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Navigating Sacred Soundscape in the Post-Secular Age: A Critical Analysis of the (Re)Production and Consumption of Digital Non-Traditional Religious Music Among Chinese Youth

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Abstract

This research explores how Chinese youth, most of whom lack formal religious beliefs or affiliations, engage with digital non-traditional religious music, such as electronic adaptations of the Great Compassion Mantra chant, on platforms such as Bilibili. A total of 15 interviews and one year of digital ethnography were conducted to examine how various music mediators, such as music, technology, the environment, and the cultural context, shape youth's affective states, namely their states of tranquility, trance, and transcendence. This study reinserts musicality into the social and cultural studies of religious music and identifies more fluid, contingent, and processual forms of associations and articulations between different mediators, along with the more emergent and ambient affective states brought about by such mediators, their networks, and related mediation processes. In addition, this study reveals Chinese youth's hybridized and idiosyncratic practices that combine alternative spiritual elements with secular experiences, highlighting the context-specific ways in which Chinese youth navigate spirituality in the post-secular age.

Keywords: alternative spirituality; Chinese youth; affective states; digital religious music; music mediation

1. Introduction

Late at night, a university student in Beijing sits down to relax after studying. Instead of lo-fi hip-hop, he clicks a video titled "The Sutra of Mahapratisara Dharani (House Remix)". With headphones on, a four-on-the-floor house beat and shimmering synth pads swell beneath a looped chant that recites the Dharani's canonical text verbatim. The student lowers the lights, lets the music regulate breathing, and begins to feel a shift: not worship in an institutional sense, but a trance-like attentional tunnel, a sense of being "cleansed", and moments of reflection about study, anxiety, and what a meaningful life could be. This small scene offers a window onto the phenomenon this research investigates: how digitally remixed music with the elements of religiosity circulates as an everyday music resource for affect regulation and reflexive meaning-making, through which alternative spirituality takes shape.

In the post-secular age (Wilson and Steger 2013; Habermas 2008), when religion is no longer simply seen as being backward, but rather is increasingly recognized as continuing to matter in public and cultural life, traditional religious practices persist. However, the aspects of religious practice have diversified, ranging from institutional worship and prescribed rituals (e.g., congregational services, prayer, sacraments) to individualized spiritual techniques (e.g., meditation, healing, self-cultivation); culturally mediated practices

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embedded in popular culture and subcultural scenes; and the emergence of digital religious practices, such as "online religion" (Bruce 2000; Bruce and Voas 2023; Heelas 2002; Thornton 2021; Wilson and Steger 2013; Helland 2005).

Within this post-secular context, the boundaries between religion, religiosity, and spirituality have become increasingly blurred. Following Durkheim (2001), religion refers to a unified system of beliefs and practices that binds adherents into a moral community (a "Church"). Therefore, this research uses "religion/religious" primarily for institutionalized belief systems, formalized teachings, and ritual practices. In comparison, "religiosity" is understood more broadly as modes of engagement with religious meanings and practices that may operate both within and beyond formal institutions (Berger 2002). In line with Heelas (2002), "spirituality" is used to describe individualized (non-institutionalized), experiential, and affective orientations—often centered on self-transformation, healing, or transcendence—that do not necessarily involve belief in a fixed deity but may intersect with or overlap with elements of "religiosity".

In this context, religious music and its related practices are significant aspects. In recent years, an increasing number of young Chinese people have been drawn to digital non-traditional religious music on social media. Here, a dichotomy between "digital traditional religious music" and "digital non-traditional religious music" is employed to highlight the electronic and popular adaptations of traditional religious music within the Chinese context. The intention is not to exclude other forms of non-traditional religious music, such as cross-religious fusion music or newly composed religious music (cf. Devine 2011; Partridge 2006), which are also important areas of research in this field. However, it is crucial to clarify that the scope of "digital non-traditional religious music" in this research specifically refers to electronic and popular adaptations of traditional religious music that are based on pre-existing religious texts, established musical repertoires, or conventionally prescribed modes of performance and instrumentation, such as Fan Bai (Tan 2012), within a given religious tradition (primarily Buddhism, though sometimes also related to Taoism or even Christianity) within the digital context of China (see Appendix C for examples). Although this is an intriguing and crucial phenomenon, related studies are rare since the current research focuses more on traditional religious music in digital format and listeners with specific religious beliefs and affiliations when discussing digital religious music (Hutchings 2011; Thornton 2021; Ingalls 2018). It is significant to explore neglected issues, such as how Chinese youth, a group without obvious religious affiliations or beliefs, are immersing themselves in digital sacred musical ambience and then entering into affective states through (re)producing and consuming such music. Furthermore, although it is sensible to examine music from a macro and structural perspective, namely its role as a cultural form of capitalism or its connection to social class (Adorno 2020; Bourdieu 1984), it is also valuable for this research to study how digital non-traditional religious music as mediation (Hennion 2017) can bring about specific and situated affective states (DeNora 2000). This analytical perspective, among other things, could contribute to current social and cultural studies of alternative spirituality and religious music.

This paper first summarizes the existing literature on religious music studies, indicates the existing gaps, delineates the theoretical framework, and proposes the research questions. Then, the methods adopted in this research, namely digital ethnography and in-depth interviews, are described in detail in the Methods and Methodology section. Subsequently, the Results section shows the empirical findings from two perspectives, namely mediation in the interaction of Chinese youth with digital non-traditional religious music and Chinese youth's affective states brought about by music mediation. Finally, the Discussion section synthesizes the existing literature and empirical findings to further examine mediation, affective states, alternative spirituality, and alternative forms of religiosity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Traditional Religious Music

"Traditional religious music" refers to the canonical vocal and instrumental music used in formal rituals and liturgies of established religious traditions. This kind of music is typically embedded in—and gains much of its meaning from—religious rituals (Hackett 2012). An example from Chinese Buddhism is the chanting of the Great Compassion Mantra—a core piece of Chinese Buddhist "Fan Bai" performed during rituals (Di 2018; Tan 2012).

Scholars have explored how religious music relates to rituals, and then leads to different spiritual states, such as the study of "Sonic Theology" (Beck 1995) and "Significant Silences" (Peek 2000; Nettl 2005). Scholars have also explored the construction of sacred space by religious music through the study of the Bosavi population in Papua New Guinea (Feld and Brenneis 2004) and the analysis of "Acoustic Ecology" (Schulz 2008). Although these studies have contributed significantly to how music leads to spiritual experience and sacred atmospheres, they risk being too focused on specific groups as the research subject, while neglecting members' individual characteristics. Relatively few scholars have explored the influence of music on certain individual affective states, such as the study of the "Trance Phenomenon" (Rouget 1985; J. Becker 2004).

In general, most studies on traditional religious music have focused on, or at least involved, the influence of religious music on certain states, such as an individual's inner emotional conditions influenced by beliefs and connections to the sacred realm (Giordan 2016). Therefore, this research also focused on Chinese youth's context-specific states brought about by religiosity-related music.

However, in the context of rapidly evolving social dynamics, the scholars above may have been subjected to some limitations. For instance, they tended to limit their research subject to traditional religious music. Religious or religiosity-related music in the post-secular age and its changing forms ought to be investigated as well, and this research explored that topic.

