Article

Exploring Pathways for the Integration of Ideological and Political Education and Digital Subcultural Art in Higher Education Institutions in the Digital Era

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Abstract: ***Background:*** In the digital era, subcultural art has rapidly proliferated across college campuses via digital platforms, influencing college students' values, development, and behavior. Clarifying its characteristics and related educational challenges is essential for strengthening mainstream cultural guidance and developing effective educational strategies. ***Purpose:*** This paper aims to provide theoretical references and practical insights for fostering positive interaction between ideological and political education and subcultures in colleges, ultimately improving the overall educational effectiveness of these programs. ***Methods:*** This study employs a literature review and qualitative analysis to summarize the characteristics, challenges, and integration paths of subcultural art within ideological and political education. ***Results:*** The study finds that digital-era subcultural art is characterized by decentralized communication, fluid virtual communities, symbolic identity construction, counter-mainstream expression, technology dependence, digital nativeness, and participatory equality. These features reshape students' value systems, challenge educators' traditional authority, widen the gap between educational content and students' interests, and complicate the guidance of public discourse. ***Conclusion***: Integration paths such as cognitive empowerment, teacher development, content innovation, and discourse-system renewal can enable ideological and political education to respond to subcultural art, promote the coexistence of mainstream values and subcultural elements, and guide students toward cultural confidence and sound value orientations.

Keywords: Digital subcultural art; ideological and political education; college students; value orientation; discourse-system renewal

1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital technology has profoundly reshaped the cultural ecology of colleges and universities and the daily interactions among college students. Digital media, such as short-video platforms, social media, live-commentary communities, and online forums, have continuously expanded students' information environments, while also enabling subcultural art to enter the university sphere in more visual, fragmented, and interactive forms. Memes, derivative works, online buzzwords, fan works, virtual idols, *Guochao* aesthetics, rap, street dance, and animation- and game-related art have become important means through which some students express emotions, construct identities, and participate in community interaction (Chen, 2025; Huang & Cong, 2023; Yang & Wang, 2021). At the same time, subcultural art may also contain tendencies such as hyper-entertainment, moral relativism, excessive parody, and echo chambers, thereby posing new challenges to the discourse modes, content supply, and value guidance of ideological and political education in colleges and universities (Jiang, 2016;

Xia & Dong, 2022). Therefore, understanding the communication logic of subcultural art in the digital age and exploring its integration with ideological and political education have become important issues for improving the effectiveness of such education. In this study, subcultural art mainly refers to art forms that emerge from subcultural groups and carry their visual, auditory, stylistic, and expressive practices.

At present, scholarship on subculture and ideological and political education in colleges and universities has established a foundational body of literature. Existing studies have mainly focused on youth subculture, online subculture, value education for college students, innovation in ideological and political education in new-media environments, and the governance of online niche culture. One line of research examines the formation mechanisms and communication characteristics of youth subculture, emphasizing its insular, symbolic, and affective expressions in cyberspace. A second line of inquiry approaches the topic from the perspective of ideological and political education in colleges and universities, analyzes the influence of online subculture on students' value identification, political cognition, and behavioral patterns, and proposes corresponding guidance strategies (Li, 2016; Wang, 2024; Zhou, 2023). Overall, existing studies provide important references for understanding changes in the cultural environment faced by ideological and political education in the digital age. However, most studies still regard subculture primarily as a value challenge or an object of governance, while paying insufficient attention to the expressive forms, aesthetic mechanisms, and transformative educational value of subcultural art itself. In particular, how the visual symbols, narrative modes, emotional expressions, and community-interaction mechanisms of subcultural art can be transformed into resources for ideological and political education remains open to further discussion. From the perspective of research development, the concept of subculture initially focused on differences in urban group cultures and youth culture expressions as important objects of observation. Chinese scholars began to study subculture in the 1990s, and related research has gradually shifted from conceptual introduction to topics such as youth online subculture, community governance, and guidance through ideological and political education in colleges and universities (Liu & Yang, 2023; Ma & Tai, 2022; Yan, 2019; Yang & Lin, 2022). Based on this, this study responds mainly to three questions: What major characteristics does subcultural art present in the digital age? What practical challenges does it pose to ideological and political education in colleges and universities? How can such education effectively integrate with subcultural art while maintaining the guidance of mainstream values?

