

Digital Nostalgia in Generation Z: Exploring the Motivations Behind Dreamcore and Y2K Revival

Qinyi Han

*Nanjing NO.1 Middle School, Nanjing, China
hanqinyi081011@qq.com*

Abstract. The rapid emergence of nostalgia aesthetics, particularly Dreamcore and Y2K, has become a significant cultural phenomenon. The questionnaire adopts a semi-structured approach featuring clear conceptual definitions to ensure respondent comprehension, and is designed based on four dimensions: behavioral dimension, psychological motivations, sociocultural context, and belongingness. Based on these four dimensions, the study reveals how social pressure, globalization, and digital platforms affect Generation Z's love for these aesthetics. This study also points out that nostalgia stems from the desire to regain the sense of security and positivity of childhood, because Dreamcore and Y2K fashion help them temporarily escape from daily pressures. Nostalgic aesthetics has indeed become a mechanism for coping with intergenerational anxiety and uncertainty. Globalization has also increased the accessibility and popularity of nostalgic styles. At the same time, nostalgic aesthetics also cultivate a sense of belonging among subculture groups, and social media is its main expression platform.

Keywords: Nostalgia, Y2K, Dreamcore, Generation Z

1. Introduction

In the post-pandemic era, nostalgia has surged in popularity across the internet, manifesting in diverse artistic forms and emerging as a cultural spotlight. Among the most prominent trends are dreamcore and Y2K aesthetics, which have gained widespread recognition not only in subcultural groups but also in mainstream media.

Dreamcore aesthetics is characterized by its dreamlike imagery, often evoking a sense of familiarity especially in relation to childhood memory. Y2K aesthetics represents the futuristic yet nostalgic visual language of the late 1990s and early 2000s, marked by glossy textures and a distinct technological optimism.

This study focuses on the motivation of nostalgia for generation Z, analyzing the popularity of two aesthetic movements: Dreamcore and Y2K. The study further explores the function of aesthetics as the tool of cultural memory construction, underscoring the identity formation of Generation Z in online subcultural groups. Ultimately, this study aims to reveal how digital nostalgia operates as both a psychological comfort and a tool for identity formation in the modern world.

2. Literature review

Boim's theory distinguishes between restorative nostalgia, which manifests as a holistic reconstruction of the past [1]. Boym exemplifies these ideas through the use of themed cafes and bars [2]. In contrast, reflective nostalgia is defined as striving to rebuild a past, which cherishes fragments of our memory. While restorative nostalgia treats the past as an ideal to reclaim, reflective nostalgia acknowledges loss and embraces the bittersweetness of remembrance.

Paul Moon has used "prosthetic nostalgia" to describe a phenomenon: a nostalgic longing for a period or place without personal memory, yet with effects akin to authentic nostalgic experiences [3]. In other words, individuals can feel genuine yearning for eras they never lived through.

This study employs Moon's concept of prosthetic nostalgia to characterize Generation Z's yearning for the early 2000s—a period they did not experience. By contrast, Dreamcore nostalgia for childhood is restorative, whereas creating retro aesthetics actively in online social groups can be seen as reflective nostalgia. Together, these three categories provide a clear framework for analyzing Generation Z's engagement with retro aesthetics.

Recent research has explored the resurgence of Y2K and dreamcore as quintessential examples of digital-era nostalgia. The 2020 resurgence of Y2K or early 2000's fashion trends coincided with and became popular during the COVID-19 pandemic [4], reflecting that Y2K blends post-pandemic anxiety with millennial optimism. Meanwhile, dreamcore is theorized as the aesthetic in relation to childhood memories. For Generation Z, dreamcore aesthetics embody a fusion of old and new, reshaping the world of their remembered world [5].

During and after the pandemic, products featuring Y2K-related aesthetics became popular online. Recent research highlights the commercialization of Y2K-related goods. According to Han & Jin, millennials advocate brand trustworthiness and image, and are highly sensitive to fashion trends [6]. Therefore, brands promote Y2K style by adopting bright colors and unique designs, which are more likely to attract consumers' attention.

However, current research lacks a sociological analysis of nostalgia in these two aesthetics. This study expands the discourse by interpreting the role of nostalgia and dream core in Y2K in social transformation and how it connects personal memory and digital collectivity.

3. Methodology

3.1. Questionnaire design

This study utilized a questionnaire method, consisting of 11 questions. The questionnaire employs a semi-structured approach, utilizing clear conceptual definitions to ensure respondent comprehension.

The questionnaire is designed based on four dimensions: behavioral dimension, psychological motivations, sociocultural context, and belongingness.