2.2. Religious Music in the Post-Secular Age

Traditional religious music still exists in the post-secular age, such as in the late 20th century and 21st century (Wilson and Steger 2013), when religion regained widespread influence. However, aspects of its listeners, (re)producers, and forms may evolve, with formal innovation occurring through the incorporation of diverse musical elements such as pop music melodies, electronic components, dance rhythms, or instruments such as African drums and Indian tablas (Devine 2011; Partridge 2006).

Notably, people without religious beliefs also (re)produce or consume music related to religiosity (Partridge 2006). However, scholars have not paid much attention to these secular listeners and (re)producers.

In addition, the music that blends elements of religiosity with popular or electronic music styles has been increasingly discussed. Partridge (2006) studied how listeners experience spirituality through this kind of music, framing such experiences as a form of "re-enchantment". Extending this line of inquiry, scholars have examined how similar music forms (sharing formal similarities while possibly being rooted in different institutional or cultural contexts) are used in current Christian worship to create a spiritual experience (Ingalls 2018, 2019), and how the materiality of other similar music (physical and sensory aspects of music, such as the volume, frequency, and texture) enables listeners to achieve spiritual states (Devine 2011).

These studies offer detailed analyses of this kind of music. Yet, what should be indicated is that the music's digital aspect, such as the listener's (re)producing and consuming

practices of such music on platforms, has seldom been discussed. In addition, although there are many similarities between the music discussed above and "the electronic and popular adaptations of traditional religious music in China" ("digital non-traditional religious music" defined by this research), such as the spirituality-related practices, the Chinese context is distinct due to its cultural context (e.g., different religious background), while the specific music forms and audience reactions vary accordingly. Therefore, it is valuable for this research to explore the phenomenon of electronic and popular adaptations of traditional religious music, specifically within the Chinese context.

2.3. Digital Religious Music

As digital music circulation has shifted from physical media to platform-based and cloud-based streaming systems, music is increasingly stored and accessed as digital files that can be downloaded or streamed (Li and Hesmondhalgh 2025). According to Bello and Garcia (2021), digital music can attract listeners with different tastes and enable them more freedom in the way that they consume and (re)produce music. The same trend has been seen in religious music (Hutchings 2011). Religious music has been massively (re)produced and consumed on social media by people, both religious and secular.

Among them, digital traditional religious music has been widely discussed. One of the most common topics that scholars focus on is how this music can contribute to constructing an online virtual worship space—including chatrooms such as St Pixels' chatroom, video streaming, virtual environments such as the game Second Life, and social media platforms such as Facebook and Church Online, where worship communities engage through posts and live streams—that supports regular worship behavior in virtual spaces (cf. Hutchings 2011).

The way in which digital traditional religious music helps to digitally (re)create religious experiences is crucial in the Western context. However, in China, most young people do not have specific religious beliefs and affiliations, so the Chinese youth pay less attention to digital traditional religious music; rather, (re)producing and consuming digital non-traditional religious music is more about the pursuit of spirituality, such as inner peace or personal growth (Heelas 2002). Thus, it was significant for this study to focus on the spiritual impact of digital non-traditional religious music on Chinese youth.

Thornton (2021) observed this emerging phenomenon of the prevalence of digital religious music with pop or electronic elements, namely "Contemporary Congregational Songs", on YouTube. Nevertheless, in his analysis, most listeners of this kind of music were still found to have certain religious beliefs and affiliations.

In general, while scholars such as Hutchings (2011) have clearly described how digital traditional religious music has shaped the online sacred space for believers' worship practice, and scholars such as Thornton (2021) have analyzed Christian believers' interactions with digital religious music that contains pop or electronic elements, they have rarely examined the (re)production and consumption of digital non-traditional religious music by (re)producers and listeners who lack specific religious beliefs or affiliations in virtual spaces, such as social media platforms. In the Chinese context, scholarship on this issue also remains especially limited. By analyzing Chinese youth's practices of (re)producing, consuming, and appreciating digital non-traditional music, this research aimed to fill this gap.

2.4. Religious Music in China

In China, traditional religious music is mainly related to Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Yan and Tang 2022). Although religious music was defined as "traditional Chinese culture", under the ideology of atheism, it was restricted in certain respects for a long

time (Qing 1994). This social background renders the Chinese context of religious music markedly different from that of existing studies.

Regarding religious music studies in China, scholars have mainly focused on traditional religious music and its offline practice (Qing 1994). Digital non-traditional religious music—primarily (re)produced and consumed by Chinese youth and circulated via online platforms such as social media, video-sharing sites (e.g., Bilibili), and music-sharing sites (e.g., NetEase Cloud Music)—remains underexplored.

3. Adopting DeNora and Hennion for Religious Music Studies

To better analyze religious music, it is also crucial to refer to scholars whose area of study is related to music. It is reasonable to view music from a relatively macro and structural lens, namely as a popular cultural form of capitalism (Adorno 2020), the cultural struggle between different social classes (Bourdieu 1984), a part of the cultural circuit (Hall 1997), a symbol of resistance (Hebdige 1979), collective action within an 'art world' (H. S. Becker 1982), or an everyday soundscape constructed under commercial and media conditions (Frith 1987). However, for the purpose of this research, it is more relevant to focus on a micro- or meso-level, specifically the music and musicality—such as the melody, rhythm, and genre—along with related practices, such as how people engage with the music and how these elements influence individuals' affective and spiritual states, which is central to the study of religious music.

As a "technology of the self" (DeNora 1999; Foucault 1988) or "prosthetic technology" (DeNora 2000), music can be used by individuals to manage their personal states. As an active resource for self-shaping, music can foster both recognizable emotional states (moods such as happiness or sadness) and more affective experiences—shifts in bodily energy, orientation, or atmosphere. Rather than being pre-existing, such affective experiences and states are reflexively constructed and continuously adjusted through musical use and through music's interaction with the surrounding environment (DeNora 1999, 2016). The use of music affords the ongoing modulation of feeling and bodily energy, and these shifts can become consequential for identity work and patterns of action (DeNora 2004, 2016). This perspective is particularly well-suited to the study of religious music, where scholars often examine how musical practices may help people cultivate, sustain, and interpret spiritual experiences in situated settings. These insights are particularly useful for bringing music and affect back into social and cultural studies of religious music.

At the same time, non-human actors, such as technological actants, should be considered when studying digital religious music. The mediation theory (Hennion 2017) and actor–network theory (Latour 2007) could take these actors into consideration. Mediation is not an external tool but an intrinsic social and technical part of music itself, while various mediators, such as music, media technology, and socio-cultural contexts, work together to construct music and musical experiences (Hennion 2012). Specifically, the concept of "mediation" is used in the sense articulated by Hennion (2017): not as the common definition of simply resolving a conflict, nor as merely a neutral medium that transmits meaning between two fixed, pre-existing poles, but as the situated assemblage of heterogeneous "mediators"—music genres, devices, platforms, bodies, listening environments, and the listener's cultural background—through which the "musical object" and the "listening subject" are jointly made and continuously (re)presented. Following this approach, the research focus is shifted from "the music" or "the audience" to the "mediators" and practical set-ups that bring them together and make specific experiences possible (Hennion 2017). More specifically, "mediators" are the elements that enact and make possible the "mediation", while the "mediation" itself refers to the process of linking and assembling these "mediators" to generate specific effects or experiences (Hennion 2017). Therefore, medi-

ation is the mechanism or dynamic process through which various mediators—through their interactions—bring the music and listener together.

