

A SURVEY STUDY ON THE CURRENT STATUS OF COLLEGE STUDENTS' LIFE VALUES

HaiYing Deng*, Sheng Huang, WeiLi Qiao

School of Computer Science, Guangdong Agriculture Industry Business Polytechnic, Guangzhou 510507, Guangdong, China.

Corresponding Author: HaiYing Deng, Email: 412680914@qq.com

Abstract: College students are in a critical period for the formation of life values, and their value orientations not only shape individual developmental trajectories but also profoundly influence the construction of the broader social value system. This study, based on a questionnaire survey conducted among college students at a university in Guangzhou, systematically examines the current state of their life values. The results reveal that in the new era, college students' life values exhibit an overall positive and progressive orientation. Most students place social responsibility and collective interests at the core of their value considerations, demonstrating strong identification with the core socialist values, an enterprising life attitude, and a keen interest in social and public affairs. However, under the combined pressures of increasing social competition and practical challenges, a minority of students display individualistic tendencies and utilitarian value preferences, with tensions emerging between ideal aspirations and realistic constraints. Further analysis indicates significant differences across demographic variables such as gender, major type, political affiliation, and parental education level in aspects of life value goals, attitudes, and evaluations, reflecting the diversity and differentiation of life values among contemporary college students. In view of these findings, the cultivation of college students' life values requires a collaborative educational framework integrating society, schools, families, and individuals. Society should build fair and inclusive platforms for development; schools should enhance ideological and political education with humanistic care; families should strengthen intergenerational communication and serve as role models; and individuals should engage in self-reflection and practical experience to achieve the organic unity of social and self-values.

Keywords: College students; Life value goals; Life value attitudes; Life value evaluation; Empirical study

1 INTRODUCTION

College students are in a critical stage of value formation and consolidation, during which their life values profoundly influence individual life choices and social behaviors, while also shaping the ideological and cultural orientation of society and forming the value foundation for national development [1]. In the context of globalization, marketization, and digitalization, Chinese college students are encountering increasingly diverse value choices. On the one hand, collectivism and social responsibility remain essential components of China's cultural foundation [2,3]; on the other hand, orientations toward individualism, utilitarianism, and hedonism have been gaining prominence, reflecting a trend toward greater diversity and complexity of values [4,5].

In recent years, the Chinese government has attached growing importance to the cultivation of young people's value systems, making the core socialist values a central component of ideological and political education in universities [6]. However, most existing studies focus on the macro-level outcomes of value education, while relatively few have explored the structural characteristics and internal differentiation of students' value orientations. In particular, there is a lack of empirical research examining differences across demographic variables such as gender, major, and family background [7,8]. Therefore, systematically depicting the overall structure of contemporary Chinese college students' life values and clarifying the variations among different groups constitute a task of both theoretical significance and practical value. Based on this rationale, the present study employs a questionnaire survey and quantitative analysis to construct a measurement framework tailored to Chinese college students' life values. The research seeks to address the following questions:

- (1) What are the overall structure and characteristics of college students' life values in contemporary China?
- (2) Are there significant differences across gender, ethnicity, major, political affiliation, and parental education level?
- (3) What implications do these findings hold for ideological and political education and the cultivation of value systems in higher education?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Values emphasize individuals' enduring beliefs within social contexts. The theoretical frameworks proposed by Rokeach (1973) and Schwartz (2012) focus on the universality and cross-cultural commonality of human values [1,9]. In contrast, life values are more terminal in nature, addressing fundamental questions such as "why to live," "how to live," and "what constitutes the value of life." They are generally composed of three interrelated elements: value goals, value attitudes, and value evaluations [10,11]. This conceptual distinction highlights the unique focus of life value research and provides a theoretical foundation for studying college students as a specific group.

Empirical studies on college students have shown that, overall, Chinese students exhibit positive and progressive life values, though a subset displays tendencies toward individualism or pessimistic attitudes, reflecting an increasingly diversified value landscape [12,13]. Recent research has identified a dual character in college students' value orientations: on the one hand, collectivism, social responsibility, and service to others remain dominant orientations for most students [14]; on the other hand, with the deepening of marketization and individualization, tendencies toward utilitarianism, hedonism, and individualism have grown stronger [4]. International evidence similarly indicates that young people's value orientations diversify in response to societal transformation [15].

