and Wacker [52] do not so much address the *quantity* of adherents or attention in the various lifecycle stages but rather *who* is typically involved and what the implications for marketers and strategists are.

Figure 1

Usually trend research tends to concentrate on the rising branch of the lifecycle. This is due to two reasons: first, only "emerging trends" are perceived as of interest and of news value in mass media; second, the "in" easily tips into a "mega-out". However Mathews and Wacker [52] do not stop at this point, but go on to ask what happens with developments which already have become "social convention". They also describe how the second half of the life cycle of a trend comes into play, a phase of disposal in the form of post-normalization (Figure 2). From a strategic point of view this phase seems to be no less interesting, since it may offer considerable recycling and endgame opportunities. The way in which these opportunities are used is essential for the further development of a mainstream phenomenon: will it freeze in a "cliché", will it develop into a cultural "icon", will it end up as a rare example of an "archetype", or will it simply fall into "oblivion"? An important strategic implication is that different dispositions in the customer segments come significantly into play. An "old" trend may have at the same time several incarnations; depending on the context these may be "cliché", "icon" or "archetype".

Figure 2

Although Mathews and Wacker [52] make a significant step forward in thinking about the dynamics of a trend, they do hardly address the question of conceptualization. What they identify at the fringe of society is a kind of behaviour or practice that may be regarded as "extreme" or "bizarre" by the majority of society – supposedly a very special kind of "trend".

A second flaw from a strategic point of view – which Mathews and Wacker's [52] lifecycle approach has in common with all its predecessors – is its hidden assumption that a trend will go through all lifecycle stages, anyway. In other words, although its description gives the reader more insight, it still is descriptive rather than analytic. An analytic framework must refer to drivers or enablers that allow a trend to reach the next stage; but it would also refer to disablers that may slow down the process or may even cause the premature death. And, finally, an analytic framework would have to address the revival of a trend that had experienced its (premature) death before.

3. Towards an Elaborate Framework for Strategic Trend Diagnosis

3.1. From Trend to Innovation

Obviously trends are as omnipresent as they are badly understood. But on what aspects of trends should an organisation focus when trends are supposed to be strategically or economically relevant? Ansoff [56] has pointed out that not every development may be of the same relevance for strategic issue management; he differentiates "familiar" from "novel" discontinuities. According to Ansoff only novel discontinuities should be of interest for strategic foresight activities, mainly because these developments are most likely to bear strategic surprises, while most of the time the market participants are familiar with the other group of developments. This argument is supported by Müller [57] (see also [58]), who pointed out that the most important characteristic of a "weak signal" may be its lack of precedence. Therefore we are going to conceptualize, from a strategic point of view, a "trend" as an *innovation*; consequently, we will understand trend analysis and research as innovation research, the science of the new.

If the nature of innovation is taken seriously, then trend analysis has to deal with two different aspects: invention and diffusion:

- First, how can the new be identified? And what constitutes this new? This refers to the aspect of *invention*.
- Second, will the new become widespread to a significant extent? This refers to the aspect of *diffusion*.

For the purposes of strategic foresight, the discussion so far has considerable implications. In order to detect strategic potentials, a trend should not be conceived of as a quantifiable phenomenon, which already has been clearly operationalised – such an activity must be regarded as a strategic *late* warning system. Rather, a trend can be thought of as a vague silhouette, whose (new) quality and outline has to be identified and evaluated. This outline has much to do with the demarcation line between normality and abnormality. Therefore, it is important to focus, firstly, on the detection of abnormal phenomena and, secondly, on the forces that drive the subsequent normalization process – which may lead to a social convention. In the remainder of this paper we are going to identify relevant theories that address the issues related to the two aspects of innovation, particularly theories for identifying and describing the new on the one hand and processes of normalization on the other hand. Fig. 3 shows how this elaborate framework aims at extending Mathews and Wacker's [52] approach by operationalizing and generalizing.

Figure 3

In order to identify the relevant theories we have to concentrate on those areas of the business environment where we primarily find novel discontinuities that lead to surprises. The answer seems to have changed rather little over time. Already Bright [3] had stated that companies

understand the fields of technological and economic developments by far better than other subsystems. The same is true for Wilson [59] who particularly advocates the incorporation of social and political trends into strategic planning. Later, Nolan [60] similarly identified the strongest needs for strategic foresight in the socio-cultural and socio-political field: "… *a decade or so ago scarcely 5% of a company's capital budget was highly sensitive to public issues; today, that proportion is closer to 50%.*" From the standpoint of strategic marketing, Cova and Svanfeldt [61] focus on "societal innovations" as the most important field, which are closely linked to cultural change, respectively cultural innovations. Therefore, and this conforms to the examples mentioned by Mathews and Wacker [52], we are going to concentrate on the socio-cultural innovations as the major source of potential strategic surprises.