This study has both theoretical and practical significance. At the theoretical level, analyzing subcultural art within the context of digital-age ideological and political education in colleges and universities helps broaden the intersection between subculture studies and research on ideological and political education. Subcultural art is not merely a form of entertainment among young people; it also reflects college students' aesthetic preferences, emotional structures, and modes of identity formation in digital environments. A systematic analysis of this phenomenon can help further clarify the cultural experiences and reception psychology of the students receiving ideological and political education. At the practical level, studying pathways for integrating ideological and political education with subcultural art can help address problems in traditional ideological and political education, such as monotonous discourse forms, limited content appeal, and communication methods that are not sufficiently relatable to students' lives. By thoughtfully integrating the symbolic resources, expressive forms, and interaction mechanisms of subcultural art, ideological and political education can enhance its affinity, appeal, and communicative power, thereby guiding college students to form sound value judgments in a multicultural environment.

This study employs a literature review and qualitative analysis. First, through a review of domestic and international literature on youth subculture, online subculture, subcultural art, and ideological and political education in colleges and universities, this paper elucidates the basic connotations, formation background, and communication

characteristics of subcultural art. Second, considering the changes in the cultural environment of colleges and universities in the digital age, it analyzes the practical challenges that subcultural art brings to the students, educators, content, and environment of ideological and political education. Finally, based on this problem analysis, it proposes concrete pathways for integrating ideological and political education with subcultural art from the perspectives of cognitive empowerment, teacher development, content supply, and discourse-system innovation. Through this research design, the study seeks to explore the possibility of transforming subcultural art from a "challenging factor" into an "educational resource" while acknowledging its real influence.

2. Main Characteristics of Digital-Age Subcultural Art

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the rapid development of digital technology has enabled artificial intelligence—driven by core application technologies such as computer vision (CV), generative AI, and speech technologies—to penetrate and reshape social production, daily life, and social governance. As a result, the communication carriers, community forms, identity construction, and content modes of subculture have undergone major changes, and subculture in the digital age has developed new characteristics (Lu, 2025).

2.1 Decentralized Communication Carriers and Cross-Domain Connections

In the digital age, lightweight media formats, such as short videos, memes, and virtual avatars, have become the core symbolic carriers of subcultural art communication, replacing the printed materials and offline activities of traditional subcultures. Accordingly, subcultural groups now rely on social platforms and community applications such as Bilibili, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo Super Topics. They no longer depend on offline venues or physical gatherings; instead, members interact through text, images, videos, and audio, thereby breaking the boundaries of social space and greatly increasing communication efficiency. Algorithmic recommendations have replaced traditional circle-based dissemination. Through interest matching, niche content can reach potential audiences, lower entry barriers, and form virtual communities that cross cities and national borders (Yang & Wang, 2021; Zhu & Zhang, 2023).

2.2 Virtualized and Fluid Community Forms

Community members participate in activities through "virtual online identities," such as nicknames, avatars, and online personas, while concealing real-world attributes such as names, ages, and regions. This anonymity frees members from the constraints of real-life identities and allows them to express their preferences for subcultural art more freely. At the same time, community members are connected by a single interest and do not need a fixed identity attachment. Their relationships are loose, but their identification is strong; they can quickly form temporary subcultural communities around hot events, and such communities may naturally dissolve or transform after the event ends. Individuals can also participate in multiple subcultural communities simultaneously, giving their identity construction a fluid character (Huang & Cong, 2023).

2.3 Symbolic Identity Construction and Counter-Mainstream Expression

Members can quickly mark their identities through specific clothing, makeup, hairstyles, tattoos, and bodily symbols such as studs, lace, and metal accessories without requiring deep, sustained participation. The symbolic expression of subcultural identity is valuable because it provides marginalized groups with a vehicle for identity confirmation and a bond of group cohesion. The symbolic expression of subcultural art also has a certain resistant quality. By using distinctive symbols that break through mainstream cultural norms, group members express reflection on and criticism of mainstream culture. This includes visual and stylistic resistance through the subversion

of mainstream aesthetics, value-based confrontation through the promotion of non-mainstream values, and social critique through collective action (Xia & Dong, 2022; Zhou, 2023).