Furthermore, prior studies have revealed significant correlations between college students' life values and various psychological and behavioral outcomes, such as mental health, academic engagement, and social adaptation. Specifically, socially oriented values are often associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect, whereas self-oriented values are linked to greater psychological stress and maladaptive behaviors [5,13]. In addition, integrating the core socialist values into curricula and campus culture has been shown to enhance prosocial behavior and strengthen value identification among students [16,17], underscoring the pivotal role of educational practice in shaping life values. In light of this, the present study adopts a theoretical framework of "goal–attitude–evaluation" to systematically investigate the current state of college students' life values in higher education institutions.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Participants

Using a convenience sampling method [18], participants were recruited through bulletin board announcements at South China Agricultural University and the online survey platform Wenjuanxing (<https://www.wjx.cn/>). A total of 438 valid questionnaires were collected. Among the respondents, 203 were male (46.34%) and 235 were female (53.66%). All participants were enrolled college students, including 255 undergraduates (58.22%), 157 master's students (35.84%), and 26 doctoral students (5.94%).

3.2 Research Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study was designed based on established theoretical models and frameworks of life values, and revised to reflect the characteristics of Chinese college students in the new era [1,4,16]. The final instrument consisted of six dimensions with a total of 27 items, specifically: Two dimensions under life value goals – collectivist orientation and individualist orientation; Two dimensions under life value attitudes – positive attitude and negative attitude; Two dimensions under life value evaluations – social value evaluation and self-value evaluation. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), where higher scores indicated a stronger orientation toward the corresponding dimension of life values.

To ensure the scientific rigor of the instrument, both reliability and validity were examined. The results showed that the Cronbach's α coefficients for the six dimensions ranged from 0.732 to 0.870, with an overall α of 0.779 and a standardized α of 0.803, indicating good internal consistency and stability [19]. For validity testing, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess common method bias. The first factor accounted for 26.102% of the total variance, below the critical threshold of 40%, suggesting that no serious common method bias existed [20]. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value was 0.880, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 5406.118$, $p < 0.001$), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The cumulative variance explained by each dimension ranged from 56.657% to 66.016%, and the total cumulative variance explained by the entire scale reached 64.180%, meeting the psychometric requirements for construct validity [21].

3.3 Data Processing

All data were processed using SPSS 27.0, including descriptive statistics, reliability and validity testing, and difference analysis. First, reliability and validity tests were conducted. Cronbach's α coefficients were calculated for each dimension to assess internal consistency, while KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity were used to evaluate structural validity, ensuring the scientific rigor of the research instrument. Second, descriptive statistical analyses were employed to examine the overall level and distribution of college students' life values across different dimensions, thereby depicting the general profile of their life value orientations. Finally, independent-sample t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to identify differences across demographic variables such as gender, grade, major type, and parents' educational level. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$.

4 RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Analysis

Regarding gender distribution, there were 203 male students (46.3%) and 235 female students (53.7%), indicating a relatively balanced sample with a slightly higher proportion of females, consistent with the gender structure of the surveyed university. In terms of ethnicity, 381 students (87.0%) identified as Han and 57 students (13.0%) as ethnic minorities, a distribution that aligns with the overall demographic composition of the university, thereby enabling

comparative analysis between different ethnic groups. Concerning academic level, the sample included 255 undergraduates (58.2%), 157 master's students (35.8%), and 26 doctoral students (5.9%). Among these, first-year undergraduates (101 students) and master's students showed higher participation rates. The inclusion of multiple educational levels facilitates the examination of life value differences across stages of higher education. In terms of major category, 200 students (45.7%) were from the humanities and social sciences, 156 (35.6%) from science and engineering, and 82 (18.7%) from agriculture and other disciplines. The relatively higher proportion of humanities students corresponds with the academic structure of the surveyed university, reflecting disciplinary diversity within the sample.

With respect to political affiliation, 150 students (34.2%) were members or probationary members of the Communist Party of China, 235 (53.7%) were members of the Communist Youth League, 48 (11.0%) were unaffiliated (mass group), and fewer than 1% belonged to democratic parties or other affiliations. This distribution accurately represents the political identity structure of Chinese college students and provides a sound basis for analyzing political differences in life value orientations. As for parents' highest educational attainment, 21 (4.8%) had primary school education or below, 83 (18.9%) junior middle school, 35 (8.0%) technical secondary school, 87 (19.9%) high school, 129 (29.5%) junior college, 60 (13.7%) bachelor's degree, and 23 (5.3%) postgraduate education or above. Overall, parental education levels showed a multi-tiered distribution, offering valuable data for examining how family educational background influences college students' life values, see Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Survey Sample