3.2. The Link to Strategy Making

Conceptualizing trends as socio-cultural innovations implies further advantages, because it can be easily linked to recent frameworks for strategy making which focus on strategic innovation (e.g. [62], see also [63,64,65]): They follow an integrative "paradigm" that considers strategy from an entrepreneurial point of view, encompassing both a resource-based and an industrial-organization type of approach. The latter aspect is important because the former differences brought up by the adherents of these two approaches have turned out to be more or less overemphasized. Moreover, this "entrepreneurial view" is a conceptual step forward, because it has at its centre the creative entrepreneur in a Schumpeterian sense, i.e., an innovative creator rather than a mere adaptor or optimizer within a given set of restrictions. According to this framework (Figure 4), there are two aims of strategy making:

- The first aim is to enable a company to gain sustainable competitive advantage by strategic innovation – i.e., introducing new rules for competing in the market, creating

new business designs, or creating new markets (e.g. [66,67,68,69,70,71,72]). And detecting socio-cultural innovations in the business environment may be an important trigger for strategic innovation.

- The second aim refers to the "context in which competitive strategy is formulated" ([73], see also [74]) and has much to do with the behaviour of a company's stakeholders. Strategy making, therefore, has also to secure the necessary degrees of freedom for future strategic moves. In fact it is socio-cultural innovations – i.e., new socio-cultural practices and new interpretations of socio-cultural reality – that lead to societal issues and, as a consequence, to stakeholder mobilization [75,76,77].

Figure 4

According to the entrepreneurial framework in Figure 4, there are three generic sources for the formulation of strategic options:

- First, the customers and their "worlds" (e.g., their knowledge, imaginings, perceptions and experiences). This may be often the starting point for strategy formulation, because the magnitude and nature of the competitive advantage can only be assessed from the standpoint of the customer. Porter [73,78] has pointed out that in order to achieve differentiation customers must first perceive a certain characteristic as beneficial and, second, they must appreciate it. This represents the "market-based view" part.

- Second, the resources and competences of the focal company. This represents the "resource-based view".

- Third, the trends and issues in a company's environment (i.e., stakeholders, competition, society).

Each of these areas can provide inspiration or other triggers for strategy formulation; however every option created from one source has to be tested against the other two [62]: New offerings based on a firm's competences are only meaningful if they are perceived and valued as beneficial by the customers. Conversely, ideas about how to gain competitive advantage from the viewpoint of a customer must be realistic with respect to a company's own resources and competences. Further, trends and issues in the business environment are not important in themselves. They can only be meaningfully interpreted and assessed if their implications for the customers' worlds – and accordingly, for customer behaviour – are considered. Conversely, ideas about how to gain competitive advantage from the viewpoint of a customer must be tested against the trends and issues in the socio-political and socio-cultural environment, as these may represent relevant drivers of change in the future; and also a firm's resources and competences may need to be re-evaluated due to emerging trends and issues [38]. Thus, by putting innovation at the core of both strategy-making frameworks and the conceptualization of trends, we end up with a more seamless integration of strategic issue management and strategic planning than in the usual "predict-and-prepare" planning mode.

4. Dimensions of Strategic Trend Diagnosis

Having formulated a conceptual framework for trends from a strategic point of view, we can now elaborate the two dimensions of trends as socio-cultural innovations: invention ("the new") and diffusion ("normalization"). We are going to identify relevant theories – mainly from the fields of cultural theory, cultural studies and art theory – that address the nature of socio-cultural innovations and relate them to trends in a context of foresight.

4.1. Context and Transgression: Sources of "the New"

Although innovation is at the core of Schumpeter's [79] economic theory, the invention dimension remains rather vague; the diffusion in the market seems to be the primary interest of economics. Other economists who are dealing with role of the new – e.g., Hayek [80], Röpke [81], or Shackle [82,83] – do not provide a sufficient operationalization, either. In contrast, we see a major contribution in the work of art theorist Boris Groys [84] who researched the anatomy of the new in a context of cultural economy.

As his primary focus Groys chooses 20th century art as a dynamic field of cultural innovation. According to Groys [84] the fundamental characteristic of the new can be seen in the fact that objects or concepts are transferred into another context. The invention therefore is best described by transgressing the boundaries of contexts, by connecting formerly separated contexts. It is the aspect of being new that makes a trend fascinating and leads to a reappraisal of values. Groys [84] discusses several examples: Duchamp exhibited everyday objects in galleries and museums, a ready-made strategy which transformed these objects into valuable pieces of art. This strategy has been applied in many variations by other famous artists like Andy Warhol or Jeff Koons. Groys also uses examples from other fields: Freud connected the nearly forgotten myth of Oedipus to psychoanalysis, thereby increasing awareness of this myth. And Marx commercialized Hegel's hard-to-read dialectics by relating this theory to economic improvements for the working class [84].

This logic is by no means limited to art or cultural history:

- By establishing the brand Y-3, Yohji Yamamoto and Adidas merged sportswear with avant-garde prêt-à-porter-fashion and created a three-stripes-couture that turned out to be a category killer in the fashion industry.