2.4 Technological Dependence, Digital Nativeness, and Participatory Equality

Digital-age subcultural art is deeply embedded in digital environments, and its forms of existence and pathways of communication are naturally symbiotic with digital technology. This characteristic stems from the growth background of the digital native core groups of the subculture. Having grown up with the internet, smartphones, and other digital technologies and media, these groups regard the digital world as an inherent component of life and have formed behavioral patterns and values deeply bound to digital technology. The equality of participants is a core value embodied in the technological dependence of subculture. Traditional subcultures were often constrained by region, identity, economic conditions, and other factors, making broad group identification difficult. By contrast, the virtual spaces constructed by digital technology have broken these physical and social barriers, enabling individuals from different regions and with different identities to gather freely around shared interests (Lu, 2025).

Based on the above characteristics, digital-age subcultural art can be understood as a new form of niche culture empowered by digital technology, artificial intelligence, and the online social ecosystem. It relies on digital symbols such as short videos, memes, and virtual images as communication carriers, takes online platforms and algorithmic recommendations as communication mechanisms, breaks through real-world barriers of region, class, and identity, and forms a decentralized, cross-domain, open, and equal cultural form (Yang & Lin, 2022).

In the digital age, subculture has deeply permeated college students' learning and lives in multiple forms, including online games, online literature, and meme culture, reshaping the value systems and behavioral patterns of young people. As an important component of moral education, ideological and political education in colleges and universities faces multiple challenges to its traditional educational logic and practical pathways under the impact of subculture, and it therefore requires systematic examination and response (Chen, 2025; Yang & Wang, 2021).

3. Challenges Posed by Digital-Age Subcultural Art to Ideological and Political Education in Colleges and Universities

3.1 Deviations in Students' Value Cognition and the Weakening of Mainstream Identification

Digital-age subculture closely corresponds to young college students' value demands for self-expression, niche community identification, and pluralistic inclusiveness, and has therefore become an important vehicle of their psychological and emotional pursuits. However, the inherent tension between subculture and mainstream culture, as well as between subculture and traditional educational models, also poses systematic challenges to value guidance, digital literacy, content adaptation, and public-opinion engagement in ideological and political education in colleges and universities (Jia, 2023; Wang, 2024).

College students are at a critical stage in the formation of their worldviews and values, and their cognitive discernment has not yet fully matured. They are therefore susceptible to negative elements in subculture. To attract traffic, some subcultural content conveys utilitarianism, hedonism, and even historical nihilism through exaggerated expression and out-of-context interpretation. Such content conflicts with the core socialist values advocated by ideological and political education, blurs students' standards of value judgment, and may lead them into states of mental inertia and conformity. For example, the popularity of subcultural discourses such as *tangping* ("lying flat") and *foxi* ("Buddha-like") can weaken college students' enterprising spirit and reduce their sense of social responsibility (Liu, 2020; Qin & Dai, 2022).

The non-mainstream character of subculture further intensifies alienation from mainstream value identification. College students gather around niche interests to form informal subcultural communities. Under big data recommendations, they may fall into "information cocoons," while the codes and rules specific to subcultural circles continually reinforce group self-identification. As a result, they may gradually move away from mainstream social values and develop resistance to the theoretical content and policy communication of ideological and political education. The exclusiveness of such insular identification makes it difficult for mainstream values to penetrate subcultural barriers. The cultivation of core values such as patriotism and dedication can thus become a ritualized expression, with limited transformation into practical action (Xia & Dong, 2022; Zhou, 2023).

3.2 Weakening of Educators' Leading Role and Challenges in Digital-Literacy Adaptation

In the pre-digital era, ideological and political educators in colleges and universities occupied a leading position in ideological and political education because they held advantages in information sources, including academic information. They therefore undertook the core responsibilities of knowledge transmission and value guidance. In the digital age, however, as user-generated media and other communication methods have become increasingly diverse, subcultural communication has broken down information barriers. College students can independently acquire large amounts of content from various fields through social platforms and algorithmic recommendations, and they have become active agents of cultural production and communication. Consequently, teachers' information monopoly has been significantly weakened. More importantly, subculture inherently carries an authority-challenging tendency and often challenges the mainstream value discourse system through parody and deconstruction. This can lead students who favor subculture to question the authority of ideological and political teachers, thereby shaking educational leadership (Zhu & Zhang, 2023).

