

# ***Analysis on the Communication Routes and Influence of the Y2K Style as a Subculture in the New Era***

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**Abstract:** Since 2018, Y2K (Year 2 Kilo), which was popular from the end of the last century to the beginning of this century, has made a comeback. Relying on social media and the Y2K subculture community, the new round of Y2K fashion has become a hot topic on the Internet. In addition, with the help of celebrities and Internet celebrities, Y2k has been widely spread. Its community has been expanding, subculture groups and some Y2K women use it to express themselves, but the wide spread of Y2K has also brought negative influence. This paper analyzes the formation, history, communication routes, and influence of Y2K. In addition, it explores the communication routes and influence of Y2K in the new era by combining it with relevant literature. It is found that the communication of Y2K relies on the Y2K subculture community formed by the subculture and Generation Z group, in which celebrities and influencers act as communication gatekeepers. Under the agenda set by the capital, people in the community encode and decode Y2K clothes as symbols and engender Y2K spiritual connotations. Then, the spirit spreads within and outside the community and generate both positive and negative impact.

**Keywords:** cultural communication, Y2K, subculture, agenda setting, encoding and decoding

## **1. Introduction**

Since 2018, an increasing number of fashion brands have brought the Y2K style back into their design, making this trend that has disappeared back into the fashion circle again. The Y2K trend originated around the 1990s. Originally the Y2K did not refer to the aesthetic style but to the computer Year 2000 problem, also known as "The Year 2000 bug" or "millennium crisis". The reason why Y2K has transformed from a computer style to a fashion aesthetic is because of people's yearning for technology and the future, coupled with nostalgia for the good old days. In such a background, this retro technology aesthetics was born.

There are two big Y2K trend hits in fashion history, once in the early 1990s to the early 2000s and then disappeared after 2004 as the Y2K fears faded away. The other one is from 2019 to now. Relying on the Internet platform and social media as the medium, the Y2K style became a trend again instantly among Generation Z. They seek cultural identity and social status by wearing elements of the Y2K style that represent different meanings. With the growth of the consumption level of Generation Z, Y2K, as a subculture, is constantly moving from the edge to the center, launching a reverse export to the mainstream culture. According to data from Google Trends, from January 7, 2018, to February

19, 2023, the popularity of this word has increased by more than 1250% [1]. Additionally, on the Chinese video website Bilibili, as of February 23, 2023, the cumulative number of watching videos on the topic of Y2K has exceeded 3.76 million in the past 90 days [2]. What is more, the real-time popularity of Y2K on the Xiaohongshu application has reached 12.63 million in the past 180 days [3]. In February 2022, the "New York Times" described the revival of this fashion trend with "Gaudy and Gleeful, Early 2000s Fashion Is Making a Comeback"[4]. Today, Y2K is becoming a key to gaining traffic, and interest in it continues to show a significant upward trend.

While Y2K is seen as trendy culture, it is often considered a subculture whose leaders are Generation Z. Nowadays, the spending power of Generation Z in fashion cannot be ignored, and its consumption behavior is inseparable from the influence of the group, the context of the time, and mass communication. However, while there has been much research in academia about the consumption behavior of Generation Z, it has rarely been combined with fashion circles. Meanwhile, academic circles mostly regard Y2K as a style to explore its style type, seldom regard it as a product of mass communication, and seldom explore the impact behind it. Therefore, this article will summarize and analyze the literature and related information, analyze the cultural and historical background behind the Y2K trend, explore the communication routes of Y2K as a subculture in the new era, and finally analyze the influence behind it in combination with the social environment of the new generation.

## 2. The History and Development of the Y2K Style

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was no such thing as a Y2K style. Out of a fascination with the future [5], people began to use some elements with a sense of the future. In 1982, some elements of computer systems, such as technical fonts and network diagrams, were shown in a film called *Tron*. These elements are later considered to be Y2K style which can express the idea that physical objects can be converted into digital signals in this film. After that, some Y2K elements were widely used in film sets and costumes. Such as the main character Lilo's outfit in *the Fifth Element* and the costumes and sets for the main actors in *The Matrix*.

At the same time, Y2K aesthetics began to show in the fashion field. In 1999, in the fashion show of the Givenchy Autumn/Winter 1999 collection, Alexander McQueen designed clothes inspired by LED lights, luminous materials, and circuit board patterns, which is an expression of the Y2K style, and showed his imagination of technology.

This trend soon affected the music production industry as well. In 2000, Britney Spears wore a red jumpsuit in her music video for *Oops!... I Did it Again*. This is one of the representatives of the Y2K style in the views of many people nowadays.