- Autonomous workgroups, abandoned in the 1970s, reappeared strongly in production plants in the 1990s in the guise of making business process reengineering more efficient.

- Quadrophonic sound, a music reproduction technique with a very small software range, was a complete market failure, until it experienced a revival as a device for surround-sound in the booming multimedia home-entertainment and DVD market.

- Finally, innovative fields in humanities and science – e.g., cognitive science, bionics or biological chemistry – are based on the transgression of the boundaries between disciplines [85,86].

These examples underline that the new is neither about something which has never been in the world before, nor is it true that there is nothing new under the sun. What becomes clear is the power of the context: Contexts influence 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 nonexisting combination of a number of different contexts. We analyzed approximately 100 influential trends (collected and documented in [87]) and found out that this way of looking at trends is both conceptually useful and feasible.

This approach also conforms to the lack of precedence as a major characteristic of weak signals. Conversely, we now have a criterion to separate the wheat from the chaff by evaluating information that claims to be a "trend": if it incorporates an unprecedented combination of contexts it points to a "novel discontinuity", otherwise we are at best faced with a "familiar discontinuity". The requirement that different contexts must be involved is also supported by other authors: Cova and Svanfeldt [61] point out that trends are especially

likely to develop into “break-throughs” when a technological development is aligned with developments in the socio-cultural field.

4.2. Trends as Paradoxes

Although conceiving of a trend as a complex combination of different contexts is a necessary first step, it is not in itself a sufficient description. What is required is an additional criterion with which to differentiate a real pattern from an artefact [88]. This additional criterion is the paradoxical form of a trend.

The paradoxical form of trend has a linkage function: on the one hand it underlines the new, on the other hand it also indicates the potential diffusion of a trend. The history of successful products supports this line of thought. It is evident that innovations are most likely to be successful when they incorporate contradictory features, as for instance Post-it notes, which are both adhesive and removable, or Nivea cream, which moisturizes without being oily. The “contradiction-based innovation strategy” [89] is based on the combination of seemingly contradictory product features; by making the contradiction explicit, it can be acted upon, mitigated, and perhaps even dissolved by an innovative technical solution.

Apparently the paradox is the driver of innovation and therefore also of trends and their diffusion. In his novel *The Savage Girl* Alex Shakar [90] develops this reasonable idea and introduces the notion of “paradessence”, i.e., the paradoxical nature of a product or brand. Paradessence means that mutually exclusive phenomena or features combine; which is exactly the case with trends, too. This is the reason why trends must be conceptualized in a more complex way than as a development in one direction or another. Rather, the new and surprising qualities of trends are important – which make hitherto contradicting elements suddenly appear compatible.

Offe [91] warns that sociologists today must be careful when making statements about societal trends, because at the same time there are always indicators that the opposite is also true. This idea of paradoxical phenomena is manifested in the concept of countertrends [92,55,93]. The concept of countertrends argues that when a trend has been detected and formulated, this trend is most likely to have at least one (simultaneously operating) countertrend. Conversely, when no countertrend to a given trend has been formulated, then the complexity of a trend – „*this schismatic core, this broken soul*", as Shakar [90, p. 73] puts it – has probably not been adequately addressed. And a supposedly identified and well-understood trend may take on an entirely new meaning when extended by its countertrend. In this case we are not dealing with two developments that are separate or evolving in opposite directions, but rather with a new – hybrid and more complex – phenomenon. Below are a few examples of this (kind of) phenomenon:

- *Glocalisation*, i.e., local specialisation in a globalising economy.
- *Bobos* (Bourgeois Bohemians), who combine a subcultural attitude with a bourgeois lifestyle.
- *Mainstream of the marginalized*, i.e., groups labelling themselves as marginalized subcultures but showing no significant differences from mainstream groups.

Each of these examples can be characterized as a paradoxical and complex development, which displays characteristics formerly perceived as contradictory or mutually exclusive; instead, they have to be regarded as forms of pluralization, individualization and hybridization.

4.3. Normalization: Drivers of Diffusion

A trend representing a paradox attracts attention because it is regarded as "not normal" and as violating conventions. The further diffusion of a trend can therefore be understood as a process of normalization, i.e., 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.

Link [94] has thoroughly investigated phenomena of normality and the emergence and drift of societal standards. Normality, according to Link [94], is a homogenized and continuous field that is distinguished from abnormality by a demarcation line. Health as the field of normal behaviour is differentiated from the abnormal zones of "addictive behaviour" or "mental illness" – which raises issues of operationalization, scaling and variance. In general, the notion of normality is primarily related to the negotiation of limits. Link identifies two strategies pertaining to these limits:

- *The proto-normalist strategy.* According to Link [94] this is a strategy of a maximum compression of the normality zone, tending to result in fixation and stabilization.

- *The flexibly normalist strategy.* Conversely, this strategy leads to maximum expansion and dynamisation of the normality zone.

