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## ■ Trends

### The Quest For Cool

**Predicting the future is hard work. Ask any professional trend spotter: it takes dedication, cultural insight and a good idea of what "cool" actually means**

By [Jeff Chu](#)

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My first clue that the blue shoes were not cool should have been the big red 50% off sticker — or maybe the take an additional 30% off sign. Instead I thought it was my lucky day. They were made of brilliant ocean-colored canvas, printed with wave-riding surfers, swaying palms, thatched huts, sandy beaches and a tropical sunset — two little Fantasy Islands for my feet. I thought they were so cool.

Today, 15 years later, I avoid using the words "cool" and "trendy" to describe anything. I know what I don't know. But there is an army of trend spotters out there who make it their business to forecast what will be hot and what will not, what we'll be snapping up and what will soon be slapped with clearance stickers to attract the next fool — which I have only just realized is but one letter different from cool. But do even they know what's cool?

Trend spotting is big business in the U.S. The never-ending quest for the Next Big Thing means jobs for people like Claire Brooks, the British-born founder and editor of the quarterly trend tip sheet called the L style Report; she counts Nokia and Skyy Vodka as clients and says that punk and the color pink are in (did they ever go out?). Brooks counts on a nationwide network of informers to help her identify the cutting edge. Even then, it's impossible to get it right — and right on time — every time: "The U.S. is a very fast society. A trend is here one moment, gone the next," she says.

Brooks has noticed that "trendsetters are very similar the world over." They share "a creative mind-set, one that says, 'I'm going to search for things for myself.'" She cites London as a magnet city for such cultural leaders; for that reason she publishes an annual London edition of the Report, with predictions of what the stylish set will wear, imbibe and fawn over in the year to come. Even so, she says, the trend-spotting industry "doesn't exist in the same way [in Europe] that it does over here." Europe is less fad-obsessed and more culturally heterogeneous than the U.S., so its tastes don't shift as quickly. Plus, since each country has its own cultural habits and quirks, regional prognostication is almost impossible, says David Bosshart, ceo of Switzerland's Gottlieb Dutweiler Institute for Economic and Social Studies, a think tank that studies consumer trends. For instance, Switzerland and Britain tend to be more open to trends and brands from abroad. "In Italy, cool is more traditional, but in Germany, cool is more informal," says Bosshart. All across Europe, "cool is more broadly defined. It's not just the most commercial thing. When you only look to fashion, you can come to false conclusions."

Authentic cool, in other words, comes from within. But it can't hurt to have a sense of what's around the corner. So this special report — TIME's foray into the world of cool hunting — roams far and wide. Sure, we like the latest high-tech gadgetry and the best-designed new stores. But we're also wowed by the security innovations that will make life a little bit safer, the medicines that will help us stay healthier, the books that will stir our souls — new things on our horizon that, take it from an expert, are definitely cool.