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Indie Encounters:
Exploring Indie Music Socialising in China

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Abstract

Indie music, a genre deeply rooted in rock and punk music, is renowned for its independence from major commercial record labels. It has emerged as a choice for music consumers seeking alternatives to mainstream popular music, catering to a niche music preference. The minority nature of indie music not only provides its lovers with a profound space for individual expression and a sense of collective belonging but also introduces other challenges into their social lives. Recently, the field of music sociology has proposed a more diverse perspective to observe and analyse the intricate role of music for individuals and society. In this context, regarding Chinese indie music lovers with niche music preferences, how their indie music practices integrate into their social lives and how they navigate their niche music tastes have become worthwhile topics of exploration. Drawing on interviews with 31 Chinese indie music lovers and extensive online ethnography, this thesis investigates how Chinese indie music lovers comprehend and engage with indie music, and how the power of indie music shapes them and their social behaviours.

I employ the theoretical framework of ‘music in action’ (Hennion, 2001; DeNora, 2011, 2016) and symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959; Blumer, 1969) to examine the dynamic and multifaceted roles of indie music in the social lives of Chinese indie music lovers. I develop a concept of ‘music socialising’ to delve into several key aspects of music lovers’ social practices. I contend that through various forms of musical activities such as music selection, live music attendance, and digital practices, indie music lovers exhibit strategic and reflexive characteristics in their music practices. These practices actively contribute to constructing and maintaining self and identity, negotiating social ties, and forming and mediating collectivity within a broader social landscape. It is through these processes that the music practices of Chinese indie music
lovers are endowed with meanings, thereby shaping their social reality. This thesis presents a rich and nuanced picture of the social experiences of Chinese indie music lovers, uncovering the transformative power of their indie music practices. It presents a compelling argument for the significance of music as a social agency, highlighting the complex interactions between music, individuals, and society. By bridging theoretical insights with rich empirical data, this thesis contributes to our understanding of the socio-cultural dimensions of music, offering fresh perspectives on the role of indie music in contemporary Chinese society.
Lay Summary

Indie music, born out of rock and punk roots, is known for its independence from major record labels. It offers a different music genre to those looking for music beyond the mainstream, feeding a specific, niche cultural taste. People who love indie music find it a way to express themselves and feel like they belong to a special community. But being an indie music lover can also bring challenges in their social lives. This research dives into how indie music impacts the social lives of its enthusiasts in China, a topic that has not been widely explored. Using interviews with 31 Chinese indie music lovers and an in-depth analysis of their offline and online activities, this study looks at how these individuals understand, interact with, and are influenced by indie music, as well as how these shape their behaviours in social settings.

This research introduces the idea of ‘music socialising’ to explore how these enthusiasts use indie music in their social lives. It shows that indie music lovers use their choices in music, attending live music events, and engaging with music online as strategic ways to define who they are, build relationships with others, and feel a part of a wider community. These activities give meaning to their musical activities and shape their social experiences. The research gives us a detailed look into the lives of Chinese indie music lovers, revealing the powerful effect of their musical choices and preferences on their identities and social relationships. The findings underscore the importance of music as a social tool and shed light on the complex interplay between music, individual, and society. This study helps us better understand the social and cultural aspects of music, offering fresh perspectives on the role of indie music in contemporary Chinese society.
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I also appreciate the 31 participants who generously gave their time and shared their experiences for this study. Your honest insights and candid discussions breathed life into the research and made it both a joy and a privilege to undertake. The friendships we forged throughout the process are a testament to the magical power of music and a clear demonstration of its social resonance.

This PhD journey has not merely been an academic pursuit; it has been a profound exploration of society, music, and the fascinating interplay between the two. Along the way, I found myself continually pondering – why do we study society and music? Though I may not have a definitive answer, I believe the essence of it lies in our innate human curiosity. We are, by nature, puzzle solvers, seekers of knowledge, driven to unravel the mysteries that surround us. Society and culture represent a vast, complex puzzle that intrigues us. They are intricate tapestries woven with countless threads of human experience and understanding. In studying society and music, we pull at these threads, unravelling the fabric to see how the piece fit together. This process does not just satiate our curiosity; it deepens it, leading us to new questions and new
paths of inquiry. Every discovery, every insight, is a stepping stone that leads us deeper into the labyrinth of understanding. As humans, we thrive on this exploration, this never-ending journey of discovery. Our curiosity drives us to delve into the unknown, to venture into the realms of uncertainty. It is this ceaseless quest for understanding that pushes us to study society and music, to uncover the unknown, and to add our voice to the ever-evolving conversation.

My doctoral journey has not only equipped me with knowledge but has also kindled a relentless curiosity to explore the world. It is this curiosity that I believe will guide my future pursuits, propelling me forward in my continual exploration of the captivating interplay of society and culture.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 General Introduction to the Research

What is music? How do we interact with it? What motivates our engagement with it? These three questions encompass the principal themes investigated in the sociological study of music and have inspired this thesis. Throughout human history, music has evolved through the millennia, reflecting changes in society, culture, and technology. From the complex rhythms of tribal chants and percussions to the symphonic layers of classical compositions and the diverse expressions of contemporary popular music, it has invariably constituted an integral strand of the human narrative. Music transcends mere entertainment; it is a vessel that carries myriad cultural and social values (Frith, 1996a). As a versatile medium, music evokes emotions, forges social bonds, and articulates cultural values, playing a vital role in our individual and collective experiences (DeNora, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Therefore, understanding the role of music in human experience holds great significance for sociologists who seek to comprehend it as a socially embedded art form that undergoes changes over time. In recent years, cultural sociology and music sociology have increasingly emphasised the complex role that music plays in society, examining how it both shapes and is shaped by individuals and society as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Music is recognised as a potent sociological object that can reveal profound aspects of human life and society (e.g., Nowak, 2016; Prior, 2018). By dissecting the multifaceted relationships between music, human experience, and society, sociologists attempt to gain insights into the mechanisms underlying music’s remarkable influence.

Given these issues, sociological scholars investigate the various ways in which the relationships between personal, social, and musical experiences have been
comprehended throughout history, exploring the reciprocal influences between music and society in diverse historical and cultural contexts (Shepherd and Devine, 2015a). The field of music sociology has covered the early interest in art music and its social and aesthetic implications (Weber, 1958) to the new possibilities for studying popular music (e.g., Frith, 1978). The discipline encompasses myriad facets of the intersection between music and society, including the interpretation of music as social meanings (Shepherd, 1991), social interactions (Becker, 1982; Benzecry, 2011), social identities (Frith, 1987; DeNora, 2000), cultural products (Benjamin, 1969; Alderman, 2001), and more, drawing on different theoretical and methodological perspectives (e.g., Thornton, 1995; DeNora, 2003a; Bennett and Peterson, 2004; Bull, 2007; Prior, 2011; Hennion, 2012). Among these, sociologists have studied two broad aspects: the interaction between music and individuals at the micro level (DeNora, 1999) and the mutual shaping between music and society at the macro level (Born, 2012). However, these two facets are not mutually exclusive. Many music sociologists have attempted to integrate them to illustrate the value of music practices in a more dialectical and complex way. For instance, David Hesmondhalgh (2013) has developed a multi-layered theoretical spectrum to examine the significance of music in promoting human flourishing, encompassing both social and individual dimensions. These studies demonstrate the interplay between music and individuals and society, illustrating the value of understanding music from different perspectives.

