

Study on Ideological and Political Education of College Students in the New Era from the Perspective of “Circle Stratification”



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Abstract: In the new era, “circle stratification” has transformed the paradigm of college students' ideological and behavioral patterns, exhibiting characteristics of cognitive narrowing, social segregation, and ideological polarization, which presents a systematic challenge to conventional ideological and political education models. This phenomenon has introduced multiple challenges in communication mechanisms (symbol misalignment, channel barriers), educational subjects (cognitive intergenerational gaps, insufficient digital literacy), and educational evaluation (limited indicators, data latency). Utilizing university educational resources and practical scenarios, this study proposes an optimization framework of “communication optimization-subject empowerment-evaluation innovation”: at the communication level, achieving flexible integration of mainstream values and circle contexts through circle case embedding, lightweight content production, and scenario-based activity design; at the subject level, enhancing educators' cross-circle guidance capabilities through teacher-student dialogue mechanisms and circle practice participation; at the evaluation level, implementing an evaluation system adapted to circle characteristics through differentiated indicator design and dynamic feedback mechanisms. This research extends the analytical scope of ideological and political education through the lens of “circle stratification” and offers strategic guidance for universities to overcome circle isolation and enhance the effectiveness of ideological and political education.

Keywords: circle stratification, college students, ideological and political education, optimization paths

1. Introduction

Following the comprehensive implementation of initiatives such as the Action Plan for Educational Informatization 2.0 and the Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Work in the New Era (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018; General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021), understanding the implications of Internet characteristics and primary ideological trends among college students has emerged as a critical priority in Ideological and Political Education. The convergence of pervasive digital technology and evolving youth subculture has fundamentally

transformed college students' cognitive patterns, value systems, and behavioral frameworks, with “circle stratification” emerging as a particularly significant phenomenon (Zhang, 2022).

“Circle stratification” describes a pattern wherein college students limit their online information exchanges to specific social circles, influenced by personalized information filtering, circle-based social interactions, and hierarchical relationship structures (Chen, 2016). Research indicates this phenomenon results from multiple intersecting factors: digital technology's “filter bubble effect” reinforces information isolation; youth generational characteristics strengthen group segmentation through identity needs; and anxiety

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regarding belonging amid shifting traditional social structures accelerates circle solidification. These elements collectively shape a new paradigm of “Circle Stratification” in college students' online social interactions (Yang & Zhao, 2024).

As a significant manifestation of youth subculture and reflection of social differentiation, “circle stratification” has transformed both the cognitive and social landscape of college students while presenting systematic challenges to mainstream ideological dissemination and traditional Ideological and Political Education paradigms. The established framework for guiding youth value orientation faces considerable challenges within this context of “circle stratification”.

This context necessitates systematic analysis of how “circle stratification” influences student ideology and behavior, examination of current educational challenges, and exploration of optimized pedagogical approaches aligned with “circle stratification” characteristics. Such research contributes to theoretical advancement in Ideological and Political Education while offering practical guidance for transcending circle boundaries and enhancing educational effectiveness for moral development, thus holding both academic and practical significance.

2. Analysis of the Ideological and Behavioral Characteristics of College Students in the New Era from the Perspective of “Circle Stratification”

2.1 Cognitive Narrowing Caused by the Intensification of Filter Bubbles

A filter bubble represents the narrowed information access pattern emerging from personalized content recommendations in online environments. It manifests as a cognitive closed loop created through the interaction of algorithmic systems and user preferences. System functionality, circle formation, pleasure-seeking motivation, usage patterns, and information homogeneity influence social media users' persistence within these filter bubbles (Dong et al., 2025). College students employ

personalized tags on social platforms to customize information filtering and delivery, establishing homogeneous information environments that exemplify “circle stratification”. The platform “Xiaohongshu” demonstrates this phenomenon: user searches and engagement trigger algorithmic learning mechanisms, resulting in targeted content delivery in areas such as beauty and fitness. This process restricts individual cognition within specific interest domains, creating self-reinforcing cognitive limitations.

