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How Does Trend Forecasting Really Work?

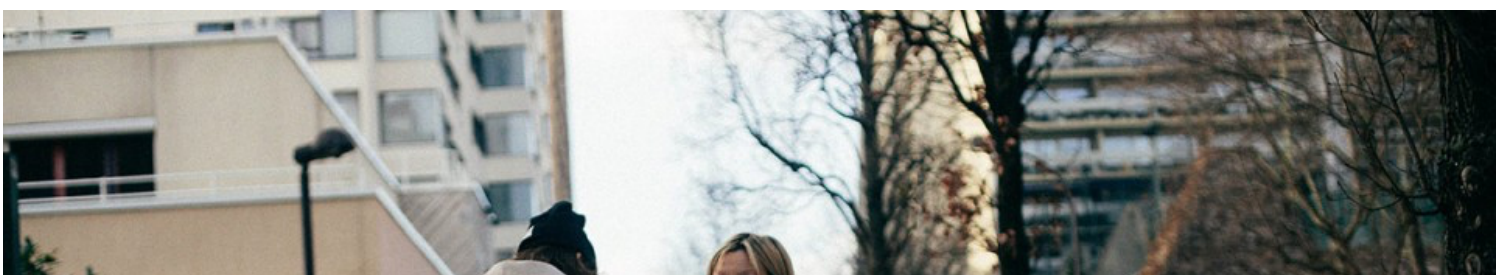
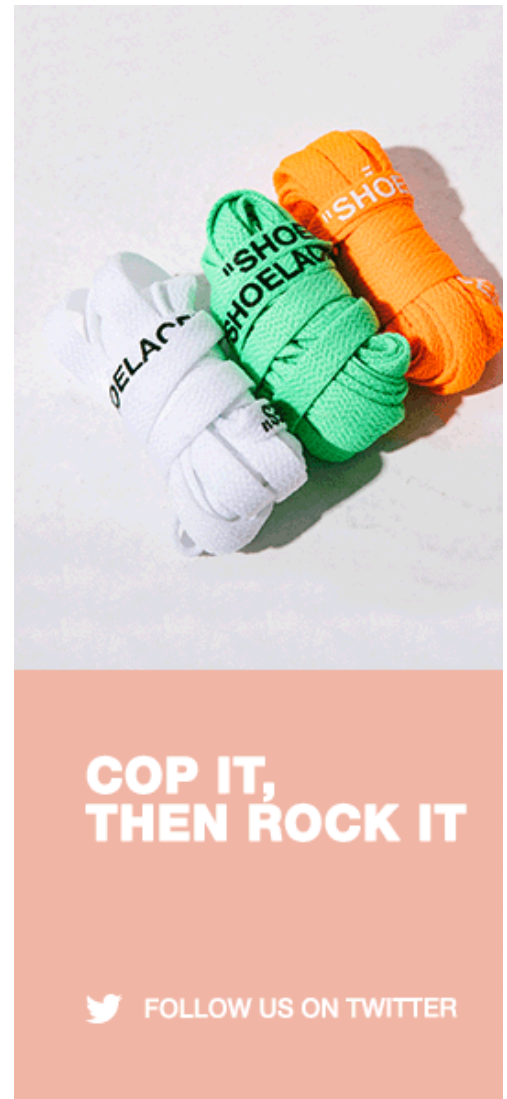


They took the cliché of the millennial “snowflake” obsession with being special and inverted it, proposing that the next definition of cool would rely upon being as “slippery and bland” as possible. They coined a term for this deliberate blankness: normcore.

The term exploded almost immediately on Twitter as a fashion trend, and within six months of K-Hole’s presentation, the staple items of normcore – unbranded department store denim, turtlenecks, fleeces, sweatpants, even the eternally vilified Crocs – were featuring on catwalks and in the pages of *Vogue*.

It had an enormous impact on street style, with Instagram and Tumblr filling up with boxy sweaters and cheap ’90s souvenir T-shirts. H&M ran a [post](#) on normcore style icons that included Jerry Seinfeld, Homer Simpson and Steve Jobs.

Nobody seemed to be aware, however, that K-Hole were not a legitimate trend forecasting agency, but an art collective who had created their own reports “[in the spirit of fan fiction](#).” Full of the “[lightweight cultural analysis](#)” and sleek design of the genuine articles produced by big-hitting trend forecasters, K-Hole became fascinated with trend forecasting after a friend who worked at a subscriber company introduced them to the expensive reports.





Mathieu Vilasco / Highsnobiety

Full of purportedly valuable information and insights, these reports would help any company truly understand—and, more importantly, market to—youth culture. K-Hole directly parodied the industry’s reliance on the gospel of trend forecasting, and by blindly latching on to normcore, the fashion industry wrote the punchline in a highly complex joke about itself.

The rise of normcore is one of a million examples of the complex,

mysterious and symbiotic relationship between trend forecasting and fashion. It's not fortune-telling, it's not purely editorial decision-making, nor is it clearly the identification or creation of a trend. Debate continues as to whether trend forecasting creates trends or simply identifies them.