This approach is aligned with the actor–network theory (ANT) (Latour 2007), which highlights the importance of non-human actors (actants), such as devices and platforms, alongside human actors, and how they work together in a network to generate specific outcomes. To some extent, "mediators" function as "actors" or "actants" within actor-networks that constitute particular mediation processes. In this framework, the mediation of music is not just a process of transmission, but a dynamic interaction between a range of mediators (actors)—both human and non-human—that collectively produce the experience of music.

Therefore, Hennion's research can contribute to relocating music as complicated assemblages of mediation, thus helping this research to better analyze digital non-traditional religious music in virtual spaces.

In conclusion, to analyze digital non-traditional religious music, this research adopted the theoretical framework of DeNora and Hennion to highlight the mediation of such music and Chinese youth's affective states.

On these grounds, this research posed the following two research questions:

RQ1. *What are the mediators in and through which Chinese youth can (re)produce, consume, and appreciate digital non-traditional religious music?*

RQ2. *What are the different affective states brought about by the mediation processes of digital non-traditional religious music among Chinese youth?*

4. Methods and Methodology

This research examined Chinese youth's consumption and (re)production practices of digital non-traditional religious music. The focus was on the mediators of this kind of music and how the music, as assemblages of mediation, leads Chinese youth into affective and spiritual states.

This research adopted interpretivism as the core research philosophy, which indicates that reality is constructed by individuals' subjective experiences. This aligns with the study's purpose to examine subjective meanings of digital non-traditional religious music among Chinese youth. Accordingly, this study adopted an exploratory, qualitative research design aimed at mapping an under-researched phenomenon rather than testing predefined hypotheses.

Regarding the specific methods, digital ethnography and in-depth interviews were applied in this study. These two methods explore the mediation processes of music, Chinese youth's subjective interpretation of digital non-traditional religious music, and their affective states after consuming or (re)producing this music. Digital ethnography was suitable for this research because it enabled the researcher to better study the practice of research subjects in virtual spaces such as social media (Varis 2015). In this section, the analytical approach, the sampling group, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations are further discussed.

To investigate how Chinese youth consume digital non-traditional religious music and explore the affective transitions experienced through their immersion in the digital context-specific ambience, this research drew theoretical insights from Hennion (2017) and DeNora (2000). By adopting Hennion's (2017) analytic framework and concepts, namely mediation theory, this study examined the various mediators involved in the interaction of Chinese youth with digital non-traditional religious music, while also delineating the processes of mediation. In addition to this, and informed by DeNora's studies on music therapy and musical affect, this research also explored how the mediation intimated in the

process of (re)producing and consuming this kind of music can enable Chinese youth to achieve specific affective states as they are immersed in digital non-traditional religious musical ambience.

Through a purposive sampling method, this study included ten digital fields (see Appendix B for specific information on the fields), namely four Bilibili (platform similar to YouTube) and three NetEase Cloud Music (platform similar to Spotify) digital non-traditional religious music influencers' comment sections, where users can share feelings and interact with other enthusiasts, and three QQ or WeChat (platforms similar to WhatsApp) groups, where the fans of digital non-traditional religious music can chat about and share how they consume and (re)produce digital non-traditional religious music. Regarding the in-depth interview, Chinese youth, as the main (re)producer and consumer group of digital non-traditional religious music, were the main research focus. The interviews included 15 active listeners or (re)producers, who were selected by the researcher during the digital field work. These interviewees had diverse educational backgrounds and were a balanced representation of males and females (see Appendix A for basic information on interviewees), who also met the following criteria:

1. The interviewees were heavy consumers or (re)producers of digital non-traditional religious music for more than one year.
2. The interviewees and their family members did not have specific religious beliefs or affiliations.
3. The interviewees were aged between 18 and 35.
4. The interviewees grew up in China.

The data were collected during a year-long ethnographic fieldwork period, from November 2024 to November 2025. This study employed participatory observation, where the researcher engaged in related digital practices such as listening to such music, browsing comment sections, chatting with fans in groups, and attempting to produce such music, while simultaneously observing the interaction behaviors of Chinese youth with digital non-traditional religious music in different digital fields. The researcher collected field notes during this process, and these records included the ways in which the participants interacted with the music. For example, the researcher observed how they shared their listening experiences in the comment sections, their reactions to musical adaptations, and how they expressed their feelings and interpretations of the music in group discussions. The active participants observed during the participatory observation process were selected and invited to be interviewees. All of the semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted virtually through Tencent Meeting, a remote conferencing application (similar to Zoom). Each interview lasted approximately 45 min. The interviews began by asking the interviewees to recall their habits, experiences, and feelings associated with listening to digital non-traditional religious music. Based on their answers, the researcher continued to follow up under the guidance of the theoretical framework of DeNora (2000) and Hennion (2017). The interviews continued until data saturation was reached, at which point no substantially new themes emerged.

After collecting enough data, the researcher coded the collected data according to a thematic analysis approach, which enabled the researcher to identify the main theme and patterns of the observation and interview (Creswell 2014). The data relating to mediation and affective states were coded thematically. Their relationship is further discussed by comparing.

In this research, ethical issues were carefully considered. The researcher obtained informed consent statements from the participants before conducting observations or interviews. Furthermore, no minors were involved in the study. Given that the topics discussed

were related to religions, the researcher ensured that all the observations, interviews, and discussions were conducted with sensitivity and without judgment.

5. Results

5.1. Mediation and Musical Practices

This research found that most of the participants were introduced to digital non-traditional religious music when they were at school. This kind of music in China is usually released on platforms such as Bilibili and NetEase Cloud Music. The most common form of such music is based on the traditional religious music of Buddhism, along with Taoism and sometimes even Christianity, which is made into a form of electronic (e.g., House, Ambient, or Glitch) or popular music (e.g., Hip-hop or R&B). Among these styles, the majority are House (an electronic music style that has a continuous, steady, and dynamic bass) or Ambient (an electronic music style that works well as background music). Importantly, the specific religious tradition on which the music was based was of relatively little significance for participants in this research. Instead, they engaged with the music primarily based on the musical style rather than its religious origins. Even when the music drew on different religious traditions, the participants engaged with it in largely similar ways, drawing on religious elements as spiritual resources to pragmatically facilitate personal spirituality or affective experiences. However, although the religious provenance of the music is relatively insignificant to participants, their engagements are not "anything goes". Following Altglas's (2014) argument that "religious/spiritual bricolage" is structured by conditions of availability rather than unfettered choice, participants' appropriations are shaped by genre conventions, platformed circulation, and the pragmatic pursuit of specific affective outcomes (e.g., tranquility, trance, transcendence). Furthermore, most interviewees reported some changes after listening to this kind of music. For example, they would view their life in a different way, as Mr. Liu mentioned: "Every time I listen to this music, I reflect on why I always get so caught up in the college entrance exam and grades". Others mentioned a changed vision of their future, as Ms. Ma stated: "Listening to this music helps me let go of the past, focus on the present, and look forward to the future".

In these cases, when Chinese youth interact with the digital non-traditional religious music, a variety of mediators and related mediation processes have also been found that allow young people to immerse themselves in a sacred ambience and bring forward specific affective states. This resonates with Hennion's (2017) emphasis that the "musical object" has to be produced through mediation; it exists in time and movement and becomes graspable via processes of mediation rather than as an autonomous entity.