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Mean	SD
Gender	Male	203	46.35	1.537	0.499
	Female	235	53.65		
Ethnicity	Ethnic Minority	57	13.01	1.130	0.337
	Han	381	86.99		
Academic Level	Undergraduate	255	58.22	3.401	1.715
	Master's Student	157	35.84		
	Doctoral Student	26	5.94		
	Humanities	200	45.66		
Major Category	Science	71	16.21	2.119	1.193
	Engineering	85	19.41		
	Agriculture	79	18.04		
	Other	3	0.68		
	CPC Member (incl. probationary)	150	34.25		
Political Affiliation	CYL Member	235	53.65	1.795	0.692
	Mass	48	10.96		
	Democratic Party	3	0.68		
	Other	2	0.46		
Parents' Education Level	Primary or below	21	4.79	4.123	1.605
	Junior Middle School	83	18.95		
	Technical Secondary School	35	7.99		
	High School	87	19.86		
	Junior College	129	29.45		
	Bachelor's Degree	60	13.7		
	Graduate or above	23	5.25		

4.2 Analysis of the Current Situation

The statistical results indicate that the life values of college students in the new era show an overall positive and upward trend. The standardized score rankings were as follows: social value (84.59%), collectivism (84.37%), positive attitude (81.95%), self-value (58.47%), individualism (54.95%), and negative attitude (43.33%). Among these, the dimensions

of social value and collectivism achieved the highest scores, reflecting a distinct socially oriented tendency. The significant difference between positive and negative attitudes demonstrates a clear attitudinal differentiation, while self-value and individualism were moderate to low, indicating relatively weaker components within the overall value system. The overall scoring rate was 68.17%, exceeding the normative benchmark (60%) by 8.17 percentage points, suggesting that college students, as a whole, exhibit a predominantly positive and constructive life value orientation.

For the difference analysis, independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were conducted at a significance level of $p < 0.05$ to examine variations across gender, grade, major type, and parents' educational level. The results revealed significant gender differences: male students scored higher on individualism and negative attitudes, whereas female students scored higher on collectivism and social value. Grade differences were observed mainly between undergraduates and postgraduates: the former emphasized social responsibility, while the latter scored higher on self-realization. Differences by major type were also notable—students in engineering demonstrated stronger competitiveness and achievement motivation, whereas students in humanities and agriculture scored higher in emotional expression and social responsibility. Moreover, students whose parents had higher levels of education tended to show greater endorsement of life value goals and social value dimensions, see Table 2.

Table 2 Overall Status of College Students' Life Values

Dimension	Maximum Score	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Score Rate
Collectivism	20	4	20	16.874	84.37%
Individualism	20	4	20	10.991	54.95%
Positive Attitude	25	5	25	20.486	81.95%
Negative Attitude	25	5	25	10.833	43.33%
Social Value	25	5	25	21.148	84.59%
Self-Value	20	4	20	11.694	58.47%
Total Score	135	27	135	92.027	68.17%

4.3 Analysis of Variance

4.3.1 Gender differences

Results from the independent-samples t-test revealed a significant gender difference in the total score of college students' life values ($t = 2.207$, $p = 0.028$). The mean score of male students ($M = 93.217$, $SD = 11.101$) was higher than that of female students ($M = 91.000$, $SD = 9.714$). Across the specific dimensions, a significant difference was observed in negative attitude ($t = 3.633$, $p < 0.001$), with males scoring significantly higher than females. Individualism ($t = 1.934$, $p = 0.054$) and self-value ($t = 1.730$, $p = 0.084$) exhibited marginal significance, with males again showing slightly higher scores. In contrast, no significant gender differences were found in collectivism, positive attitude, or social value ($p > 0.1$).

Overall, these results suggest that male students tend to score higher in competitive and negatively oriented dimensions, while female students display relatively higher orientations toward social value and positive attitudes, indicating gender-based differentiation in value orientation and emotional disposition.

4.3.2 Ethnic differences

Results of the independent-samples t-test indicated that ethnicity did not produce a significant difference in the total score of college students' life values ($t = -0.509$, $p = 0.611$), nor were there significant differences across any of the six dimensions ($p > 0.1$). Specifically, in the collectivism dimension, Han students ($M = 16.921$, $SD = 2.689$) and ethnic minority students ($M = 16.561$, $SD = 2.928$) showed no significant difference ($t = 0.931$, $p = 0.352$). Similarly, in the individualism dimension, the mean scores of Han and minority students were 10.971 and 11.123, respectively, with no statistically significant difference ($t = -0.316$, $p = 0.752$). No significant ethnic differences were found in positive attitude, negative attitude, social value, or self-value dimensions.