Fashion is a circle, and since 2019 the Y2K style has been trending again, but this time as a subculture, which is different from the previous attributes of mass culture. In 2018, Jeremy Scott made an attempt to bring back the Y2K style in the Moschino 2018 autumn and winter fashion show by using exaggerated bright colors and a large number of translucent PVC and reflective metal fabrics. After that, luxury brands such as Dior and Balenciaga have successively launched Y2K-style designs in their fashion shows.

The Y2K style used by luxury brands also leads celebrities to join this trend. In recent years, there have been many Y2K style albums and songs, such as Future Nostalgia by Dua Lipa, Stupid Love by Lady Gaga, and the album HOW YOU LIKE THAT by BlackPink. The promotion of cultural industries such as music and fashion has officially made the Y2K style popular again.

### 3. The Historical and Cultural Context of the Y2K Style

From the early 1990s to the early 21st century, with the rapid development of the global economy, the continuous development of Internet technology, and the speculation that the Millennium bug would lead to the paralysis of global infrastructure, the fear of uncertain future led many people to describe the millennium as a futuristic, technologically advanced utopia. As the founder of the Consumer Aesthetics Research Institute-Evan Collins said, "You're in the middle of a dot-com boom; technology is advancing quickly, but along with that, there is a sense of unease [5]". In the years before the year 2000, there was growing concern that changing the date would cause computers to malfunction, causing catastrophic interruptions to life that was increasingly dependent on these technologies. It is this anxiety that is driving people under the hood over this shiny, tech-related frenzy [5].

Back to the new generation of the Y2K style, after 2019, the uncertain future of life brought about by Covid-19 made people miss the good things of the past. The spread of the epidemic has deepened people's uncertainty about the future, which creates an urge to escape from reality. Therefore, the Y2K style in the new era can also be interpreted as a conditioned reflex brought by the global disaster in the post-pandemic era. As people today recreate millennial fashions, they are also recreating the optimism of the period. Therefore, at this time, technology elements, such as computer systems, are used to express people's retro nostalgia. Moreover, elements used to create fantasy worlds are used to reflect the nowadays' review of people's optimism at that time [6].

But beyond the pandemic, the reason for Y2K's recent resurgence includes the influence of celebrity culture. Since 2020, an increasing number of artists have used the Y2K style. Celebrity power and the spread of social media also contributed to the popularity of the new Age Y2K style.

In addition, with the opening of society, more and more women are awakening their self-awareness, especially in East Asian countries and Generation Z, which also promotes the popularity of the Y2K style in the new era. The awakening of female consciousness guides women to choose clothes with more personality and break stereotypes, so full of personality Y2K style clothing can cater to some women's preferences.

### 4. The Communication Routes of the Y2K Style as a Subculture in New Era

Generation Z is a generation born between 1997 and 2012. They grew up in the era of popularization of mobile devices, rapid advancement of Internet communication technology, and rapid development of social media [7].

Generation Z usually lives under high pressure, and they lack independent life, which also makes them want to seek a space for themselves. The community with common preferences creates an illusion and heterotopia for them. By immersing in this, they can temporarily escape the real space, get rid of the social self, and satisfy their free self-desires. They tend to construct group identity through consumption, and at the same time, express group identity through consumption [8]. Therefore, their consumption behavior is usually to satisfy their own desires and emotional needs, and they often choose some meaningful products that can satisfy their emotions.

The main reason why Y2K is pursued by subculture groups is that its fashion style is beautiful and stylish. The consumption level and consumption behavior of Generation Z also make Generation Z more interested in Y2K. In the process of Y2K communication, the community culture of Generation Z plays a vital role. Among them, social media influencers and celebrities, as opinion leaders, dominate the spread of Y2K fashion. At the same time, as a subculture, Y2 K's elements are regarded as symbols and spread as symbols. By encoding and decoding symbols by subcultural groups and setting the agenda of communication, more people who agree with their ideas can join Y2K spreading.

#### **4.1. Subcultural Groups and Generation Z Are the Subjects of Communication and Recipients of the Information**

In the new edition of "The Subcultures Reader" edited by Ken Gelder, an expert in the history of subculture studies, he defined "subculture": "A subculture refers to a group of people whose particular interests and habits are in some way non-normative and/or borderline by who they are, what they do, and where they do it [9]. From this definition, subculture and mainstream culture are not the same, and it is in a marginal state in the mainstream culture and dominated by a small number of people with specific preferences and habits. This is also just like Y2K fashion. Not everyone can accept this retro trend nowadays. Furthermore, the popularity of this trend is more among a specific group of people, for example, Generation Z. Generation Z has independent views on the interpretation of Y2K. They like to wear this kind of fashion that is not recognized by the mainstream public, they also get together because of this culture to form a small community. By relying on the platform of social media, the community communication of Y2K in the new era is more intimate. People in this community not only receive information from others in the group but also convey their own interpretation of Y2K through social media.

