# Research on the Application of Image Art Therapy in Universities: Practical Paths and Therapeutic Mechanisms Analysis

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**Abstract.** Mental health issues among college students are increasingly prominent, necessitating innovative intervention methods. This study explores the application of image art therapy in college mental health education, analyzing its practical pathways and therapeutic mechanisms to demonstrate its unique value in alleviating students' psychological stress and enhancing their psychological adjustment capabilities. Results show that image art therapy exerts therapeutic effects through multi-dimensional approaches, including emotional regulation, self-expression and cognition, empathy, and peer support, thereby enriching the methods used in university mental health education. This paper recommends integrating image art into university courses and activities and strengthening professional teaching staff and resource construction, thus providing new insights for college mental health education.

**Keywords:** Image Art; Art Therapy; College Students' Mental Health

## 1 Introduction

Contemporary college students are facing multiple mental health challenges. Under the combined pressures from family expectations, academic competition, and employment difficulties, many students are susceptible to negative emotions such as anxiety and depression, resulting in a high incidence of psychological problems. Surveys indicate that the reported rate of psychological issues among college students has increased significantly in recent years. Educational authorities have emphasized the management of college students' mental health, urging universities to enhance the specificity and effectiveness of psychological counseling through strengthened professional support and scientific management. The education sector has begun advocating for integrating aesthetic education into mental health education, introducing innovative interventions such as art therapy to alleviate psychological stress and improve mental well-being. As a significant component of aesthetic education, image art—which encompasses artistic forms utilizing visual imagery—demonstrates unique therapeutic value in psychological interventions and emotional healing due to its vivid narrative methods and powerful

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emotional appeal. Conducting research that integrates image art with art therapy not only enriches the pathways of aesthetic education in higher education but also provides new insights into supporting the mental health of college students, holding significant theoretical and practical implications[1].

## 2 Psychological Issues among College Students: Manifestations and Causes

The psychological distress commonly experienced by college students can be categorized into three types: emotional disorders and stress responses, academic burden and career confusion, and interpersonal relationship issues along with value dilemmas.

Regarding emotional issues, anxiety and depression are highly prevalent. According to a national survey, approximately 21.5% of college students are at risk of depression, and 45.3% exhibit tendencies toward anxiety[2]. Similarly, a study conducted across 133 universities in the United States involving nearly 96,000 students found that 37% met clinical criteria for anxiety disorders, while 44% exhibited depressive symptoms[3].

In academic and career aspects, pressures related to postgraduate entrance examinations and uncertain employment prospects have become significant stressors. Surveys indicate that students planning to pursue graduate studies exhibit notably higher anxiety risks compared to those without such plans. Many students engage in prolonged and intense academic studies and internships to enhance their competitiveness, resulting in accumulated psychological fatigue and anxiety.

In interpersonal relationships and value orientations, many college students experience social anxiety, dormitory conflicts, and frustrations in romantic relationships. Excessive family expectations combined with poor communication exacerbate psychological stress. Additionally, rapid societal changes can lead some students to feel disoriented, resulting in phenomena such as "hollow heart syndrome" or a sense of nihilism. Without timely intervention, these issues may evolve into severe psychological disorders.

The causes of contemporary college students' psychological problems are multiple and complex, encompassing both macro-level societal factors and micro-level individual developmental factors. These challenges indicate the necessity for universities to introduce richer and more diverse intervention methods in mental health education to relieve psychological stress and strengthen psychological resilience among students. Integrating image art into aesthetic education and psychological counseling represents a positive exploratory approach, providing college students with subtle yet effective psychological support.

## 3 Application of Image Art in Art Therapy

### 3.1 Evolution of Image Art in Art Therapy

Image art broadly refers to art forms created and presented through visual media, including film, photography, and video installations. Art therapy, originating as a

psychological treatment method in Europe and America, initially employed visual arts such as painting for therapeutic intervention. With the development of art therapy, image-based arts have gradually emerged as a significant branch, giving rise to specific forms such as film therapy, photography therapy, and video therapy. By appreciating or creating visual narratives, individuals can project their own emotions onto these stories or express their inner experiences creatively, thereby achieving therapeutic and psychological intervention goals. Contemporary studies indicate that this type of art therapy using image media provides clients with an opportunity to adopt a "third-person perspective" to examine their own issues, facilitating a more objective and indirect exploration of internal conflicts.