The discussion about the value of music raises another, more fundamental question: how should we understand music? Is it the organised sound with a system of tonality (Weber, 1958), a materialised object as a commodity (Adorno, 1962; Benjamin, 1969), a reflection and expression of social structure (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Bourdieu, 1984), or an ongoing activity associated with its participants (Becker, 1982; Small, 1998)? In an era dominated by digital
technologies and culture, music exists in even more complex forms (Prior, 2017), further complicating our understanding of its nature and influence. With the rise of streaming music services, social media, and other digital platforms, the online and offline spheres are more closely connected, and music now resides and is experienced in a variety of ways and across a range of contexts (Nowak, 2016).

Given these perspectives and developments, our understanding of music should not be monolithic but rather should consider the complex changes and diversity of music in different regional, cultural, and technological contexts. I, therefore, argue in this study for a practice-focused epistemology, i.e., that we should understand and perceive music and its role in the lives of individuals and society from a practice-oriented perspective. This claim is anchored in Georgina Born’s (2005, 2015) theory of musical mediation, which advocates for perceiving music as a multi-level, multifaceted, and dynamic mediating phenomenon rather than a fixed or essentialised entity. From this perspective, music is understood as a constellation of mediations – ‘an aggregation of sonic, social, corporeal, discursive, visual, technological and temporal mediations’ (Born, 2015, p. 359). It is within this web of diverse mediating logics that the very ontology of music is shaped and constructed. An important implication of this perspective is that it directs us to focus not just on music as a product or an object but also on the processes through which music takes on meaning and

\[1\] In this discourse, it is crucial to clarify that I am not advocating for a dichotomy between online and offline practices and experiences. Instead, I acknowledge the complex interplay between the online/digital and offline/physical spheres. The digital realm is not an isolated phenomenon but is deeply interconnected with material technologies and connections (Castells, 2001). Online and offline spaces are not mutually exclusive but rather influence and shape each other in profound ways. This recognition of the intertwinement between online and offline realities is fundamental to my understanding of music practices in the contemporary technological context.
exerts influence. It urges us to examine how music is practiced, how it becomes an actor in cultural and media production and consumption processes, and how it influences and changes other actors in practice. This is a crucial approach to understanding and interpreting music and its impacts, which is what this research intends to achieve. Therefore, considering and assessing the practice of music in the current social context is at the heart of this thesis. The aim is to explore and investigate how people practice music and why it is important to do so. Music practice can encompass a range of musical activities, including composing, performing, listening, and more (Small, 1998). This thesis mainly focuses on activities and behaviours associated with the reception, consumption, interpretation, and engagement with music, primarily in the ways in which people listen to, share, and discuss music, as well as incorporate music into their daily lives.

In my view, research on music practice is necessary and meaningful at present in both academic and empirical terms. Firstly, despite the growing interest in the sociological study of music, many studies predominantly underscore its beneficial impacts, highlighting the positive role it plays in people’s lives, in their identity and social relationship works (e.g., Frith, 1996a; DeNora, 2000). This view has contributed to our understanding of the social power of music. However, it sometimes overlooks the fact that the meaning and significance of music are constructed by specific culture and context, and different people attach varying degrees of value to music. Thus, music can play entirely different roles for different individuals (Negus and Velázquez, 2002; Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Zangwill, 2012). For example, music can promote a sense of belonging to the in-group while also creating separation from the out-group. Adopting an approach to studying music and musical activities from the perspective of practice can help us circumvent the over-positive assumption, recognising the multifaceted impact of music. This approach requires us to take in-depth
research on the musical habits of specific cultural and social groups, exploring the various ways in which music is used and examining its personal, social, and cultural impacts on them. At the same time, close observation of music practices can also draw on the perspectives of a broader range of other disciplines, such as media studies, social psychology, and musicology, within a sociological framework to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the role and significance of music in people’s social and cultural lives.

Secondly, in socio-economic terms, the process of commodification is increasingly prevalent in popular music practices (F. Holt, 2010). This trend, facilitated by the commercialisation of music, has led to a certain ‘alienation’ of these practices. As music practice becomes more commercialised, there is a

2 The discussion here focuses on the commercialisation of the practice of engaging with popular music rather than the commercialisation of popular music per se. It is important to distinguish between the two concepts.

Historically, the birth of popular music in the early 20th century coincides with its commercialisation, where commercialisation is understood as a fundamental characteristic of popular music (Negus, 1996b). Indeed, its development has been closely tied to advancements in recording and broadcasting technologies, changes in marketing and distribution mechanisms, and the expansion of consumer culture. This interplay between popular music and commercialisation is integral to its characterisation, underpinning many of the structures and conventions of the music industry.

However, the emphasis here is on the commercialisation of the practices of listening to and participating in popular music – the ways in which individuals engage with, interpret, and use popular music in their everyday lives. This distinction is significant because it allows us to explore how commercial forces might shape not just the creation and production of popular music but also the behaviours and attitudes of its consumers, from their listening habits to their emotional and social engagement with music. This focus on music practice recognises the active role of the listener, who is not a passive recipient of commercially produced music but an agent who interprets, evaluates, and uses popular music within their social and cultural context.
risk of creating a sense of separation or disconnection between music activities and individuals involved in the practice, leading to the erosion of its authenticity and diversity. This has been an influential view since the origins of modern music sociology in Adorno’s (1962) work, although it is disputable within the field (see DeNora, 2003a). The music industry’s growing emphasis on the economic value of music has had a profound influence not only on music itself but also on music practices. As music increasingly becomes commodified, listeners may assume more passive roles as consumers rather than active participants in musical experiences. In addition, the pressure to generate commercially successful music can lead to the homogenisation of popular music offerings, thereby narrowing the range of music available to listeners and undermining the richness and diversity of musical experiences. The commodification of music has been a topic of discussion among sociologists for decades (Adorno, 2002, 2016; Peterson and Anand, 2004). However, the current climate of the music industry has accelerated this process, extending commodification to the level of music practice.

One example of the commodification of music practices in recent years is the growing popularity of music festivals worldwide, as demonstrated by the gradual increase in their revenues (before the COVID-19 pandemic) (Statista, 2023). The social and entertainment functions of music festivals have become significant motivators for many people to participate in these events (McMorland and Mactaggart, 2007; Pegg and Patterson, 2010). Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, this trend continued to be validated with the rise of streaming music festivals, as I have argued elsewhere (Zhao, 2023). This demonstrates how live music practices are becoming a commercialised product that is consumed as a form of entertainment by some people. Statistics show that the music industry has seen a marked increase in revenues from live performances over the last two decades. This is evidenced by the change in
performance rights revenue, which has risen from 2.7% (US$0.6 billion) of global music industry revenue in 2001 to 9.5% (US$2.5 billion) in 2022 (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, 2023). As a further example, in response to the decline in global music industry revenues following the peer-to-peer (P2P) crisis, the music industry has undergone a digital turn, including a move to digital downloads and streaming services in more recent years. However, in this process, listeners’ music practices, such as writing reviews, creating playlists, and expressing personal preferences, are gradually commodified by platforms, ultimately serving as mechanisms through which the music industry can control the circulation and consumption of music (Burkart, 2014).

These are all indicative of the shift of the music industry from a commodity economy based on recording sales to the so-called experience economy (Zhang and Negus, 2021). This shift has allowed the music industry to capitalise on consumers’ desire for unique and immersive musical experiences, ultimately shaping the new ways in which music is produced, distributed, and consumed. In this process, music practices gradually become part of the economic practice of the music industry. While economic factors play a significant role in shaping the landscape of music practice, it is crucial to acknowledge and recognise that the industry’s over-emphasis on economic value could have a detrimental effect on the cultural and social significance of music practices for audiences. This necessitates adopting an in-depth, sociological perspective to understand how music consumers manage and sustain the socio-cultural value of music that is meaningful to them in light of the challenges posed by the commodification of

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3 The experience economy refers to a shift in the way goods and services are valued and consumed, where the focus is placed on creating memorable and immersive experiences for customers as a form of economic offering (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).
music practice. This illuminates the ways in which popular music as a cultural practice is understood, appreciated, and experienced by individuals.

