



CORES, CONSUMPTION, AND DIGITAL AESTHETICS

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ABSTRACT: Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the social media platform TikTok saw a massive influx of new users, a large chunk of whom were Gen-Z. Following stay-at-home orders, many struggled to find ways to connect with others. Feeling disconnected and alienated from the world, many turned to social media platforms as an escape. Four years have passed since the pandemic, and Gen-Z now reigns supreme as the largest user base of TikTok. Perhaps coincidentally, the past four years have also seen surging reports of feelings of isolation and loneliness in Gen-Z. Remnants of the pandemic can be seen in Gen-Z's struggle to understand their role in the world around them. One basis for this struggle comes from a lack of personal understanding. In a cycle all too familiar, Gen-Z has been turning to social media apps as a temporary fix for a complex issue. By analyzing trends on social media, we might be able to gain insight into how this demographic has been coping with a lack of self-understanding. In a never-ending sea of content, microtrends and aesthetic-cores stand out as a way for those lacking self-identity to find temporary comfort in belonging. But is this persona-escapism at all practical in the long run?

Introduction

Being born from 1997 to 2012, Generation Z makes up over 40% of all users on TikTok (Krisadhi et al., 2023). Gen-Z, having a considerable influence on the app, is responsible for a lot of the trends on the app that become popular. Like all trends, nothing on the app stays relevant forever. Like a never-ending game of whack-a-mole, when one trend dies out, a new one arises to fill its place. A repeated and exacerbated cycle of life and death dictates the relevancy of trends. So much so that the term “microtrend” has sprung up to describe the ever-decreasing shelf-life of trends that rise to prominence on the app in a short amount of time (Lee, 2022). Though “microtrend” as a label can be used to describe a variety of subjects, the label sees widespread usage to describe fashion-related crazes. This should come as no surprise, as perhaps no industry plays into the hands of “trends” quite like fashion does or can.

Trend Dictatorship

Like TikTok, the world of fashion has also seen an acceleration in its trend cycle. Researchers Andrew Reilly and Jana Hawley note a shift in trend-cycle dictation from the hands of brands to consumers as opening the door for fast-fashion brands to prevail over traditional brands—due to their ability to pump out clothes at a faster rate. (Reilly et al., 2018). A shift in the power to dictate trends forces the brand to wait on the whims of the consumer. And to the dismay of the traditional brand, it is never kept waiting too long. The fast-fashion brand, however, is more than eager to satisfy the desires of the consumer.

The rise of social media (and its usage among younger audiences) coincides with this shift in the fashion industry. As the traditional brand got phased out, so did the traditional consumer. The traditional consumer has evolved into one defined by their youth and connection to the internet. What prevails among these young natives of the internet is a virulent hunger for “new”—a hunger that’s appeased (but never quite fulfilled) by consumption, which gives life to microtrends (Reilly et al., 2018). Reilly and



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Hawley use the term “attention-deficit fashion” to describe the internet-induced accelerated life-and-death cycle of fashion trends. It becomes clear that microtrends are the direct result of a new age of consumerism—one where youth and impulsivity are key elements.

Cores, Conformity, and Coquette:

The impulsive nature of Gen-Z’s consumption in terms of fashion can be attributed to the fear of falling out of what’s “in-trend” and, in turn, feeling left behind by the world (Sasmista et al., 2021). Feeling disconnected, one might go to great lengths to reobtain a sense of relatability towards a social group to manufacture feelings of inclusion (Lyngdoh et al., 2022). In the world of microtrends, participation presents itself as a remedy to this fear of missing out. Participation allows for a sense of relatability to be momentarily reobtained. It is once again lost, however, when the trend falls out of style. So, to prolong these feelings of inclusion, one might engage in a constant cycle of participating in microtrends—not due to genuine enjoyment but out of perceived necessity.

An extension of microtrends can be seen in the form of aesthetic-cores. “Cores” are amalgamations of hobbies, personality traits, and (most importantly) fashion styles that get lumped together into one easily digestible and presentable package. For something to become an aesthetic-core, there needs to be something (an identity) that has been deemed worthy enough of being replicated. The assessment of “worthiness” is one based purely on aesthetics. Substance matters little in deciding what becomes an aesthetic-core, as in the process of mass-replication, substance is inherently lost. These aesthetic-cores can be interpreted as new-age digital forms of youth subcultures. Typically, in youth subcultures, individuals contort their own identity to fit in better with the values and behaviors expressed by the subculture (Bata et al., 2019). Rather than attempting to fit into a subculture, Gen-Z attempts to fit in with the values of whatever aesthetic-core they like most. However, in this process of building self-identity through the deconstruction and modification of one’s own personality, authenticity of identity becomes

lost (Gaitan, 2020). To fully assimilate with an aesthetic-core means to rid yourself of individuality, in preference for a predetermined set of ideals and values.

“Coquette” is an example of an aesthetic-core that has gained popularity on social media (Kenzie, 2024). A modern spin on aesthetics derived from Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, coquette places high emphasis on perceived youthful femininity (Lanigan, 2023). Pink bows, ballerina flats, and innocence are at the core of the aesthetic. One who identifies with such an aesthetic does not concern themselves with pointless online discourse or real-world conflicts. Rather, they enjoy frolicking in open fields, baking and enjoying pastries, and gossiping with friends. To identify with such an aesthetic is, in a way, an escape from the pressures of the world through an aesthetic entirely based on escapism. After all, who has time to worry when there are cakes to be enjoyed and beautiful picnics to attend? It is worth clarifying that these activities on their own are not indicative of the character of an individual. What an aesthetic-core, such as coquette, represents differs from how an individual may choose to interpret and represent it. Aesthetic-cores are not based on reality; rather, they are based on a romanticized version of reality. So, when aesthetic-cores are blindly embraced (that is, without interpretation), they can become interpreted as a form of digital escapism. In such (extreme) cases, the individual prefers an idealized version of reality over reality itself.

Conclusion

The point of this paper is not to completely disregard the comfort one might find in social media; rather, it is to point out that complete reliance on these platforms as a substitute for identity is not practical in the long run. Microtrends, aesthetic-cores, and similar trends should only serve as a basis for one to build their identity. Complete association with these entities deprives an individual of the genuine aspects of building character (Gaitan, 2020). In the struggle to find self-identity, Gen-Z should grow to be cautious of the cycle of impulsive, consumptive, and wasteful behaviors that is encouraged by these trends (Harahap et al., 2023). When fostering a sense



of identity, authenticity should be prioritized over the desire to fit in. Authenticity, in this context, refers to the question, “How genuine is my enjoyment of participating in these trends?” Fostering a sense of identity should be based on the individual’s personal values and should not be undermined by the “trendiness” of its components.

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