### 3.2 Film Therapy

Film therapy, which emerged as a psychological counseling method in the 1990s, utilizes movie plots and character narratives to promote psychological healing. Films, with their compelling storytelling and abundant emotional elements, deeply resonate with audiences, often triggering strong emotional responses and providing emotional release. In psychological counseling practice, therapists select films with positive and enlightening themes for clients, guiding them to reflect on psychological issues depicted in the films. During movie-viewing discussions, clients typically engage as observers, making it easier for them to open up, relate the narrative to their personal experiences, and express feelings they usually find difficult to articulate. This form of psychological projection and reflection via movie narratives enables many students who struggle to directly express emotions to confront their feelings more honestly. A systematic review of 38 studies found that 36 reported positive therapeutic effects from movie-based interventions for alleviating psychological problems[4]. Thus, film therapy has become a beneficial complementary approach in college mental health education.

### 3.3 Photography and Video Therapy

Photography therapy and video therapy are also crucial modalities in art therapy. Photography therapy encourages clients to observe and document their daily lives through the camera lens, thereby facilitating self-expression and emotional regulation. When focusing on photographic subjects, individuals temporarily step outside themselves, redirecting their attention toward the external world, thus alleviating internal stress and revitalizing their lives. This process also allows individuals to narrate their life stories from an external viewpoint, promoting self-reflection and meaning construction. By organizing photographs with special significance and accompanying narratives, students can re-examine their growth experiences, achieving trauma healing and enhanced self-identity through visual storytelling.

Video therapy involves instructing students to create short films or record video diaries, enabling them to reenact internal conflicts or envision future possibilities from the perspective of a director or performer. Similar to psychodrama, this method provides a safe context for participants to perform roles that address unresolved emotional conflicts, facilitating emotional release and rebuilding confidence.

Whether through film appreciation or photographic creation, image art offers rich media resources for art therapy. Its narrative and visual characteristics support the projection and transformation of psychological energy, making it an emotionally engaging and approachable tool for psychological interventions. To clearly demonstrate the distinctions and therapeutic effects of various image art therapies, Table 1 summarizes characteristics and therapeutic benefits of different modalities such as film therapy, photography therapy, video therapy, virtual reality therapy, animation therapy, and digital storytelling therapy, thereby deepening understanding of the diversity and application advantages of image art therapies.

**Table 1.** Forms of Image Art Therapy, Key Features, and Effects.

| Form of Therapy | Key Features | Therapeutic Effects |
|---|---|---|
| Film Therapy (Cinema Therapy) | Utilizes film narratives and characters | Emotional resonance, catharsis, self-awareness |
| Photograph Therapy | Captures daily life through photography | Self-expression, stress relief, self-reflection |
| Video Therapy | Filming short videos or video diaries, role-playing | Emotional expression, safe emotional release, confidence rebuilding |
| Virtual Reality Therapy | Simulates realistic environments through VR technology | Immersive exploration of emotions, safe stress management |
| Animation Therapy | Expresses inner ideas through creating or viewing animation | Creative expression, emotional release, enhanced imagination |
| Digital Storytelling Therapy | Combines images, audio, and video in personal storytelling | Self-identity, emotional expression, meaning reconstruction |

## 4 Practical Paths of Image Art Therapy

The practical paths of image art therapy in universities are diverse and flexible. Through course instruction, thematic film viewing, creative self-expression, and group activities, college students can actively participate and gradually internalize therapeutic experiences. These approaches not only enrich methods of psychological intervention for college students but also align with the interests and expressive habits of the younger generation, demonstrating excellent acceptability and effectiveness. As shown in Figure 1, various pathways such as curriculum integration, thematic film viewing activities, image-based creative expression, and group interactive experiences collectively contribute to effectively enhancing college students' psychological well-being.

### 4.1 Curriculum Integration and Classroom Teaching

Integrating image art therapy into the university curriculum system lays the foundation for long-term intervention. Universities can offer general education or elective courses such as "Image Art and Mental Health," taught by instructors with interdisciplinary backgrounds in psychology and art. Practical components like film appreciation and photographic creation can be embedded into the courses to guide students in expressing

emotions and relieving stress through artistic means. For instance, image-based therapeutic workshops could be established to teach basic psychological adjustment techniques and methods of artistic expression. Such courses seamlessly combine mental health education with aesthetic education, subtly nurturing students'

