

A Review of Youth Nostalgic Consumption Psychology and Identity in Social Media Environments (2018-2026)

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Abstract

In recent years, retro-style outfits have continued to gain popularity on social media platforms. Clothing styles marked by earlier eras, such as Y2K millennium style, vintage outfits, and retro sportswear, have become widely popular among young people. This phenomenon raises a question worth exploring: why have young people developed such strong interest in “old clothes”? What role does social media play in the transformation of nostalgic emotions into consumption behavior? Taking 2018 to 2026 as the time window, this paper systematically reviews the literature on youth nostalgic consumption in social media environments and discusses it from three dimensions: conceptual definition, activation mechanism, and identity. The review preliminarily reveals the role of social media in the dissemination and diffusion of nostalgic content and also confirms that nostalgic consumption is an important path through which young people respond to identity anxiety and seek group belonging. However, existing studies still have three limitations. First, they lack a systematic explanation of how platform mechanisms promote the transformation of nostalgic emotions into consumption behavior. Second, they pay insufficient attention to how young people continuously construct identity through symbolic practices, community interaction, and consumption choices on social media. Third, the special mechanism of “non-experiential nostalgia” in the digital age has not been fully discussed. Future research may focus on constructing theoretical models that take social media as an intermediary variable and connect the logical path from emotion to behavior and then to identity.

Keywords

nostalgic consumption psychology, retro-style outfits, Y2K, social media, identity

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and the Raising of the Question

In recent years, retro-style outfits have continued to receive high levels of attention on social media. From the revival of Y2K millennium style to the rise of vintage outfits, and from repeated returns of 1990s American retro style to Hong Kong-style outfits, more and more young people have begun to actively search for and wear clothing from earlier periods. On Xiaohongshu, posts related to “retro outfits” have exceeded one million. On Douyin, views of topics related to Y2K have reached billions. Behind these phenomena lies a question worth asking: why have young people developed such strong interest in “old clothes”? What role does social media play in this process?

Y2K style is a typical representative of this phenomenon. Y2K is the abbreviation of “Year 2000”. It originally referred to the “millennium bug” in the field of computer technology and later gradually evolved into a distinctive aesthetic style. Characterized by highly saturated colors, metallic textures, transparent materials, and technological elements, it carries people’s optimistic imagination and positive expectations for the future around the millennium [1]. Around 2020, Y2K style returned after an interval of 20 years and rapidly entered fashion, music, film, television, and other fields, becoming one of the most representative trends in youth retro-style outfits [2].

It should be noted that the popularity of retro-style outfits is not only an aesthetic return, but also an observable form of consumption behavior. From the rise of second-hand vintage stores to the emergence of independent designer brands featuring Y2K style, and then to luxury brands successively launching millennium-style items, nostalgic consumption has become a force that cannot be ignored in the contemporary consumer market. For researchers, this phenomenon raises questions at three levels. First, as an academic concept, how should the connotation and extension of “nostalgic consumption” be defined? Second, as the most important information-acquisition and social platform for contemporary youth, how does social media activate and amplify the popularity of retro-style outfits? Third, what kind of identity do young people construct through the consumption behavior of retro-style outfits?

1.2 Definition of Keywords

Nostalgic consumption psychology: This refers to consumption motivation and behavioral tendency generated by consumers’ longing for and attachment to an idealized past. Nostalgic consumption is not only the purchase of specific products or services, but also the consumption of temporal meaning and emotional value attached to products [3].

Retro-style outfits: This refers to a way of dressing that borrows clothing elements and aesthetic styles from past eras and skillfully combines them with modern outfits. Retro or vintage style is not a simple copy of history, but a creative dialogue between tradition and modernity completed through element extraction, style reorganization, and material mixing [4]. Y2K style is one of its representative cases.

Social media: This refers to internet platforms centered on user-generated content and connected by social relationships, including but not limited to WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Bilibili. In this paper, social media is regarded not only as a channel for the dissemination of nostalgic content, but also as a structural field in which nostalgic emotions are activated, amplified, and transformed.

Identity: This refers to an individual’s cognitive and emotional confirmation of who one is and which group one belongs to. In the context of this review, identity includes both the self-positioning completed by young people through retro-style outfits and the sense of group belonging formed in social media community interaction [5].