Research indicates that filter bubbles' narrowing effects may significantly impact youth value formation (Nie & Nie, 2024). For example, participants in the “2D-dimension (ACGN subculture, referring to the virtual world)” circle frequently employ pejorative terms like “3D-dimension (referring to the real world)” and “xiànchōng (a derogatory term for people with fulfilling real lives)”, developing resistance to mainstream values such as “social responsibility” and “collectivism”. Similarly, the “lying flat circle” utilizes terms like “involution” and “996ICU”, characterizing the “spirit of striving” as “capital exploitation”, thereby diminishing some youth's recognition of the fundamental principle that “labor creates value”.

2.2 Interaction Segregation Caused by the Solidification of Social Barriers

The online social circles established by college students based on shared interests and individual requirements demonstrate an operational model dominated by internal information exchange. This structure impedes information flow between circles, creates exclusive boundaries, and produces a communication pattern characterized by intensive internal interaction but limited external engagement (Luo & Wang, 2021).

The solidification of social barriers manifests in both information acquisition and the reconstruction of social relationships. The tension between rebuilding traditional social connections and the increasing rigidity of digital social interaction further intensifies these social barriers. High-frequency interactions within circles strengthen in-group

cohesion—for example, the “postgraduate entrance exam circle” develops into an emotional community through daily check-ins and mutual support. Conversely, emotional detachment from out-group members gradually evolves into cognitive bias: members of the “career preparation circle” typically perceive the “Buddhist circle” as “lacking ambition”, and such stereotypes subsequently reduce cross-circle engagement.

Research indicates that the exclusive nature of circle identities causes young people to “confine themselves within circles”, creating a closed social ecosystem. Information flow between circles depends on selective interactions of intermediary nodes, limiting cross-circle mobility and generating “social islands” (Huang & Cong, 2023; Qiu, 2025). Young individuals who remain confined within circles frequently develop the cognitive misconception of “prioritizing circle stance over public interests” when engaging in public affairs, presenting a latent challenge to fostering a socially inclusive youth generation.

2.3 Ideological Polarization Driven by Value Cohesion

Small groups formed by young people in specific interest fields or social contexts demonstrate shared values, discourse patterns, and behavioral norms (Zhu & Zhu, 2023), which significantly influences their social cognition and ethical judgment (Liu & Feng, 2025). Values exhibit a distinct pattern of “internal convergence and external differentiation”: within circles, strong consistency emerges through value aggregation, while differences from external circles progressively increase.

First, through the continuous production of homogeneous content (e.g., the collective idol-worship discourse in “fan circles” referring to groups of fans who follow idols), circles establish a closed value and meaning production system. This leads members to develop a binary perception of “Us vs. Them”, viewing circle culture as the “benchmark of legitimacy” and external values as “heterogeneous interference”. Second, intra-circle interactions magnify members' initial value orientations. Frequent

homogeneous information exchange within circles readily produces the “echo chamber effect”. Through repeated information circulation in a closed system, this effect continuously reinforces the circle's “value consensus”, causing young people to mistakenly equate it with mainstream values, thereby affecting their value judgment. Additionally, the “filter bubble” restricts young people's choice through personalized recommendations, consolidating and amplifying their “value consensus”. This frequently leads to extremism in discussions and gradual alienation from mainstream values. These combined effects intensify deviations in young people's value cognition (Liang, 2024).

Value cohesion provides members with stable social support and meaning belonging (e.g., the role of ethnic minority cultural circles in enhancing members' cultural confidence) but may also create the “circle lock-in” effect: students immersed in a single circle often develop social cognition constrained by the circle's framework, forming a “well-bottom identity” (a metaphor for a narrow and confined sense of identity). Balancing respect for cohesive values within circles while guiding members toward an identity pattern of “diversity in unity” has become crucial for Ideological and Political Education to overcome circle closure.

