

Are VSCO girls and Insta Models our last hope for climate change

Through apps like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, multiple trends have gone viral globally and quickly by ‘influencers’, like Instagram models and VSCO girls who have distinct stereotypical personalities and lifestyles which are adopted by millions of their followers online. Trends everyone takes part in or wants to be a part of. Named after a photo editing app, VSCO (pronounced visco) girls are majorly white middle-class teenagers while insta-models are older white women whose brand is yoga at the beach and vegan breakfasts, both groups dominate the internet with viral trends, justifying them with environmentalism and climate activism. What is interesting is, regardless of eventually being ridiculed for these shallow trends, they are by far the fastest most effective ways of not only spreading incomplete awareness but also convincing people to make small changes in their lives. Some of the viral trends have been boycotting single use plastic and using metal bottles or straws instead, thrifting old clothes to avoid fast fashion, buying cruelty free and vegan cosmetics, encouraging vegan and vegetarian diets and many more. If we were to put the roots of these trends into statistics:

-Today we produce around 300 million tons of plastic waste every year (nearly equivalent to the weight of the entire human population), 60% of which ends up either in landfills or the natural environment. If current tendencies continue, our oceans could contain more plastic than fish by 2050 (in just 30 more years). Every minute, around one million plastic bottles are purchased around the world.

- The fashion industry produces 10% of all humanity's carbon emissions, is the second largest consumer of the world's water supply and pollutes the oceans with microplastics.

-Animal agriculture is responsible for 18% of greenhouse gas emissions, more than the entire transportation industry; cars, trains, planes etc., COMBINED. Livestock and their byproducts account for 51% of all worldwide greenhouse gas emissions.

But that is the thing about these trends, not only are they short lived, but statistics like these are also often absent. This newfound internet activism is attracting people to words like organic, eco-friendly, sustainable etc. just to be a part of the new wave without much understanding. Lifestyle which is 'morally' and 'socially' acceptable is being controlled by internet influencers largely, that too in a rather shallow way, where the trend is justified by incomplete statistics and information taking the attention from the real damage and giving it short lived attention. The morbid details of the harms done to the planet go on and on, details influencers mask with pictures of baby pigs and acai bowls, actually convincing their followers to turn vegan or at least include vegan meals often, even if it's for a picture they will post. Who knew ignoring gloomy statistics with aesthetic pictures of vegan food was going to be a more effective route?

Apart from all the jokes and ridiculing, a lot of it stems from internet influencers and their short-lived trends, but still effectively works in its own way. In *Environmental Failure: A Case for a New Green Politics*, James Speth mentions, "Today's environmentalism tends to be pragmatic and incrementalist — its 'actions are aimed at solving problems and often doing so one at a time", and I think that is exactly what is happening not only with these influencers (who use metal straws to answer the plastic problem, while they buy multiple fake plastic plants for their rooms to match their 'conscious' internet persona) but also a lot of environmentalists and activists too, who

sometimes tend to be highly radical. Being vegan, having a zero-waste lifestyle, wearing only organic clothes, not travelling in planes etc., are some pretty radical ideas which make people 'truly' eligible to fight for climate change and when almost inconsequential changes like metal straws and shorter showers are given more importance, people tend to avoid getting involved in the movement, fearful of being called hypocrites.

Situations like these put us against ourselves, forming two different sides for the same cause, which only helps capitalistic industries and ignorant politicians. These two different sides, individual action and systematic change is a conversation we waste too much time on, diverting attention from real issues while a balance between the two is all we need. When we focus on individual action, we look at issues as consumers but when we focus on systematic change, we switch from being consumers to citizens. That is why we need to fight as both, consumers and citizens, instead of choosing one and attacking the other. While individual action is the answer for short term harm reduction, systematic change needs to be given equal attention side by side. People we vote for, holding people in power accountable, protests, petitions etc. are all we have.

This radicalism doesn't only extend to 'individual vs societal' debate but major decision making and policies too. Just how people are attracted to words like sustainable and ecofriendly as consumers, the idea of what's good for the planet can be very biased for environmentalists too. Ivanpah in California is one of the biggest solar farms, and like any other farm, the whole area had to be cleared. Tortoises and their babies literally had to be pulled out from burrows and sent in trucks to captivity where most of them died. Not only that but 6000 birds are actually killed every year catching fire above solar panels and plunging to their deaths. We think of solar panels as clean energy, but after their life of 20-25 years, they are just shipped to third world countries where

harmful toxins are expose to underprepared workers. I don't want to get into the details of clean energy or how technology made to benefit the environment is actually harming it, the point I'm trying to make is that there is a massive gap between the knowledge we have currently at large as common citizens and the knowledge we actually need. On top of that when the information is being given to us by underinformed internet celebrities, it doesn't help with anything. I understand that the solution is a lot more complicated, but if we don't start with informing ourselves and spreading awareness, we will forever be stuck in a loop of individual vs societal while the big capitalistic giants laugh.

SOURCES

Our planet is drowning in plastic pollution

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The fashion industry emits more carbon than international flights and maritime shipping combined. Here are the biggest ways it impacts the planet.

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What YOU can do about climate change

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