1.3 Framework Description

This paper adopts a thematic framework. The three dimensions are discussed in parallel according to topic sections: from “what nostalgic consumption in retro-style outfits is” (conceptual definition), to “how social media activates it” (activation mechanism), and then to “what kind of identity is constructed after activation” (identity construction).

2. Dimension One: Core Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Basis

The review question in this section is: how have existing studies discussed the definition of nostalgic consumption psychology, and how has retro-style dressing been defined within it?

Research on nostalgic consumption psychology begins with the definition and distinction of the concept of “nostalgia” itself. From the perspective of conceptual history, the word nostalgia was first created by the Swiss physician Hofer in 1688. It combines the Greek words *nostos*, meaning return home, and *algos*, meaning pain. It originally referred to a painful state caused by longing for one’s hometown and was long regarded as a psychological illness in a medical sense. It was not until the end of the twentieth century that scholars such as

Davis freed nostalgia from the pathological framework and redefined it as a normal emotional response to an idealized past. Only then did nostalgia formally enter sociology and consumer behavior research [6]. On the basis of conceptual evolution, academia has gradually formed a multidimensional theoretical consensus around the definition of nostalgia. From the object dimension, nostalgia can be divided into personal nostalgia, which is based on personal experience, and collective nostalgia, which is based on shared group memory. From the source dimension, it can be divided into direct nostalgia, which refers to longing for a past that one has personally experienced, and indirect or historical nostalgia, which refers to imaginative longing for a past that one has not personally experienced [6]. Some scholars have systematically reviewed and compared existing definitions of nostalgic consumption and have traced the evolution of nostalgia definitions from Davis to Holbrook and Schindler [3]. After nostalgia was introduced into the field of consumer research, scholars further advanced theoretical explanations of nostalgic consumption. From the perspective of the Birmingham School's subcultural theory, some studies define the nostalgia culture of the post-1980s generation as a youth subcultural phenomenon and point out that nostalgia is essentially an emotional response to a rapidly changing society [7]. These studies also analyze how nostalgic subculture conducts stylized expression through online carriers, how it carries a resistant temperament to cope with identity anxiety and lack of belonging, and how it is ultimately incorporated into the commercial logic of consumer society and finds it difficult to escape incorporation.

"A Sociological Perspective on Nostalgia and Nostalgic Consumption" raises nostalgic consumption from the psychological perspective to the sociological level. The article distinguishes between "therapeutic nostalgia" and "value-endowing nostalgia". The former is the self-repair of individuals when the chain of meaning breaks. When the chain between instrumental action and ultimate goals is broken, individuals seek spiritual comfort through nostalgia. The latter is a retrospective balancing of collective forward-looking preference. In the process of modernization, excessive abandonment of tradition has aroused the public's conscious protection of cultural heritage [6]. The article "An Analysis of Nostalgic Consumption in Consumer Life" further explains the sociological causes of nostalgic consumption from two dimensions: rupture of the meaning chain and rupture of the meaning dimension. The so-called rupture of the meaning chain refers to a disconnection in the causal link between daily action and ultimate goals, for example, when people work hard but cannot realize an ideal life. The so-called rupture of the meaning dimension refers to the failure of different dimensions of ultimate goals to be achieved together, for example, when improvement in material life comes at the cost of spiritual and interpersonal dimensions. The two ruptures jointly give rise to a generalized psychology of nostalgic consumption [8].

In the specific field of retro-style outfits, some scholars have pointed out in their analysis of Y2K clothing style that Y2K style can be divided into three visual schools: futurism, The Matrix, and millennium girl. Each has different symbolic elements and aesthetic features. The futurist school emphasizes metallic texture and transparent materials, The Matrix school is marked by dark leather and sharp sunglasses, and the millennium girl school highlights highly saturated colors and tight low-waist silhouettes [2]. Other studies further begin with the Birmingham School's concept of "style" and point out that the style construction of Y2K has experienced the process of appropriation, bricolage, and imitation. Classic symbols such as highly saturated colors, metallic textures, and transparent materials are extracted from millennium films and music videos, then combined with the fragmented information of the current internet environment to complete bricolage, and finally form a subcultural style with a retro-futurist temperament [9].