Therefore, if music practices face commodification and music’s influences operate in a complex system, it necessitates a thorough exploration of the way music is practiced. Such an analysis demands a detailed examination of consumption practices, values, and emotions as intersubjective phenomena and relational constructs. In this thesis, I specifically concentrate on the indie music scene in China, scrutinising the role indie music plays in the lives of Chinese indie music lovers. Here, I will briefly explain two concepts – ‘music lovers’ and ‘indie music’ – which will be further explored and elaborated upon later in the thesis.

The focus of this study is a specific group of music enthusiasts, termed ‘music lovers’. This designation is both a self-identification by the participants and a deliberate choice to differentiate them from ‘fans’, a term more commonly used in music sociology. In the Chinese context, the word ‘fans’ has developed particular connotations, often associated with an intense, idol-centric devotion that can overshadow the music itself (Baker, 2009; Mcdonald, 2009; Zhang and Negus, 2020). The enthusiasm of fans is frequently misunderstood by observers outside the fans community, who, lacking a detailed understanding of the fans’ cultural and social dynamics, may interpret it as a form of zealotry. In contrast, the use of ‘music lovers’ in this study refers to individuals who integrate music deeply into their identity and social interactions. This term highlights an appreciation and engagement with music for personal growth and meaningful social connections. Unlike ‘fans’, ‘music lovers’ are characterised by their deep interest in and attachment to the music itself, rather than following trends or idolising artists. By choosing ‘music lovers’ over ‘fans’, this research aims to distance itself from the idol-centric connotations prevalent in China and
to emphasise a more profound, introspective relationship with music.

Indie music – short for independent music – primarily refers to popular music produced independently from commercial record labels, encompassing a wide range of sub-genres and styles. However, my research focuses on indie rock in China. Indie music and indie music lovers hold distinct reference values in two aspects. First, being on the periphery of the commercial music production system, indie music occupies a unique position within the music industry while also embodying an anti-commercial ideology (Hesmondhalgh, 1999). Analysing the understanding and practices of indie music by its enthusiasts provides valuable insights into the intricate and dynamic ways in which music functions as a socio-cultural practice within the given context. Second, the niche nature of indie music, especially in China, poses challenges to indie music lovers in their social interactions. Understanding how these individuals navigate these challenges can illuminate the multifarious nature of the value of music in people’s social lives.

Using qualitative research methods based on data collected from interviews and online ethnography of Chinese indie music lovers in the Beijing indie music scene during 2019-2020, I will examine indie music lovers’ understanding of indie music and its power in shaping themselves and their social lives. I place this research in the broader context of contemporary digital media usage, examining how music lovers navigate online and offline spheres. In this thesis, I will investigate Chinese indie music lovers’ music practices at the social level, which I refer to as ‘music socialising’, and interpret the processes involved through the lens of symbolic interactionism. In the following sections, I will first provide a definition of music socialising and introduce the background of this study. Then, I will pose specific research questions and provide an overview of the following chapters in this thesis.
1.2 Conceptualising Music Socialising

In this study, I propose ‘music socialising’ as a central concept to depict and scrutinise the practices of Chinese indie music lovers. Music socialising encapsulates the various ways in which individuals engage with music as a social activity. This engagement includes a wide array of activities such as listening to music, attending live music events, posting music-related content on social media, participating in music-lover social networks, and engaging in other related practices, both digital and in-person. The concept of ‘music socialising’, as advanced in this research, brings to the fore the proactive engagement of individuals with music as both a means of self-construction and a strategic tool for social interaction. This concept extends beyond the traditional focus on music listening found in some music sociological studies (e.g., DeNora, 2000). At its essence, ‘music socialising’ delineates the myriad ways individuals engage with music as a social activity, recognising its role not only as entertainment but also as a vital conduit for social communication and interaction.

While terms like ‘musicking’ (Small, 1998) in previous literature aptly encapsulate individuals’ musical engagement, they often do not fully address the individual agency and socio-cultural implications embedded in musical activities. ‘Music socialising’, in contrast, underscores the proactive, intentional nature of these engagements. It posits that musical activities, within the framework of this research, are not passive experiences but deliberate practices driven by individual choices and motivations. ‘Music socialising’ is not a passive occurrence; individuals actively select, shape, and interpret their musical experiences, imbuing them with personal and social significance. This focused approach differentiates ‘music socialising’ from broader concepts, making it particularly relevant for analysing a specific subset of the population.
– those deeply involved in and committed to music. This emphasis allows for a more nuanced exploration of the practices, meanings, and identities among individuals for whom music is a significant social and personal anchor.

As the research focuses on the Chinese indie music scene, I specifically investigate its main audience – indie music lovers. This category of music listeners’ connection to music often transcends mere listening and evolves into a social experience. These individuals not only immerse themselves in music but also use it as a conduit for creating and expressing social bonds, personal values, and attitudes toward culture (Hennion, 2001). To describe and conceptualise the social practices of indie music lovers, it is necessary to first review the concept of socialisation, which forms the basis of music socialising.

Socialisation is a critical part of human development that has been extensively studied by scholars from various disciplines. An influential perspective in sociological interpretation is symbolic interactionism, which views socialisation as a dynamic, lifelong process where individuals develop an understanding of their identity, social position and roles, and ways of interacting with others (Mead, 1934). The continuous interactions with others lead to reactions, reflections, and self-understanding that help individuals develop their self-concept and, in turn, influence their behaviours, attitudes, and values (Blumer, 1969).

Interpreted through the lens of symbolic interactionism, socialisation encapsulates two key aspects. Firstly, it is a constant mediating process between structure and agency rather than a linear progression from social structure to the individual (Stryker, 1987, 2001). In other words, individuals are active interpreters and negotiators of their social surroundings instead of passive recipients of social norms. An interactionist perspective thus
acknowledges that individuals are not just products of their environment but can shape it as well. Secondly, socialisation is an ongoing process spanning the individual’s life course. It is not limited to childhood or adolescence but continues in various forms throughout adulthood. For instance, individuals may undergo a re-socialisation process when entering new social contexts. This means that individuals must continuously adapt to new social situations and environments.

Contrasting this, structural functionalists argue an alternative perspective. If socialisation is a process of ‘making’ and ‘taking’ social roles from the interactionist viewpoint, it is a process of ‘learning’ for functionalists (Parsons, 1951). In this perspective, socialisation has a clear outcome of whether individuals have learned and adapted to their roles. This process typically occurs in social institutions such as families, schools, and workplaces, where individuals learn to comply with rules, share values, and cooperate with others. A ‘successful’ socialisation enables individuals to integrate into the social system and keep it functioning and developing continuously.

However, this perspective has received criticism for its deterministic nature and the under-emphasis on individual agency and ongoing socialisation (Gecas, 2001; Guhin, Calarco and Miller-Idriss, 2021). In contemporary society, traditional fixed social structures and relationships are replaced by flexible and temporary ones, and individuals are expected to constantly adapt to changing circumstances (Bauman, 2000). As a result, a functionalist approach to understanding socialisation is no longer adequate. Take individuals’ music tastes as an example. Although an individual’s particular position in the social structure – social class – still plays an influential role, music taste is now seen more as a personal choice and a lifestyle (Bennett, 1999). It is argued (e.g., Frith, 1996a; Martin, 2015) that the structuralist approach falls short of providing
a sufficient explanation for how people engage with music on a daily basis within the contemporary social context (DeNora, 2000; Hennion, 2007). But it is necessary to acknowledge that analysing the role of structural elements in music practice remains relevant and significant, as evidenced by a series of studies influenced by Bourdieusian theories (Prior, 2013). The key point is to understand that structural factors are not (sole) determinants of an individual’s music practices.