The first dimension is behavioral dimension (Q3, Q6), aiming to assess engagement channels (social media, fashion) and daily practices (clothing, decor, photography). Then is the second dimension, psychological motivations (Q5, Q7-Q8). This part explores emotional drivers of nostalgia (childhood memories, escapism, social pressure) and connections to the millennial era. The third dimension is sociocultural context (Q7, Q9): examine globalization's role during the dispersion of aesthetics and their social impact. Eventually is the fourth dimension, belongingness (Q10). The goal is to measure community identification among participants.

The questions integrate quantitative (Likert scales, multiple-choice) and qualitative (open-ended options) methods, which ensures the questionnaire’s comprehensiveness.

3.2. Results

The questionnaire was released and 77 responses were collected, and 71 of them are valid. The results have passed the reliability and validity tests (p value=0.025).

It is distributed online to Generation Z across the world through social media platforms (Bilibili, Rednote and We chat), using random sampling to choose the participants.

The link to the original questionnaire: <https://www.wjx.cn/vm/QPCwWiF.aspx#>In the following chapters, the results will be analyzed through descriptive analysis.

Table 1. The platform participants first came into contact with nostalgic aesthetics

Options	subtotal	proportion
A. Social media (e.g. Tiktok, Weibo, Rednote, etc.)	45	63.38%
B. Film and television (films, TV series, music videos, etc.)	35	49.3%
C. Musical works (album covers, musical styles, etc.)	41	57.75%
D. Fashion trends (clothing, accessories, makeup, etc.)	23	32.39%
E. Art exhibitions (art exhibitions, installations, etc.)	25	35.21%
F. Friend Recommendations	10	14.08%
G. Others (please specify)	2	2.82%
The number of people who fill in this question effectively	71	

According to Table 1, we asked the participants about the engagement channels they are practicing in the dispersion of nostalgia aesthetics. Social media (A, 63.38%) dominates as the primary channel for encountering nostalgia aesthetics, followed by film/TV (B, 49.3%) and music (C, 57.75%). Fashion (D) and art exhibitions (E) lag behind (32.39%, 14.08%), suggesting digital platforms drive aesthetic discovery as the main force.

Table 2. The level of affection towards Y2K and dreamcore aesthetics

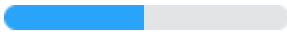
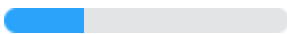
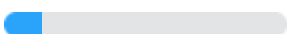
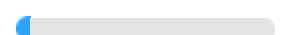
Options	subtotal	proportion
A. I like it very much, it's my favorite style	35	 49.3%
B. I like it and think it's very distinctive	20	 28.17%
C. General, no particular feeling	10	 14.08%
D. I don't like it very much, and I'm not interested in this style	4	 5.63%
E. I don't like it very much	2	 2.82%
The number of people who fill in this question effectively	71	

Table 2 asked the participant about their level of affection. Nearly half (49.3%) are extremely fond of the style, while 28.17% like it very much, indicating that strongly appeals to Generation Z. Only 5.63%–2.82% express dislike. To conclude, 77.47% lean positive, highlighting its cultural resonance among Generation Z.

4. Motivation for nostalgia in Generation Z

The questionnaires explore the key insights into how Generation Z engages in the spread of Dreamcore and Y2K aesthetics. The findings are analyzed based on four dimensions: behavioral engagement, psychological motivations, social and cultural context and belongingness. The function of retro aesthetics will also be discussed.

4.1. Behavioral engagement with nostalgia aesthetics

Table 3. The engagement channels to express the affection for aesthetics

Options	subtotal	proportion
A. Wearing clothing and accessories in the relevant style	36	50.7%
B. Decorate your own living space (e.g. posters, ornaments, etc.)	26	36.62%
C. Take photos, videos with Dreamcore or Y2K style	41	57.75%
D. Use relevant styles of mobile wallpapers, computer desktops, etc	27	38.03%
E. Attend activities or gatherings related the topics	22	30.99%
F. Others (please specify)	5	7.04%
The number of people who fill in this question effectively	71	

According to Table 3, social media emerged as the dominant channel for encountering nostalgia aesthetic, followed by music and film or television. Hence, digital platforms work as the primary medium for aesthetic dissemination. Meanwhile, fashion and art exhibitions played lesser roles, suggesting that nostalgia trends are largely based on digital platforms.

Furthermore, participants actively incorporated two aesthetics into their daily life, mainly through wearing clothing and accessories of the corresponding style (Table3-A), using mobile phone wallpapers and computer desktops with a similar style (Table3-D), and taking photos or videos with a dreamcore or Y2K style (Table3-C). Over half (57.75%) of the participants selected taking photos and videos, which proves that participants are actively engaging in creating similar artworks.