3. Practical Dilemmas of Ideological and Political Education for College Students in the New Era from the Perspective of Circle Stratification

3.1 In Terms of Communication Mechanisms: Symbol Misalignment and Channel Barriers Prevent Mainstream Values from Penetrating Circle Barriers

As the core carrier of value transmission in Ideological and Political Education, the effectiveness of the communication mechanism determines the penetration and recognition of mainstream values. In the context of Circle Stratification, traditional communication mechanisms' linear logic, symbol system, and channel selection have experienced systematic misalignment with circle-stratified young people's information consumption habits, cognitive

preferences, and recognition patterns. The main reasons are as follows:

First, a circle fundamentally represents an emotional aggregate of “community of interests + value resonance”, with information interaction following the principle of “homophily” — members develop defensive mechanisms to actively filter out heterogeneous information by selecting content aligned with their preferences. The “filter bubble” effect of algorithmic recommendations reinforces this isolation: platforms precisely deliver homogeneous content based on user profiles, automatically excluding mainstream value content that diverges from circle preferences, resulting in fragmented communication patterns of “you push what you have, I watch what I like”. This technology-driven information isolation reduces traditional Ideological and Political Education communication channels (such as official WeChat public accounts and campus radio) to “ineffective communication” within circles, impeding mainstream values from penetrating the circles’ “information moat”. Second, the influence of traditional Ideological and Political communication channels (classroom teaching, official websites, printed materials) continues to decline among circle-stratified young people, while emerging platforms where circles are active (such as Bilibili, TikTok, Xiaohongshu, and scripted murder game scenarios) remain underdeveloped. Additionally, the algorithmic recommendation mechanisms of emerging platforms and circle communication patterns (such as cross-circle sharing and interactive engagement) have not been integrated into communication strategies, limiting mainstream content’s ability to gain organic reach and resulting in ineffective official communications.

Furthermore, opinion leaders within circles (such as e-sports streamers and prominent fans) have established “non-institutional authority” based on their expertise and emotional connection with followers. When disagreements arise between mainstream value communication and circle opinion leaders, circle-stratified young people typically favor

the latter, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of Ideological and Political Education.

3.2 In Terms of Educational Subjects: Cognitive Intergenerational Gaps and Insufficient Digital Literacy Weaken Guidance Effectiveness

As leaders of Ideological and Political Education and primary carriers of value transmission, educational subjects face systematic challenges in their interaction with educational objects, ability matching, and authority construction against the backdrop of “circle stratification”. This challenge fundamentally stems from the misalignment between traditional educational subjects’ cognitive frameworks and ability structures, and the behavioral patterns and cultural ecology of circle-stratified young people.

First, the developmental experiences and values of educational subjects (especially senior teachers) were formed in the pre-digital era, and their cognitive frameworks primarily align with traditional principles of “collective narrative priority” and “standardized expression dominance”. They lack comprehensive understanding of circle-stratified young people’s cognitive characteristics, including “individualized identity”, “small-circle consensus”, and “emotional expression”. Second, circle-stratified young people engage actively in digital environments such as bullet comment interactions, metaverse socializing, and scripted murder games. These environments serve not only as social spaces but also as implicit channels for value dissemination. However, educational subjects predominantly rely on traditional formats such as classroom teaching and theme-based class meetings. They demonstrate limited awareness of digital scenarios’ educational potential and lack systematic understanding of technical elements like algorithmic recommendation and community management, hindering the integration of Ideological and Political Education into students’ digital lives.

Finally, effective value guidance requires precise understanding of audience differences, yet educational subjects lack systematic knowledge of different circles’ core demands. For instance,

theoretical guidance effective for “academic circle” students may be perceived as didactic in the “fan circle”; dedication-focused education suitable for the “volunteer public welfare circle” may encounter resistance in the “lying flat circle”. This misalignment stems from educational subjects’ insufficient circle research mechanisms and audience segmentation analysis capabilities, along with their inability to develop circle-specific educational strategies.