Drawing on experiences from the last decades, Link [94] states that the proto-normalist strategy which was inspired by natural sciences and industry norms is becoming obsolete, whereas the flexibly normalist strategy is now on the rise. The latter refers to the idea that normality is a social construction which can be negotiated. Since the 1960s, new social movements have mobilized for a different societal consensus. Their aims have been, e.g., to establish anti-authoritarian education, free love, legalization of drugs, self-organized work etc. as new normalities and dominating lifestyles.

Now we can formulate more precisely what is going on in the first half of Mathews and Wacker's [52] trend lifecycle. This part can be regarded as a three-fold process of normalization:

- First, while a new socio-cultural practice diffuses into society, this practice experiences a reassessment: what starts as an abnormal behaviour ("perversity") of a (stigmatized) group becomes the behaviour ("preference") of a broader audience and even part of the establishment.

- Second, according to Dekkers [95] the normalization of a socio-cultural practice can also be regarded as change in general value schemes: even those individuals that do not adopt a certain practice tend to accept it nonetheless and think of it as being "normal".

- Third, while such a practice is spreading, it tends to lose its extreme forms and takes on more mass-compatible flavours – which allows even larger groups to relate to this practice. As a consequence, the trend becomes a "moving target".

The transformation of a psychological category ("perversity") into an economic one ("preference") points to the fact that new markets are being created here. In other words: where taboo-zones are shrinking, new markets begin to emerge as a consequence of normalization. Groys [96] emphasizes that social protest movements have always tended to create new markets (e.g., "Alternative Rock" music or organic food). In short, dissidence and deviance are always synonymous with potential markets. Thus, rethinking the trend lifecycle as a process of normalization allows a generalization of the specific cases presented by Mathews and Wacker [52]. And it points to the fact that a lifecycle is not a natural law but a result of socio-cultural forces at work. Therefore, when we monitor a trend we have to

monitor the forces that are negotiating and shaping the boundary between normality and abnormality – with respect to all three aspects of normalization.

At this point, we need a second generalization that refers to where deviants come from. In Mathews and Wacker's [52] examples they are more or less outsiders or even sociopaths at the fringe of society who practice bizarre behaviours. However, it is questionable if this romantic image is still true in highly individualized societies, for "[i]nto the shoes of the village idiots and the oddballs, of the eccentrics and the queer fish, has stepped the average deviationist, who no longer stands out at all from millions like him" [97, p. 179]. Of course, it is promising to focus on subcultures as unorthodox or even deviant groups – which may even become lead users for specific industries (e.g., graffiti sprayers for spray-paint manufacturers). However it is even more relevant to identify the nature of these innovative practices, as such processes may also take place at the centre of society. Following the groundbreaking works of Lévi-Strauss [98] and de Certeau [99], the field of cultural studies considers (mis-)appropriation as the primary source for creating new meanings or new forms of usage (e.g. [100,101]). The notion of "cultural hacking" [102,103] best captures this kind of innovation process, as do the French terms "détournement" [104] and "bricolage" [98]. They relate to all forms of physical and symbolical de- and re-contextualisation which create "the new" [105] but also operate as a driving force in the process of normalization. While companies try to prescribe "normal" uses and meanings in user manuals or advertisements, (mis-)appropriations by consumers represent competing, "abnormal" practices that may seem much more attractive for a larger audience.

4.4. Lifecycle Deviations: Backlash and Revival

Often the most interesting results of lifecycle analyses do not come from conformance to an idealized shape but from anomalies that occur. In this section we will discuss phenomena that are not included in Mathews and Wacker's [52] lifecycle.

Unlike the "natural history approach" of lifecycles, the notion of negotiating the boundary between normal and abnormal implies that the process of normalization may stop or even suffer a backlash. Societal forces may be at work, in extending or creating taboo zones. For example, advertisements for skincare from the 1970s that innocently showed happy nude families with children would seem unacceptable today due to concerns with (Internet) paedophilia and child sexual abuse. When monitoring the forces that are negotiating and shaping the boundary between normality and abnormality, we have to ask if additional contexts may come into play - enablers or disablers of each of the three aspects of normalization. In order to detect such contexts, awareness and sensitivity must be increased. This can be done, as we have shown elsewhere [38], by asking "what (must happen) … so that …?" instead of the conventional scenario question "what … if …?". If an organisation has an idea of which contexts could be particularly damaging to or supportive of a normalization process, the effectiveness of its scanning and monitoring activities can be increased.

Therefore, a descriptive lifecycle approach will not provide a deeper understanding of the evolution of socio-cultural practices. This is also true with respect to Mathews and Wacker's second half of the trend lifecycle that discusses the transformation of mainstream phenomena. Although it is strategically important to realize that a social convention may mean different things to different people over time, it is not exactly an issue of foresight but rather of segmentation. With respect to strategic foresight, it is more worthwhile and challenging to ask if a phenomenon which has widely disappeared – perhaps due to over saturation, perhaps due

to a premature death by oblivion – may revive. This makes revival an important phenomenon of post-normalization.