Overall, existing research has formed a relatively mature analytical framework for defining the concept of nostalgic consumption psychology. From the disciplinary context, nostalgia has undergone multiple paradigm shifts, from medicine to psychology, from psychology to sociology, and from sociology to consumer behavior research. From the theoretical orientation, the subcultural perspective and the sociological perspective form a complementary explanatory system. However, the above studies mostly define nostalgic consumption on the basis of personal experience and assume that the nostalgic object is something consumers have experienced themselves. Contemporary young people's retro-style outfits are largely directed at eras they have not personally experienced. For example, most members of today's Generation Z who pursue Y2K style did not truly experience the millennium. There is tension between this "non-experiential nostalgia" and the traditional nostalgia theory centered on personal memory. How media representation creates emotional connections that cross the boundaries of personal memory is one of the core questions that existing research has not yet fully answered.

3. Dimension Two: The Activation Mechanism of Social Media for Youth Retro-Style Outfits

The review question in this section is: what literature discusses the relationship between social media and nostalgic consumption, what are its main views, and how does social media promote the popularity of retro-style outfits?

If the literature in Dimension One answers “what nostalgic consumption is”, then the literature in Dimension Two attempts to answer “what has changed in nostalgic consumption in the age of social media”. In recent years, with the intervention of communication studies, scholars have begun to pay attention to how media technology is embedded in the generation process of nostalgic consumption.

The article “Identity of Difference: Affective Structure and Self-Tension in Youth Digital Nostalgia Space” proposes the core concept of “digital nostalgia”. Based on in-depth interviews with several young people who have experience in digital nostalgia practices, Jiang Nan finds that media technology not only records and marks young subjects’ past life stories and reshapes and embeds old situations into their memory frameworks, but also to some extent shapes “generational units” and “affective structures” with shared life experiences [10]. This study also reveals two key mechanisms: psychological dissociation and shared reality. Psychological dissociation means that people psychologically decompose and separate different parts of individual behaviors or things so that they exist and operate independently, allowing old forms to gain new functions and new meanings in a digital context. Shared reality means that people perceive commonality with others in beliefs, value judgments, emotional responses, and other aspects, thereby gaining the experience of successfully establishing connection. Through shared reality, cross-generational young nostalgic subjects can break through the separation of generational experience and establish broad emotional connections and cultural identity [10].

Other scholars analyze the evolution of the relationship between youth subculture and mainstream culture in the new era through the three stages of confrontation, breaking boundaries, and reconciliation. The article points out that short-video platforms such as Douyin and Bilibili provide a stage for the display and dissemination of youth subculture, enabling subcultural elements to penetrate the boundary of mainstream culture and form a boundary-breaking effect [11]. Although this article does not specifically discuss retro-style outfits, its analysis of how the media environment affects subcultural communication provides important background support for understanding the diffusion mechanism of nostalgic consumption on social media.

Focusing on retro-style outfits, the revival of Y2K style is also important from the perspective of youth subculture. Studies point out that the leadership of celebrities and key opinion leaders is an important force that has pushed Y2K style from subculture into public view. Lady Gaga wore a pink fluorescent-textured costume during the promotion of her new song in 2020, and BLACKPINK’s comeback music video was filled with strong Y2K elements. The outfits of these artists quickly triggered fan imitation and social media dissemination [12]. In addition, the role of circle culture cannot be ignored. Y2K style initially spread within niche circles, where members gathered because of shared aesthetic interests and continuously expanded the edge of the circle by sharing the history, outfits, brands, and other content of Y2K style [12]. From 2020 to 2023, views of the Y2K topic on Douyin reached 1.22 billion, and countless recommendation posts appeared on Xiaohongshu. Circle culture has pushed niche retro style step by step into public view [12].

The empowerment of new media technology plays a key role in this process. In the post-subculture era, the power of media technology is particularly prominent. Social media is the main channel for the dissemination of cultures related to retro-style outfits. Young people use the advantages of platforms such as Weibo and Zhihu, including fast communication and broad reach, to effectively promote the spread of retro outfit culture. Media constructs a free and equal communication space for youth subcultural groups, allowing subcultural communication to break through geographical boundaries and eliminate cultural barriers caused by spatial differences [13].