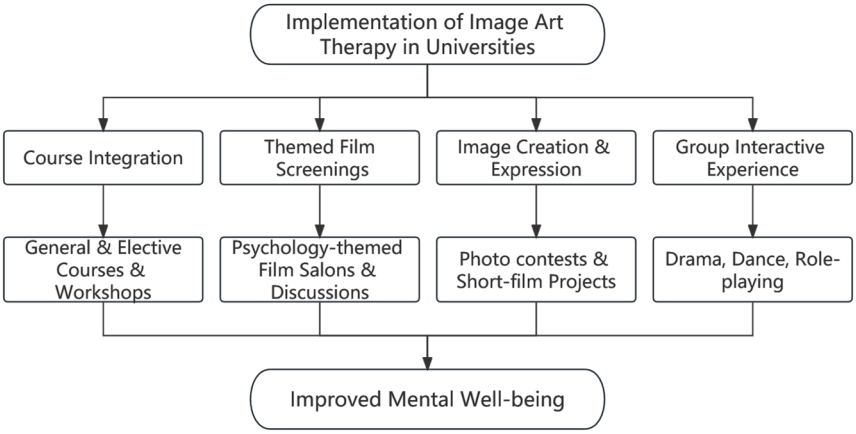


**Fig. 1.** Practice Pathways of Image Art Therapy in Universities.

### 4.2 Thematic Film Viewing and Image Salons

Organizing film viewings or movie salons with psychological themes is a common approach for universities to practice image therapy. Mental health centers or student associations can regularly host themed activities such as "Psychological Movie Salons" or "Healing with Cinema," selecting films with educational psychological content for group viewing. During these relaxing sessions, students not only receive aesthetic education but also experience emotional resonance and catharsis through film narratives. Guided by counselors, post-viewing discussions help summarize psychological dilemmas and coping strategies depicted in the films. This educational yet enjoyable group counseling format enables students to engage seriously with psychological issues within an entertaining context, gaining empathetic peer support. Film viewing activities thus serve as subtle and effective supplementary tools for mental health education on campus, helping students reduce stress and facilitate personal growth.

### 4.3 Image Creation and Self-Expression

Encouraging students to participate directly in image creation provides an effective pathway for integrating aesthetic education with psychological counseling. Universities can organize campus photography competitions, short film workshops, and documentary filmmaking projects, offering students platforms to narrate their personal stories through visual media. The creative process itself, transforming inner thoughts into tangible image works, acts as therapeutic self-expression. Psychological counselors can

guide students to use photography to focus on meaningful themes or personal experiences, promoting self-disclosure and collective discussion through sharing their artwork. A group counseling activity incorporating photo diaries demonstrated improved emotional management skills among participating students. Compared to verbal communication alone, image creation offers a vivid and indirect expression mode, enabling students who are reluctant or unable to verbalize their feelings directly to express emotions creatively without explicitly revealing their privacy. This enhances their motivation and engagement in the therapeutic process.

### 4.4 Group Activities and Interactive Experiences

Employing image art in interactive group activities can leverage aesthetic education's emotional appeal while enhancing peer support and social therapeutic effects. For example, performance-based image arts like dance or drama can be integrated into group counseling activities, using body movements or role-playing games to build connections and trust among participants. In group film therapy sessions, facilitators can include interactive segments during screenings to enhance participant engagement and empathy. These experiential image-based activities break down barriers among strangers, creating a safe and inclusive environment where students find friendship, emotional support, and channels for emotional release through cooperation and sharing. Practical experience indicates that art-integrated group activities effectively strengthen students' empathy and group cohesion, helping participants genuinely feel "not alone," and obtain psychological support and understanding from their peers.

## 5 Analysis of Therapeutic Mechanisms

Understanding the therapeutic mechanisms of image art is critical for optimizing mental health education practices in universities. This chapter provides an in-depth analysis of how image art promotes psychological healing through multiple dimensions, including emotional regulation, self-expression and cognitive enhancement, as well as empathy and interpersonal support, thus offering scientific evidence and practical guidance for university education.

### 5.1 Emotional Regulation Mechanism

Image art directly impacts the emotional centers of the brain through audiovisual combinations, often resulting in positive psychological reactions. Visual stimuli such as images and colors can evoke feelings of pleasure and tranquility, while synchronized music and visual rhythms can guide physiological rhythm changes, thus influencing emotional states[5]. Appreciating an excellent film or a set of compelling photographs can rapidly redirect attention and relieve anxiety. When students immerse themselves in scenarios created by image art, everyday worries and pressures are temporarily suspended, providing a safe space for emotional catharsis. Many university students involved in film therapy reported that watching films felt like pressing a mental "pause

button," temporarily freeing them from real-life pressures and allowing them to experience inner peace and healing. Such emotional resonance and release triggered by imagery help alleviate tension and stabilize emotions, effectively reducing stress among students.