4.2. Psychological motivations

Table 4. The level of influence social environment had on nostalgic aesthetics

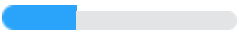
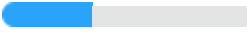
Options	subtotal 1	proportion
A. has a huge influence, and these factors have prompted me to lean more towards this retro style to escape from reality	19	 26.76%
B. has an impact that makes it easier for me to emotionally resonate with the style	23	 32.39%
C. Not much influence, I like this style mainly because of its inherent charm	19	 26.76%
D. No impact at all	10	 14.08%
The number of people who fill in this question effectively	71	

Table 5. The pursuit nostalgic aesthetics is whether related to the desire to return to the millennium

Options	subtotal	proportion
Yes, these aesthetics remind me of the good old days of my childhood, or make me feel the social atmosphere of the millennium (even if I don't have many memories of millennium at the time)	35	 49.3%
There are certain effects that I cherish or miss about the atmosphere of the millennium	29	 40.85%
It's not a big deal. The millennial vibe is certainly desirable, but it's not the main reason I love these aesthetic	19	 26.76%
No, I don't have many good memories of the millennium	14	 19.72%
The number of people who fill in this question effectively	71	

According to Boym [1], restorative nostalgia emphasizes returning to the safety and warmth of early life. Consistent with this, the survey found that a majority of Generation Z fans cited childhood comfort as a key motivation: 61.8% said they enjoy nostalgic aesthetics because they evoke beautiful childhood memories. In other words, Dreamcore allows young people to enter an ideal past. This finding reflects broader trends: Generation Z is reported to be “searching for comfort in a time before social media. To conclude, Dreamcore’s popularity comes from the desire to recapture childhood security and positive to some extent.

Generation Z interviewees in the study report that Dreamcore and Y2K fashion help them momentarily leave daily pressures behind. Indeed, mainstream data show rising Generation Z nostalgia: 37% say they feel nostalgic for the 1990s (even if they were very young or not yet born then) and describe that decade as a carefree time to escape contemporary stress.

4.3. Sociocultural drivers

Table 6. The level of influence social environment had on the spread of nostalgic aesthetics

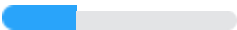
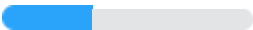
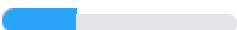
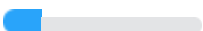
Options	subtotal 1	proportion
A. has a huge influence, and these factors have prompted me to lean more towards this retro style to escape from reality	19	 26.76%
B. has an impact that makes it easier for me to emotionally resonate with the style	23	 32.39%
C. Not much influence, I like this style mainly because of its inherent charm	19	 26.76%
D. No impact at all	10	 14.08%
The number of people who fill in this question effectively	71	

Table 7. The role of globalization played in the popularity of nostalgic aesthetics

Options	subtotal	proportion
A. Promote intercultural exchange and make these vintage styles easier to disseminate	37	 52.11%
B. Provide more access to and understanding of these styles (e.g. international social media, film and television productions, etc.)	42	 59.15%
C. Make Generation Z more receptive to diverse cultures, thereby generating interest in this unique retro aesthetic	39	 54.93%
D. Nothing noticeable	4	 5.63%
The number of people who fill in this question effectively	71	

According to Table 6, contemporary social conditions significantly influence Generation Z's attraction to nostalgic aesthetics. 59.15% of the participants acknowledged that factors such as social pressure and global crises either prompted them to accept retro styles as a form of escapism (26.76%) or facilitated emotional resonance with these aesthetics (32.39%). This suggests that nostalgic online aesthetics serve as a coping mechanism for generational anxiety and uncertainty. According to Yu, self-focused Y2K women began to miss the past era of unlimited possibilities, free expression of personality, and full of color, thus adding nostalgic elements to the current Y2K style, making it more diversified [7]. In addition, globalization plays a significant role in the spread of these aesthetics. Over half of the respondents agreed that globalization has enhanced access to nostalgic styles. Specifically, 59.15% cited improved exposure to these styles, and 54.93% believed that growing cultural receptiveness has fostered a deeper interest in retro aesthetics. Thus, the popularity of Dreamcore and Y2K among Generation Z is not only an individual emotional response

but also a reflection of broader sociocultural dynamics shaped by global inter connectedness and collective stress.

4.4. Belonginess

Table 8. The sense of belonging in the pursuit of nostalgic aesthetics

Options	subtotal	proportion
A. Yes, being able to resonate strongly with people who share the same preferences and have a strong sense of belonging	20	28.17%
B. There is a sense of belongingness that can be found in a particular group	24	33.8%
C. Not so sure, no particularly noticeable sensation	14	19.72%
D. No, it's just a personal preference, and the question of belonging has not been considered	13	18.31%
The number of people who fill in this question effectively	71	

The results indicate that nostalgic online aesthetics play a key role in fostering a sense of community and belonging among Generation Z. According to Table 8, 28.17% of respondents reported a strong sense of belonging through shared preferences, while 33.8% noted a sense of connection within specific subcultural groups. This suggests that more than 60% of participants experience some level of social attachment through their engagement with Dreamcore and Y2K aesthetics. These findings align with the idea that aesthetic participation online is not merely personal but also inherently social. Through digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Bilibili, Generation Z users create, share, and respond to nostalgic content, which forms collective emotional experiences and subcultural identities. While 19.72% remained uncertain about their sense of belonging and 18.31% viewed it as purely personal, the overall trend highlights that nostalgic aesthetics play an important role in Generation Z's cultural life. In a fragmented digital age, retro aesthetics thus become a powerful tool for youth to form meaningful interpersonal connections.

