

# From Symbolic Walls to Affective Worlds: Spatial Self-Organization and Youth Subjectivity in ACG Subcultures

Zhengyang Liu, Pingfan Cui

Marxism Studies, Shanghai University of Sport, Shanghai 200438, China

---

**Abstract:** ACG (Anime, Comic, Game) subcultures have emerged as pivotal cultural forms among youth in the digital era, forming dynamic ecosystems that deviate from conventional social and institutional spaces. This paper proposes the concept of “spatial subcultures” to analyze how bullet screen commentary, self-organizing online communities, and the aesthetic ideal of “pure love” co-construct emotional belonging, identity formation, and cultural autonomy. Drawing on spatial sociology and complexity theory, the article offers a framework to interpret contemporary youth cultures beyond instrumental rationality.

**Keywords:** ACG subcultures; Spatial theory; Bullet screens; Youth identity

---

## 1. Spatial Subcultures and the Reconfiguration of Youth Identity

A defining feature of contemporary youth culture is its detachment from formalized institutional spaces and its gravitation toward fragmented, virtual, and decentralized cultural zones. Within these spaces, individual expression is no longer mediated by traditional structures of authority but is enabled through anonymity, synchronicity, and shared symbolic practices.

Spatial sociology emphasizes that social space is not a static container but a dynamic and produced construct. As Lefebvre<sup>[1]</sup> argues, distinct modes of production yield distinct spatial forms. In the context of youth subcultures, space emerges organically through decentralized participation and adaptive reorganization—a hallmark of self-organizing systems.

What we term here as “spatial subcultures” refers to cultural systems that construct symbolic boundaries via specific media forms (e.g., bullet screens), operate through decentralized communities, and are sustained by affective and aesthetic orientations. These systems do not rely on linear communication but instead evolve through nodal connectivity and emotional resonance.

The appeal of such spatial subcultures lies not in their didactic or utilitarian value, but in their capacity to provide temporary refuge from societal pressures and a space for identity experimentation. These systems are best understood not as discrete subcultures but as affective spatial topologies, in line with Shields’s cultural spatial theory<sup>[2]</sup>.

Spatial subcultures emerge not only as aesthetic experiments but as responses to systemic exclusions in institutional and public discourses. Many youth report feeling unheard or misrepresented in school settings, mainstream media, or civic life. Within ACG spaces, however, they reclaim narrative agency—constructing worlds where their values, humor, and identities are legible and central. What appears as niche escapism is often a reaction to cultural disempowerment in dominant social spaces. These subcultures thus serve as zones of symbolic reparation, where dislocated subjectivities can recompose coherence and visibility.

## 2. Bullet Screens: Discursive Boundaries, Affective Synchrony, and Spatial Belonging

Bullet screens enable viewers to post comments that appear in real-time across the screen, fusing reception and expression into a shared temporal-spatial experience. This interaction disrupts the linearity of traditional media consumption and gives rise to a digitally co-present cultural space.

More than a medium of expression, bullet screens function as gatekeeping mechanisms of cultural literacy. With their distinctive lexicon, memes, and visual codes, they demarcate who belongs and who doesn’t. This semiotic exclusivity strengthens in-group identity while excluding unfamiliar outsiders.

Terms like “Incoming High Energy,” “2333” (laughter), or “Elementary kids get out” have diffused into general digital culture, but their original contexts and emotive nuances remain legible primarily to experienced users. Such ‘soft thresholds’ create symbolic boundaries for cultural participation, functioning much like the pop-cultural filters described by Jenkins<sup>[3]</sup>.

Bullet screens also generate a sense of “virtual co-presence.” Users experience emotional simultaneity through shared screens, cultivat-

ing a collective awareness even in the absence of physical proximity.

Unlike the passive silence of a cinema audience, bullet screen spaces are elective and participatory. One may observe, contribute, mimic, or innovate. Viewing becomes a performative and communal act.

Critically, bullet screens offer a mechanism for psychological escapism and emotional regulation. They externalize interior states into visible, socially validated streams, granting users a sense of agency and symbolic control. For many, they function as emotional release valves within constrained daily routines. This is consistent with Harari's argument that as individuals drift away from embodied experiences, they increasingly turn to symbolic systems for meaning and connection<sup>[4]</sup>.

### 3. Communities: Nonlinear Networks and Self-Organizing Cultural Systems

Unlike conventional clubs or interest groups, ACG communities do not rely on top-down organization. Instead, they emerge organically through digital interaction, exemplifying the principles of self-organization.

A defining trait of these communities is their nonlinear structure. They operate through loose yet resilient networks, lacking central authority. Individuals act both as participants and co-constructors of norms, enabling emergent collective order through ongoing interaction<sup>[8]</sup>.

These communities are driven by a desire to share bounded cultural codes. Once individuals achieve symbolic fluency in a subcultural language, they are often compelled to seek resonance with others. The community thus serves not merely as a space of intake, but as a networked system of mutual recognition and affiliation.

In practice, such communities often extend from online interaction to offline collaboration—through cosplay troupes, fan conventions, or intercollegiate anime alliances. This "digitally initiated, physically grounded" structure reveals how virtual culture reshapes real-world social formations.

Crucially, these communities grant participants relatively equal discursive agency. Leadership is diffuse, and governance relies less on formal rules than on shared symbolic capital and affective resonance.

Such structures are highly adaptive and expansive. When distinct communities intersect, they often give rise to hybrid cultural ecosystems—an embodiment of "catachrestic mutation," as theorized in complexity science<sup>[4]</sup>.