Overall, existing research has paid attention to the role of social media in the dissemination of nostalgic content and the diffusion of emotion, but it more often remains at the level of communication effects, such as how many likes, comments, and reposts nostalgic content receives. Platform mechanisms, such as how algorithmic recommendation accurately pushes retro outfit content to groups interested in nostalgic style and how community interaction catalyzes individual nostalgic emotions into group consumption motivation, have

not yet been given a systematic process explanation. This leaves further room for this review to sort out, from the perspective of communication mechanisms, how platforms promote nostalgic consumption.

4. Dimension Three: Identity Construction in Nostalgic Consumption

The review question in this section is: what studies examine nostalgic consumption and youth identity, what are their main views, and what kind of identity do young people construct through retro-style outfits?

Dimension Three asks “what kind of identity young people construct through retro-style outfits”. This question raises nostalgic consumption research from the behavioral level to the level of cultural meaning. The article “An Exploration of the Nostalgia Psychology of Youth Popular Subculture” reveals the internal connection between nostalgia and identity from an early interdisciplinary perspective of psychology and sociology. The study points out that the generalization of nostalgic psychology among contemporary youth is essentially an emotional response to interpersonal pressure, career pressure, and learning pressure. In a rapidly changing society, young people face problems such as vague self-positioning, fewer friends, and a single activity circle. Nostalgia therefore becomes an important way for them to cope with identity anxiety and seek group belonging [9]. Starting from interpersonal communication, the article analyzes how nostalgia helps young people establish emotional connections by evoking shared past experiences and extends nostalgia from an individual psychological phenomenon to the level of group culture.

Under the continuation of the Birmingham School’s tradition of subcultural theory, the identity expression function of nostalgia culture has received further analysis. Post-1980s nostalgia is a cultural practice that seeks identity through stylized expression. Nostalgic activities rise from individual emotional expression to collective action. Through online communities, forums, and other platforms, people with common interests share the same memories with one another and form an increasing number of group organizations [9]. The nostalgic style corresponds to this group’s state of being unable to escape the net of reality and the past and unable to piece together the “beauty” of reality and the past. This homologous relationship makes nostalgia culture a “complete nostalgic way” for individuals and also a recognizable emotional marker and expression of the group. Based on empirical survey data, the article “Construction and Evolution of Identity in Youth Subculture in Cyberspace” systematically analyzes the construction path, real difficulties, and evolution trend of youth subcultural identity in cyberspace. The study finds that contemporary youth participation in subculture in cyberspace is characterized by virtualization, symbolization, and circle formation, and that identity shows a fragmented and diversified trend. Specifically, through subculture, young people not only seek pleasure, but also seek value identification and group belonging [14].

With regard to retro-style outfits, some scholars have analyzed the renewed popularity of Y2K clothing aesthetics from the perspective of youth audience psychology. Research points out that Generation Z youth are mostly a new group with autonomous and independent thinking. They no longer identify with original mainstream fashion and instead pursue fashion and clothing that can indicate their life attitudes. Through advanced online new media, these young audiences can construct countless social circles with like-minded people [15]. In addition, the niche groups represented by subculture bring members a unique sense of superiority, and this sense of superiority produces a strong sense of resonance and identification among young audiences. Y2K style was originally a niche culture among a small group of people who insisted on millennium fashion culture, but under online communication and the superiority psychology of new youth audiences, Y2K style began to form cultural identification and clear label classification [15].

Under the influence of consumerism, media platforms intentionally amplify and solidify Y2K visual sensory cultural symbols and deliberately combine them with fields such as fashion outfits and beauty makeup, launching large numbers of products with Y2K elements and further stimulating the consumer market. Under the manipulation of various media, the original style and cultural connotation of Y2K are decomposed and mixed into other elements. It has been transformed from a millennium computer problem into a mass entertainment consumption culture [13]. This process of incorporation precisely shows how retro-style outfits transform from identity labels of subcultural groups into consumption symbols absorbed by mainstream commercial logic.