5. Discussion

While nostalgia aesthetics such as Y2K and Dreamcore are often perceived as personal expressions of memory and emotion, their resurgence is deeply intertwined with consumer culture. The 2020s revival of Y2K aesthetics was initially led by entertainment industries and celebrities. For instance, Lady Gaga released her new album "Chromtica" in May 2020, which is filled with Y2K-related icons. Furthermore, Y2K gained its wide popularity through Korean female idol groups, which can be represented by BLACKPINK's high-saturation hair color, unique makeup and metal material accessories to create a futuristic visual effect in the album "How you like that" in 2020. As celebrities embraced these styles, Generation Z began adopting similar fashion trends, prompting brands and platforms to leverage Y2K elements. Fashion labels like Zara and H&M frequently

release early 2000s-inspired collections, illustrating how nostalgia has been transformed into a consumable aesthetic—turning emotional yearning for the past into a marketing tool.

Nevertheless, nostalgic aesthetics still play a significant role in shaping subcultural communities and individual identity among Generation Z [8]. Online spaces allow young people to participate in creating these aesthetics, not merely by purchasing related products but also by actively generating and sharing content—such as outfits, images, and videos—through platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Bilibili. In these digital communities, participants often actively engage in comments and shares, reflecting common generational experiences.

6. Conclusion

This study explores the significance of nostalgia aesthetics in shaping Generation Z's cultural and emotional experiences. Findings demonstrate that these aesthetics fulfill different psychological needs and provide a sense of identity and belonging. Dreamcore, through restorative nostalgia, offers a comforting return to an idealized childhood, while Y2K operates through reflective and prosthetic nostalgia, allowing users to escape into a lost, imagined past. The study reveals that these aesthetics are not just passive cultural artifacts but active tools for self-positioning and emotional expression in the face of contemporary challenges. The sense of belonging derived from the formation of online sub-cultural groups also alleviates the stress of Generation Z.

In terms of cultural and psychological impact, the study highlights how digital platforms have become crucial spaces for the creation and dissemination of nostalgic aesthetics. These platforms not only allow for the consumption of related content but also enable individuals to contribute to the creation of nostalgic visual and narrative representations, reinforcing group identity and emotional connection among Generation Z.

However, the study also has limitations, including a small sample size and a primary focus on online engagement. Future research could investigate offline interactions and explore the role of nostalgia across cultural, gender, and class dimensions. More in-depth qualitative methods such as interviews could offer richer insights into how individuals emotionally and socially engage with nostalgic aesthetics in their everyday lives. Future studies could also focus on the development of aesthetics in a particular area; for instance, Chinese Dreamcore has become an attractive topic on the Chinese Internet, and discussing such topics can offer a more profound analysis of the diffusion of aesthetics among particular cultures.

References

- [1] Boym, S. (2008). *The future of nostalgia*. Basic books.
- [2] Ayres, D. (2021). *Prosthetic Nostalgia: Defining and Contextualising New Terminology in Humanities Discourse*. (University Centre Doncaster), MA thesis. Online publication. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.28902.29761.
- [3] Moon, P. (2021). Prosthetic nostalgia: History and memory in "Art Deco Napier". *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, (32), 60-80.
- [4] Ussher, T. (2023). *A Study of Nostalgia, Fashion, and Covid-19* (Doctoral dissertation, Toronto Metropolitan University).
- [5] hang Jingrui. (2023). Study on the artistic expression and aesthetic psychology of dream core from the perspective of psychoanalysis. *Popular Literature and Art*, (18), 223-225. doi: 10.20112/j.cnki. ISSN1007-5828.2023.18.075.
- [6] Han Peiwei & Jin Yongshan. (2022). Study on the fashion characteristics of "Y2K" aesthetics from the perspective of youth subculture. *Art Panorama*, (19), 130-132..
- [7] Yu, R. (2023). The research on the female identity construction under the influence of Y2K culture. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, 4, 512-517.
- [8] Sun Tingting & Chen Ying. (2023). Analysis of the reasons for the resurgence of Y2K style from the perspective of youth subculture. *Fashion Designer*, (09), 60-64. doi: 10.20100/j.cnki.cn11-4548/ts.2023.09.011.