In genera, the findings suggest that ethnic background does not significantly affect either the overall structure or the subdimensions of college students' life values, indicating a high degree of value consistency and integration among students from different ethnic groups in contemporary Chinese universities.

4.3.3 Differences by major category

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine differences in life values among college students from different academic disciplines. The results showed significant between-group differences in the total score ($F = 8.989$, $p < 0.001$), as well as in negative attitude ($F = 21.400$, $p < 0.001$), self-value ($F = 8.009$, $p < 0.001$), positive attitude ($F = 2.636$, $p = 0.034$), and social value ($F = 2.957$, $p = 0.020$) dimensions. Specifically, engineering students achieved the highest total score ($M = 97.388$, $SD = 11.359$), and also ranked highest in negative attitude ($M = 14.118$, $SD = 4.110$) and self-value ($M = 13.459$, $SD = 3.304$). Agriculture students scored higher in positive attitude ($M = 21.481$, $SD = 3.054$) and social value ($M = 21.696$, $SD = 2.803$). In contrast, humanities students obtained the lowest score in negative attitude ($M = 9.515$, $SD = 2.979$), suggesting a more optimistic and emotionally stable orientation

compared to other groups. It is noteworthy that the “other” major category included only three participants; therefore, this subgroup was excluded from further comparative analysis due to the insufficient sample size.

These findings imply that disciplinary background significantly influences students' life value orientations: engineering students tend to display stronger achievement motivation and self-oriented tendencies, whereas humanities and agriculture students exhibit greater social awareness and positive affective attitudes.

4.3.4 Differences by political affiliation

Results from the one-way ANOVA showed that political affiliation did not have a significant effect on the overall life value score of college students ($F = 1.645$, $p = 0.162$), with mean scores across groups ranging from 90.660 to 92.894. At the subdimensional level, no significant difference was found in collectivism ($F = 1.642$, $p = 0.163^*$), indicating that students of different political affiliations share a relatively consistent orientation toward collectivist values. However, the individualism dimension showed a significant difference ($F = 2.845$, $p = 0.024$): CPC members scored the lowest ($M = 10.253$), while Communist Youth League members ($M = 11.336$), non-affiliated students ($M = 11.563$), and democratic party members ($M = 11.000$) obtained relatively higher scores. The positive attitude dimension did not differ significantly among groups ($F = 1.011$, $p = 0.401^*$), whereas the negative attitude showed a significant difference ($F = 5.925$, $p < 0.001$). CPC members scored the lowest ($M = 9.747$), while democratic party members scored the highest ($M = 15.667$), suggesting variation in emotional and cognitive orientations across political identities. In the life value evaluation dimensions, both social value ($F = 3.034$, $p = 0.017$) and self-value ($F = 2.941$, $p = 0.020$) exhibited significant group differences, indicating that students with different political affiliations vary in how they assess social and personal values.

On the whole, these results suggest that while political identity does not significantly alter the overall life value orientation, it is associated with specific value tendencies—CPC members demonstrating stronger collectivist and socially oriented values, and non-affiliated or minority-party students exhibiting relatively greater individualistic and affective differentiation.

4.3.5 Differences by parents' educational level

Results of the one-way ANOVA indicated that parents' educational level had a marginally significant effect on the overall life value scores of college students at the 10% level ($F = 1.874$, $p = 0.084$). Students whose parents had junior college ($M = 93.395$) or high school ($M = 93.115$) education scored relatively higher, while those whose parents held bachelor's or graduate degrees showed slightly lower mean scores. At the subdimensional level, collectivism did not show a significant difference ($F = 1.330$, $p = 0.242$), although the graduate group had the highest mean score ($M = 17.348$). In contrast, the individualism dimension revealed a significant difference ($F = 2.384$, $p = 0.028$), indicating that students whose parents had higher educational attainment tended to exhibit lower individualism scores (graduate group $M = 9.783$). In terms of value attitudes, significant differences were observed in negative attitude ($F = 4.455$, $p < 0.001$), with students whose parents had bachelor's or graduate degrees scoring significantly lower than those in other groups, suggesting a more optimistic life orientation. Positive attitude did not reach statistical significance ($F = 1.482$, $p = 0.183^*$). Regarding value evaluations, both social value ($F = 0.472$, $p = 0.829^*$) and self-value ($F = 1.622$, $p = 0.139^*$) showed no significant differences across groups.

Total, these findings suggest that parents' educational level exerts its main influence on individualism and negative attitude dimensions: students from families with higher parental education tend to display lower self-centered tendencies and more positive emotional orientations, reflecting the possible role of family education in shaping pro-social and emotionally balanced life values.

