
ROOM FOR TRENDS? Bridging the gap between abstract trends and trend-based innovations for small and medium-sized hotels in Denmark

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Abstract

The hospitality industry, particularly among small and medium-sized hotels, faces mounting pressure to remain competitive in a market increasingly shaped by shifting social and consumer trends. Leveraging such trends using them as a springboard for innovation can provide a significant competitive advantage and support long-term survival. However, many hotels in this segment struggle to engage in trend-driven innovation due to limited time, resources, and strategic capacity, as well as predominant operational focus. The paper draws on a literature review and qualitative data from hotels managers to explore how small and medium-sized hotels can effectively integrate trends into their innovation processes. The paper concludes by offering practical recommendations to potentially inspire hotel managers translate abstract trends into tangible services and products that enhance competitiveness.

Key words: Innovation, trends, business development, hotel industry

Track 1: Business Model Innovations

Focus of paper: Theoretical and empirical

Introduction

At the end of every year, numerous reports from trend and consumer agencies, national tourism organizations, and trend forecasters highlight the “next big trends” expected to shape the coming year (Dragt, 2023; SKIFT, 2023). These may include sustainability, digitalization, health, slow travel or solo travel (SKIFT, 2023; turisme.nu, 2023). However, the focus of these reports is often on the trend itself rather than on the process of applying it to a specific business context (Dragt, 2023). As a result, the identified trends are typically abstract in nature and presented at a level that feels distant from day-to-day operations, making it difficult for businesses to translate them into concrete action. From a business perspective, however, trends can offer a valuable competitive edge, particularly for small hotels, if they are properly understood and strategically implemented:

“Trends are opportunities and threats. They provide a new and exciting space for innovation but can also result in serious problems – especially if you choose to turn a blind eye to them” (Kongsholm, 2022).

As Danish trend forecaster Louise Byg Kongsholm notes, trends hold significant potential for business growth, if companies can decode them and adapt their strategies accordingly (Kongsholm, 2023; Hjalager 2020). Conversely, overlooking a major industry trend can pose substantial risks. This raises the question: how can

smaller actors within the hospitality and hotel industry respond effectively to emerging trends? Specifically, how can a small hotel collect, interpret and innovate based on abstract macro-level trends to enhance its service offerings and develop new products?

For small and medium-sized enterprises in the Danish hotel sector, this is a particular challenge, given their continued operation under conditions of intense and sustained competition (Det Nationale Turismedeforum, 2025). During the research period, it became evident that there is limited empirical evidence on how these hotels approach the process of identifying, interpreting, and applying trends in their business strategies. Moreover, it remains unclear how hotel managers conceptualize the very notion of trends, how they scan early signals, and how they translate abstract insights into concrete innovations.

This paper addresses this "translation gap" between high-level trend concepts and trend-inspired innovation by offering practical, research-informed recommendations for managers of small and medium-sized hotels. The study examines the potential, challenges, and enabling factors that influence their capacity to engage in trend-driven innovation processes, with particular attention to the early stages of trend work: the detection and understanding relevant signals and tendencies.

Theoretical framework: The concept and value of trends

The concept of *trends* is inherently complex and interdisciplinary, intersecting fields such as marketing, sociology, and business development. In this paper, trends are defined as social and cultural transformations reflected in values, needs, and behaviors within specific societal groups (Raymond, 2010; Kongsholm, 2022; Dragt, 2023). Dragt conceptualizes a trend as a shift in values and needs driven by underlying forces and manifested in specific behavioral expressions (Dragt, 2023). She identifies three interconnected layers in the anatomy of a trend, *drivers* (e.g., digitalization, urbanization), *values and needs* (e.g., desire for simplicity, convenience) and *manifestations* (e.g., tangible products or behaviours, such as meal kit subscriptions). Kongsholm further refines this understanding through a typology categorizing trends in *giga*, *mega*, *micro* trends, or *fads*, according to their duration and societal impact (Kongsholm, 2022). This hierarchy is operationalized through the *trend pyramid*, presented by the Danish trend bureau Pej gruppen, which provides a strategic framework for classifying trends. A variation of this pyramid is also presented by Postma and Papp in the *Journal of Tourism Futures* (2020), serving as a central analytical tool in tourism trend research:

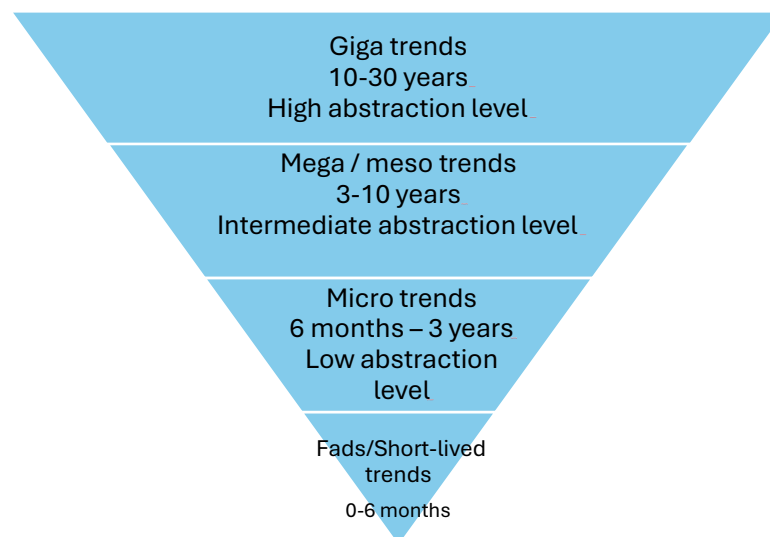


Figure 1: Trend pyramid and connection between trend level, own illustration based on pej gruppen and Postma & Yeoman, 2025

The model illustrates how microtrends are nested within megatrends, which in turn derive from gigatrends, enabling businesses to place surface-level changes within the context of deeper structural transformations. For small tourism and hospitality businesses, this framework supports strategic focus by distinguishing between brief fads and enduring forces.

The value of trends

Trends can act as catalyst for innovation when strategically interpreted and applied. According to Dragt (2023) and Raymond (2020), effective innovation begins with a deep understanding of emerging consumer behaviors and preferences, a process encapsulated in the concept of *trendslation*: translating identified trends into tangible strategies, services, or products. At the core of this process lies an organization's *future consciousness*, its ability to anticipate, interpret, and prepare for change (Kongsholm, 2022; Dragt, 2023). Building this capacity requires developing specific trend-related competencies, such as curiosity, cross-disciplinary thinking, active listening and openness.

Trend researchers stress that successful trend adoption requires understanding the drivers and values underlying a manifestation. They argue that to adopt to trends, you must know what lies behind the trend to fully understand the potential (Kondrup 2021; Dragt, 2023). For example, the growing popularity of ice baths and winter bathing clubs in Denmark (Femina, 2023; DR.dk, 2024) can be traced back to broader macro- and gigatrends such as increasing focus on wellbeing, physical and mental health, and stress relief. Recognizing and understanding giga trends, their tipping point and life span, can help business anticipate mega and micro trends they might produce (Postma & Yeoman, 2020).

Practice-oriented trend forecasters often describe the trend process as progressing through distinct phases (Raymond, 2020; Kongsholm, 2022; Dragt, 2023). While terminology and emphasis vary, these phases generally begin with scanning the external environment for early signs and weak signals, followed by analyzing, categorizing, and interpreting them in relation to broader patterns. Dragt (2023) emphasizes that trend research focuses on detection and scanning, while innovation relates to applying these insights to create new products and services. Trend-inspired innovation can therefore provide hotels with a strong competitive advantage by making them more responsive to change.

