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Y2K Fashion Characteristics of 5th Generation K-POP Idol Group Analytical Research

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Abstract

Purpose: This study analyzed the styles of 5th generation K-pop idol groups that debuted in or after 2022 and have more than five million followers on Instagram, focusing on the characteristics of Y2K fashion. **Research design, data and methodology:** The characteristics of Y2K fashion were classified based on a review of previous studies. Visual materials were collected from televised music program performances, official performance videos released by the groups' entertainment agencies, and other relevant sources, and were comparatively analyzed. **Results:** NewJeans emphasized a natural and youthful image through high-teen style. LE SSERAFIM presented a healthy and athletic image through athleisure style. BABYMONSTER combined athleisure style with hip-hop elements to express a free-spirited image. ILLIT highlighted a lovely and youthful image through high-teen style. NMIXX used high-teen style to emphasize a confident and assertive image. **Conclusions:** The 5th generation K-pop idols are using Y2K fashion as a means of expressing their own identity and connecting the past with the present. This brings back memories of the past while communicating with the public, while providing familiarity and newness, suggesting that K-pop idols' Y2K fashion style is not just clothes, but as a medium that expresses the individuality and sensitivity of the generation.

Keywords: Y2K, Fashion Characteristics, 5th Generation, K-POP Idol,

JEL Classification Code: Z11, M31, L67, L82,

1. Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, the Korean Wave has expanded beyond Asia and gained widespread recognition across the world, with K-pop establishing itself as one of its leading forms of cultural content (Kim et al., 2025). K-pop refers to Korean popular music and has become a globally popular music genre (Xie & Lee, 2024). Fashion closely interacts with music and visually contributes to the creative activities of K-pop artists, who have emerged at the center of global

culture (Yu & Chun, 2023).

Since 2020, Y2K aesthetics have experienced a strong revival in the fashion industry as a distinctive visual language that connects the technological aspirations of the millennium era with a sense of nostalgia (Yang, 2026). Retro styles, which were once perceived by consumers as outdated and unfashionable, have been reinterpreted in line with contemporary trends amid the current revival of retro culture. They evoke familiar memories and nostalgia while also offering interest and enjoyment through styles from the

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past that younger generations may not have directly experienced (Choi & Hwang, 2023). On TikTok, a globally popular short-form video platform, the hashtag Y2Kfashion has exceeded 393,000 views, while numerous luxury fashion brands have also introduced Y2K-inspired collections reflecting the sensibilities of the turn of the millennium (Min, 2025).

In this way, Y2K style has emerged as a new trend through the imitation and reinterpretation of past styles and has been widely discussed across various forms of media, including fashion magazines, television, and social media (Park, 2024). As retro culture has gained popularity, contemporary Korean popular culture has increasingly turned its attention to the past, with popular music showing the strongest interest in retro trends (Jung, 2021).

K-pop idols have been particularly active in adopting the Y2K trend and can be regarded as icons who lead global fashion trends. Although the Y2K trend promoted by K-pop idols has attracted considerable attention in global popular culture, research analyzing the Y2K styles of K-pop idols remains limited. Previous studies have separately examined Y2K fashion trends or the styles of K-pop idols, but few studies have analyzed these two areas in an integrated manner. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the Y2K styles reflected in the fashion of 5th generation K-pop idols and provide foundational data for developing fashion styles that can be adopted and expressed by the general public.

2. Literature Review

2.1. 5th Generation K-pop Idols

The term “5th generation idols” began to emerge in the Korean music industry in early 2023, when the television audition program Boys Planet started airing. Around this time, the media and broadcasting companies began categorizing idol groups that debuted around 2023 as 5th generation idols, and several entertainment agencies also started officially using the term “5th generation.”

Another notable perspective defines 5th generation idols as those who debuted after the COVID-19 pandemic. Industry observers have suggested that entertainment agencies would be able to pursue a wider range of activities by building on the expertise in online promotion they accumulated during the pandemic (Lee, 2023).

One of the major differences between 5th generation idols and previous generations lies in their use of strategies centered on short-form content, real-time communication through fan platforms, algorithm-driven viral marketing, and the simultaneous targeting of global audiences. Through these strategies, 5th generation idols are leading global

trends and exerting considerable influence on the public.