### 5.2 Self-Expression and Cognitive Mechanism

Image art provides college students with a non-verbal channel for expression, enabling them to externalize inner experiences more freely. In traditional talk-based counseling, students often find it difficult to openly discuss deep-seated feelings due to privacy concerns, social pressure, or limited verbal skills. Art therapy employs non-verbal media such as painting and images to reduce clients' defenses and anxiety, facilitating engagement in the therapeutic process. This approach is particularly beneficial for individuals uncomfortable with or resistant to traditional verbal counseling[6]. Specifically, when students use a camera to document life or edit films to narrate personal stories, they effectively "speak" through visual symbols. This subtle and liberating form of expression conveys complex emotions difficult to articulate verbally[7]. Methods such as regularly taking "emotional photo diaries" enable students to externalize internal emotional states into tangible artworks, allowing them to review these images from a third-person perspective, deepening self-awareness and reflection on their emotional patterns. Writing film reviews or character diaries after viewing sessions is also an effective means of promoting self-awareness, as students project their internal psychological journeys onto their narratives, reflecting inner processes.

### 5.3 Empathy and Interpersonal Support Mechanism

Artistic experiences, especially image art, frequently involve group interactions, creating favorable conditions for fostering empathy and providing social support. Powerful films or photographs deeply move people because they depict universally relatable human emotions. When students watch the same film together, emotional connections naturally form amid shared laughter and tears, enabling mutual understanding of their emotional reactions to the storyline, thereby fostering resonance and empathy. Research shows that engaging in positive artistic appreciation activities enhances empathy development in youth, helping them regulate emotional responses for both themselves and others[8]. This occurs because image art, through narrative contexts, encourages viewers to experience life from another person's perspective, effectively serving as an empathy training process. During post-viewing discussions, when a student bravely shares personal experiences similar to those depicted in the film, classmates typically respond with empathetic gestures and understanding—an experience of support and validation crucial for psychological healing. Additionally, cooperative activities involving photography or video production necessitate communication and teamwork, strengthening trust and friendships among students. When a team member experiences emotional distress, peers offer encouragement and comfort, enhancing group cohesion and making students genuinely feel "not alone," drawing emotional support and psychological strength from their peers[9].

To clearly illustrate various psychological mechanisms of image art therapy and their specific effects, Table 2 summarizes critical roles of mechanisms including emotional regulation, self-expression and cognition, empathy and interpersonal support, psychological projection, trauma recovery, and positive psychological reinforcement, aiding readers in gaining a deeper understanding of how image art achieves psychological healing effects.

**Table 2. Key Therapeutic Mechanisms of Image Art Therapy.**

| Therapeutic Mechanism | Description |
|---|---|
| Emotional Regulation | Regulates emotions directly via audio-visual stimuli, relieving stress and fostering calmness and positive mood states. |
| Self-Expression & Cognitive Insight | Uses image creation/viewing for non-verbal emotional expression, enhancing self-reflection and insight. |
| Empathy & Social Support | Engages groups in shared image experiences to foster empathy, emotional understanding, and social support. |
| Psychological Projection | Projects internal emotions onto images or characters through creation/viewing, indirectly releasing psychological distress. |
| Trauma Recovery | Safely revisits and explores traumatic experiences through visual media, gradually reducing psychological impact. |
| Positive Psychology Reinforcement | Reinforces positive emotions and enhances subjective well-being and psychological resilience via positive-themed imagery. |

### 5.4 Summary

Image art plays a comprehensive and multi-dimensional role in psychological healing among college students. From directly regulating emotions to facilitating internal self-expression, and further enhancing interpersonal empathy and social support, these mechanisms interact synergistically, making image art not only a critical tool in university mental health education but also offering a warmer and more nuanced support system for students' psychological development. In the future, universities should further explore and expand the therapeutic potential of image art, adapting continuously to evolving student mental health needs and consistently enhancing the effectiveness of psychological education.

## 6 Conclusion

As a significant medium of aesthetic education in universities, image art holds unique value in psychological health education and art therapy practices among college students. Its vivid expressiveness and emotional resonance effectively contribute to preventive interventions in psychological issues, enriching the nurturing function of aesthetic education on students' emotional well-being. Furthermore, image art therapy transcends the limitations of traditional verbal counseling methods, penetrating student populations in more accessible ways. By helping students regulate emotions, release stress, offer safe pathways for self-expression, enhance self-awareness, and encourage

personal growth, image art therapy significantly improves empathy and social support through group experiences. Given the multiple psychological challenges confronting contemporary students, the integrated application of image art demonstrates substantial practical significance and promotional value.

Future research could focus on exploring differences in therapeutic efficacy among various forms of image art, and investigate specific intervention mechanisms targeting psychological issues such as social anxiety and academic burnout. Additionally, exploring integrated therapeutic models combining image therapy with cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness practices could offer valuable insights. Emerging new media art forms, such as virtual reality films and interactive image therapy, also merit attention for their promising potential in psychological healing contexts.

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