3.3 In Terms of Educational Evaluation: Single Indicators and Data Lag Make It Impossible to Accurately Measure Educational Effectiveness

As a crucial component in the closed-loop system of Ideological and Political Education, the scientific validity of educational evaluation directly influences the optimization of educational strategies and effectiveness improvement potential. In the context of “circle stratification”, traditional evaluation mechanisms’ indicator systems, data collection methods, and methodological approaches have become misaligned with circle-stratified young people’s cognitive characteristics, behavioral patterns, and the subtle nature of value transmission.

First, traditional Ideological and Political Education evaluation typically employs standardized metrics (such as participation rate, assessment scores, and activity frequency), which fail to address the “diversified value cognition and differentiated behavioral performance” characteristic of “circle stratification”, resulting in misalignment between evaluation indicators and educational objectives. For instance, evaluating “e-sports circle” students solely on Ideological and Political course attendance while overlooking their implicit value identification through teamwork and competitive spirit produces results disconnected from actual educational impact.

Furthermore, value transmission within “circle stratification” primarily occurs in digital environments (such as bullet comment interactions, virtual communities, and metaverse activities). The data in these contexts is characterized by fragmentation, real-time nature, and subtlety, requiring technical tools like big data analysis and

sentiment computing for capture. However, current Ideological and Political Education evaluation relies primarily on “manual collection and experience-based assessment”, lacking systematic digital footprint monitoring capabilities. For example, it cannot analyze value acceptance through circle chat semantic analysis or assess emotional identification through virtual activity behavioral patterns, creating a disconnect between evaluation methods and educational contexts.

4. Optimization Paths for the Communication of College Students’ Ideological and Political Education from the Perspective of “Circle Stratification”

In response to Circle Stratification’s characteristics of cognitive narrowing, interaction segregation, and ideological polarization, as well as Ideological and Political Education’s practical challenges in communication mechanisms, educational subjects, and evaluation, this study develops implementable optimization strategies across three dimensions—communication optimization, subject empowerment, and evaluation innovation—by integrating university educational resources and practical scenarios.

4.1 Communication Optimization: Embedding Circle Cases and Strengthening Lightweight Content Production

Ideological and Political educators can facilitate the practical transformation of theoretical discourse through strategic case embedding specific to different circles. In educational communication, instructors can apply symbol encoding theory to reconstruct mainstream ideological discourse into narrative forms that resonate with various student subcultural groups. For instance, when explaining “collectivism”, educators can analyze the “collaborative combat mode” within the “e-sports circle”. The teaching interaction component can incorporate thematic discussions such as “Circle-Based Value Interpretation”. This approach guides members of Hanfu cultural communities to examine cultural confidence formation through the lens of cultural

symbol communication and identity construction. Similarly, career-oriented student groups can explore social responsibility through the framework of human capital theory and professional ethics. Enhancement of university new media communication effectiveness requires developing distinctive content matrices for campus WeChat accounts, including dedicated “Circle Value Narration” sections that address real scenarios within student subgroups. Examples include narratives such as “Dawn Hours of Postgraduate Aspirants: The 5 a.m. Library Experience” and “E-sports Clubs' Public Service: Interest-Driven Value Transmission”, replacing conventional propaganda with concrete examples.

4.2 Subject Empowerment: Enhancing Guidance Capabilities through Teacher-Student Dialogue and Circle Practice

Establish an interactive teacher-student communication framework through regular “Teacher-Student Circle Dialogue Sessions”, engaging student representatives from diverse social circles in substantive discussions with Ideological and Political Education staff. These sessions address practical student concerns, including “club practice and academic development integration strategies” and “addressing online subcultural group extremism”. Educators serve as facilitators, achieving ideological guidance through active listening, inquiry, case analysis, and related approaches. Ideological and Political Theory instructors can participate in student organization activities, including anime exhibitions and e-sports events, analyzing discourse symbols, value orientations, and operational mechanisms within specific circles. During individual consultations, counselors can implement a “circle-related topics” interview framework: conducting thorough discussions about trending club issues and group values (such as circle-specific perspectives on “lying flat”), while encouraging students to share their circle cultures and identify positive elements. Continuous monitoring of students' circle culture perceptions helps avoid stereotypical interpretations of youth subcultures.