Overall, existing research has formed a relatively complete theory in the following respect: identity construction in nostalgic consumption is a multilevel process from individual emotion to group belonging and

then to circle culture. However, existing studies mainly regard nostalgic consumption as a psychological compensation behavior through which young people relieve anxiety and obtain emotional comfort. They still lack detailed mechanism analysis of how the construction process unfolds step by step in social media interaction.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Research Findings

Taking 2018 to 2026 as the time window, this paper systematically reviews existing research on the nostalgic consumption psychology and identity of youth retro-style outfits in social media environments from three dimensions, with Y2K style as a case running through the discussion. At the level of conceptual definition, research on nostalgic consumption psychology has experienced a paradigm shift from pathology to sociology and from individual psychology to consumption behavior. Nostalgia is no longer regarded as a psychological illness. Instead, it is understood as a normal emotional response to an idealized past and as a collective psychological compensation mechanism under rapid social change. The subcultural perspective and the sociological perspective constitute complementary explanatory frameworks. Taking Y2K style as an example, the concept of retro-style outfits can be understood from two dimensions: its visual school classification, including futurism, The Matrix, and millennium girl, and its style construction process, including appropriation, bricolage, and imitation.

At the level of the social media activation mechanism, media technology has been confirmed not only as an intermediary channel for nostalgic emotions, but also as an infrastructure that actively participates in the selection, processing, and meaning-endowing of nostalgic memory. The concept of digital nostalgia reveals how media technology shapes the affective structure of specific generations. Studies on the reasons for the revival of Y2K style specifically show how celebrities, circle culture, Generation Z consumption power, and new media technology jointly promote the revival of retro-style outfits. Through mechanisms such as psychological dissociation and shared reality, social media aggregates individuals' occasional nostalgic emotions into an observable collective consumption phenomenon.

At the level of identity construction, nostalgic consumption has been confirmed as an important path through which young people cope with identity anxiety, seek group belonging, and construct self-continuity. Taking Y2K style as an example, young people wear clothing with millennium symbolic features and display, share, and interact around it on social media, thereby completing the confirmation of self-identity and the establishment of circle belonging. Retro-style outfits are not only the consumption of past aesthetics, but also a declaration of personal identity.

5.2 Limitations of Existing Research

5.2.1 There is a Lack of Systematic Explanation of How Platform Mechanisms Promote the Transformation of Nostalgic Emotions into Consumption Behavior

Existing studies have paid attention to the role of social media in the dissemination of nostalgic content and the diffusion of emotion, but they more often remain at the level of communication effects. They have not yet provided a systematic process explanation of platform mechanisms.

5.2.2 There is Insufficient Attention to How Young People Continuously Construct Identity Through Symbolic Practices, Community Interaction, and Consumption Choices on Social Media

Existing research mainly regards nostalgic consumption as a psychological compensation behavior through which young people relieve anxiety and obtain emotional comfort. It pays insufficient attention to the process through which young people use nostalgic symbolic practices, community interaction, and consumption choices on social media.

5.2.3 The Special Mechanism of “Non-experiential Nostalgia” in the Digital Age Has Not been Fully Discussed

Traditional nostalgia research is mainly based on personal experience and assumes that the nostalgic object is something consumers have experienced themselves. However, contemporary young people’s retro-style outfits are largely directed at eras they have not personally experienced. For example, most members of today’s Generation Z who pursue Y2K style did not truly experience the millennium. There is tension between this “non-experiential nostalgia” and the explanatory framework of traditional nostalgia theory centered on personal memory. How media representation creates emotional connections that cross personal memory has not yet been fully discussed.

5.3 Future Research Directions

Based on the above limitations, future research can be advanced in the following directions. First, it can focus on platform mechanisms and examine how algorithmic recommendation and community interaction promote the transformation of nostalgic emotions into consumption behavior. Second, it can deepen process-oriented research on identity construction on social media and pay attention to the specific operation of the three paths of nostalgic symbolic practice, community interaction, and consumption choice in identity construction. Third, it can expand the theoretical framework of non-experiential nostalgia and explore how media representation creates emotional connections that cross personal memory, so as to respond to the specificity of subcultural phenomena such as retro-style outfits in the digital age.

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