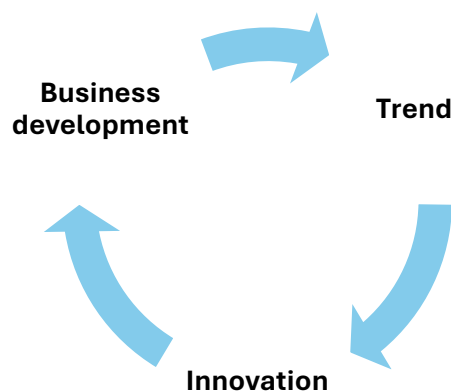


Figure 2: The relationship between trends, innovation, and business development, own illustration (2025)

The innovation and development phase builds upon trends deemed relevant by the organization. The initial scanning phase is typically the most resource-intensive, involving systematic collection of signals from diverse sources through multiple methods (Kongsholm, 2022). This phase requires organizations to adopt a mindset

characterized by openness and curiosity toward the external environment and societal transformations. Consequently, the development of trend literacy and organizational trend competence becomes essential. However, these capabilities demand time, knowledge and resources that are often scarce within the operationally intense accommodation and hospitality sector. Accordingly, there is a need for accessible, practice-oriented, and methodologically structured approaches to leverage trends effectively as drivers of innovation and business development.

Research design

This research adopts a qualitative and exploratory research design, combining a literature review with empirical primary data collection through semi-structured interviews. The aim is to develop an in-depth understanding of how small and medium-sized hotels in Denmark engage with trend-based innovation and the factors that enable or constrain such practices. The research was conducted in several phases. The preliminary exploration involved initial interviews and dialogues with hotel managers and trend experts to identify key challenges and perspectives. This was followed by a literature study of relevant academic and applied sources on trend theory, innovation, and tourism management, which established the theoretical foundation of this paper

The primary empirical data consist of six semi-structured interviews with managers from small and medium-sized hotels across Denmark, focusing on their experiences with trend adaptation and innovation. In addition, three semi-structured interviews with trend and innovation experts were conducted as part of the primary data collection to provide complementary insights and external perspectives.

Trends, innovation and business development in the Danish hospitality industry

In 2023, the Danish Board of Business Development published an analysis of megatrends and their implications for Danish small and medium-sized businesses (Danmarks Erhvervsfremmebestyrelse, 2023). The report argues that megatrends represent a valuable springboard for innovation and business development, as they reflect the broader forces shaping society, markets, and consumer behavior. Tourism and hospitality are explicitly identified as sectors likely to face increasing pressure from developments such as demographic change, climate challenge, sustainability demands, health concerns, and evolving lifestyles and values. The report therefore points to substantial untapped potential for the industry to use trends as drivers of innovation.

This view is supported by other sources that recognize both potential and challenges the industry faces when working with trends, innovation and business development. Danish tourism researcher Anne-Mette Hjalager highlights that the Danish tourism sector has the highest proportion of micro, small, and medium-sized businesses compared to other industries, which often limits budgets and narrows competence profiles (Hjalager, 2020). She refers to several studies (Det Nationale Turismeforum, 2023; Vækstteam for turisme, 2013) showing that innovation in Danish tourism is typically led by large, well-established firms in the attractions and hotel sectors, while renewal in smaller enterprises, particular in accommodation and restaurants, lags behind.

This need for greater innovation capacity in small hotels is echoed by Finn Kræfting, CEO of association of Small Danish Hotels, who stresses the importance of academic competencies and new knowledge in the industry (*turistmonitor.dk*, *turisme.nu*, 2024). Recent articles in the Danish hospitality media *Turismenyt* and *Turistmonitor* have likewise highlighted the innovation capabilities of the Danish hotels stating that: “*the industry needs academic competencies (...)*,” and referring to it as “*(...)the conservative hotel industry (...)*,” (*turistmonitor.dk*, *turisme.nu*, 2024), which highlights the demand for developing trend and innovation competencies within the Danish hotel industry.

Despite these challenges, recent years have seen several successful tourism start-ups that have effectively leveraged key contemporary trends. Examples include *Oh So Quiet*, *Landfolk*, *Digital Guest*,

Campanyon/Owayy, and the wellness destination *Fjordgården Spa*. These businesses have embedded elements such as convenience, digitalization, sustainability, outdoor living, and nature at the core of their business strategies, demonstrating that understanding and applying trends can be a highly effective development approach.

Empirical insights: key findings

The empirical analysis revealed several factors influencing the ability of small and medium-sized hotels to work effectively with trends and innovation. Three key themes emerged: Managers' understanding of trends, the conservative nature and operational focus of the sector, and the role of managerial culture and skills.