5.1.1. Music as Mediators

The most salient mediator is the digital non-traditional religious music itself and the related musical adaptation. These adaptations typically retain the original religious text as lyrics and are delivered through vocal chanting, while the melody, orchestration, and instrumentation are reworked into electronic or popular styles.

Many participants indicated that they cannot listen to traditional religious music for very long. For instance, Mr. Zhou emphasized that traditional Buddhist music always annoys him, while he can listen to non-traditional Buddhist music for hours. Mr. Ye also described traditional religious music as "sudden peace" that lacks a smooth emotional transition compared with digital non-traditional religious music. In addition, it was observed that many commenters in the comment sections of influencers who (re)produce such music reported experiencing discomfort, or even fear, when listening to traditional religious music. Furthermore, Ms. Ma mentioned that listening to traditional religious music seems to give her only healing effects, while non-traditional religious music can bring her more

feelings and experiences, such as making her feel temporarily detached from everyday concerns or more inwardly focused. Therefore, electronic adaptation functions as a key mediator, linking young listeners to specific affective states through the broader processes of mediation.

Electronically produced sound effects and the sound design of the music were also frequently mentioned by the interviewees as mediators. Mr. Zhou, a (re)producer of such music, said that his fans often tell him that the sound effects in music make it easier for them to immerse themselves and feel or imagine according to the music. For example, low-pass filtered sounds (sounds without high frequencies) are more likely to evoke feelings of being underwater or trapped, thus tending to make listeners cry. Ms. Ma also said that the "lion roar" sound effect at the beginning of one of her favorite pieces in this kind of music immediately allowed her to enter a focused and solemn state.

In addition, the music's lyrics (e.g., the content of the mantra) are important mediators. Although most of the interviewees did not know the specific meaning of these religious texts, they felt that it could help them enter an affective state and immerse themselves in the sacred atmosphere, which rarely happens when listening to other popular songs with a language that they do not understand. For instance, Ms. Ma mentioned that every time she heard "Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha" in adaptations of the "Heart Sutra of Boro Boromita", she felt at peace, even if she did not understand what it meant.

Therefore, at the level of musicality, the mediators—including electronically adapted melodies, digitally produced sound effects, and traditional religious texts, as performed through chanting—work together to immerse young people in the sacred atmosphere and give rise to specific affective states.

5.1.2. Environments as Mediators

Participants also indicated the importance of the environment when they listen to such music. As a crucial mediator, the environment shapes the actor network through which the music is experienced and conditions the affective states that the music affords.

Most of the participants tended to listen to this kind of music in private spaces, such as a bedroom. For example, Mr. Tsang mentioned that his favorite thing is to listen to this kind of music hundreds of times alone on his balcony. A chair, a cup of tea, and digital non-traditional religious music playing on his phone would immerse him for a long time.

A private environment is a significant mediator not only for the appreciation of such music, but also during its production process. Mr. Zhou mentioned that he chose to build a "home studio" to create and record this kind of music because he would feel unable to fully express and chant the mantra in an outside studio. Only when he is alone and stays in his familiar bedroom with his computer, a few musical instruments, and other recording equipment can he find his true self and the feeling necessary to (re)produce this kind of music.

In some noisy and public environments, the affective states triggered by this music are not the same as those triggered in the privacy sphere. Mr. Tsang indicated that listening to this kind of music on the bus may only lead to a state of concentration that isolates him from external sounds, while listening alone will bring about a calmer and more reflective state, accompanied by wandering thoughts and personal reflection.

Moreover, even different weather conditions, as elements of the environment, can play a role. Mr. Tsang said that "Listening to this kind of music on a rainy day, even if it is the same song, can evoke affective states that would not typically be triggered. I once had an experience where, while walking through the rainy streets of Hong Kong and listening to this kind of music, I suddenly 'saw' a vision of a giant Buddhist statue".

In short, environments operate as active mediators that condition the kinds of affective states that listeners can achieve. This aligns with DeNora's (2000) argument that affective states are reflexively linked to the settings in which they are created and maintained, and that "environments" are not external to "the music", but part of the resources through which affective states take shape over time.

5.1.3. Technical Actants as Mediators

Technical actants, such as material ones like digital devices and virtual ones like platforms, are also significant mediators.

Material technical actants, such as specific devices, do more than "deliver" digital non-traditional religious music. In participants' accounts, they engage in mediation processes in various ways: they structure access, produce enclosure, and modulate perceptual intensity.

Participants would listen to digital non-traditional religious music on a computer or laptop in a private space, sometimes with a loudspeaker. These devices help bring this music into the private sphere, which most of them desire. However, mobile phones and headphones are the most frequently mentioned technical mediators. Their mobility gives young people the chance to choose the environment in which to listen. As has been mentioned before, the participants experienced different affective states in different environments, such as quiet private spaces or noisy public spaces, and mobile devices allow them to listen in almost any environment, which also allows for more possible affective states to be aroused.

Beyond mobility, technological devices can also intensify immersion. For instance, when Mr. Fu sometimes listens to such music on recorded cassettes rather than on his phone, he finds it easier to enter a calm, inwardly focused, and contemplative state, which potentially makes him more open to transcendent experiences, as every detail in the music feels clearer. Mr. Han made a similar point when referring to his Audio-Technica headphones. Here, immersion is not treated as an intrinsic property of the music alone, but as an achievement co-produced by specific technical actants.

In addition to material technological devices, some virtual technical actants, such as platforms, are also important. Platform affordances shift how attention is allocated, thereby altering how listeners enter and sustain affective states. Platforms such as the video-sharing platform Bilibili are significant technical actants for mediation. Bilibili provides such music alongside videos, although most of the interviewees in this research said they would prefer to use the function of "background playback" rather than watch specific videos. In this situation, a music-sharing platform such as NetEase Cloud Music can meet the major requirements of most interviewees. However, three of the interviewees indicated that visual images helped them engage better. Mr. Liu indicated that "I think my attention is probably 60% on video and 40% on music". He believes that visual images, especially more abstract ones such as twisting lines that fill the screen, can better guide him to enter different affective states. This contrast indicates that platformed listening is not uniformly audio-centric; rather, participants actively toggle between audio-only and audio–visual assemblages to regulate how affect is felt and sustained.

Finally, virtual technical actants also operate upstream in production. Both Mr. Fu and Mr. Zhou, who are (re)producers of such music, indicated that they would use digital audio workstations (DAWs), namely Ableton Live, FL Studio, or Logic Pro, to (re)produce this kind of music. This type of software applies the logic of traditional analog music (the early version of electronic music), imitates analog or hardware synthesizers, and provides virtual oscillators, filters, and amplifiers to recreate the production of analog music digitally, thereby enabling the (re)production of digital non-traditional religious music in

electronic styles such as House. With the help of DAWs as mediators, the styles and production logic of analog music can be applied to digital music production and make digital non-traditional religious music possible.

Overall, technical actants, both material and virtual, operate as mediators that restructure access, enclosure, perceptual intensity, attention allocation, and the conditions and stylistic possibilities of (re)production, thereby shaping not just whether listening happens, but also the kind of affective experience that becomes available. This directly echoes the notion that technical actants are not only immaterial channels, but also material objects that help embody and organize religious experiences and practice (Campbell and Connelly 2020; Evolvi 2022).

5.1.4. Cultural Background and Personal Experiences as Mediators

The cultural and personal experiences of the participants also significantly influenced their reactions to such music, including how they understand and interpret their affective states aroused by digital non-traditional religious music. This resonates with DeNora's (2000) point that musical materials often act through culturally conventional and biographical associations rather than semantic comprehension alone.