#### **4.2. Promoted by Social Media Influencers and Celebrities as Opinion Leaders**

The spread of Y2K is closely related to the Internet. Relying on social media as the carrier, social media influencers and stars have largely shaped the ideas, fashion attitudes, and lifestyles of the Y2K community [6]. The key opinion leader often has a large fan base. Through fans and other users' forwarding and commenting, their influence continues to grow. Meanwhile, through contact with Y2K fashion, they use their own interpretation and understanding to give Y2K their own ideas and then pass them on to others [10]. For example, in the field of KPOP music, some girl groups regarded Y2K as their main style. The girl group NewJeans caused a retro trend through Y2K fashion and Y2K-style music videos. After the release of its Y2K-style "Ditto" music video, many people imitated its dance and costumes, causing a sensation on social media, and more and more people started to try Y2K, which led to the spread of Y2K style.

#### **4.3. Encoding and Decoding of Y2K Symbols by Subcultural Groups**

British scholar Terrence Hawkes summed up symbols in this way: "As long as anything exists independently, is connected with another thing, and can be explained, then its function is a symbol [11]." In the process of communication, the whole process of communication can be realized only after the communicator constructs meaning through symbols and the receiver successfully interprets the meaning of symbols.

Symbols have three basic functions. One of them is the expression and explanation, and the communication activities between people are first expressed as encoding and decoding [11]. Among them, encoding means that the communicator converts the information he wants to convey into symbols, and decoding means that the object of communication interprets and interprets the received symbols. For example, during the spread of Y2K, there were many PVC clothes, LED light elements, and laser-colored fabrics in the past. These symbols imitate the clothes of astronauts or robots, and they are symbols of technology. Additionally, people's longing for space conveys a kind of future technology. In the new generation of the Y2K trend, the symbol user first carried out the encoding, and then other creators carried out decoding to reorganize the meaning of the symbol. For instance, Hajime Sorayama created Sexy Robot in 1978, which integrated the coldness of machinery into people's erotic desires, representing human's desire for technology such as robots. Then, Dior's 2019 early autumn show, through cooperation with Sorayama, created a series of clothes with a sense of future technology. This process is the best explanation of encoding and decoding. Sorayama uses

machinery as a symbol to give its technological meaning, and Dior decodes it and carries out a new interpretation through its own interpretation. The basic condition for the realization of communication is that both parties must have a standard symbol system and a common semantic space [12]. In Y2K, a subcultural community, members get together because of the meaning and spiritual identity expressed by symbols. Opinion leaders gain a sense of identity by encoding symbols, meanwhile, recipients of communication activities become decoders, and they gain a sense of belonging. In addition to participating in decoding, recipients will also communicate old codes and construct new symbols, and then disseminate them to more people. This kind of communication is not limited to the community. As long as more people agree with the symbolic meaning, the scale of the community will continue to expand.

#### 4.4. Agenda Setting in Communication

Walter Lippmann believed that the mass media (in his day, mainly newspapers and magazines) created the picture of the world. Moreover, he believes that the images of reality provided by the press are often incomplete and distorted [13]. American communication scientists Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw summarized research on the impact of media election reports on voters. They believe that mass communication has a way of setting the "agenda" function for the public. The media influences people's judgments of major events and their importance in the world around them by endowing various issues with different degrees of salience [11]. That is to say, through its value concept, the communication media selects the part that conforms to the concept from the real environment, integrates and processes it, and then provides it to the audience. Mass communication has been closely related to human beings, and it is hard not to be affected by human judgment and understanding. The construction of Y2K in the new era is inseparable from social media. Its essence is a fashion trend, a part of the fashion industry, related to business, and inseparable from the operation of capital. On social media, there are many posts about Y2K containing some advertisements. These advertisements are difficult for people to detect. Many Y2K information recipients did not notice. One step Climb into the constructed world one step at a time and then achieve the purpose of the builder. This kind of agenda-setting has allowed more and more people who are wandering on the fringes of the community and people in the community to join the circle, which has greatly promoted the spread of the "Y2K" culture.