At the same time, the digital literacy of traditional educators often struggles to keep pace with the scale of subcultural communication. In the digital age, subculture relies on multiple platforms and media, such as short videos, live streaming, and community interaction. Some ideological and political teachers, however, lack the proficiency to use new-media technologies and have an insufficient understanding of subcultural forms such as live-commentary culture and derivative fan works. This prevents them from accurately grasping students' ideological dynamics and from conducting effective dialogue in subcultural contexts, further aggravating the weakening of educational leadership (Lan, 2023).

3.3 A Growing Gap Between Educational Content and Students' Interest Foci

Traditional ideological and political education is authoritative and systematic in content, but its pace of updating is relatively slow and can become detached from the fast-changing and diverse interests of subculture. Theoretical expressions in ideological and political education resources are often based on grand narratives, whereas college students pay more attention to micro-level issues in subcultural contexts, such as individual needs, personal feelings, employment concerns, and dormitory relationships. The gap between educational content and students' lived experiences reduces the appeal of ideological and political education. Meanwhile, constructive elements in subculture have not been fully valued, explored, or integrated, which makes ideological and political education less attractive and less approachable and makes it difficult to stimulate students' emotional resonance (Jia, 2023).

In terms of educational methods, traditional ideological and political education mainly adopts a one-way classroom lecture model, which contrasts sharply with the free dialogue, participation, and expression advocated by subculture. College students are

accustomed to obtaining information through fragmented forms such as short videos and community interaction, and they may therefore resist single-mode theoretical instruction in ideological and political education. In fact, ideological and political content is not always suitable for teaching through forms favored by subculture, such as anime mashups and derivative works. This creates a gap between ideological and political content and students' interests, significantly weakening the efficacy of mainstream ideological and political values.

3.4 Increasing Complexity of the Educational Environment and Difficulty of Public-Opinion Guidance

The openness and anonymity of digital space make the spread of subculture highly viral, while the uneven quality of information provides opportunities for the penetration of undesirable trends of thought. Through media such as films, games, and comics, Western discourse systems may purposefully reshape subculture and export ideology through symbolic grafting, thereby posing potential threats to college students' national pride, identification, and confidence in local culture. At the same time, artificial intelligence lowers the threshold for content production. Uneven subcultural content can be precisely delivered to college students through intelligent splicing and algorithmic recommendations, increasing the difficulty of information screening and filtering (Jiang, 2016).

The deep integration of digital technology and reality further increases the complexity of the environment for ideological and political education. College students' behaviors within subcultural circles may differ from their real-life states. Some students display irrational and non-autonomous behaviors in online spaces, such as biased emotional venting and blind conformity. Such an online behavioral disorder can even affect real life, increasing the difficulty for ideological and political education to accurately grasp students' ideological shifts. In addition, given the sudden and rapidly spreading nature of online public opinion, once a subcultural issue triggers negative public opinion, it can quickly ferment into a group event, placing higher demands on the public discourse management capacity of ideological and political education.

In summary, the challenges that digital-age subcultural art poses to ideological and political education run through students, educators, educational content, and the learning environment. In essence, they reflect deep contradictions between the development of diverse cultures in the digital age and mainstream values as well as traditional educational models. These challenges reveal both an "adaptation gap" between ideological and political education and the requirements of the times and the "core direction" of reform in ideological and political education. Only by closely following the technological logic of the digital age, respecting the reasonable demands of subculture, and innovating educational concepts and methods can colleges and universities realize the harmonious coexistence of mainstream values and subculture and improve the effectiveness of ideological and political education (Wang, 2024).

4. Integration Pathways for Ideological and Political Education and Subcultural Art in the Digital Age

In response to the challenges faced by ideological and political education under the impact of subculture, and in light of the main characteristics of subculture in the digital age, an integrated response system can be constructed from four dimensions: cognitive empowerment, teacher development, content innovation, and communication transformation. Such a system can promote the integration and interaction between ideological and political education and subcultural art in colleges and universities (Lan, 2023; Wang, 2024).