Some interviewees had some knowledge of Buddhism, and thus they tended to use Buddhist knowledge to interpret and make sense of their experiences. For example, Ms. Yang, who became interested in reading books related to Buddhism, usually adopted words such as "Vishuddhi" (清净) and "Anatta" (无我) to describe the affective states brought about by such music. Similarly, Mr. Zhou mentioned some words, including "Samadhi" (禅定) and "Bodhi" (觉醒). For interviewees who have some knowledge of other religions, even when listening to digital non-traditional religious music adapted from Buddhist tradition, they used concepts drawn from other religious traditions to describe and interpret their own state. For example, Mr. Wang would adopt "baptism" to describe his feeling when listening to some Buddhist mantras in the House style. However, in most cases, the interviewees tended to understand this type of music through more secular experiences. For instance, Mr. Fu and Mr. Tsang mentioned that their affective states aroused by such music are similar to certain atmospheres of scenes in science fiction movies or TV series, such as *Blade Runner* or *Ghost in the Shell*. Alternatively, the participants would use more normal words, such as freedom, peace, and so on, to describe and interpret their experiences.

In summary, through the various ways of interaction, articulation (how different actors are linked and coordinated in practice), and combination, these different types of mediators enable Chinese youth to immerse themselves in distinct and diverse atmospheres, resulting in various affective states.

5.2. Affective States and Experiences Brought About by Mediation

5.2.1. Peace and Tranquility

Peace and tranquility were the frequently mentioned affective states. Most of the participants indicated that listening to this kind of music makes them feel very calm. Specifically, Mr. Liu indicated that when he listens to this kind of music in the bedroom, especially when the music is adapted in an Ambient style, he enters an "empty" state and becomes extremely peaceful, without any emotional dynamics. Ms. Bu said, "Lie in bed, and hear this music, I will enjoy that I do not have to think about anything, and I can just empty my feelings". It is worth noting that this "tranquility" usually occurs when using a private setting as a mediator, in line with DeNora's (2000) observation that music typically brings about "peace" within specific intimate environments rather than functioning independently as a cause.

Mr. Ye and Mr. Wang further elaborated on the process of being peaceful. They indicated that this kind of music, especially those examples in House style with a regular and rhythmic drum as the bass, will smoothly guide them to gradually adjust their "frequency" to a peaceful state from a relatively excited state. This will occur without being too obtrusive.

In addition, this state can be very helpful in enabling them to achieve "flow states". Mr. Tsang mentioned that this kind of music makes him very calm, and then he becomes focused. He likes to listen to this kind of music while painting and designing. When listening to such music, he can free his mind, but this kind of "free mind" will not distract him from the work.

5.2.2. Trance

Trance-like experiences are often accompanied by phenomena such as time distortion, ego dissolution, and episodes of automatic behavior (Rouget 1985). While Rouget (1985) theorizes "trance" largely through ritualized settings, the results of this research indicate that similar experiential states can be achieved in platformed everyday digital non-traditional religious music listening through mediators such as technical actants, chanting, or specific environmental conditions.

A "reduced perception of the surroundings" was the point most often mentioned. Mr. Zhou, a producer of such music, mentioned that one of his fans told him that she was induced into a trance state and had near-death-like experiences when listening to Mr. Zhou's music. She could not feel herself and felt "cut off" from the world.

At the same time, while the perception of external surroundings is reduced, some listeners reported an intensification of internal perceptions or imagery. Mr. Tsang mentioned that listening to such music seems to help him see some illusion before him. For example, Mr. Tsang described that, once, when he was walking on a rainy Hong Kong street and listening to such music with some solemn chanting, he suddenly felt as if the people next to him and the car could not be perceived, and he "saw" a huge and mossy Buddhist statue standing in the middle of the city.

The reduction in external perception is also reflected in the transformation of subjectivity, particularly in the perception of the "self" and the body. Ms. Yang said, "When I listen to such music, I will sometimes feel that I am me, but I am not me". She can hardly identify or perceive herself when the chanting goes on for a while. Additionally, Ms. Zhang reported that this music can make her barely aware of her body, especially pain. After a major surgery, when she is in pain, this type of music can significantly reduce her feelings of pain to the point where she does not even need to use the "pain pump". Mr. Zhou stated that one of his fans who received treatment for rectal cancer had a similar experience.

Sometimes, automatic behavior induced by a trance state can also be found. Ms. Wang described that when she listens to this music, especially types that involve chanting, she would enter into a trance state very easily and do something unconsciously. She said, "There are several times when I listen to this kind of music in my dorm, I suddenly realize that I have been unknowingly singing along for a long time".

5.2.3. Healing and Empowerment

Healing is frequently mentioned as an outcome of certain affective experiences enabled by the music. For example, Ms. Ma indicated that when she is very sad, especially when she is in a private space, this kind of music, particularly those adapted to the House style, is like a person accompanying her to comfort her. She can feel the transmission of power from the music, and there is a sense of healing. Mr. Liu said that sometimes when he thought about the death of a loved one, he would feel sad, but this kind of music gave

him an inexplicable sense of uplift and healing. Ms. Liu said, "When I listen to this kind of music at high volume, I feel a numb sensation in my head, as if energy is flowing in, and my bad mood starts to fade away".

These accounts resonate with DeNora's (2000) argument that music can be used as a technology of the self—and even as a "prosthetic technology of the body"—through which listeners move out of dispreferred states and reorganize embodied energy and endurance in everyday life.

5.2.4. Transcendence of the Self

The state of transcendence of the self was mentioned by several interviewees. Although the interviewees gave different descriptions, they all mentioned a connection to the realm of transcendence. In this respect, these descriptions resemble what Yaden et al. (2017) termed "self-transcendent experiences"—transient states marked by a decreased self-salience and a heightened connectedness.

For example, Mr. Wang said that "The low-frequency sounds draw my soul out to another space". Mr. Han claimed that when he listens to such music, he enters a "sublimated, elevated, and extremely pure space" that is impossible to find in the material world. His own consciousness merges with the whole universe. Ms. Ma reported that when listening to such music, there will be a "good" field above, and it will constantly attract her to get closer. Ms. Yang also said that "Through such music, I can get from this world into another one that is extremely free and open. I enjoy exploring that world. Why do I feel that the world is free? Because the 'modern' elements, especially the electronic music elements, within this kind of music give me this feeling".

5.2.5. Reflections on Life, Being, and Existence

Participants frequently thought about life, being, and existence while listening to this kind of music. The most mentioned concern was the questioning of the present and asking themselves what they really want. Mr. Liu said that every time he listens to this kind of music, he obsesses about why he wants to take a college entrance examination, and then he questions why he obsesses about his score and studying. Mr. Tsang also pointed out that when listening to this music on a rainy day, he found himself repeatedly questioning whether material things—such as money—are truly sufficient to satisfy him.

Furthermore, this music prompts listeners to appreciate life. Mr. Tsang reported that the music encouraged him to look forward to the future. Ms. Ma indicated that listening to this music prevented her from thinking about the past, whether good or bad, and instead made her focus on the present and believe that the future is good. At the same time, interviewees' cultural backgrounds, such as their knowledge of Buddhism, shaped how they interpreted these states. Ms. Xie said, "When I listen to this music, I would think that I need to focus on the present moment, cultivate myself, get peace, and then guard against arrogance and impetuosity. I think that is exactly what Buddhism teaches us to do".