5 RESEARCH DISCUSSION

5.1 Positive Manifestations of College Students' Life Values

The survey results show that the life values of college students in the new era generally present a positive orientation. More than 80% of students demonstrate clear life goals, a progressive value attitude, and evaluation standards oriented toward social value, highlighting a strong sense of responsibility and social identity.

At the level of life value goals, 83.05% of college students identify with a collectivist orientation and generally tend to place collective interests above individual interests. For example, in the item “When personal interests conflict with collective interests, individuals should give priority to collective needs,” the approval rate reached 81.74%. In items such as “The realization of personal value should be based on contributing to the collective,” “The success of teamwork gives me more satisfaction than personal achievement,” and “A sense of collective honor is an important motivation for my efforts,” the approval rate all exceeded 80%. These results indicate that college students have a strong sense of collectivity and collective honor, reflecting the deep integration of the socialist core values.

At the level of life value attitudes, 81.37% of college students show a positive and enterprising attitude toward life, among which “believing that life is beautiful and meaningful” obtained an approval rate of 85.16%. The approval rates for items such as “Achieving a happy life through unremitting struggle” and “Engaging in study and work with full enthusiasm” also exceeded 80%, showing that college students generally hold an optimistic attitude toward life and possess strong psychological resilience and motivation for self-improvement.

At the level of life value evaluation, 85.66% of college students agree with evaluation standards oriented toward social value. “The altruistic and self-sacrificing spirit of model figure Zhang Guimei in the new era is worthy of learning” received an approval rate of 91.33%, while “The standard for measuring the social value of life is the individual's

contribution to society and others” received 77.86%. This shows that most college students emphasize social responsibility and selfless dedication in value judgment, and tend to evaluate individual life value from the perspective of society as a whole.

5.2 The Tendency Toward the Realization of Life Value Ideals

The survey results show that contemporary college students exhibit a high level of idealization in the normative dimension of their life values. The dimensions of social value (84.59%), collectivism (84.37%), and positive attitude (81.95%) all scored at a high level, reflecting that most students cognitively identify with principles oriented toward the collective and society. However, individualism (54.95%) and self-value (58.47%) were at a medium level, while the proportion of negative attitudes (43.33%) was relatively high, revealing that individualized survival logic and environmental pressures have a significant impact on college students in real-life contexts. This result reflects a structural tension between ideals and reality: on the one hand, more than 85% of students agree that “life is beautiful and meaningful”; on the other hand, 36% of students expressed a passive attitude toward the item “It is enough to let my future development take its natural course,” and about 24.66% agreed with “The current competition is so intense that individual effort can hardly change the situation,” reflecting a sense of powerlessness and anxiety among some students under external competitive pressure.

Further analysis indicates that college students’ high recognition of collectivism and social value coexists with a strong pursuit of personal achievement. In the items “When personal interests conflict with collective interests, individuals should submit to collective needs” and “The success of teamwork gives me greater satisfaction than personal achievement,” 81.74% and 87.45% of students, respectively, expressed agreement, showing the dominant position of collective orientation. At the same time, more than 51% of students agreed that “The realization of personal goals is more important than collective goals,” demonstrating the prominence of individual achievement motivation.

Group difference analysis shows that Party members display stronger tendencies toward prioritizing collective interests and participating in volunteer service. Students whose parents have higher educational attainment are more likely to agree that “social contribution is the criterion for measuring life value,” while those whose parents have lower educational levels score higher on items related to individualism and self-value. Science and engineering students place more emphasis on realizing self-value through learning and competition, whereas humanities students perform better in cooperation and public welfare orientation.

Overall, the results suggest that contemporary college students’ life values exhibit a juxtaposed state between ideals and reality: they embody a rational pursuit of collective and social responsibility while inevitably being influenced by individualized needs and competitive pressures.

5.3 The Tendency Toward Contradiction in Life Value Relations

In the new era, college students exhibit a complex and subtle tendency toward contradiction in the cognition and pursuit of life values. This tendency is not only reflected in their deep reflection on the gap between personal ideals and reality but also embedded in their hesitation between tradition and modernity, as well as between collective and individual choices. The survey data show that college students present a significant imbalance across the two sets of dimensions — “collective vs. individual” and “positive vs. negative.”

From the perspective of “collective vs. individual,” although 81.74% of students agreed that “the realization of personal value should be based on contributing to the collective,” and 81.28% highly recognized that “a sense of collective honor is an important motivation for my hard work,” indicating a strong identification with group interests and social responsibility, there are still 26.49% of students who expressed a relatively strong individual tendency by agreeing with “everyone for himself, and God for us all.” In addition, 23.97% agreed that “the achievement of personal goals is more important than the realization of collective goals,” reflecting that some college students place greater emphasis on personal interests and self-achievement. This situation suggests that certain students have not yet fully achieved a balanced value orientation between collective dedication and individual aspiration.

