KISS MICROTRENDS GOODBYE AND EMBRACE SUSTAINABILITY INSTEAD

A Deep Look Into How Overconsumption is Slowly Killing Earth and Individualism

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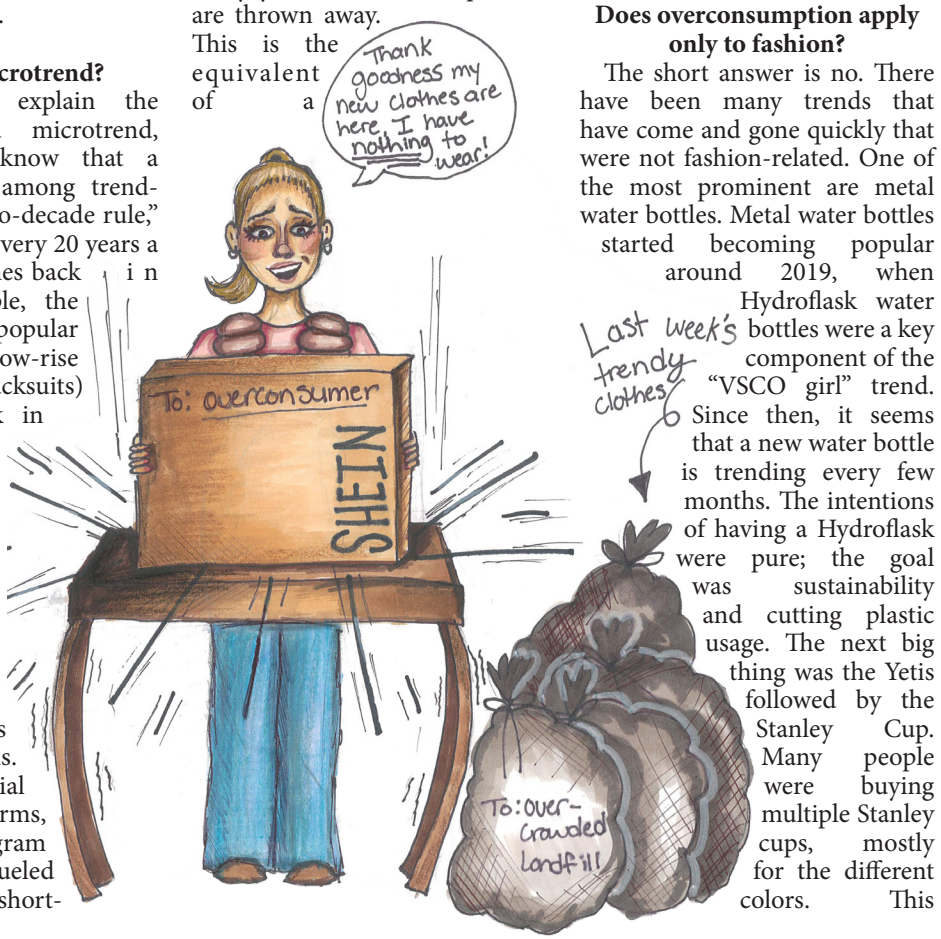
Since the beginning of civilization, there have always been trends. Every single texture, color, or shape of clothing has been in fashion at some point, and every generation has inanimate objects with which they are obsessed. On the surface, trends seem harmless and like a fun way to make conversation or feel a sense of belonging with the tribe, so to speak. Before the days of the internet, trends were discovered through magazines, commercials, or even just basic conversation. These things took time to catch on and go away. However, with current technology, trends can blow up overnight, meaning that there are a lot more of them than there used to be, and they're much more fleeting. This boom, hitting hard around 2020, has led to an exorbitant number of micro-trends. These micro-trends have added a heavy load to a problem the world has been struggling with for decades: Overconsumption.

What is a microtrend?

In order to explain the definition of a microtrend, readers should know that a common theory among trend-studiers is the "two-decade rule," which states that every 20 years a fashion trend comes back in style. For example, the clothes that were popular in the 2000s (low-rise jeans, baby tees, tracksuits) are coming back in style in the 2020s. This cycle began before the rise of social media. Typical trends last from 5-10 years, but the shelf life of a microtrend is much shorter. The average microtrend lasts from 3-5 months. The rise in social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, has fueled this increase in short-lived trends. For example, in the summer of 2023, it was very popular to wear pink and sparkly clothing, due to the release of the movie "Barbie." This was very popular all summer, but after that, it died out, and people had moved on to the next micro-trend, leaving all the newly purchased pink clothes to be forgotten at the thrift store or landfill. The 2020s have seen an absurd amount of microtrends like this one.

