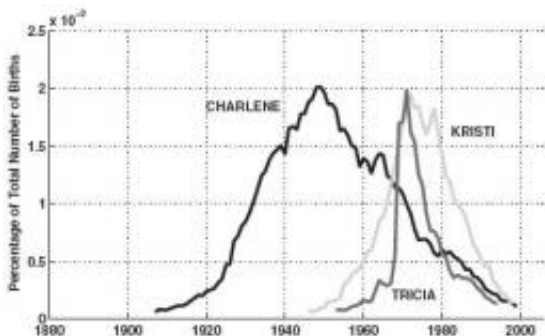# Why Things Become Unpopular

June 4 2009, By Lisa Zyga

A recent study has found that the fall of an item's popularity mirrors its rise to popularity, so that items that become popular faster also die out faster, which is demonstrated by name trends. Image caption: Berger and Le Mens. ©2009 PNAS.

(PhysOrg.com) -- "Why is everybody suddenly wearing those new sandals and listening to that new band? It's so trendy!" A recent study has investigated this sentiment in order to understand why some cultural products and styles die out faster than others. According to the results, the quicker a cultural item rockets to popularity, the quicker it dies. This pattern occurs because people believe that items that are adopted quickly will become fads, leading them to avoid these items, thus causing these items to die out.

In their study, Jonah Berger from the University of Pennsylvania and Gaël Le Mens from Stanford University and Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona have investigated why things become unpopular, and have

found some surprisingly counterintuitive results. Their study is published in a recent issue of [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](link).

"While it is easy to see products, ideas, or behaviors catch on in popular culture, less in known about why such things become unpopular," Berger told *PhysOrg.com*. "We show how social dynamics drive cultural change, and examine the reciprocal interplay between individual decisions and collective outcomes. Aggregate changes in popularity shape individual choice, which in turn drives aggregate popularity."

To investigate how cultural tastes change over time, Berger and Le Mens analyzed thousands of baby names from the past 100 years in France and the US. (Because there is less of an influence of technology or advertising on name choice, baby names provide a way to study how adoption depends on primarily internal factors.) The researchers found a consistent symmetry in the rise and fall of individual names; in other words, the longer it took for a name to become popular, the longer it took for the name to fade out of popularity, and thus the more staying power it had compared to names that quickly rose and fell. The effect was robust, occurring in both countries and across various time windows.

To find additional support for this relationship, the researchers also interviewed expecting parents on how likely they would be to give their children certain names. Afterwards, participants rated their perception of how trendy each name was. The results showed that parents viewed names that had experienced sharper recent increases in usage as fads, and avoided these names in accordance with this concern.

As the scientists explain, these findings suggest that beliefs about the evolution of popularity may be self-fulfilling. There is no mathematical necessity that forces cultural items (such as names) that sharply increase in popularity to die out faster, but people's beliefs have the ability to create this reality, since people don't want to be seen as following the

herd. This effect is an example of how psychological processes shape culture, in addition to the more widely known reciprocal dynamic, that culture can shape thought processes.

Besides baby names, the symmetry between popularity rise and fall can carry over to other cultural items. For example, the scientists noted that similar outcomes have been observed in the music industry, where new artists who shoot to the top of the charts right away also fall quickly, and so have lower overall sales than those who rise more slowly. While this finding seems counterintuitive, since a quick rise in popularity would seem like a good thing, it shows that a backlash to perceived fads should be taken into account. As the researchers explain, people who want to ensure the persistence and success of particular items should seek to popularize the items at a slow but steady pace.

"Managers often want their products to catch on quickly, and conventional wisdom would say that products which catch on quickly should be more likely to succeed," Berger said. "Our results, however, show that the exact opposite can occur. Fast adoption can hurt success. We think these findings extend to a broad range of areas where choices signal identity. People often join social movements, choose products, or wear styles because of what it communicates about them to others, and in these domains of life, adoption speed should influence cultural success."

More information: Jonah Berger and Gaël Le Mens. "How adoption speed affects the abandonment of cultural tastes." *PNAS*, 8146-8150, May 19, 2009, vol. 106, no. 20.

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