In comparison to the functionalist claims, the interactionist perspective on socialisation offers a more nuanced and complex understanding of the process. Socialisation, from this viewpoint, is seen as a dynamic and active process which highlights the importance of individual agency and personal choice (Blumer, 1969). Individuals are not simply passive recipients of social norms and expectations but instead are continuously engaged in interpreting, reflecting on, and challenging them, actively creating and re-creating their social reality. This indicates that socialisation is an active process, requiring individuals to engage in practices that reflect their chosen roles and the social norms associated with them. Given the rapidly changing nature of today’s world (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; Archer, 2012), this active and reflexive process of socialisation takes on even greater importance. In a world characterised by ongoing shifts in social norms and evolving roles, individuals must adapt and adjust to these changes, effectively making and remaking their own social lives in the process. The interactionist perspective on socialisation brings attention to its dynamic and multifaceted nature.

The symbolic interactionist perspective has inspired many influential works in music sociology and influenced current research. DeNora (2000) has made significant contributions, examining how individuals actively interpret and use music in their everyday lives. In DeNora’s work, individuals are not passive
recipients of music’s influence but active agents who use music for their purposes, managing and regulating moods, identities, and social situations. Frith (1978, 1983) has also drawn on symbolic interactionism, demonstrating how music is more than a mere soundtrack to our lives but an active part of our self-concept and social interactions. Similarly, Hennion (2007) and Bennett (1999) have shown how music is implicated in lifestyle choices and social identities, highlighting that individuals actively shape their musical tastes, reflecting and shaping their self-concept and social affiliations. They demonstrate that musical tastes are actively constructed and negotiated by individuals within their social contexts rather than (merely) determined by social class, as Bourdieu (1984) asserted. These studies underscore the fundamental tenets of symbolic interactionism, showcasing the significance of individual agency, the social construction of meaning, and the dynamic and negotiated nature of identities and social behaviours.

The concept of music socialising builds on a symbolic interactionist interpretation of socialisation. It refers specifically to an active and dynamic process where individuals not only engage with music through various activities but also use it to facilitate social interaction and communication between individuals. It recognises that the interplay between music and individuals can be instrumental in shaping identity, navigating social relations, and experiencing collectivity. These three dimensions imbricate with each other in music socialising and are the basis for this research. In this thesis, the concept of music socialising will be used to describe the practices and experiences of indie music lovers. It is defined as a dynamic process in which individuals exercise their agency to shape their selves and connect and form social relationships through music. I try to apply the gerund form of ‘socialising’ to keep its inherent meaning of an action. Frith (1996b) argues in his analysis of the relationship between music and identity that identity is a process rather than a thing.
Similarly, the social interactions surrounding music are also ongoing and evolving processes. Regardless of identities or social relationships that are shaped through music socialising, they are continuously generated, negotiated, and sustained through ongoing engagement with music.

The concept of music socialising offers a distinctive perspective on the study of the socialisation process of music lovers, emphasising the importance of music as a tool and conduit for social interaction and communication. It highlights the diversity and complexity of socialisation experiences across different individuals and contexts, which is critical for a comprehensive understanding of the process. This research on indie music socialising contributes to the sociological understanding of socialisation by offering a multifaceted and detailed perspective.

1.3 Contextualising the Research

Independent, or ‘indie’, music in China is a dynamic and rapidly evolving music genre and culture that has gained significant momentum in recent years, driven by a range of factors, including cultural, social, and economic influences. It provides an intriguing backdrop for examining music socialising practices. In this section, I briefly outline the Chinese indie music scene and the online-offline integrated character of music practices to contextualise this research.

The origin of indie music can usually be traced back to the British and American punk music and culture of the 1970s and the subsequent post-punk movement (Hesmondhalgh, 1997, 1999; Hibbett, 2005). It is a genre of music that opposes the commercialised mainstream music industry and advocates for the independence and freedom of musicians over their music (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2015). In recent years, the term has broadened to include music not necessarily produced by independent musicians but is still characterised by its
experimental aesthetics and independent ethos (Hesmondhalgh, 1999). In the context of China, emerging from the late 20th century, the indie music scene has emerged as a countercultural movement with roots in Western alternative music genres, especially rock and punk music. While the origins of the indie music scene in China can be traced back to Chinese rock music in the 1980s, it was not until the 2000s that it began to gain wider recognition and popularity. In its early stages, indie music in China appeared more in the form and concept of rock music as a way to express and reflect new social ideas. In the past two decades, it has become more of a challenge and rebellion against the mainstream music industry (see Section 4.1 for more details on the definition and development of indie music). The Chinese indie music scene is a diverse and dynamic sphere that defies easy categorisation. But in general, indie music is a music genre and culture that is characterised by its aesthetics of independence and authenticity, which differentiate it from mainstream popular music.

Indie music extends beyond the mere confines of a musical genre; it symbolically encapsulates a distinctive set of values. Emphasising authenticity, creativity, and individuality over mainstream conformity and commercial appeal, indie music exemplifies a particular ethos or worldview expressed through its artistic articulation and experimentation. However, the transformative power of indie music does not solely reside in the music itself but also greatly in the process of ‘musicking’, a term introduced by Small (1998) to encompass the diverse range of activities involved in engaging with music. For indie music lovers who engage with indie music and its culture as active listeners, indie music is an important form of social and cultural engagement. When individuals engage with indie music, they are not merely consuming it but are participating in a cultural practice that goes beyond the sonic aspects of the music. The act of ‘musicking’ in the indie music culture – from attending live performances,
listening to music on streaming platforms, discussing favourite music on social media, and engaging with music lover networks – fosters a more participatory relationship between indie music and its enthusiasts. It becomes an avenue through which indie music lovers can actively enact and negotiate their identities, challenge mainstream narratives, form unique social behaviours and relations, and attribute meanings to indie music.

The participatory relationship with indie music, however, is not restricted to the physical world. One of the defining features of this research context is the integration, or rather, interpenetration, of online and offline practices. Indie music lovers are not confined to face-to-face spaces like livehouses and music festivals but also engage in a wide range of digital practices, like social media and streaming music platforms. The rise of digital technologies and social media platforms has created new opportunities for listening, sharing, and socialising music (Nowak, 2016; Prior, 2018). This online-offline integrated environment reflects the changing nature of music activities in China and worldwide, creating both opportunities and challenges for indie music socialising.

The rapid development of the Internet and the various devices and platforms it has birthed have transformed how we interact socially, opening up new avenues for sharing and engaging with music. The high popularity of social networking sites (SNSs) during the beginning of the Web 2.0 era marked a significant shift in online interactions. These platforms have made it easier for people to connect, communicate, and share experiences, with music often acting as a common thread tying these interactions together. From the early days of MySpace (Mjøs, 2013) to the prevalence of Facebook and Twitter (Baym, 2012), as well as the emergence of music streaming services (Luo, 2017), digital platforms have played a crucial role in creating a digital space for
music enthusiasts to communicate and interact, forming online communities (Baym, 2007).