2.2. Y2K Fashion

Y2K is a compound term formed from “Y,” which stands for year, the number 2, and “K,” which represents kilo or one thousand. It refers to the year 2000 and is also associated with the term “millennium bug,” which combines “millennium,” meaning one thousand years, and “bug,” referring to a computer programming error (Edwards, 1998). The emergence of Y2K fashion is closely linked to the distinctive historical context of the millennium. The rapid development of science and technology, particularly computer technology and the internet, created an ambivalent emotional response toward technological civilization. Against this background of intersecting and complex emotions, Y2K emerged as a distinctive cultural phenomenon (Lee & Lim, 2026).

In the fashion industry, Y2K no longer refers primarily to a programming error. Instead, it is used as a period-specific term referring to the late 1990s and early 2000s, when concerns surrounding the Y2K problem became widespread (Min et al., 2023).

Y2K fashion reflects not only the cultural and technological changes of that period, but also the continuous cycle and evolution of fashion, together with the pursuit of individuality and retro sensibilities (Fu, 2024).

Min, Lee, and Chun (2023) defined Y2K fashion as “a style that was popular in the early twenty-first century, reemerged in the 2020s, and has since been reinterpreted in a contemporary manner as a form of retro fashion.”

3. Methods

3.1. Research Subjects

The subjects of this study were influential K-pop idol groups that debuted in or after 2022 and had more than five million followers on Instagram. NewJeans with 11.94 million followers, LE SSERAFIM with 10.39 million followers, BABYMONSTER with 9.67 million followers, ILLIT with 6.57 million followers, and NMIXX with 6.09 million followers were selected as the subjects of the study, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: 5th Generation K-pop Idol Groups

Group	Debut Date	Instagram Followers	Members
NewJeans	July 22, 2022	11.94 million	Minji, Hanni, Haerin, Hyein
LE	May 2, 2022	10.39 million	Kim Chaewon, Sakura, Huh

SSERAFIM			Yunjin, Kazuha, Hong Eunhae
BABY MONSTER	April 1, 2024	9.67 million	Ruka, Pharita, Asa, Ahyeon, Rami, Rora, Chiquita
ILLIT	September 2, 2023	6.57 million	Yunah, Minju, Moka, Wonhee, Iroha
NMIXX	February 22, 2022	6.09 million	Lily, Haewon, Sullyoon, Bae, Jiwoo, Kyujin

3.2. Research Methods

To examine the characteristics of Y2K fashion styles, the fashion styles of 5th generation idol groups were analyzed from February 22, 2022, to June 30, 2026. Visual materials were collected and analyzed from performances on major music programs, including Mnet's M COUNTDOWN, KBS's Music Bank, MBC's Show! Music Core, SBS's Inkigayo, and MBC every1's Show Champion, as well as official performance videos released by the groups' entertainment agencies. Previous studies and online materials were reviewed to establish the analytical framework for Y2K fashion styles. Based on previous studies by Kim and Kim (2025), Fu (2024), Min et al. (2023), and Lim and Choi (2023), the characteristics of Y2K fashion were classified into futuristic technology, high-teen, athleisure, and Ameka-ji styles, and the analysis was revised and supplemented by referring to the research methods used. Focused on the overall Y2K style characteristics of each 5th generation idol group. Comparative analysis was conducted using cases in which the characteristics of Y2K fashion were most prominent and consistently represented across the entire group rather than through the styling of individual members.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. General Analysis of Y2K Fashion

The analysis of Y2K styles from each group's debut through June 2026 identified a total of 125 Y2K fashion styles, as presented in Table 2. The frequency of Y2K styles by group was highest for NewJeans with 31 cases accounting for 24.8 percent, followed by LE SSERAFIM with 28 cases accounting for 22.4 percent, NMIXX with 25 cases accounting for 20.0 percent, ILLIT with 23 cases accounting for 18.4 percent, and BABYMONSTER with 16 cases accounting for 12.8 percent. Among the characteristics of Y2K fashion, high-teen style was the most frequently observed with 50 cases accounting for 40.0 percent. This

was followed by athleisure style with 44 cases accounting for 35.2 percent, Ameka-ji style with 18 cases accounting for 14.4 percent, and futuristic technology style with 11 cases accounting for 8.8 percent. The most frequently observed Y2K fashion characteristic differed by group. High-teen style was most common among NewJeans, ILLIT, and NMIXX, whereas athleisure style was most frequently observed among LE SSERAFIM and BABYMONSTER, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Y2K Styles of 5th Generation K-pop Idol Groups

Category Group	Future Technology	High- Teen	Athleisure	Ameka- ji	Total
New Jeans	2	15	9	5	31 (24.8%)
LE SSERAFIM	3	5	16	4	28 (22.4%)
BABY MONSTER	2	2	10	2	16 (12.8%)
ILLIT	2	16	3	2	23 (18.4%)
NMIXX	2	12	6	5	25 (20.0%)
Total	11 (8.8%)	50 (40.0%)	44 (35.2%)	18 (14.4%)	125

4.2. Y2K Fashion Characteristics of 5th Generation Idol Groups

4.2.1. NewJeans

The analysis of NewJeans' Y2K fashion characteristics showed that high-teen style was the most frequently observed, with 15 cases, followed by athleisure style with 9 cases, Ameka-ji style with 5 cases, and futuristic technology style with 2 cases (Table 3).