These affective experiences of reflection can be read as moments of identity work—an everyday "technology of the self" through which listeners temporarily re-order priorities and re-orient themselves toward desired ways of being (DeNora 1999; Foucault 1988). At the same time, such affective experiences are brought about by mediators such as participants' Buddhist knowledge, which supplies interpretative resources for self-cultivation (e.g., "focus on the present moment")—thereby extending accounts of music as a resource for identity work and as "technology of the self" into a spiritual and religiosity-related context.

6. Discussion

6.1. Reinserting Music and Musicality into Social and Cultural Studies of Religious Music

DeNora (2000, 2004) argues that it is important for social science scholars to take musical properties—such as melody, timbre, and genre—seriously, and to examine how these properties can influence areas traditionally emphasized in the social sciences, such as affect. Her work demonstrates that even seemingly minor formal details can scaffold situated orientations and affective experiences. For instance, she shows how the use of an "interval of a third" in background music played during airplane boarding can help to produce an atmosphere of "order" for passengers (DeNora 2000).

This attention to "music properties" and their affective consequences resonates with broader calls to take sound and listening seriously within the scholarship on religiosity, sound, and music. Scholars such as Ingalls (2019) and Devine (2011) similarly argue that sonic and musical dimensions should not be treated merely as contextual background, but as constitutive forces shaping religious experience, perception, and affective engagement.

This research also pays attention to such music properties. For example, it discussed how sound effects, like the "lion roar", can immediately elicit a focused and solemn attentional state. Likewise, the specific mode of singing—namely chanting—can bring about trance-like absorption, and may also open up the affective experiences of transcendence. In this respect, the analysis echoes Ingalls' (2019) emphasis on sacred sound and sonic immersion in digital religious practices, where vocal techniques such as chanting facilitate altered states of attention and absorption.

Foregrounding musical properties and their effects also enables this study to pay closer attention to genre—an aspect rarely examined. Thornton (2021), for example, distinguishes several types (genres) of digital music on YouTube that combine elements of religiosity with popular or electronic styles, classifying them according to musical characteristics and the ways in which music is associated with video content. Building on the attention he pays to styles, types, and genres, this study further examines how different musical genres shape listeners' affective states in distinct ways. The findings suggest that different adaptations of the same piece can evoke markedly different affective states. For instance, a House-style adaptation may feel empowering and more readily orient listeners toward a sense of transcendence, whereas an Ambient-style version is more likely to elicit affective experiences of relaxation or emptiness. Thus, rather than treating genres solely as classificatory labels or platform-based categories, this research also approaches genre as an affective and experiential configuration, through which distinct musical properties contribute to different affective states.

6.2. Music as an Assemblage of Mediators

Hennion (2017) argues that music does not exist as an autonomous or independent object; rather, it is constituted through actors, actants, mediators, and processes of mediation. In this view, multiple mediators interact, articulate, and hybridize to make music "real" in practice. For example, by conducting an ethnographic study in a music education class, he found that in-class interaction, student response, musical instruments, textbooks, and classroom environments construct music and musical education practices together (Hennion 2017). Similarly, DeNora (2000) emphasizes the role of multiple actors and actants in the process through which musical experiences and related affective states are produced before, during, and after listening. For example, she analyzed that for Lucy to alleviate stress through music, it needs the participation of a series of actors, such as "learning classical music since childhood", "the music is soothing piano music by Schubert", "the current environment is very quiet" (DeNora 2000). These studies collectively show that

music-related affective experiences emerge not only from musical properties themselves but also through extra-musical actors and mediators.

Based on these observations, this research applies and further elaborates on the mediation theory. Multiple mediators, namely electronic adaptation, various technological actants, and cultural backgrounds, have contributed to Chinese youth's consumption and (re)production of digital non-traditional religious music. Mediation influences not only whether young people choose to listen to this kind of music but also how they listen to it and how they experience its affective impacts. Changes in mediators can also cause significant differences, such as completely different affective states in different environments. In Meyer's (2013) terms, in particular moments, the mediators can cohere into a "sensational form" that renders certain affects experientially available and potentially repeatable under similar conditions, while when mediators shift across settings, certain desired affective experiences (e.g., calmness or immersion) can be harder to sustain, yielding markedly different affective states.

Furthermore, this study elaborates on mediation theory by foregrounding how relations among mediations are dynamic, revised, and sometimes reconfigured over time. Rather than treating such relations as completely "fixed", Hennion (2017) and DeNora (2000) show how articulations (how different actors are linked and coordinated in practice) among mediators, such as musical materials, settings, and forms of conduct, can be temporarily stabilized as practical achievements within particular social scenes, even as they remain open to revision over time. Building on this insight, the digital non-traditional religious music cases examined here further suggest that such articulations may be particularly more fluid, contingent, and processual (unfolding over time rather than occurring as fixed moments) when the mediation process is multi-modal and related to religiosity and spirituality. For instance, as interviewees gain a deeper understanding of Buddhist knowledge, they may change the way they listen to this music, attach new personal meanings to it, or interpret specific vocal techniques such as chanting differently, thereby reshaping their interactions with the same musical material. In this sense, relationships among mediators could be contingent and processual: they are assembled in practice, hold only provisionally, and are continually reconfigured as interpretive resources, situational conditions, and listening practices evolve over time.

6.3. Emergent Affective States and Experiences

DeNora has examined in detail how music can be used to regulate affect in everyday life, including accounts in which music functions as a kind of "asylum" and as a "technology of the self" (Foucault 1988; DeNora 1999, 2000, 2016). Consistent with this framework, this study likewise shows that participants actively utilize music for self-regulation—for example, to soothe themselves, to feel "healed", or to sustain a more focused attentional state.

What is worth noting, however, is that many participants in this study often describe affect as an ambiguous ambience or atmosphere that is difficult to verbalize. This emphasis on ambience aligns with Wanner's (2020) account of an "affective atmosphere of religiosity", where religiosity works through an ambient, often unmarked presence that can become "second nature" (more readily sensed than explicitly named) and thus elude recognition rather than registering as a neatly nameable inner state. By comparison, DeNora's (2000) cases often foreground more readily describable affective orientations (e.g., calm, a sense of order, well-being), articulated through relatively shared scripts of everyday conduct. Importantly, the contrast with DeNora is not that experiences found in this research fall outside her framework: DeNora (2000) cautions that what music will "cause" cannot be assumed in advance, and that no musical material is guaranteed to secure a predictable

action frame across situations. Rather, the difference lies in the degree of conventionalization and shareability of the scripts through which listeners can name and communicate what they feel. For instance, in DeNora's (2000) discussion of background music in flight, institutional settings and familiar genre conventions can help to stabilize a describable orientation such as a sense of "order".

In this research, mediators such as electronic adaptation, platform affordances, religious knowledge, and personal imagination combine in contingent and processual ways, making "emotion words" feel insufficient. Here, the processes of mediation are also platformed and cross-sited: as digital religion scholars note, religious or spiritual experience is produced across hybrid online–offline spaces (Siuda 2021) and across what Evolvi (2022) calls "hypermediated religious spaces" that connect multiple platforms with offline and material experience. In such settings, the scripts for naming and communicating feeling are often less conventionalized and less shareable, which helps explain why participants often describe affective and spiritual experiences as ambient and highly personalized—such as sensing a science-fiction-like atmosphere, "seeing" an illusion of a mossy giant Buddhist statue on a rainy Hong Kong street, or entering near-death-like experiences while listening to the music. These affective states of participants are difficult to verbalize and only contingently stabilized in practice, thus experienced by participants as particularly emergent.