What's so wrong about these micro-trends?

A common denominator among these fashion microtrends is fast fashion. Many people who participate in the never-ending microtrends source their wardrobes from places like Shein because the clothes are extremely cheap. The reason that the clothes are so cheap is that they are not well-made, nor are they made with sustainable materials. According to Earth.org, of the 100 million garments made every year, 202.8 billion pounds are thrown away. This is the equivalent of a garbage truck full of clothes dumping onto a landfill every second. Not only is the amount of clothing being dumped an issue, but it's also a concern that many fast fashion places use materials that don't break down easily, because the materials (and companies) are cheap. In cases like Shein, clothes are typically made of polyester, which takes at least 20 years to break down, and can, in some cases, take up to 200 years. In the cases where the clothing is donated rather than thrown away, many of these clothes are not bought secondhand because they are no longer "trendy" and eventually will end up in a landfill, just like the others. According to Earth.org The number of times a garment is worn has decreased by about 36% in the last 15 years, lining up with the rise of social media and rapidly spreading trends. Many items are worn only a handful of times before they are thrown away.



Does overconsumption apply only to fashion?

The short answer is no. There have been many trends that have come and gone quickly that were not fashion-related. One of the most prominent are metal water bottles. Metal water bottles started becoming popular around 2019, when Hydroflask water bottles were a key component of the "VSCO girl" trend. Since then, it seems that a new water bottle is trending every few months. The intentions of having a Hydroflask were pure; the goal was sustainability and cutting plastic usage. The next big thing was the Yetis followed by the Stanley Cup. Many people were buying multiple Stanley cups, mostly for the different colors. This defeated the entire purpose of having a water bottle to cut waste, as having more than necessary is wasteful. After Stanley died out, Owala came in and was the new craze, as well as Hydro Jugs. Just like the Hydroflasks, Yetis, and Stanleys were left behind. Many of these water bottles will sit in a cabinet, mostly unused, or end up in a thrift store or a landfill. The reason that Hydroflasks became so popular in the first place was the goal towards sustainability, but the trend has become what it aimed to defeat. The metal water bottle craze is just one example of overconsumption outside of fashion.

Well, how can I fix it? I'm just one person?

The impact of one person can be a lot more meaningful than some would realize. Openly advocating for a more sustainable and eco-friendly lifestyle and spreading awareness can do an exponential amount of help. Some ways to avoid overconsuming are to be conscious of your lifestyle choices. Ask yourself: "Am I buying this because I genuinely like it, or do I just want to blend in with the trends?" An effective way to be sustainable with clothing is thrifting, which is not only good for the planet but also is much more affordable than buying new. Incorporating thrifting into shopping can benefit consumers and the environment alike. A common phrase used to avoid changing consumer habits is "Well, they already made it, so I might as well just buy it." This could not be farther from the truth. All basic principles of consumerism revolve around supply and demand. So while the things that they have made may not be used, and could be thrown away, the manufacturers won't make more if they aren't bought. There is no supply if there is no demand. All it takes to slow down the cycle of overconsumption is to put just a few seconds of consideration into what you buy.

Artist Statement

For this editorial cartoon, I wanted to highlight the excessive consumerism of textiles. I illustrated a young woman in a state of relief after receiving her package of new clothes from a fast-fashion company, claiming she has “nothing to wear”. The table is drawn to show how immense the package is, criticizing the unnecessary amount of clothing purchased. To the right, garbage bags full of “last week’s trendy clothes” to be sent to the overcrowded landfill are shown. These were illustrated to represent the human disregard for the environmental impact of fleeting trends and overconsumption. The young woman is drawn as an everyday person to show that this is something common in society.

I chose to use a combination of alcohol markers and colored pencils for this editorial cartoon. The markers allow for bold color and smooth blending, while the colored pencils help convey the texture and depth. The colors are meant to resemble the colors of the real-life counterparts of the aspects of images. My goal was to make people reconsider their consumption habits, and ponder if they are as drastic as the one in the cartoon.