



STYLE

Buy, Buy, Buy

Microtrends and the fluctuating fashion zeitgeist

// BY REETI MALHOTRA

Last year, the look was leopard print — a product of the maximalist “mob wife” aesthetic that proliferated on social media and promoted an accessible in to an elusive world of luxury.

This year, the look is polka dots. Polka dots are on dresses, skirts and nails. The retro print is no longer dated, but rather the epitome of versatile, playful class, at least according to Vogue. Walk around any function lacking a discernible theme and you’ll spot someone donning polka dots.

Am I criticizing either pattern? Absolutely not. But the ceaseless cycle of rising and dying microtrends made me wonder how rapidly changing mainstream tastes affects our own style.

I fell in love with animal print — cheetah, leopard and zebra — at 17. My Pinterest algorithm had spat out photo after photo of the “rockstar girlfriend” aesthetic — which crucially included lots of animal print, leather and fur. The look had found its perfect target: a teenager with a nascent love for rock revival bands.

Pinterest collages paved the way for my devotion to Alexa Chung’s effortless indie sleaze and Kate Moss’ cool chaotic rock. My closet was soon populated by leather jackets, boots, bags and metallic tops that provided a pop of alternative texture. I learned how to draw on my eyeliner — smudging it just right — and to paint on a dark lip. I only wore black, red and

silver. I had swallowed the “rockstar girlfriend” aesthetic whole and absorbed it into my identity.

But while wearing an all-black leather look in the middle of spring is a choice I can applaud, it’s not one that always works for me. I got older and developed a greater range of tastes — and bought new pieces to go along with them. I purchased flowery, iridescent, beaded cami tops, inspired by the lighter-colored dresses my friends and I prefer to wear in a sweltering Singaporean summer; bright flats, borne from my love for Punjabi juttis; and baggy skater jeans paired with band tees, like Lindsay Lohan’s styling in “Freaky Friday.” I still wore my leather and grunge looks, but broke them up with a hint of something different.

Each of these garments became a staple in my wardrobe around the time that their corresponding microtrend appeared in the mainstream. My cami tops became fashionable amid the ongoing Y2K resurgence. Juttis became cute after “balletcore” proliferated on TikTok. The baggy look became desirable with the rise of the “cool girl.” I point this out not to be critical of the reliance on microtrends for fashion inspiration — sometimes the

awareness of a certain aesthetic can point us towards a fitting mode for self-expression, like me with my “rockstar girlfriend” discovery — but to highlight how dominant they are in navigating our present fashion zeitgeist.

Ever-shifting microtrends make us buy, buy, buy to keep up with the times. As our closets fill up

with an endless number of pieces, certain garments shift to the back, gathering dust as the trend that drove us to purchase them fades. Others come to the front, deemed newly desirable according to forever fluctuating fashion tastes.

While clearing out my closet before returning to college this fall, I found a white linen

en top I hadn’t worn in a year. At present, it is the ugliest garment of clothing I own. It is not “me,” nor an item I would reach to wear irrespective of its deviation from my usual style preferences. But as the law of motion of fashion requires, fashionability returns. Give it a year, or two, and I know the top will be a “hidden gem” I’ll be delighted to discover as “Clean Girl Bali Bougie” becomes the new look of the moment. Maybe.

The principal topic of conversation with microtrends in recent years has been their contribution to overconsumption. Fast fashion companies churn out clothes to match the latest algorithm-pushed style. We in turn buy pieces without discerning if we actually like them, or if their inflated sense of palatability — borne from transient popularity — drove us to purchase them. This is a valuable point of discourse. However, I think it is equally important — from the standpoint of appreciating fashion as an industry, art form and means of self-expression — to recognize their im-

pact on how we formulate our personal style.

The 2020s don’t have a set fashion look, as the 70s, 80, 90s or 2000s did — we have a plethora of them. Though microtrends make up the superficial commodification of subcultures for fast fashion conglomerates — and therefore warrant a measured degree of criticism — they also compel us to learn about our personal style, given we don’t run to buy everything we see.

So, don your leopard print or polka dots. Stop there if you please. But don’t be afraid to use each “mob wife” or “balletcore” or “clean girl” trend as a vantage point to dive into the broader fashion world and rich subculture that each of these aesthetics hails from. You might find something that gives you a way to express a newfound aspect of your identity, or at least something chic and fun to wear that’ll last longer than the doomed-to-die fad that led you to discover it. Take it from me.

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