However, this is not to say that offline music activities have ceased to be important. Offline events like live gigs, music festivals, and cultural gatherings still provide a distinct face-to-face space for music lovers to engage with one another and participate in social practices (Behr et al., 2016; Vandenberg, Berghman and van Eijck, 2021). In the context of the indie music scene in China, offline events provide an exceptional opportunity for indie music lovers to socialise. Livehouses, which are small and professional live music venues, have become an important part of the indie music scene in China, as I will show in Chapter 4.

It is important to recognise that music socialising permeates multiple intertwined spaces, both online and offline. As both aspects are significant in music socialising practices, research into music socialising needs to consider and integrate them. The integration of online and offline practices presents a specific research context for exploring the social practices of indie music lovers in China. To understand the complexities and dynamics of this unique research context, we need to adopt a multi-dimensional approach that integrates social, cultural, and technological perspectives. This approach considers the diverse and evolving nature of indie music socialising in China and explores how digital technologies and social media platforms are transforming the practices, values, and identities of indie music lovers. In doing so, we may also uncover new insights into how digital and physical practices intersect and shape each other within this unique cultural context.

To conclude, the Chinese indie music scene provides a rich and multifaceted landscape for exploring music socialising practices. As a rapidly evolving music
genre and culture that has grown in popularity and complexity over recent years, comprehending these practices necessitates a deep dive into the everyday interactions, interpersonal relations, and dynamics between music lovers. The love for indie music is a relational matter, dependent on the resources mobilised in everyday interpersonal activities, both online and offline. This study will not only shed light on the specific social practices of indie music lovers in China but also provide valuable insights into the broader cultural and technological shifts that are shaping the landscape of cultural consumption and social interaction.

1.4 Research Objectives and Questions

The primary aim of this research is to conduct an in-depth investigation into the music socialising practices of Chinese indie music lovers and explore their multifaceted impact on these individuals’ social lives. Recognising music socialising as an intricate and interconnected practice that spans both digital and physical realms, this study endeavours to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how indie music functions as a catalyst, mediator, and symbol in shaping the social lives of its enthusiasts.

One of the main objectives of this research is to scrutinise the role of indie music in the formation and expression of both individual and collective identities among its enthusiasts. Drawing from symbolic interactionism, the study intends to examine the importance of indie music as a mediator and signifier of self-concept and self-identity. My first research question, then, asks:

In what ways do the socio-cultural practices of indie music lovers in China contribute to the construction and expression of their individual and collective identities?

The initial research question of this research identifies my intention to explore
the dynamics involved in identity construction among indie music lovers in China, particularly within the context of music-related social interactions. Drawing on this research question, I will investigate how these individuals use music and engage in music-related social interactions to negotiate their identities and how they perceive and employ indie music as a means of self-expression. By examining these dynamics, the answers to this research question are expected to shed light on the role of music as a social agency for individuals in constructing and reflecting their identities. Additionally, the research will delve into the nature of social relationships established among indie music lovers within various online and offline spaces, such as social media, streaming music platforms, and live performances. In doing so, the research will identify and analyse the specific modes of interaction, communication, and engagement that characterise these relationships. This inquiry leads to the second research question:

*To what extent do indie music lovers use music as a means of negotiating and fostering social relationships? And in what ways does this relate to the broader social and cultural dynamics within their interpersonal networks?*

This second research question aims to explore how indie music is used as a tool for social interaction among Chinese indie music lovers. In exploring this question, I seek to understand how indie music lovers use indie music in their social relationships and interactions with others, including how they use music to form social connections, cultivate relationships, and communicate feelings. Here, the inquiry does not only focus on the impact of indie music on the relationships among its enthusiasts but also examines its effect on the interactions between indie music lovers and non-music lovers. In addition, the research will investigate the broader sociality manifested in music socialising activities of indie music lovers. Specifically, it poses the third research question:
In what ways do indie music socialising practices influence participants’ perceptions and aspirations for broader social interconnectedness, such as community involvement?

It will analyse how participation in music socialising activities influences the negotiation of sociality and assess the impact of online and offline music socialising activities on indie music lovers’ understanding of self and belongingness. By exploring the ramifications of these activities on the formation of social networks and social relationships, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the role of music in a reflexive society.

In addition, another critical objective is to identify the interplay between online and offline platforms for music socialising among indie music lovers and to analyse its impact in shaping music lovers’ social lives. To achieve this, the study employs a multi-method approach, which includes online ethnography and in-depth interviews. Through this approach, the research examines the dynamics of online and offline interactions and their implications for the overall music socialising experience. Thus, this study also discusses the role of different spatial affordances\(^4\) in shaping the music consumption and socialising experiences of Chinese indie music lovers.

\(^4\) The concept of ‘affordances’ was initially introduced by psychologist Gibson (1979), referring to the feature of an environment that can be used by people for a specific purpose. It was later adopted and adapted by scholars to denote the attributes and capabilities of a product or system that facilitate or restrict the actions a user can perform (Hutchby, 2001). In this context, ‘spatial affordances’ refers to the opportunities and limitations offered by both digital and physical spaces in terms of how they allow and facilitate music socialising activities. The term ‘affordances’ is employed here to highlight how the specific characteristics and capabilities of these various spaces influence the ways in which music socialising practices can occur within them.
The organisation and structure of the chapters in this thesis will not strictly follow the sequence of the research questions. This is primarily due to the interdependent nature of these questions and elements, which makes it questionable to isolate or reduce them for analytical purposes. However, it can be viewed as a compilation of interwoven elements that constitute a composite answer to the problem of music socialising in the context of the Chinese indie music scene. By addressing the objectives and questions outlined, the research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the social and cultural aspects of music consumption and engagement. Additionally, it offers a unique and a China-based contextually grounded perspective on the role of indie music in shaping the social lives of its enthusiasts.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

In this introduction, I have introduced the research topic, defined the core concept of music socialising, provided an overview of the research background, and outlined the research questions. In Chapter 2, I position my work in relation to established knowledge in sociology by presenting a literature review on key areas such as identity and sociality, culture and music, digital practices, and social transformation in reflexive modernity. This chapter also addresses the theoretical frameworks of music-in-action and symbolic interactionism that are employed to guide the research.

Chapter 3 outlines and defends the methodology and methods of the research, elaborating on the semi-structured interview and online ethnography as suitable micro-sociological approaches for this thesis. It describes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the research and explains how an abductive research strategy was operationalised in this study. Next, the chapter defines the research population, which lays the foundation for exploring indie music and its
impact on various aspects of music socialising. This is followed by a discussion of reflections about my own role in the research and a discussion of the concerns about the relationships between macro and micro-level sociological research.

Chapter 4 embarks on a wide-ranging exploration of indie music, delving into its origins, live music experiences, and digital consumption practices. Drawing upon research participants’ perspectives, the chapter elucidates the multifaced factors that have shaped the definition of indie music in and beyond China. By examining the urban music environment and the role of small music venues in Beijing, the chapter probes the vital connection between live music experiences and the specific urban music environments. Furthermore, the chapter scrutinises the transformative impact of streaming technology on the listening habits of indie music lovers, investigating the interplay between big data, algorithms, and user engagement on streaming music platforms. In doing so, this chapter establishes a holistic understanding of the foundations and backgrounds of Chinese indie music lovers’ music socialising practices.