The emergence of collaborative platforms and federated campus clubs across global universities signals a transition: from niche to networked, from invisible to institutionalized.

### 4. "Pure Love": Aesthetic Sentiment and the Affective Logic of Virtual Empathy

In ACG subcultures, "pure love" refers not to conventional romantic plots but to an aesthetic sensibility marked by emotional idealism, affective intensity, and the intentional detachment from real-world constraints.

Its conceptual lineage can be traced to the Japanese aesthetic of "mono no aware"<sup>[9]</sup>, which centers on empathy toward transient beauty and ephemeral affect. Rather than a realistic romance, "pure love" in this context embodies a yearning for emotional purity—a desire staged within virtual narratives, not real-world experiences. This mirrors the aesthetics of mono no aware, as articulated in East Asian media traditions and specifically explored in Wan's work on anime culture<sup>[7]</sup>.

In participant surveys, respondents often described "pure love" as "unrealistic but emotionally necessary," or "a place to rest when real life becomes too complex." This suggests its function as a psychological safe zone, offering symbolic reprieve from cognitive overload and emotional fatigue.

This aesthetic does not promote mimetic behavior. Most participants clearly distinguish virtual narratives from lived realities, asserting: "I enjoy it, but I wouldn't imitate it." For them, "pure love" facilitates identity work and emotional expression in symbolic space—not real-world commitment.

At a deeper level, the "pure love" aesthetic sustains emotional continuities with childhood. It compensates for the emotional security often eroded by early socialization pressures, allowing youth to maintain a symbolic state of adolescence through affective fantasy.

In this light, "pure love" is not only a subcultural trope but also a spatial defense mechanism against the disintegration of emotional continuity. It sustains a form of digital romanticism, wherein symbolic retreat becomes a mode of preserving subjective coherence<sup>[10]</sup>.

### 5. Bridging Virtual Symbolism and Real-World Economies: A Policy-Oriented Perspective

While ACG subcultures offer valuable spaces for emotional exploration and cultural autonomy, unmoderated immersion in symbolic universes can lead to disorientation, identity fixation, or escapist tendencies among youth. A responsive policy framework is thus needed—not to suppress ACG participation, but to guide its integration with real-world civic and economic ecosystems. Public education and digital literacy programs can help young users critically engage with symbolic content, distinguishing affective resonance from ideological absolutism.

More importantly, cultural governance should support the translation of ACG symbolic creativity into tangible industries. Instead of confining cosplay, or narrative fandoms to online echo chambers, targeted policies can promote their transformation into cultural tourism, interactive entertainment, and creative IP ventures. For instance, municipalities could establish themed festivals, ACG-integrated urban art programs, or youth-led animation incubators. This approach not only fosters employment and cultural entrepreneurship, but also grounds symbolic fantasy in participatory real-world practices. In doing so, ACG becomes not a retreat from reality but a generative site for economic innovation and democratic expression.

## 6. Conclusion: Youth Subjectivity and the Governance of Digital Subcultures

ACG culture is not merely an aggregation of niche interests. It is a multi-layered cultural space that integrates symbolic language, decentralized community dynamics, and affective aesthetics. Bullet screens enable synchronous expression, communities foster non-hierarchical collaboration, and “pure love” offers emotional sanctuary and symbolic coherence.

This spatial subculture structure reveals an essential truth: youth subjectivity has not disappeared but has instead migrated into symbolic and anonymized spaces. Rather than viewing youth as “immersed in escapism,” we might better understand them as actively reconfiguring identity through digital-cultural practices. David Harvey reminds us that space is never neutral—it encodes relations of power, justice, and access <sup>[5]</sup>.

This shift calls for a methodological reorientation: moving beyond behavioral or moralist frameworks, youth cultural studies must adopt spatialized and systemic approaches to understand the structural logic of subcultural formation.

Public cultural policy must also reckon with the legitimacy and vitality of such emergent spaces. Across the globe, youth-led cultural self-organization challenges linear and top-down governance models. The key question is not how to suppress such movements, but how to engage them in shaping broader modes of public culture.

As a spatially self-organizing phenomenon, ACG culture provides a mirror of contemporary youth experience. It is both a refuge from societal pressures and a potential platform for new forms of civic participation. Understanding this process is not only a scholarly imperative but a strategic necessity for inclusive cultural governance.

---

## References

### Books and Book Chapters

- [1] Lefebvre, H. *The Production of Space*; Nicholson-Smith, D., Trans.; Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 1991.
- [2] Shields, R. *The Spatial Questions: Topologies of Culture and Social Theory*; Routledge: London, UK, 2013.
- [3] Harari, Y.N. *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*; Spiegel & Grau: New York, NY, USA, 2018.
- [4] Simmel, G. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*; Wolff, K.H., Ed. and Trans.; Free Press: New York, NY, USA, 1950.
- [5] Prigogine, I.; Stengers, I. *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*; Bantam Books: New York, NY, USA, 1984.
- [6] Harvey, D. *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*; Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 1996.

### Journal Articles

- [7] Jenkins, H. Pop Cosmopolitanism: Mapping Cultural Flows in an Age of Media Convergence. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2004, 7(2), 152–172.
- [8] Ito, M. et al. *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*; MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2010.
- [9] Wan, L. Yuri and “Mono no Aware”: A Study on Japanese Anime Aesthetics. *Beijing Soc. Sci.* 2014, 6, 39–41.
- [10] Shen, X. *The Philosophy of Self-Organization and Chaos Theory*; Beijing Normal University Press: Beijing, China, 2008.