The futuristic technology style used white holographic materials with a glossy finish throughout the entire outfit, including tops, bottoms, and footwear, to create the appearance of laboratory uniforms or spacesuits. Oversized jackets and pants that did not closely follow the contours of the body combined elements of hip-hop fashion with imagery associated with the digital age, emphasizing a futuristic and experimental mood.

The high-teen style most frequently featured cropped tops paired with pleated skirts inspired by traditional school uniforms. Check patterns were incorporated into basic school-look colors such as white, navy, and gray. Some outfits were styled with name tags attached to cardigans or jackets to create the appearance of actual students, while others added a feminine touch through cropped tops.

Table 3: NewJeans Y2K Style

Category	Future Technology	High-Teen	Athleisure	Ameka-ji
Silhouette	Oversized tops and bottoms that do not closely follow the contours of the body	Cropped tops exposing the waist and pleated skirts falling from the waist	Slim-fitting tops and bottoms, crop tops with windbreaker jackets, and oversized sports uniforms	Slim-fitting crop tops paired with jumpsuits or cargo pants
Color	White, silver, and glossy holographic finishes	White, navy, black, gray, and brown	Neon, blue, green, black, white, and navy	Gray, black, khaki, and white
Accessories	White headbands, silver hoop earrings, and similar accessories	Ribbon hairpins, knee-high socks, leg warmers, doll keychains, and similar accessories	Sports wristbands, colorful beaded necklaces, and similar accessories	Colorful beaded straps, gloves, and utility-pocket crossbody bags
Image Samples				

Overall, high-teen styling that expressed the lively and natural image of students was the most prevalent.

In the athleisure style, sports uniform items such as sports jerseys, track pants, and crop tops were used to create an active and free-spirited mood. Highly visible and refreshing colors, including neon windbreaker jackets and blue and green track pants, were used to emphasize a sporty and dynamic image.

The Ameka-ji style mainly featured workwear- inspired jumpsuits in gray and khaki. Outfits based on the workwear of mechanics and technicians were completed with utility-pocket crossbody bags, gloves, and work boots. These elements were contemporarily reinterpreted through sleeveless tops and colorful beaded accessories attached to straps.

NewJeans most frequently presented school-uniform-inspired high-teen styles. Rather than adopting highly

decorative high-teen fashion, the group primarily used natural styling. This styling strongly expressed the image of ordinary schoolgirls, youthfulness, freedom, and natural charm.

4.2.2. LE SSEARFIM

The classification of LE SSERAFIM's Y2K fashion characteristics showed that athleisure style was the most frequently observed, with 16 cases, followed by high-teen style with 5 cases, Ameka-ji style with 4 cases, and futuristic technology style with 3 cases. (Table 4).

The futuristic technology style emphasized a cyber-inspired and futuristic mood through the use of silver, gray, and steel-toned colors. Metallic materials were applied to athletic items such as training shorts, padded pants, and jumpers to incorporate athleisure details. Cropped tops and low-rise bottoms were mainly used to emphasize the

Table 4: LE SSERAFIM Y2K Style

Category	Future Technology	High-Teen	Athleisure	Ameka-ji
Silhouette	Cropped tops exposing the waist, paired with short pants or wide-fit pants	Slim-fitting cropped shirts and pleated skirts	Cropped tops exposing the waist, windbreaker jackets, and shorts or training pants	Crop tops paired with oversized cargo pants or jumpsuits
Color	Silver, white, gray, and steel	Brown, beige, white, black, gray, and check patterns	Black, neon, and white	Navy, white, khaki, and black
Accessories	Baseball caps, sunglasses, and silver bracelets	Glasses, ties, and berets	Baseball caps, sports wristbands, chain belts, and chain necklaces	Goggles, belt straps, and gloves
Image Samples				

waistline, while reflective and glossy finishes created an overall mechanical image.