Chapter 5 delves into the details of indie music socialising by examining the core audience, referred to as ‘music lovers’, and their unique relationship with the music they enjoy. Drawing on Hennion’s (2001) concept of ‘music lover’, this chapter explores the ways these individuals engage in meaningful music practices and adapt to the interplay between music, self, and others, positing that music acts as an active cultural resource rather than mere entertainment. Furthermore, the chapter examines the process of identity construction among Chinese indie music lovers through the lens of Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of taste. However, rather than interpreting cultural taste as a reflection of social structures, it proposes a view of ‘taste as practice’ in order to understand the significance of enjoyment in this process.
Chapter 6 begins with a discussion of the role of indie music in the social lives of its enthusiasts, investigating the varying degrees of importance that indie music practice holds in the everyday lives of indie music lovers. It further examines the dichotomy that music lovers perceive between ‘musical friends’ and ‘daily friends’, exploring the sociological underpinnings and implications of this categorisation. And then, the chapter particularly analyses the dynamic interactions between indie music lovers and their musical friends, emphasising the mutual influence of music engagement and interpersonal interactions. By dissecting the processes of social and emotional support, identity validation, and the cultivation of belonging within these friendships, it sheds light on the fluid and context-dependent nature of musical friendships in the realm of Chinese indie music.

Chapter 7 explores how Chinese indie music lovers use social media to construct and communicate their musical selves and identities and engage in social interactions. The chapter is divided into three sections. First, it introduces the concept of self-curatorship, which refers to the creation and curation of personal narratives and memories through digital content. It examines how self-curatorship affects the posting practices of music lovers on social media and its role in shaping and cultivating their musical selves and identities. Then, the chapter explores how indie music lovers use music to express their emotions on social media platforms and provides insights into the complex relationship between music, emotions, and social media. Furthermore, it discusses how research participants use social media to present themselves to different audiences and the ways in which they balance their desire for validation and acceptance with their need for uniqueness and individuality. Overall, this chapter aims to provide insights into the ways in which social media shapes the digital practices of indie music lovers.
Chapter 8 explores the concept of collectivity among Chinese indie music lovers. The chapter compares the concept of collectivity and community, highlighting the former’s better reflection of Chinese indie music lovers’ music socialising practices, followed by an examination of how they form collectivity through interactions and meanings. The concept of resonance is employed to explain their connection with each other. It is ended by discussing how indie music lovers generate collectivity through both digital and offline interactions and how this affects their sense of individuality.

Chapter 9 summarises the research findings and returns to the research questions, outlining the research’s implications and contributions to the understanding of music socialising and its impact on indie music lovers’ social experiences. It illustrates that through the establishment of the framework of music socialising, the research contributes to the fields of cultural sociology and the sociology of music by promoting a more multifaceted and inclusive understanding of music and sociality. The chapter also discusses the limitations of this study and the further areas of research that it has inspired.

In conclusion, this research makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of music’s social impact by delving into the complex phenomenon of music socialising among Chinese indie music lovers. By moving beyond the Western setting and investigating a non-Western indie music scene, the study diversifies and enriches our understanding of the socio-cultural significance of music, contributing to a growing field of scholarship on music sociology in East Asia (e.g., Siriyuvasak and Hyunjoon, 2007; Móri, 2009; Fung, 2013; Wang, 2019; Zhang and Negus, 2020). The findings emphasise the centrality of music in the construction and expression of individual and collective identities and underscore its key role as a tool for social interaction. Furthermore, the study sheds light on how participation in music socialising
activities shapes individuals’ perceptions of social interconnectedness and their sense of belonging. These insights provide a nuanced understanding of how music intersects with and influences key aspects of social life. Beyond these contributions, the research also reveals the significant interplay between online and offline spaces in music socialising. In the digital age, understanding these dynamics becomes increasingly important for developing comprehensive theories and models of music consumption and socialisation. I hope that this research serves as a stepping stone for exploring the intricacies of the relationship between music and social life. The study offers a contextually grounded perspective that I hope will encourage other researchers to look beyond the dominant Western-centric settings and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of music’s socio-cultural significance.
Chapter 2 Positioning the Research

Scholarly interest in exploring music as a socio-cultural phenomenon spans multiple disciplines, including, but not limited to, sociology, communication and media studies, psychology, and musicology. One of the central components of these works has been the observation that music lovers, driven by their passion for music, develop social practices that play a formative role in shaping their identities, interpersonal relationships, and cultural participation. This chapter reviews sociological research that explores these music socialising practices of music enthusiasts. It draws on a wealth of relevant literature to locate this research within the theoretical approach of music in action and symbolic interactionism and within the broader context of reflexive modernity. This chapter aims to position the analysis and discussion in the following chapters within the field of the sociology of music and establish a robust theoretical foundation for this research.

In Section 2.1, this literature review foregrounds the social implications of music and its profound influence on individuals’ everyday experiences. Notably, music emerges as a powerful force in shaping and perceiving one’s self-perception and identity, forming social connections, and moulding patterns of social engagement. The review begins by examining the multifaceted impact of music on personal and social identities, thereby shedding light on the complex and dynamic process of identity construction and negotiation underpinned by music practices. Subsequently, the review transitions to exploring music’s function as a facilitator of social bonds and group belonging while also pointing out the potential negative effects of music in social relationships. Previous studies enlighten us to take a multi-faceted perspective on the social impact of music rather than simply assuming that music always exerts a positive effect. The review further discusses the transformative role of digital platforms and
technologies in shaping music consumption, particularly emphasising the opportunities and challenges they present to musical socialising. The impact of digitalisation on music listening practices, the formation of online music communities, and the evolving nature of music engagement are reviewed in depth. The final aspect of the review explores the role of live music engagement in influencing music socialising. Through this review, the multifarious ways music penetrates the social realm of individuals’ lives are illuminated, demonstrating the significance of music in sculpting identities, social bonds, and cultural engagements within both digital and physical spaces.

Section 2.2 positions the research within the theoretical framework of ‘music in action’ and symbolic interactionist perspectives. The review elucidates the micro-sociological emphasis on both music and social actor as proactive agents in the process of meaning-making. An overview of symbolic interactionism highlights the applicability of an interactive lens in unpacking the music socialising practices of indie music lovers within their everyday lives. The study is further contextualised within the landscape of reflexive modernity, paving the way for a deeper exploration of the social and sociological significance of music socialising.

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 Music, self, and Identity

The impact of music on human lives is both profound and multifaceted, deeply intertwined with emotion, memory, self-perception, and identity (DeNora, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). An examination of the existing literature reveals a complex debate on how individuals connect with and through music. This section will explore different perspectives and their implications for understanding the intricate dynamic between music, self, and identity.
Hargreaves, Miell and MacDonald (2002) suggest that the so-called ‘musical identity’ contains two different layers of definitions: *identities in music* and *music in identities*. ‘Identities in music’ refer to the identities formed within specific cultural roles and categories associated with music practices. Examples include roles such as musicians, DJs, and fans (Finnegan, 1989; Fung, 2009; Baym, 2018). This concept emphasises an individual’s position within music production and consumption. And ‘music in identities’ accentuates music’s role in constructing one’s self-identity (DeNora, 2000; MacDonald, Hargreaves and Miell, 2017). These interrelated dimensions of musical identity not only underline the multi-layered nature of music engagement and its significant influence on identity construction (Frith, 1996b) but also spotlight the fundamental social function of music in shaping and influencing our everyday lives. Therefore, the intricate relationships between music, self, and identity make a compelling case for scholarly examination.