4.3 Evaluation Innovation: Establishing Differentiated Indicators and Dynamic Feedback Mechanisms

The evaluation framework can incorporate circle-specific indicators within its unified structure. For instance, e-sports group assessment may emphasize practical elements such as team collaboration and rule adherence during competitions, expanding beyond traditional theoretical knowledge evaluation. The evaluation process can establish a comprehensive data collection system utilizing existing educational information platforms. Examples include: Employing digital management systems to track student participation in cross-circle activities; Assigning “Circle Culture Value Cognition Reflection” assignments in Ideological and Political Theory courses to gather circle-based content interpretations; Implementing “Weekly Value Perception Micro-Expressions” through class messaging groups to monitor value cognition development. Data collection should prioritize key value identity evolution indicators over comprehensive coverage, particularly focusing on students' application of core socialist values in circle phenomenon analysis.

5. Conclusion

Digital Age Circle Stratification has fundamentally altered college students' ideological and behavioral patterns, presenting systematic challenges to traditional Ideological and Political Education. This research identifies three dimensional characteristics of student “Circle Stratification”: cognitive narrowing, social segregation, and ideological polarization. Filter bubble intensification restricts youth cognition to homogeneous interest networks; social barrier solidification increases cross-circle interaction exclusivity; and value cohesion creates “internal convergence and external differentiation” polarization risks. These factors create educational challenges in communication mechanisms, educational subjects, and evaluation: Mainstream values encounter circle penetration difficulties due to symbol misalignment and channel

obstacles; educational subject guidance effectiveness diminishes through cognitive generational gaps and digital literacy limitations; and evaluation systems inadequately measure educational impact due to limited indicators and data delays.

In response to these challenges, this study establishes an optimization framework based on university educational resources and practical scenarios, comprising “communication optimization-subject empowerment - evaluation innovation”. At the communication level, it achieves flexible integration of mainstream values and circle contexts through circle case embedding, lightweight content production, and scenario-based activity design. At the subject level, it enhances educators' cross-circle guidance capabilities through teacher-student dialogue mechanisms and circle practice participation. At the evaluation level, it establishes an evaluation system adapted to circle characteristics through differentiated indicator design and dynamic feedback mechanisms. The framework's core principle involves moving away from confrontational educational approaches toward integrated value leadership—respecting circle cultural diversity while achieving organic integration of mainstream values and circle subcultures.

This study broadens the research scope of Ideological and Political Education through Circle Stratification analysis, illuminating technology-driven changes in youth ideological and behavioral patterns and the mechanisms behind educational challenges. It provides actionable recommendations for universities to overcome circle isolation and enhance Ideological and Political Education effectiveness. However, limitations exist: first, insufficient consideration of circle characteristic variations across different institution types (e.g., comprehensive universities versus vocational colleges); second, inadequate longitudinal tracking and verification of the optimization paths' practical outcomes.

Future research opportunities include conducting comparative studies across institutions to better understand “circle stratification” differences, and employing action research methods to validate

the optimization paths' effectiveness. These efforts would provide stronger theoretical and practical foundations for developing Digital Age-appropriate Ideological and Political Education paradigms. In conclusion, “circle stratification” presents both challenges and opportunities. Ideological and Political Education can only strengthen mainstream values within complex circle ecosystems and guide youth development through proactive adaptation to changing ideological patterns, educational innovation, and methodological advancement. This approach helps cultivate new-era talents capable of contributing to national rejuvenation amid diverse cultural interactions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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