At the “positive vs. negative” attitude dimension, a similar bidirectional differentiation can be observed in college students’ life value attitudes. On the one hand, 80.14% affirmed the statement “I can always devote myself enthusiastically to daily life, work, and study,” and 77.86% responded positively to “I often regard temporary setbacks or failures as opportunities for learning and growth,” indicating that most college students still maintain a certain spirit of optimism and self-motivation. On the other hand, 22.15% agreed with “I often feel frustrated and anxious about the future,” and 14.38% expressed agreement with “I feel that the people around me lack sincerity and kindness,” suggesting that a portion of students experience insecurity and doubt in social interactions and expectations for the future.

Further group analysis shows that males score slightly higher than females on the individualism dimension but also show a stronger tendency toward negative attitudes, suggesting a more pronounced conflict between self-assertion and social norms. Meanwhile, students of different majors and political identities, while emphasizing external social responsibility, provide relatively less support for individual growth and autonomy, resulting in a contradictory pattern where “external conformity” and “internal differentiation” coexist.

This contradictory pattern indicates that while college students generally identify with social responsibility, they have not yet fully internalized and cultivated individual autonomy. It also implies that universities and society, in the process

of fostering a harmonious system of socialist core values, need to strike a more balanced approach to managing the tension between social norms and individual development.

5.4 The Tendency Toward Utilitarianism in Life Value Goals

Life value goals refer to the primary pursuits and ultimate purposes that guide human behavior and development, occupying a central position in the system of life values. The survey results show that, overall, college students demonstrate a significant collectivist orientation in their life value goals. However, at the same time, some students exhibit a clear tendency toward utilitarianism in their pursuit of individual interests and personal achievements.

Specifically, in the items "The realization of personal value should be based on contributing to the collective" and "A sense of collective honor is an important motivation for my hard work," 42.24% and 41.55% of respondents chose "agree," supplemented by 39.50% and 39.73% who selected "strongly agree." This indicates that while most students recognize collective interests, they also regard contribution to the collective as an important standard for measuring personal success. However, 26.49% of respondents agreed with the statement "Everyone for himself, and God for us all," and 23.97% agreed that "The realization of personal goals is more important than that of collective goals." In addition, 13.25% expressed positive agreement with "I only like to do my own things, and my classmates are the same." Overall, approximately 13.25% to 26.49% of students show a relatively obvious individual-priority tendency. This distribution suggests that although collectivism remains the mainstream, some college students—facing the realities of social competition—tend to regard personal interests and achievements as the core motivation for realizing self-value, revealing a certain degree of utilitarian value orientation.

Furthermore, when considered alongside the contradictory relationship between the "collective vs. individual" and "positive vs. negative" dimensions, it becomes clear that this utilitarian tendency is not an isolated phenomenon but rather the result of the interplay of multiple socialization factors. First, although most college students ideologically recognize social responsibility and collective dedication, in practice, some individuals—under the pressures of study, employment, and uncertainty in self-positioning—are more inclined to prioritize personal goals, seeking more direct economic and social returns through personal effort. Second, group characteristic analysis indicates that male students, those majoring in engineering, and those whose parents have lower educational levels score relatively higher on the individualism dimension. This further confirms that under a highly competitive environment, certain groups of college students are more easily driven by utilitarian thinking. Third, the political socialization process also shows that although student Party members perform strongly in collectivism and social responsibility, non-Party students place greater emphasis on personal goals.

5.5 The Tendency Toward Negativity in Life Value Attitudes

Life value attitude refers to an individual's perception and evaluation of the meaning and function of practical activities at both social and personal levels. It plays an important role in shaping personal behavioral choices, emotional states, and participation in social practices. The survey results show that although contemporary college students generally maintain a positive mainstream orientation in their life value attitudes, a certain proportion still display negative emotions and cognitions. Specifically, the positive attitude score rate was 81.95%, while the negative attitude score rate reached 43.33%, indicating a coexistence and tension between positivity and negativity.

At the item level, 80.82% of students agreed with the statement "I always treat myself kindly, accept who I am, and pay close attention to my physical and mental health," and an even higher 82.88% agreed that "I believe I can achieve a happy life through my own persistent efforts." These findings suggest that most college students maintain an optimistic and proactive belief in self-care and personal striving. However, 14.84% of respondents expressed doubt about the value of daily life in the item "I often feel that some things in life are meaningless," implying that a certain portion of students still experience emotional negativity to varying degrees.