#### 5. The Influence of the New Y2K Style

The Y2K trend relies on the powerful communication effect of the Internet, and its community size continues to expand, but its influence has both disadvantages and advantages.

On the one side, women's Y2K clothes are primarily short in order to reveal more body parts. Its essence is the desire of men for women's bodies in a patriarchal society. Men in the patriarchal society's one-sided aesthetics of white, young, and thin have influenced the style of Y2K. The popularity of this aesthetic trend has also triggered men's disgust with women's fat and women's own fat-phobic culture. The dominant people in the patriarchal society are men. They have their own standards and rights to judge women. They have constructed through "agenda setting" that women must wear tops and vests in Y2K. Therefore, although Y2K seems to be a female-led female fashion aesthetics, its real constructors are men [14]. Under the guidance of this idea, more and more women began to choose to lose weight in order to pursue good-looking clothes, and more and more Y2K fashion participants began to pursue flat stomachs and S-curves.

At the same time, the Y2K community has a strong pursuit of symbols. They do not pursue the quality or the fabric of clothes, but only wish to follow the symbolic meaning of clothes. This is just as Baudrillard said, under the guidance of the consumption system, people's symbolic pursuit of



objects has far exceeded the functional demand for the objects themselves [15]. Members of the Y2K community, as consumers, are the objects of needs and satisfaction. What satisfies them is not necessarily material products, but expressive things composed of items. The Y2K community's fanatical pursuit of symbols also promotes the breeding of symbol consumerism. As early as the 1940s, Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School and Adorno's "Dialectics of Enlightenment" pointed out that the capitalist mode of production, especially the advertising and popular culture in it, will make "as a carrier of meaning" The language is degraded to sings devoid of quality [15]. The injection of capital made the symbol meaningless and also led many Y2K consumers to follow suit. For example, many of them may not know what the butterfly represents, but because of its high popularity, they choose to buy clothes with butterfly elements.

In addition, Y2K's community culture has essentially trapped it in a new rights system, and their demands have not been clearly expressed. Generation Z youth are the main consumers of Y2K, and the media environment and living environment they live in are completely different from those of previous generations. They are eager to find comfort and a sense of self-realization in the Y2K world, but due to the development of Internet technology and the invasion of platform capital, the entire Y2K industry cannot do without the production and consumption of commodities. Chinese scholar Wang Yongtao believes that Generation Z is vulnerable to consumers who have been disciplined and seduced. They seek happiness and a sense of self-realization from the world they created. This world is essentially against the dominant cultural power system in real society. A kind of escape and resistance. However, due to the intervention of capital, after they enter the community, they must obey the new power system. This power system is apparently determined by gatekeepers such as influencers and celebrities, but in fact, it is the capital that formulates the rules of the game behind the scenes [8].

From a positive point of view, for women in the Y2K style, Y2K as a youth subculture is also a rebellious fashion. As the British Birmingham School said, Youth subculture represents an ideology of anti-hegemony. And Y2K style, as a subcultural style, helps subcultural groups express themselves [16]. We can also see on social platforms that many female influencers with ordinary figures choose to show their individuality through the Y2K style. They break the white and thin aesthetics and show their figures by wearing garments oppositely to resist the mainstream order.

Meanwhile, the Y2K trend still strengthens the expression of self-discourse and identity construction of young people to some extent. Members of the Y2K community communicate with each other. They themselves are restricted by the rules in the leading society, but in the fantasy utopia world created by Y2K, they show their own style, construct group identity through element exchanges, and temporarily escape the traditional society that defined and controlled them [8].

## 6. Conclusions

In summary, this article is based on the research on the communication routes of Y2K and analyses it from four perspectives: generation Z and subcultural communities, opinion leaders in communication, encoding and decoding, and agenda setting. In addition, it finds that the communication of Y2K in the new era is based on the Y2K community, opinion leaders encode and give relevant meaning to Y2K fashion elements, and other members of the community decode and then encode and continue to spread. Behind this is the agenda-setting of capital to encourage more people to join the community. Although behind Y2K is the agenda setting of capital, dialectically speaking, apart from the negative impact, the spread of Y2K has also brought a positive impact.

This article systematically integrates the development, historical and cultural background, communication routes, and influence of Y2K. Y2K culture is one of the subcultures in the new era. It is hoped that in future research, quantitative analysis can be used to study community members' thoughts on Y2K through questionnaires or interviews. At the same time, because the subculture does

not belong to mainstream culture, it is not popular in many people's minds. It is hoped that the research on the subculture in the future, can guide people to look at the subculture dialectically.

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