The concept of identity occupies a central position within sociological discourse. Despite not engaging explicitly and directly with the contemporary notion of self-identity, early sociologists such as Durkheim (1995) and Weber (2013) shed light on the significant impact of social structures on individuals. In doing so, they lay a groundwork for understanding how identities are shaped by an intricate matrix of social, cultural, economic, and political factors. In alignment with this premise, a significant body of scholarly work has delved into the role of social structure in determining individual cultural participation and the genesis of cultural identities. Two notable theoretical contributions in this domain are particularly worth reviewing: Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis of French society in the 1970s and the influential tradition of cultural studies developed by the Birmingham School (Hall and Jefferson, 1976), which was substantiated by empirical research of British youth culture during the same period.
Bourdieu’s (1974, 1984) work posits that an individual’s social class and background significantly influence their cultural tastes and preferences, which in turn serve as markers of their social position. He contends that individuals acquire a ‘habitus’ – a set of dispositions influenced by their social and economic background – which constructs their lifestyle and cultural taste, including musical preferences. Bourdieu’s concept of ‘distinction’ further extends this argument, proposing that individuals use cultural preferences, including music, to differentiate themselves from others and assert their social status. Bourdieu underlines that our identities are not self-determined but significantly shaped by our socio-economic backgrounds. Our cultural tastes, preferences, and participation are integral components of identities, acting as symbolic markers of our social positions. In comparison, the cultural studies approach (e.g., Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Muggleton, 2000; Hodkinson, 2002) focuses on youth subculture and examines how these subcultural groups use cultural symbols, such as music styles, to resist mainstream culture and assert their identities. This perspective underscores that individuals negotiate power and form identities through cultural participation. It suggests that music is not only a reflection of one’s social background but also a tool for expressing resistance, rebellion, and identity negotiation. However, the styles and preferences of these subcultures are not random but are symbolic reflections and responses to their particular socio-economic conditions.

Despite their differences, these two perspectives highlight the profound influence of socio-cultural factors on musical identities and practices and have inspired a range of related research. For example, several studies investigated people’s use of musical practices and preferences as markers of identity and distinction, drawing social boundaries and indicating their social positions (Bennett et al., 2009; Webster, 2020). Such theories and investigations often infer a structural link between music and identity, associating specific music
genres with particular social groups (Levine, 1990). This traditional structuralist framework, however, has been complemented or developed by more contemporary sociological investigations into cultural participation. For instance, while social stratification remains a pervasive pattern in music consumption, researchers have noted a shift from a homologous relationship between social classes and cultural tastes to the omnivore-univore distinction (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2006). That is to say, a distinction between diverse and wide-ranging cultural tastes and interests and narrow and limited ones. This distinction suggests that higher social classes are increasingly characterised by cultural omnivorosity, signifying a form of cultural capital that demonstrates social status not through the exclusion of ‘low culture’ but through the inclusive consumption of diverse cultural forms. This evolution underlines the dynamic relationship between music, social class, and identity.

However, I agree with critics who suggest that the structural approach to understanding the relationship between socio-cultural structures, music practice, and identity has limitations. Both Bourdieusian theory and cultural studies tradition have been criticised for overemphasising the decisive role of social structures in shaping individual cultural practices, which may overlook the agency and creativity of individuals in shaping their own identities. One key critique, according to Frith (1996b, p. 108), is levelled at the assumption that music ‘must somehow “reflect” or “represent” the people’. Building on this critique, DeNora (2000) labels the assumption that links specific music styles with corresponding social beings as the ‘grand’ tradition. She interrogates the compatibility of this approach with contemporary social contexts, characterised by the coexistence of contrasting cultures.

Accordingly, these music sociologists propose an alternative view to exploring the active role that individuals and music play in the process of identity
construction. Frith (1987) posits that a primary social function of popular music is to assist individuals in formulating self-definitions and locating themselves within societal matrices. This stance emphasises the notion of identity as an ongoing process rather than a static entity, spotlighting its dynamic and evolving nature (Frith, 1996b). Similarly, Negus (1996a) challenges the idea that identity is inherently inscribed in specific music genres, proposing that identity is crystallised through dynamic processes that connect individuals through and with music. This view situates social actors as pivotal agents in constructing identity. In his original words, ‘cultural identities are not fixed in any essential way but are actively created through particular communication processes, social practices and “articulations” within specific circumstances’ (Negus, 1996a, p. 100). These claims reveal the active interplay between musical identities and practices.

This claim is rooted in the emerging emphasis in sociological research in recent years on the fluid, dynamic, and context-dependent nature of identity (Giddens, 1991). This understanding has directed greater attention towards the construction, negotiation, and performance of identity across social contexts, acknowledging that our self-concept and identities are shaped by our interactions with others and the broader social and cultural systems. In relation to music, this perspective invites researchers to explore how individuals actively engage with music to construct and negotiate their identities rather than presuming a direct correspondence between musical preferences and social categories. The conception of identity as a product of social interaction can be traced back to Mead’s (1934) work, which proposed that the self is constructed gradually through role-taking, where individuals adopt the attitudes and expectations of others in the social environment, thus building a corresponding perception of self-identity. Drawing on Mead’s ideas, Goffman (1959) introduces the concept of ‘presentation of self’, suggesting that individuals
actively manage their identities in social situations by performing roles congruent with current social norms and expectations. According to this view, identity is continuously constructed, negotiated, and redefined through social interactions, with individuals interpreting and responding to the symbolic cues during interactions (Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1980). And music is exactly one of these symbolic cues in social interactions (Larsen, Lawson and Todd, 2010).

Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning interest in exploring the role of music in individuals' everyday lives and its impact on personal identity construction. Music is increasingly recognised as a significant cultural resource individuals employ to define and shape themselves (Born, 2011; Nag, 2018). This emphasis on the role of music in identity construction is anchored in several seminal contributions in the field. For instance, DeNora (2000) presents an in-depth examination of how individuals use music as a tool for self-regulation, emotion management, and identity work in their everyday lives. She proposes that music functions not only as a reflective medium that facilitates self-perceptions but also as a transformative tool that moulds the perception of oneself through its unique material properties. This perspective positions music as a formative force in the construction of identity. Similarly, Hesmondhalgh (2013) argues that music is a valuable medium through which individuals navigate complex emotions, eventually contributing to human flourishing. These insights illuminate the myriad ways in which individuals draw upon music as a cultural resource in the process of identity formation.

This has led to a wealth of research by scholars on the interplay between music and identity, covering a variety of aspects, including gender and sexuality (McClary, 1991; Hawkins, 2009; Milestone and Meyer, 2012), race (Roy, 2010; Hughes, 2015), ethnicity (Stokes, 1994; Baranovitch, 2003), locality (Shank, 1994; Bennett, 2000), and more. Some other researchers also extend this
discussion into the context of the digital age, highlighting the potential significance of immersive and ubiquitous music participation with digital technology in shaping identity (R. Bennett, 2015; Nag, 2018). In the context of China, Luo (2017) uncovers the ways in which Chinese music listeners express their identities through music, spanning choosing different music genres and styles, participating in online communities, and engaging in various forms of online music activities in the digital media era. Luo (2017, p. 251) states, ‘[m]usic consumption is no longer a passive behavior; it activates consumers’ behavior by providing them with opportunities for creation, communication, and building identities through music consumption’. The growing literature on music’s integral role in everyday life has illuminated its significance in identity construction and negotiation, revealing diverse ways music permeates our lived experiences.

Although these studies have advanced our understanding of music and identity, there remains scope for further exploration of the intricate interaction between music and various socio-cultural practices and contexts in the orchestration of identity construction. The current body of research has overlooked the role of music in the lives of certain underrepresented groups, such as non-Western societies and cultures. This gap provides an avenue to broaden the understanding of how individuals engage with music in different social contexts.