Furthermore, notable demographic variations were observed in students' life value attitudes. Students majoring in engineering and those whose parents have relatively lower levels of education are more likely to experience negative emotions under the pressures of social competition. Similarly, male students tend to exhibit higher levels of anxiety and frustration caused by "involution" pressure and conflicts in self-identity. In contrast, Party member students and those whose parents possess higher educational attainment scored lower on the negative attitude dimension, indicating that organized ideological cultivation and advantageous family education provide a buffering effect on emotional regulation and social adaptation.

In general, the tendency toward negativity presents differentiated characteristics among college students. It is shaped not only by external social pressures but also by the combined influence of political socialization, parental educational background, and the cultural characteristics of academic disciplines.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Research Conclusions

The study reveals the complex structure of contemporary college students' life values, situated between ideal pursuit and realistic choice. It demonstrates an overall pattern dominated by social responsibility and collectivist consciousness, while also showing a potential expansion of individualistic and utilitarian tendencies. The strong identification of

college students with “social value” and “collectivism” indicates that the socialist core values have formed a relatively stable psychological structure and cultural foundation within this group. Meanwhile, the presence of “individualism” and “negative attitudes” reflects the psychological tension and challenges young people face between self-realization and social expectations under intensified competition and increasing social uncertainty. This tension should not be viewed as a disintegration of values but rather as a natural result of the pluralistic interaction within youth value systems during a period of social transformation.

At the theoretical level, this study, based on a three-dimensional framework of “goals–attitudes–evaluations,” reveals the hierarchical structure of college students’ life values. It deepens the understanding of the mechanism of value socialization among college students and provides contemporary empirical support for the Marxist theoretical proposition regarding the unity of the individual and society.

At the educational level, the findings suggest that ideological and political education in universities has achieved positive results in strengthening social value orientation. However, deficiencies remain in promoting personal growth and psychological adjustment. Educators are therefore required to establish a dynamic balance between social orientation and individual development, guiding students to transform external recognition into internal self-consciousness.

At the policy level, this research offers empirical evidence for youth education and social governance. It suggests that relevant departments should integrate mental health support, employment system optimization, and mechanisms for social participation into the framework of value education. Such institutional measures can effectively link ideological cultivation with real-life development paths, thereby promoting the continuous transmission of socialist core values and enhancing social cohesion.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the life values of contemporary college students are generally positive; however, certain tensions persist between ideals and reality — social-value orientation coexists with individual achievement motivation, collectivist consciousness intertwines with utilitarian tendencies, and positive mindsets coexist with anxiety and pressure. To address these dynamics, a multi-dimensional and collaborative value cultivation system should be established across four levels: society, university, family, and individual.

6.2.1 Societal level: optimizing the value ecology for youth development

Society serves as the macro-environment for the formation and development of college students’ life values. Public policies and social systems should provide practical support for realizing students’ ideals. Policymakers should strengthen mechanisms for youth employment and social mobility to reduce value anxiety arising from structural pressures. Mainstream media and public cultural products should convey positive, authentic, and rational social values while shaping role models that reflect the spirit of the times. In addition, social organizations and enterprises should actively engage in youth socialization by providing platforms for social governance, volunteer service, and innovation and entrepreneurship. Through such real-world experiences, students can internalize social values as personal beliefs.

6.2.2 University level: strengthening the integrative function of ideological and political education

Universities are the key arenas for cultivating college students’ life values. Ideological and political education should not only reinforce social responsibility but also guide students’ spiritual growth and psychological adjustment. The curriculum should evolve from knowledge transmission to value-oriented instruction by integrating case-based learning, project-based practice, and interdisciplinary courses that embed “value education” within “knowledge acquisition” and “practical action.” A tripartite support system combining mental health, value education, and career planning should be established to promote meaningful dialogue between teachers and students on “how to live a fulfilling life.” Moreover, campus culture should emphasize everyday and contextualized value experiences, enabling students to internalize social responsibility and life values through club activities, volunteer work, and scientific innovation.

6.2.3 Family level: enhancing intergenerational communication and role modeling

Family education constitutes the foundation of life value formation. The study shows that higher parental education levels are associated with more rational and socially oriented life values among children. Families should therefore play an active role in value guidance through open communication and rational demonstration, helping children form stable value orientations. Parents should avoid evaluating success purely through utilitarian standards, instead emphasizing social responsibility, character development, and mental well-being. Family education support mechanisms—such as parent workshops and psychological counseling programs—should be further developed to improve parents’ educational literacy and foster collaboration among families, schools, and society in building a community for value education.