I. Hotel managers' understanding of trends

The interviews indicated that hotel directors often define and interpret trends primarily in terms of guest demand and needs. Guest reviews emerged as their main source of insight. However, these reviews are retrospective in nature, reflecting past experiences rather than signaling emerging changes. This contrasts with the perspective of trend researchers, who emphasize the importance of early-stage trend identification to inform proactive innovation.

Additionally, a broader range of information sources, such as industry reports, market analysis, and observations of societal change, could help hotels capture evolving guest expectations earlier, thereby enabling them to respond in a timelier and more strategic manner.

II. Conservative business culture and operational priorities

Several hotel managers described the Danish hotel industry as a relatively conservative sector, lacking a strong tradition of engaging with or capitalizing on trends. Few hotels were perceived as first movers, and this self-image as a non-innovative industry was seen as a potential barrier to recognizing the value of trend-based innovation.

Operational demands emerged as another constraint. Managers reported that most time and resources are devoted to day-to-day operations and guest services, often disrupted by unforeseen challenges. Strict task boundaries, linked to occupational groups and union agreements, further limit flexibility. One director noted that when an employee presents an innovative idea, dedicated time can occasionally be allocated to explore it, however, such instances are rare. Overall, without systematic scheduling, trend research risks being sidelined by operational priorities.

III. Managerial culture, skills and approach

Innovation capacity in small and medium-sized hotels is closely tied to the orientation and competencies of their managers, as dedicated innovation roles are uncommon. The youngest and most academically oriented director in the sample actively prioritized development, embracing the motto: *"If it isn't broken, fix it anyway."* He maintained continuous awareness of trends, particularly in digitalization, and encouraged staff to share observations from guest interactions and competitor activities. This outward-looking approach fostered a culture of openness, curiosity, and proactive development, which he regarded as a competitive advantage.

The findings suggest that managers who have upgraded their academic skills over time are more likely to prioritize and structure ongoing trend-based innovation. Those most engaged in this work also demonstrated a conscious approach to sourcing external input, drawing on trade fairs, professional networks, destination management organizations, industry associations, and, in some cases, social media and trend reports.

Practical recommendations

The paper sheds light on small and medium sized hotels' approach to working with trends and innovation. Based on the findings, several practice-oriented recommendations are proposed to support hotel managers in strengthening their capacity to translate trends into competitive offerings.

First, hotel staff are not expected to act as professional trend forecasters. Rather, they should cultivate competencies in curiosity, observation, and analytical thinking regarding changes in their environment. By becoming more academically attuned to shifts in guest behavior and preferences, employees can develop the ability to identify and collect early signals and emerging tendencies.

Second, trend-related tasks should be meaningfully integrated into existing job roles. For example, reception staff could monitor recurring patterns in guest requests, while waiters might observe shifts in menu preferences or popular flavors. As frontline employees have frequent direct contact with guests, they are well placed to serve as ambassadors for trend awareness.

Third, trend-scanning activities should be systematized and embedded into the hotel's strategic processes. Trend consultant Jarle Kondrup from Innovation Lab emphasizes that hospitality businesses must continuously monitor evolving guest behaviors to remain relevant over the coming decade (Kondrup, personal interview, 2023). He links trend scanning, innovation, and business development to a muscle that must be exercised regularly. Integrating such activities into the hotel's annual planning cycle can help institutionalize this capability without requiring significant new investments or structural changes.

Fourth, the use of visual tools can support hotels in working with trends, particularly in a sector where work culture is highly practical and hands-on (Hjalager, 2023). The trend pyramid has proven especially effective for detecting, categorizing, and contextualizing trends, linking surface-level manifestations to broader macro- and megatrends.

Finally, collaboration and co-creation with other businesses can enhance trend-related innovation capacity. Danish researchers Christensen and Smed (2020) identifies collaboration and co-creation as key components in innovation processes among small tourism businesses. This was echoed by one young boutique hotel manager in the study, who emphasized the value of a professional network for sharing ideas, co-creating, and conducting trend research.

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