In fact, two of the trend examples mentioned in section 4.1. – autonomous workgroups and quadrophonic sound – already represent revivals. A closer look at these examples shows that the contexts have changed considerably in the meantime. On the one hand, additional enabling contexts have come into play (in the case of quadrophonic sound: new applications and new software formats); on the other hand, disabling contexts have disappeared (in the case of quadrophonic sound: technological limitations). The analogy to the backlash case discussed above is evident, so that the "what (must happen) … so that …?" technique can be applied as well in order to support scanning and monitoring for potential revivals. The technique could even be used to categorise a revival with respect to Mathews and Wacker's [52] typology of post-normalization (i.e., cliché, icon, and archetype).

Our conceptualisation of revivals also implies that old phenomena do not simply reappear in the same form some years or decades later. Rather, they are integrated in contemporary contexts, even driven or enabled by them. This is supported by examples from everyday experience: The platform shoes that were popular during the 1970s revival in the late 1990s looked rather different from those worn 25 years before.

5. Normalization and Post-Normalization: The Cases of Hip-Hop and Skateboarding

This section will illustrate the relevance and suitability of the framework for strategic trend diagnosis described above. We will present the cases of hip-hop and skateboarding, conceiving both as socio-cultural innovations. We have decided to focus on subcultures, as the probability of identifying deviant practices in the examples is high; and as Mathews and Wacker's [52] approach explicitly relates to this kind of communities, we wanted to ascertain

if the proposed framework will provide additional value for foresight. We have chosen these two examples because there is much material available due to their long histories. Although there may be some danger of myth-making with respect to the origins, a long history is important, because we want to test as many aspects of our framework as possible. We also provide more than one example in order to show that, first, one single lifecycle will not fit all purposes and, second, the framework is able to address both conformance to and deviations from the ideal lifecycle shape: While hip-hop's diffusion seems to grow over time, skateboarding obviously has experienced a revival.

We will make a phenomenological analysis in the tradition of interpretive anthropology [106]: We analyze "the new" in the socio-cultural practices (particularly material culture) and provide a reconstruction of the normalization process for both cases in section 5.1., while for section 5.2. we use current information in order to make a (real-time) trend diagnosis and find out what the implications are (for the case of hip-hop).

In order to understand these two fields and the practices involved, we used original sources (videos, records, fanzines), comprehensive documentaries (videos, DVDs, photo books), and the body of cultural studies literature on these subjects. Because of space constraints, we will cite only the most important references and will present only a summary of the most important aspects.

5.1. Transgression and Normalization

The hip-hop culture consists of four central elements: disc jockeying (DJing), break dancing, graffiti art, and rapping. We already can see from this list that the contexts involved are manifold: new practices of presenting music, new forms of dancing, new styles of art and new ways to present lyrics and communicate with an audience.

According to legend, hip-hop started in the last week of August 1973 at a house party in New York City's Bronx neighbourhood [107]. DJ Kool Herc, known as the father of hip-hop, used two turntables and a microphone to isolate and combine the rhythm parts of two songs and laid his voice over both, creating a new musical style by using technical equipment in an unintended way. This "mixing" was an interesting new practice, because overlapping records created a continuous stream of music [108], whereas DJs in the decades before had played one record after another – like a living music box [109]. This not only changes the role of the DJ but also the role of the record in DJing: individual "songs" give way to "tracks", which are "tools" for the DJ. Consequently, the abnormal practices in hip-hop music evolved around the misuse of turntables and records. This is particularly true for "scratching" which was contradictory to the predominant HiFi attitude of the record and turntable industry. The subordination of records to mere tools and their maltreatment were regarded as a "perverse" abuse of objects hitherto regarded as a fetish in HiFi contexts.

Another intriguing misappropriation provided by hip-hop relates to digital sampling, a technology that emerged in the 1980s and was widely adopted by hip-hop producers. But although sampling technology suggests the creation and assembly of discontinuous sound bites – i.e., montage – advanced users finally managed to create sound continuities and overlays [108,110]. Suffice it to say that over the years several other novel practices of using technology and equipment have been added – and that practices developed in hip-hop culture were appropriated by other music styles like "techno" or "drum'n'bass".

Over the past 35 years hip-hop has become a cultural and artistic phenomenon [111], which has affected youth cultures around the globe. According to the three-fold process of normalization we have described above, the following applies to the normalization of hip-hop:

- Hip-hop had emerged from being stigmatised and perceived as an abnormality to being the preference of a broader audience. Obviously, this transformation has, from an economic point of view, not only created a significant market for the music industry, but also affected the fashion industry [112].

- While not universally accepted and liked, hip-hop has emerged, of course due to its many different forms and styles, to a music genre referred to as "normal".

- Hip-hop has changed over the years and lost its original forms from the 1970s; styles of music, outfit and attitude have diversified. Major record labels today promote a broad range of hip-hop artists, including mainstream hip-hop performers who lack street credibility and have nothing to do with the first performers in the Bronx.