The practice, influenced by innumerable factors, exists in the grey space between all these elements. What is clear is the influence of trend forecasting on increasingly broad aspects of our lives, from what we eat for breakfast to the features on our smartphones. It is the invisible hand that refines our choices before we even know we are making a choice.

Before exploring the complexities around trend forecasting, however, we first have to reach a working definition. The discipline has its roots in, and is still largely supported by, the fashion industry.



📷 The WGSN office in New York / fusion.net

In the pre-Internet world, the trend forecasting system was clearly defined. Fashion forecasters were to be found at runway shows, where designers and fashion houses would set the agenda with their collections. Forecasters would decide which looks were the most important and would cause the biggest impact in their target markets. These would be outlined in trend reports for their clients – most often chain and department stores – who would design their collections accordingly.

Images would trickle down to the public via fashion magazines, and 12 to 18 months after the magazines hit the stands, retail versions of catwalk designs would hit the street.

This was how things worked until the Internet happened. The general democratization of information that was unleashed by the Internet overthrew many of fashion's gatekeepers, exploding the top-down, runway-first model of fashion into a tangled web of influencers, from teenagers on YouTube to the weirdest corners of Instagram. You no longer need a powerful position at a fashion house to influence style; all you need is your phone.

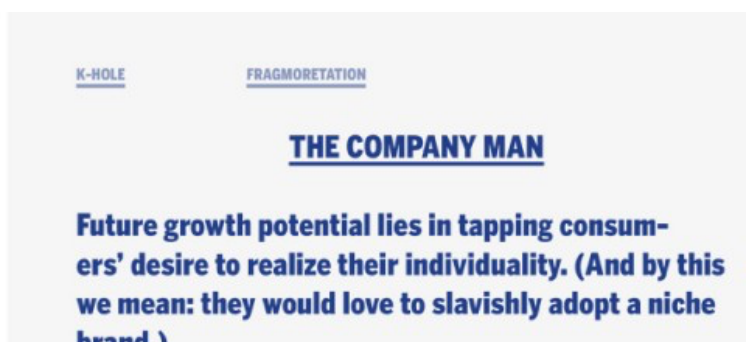
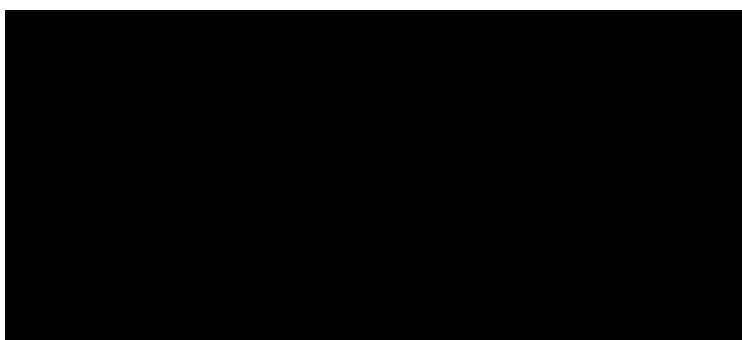


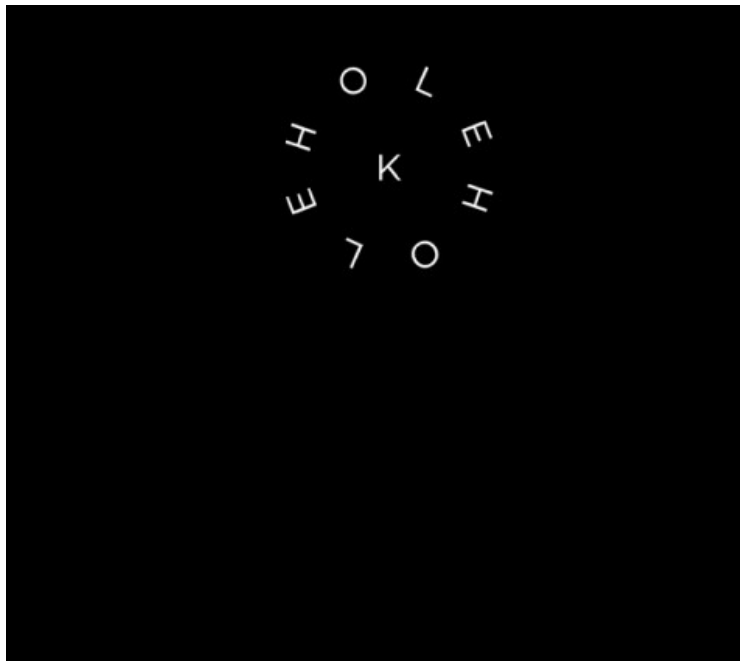
 Mathieu Vilasco / Highsnobiety

So who are the trend forecasters? Some companies (such as Urban Outfitters) run vertically integrated models, meaning that they have their own in-house trend forecasting team, rather than going to an external organization for their insights. Independent labels and designers tend to rely more on their own instincts and vision, eschewing the need for idea validation in favor of trusting themselves.