4.1 Strengthening Cognitive Empowerment and Improving Students' Value Judgment

On the one hand, interactive platforms for critical thinking can be built in the classroom. Around popular subcultural expressions such as *tangping* ("lying flat") and *foxi* ("Buddha-like"), ideological and political teachers and students can jointly discuss the social emotions and value orientations behind them through themed debates, seminars, and similar activities. This can guide students to view subcultural art dialectically, clarify the importance of an enterprising spirit and a sense of social responsibility through reflection, and avoid falling into mental inertia. On the other hand, colleges and universities can offer regular media literacy courses that systematically explain the logic of digital-information dissemination and the operation of the traffic economy. By using typical cases such as exaggerated expression and out-of-context interpretation, such courses can help students recognize the harm of negative content such as utilitarianism and historical nihilism and master methods of information selection, truth verification, and critical thinking (Chen, 2025; Qin & Dai, 2022).

4.2 Strengthening Teacher Development and Enhancing Ideological and Political Teachers' Cultural Guidance Capacity

Ideological and political teachers are the core force through which colleges and universities respond to the challenges of subculture, and their understanding of and ability to guide subculture directly determine educational outcomes. In the digital age, it is necessary to strengthen the development of ideological and political teachers and enhance their comprehensive capacity to adapt to subcultural environments. On the one hand, specialized training should be strengthened. Colleges and universities can organize ideological and political teachers to participate in subculture research training, through which they can systematically grasp the development patterns and communication characteristics of subculture and improve their capacity for analysis and judgment. Training in new-media technologies should also be carried out to enhance their ability to conduct ideological and political education through short-video production and other methods, thereby adapting to the technological demands of subcultural communication. On the other hand, exchange and research platforms should be established. Colleges and universities can encourage ideological and political teachers to enter campus subcultural fields, understand students' subcultural needs and concerns through questionnaires, face-to-face communication, and online public-opinion analysis, and establish subculture research teams. These teams can identify the positive cores and negative risks of different subcultural forms, conduct specialized research on the integration of campus subculture and ideological and political education, summarize and disseminate excellent guidance experiences and methods, and strengthen intercollegiate exchange so that practical achievements in responding to subcultural challenges can be shared and jointly improved.

4.3 Innovating Content Supply and Integrating Mainstream Values with Subcultural Art

Because subcultural content corresponds to students' individualized needs and discourse habits, ideological and political education in colleges and universities in the digital age needs to break the silos of traditional content delivery. With the goals of "integrating into" and "bringing to life," it should promote deep integration between mainstream values and subculture and enhance the appeal and infectiousness of educational content. First, the positive elements of subcultural art should be explored to enrich the content carriers of ideological and political education. Ideological and political teachers can sort out outstanding achievements in campus subcultural art and online subcultural art and integrate the spirit of striving, the concept of teamwork, and the sense of social responsibility contained in them into ideological and political courses and curriculum-based ideological and political education. For example, the spirit of striving and the concept of teamwork in esports culture can be incorporated into professional ethics education, and elements of traditional culture in guofeng subculture can be

combined with education on cultural confidence, thereby achieving resonance between mainstream values and subcultural art. Second, ideological and political education should respond to real issues derived from subcultural art and strengthen its relevance. In response to historical nihilist statements and extreme individualistic tendencies that emerge in subcultural communication, ideological and political education should take the initiative to speak out and respond accurately, correcting erroneous trends of thought through detailed historical materials and rigorous logical analysis, and guiding students to distinguish right from wrong. In response to students' confusion about identity and online behavioral norms during their participation in subcultures, such issues should be incorporated into ideological and political education so as to help students establish sound views of the Internet and strengthen their identification with mainstream values (Lan, 2023; Xia & Dong, 2022).