The high-teen style featured white shirts combined with pleated skirts, vests, and ties in warm brown and beige check patterns to create a school-uniform-inspired look. Ties were wrapped around the waist to add an individual touch, while glasses were worn as accent accessories.

The athleisure style created an energetic mood through sportswear items such as bra tops, cropped hoodies, and windbreaker jackets in neon and black. Cropped tops that emphasized the waistline were frequently paired with shorts or oversized pants. Styling centered on sneakers further highlighted a healthy and active image.

The Ameka-ji style incorporated workwear elements such as cargo pants, jumpsuits, suspenders, and utility pockets, primarily in khaki and navy. The bottoms featured wide silhouettes with large three-dimensional pockets and straps, while slim-fitting crop tops created a contrasting silhouette. Goggles, gloves, and work boots were used to convey a strong and active image. Black stains were also applied to white crop tops to represent realistic traces of manual work.

LE SSERAFIM most frequently adopted athleisure styling to emphasize a healthy and athletic image. The group often presents dynamic performances requiring physical strength, thereby expressing powerful energy as well as images of confidence and challenge.

4.2.3. BABYMONSTER

The analysis of BABYMONSTER's Y2K fashion characteristics showed that athleisure style was the most frequently observed, with 10 cases, followed by Ameka-ji,

high-teen, and futuristic technology styles, with 2 cases each (Table 5).

The futuristic technology style created a futuristic image through the use of reflective silver materials across the tops, bottoms, and footwear. Slim-fitting crop tops were paired with short pants or skirts. The bottoms were decorated with asymmetrical wave-shaped ruffles, creating a feminine image reminiscent of a futuristic fairy.

The high-teen style sought to create a lively student image through items such as white shirts, striped ties, and pleated skirts. White shirts served as the foundation of the outfits and were paired with short gray pleated skirts to produce a clean and polished appearance.

The athleisure style frequently featured white triple-stripe details associated with sportswear brands. Hip-hop and streetwear elements were added through items in primary colors such as red, yellow, and blue. Windbreaker jackets, sports jerseys, Bermuda shorts, and cargo pants were used to create oversized silhouettes. Colorful sneakers, headbands, and bandana scarves emphasized individuality and a free-spirited image.

The Ameka-ji style was generally coordinated in pink or white to emphasize practicality and a relaxed mood. Cargo pants with multiple pocket details, jumpsuits, and overalls reflected workwear traditionally worn by laborers. Oversized garments were used instead of body-hugging silhouettes to enhance mobility, while belts, chains, and gloves were added as accent details.

BABYMONSTER most frequently combines athleisure with hip-hop styling. This combination creates a girl-crush image rooted in hip-hop culture and conveys a free-spirited streetwear sensibility.

Table 5: BABYMONSTER Y2K Style

Category	Future Technology	High-Teen	Athleisure	Ameka-ji
Silhouette	Slim-fitting crop tops paired with short pants, short skirts, or wide-leg pants	Slim-fitting shirts and pleated skirts falling from the waist	Slim-fitting cropped tops or oversized sports uniforms, paired with Bermuda shorts or wide-fit pants	Slim-fitting tops paired with cargo pants, jumpsuits, or overalls
Color	Silver, white, and light gray	White, gray, light blue, and black	Black, white, red, yellow, blue, and navy	Pink, white, blue, and red
Accessories	Shirred details, harnesses, and hand warmers	Ties, chain belts, hand warmers, and baseball caps	Sports wristbands, knee pads, bandana scarves, and headbands	Leather belts and gloves
Image Samples				

4.2.4. ILLIT

The analysis of ILLIT's Y2K fashion characteristics showed that high-teen style was the most frequently observed, with 16 cases, followed by athleisure style with 3 cases and Ameka-ji and futuristic technology styles with 2 cases each (Table 6).

The futuristic technology style created an overall futuristic image through items such as crop tops and skirts made of silver metallic materials, as well as brooches, headbands, belts, and necklaces. Rather than presenting a strong cyber-inspired aesthetic, the outfits combined puff shoulders with sky-blue skirts to create the image of a princess-like futuristic girl. Ribbon embellishments evoked fairy characters and further emphasized a lively and dreamlike futuristic image.

The high-teen style incorporated school-uniform elements such as white shirts, knitted vests, and ties, with dark green check patterns used as a particularly prominent

feature. Shirts and vests created a neat appearance for the upper body, while voluminous A-line skirts produced a fuller lower-body silhouette and conveyed a lovely mood.