6.2.4 individual level: fostering self-identity and value awareness

College students themselves are the primary agents in constructing their life values. They should be encouraged to achieve internal value integration through self-reflection—maintaining active identification with social ideals and collective interests while also recognizing legitimate personal development needs and realistic pressures. Students should cultivate independent thinking and self-regulation skills, maintain psychological resilience in the face of setbacks, and deepen their understanding of life’s meaning through reading, volunteering, and social participation. In doing so, they can realize the organic unity of “self-achievement through social contribution.”

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

FUNDING

This research was funded by the Guangdong Agriculture Industry Business Polytechnic University Network Ideological and Political Education Effectiveness Evaluation Mechanism Research in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province (25FDYYB05).

REFERENCES

- [1] Schwartz S H. An overview of the Schwartz theory of basic values. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2012, 2(11).
- [2] Weng L, Zhang Y B, Kulich S J, et al. Cultural values in Chinese proverbs reported by Chinese college students. *Asian J of Social Psycho*, 2021, 24(3): 232-243.
- [3] Zhen Z, Fan Z, Sheng Y, et al. Psychometric analysis of the SVO slider measure in Chinese cultural context. *Studies of Psychology and Behavior*, 2015, 13(4): 404.
- [4] Shuai P, Shuyue M, Hailiang Z. Individualism and collectivism transition in Chinese college students: Evidence from after 70's, 80's, and 90's. In: *Proceedings of the 2015 3rd International Conference on Advanced Information and Communication Technology for Education (ICAICTE-2015)*. Atlantis Press, 2015, 23-30.
- [5] Tang S, Gao D. Values characteristics of Chinese college students with upper-level learning engagement. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2025, 16: 1414065.
- [6] Dong S, Jia J, Leng Y, et al. The influence of cultivating contemporary Chinese core values on prosocial behaviours of undergraduate students. *Int J Psychol*, 2025, 60: e70085.
- [7] Borg I. Age- and gender-related differences in the structure and the meaning of personal values. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 2019, 138: 336-343.
- [8] Nezelek J B. Relationships between personal human values and social value orientation. *PLoS One*, 2024, 19: e0312795.
- [9] Rokeach M. *The nature of human values*. Free Press, New York, USA, 1973.
- [10] George L S, Park C L. Meaning in life as comprehension, purpose, and mattering: Toward integration and new research questions. *Review of General Psychology*, 2016, 20(3): 205-220.
- [11] Martela F, Steger M F. The role of significance relative to the other dimensions of meaning in life: An examination utilizing the three-dimensional meaning in life scale (3DM). *J Posit Psychol*, 2023, 18(4): 606-626.
- [12] Ge Y, Lu C Y, Shuai M Q, et al. Meaning in life among Chinese undergraduate students in the post-epidemic period: A qualitative interview study. *Front Psychiatry*, 2022, 13: 1030148.
- [13] Xie J Q, Yin X Q, Qiu J, et al. Latent profile analysis of personal values among Chinese college students: Associations with mental health disorders and life satisfaction. *Curr Psychol*, 2023, 42: 27232-27244.
- [14] Guo J, Jiang Y, Lin S, et al. Individualism and collectivism as predictors of creative potentials and real-life creativity in China and US. *Creat Res J*, 2025, 37(2): 120-131.
- [15] Inglehart R, Welzel C. *Modernization, cultural change, and democracy: The human development sequence*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790881>.
- [16] Tian X. Core socialist values and curriculum policy in China: A study of the curriculum standard for Chinese language. *Eur J Educ*, 2024, 59: e12633.
- [17] Deng S, Wang X. Exploring locally developed ELT materials in the context of curriculum-based value education in China: Challenges and solutions. *Front Psychol*, 2023, 14: 1191420.
- [18] Zhang J, Huang Y, Wu F, et al. Scaling up online professional development through institution-initiated blended learning programs in higher education. *Internet High Educ*, 2025, 65: 100988.
- [19] George D, Mallery P. *IBM SPSS Statistics 29 step by step: A simple guide and reference*. Routledge, New York, USA, 2024. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032622156>.
- [20] Podsakoff P M, MacKenzie S B, Lee J Y, et al. Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies. *J Appl Psychol*, 2003, 88(5): 879-903.
- [21] Black W, Babin B J. Multivariate data analysis: Its approach, evolution, and impact. In: Babin B J, Sarstedt M (eds.) *The Great Facilitator*. Springer, Cham, 2019, 121-130.