If you're a slow-moving corporate retail powerhouse, you may not have the same amount of flexibility, but likely have enough budget to hire to a trend forecasting agency. The biggest player in this field is [WGSN](#). WGSN (World's Global Style Network) provide data, analytics and insights to companies seeking to stay ahead of the curve across a broad range of industries, but their most successful category is their fashion trend forecasting.

WGSN claim to be able to forecast colours and trends up to two years in advance. Their textile and materials teams work even further into the future, as the fabrics they predict as key trends need to be manufactured before the clothes can be made. All this means that the cut, wash and finish of your jeans was probably scouted by trend forecasters two to three years before you even thought about buying them.



 K-HOLE Issue 1

Trend forecasters like [Sarah Owen](#), a former youth editor who now forecasts digital media and marketing at WGSN, spends her days trawling through Instagram, trying to find the most fashion-forward teens to follow—literally. She once found a group of teenage girls via Instagram who she followed around Coachella, documenting their every tassel, choker, and accessory.

Any number of lifestyle, health and economic factors can influence trends, and trends can be forecast across almost every single aspect of your day to day life. Food, travel, home decor, fitness: all of these affect trends and fashion, influencing in both directions, and in ways you'd never foresee.

As consumers grow hungrier for new product, and what's happening on the street and online are taking the influence away from what's on the runway, the idea of what constitutes a “trend” has shifted. It's no longer about a singular look, but distilling lifestyles and mindsets into marketable concepts.

One trend forecaster recently filed a report on “[Future Breakfast Solutions](#),” which could affect the design of everything from crockery to

pyjamas to cereal. By 2020, around 40% of the American workforce is expected to be [working from home](#); this has been a huge supporting factor in the rise of athleisure, because people want to be comfortable at home but still be able to turn up to a cafe without looking like a schlub.



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These broad influences are reflected in WGSN's client base, which includes a range of companies as diverse as Chrysler, NBC, Nickelodeon and Starbucks. Anne Lise Kjaer, the CEO of trend management and ideas consultancy [Kjaer Global](#), is one of the world's leading "futurists," also known as a "future narrator."

She and her company [predict trends at a societal level](#), and if you're a client, they will narrow down what the future looks like for your company, brand and products specifically. It's not that hard to foresee the impact of

“education to go” and the end of classrooms on everything from tech, footwear, clothing, accessories, stationery and food.

So what does the future of breakfast, or sweatpants, or bedding look like? To get those answers from the trend forecasters, you’re going to have to front up some serious cash. WGSN exists behind a very steep paywall, and it is not intended for the average fashion follower who wants to keep up to speed – their website specifies that it is “not suitable for consumers.”



kjaer-global.com / THE LIQUID SOCIETY 2025+ / Technology Trend Compass

This is primarily to make clear that this is a service for corporates with the need, capacity and budget for serious data crunching, but perhaps there is another reason for it. To paraphrase John Oliver, many of us absolutely love the end products of fashion, but much like a delicious salami or sausage, we don’t want to look too closely at how it’s made.

A closer look might reveal that fashion is so trend- and profit-driven that true creativity is being squeezed out. WGSN is, without doubt, the biggest player in the trend-forecasting industry, with more than 6,000 users subscribing to their insights. However, subscribers also have access to more than 70,000 design templates, as well as a database of patterns and colors, constantly updated to reflect the trends forecast for the upcoming season.

When you have some of the world's biggest brands—the likes of Zara, Topshop, H&M, and Marks and Spencer— all subscribing to the same database of colors, patterns and practically ready made templates, it's not difficult to see why “[shoppers complain that everything on the high street looks the same.](#)” The prevalence of trend forecasting contributes to another problem: fast-fashion companies readily translating runway collections into [lower-priced versions](#) and getting them into stores first, or making offerings a that hew a little too closely to products by [independent designers](#).





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The fashion industry's reliance on trend forecasting has mutated from a symbiotic relationship to something more akin to a Möbius strip of desperation—the industry that used to set the trends itself is now reliant on trend forecasters to share their gospel. But it's also reflective of how much of a quagmire fashion has become. When a oversized cotton Vetements Champion hoodie commands the same price as a designer handbag, it subverts longstanding ideals of luxury aspiration.

It's become increasingly difficult to discern between self-aware parodies, avant-garde visionaries, and Instagram cool kids who just look, really, really good in clothes. This new digital feedback loop, reinforced by the Internet's meme-fueled short-term memory, has made it so it's no longer clear whether we're looking at the chicken or the egg when a “trend” blows up, which is probably why it seems the industry is chewing happily away on its own tail, as was the case with normcore.

While normcore was conceptualized by an art collective—pretty much the very definition of true creatives—there's a question around whether they would have been taken as seriously had they not been viewed as a trend forecasting agency. WGSN's motto, emblazoned in neon in their company headquarters, is “Create Tomorrow” – perhaps reflecting their belief in who the true creators of fashion are.

Now check out our own predictions on some of the [fashion trends we expect to blow up this year](#). Unlike a trend forecasting agency, ours is free to view.

Lead image: [Thomas Welch](#)

forecasting

vogue