The athleisure style generally featured crop tops with lettering and short sports shorts. Pastel colors such as blue, yellow, and orange were used as accent colors. These outfits were coordinated with headbands, knee pads, and sneakers to create a sporty mood.

The Ameka-ji style centered on denim overalls derived from the workwear of farmers and carpenters. These were presented in various forms, including long pants, shorts, and skirts. Vivid colors such as yellow, pink, orange, blue, and purple were used as accents on the tops. While retaining the structural characteristics of traditional denim workwear, the styling created a bright and approachable image.

ILLIT most frequently employed high-teen styling to express a dreamlike and romantic image. The group's styling emphasized a lovely and lively image of young girls.

Table 6: ILLIT Y2K Style

Category	Future Technology	High-Teen	Athleisure	Ameka-ji
Silhouette	Slim-fitting tops paired with short, voluminous skirts	Slim-fitting shirts paired with voluminous A-line pleated skirts	Slim-fitting or oversized tops paired with short training shorts	Slim-fitting tops paired with oversized overalls or wide-leg pants
Color	Silver, white, sky blue, and baby pink	White, green, black, navy, gray, and check patterns	Gray, orange, blue, black, and pink	Blue, pink, yellow, orange, and white
Accessories	Silver brooches, ribbon hairpins, and silver headbands	Leg warmers, cat-ear headbands, cat-ear beanies, and bandana scarves	Knee pads, headbands, and knee-high socks	Crossbody bags, leg warmers, and hand warmers
Image Samples				

4.2.5. NMIXX

The analysis of NMIXX's Y2K fashion characteristics showed that high-teen style was the most frequently observed, with 12 cases, followed by athleisure style with 6 cases, Ameka-ji style with 5 cases, and futuristic technology style with 2 cases (Table 7).

The futuristic technology style featured slim-fitting silhouettes in white and silver metallic colors.

The restrained use of white and silver emphasized a cool and futuristic image, evoking the appearance of science-fiction fashion.

The high-teen style drew on the school uniforms of American private schools through items such as white shirts, white jackets, red ties, and check-patterned pleated skirts. White jackets with accentuated shoulder lines were worn throughout the outfits to create a minimal appearance, while

red ties served as focal points. Check-patterned pleated skirts further reinforced the school-look image. Other outfits combined white shirts with gray vests and gray pleated skirts.

The athleisure style consisted of sportswear-based outfits featuring navy, white, and black color-blocked track pants and windbreaker-style zip-up jackets. White crop tops were paired with windbreaker-style jackets to evoke fitness wear and create an active image. Loose-fitting wide track pants added a dynamic quality while combining sportswear with a streetwear sensibility.

Table 7: NMIXX Y2K Style

Category	Future Technology	High-Teen	Athleisure	Ameka-ji
Silhouette	Slim-fitting cropped tops paired with short skirts, shorts, or wide-fit pants	Slim-fitting shirts and jackets paired with pleated skirts falling from the waist	Slim-fitting crop tops and windbreaker jackets paired with oversized training pants	Crop tops and jackets paired with wide cargo pants or jumpsuits
Color	Silver, white, and steel	White, navy, gray, red, and check patterns	White, navy, black, and gray	Black
Accessories	Thigh chokers and bracelets	Ties and leg warmers	Sports wristbands and silver necklaces	Fedora-style hats and chain belts
Image Samples				

The Amekaji style featured black jumpsuits accented with belt details. Fedora-style hats were also worn, evoking combat uniforms and maintenance uniforms associated with soldiers, pilots, and special forces. These concept outfits emphasized functionality and practicality while conveying a strong and combative image.

NMIXX most frequently adopted high-teen styling to emphasize a dynamic and active image. Rather than expressing a cute and lovely mood, the group presented a confident and charismatic image of young women.

5. Conclusion

5th generation K-pop idol groups are shaping fashion trends and contributing to the emergence of new styles. They express their concepts through Y2K fashion from the early 2000s, reinterpret it from a contemporary perspective, and share the resulting content through social media platforms. The analysis conducted in this study confirmed that the Y2K fashion of 5th generation K-pop idols goes beyond the simple reproduction of past styles. Each group reflects its desired image, distinctiveness, and popular appeal through its styling, thereby contributing to the development of a new fashion culture. The groups use Y2K fashion as a means of expressing their individual identities and creating a sense of connection between the past and the present. Through this approach, they communicate with the public by evoking memories of the past while simultaneously offering a sense of familiarity and novelty. The findings suggest that the Y2K fashion styles of K-pop idols function not merely as clothing, but as a medium through which the individuality and sensibilities of their generation are expressed.

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