Thornton [109] emphasises the importance of media as the driving force for the development of emerging youth subcultures. We will therefore also mention some milestones that have to do with media. While in the early years only unofficial boot-leg recordings of parties in the Bronx circulated, it was not until October 1979 that the first official hip-hop record, "Rapper's Delight", marked a relevant step in the process of normalization of hip hop, changing the rules of the hip-hop game [107]. "Rapper's Delight" caught fire, crossing from New York to Black Radio, up the American Top 40 list and around the world, selling eight million copies worldwide. While it can be argued that with the release of this hip-hop track, and of course because of its success, hip-hop appealed to a broader audience, this incident only marks an early point in the process of normalization of hip-hop.

Empirical research in issues analysis suggests that an issue has reached a take-off point when it migrates to other communicative milieus. This was the case when hip-hop became the subject of a movie for the first time: the docudrama "Wild Style" was released in 1982 and

brought graffiti art, break dancing, and of course hip-hop music to global attention, followed by even more movies [107].

Finally, in the late 1980s the process of normalization of hip-hop made a significant jump, when hip-hop music was aired on a regular basis on the cable television network music television (MTV). In 1988 MTV Raps was launched, making hip-hop music available to millions of youth, and especially white youth. Approximately a year later hip-hop also diffused into the American media because of parents' complaints about the violent and sexually explicit hip-hop lyrics. This campaign peaked in the early 1990s, forcing the major record labels to wonder if they wanted to move on with hip-hop artists, in defiance of public pressure. Overall, in the public awareness hip-hop had become a commodity – and subject to all problems and consequences of product liability.

A final important aspect in the normalization of hip-hop is the paradoxical form of its globalisation: it is a perfect example of glocalisation. On the one hand, superstar-based American hip-hop has been spreading all over the globe; but on the other hand, it has been adapted and re-configured, creating specific varieties of in local contexts. This includes both the appropriation of local music traditions and lyrics in languages which significantly differ from English in their rhythms and flows (e.g., German, French or Turkish); and it has brought emergence of local superheroes who in their home countries may sell even more records than their American blueprints.

While the evolution of hip-hop seems to fit quite nicely with Mathews and Wacker's [52] lifecycle of trends, this appears to be different in the case of skateboarding. The diffusion of skateboarding rather represents a lifecycle deviation, characterised by backlashes and revivals, combining processes of normalization and post-normalization. Brooke [113, p. 14] counts four waves in the diffusion of skateboarding and states: "For the past 40 years,

skateboarding has rolled in and out of the public's consciousness." In other words, skateboarding has experienced normalization and post-normalization. After the first commercial skateboards hit the markets in the US in 1959 and disappeared in 1965 [113], skateboarding underwent its first revival. In the remainder of this section, we will reconstruct this first revival as a *transgression cum normalization* which took place in the early 1970s.

While skateboarding had disappeared in the mid-1960s in most areas of the US, it remained alive in Santa Monica (CA) as a part of its surfing culture. The first transgressions of contexts can be identified in the early 1970s when some young outcasts in a dangerous quarter of Santa Monica known as "Dogtown" tried to link – more radically than ever before – the aesthetics and techniques of surfing to skateboarding. This included methods of *bricolage* for manufacturing their own equipment, the graffiti-based aesthetics of boards and the moves they tried to accomplish. However, there were also disabling contexts, particularly the poor quality of the "clay wheels" that prevented a skateboarding revival [114,115]. The second wave finally took off around 1973 when the invention of the urethane wheel provided a strong enabling context, particularly for extremists like the Dogtown skateboarding community who now could refine their style which was oriented towards the latest practices in surfing, particularly the emerging short board surfing. Quite soon, national competitions for skateboarders were re-established, and the presentation of their abnormal style gave rise to much debate among referees about what was acceptable [115]. This became the starting point of a normalization process that ended up in general acceptance and worldwide reputation for members of the Dogtown crew [114]. This process which resulted in more than 20 million skateboarders in the U.S. in 1978 [115], was driven by several factors that can be summarized as follows:

- The new technology not only changed skateboarding, but made it also safer and led to the nationwide proliferation of skate parks, solving many legal difficulties with skateboarding.

- However, linking an advanced surf style to skateboarding was not the only innovative socio-cultural practice provided by *détournements* of the Dogtown community. At that time, Southern California was experiencing one of the worst droughts in history, leading to hundreds of empty swimming pools in the Beverly Hills area. Riding these kidney-shaped, empty pools – often illegally – gave rise to a new, even more extreme style of skateboarding and can be regarded as the birth of the "halfpipe" which is now part of every skate park around the globe.

- A precursor of this extreme practice had already been reported in 1965 in the magazine *The Quarterly Skateboarder* [113], pointing out the relevance of specialised media on the process of normalization. This is consistent with the empirical research of Thornton [109] who emphasises the importance of such "niche media" for the formation and public recognition of a subculture. In 1975, *The Quarterly Skateboarder* resumed publication after a 10-year break under the abbreviated name *Skateboarder* [115].