6.4. Alternative Religiosity and Spirituality

According to James (2003), religious experiences are related to a range of subjective phenomena, namely conversion, saintliness, mystical states, and distinctive shifts in consciousness. James's (2003) discussion is especially helpful for interpreting several of the affective experiences observed in this study. Specifically, according to James (2003), some religious experiences are marked by ineffability (difficult to articulate), a noetic quality (are experienced as insight or revelation rather than mere emotion), and often a sense of passivity (as if one is "carried" into the state). Many participants' experiences resonate with these features: participants frequently describe trance-like absorption, diminished self-sense, and vivid internal imagery as difficult to put into words; they also frequently report a sense of existential insight; and these states are sometimes triggered immediately by specific electronic sound effects or chanting. At the same time, James's (2003) discussion of "mind-cure" and mental therapeutics in the context of religious experience foregrounds how experiences of relief and healing may involve the reorganization of affective and bodily states—an angle that helps interpret participants' descriptions of comfort, uplift, and reduced pain when listening to such music.

Nevertheless, a key divergence can also be observed. Whereas many of the classical religious cases discussed by James (2003) are narrated as relations to a divine presence or a personal God, the experiences reported in this research are rarely interpreted as encounters with a fixed deity or divine agency. Instead, they emerge in the absence of organized, institutionalized belief systems and are more often framed pragmatically as affective regulation, self-cultivation, or spirituality-oriented experience. This situation resonates with what Heelas (2002) describes as "New Age spirituality". Differing from theistic spirituality, New Age spirituality manifests itself more in the transcendental connection of the individual to the universe, nature, or a higher-dimensional being (immanent transcendence that spiritual meaning is located within embodied and affective experience) instead of emphasizing the connection with the transcendental deity (Heelas 2002). Specifically, Heelas (2002) describes New Age spirituality as being characterized by personalization, de-traditionalization, and non-institutionalization, while it focuses on the individual's life experience (experiential authenticity) rather than relying solely on external religious and traditional rituals, and can be aroused through de-traditional and personal practices, like

meditation, energy healing, and yoga. This is consistent with this research, where interviewees describe transcendence more as the universe or a "good field", and no one mentions a specific deity, while interviewees' spiritual states are also enacted through everyday individualized engagements with digital non-traditional religious music.

This observation also aligns with digital religion scholarship, which suggests that contemporary spiritual experiences are increasingly embedded in everyday digital practices rather than formal religious settings (Campbell 2023; Tsuria and Campbell 2021; Campbell and Evolvi 2020). Also, this can be further clarified through recent scholarship on youth spirituality. Studies on young people's religious orientations suggest that many youths position themselves as "spiritual but not fully religious" (Sbalchiero and Giordan 2024). In the Chinese context, research on Buddhism and youth culture similarly emphasizes affective and symbolic forms of religiosity that transcend doctrinal knowledge or institutional membership, especially in digital environments where religious content is encountered in fragmentary, symbolic, and customizable ways (Ouyang and Xie 2025). This helps explain why participants in this research engage with digital non-traditional religious music not as an expression of formal belief, but as a flexible spiritual resource.

Furthermore, Jensen (2025) even conceptualizes "religion" as a polythetic and practice-oriented category, sharpening this analysis. Jensen (2025) argues that religion should not be reduced to belief in gods or institutional affiliation but should be understood as a flexible assemblage of practices, representations, and affective orientations that may be unevenly distributed across contexts. From this angle, the practices observed here need not fully conform to conventional definitions of religion in order to be analytically meaningful as forms of religiosity. Instead, they occupy a "betwixt and between" ground (Heelas 2002), between religion and non-religion, where affective engagement, symbolic resonance, and experiential intensity take precedence over doctrinal coherence. In this sense, Chinese youth's engagement with digital non-traditional religious music is a form of lived, affective religiosity that is neither fully secular nor institutionally religious. Taken together, the findings extend James's (2003) insight by showing how experiences similar to "religious" states can arise within post-secular, digital contexts, where "spirituality" is increasingly decoupled from institutional religion and articulated through everyday cultural practices like music listening.

Based on these, it can be inferred that some part of Chinese youth's current practices of (re)producing or listening to digital non-traditional religious music can be a kind of alternative spiritual experience or even a kind of "religious" experience to some degree.

But at the same time, some reported reactions—such as "feeling peaceful" or "relaxed"—are also common in listening to secular music (e.g., popular music) in everyday listening contexts. Regarding these specific reactions, both participants' own interpretations and comparisons with existing research suggest that they do not have very obvious characteristics related to religiosity or spirituality. From this perspective, such practices can be understood as forms of affective regulation and everyday mood management (DeNora 2000), without necessarily invoking religiosity or spirituality. This ambiguity also resonates with Mosurinjohn's (2022) observation that affective states may operate across religious and secular contexts alike.

Therefore, Chinese youth's engagement with digital non-traditional religious music can be understood as comprising multiple experiential layers rather than constituting a uniform "religious" or "spiritual" phenomenon. It is perhaps best described as idiosyncratic, insofar as they include both kinds of "religious"/religiosity-related (primarily alternative spirituality), secular, and mixed elements.

6.5. The Comparison Between Alternative Spirituality in the West and China

According to Partridge (2006), in the context of "re-enchantment" and the rise of alternative spirituality, Western societies have also witnessed growing interest in musical forms that combine elements of religiosity with popular or electronic styles, sometimes associated with what he terms "occulture". Under conditions of secularization, spiritual engagement in these contexts tends to prioritize personal experience, emotional resonance, and existential reflection over institutional doctrines or formal religious authority (Bruce 2000; Partridge 2006). As Partridge (2006) notes, listeners frequently describe affective responses such as emotional resonance, moments of spiritual awakening, or a sense of connection to a larger universe when engaging with such music, rather than explicitly religious commitments. Importantly, similar experiential and affective dynamics have also been identified in musical forms that are formally similar but genealogically and institutionally distinct. For example, Ingalls's (2018, 2019) research on contemporary Christian worship music (church-based worship songs shaped by popular music styles and designed to structure embodied, affective, and participatory forms of Christian devotion) demonstrates that, despite its firm grounding in church-based theology and liturgical practice, listeners' engagement is frequently articulated through embodied feeling, emotional intensity, and a sense spiritual transcendence, rather than being primarily framed in terms of explicit doctrinal reflection.

In this respect, Western engagements with some modern adapted music that blends elements of religiosity with popular or electronic music styles share clear similarities with the affective and experiential orientations identified in this study among Chinese youth's practices related to digital non-traditional religious music.

However, an important contextual divergence should also be highlighted. In Partridge's (2006) discussion of "re-enchantment" and "occulture", anxieties are voiced—especially from Christian institutional perspectives—about alternative spiritualities (and related cultural forms) as potentially displacing Christianity and unsettling established theological and ecclesial boundaries. Related boundary work is also visible in scholarship on other similar music, though it is articulated less as religious displacement and more as debates over authority, authenticity, orthodoxy, and the musical legitimacy within Christian worship practices (Ingalls 2018, 2019; Devine 2011). Such tensions have also been observed in theological scholarship, where the contemporary rise of individualized spirituality is framed as conflicting with institutionalized Christianity and as a source of anxiety for religious institutions in Western societies (Schneiders 2003). This concern reflects the continued cultural presence of institutionalized Christianity in many Western societies, where alternative spiritual practices may be interpreted as competing with, or destabilizing, dominant religious frameworks. By contrast, such anxieties are largely absent in the Chinese context examined in this study.