4.4 Renewing Communication Methods and Building an Ideological and Political Education Discourse System Adapted to Subculture

Subcultural communication is characterized by fragmentation, interactivity, and situatedness. In response to these characteristics, ideological and political education in colleges and universities should change the communication mode of one-way indoctrination and construct a discourse system and communication channels suited to subculture, so that mainstream values can be accepted and widely disseminated. First, it should shift from official discourse to accessible discourse by abandoning rigid and stereotyped expressions, drawing on subcultural discourse styles, appropriately incorporating popular sentence patterns and other elements favored by students, and transforming mainstream value concepts into vivid and lively discourse expressions. Second, it should shift from grand narratives to micro narratives. Educators should correctly view students' participation in subcultural art, connect with their everyday learning experiences, growth-related concerns, interests, and other micro-level scenes, actively integrate social resources such as digital media, and tell stories of mainstream values in ways that make ideological and political education more grounded and immersive. Third, it should shift from one-way output to two-way interaction. Students should be encouraged to participate in the creation and dissemination of ideological and political discourse through topic discussion, content co-creation, and other forms, so that they become subjects in the communication of mainstream values (Zhu & Zhang, 2023).

5. Conclusion

The rapid digital transformation of the media landscape in the digital age has profoundly reshaped the cultural ecology of colleges and universities and has enabled subcultural art to enter the lives of college students in more everyday, visual, community-driven, and interactive ways. Subcultural art is no longer merely a marginal expression outside mainstream culture; it has gradually become an important means for college students to express emotions, construct identities, engage in community interaction, and practice aesthetics. For ideological and political education in colleges and universities, the rise of subcultural art has brought practical challenges, including the complication of students' value systems, the weakening of educators' leadership role, insufficient appeal of educational content, and increased difficulty in public discourse management. At the same time, it also provides new possibilities for discourse renewal, content innovation, and communication transformation in ideological and political education. This study analyzes the relationship between ideological and political education and subcultural art in the digital age. On the basis of clarifying the connotations and characteristics of subcultural art, it further examines its practical influence on ideological and political education and proposes integration pathways from the perspectives of cognitive empowerment, teacher development, content supply, and discourse-system renewal.

Overall, when facing subcultural art, ideological and political education in colleges and universities should not simply adopt an attitude of exclusion, suppression, or opposition. Instead, while maintaining the guidance of mainstream values, it should fully recognize the modes of youth expression, emotional structures, and communication resources contained in subcultural art. Only by truly understanding why college students participate in subcultures, how they use subcultural symbols, and how they form group identification through subcultural art can ideological and political education more effectively enter students' lifeworlds. Thus, promoting the integration of ideological and political education and subcultural art does not mean lowering the value standards of ideological and political education; rather, it means enhancing the appeal, affinity, and effectiveness of mainstream value communication in a way that is closer to students' experiences.

Nevertheless, this study still has certain limitations. First, it mainly adopts a qualitative literature review and qualitative analysis to discuss, at the theoretical level, the integration pathways between subcultural art and ideological and political education. It lacks empirical materials such as questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations, and its presentation of students' actual reception remains insufficient. Second, subcultural art includes a wide range of forms, such as online buzzwords, derivative works, animation and games, virtual idols, rap, street dance, and trend-oriented visuals. This study analyzes them more from an overall perspective, and the discussion of the differences among various types of subcultural art remains insufficiently detailed. Third, the integration pathways proposed in this study remain mainly at the level of principles and general directions, while more specific operational plans for teaching scenarios, curriculum design, platform operation, and evaluation mechanisms still require further development.

Future research can proceed in three directions. First, empirical research should be strengthened through questionnaires, interviews, case analysis, and other methods in order to understand college students' actual attitudes toward subcultural art and their reception of ideological and political education content. Second, future studies can select specific forms of subcultural art for focused research, such as short-video derivative works, online memes, virtual idols, rap culture, or game art, and analyze the specific mechanisms through which they can be integrated with ideological and political education. Third, further attention should be paid to the influence of digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and algorithmic recommendation on the communication environment of ideological and political education, so as to explore more precise, interactive, and sustainable educational models. As digital technology continues to iterate and youth culture continues to change, ideological and political education in colleges and universities also needs to continually renew its discourse system and practical methods through dynamic adjustment, so that mainstream values can truly enter students' everyday lives and play an active guiding role in multicultural environments.

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