- Labels for the various innovative moves were important communication devices; the same is true for the aesthetic of Craig Stecyk's skateboarding photography.

- Many documentary films on skateboarding were made in a very short period of time, spreading the practices of contemporary skating.

- The fact that one of the best skateboarders, Tony Alva, marketed himself as the first skateboarder pop star was another driving factor for the process of normalization.

- Finally, this second wave of skateboarding has introduced several paradoxes in comparison to the first, less successful lifecycle. First, the new generation of skaters could achieve styles on concrete that had been formerly regarded as possible in water only. Second, skateboarding was no longer about bridging distances; contemporary skateboarding practices can be regarded as hanging around in the same place while being constantly on the move. This is particularly true for skating in downtown areas where skaters are (mis-)appropriating urban space and "urban furniture" [116,117,118]. Third, an analysis by Zarka [118] shows that skateboarding combines two aspects that, from the standpoint of the sociology of play [119], are mutually exclusive.

All in all, the revival means that skateboarding had turned into a socio-cultural practice which was different from that of the first cycle – both in form and meaning. Using the framework of socio-cultural innovation, we are able to identify the differences. It is obvious that this revival is a second process of *transgression cum normalization* rather than a disposal cycle of the Mathews and Wacker [52] type.

For an analysis of further revivals of skateboarding that are beyond the scope of this paper, it would also be important to identify how other actors may appropriate this specific practice and link their own contexts to it, thereby putting it back on the agenda. For example, a skate park was part of the famous art exhibition *documenta11* in 2002 – notably as an artwork. In addition, there has been recent discussion whether skateboarding should be included as a sport in the 2012 Olympic Games in London [120].

5.2. Diagnosis for Post-Normalization

Now we are going to assess whether hip-hop has already moved on to the second part of its life cycle. There is a consensus that hip-hop has reached mass-markets and social convention, and we offer evidence of whether or not hip-hop has already entered the phase of post-normalization (see Figures 1 and 2). According to Mathews and Wacker [52], a probable next step of evolution may be the "cliché", but the authors [52, p. 39] warn their readers: "The path beyond the mass market, however, is far from linear or predictable." Indeed, there are some early indicators that segment-specific communication strategies and products begin to emerge that go well beyond the stereotype of street credibility, quite explicitly capitalizing on the issue of hip-hop as cliché: e.g.,

- the preppie hip-hop advertisements of Smirnoff Raw Iced Tea (http://www.teapartay.com/);
- the Munich-based *jeunesse-dorée* hip-hop label Aggro Grünwald, [http://aggro-gruenwald.de, see also 121];
- the French subgenre "hop-hop", sometimes referred to as "rap rigolo" [122].

At the same time, there are indicators that hip-hop is moving towards the other two stages of post-normality:

- as an icon, hip-hop stands for a "ghetto chic" that capitalises on the paradoxical combination of street credibility on the one hand and ostentatious use of luxury goods on the other;
- as an archetype, hip-hop defines contemporary "American Black Music" as a standard.

While an icon can still be associated with a high commercial potential – comparable with the stage of social convention – this is according to Mathews and Wacker [52] not the case with a cliché or an archetype, where commercial potential is supposed to be significantly smaller. Although this may be nice to know, the strategic implications become clearer when we apply the innovation perspective and the "what (must happen) … so that…" technique: If hip-hop is able to create or incorporate new socio-cultural practices again and again, it may experience a continual revival without previously having fallen into oblivion. At the moment there are emerging trends in hip-hop that substantiate this scenario of "rejuvenation". Practices of cultural hacking (see section 4.4.) have successfully linked UK hip-hop to "dubstep" (or "grime", respectively), the most important upcoming genre of electronic dance music in the last few years [123]. As this new combination is particularly salient for the UK, scanning and monitoring will have to find out if global normalization or similar local innovations in other countries will follow.

6. Summary and Conclusion: Exploring Future Normalities

We have started with the observation that although "trend" seems to be a central concept in strategic issue management, its content and meaning have been poorly reflected. The aim of this article was to develop a conceptualisation of trend – i.e., trend as socio-cultural innovation – that is useful in a foresight context and, subsequently, to tap this potential for a more powerful trend diagnosis. We have identified relevant theories that allow for more insights into the nature and the evolution of a trend than conventional (lifecycle) descriptions.

From an entrepreneurial view, strategy making is tantamount to the creation and skimming of potentials. Therefore, foresight concepts have to address market creation instead of merely "being faster than competition" or "being better prepared against crises". If we take seriously the idea of trends as socio-cultural innovations, we can conceptualize a "trend" as a process of

transgression cum normalization. This leads to a first contribution: a theory of market creation. It may be evident on an intuitive level that socio-cultural trends can be regarded as a basis on which to create new markets; on a theoretical level this connection had not yet been formulated consistently. In order to accomplish this task it was necessary to build upon several conceptual elements, which, in the final analysis, conceive of a "strategic trend diagnosis" as a means of identifying possible "future normalities". The elements can be summarized as follows:

- a frame of reference for strategy making on the basis of an "entrepreneurial view",
- the conceptualization of trends as socio-cultural innovations,
- "the new" as the first aspect of innovation, described by a transgression of contextual boundaries (achieved by, e.g., *bricolage* and *détournements*),
- diffusion as the second aspect of innovation, operationalized by a threefold process of normalization,
- "paradessence" with its linkage function between the new and diffusion, and
- a two-part life cycle of trends, consisting of consecutive stages of normalization and different – but not mutually exclusive – stages of post-normalization (including revivals).