This difference can be partly explained by the distinct religious and socio-cultural landscape of China. As Ji (2006) and Yan and Tang (2022) argue, China lacks a deeply entrenched, institutionalized religious system comparable to Christianity in the West. Consequently, religious symbols, concepts, and practices often circulate in more fragmented, culturalized, and instrumentalized forms. According to interview findings of this research and other related studies (cf. Ji 2006), Chinese people, especially the young, are open to various forms of religiosity, while in digital environments in particular, their religiosity-related experience and knowledge come from the frequent encounter with religious or religiosity-related elements through films, games, popular culture, and social media, rather than through formal religious education or institutional affiliation, thus being mixed, hybridized, and idiosyncratic. This also helps to explain why the participants in this study freely draw on concepts across religious traditions—such as using terms

like "baptism" to describe affective experiences triggered by music rooted in Buddhist traditions—without perceiving this as problematic or contradictory. This also suggests that there are no clear institutionalized boundaries limiting Chinese youth's perception of religiosity and spirituality.

In addition, this pattern—which could be understood as "religious/spiritual bricolage" (Altglas 2014)—also resonates with broader observations that digital platforms facilitate the decontextualization and recombination of religious symbols, enabling users to engage with spirituality in selective, personalized, and affect-driven ways (Campbell 2023; Campbell and Evolvi 2020; Tsuria and Campbell 2021). In such environments, religious and religiosity-related content is less constrained by institutional boundaries and more readily appropriated as a resource for self-exploration, spiritual experience, or existential reflection.

Consequently, Chinese youth may be particularly receptive to alternative forms of religiosity and alternative spirituality, not because of stronger religious commitment, but precisely because of the relative absence of institutional constraints and doctrinal gatekeeping. In this sense, the Chinese case does not simply mirror Western patterns of alternative spirituality but highlights how post-secular, digitally mediated contexts can give rise to distinct configurations of meaning, affective practice, religiosity, and spirituality.

7. Conclusions

This research focused on digital non-traditional religious music and its consumption and (re)production practices among Chinese youth. Elaborating on the theoretical framework drawn from Tia DeNora and Antoine Hennion, this research not only scrutinized the components of music mediators, such as the music, technical actants, the environment, and the cultural background, but it also brought the affective states and experiences into focus, such as peace, tranquility, healing, trances, and a sense of transcendence, which were experienced by the participants when immersing themselves in digital non-traditional religious music.

The contributions of this research include first bringing musicality, such as music genres, sound effects, and adaptations, back into the studies of religious music in the social sciences. In addition to using empirical data to support the theories of Hennion and DeNora, this research discovered more complex, processual, and fluid associations and articulations among all the components of music mediators through the framework of mediation theory. When the articulations among mediators are complex and the influencing mediators are diverse, the specific affective states addressed by participants in this research can be considered emergent and ambient compared with DeNora's research. Moreover, this study found that even without traditional religious practices such as rituals, Chinese youth who lack specific religious beliefs or affiliations can still experience certain forms of religiosity and spirituality, such as transcendence. Nevertheless, the practice of Chinese youth interacting with such music is also accompanied by many experiences free of religiosity or spirituality. Based on these points, it was concluded that the practices of Chinese youth listening to and (re)producing such music are hybridized and idiosyncratic. In the end, a comparison with Western cases highlights how China's relatively weak institutional religious embedding can allow alternative spirituality to be appropriated with fewer boundary constraints in everyday digital practice. Overall, this study contributes to the expanding scholarship on post-secular religiosity in China's digital contexts by illuminating how Chinese youth without specific religious beliefs or affiliations experience spirituality through mediated musical practices.

It should be noted that although this paper addresses a less well studied, yet still significant, issue, it has several limitations. First, the study was based on a relatively small

sample and was not intended to be statistically representative; the analysis focused on specific platforms, and the findings are therefore shaped by platform-specific affordances and user practices. In addition, as participation was voluntary, the study may have been subject to self-selection bias, foregrounding the experiences of more highly engaged listeners. In addition, this study does not situate the practices of Chinese youth in relation to broader socio-cultural structures. Future research may therefore draw on anthropology and the sociology of religion to further explore how music mediation relates to issues such as liminality, communitas, or identity-making in alternative ritualized spaces.

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Appendix A

Table A1. List of interviewees.

No.	(Last) Name	Age	Gender	Educational Background	Role
1	Fu	18	Male	Associate Degree in Sciences (ongoing)	(Re)Producer & Listener
2	Liu	18	Male	High School Diploma in Arts (ongoing)	Listener
3	Tsang	22	Male	Bachelor's degree in visual arts (ongoing)	Listener
4	Zhou	35	Male	Bachelor's degree in Arts	(Re)Producer & Listener
5	Ma	30	Female	Bachelor's degree in Arts	Listener
6	Ye	25	Male	Bachelor's degree in Arts	Listener
7	Zhang	30	Female	BSc & MA	Listener
8	Han	34	Male	Bachelor's degree in Arts	Listener
9	Liu	32	Female	Bachelor's degree in Arts	Listener
10	Wang	28	Male	Bachelor's degree in Arts	Listener
11	Xie	32	Female	Bachelor's degree in Sciences	Listener
12	Han	26	Male	Master's degree in Sciences (ongoing)	Listener
13	Wang	19	Female	Bachelor's degree in Sciences (ongoing)	Listener
14	Yang	21	Female	Bachelor's degree in Sciences (ongoing)	Listener
15	Bu	21	Female	Bachelor's degree in Sciences (ongoing)	Listener

Appendix B

Table A2. List of the digital ethnography fields.

No.	Field Name (CN)	Field Name (EN)	Platform	Field Type	Lengths of Participation
1	梵乐周承霖	Busic Zone	Bilibili	Comment area	1 year
2	梵乐周承霖	Busic Zone	NetEase Cloud Music	Comment area	1 year
3	未来紫歌	Vigo_Van	Bilibili	Comment area	10 months
4	未歌Vigo	Vigo_Van	NetEase Cloud Music	Comment area	11 months
5	付玉萍Mento	FuyupingMento	Bilibili	Comment area	0.5 month
6	常成狮子吼颂钵	Changcheng Lion's Roar Singing Bowls	Bilibili	Comment area	8 months
7	常成	Changcheng	NetEase Cloud Music	Comment area	7 months
8	周承霖的乐迷群	Zhou Lei Fan Group	WeChat Fans Group	Chatroom	1 year
9	芬尼根的守灵夜	Finnegans Wake	QQ Fans Group	Chatroom	2 months
10	花庄	Hua Zhuang	QQ Fans Group	Chatroom	2 months

Appendix C

Examples of "Digital Non-traditional Religious Music"
https://163cn.tv/Z29GiKh (accessed on 1 February 2026)
https://163cn.tv/Z35CNhq (accessed on 1 February 2026)
https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1si421k7cg (accessed on 1 February 2026)
https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1y1421b7n2 (accessed on 1 February 2026)

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