It is remarkable that both the stages of normalization, in which a new socio-cultural practice becomes a social convention, and also the phenomena of post-normalization may lead to a process of market creation. The latter does not come about by expanding the normality zone but rather by properly identifying and addressing the segment-specific characteristics of a seemingly "old" trend. In this context symbolic and practical *détournements*, for example

from subcultures, can be powerful drivers for processes of iconization or for revivals. Taken together, these aspects support the metaphor that trends may be regarded as "The future that has already happened" [124].

In addition to providing the theoretical link between trends and market creation, this discussion also has practical implications for strategic trend diagnosis. In an age of ubiquitous trend information we need instruments for probing the incoming news in order to avoid a trend overload. If one considers the following notorious trend formulas one will easily recognize that the differentiations between invention and diffusion are not being addressed:

- the "*more and more*" formula ("More and more women are buying dumbbells and skipping ropes" [125].)
- the "*industry-gossip*" formula ("The trend towards quality is becoming prevalent in the gardening-tools industry.")
- the "*false analogy*" formula ("Blue is the new silver" [126].)

These trend formulas must be regarded as being mere *clichés*. They have little strategic relevance, because they attempt to answer the question "in which direction will a trend evolve?". This question tends to be too simplistic to be of diagnostic value, because it fails to elaborate sufficiently the aspects of both invention (the contexts that are forming a new constellation) and diffusion (the forces that drive the three aspects of normalization).

If we consider the characteristics of trends and their dynamics described above, the question "in which direction will a trend evolve?" can be replaced by the following four sets of questions for exploring future normalities:

- *Whither?* Which contexts are involved in a trend? What can be regarded as the new in this constellation? What is the current stage in the life cycle of this trend – normalization or post-normalization?

- *What's missing?* What is the paradoxical element of the trend? What is the corresponding countertrend? Are there any contexts which would be needed to allow the trend to advance in its process of normalization?

- *Why not?* Are there any contexts which could prevent the trend from moving on in its normalization process? How could the trend relate to other trends – i.e., does the trend have some contexts in common with other trends?

- *So what?* What aspects of the trend match our expectations or seem familiar? What is unexpected or represents an anomaly? What aspects of the trend challenge the premises of the current strategy? In what contexts will the trend cause the maximum damage? In what contexts will the trend provide the greatest strategic potential?

Answers to these questions will lead to the "big picture" of a trend, one that provides support for strategy making. In contrast, a trend that is poorly understood or incorrectly interpreted must be regarded as strategic disinformation – which may be more dangerous than a trend that has been ignored.

Finally, how can this approach to trend diagnosis be related to other methods and techniques used for foresight? Obviously this kind of diagnosis can enrich scenario building, first, by avoiding the deceiving notion of trends as a development in a certain direction. Nevertheless, there will be some challenges to be met, as paradoxical phenomena may require a new view on what is to be regarded as a consistent scenario [39]. Second, if trends have one or more contexts in common, a larger cluster of interlinked trends can be built up, sometimes also

called pattern or “trend landscape” [e.g. 127]. Such a trend landscape can be regarded as a micro-scenario – and shows some correspondence to focused scenarios in the foresight literature (e.g., the scenario of the “global teenager” in [128]). It also addresses the demand for focusing on small patterns and soft signals in scenario thinking formulated by MacKay and McKiernan [129].

Therefore, our future research will aim at aligning more closely scenario-building processes and trend diagnosis, particularly at redesigning scenario-building processes for the proper inclusion of trends [130]. Another promising field of research may be the use of the “informational cascades” approach (e.g. [131,132]) for analyzing normalization processes more deeply. This approach seems to be of particular relevance, as the traditional “trickle-down”, “trickle-up” or “trickle-across” mechanisms of diffusion are vaporizing (e.g. [133]) in a trend-addicted economy in which everybody observes everybody [13,134].

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Figure captions

Figure 1:

Title: The path of the devox: from fringe to social convention

Description: Life cycle of a trend: normalization [52, p. 18]

Figure 2:

Title: The path of the devox: from social convention to archetype or oblivion

Description: Life cycle of a trend: post-normalization [52, p. 43]

Figure 3:

Title: Towards an elaborate framework for conceptualizing trends

Description: Towards an elaborate framework for conceptualizing trends (Authors)

Figure 4:

Title: Conceptual Framework for Strategy

Description: Conceptual Framework for Strategy Making (—> = trigger/inspiration for; <—> = investigate mutual relationships) [62]