At the same time, the interplay between music and identity has given rise to compelling yet contentious discussions. Nowak (2016), for example, criticises the prevalent paradigm in music sociology, which overstates the semiotic significance of music in the identity construction process. Therefore, he advocates for a shift in focus from identity to the importance of music in the ‘life narrative’ (see also Negus, 2012), moving away from its ‘meaning’ towards its ‘role’. He contends that this approach is not a mere substitution but an
acknowledgement of music’s influence on emotional reflexivity, integrating individual experiences, music consumption, and everyday life structures. In the same vein, despite acknowledging the value of music in constructing identity, Negus and Velázquez (2002) point out the potential limitations of positing a necessary connection between music and identity. They propose that music practices can sometimes facilitate an escape from daily identities, prompting individuals to experience ‘a retreat from identities’ (Negus and Velázquez, 2002, p. 143). This statement underlines music’s ability to create an alternative experiential environment distinct from an individual’s daily reality, thereby affording the experience of detachment. However, there is an omission from this argument. Music practices, such as attending a live performance, may dissolve one’s daily identity; but meanwhile, individual differences may disappear in practice, leading to the temporary formation of a new shared collective identity among audience members. Thus, music remains connected to a certain identity, but it has the potential to evoke and represent a different one beyond an individual’s ‘everyday identity’.

Taking a broader social and historical perspective, Hesmondhalgh (2008, 2013) provides a more nuanced understanding of the role of music in the construction of the self, demonstrating both its enabling and constraining aspects. He posits that music has become intertwined with capitalist structures and intensified consumer behaviours; simultaneously, the achievement of emotional self-actualisation through music has become entangled with status competition. Thus, the positive influence of music on identity formation may not remain constant when private lives intersect with social and historical processes. Hesmondhalgh (2007) acknowledges music’s positive impact on individuals but simultaneously asserts that ‘music’s power to enable self-making is constrained, limited, and damaged’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2008, p. 342) within a macro-social context, specifically within class-divided societies. Indeed, music consumption
extends beyond the listeners to encompass broader social elements, such as cultural norms, social class distinctions, and gender roles. Thus, Hesmondhalgh points out that a social-contextual analysis should be the first step of any investigation of music practices because, after all, it is the society that enables individuals’ practices and simultaneously constrains them.

Collectively, these studies outline the critical role of music in identity formation, which is not merely a reflection or representation of social categories or structures but a complex, active process that involves individual choices, interpretations, and negotiations. I agree with the interactionists here in acknowledging that music, as a symbolic resource for individuals, plays a crucial role in forming and expressing identity. At the same time, however, it is necessary to critically assess the implications of this relationship, considering how music can both support and constrain identity work. Therefore, to develop a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the interplay between music, self and identity, this research examines the role of individual agency in shaping identities through music and the multi-faceted influence of music on their identities, considering the diverse ways in which music is consumed and experienced in a specific socio-cultural context in China.

2.1.2 Music and Social Interaction

Music gives rise to diverse social relationships and interactions (Born, 2012), playing a pivotal role in both individual and collective experiences (Hesmondhalgh, 2008, 2013). Music, in essence, is a collective and interactive activity (Becker, 1974). In his influential book Art Worlds, Becker (1982) suggests that collaborative musical activities have the potential to connect all participants in the music world. Music, like other forms of art, is ‘not the products of individual makers […] it is[,] rather, joint products of all the people who
cooperate via an art world’s characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence’ (Becker, 1982, p. 35). In other words, music is a product of cooperation created through a series of extensive social interactions. Therefore, sociality is not an adjunct aspect of music but rather its intrinsic quality.

The capacity of music to foster interpersonal relationships has been recognised across a diverse range of cultural contexts (O’Hara and Brown, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). The uniqueness of music lies in its ability to draw individuals together, crafting connections through the communication of values, beliefs, and emotions (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Scholars have investigated how music listening and engagement set the stage for social interactions, enabling individuals to convey their thoughts, feelings, and experiences through shared music experiences (Prior, 2014; Hagen and Lüders, 2017). This powerful communicative feature is closely tied to the emotional dimensions of music (Juslin and Västfjäll, 2008; DeNora, 2010), which catalyse social connections and interactions, providing opportunities for collective effervescence (Vandenberg, Berghman and van Eijck, 2021). As psychologists have observed, music can elicit empathy and foster emotional contagion among listeners (Lundqvist, Carlsson and Juslin, 2009; Clarke, DeNora and Vuoskoski, 2015), thus promoting group synchronisation and coordination as evidenced in communal music activities like singing together (Tarr, Launay and Dunbar, 2014).

From a sociological perspective, a vital mechanism through which music facilitates social bonding is its ability to bolster group identity and nurture a sense of belonging among group members. Music preferences and tastes often represent social distinction and group belonging (Eijck, 2001; Lizardo, 2006; Prior, 2013). Individuals with similar musical tastes can connect with one another and establish social bonds founded on their shared interests, thereby
contributing to a sense of belonging within a specific social or subcultural group (Bennett, 1999; Negus and Velázquez, 2002). In this capacity, music becomes an instrument for collective expression and emotional resonance within groups. Through shared experiences of listening, performing, or dancing to music, group members can strengthen their connections and develop a sense of collectivity and belonging (A. Bennett, 2015). These collective experiences can also reinforce shared values, norms, and ideologies within the group, further solidifying the sense of belonging and group identity (Frith, 1996b).

In addition to the effects of musical tastes and preferences, symbols and other cultural artefacts associated with specific subcultures or social groups also play a significant role in the process of social bonding. Symbols of a subcultural group, including various visual and stylistic cues, are typically used to signal membership and affiliation (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hodkinson, 2002). One of the most prominent cases in academic research is the use of distinctive clothing, hairstyles, and iconography by the members of the punk subculture of the 1970s to express their collective identity and belonging to the subculture group, demonstrating opposition to dominant norms (Hebdige, 1979). Moreover, music events, such as various forms of music performances, are often viewed as music-related rituals, contributing to the construction and maintenance of group identity (Vandenberg, Berghman and van Eijck, 2021). These activities offer individuals opportunities to interact with others who share their interests, reinforcing social bonds and group cohesion.

While the role of music in fostering social relationships is widely recognised, it is important to also consider more nuanced or even conflicting views present in the literature. As Turino (2008) suggests, music is a powerful social force, but its effects depend on how it is used and experienced. Negus and Velázquez (2002, p. 142) further elaborate on the diverse interpretations and experiences
of music, stating that ‘music listening and the associated practices of consumption can never simply and unproblematically entail a sense of community, identification, solidarity, and shared affiliation’. While they suggest the potential for music to cultivate a sense of collectivity, they caution against oversimplified interpretations of music as a unifying force. A related claim is that the ‘belonging’ fostered by music is not necessarily normatively ‘positive’ but might reinforce existing divisions, exacerbating conflicts between different social groups. An example of this can be seen in the controversial use of the so-called ‘White Power music’. It has been leveraged to propagate a particular ideology, cultivating a ‘White Power’ collective identity while advocating a racist agenda (Corte and Edwards, 2008; Windisch and Simi, 2017).

Furthermore, Zangwill (2012) challenges the prevailing view further by positing music listening as an individualistic experience. He argues that communal music consumption constitutes a ‘group activity’ rather than a social phenomenon, relegating music’s social, political, and moral aspects as merely extrinsic to the music itself. Zangwill’s argument is too radical and focused on individual subjectivity, as it minimises the social dimension of music that has been well documented in the literature. Nonetheless, it, together with the previously mentioned research, reminds us that the role of music in social relationships is multifaceted, shaped by a complex interplay of context, individual experiences, and the music itself.

To sum up this section, the role of music in fostering social interactions and bonds is undeniable, but it can vary depending on the context, the individuals involved, and how music is used. Current research has largely overlooked the specific dynamics of social relationships within indie music scenes, particularly in non-Western contexts. For example, how do indie music lovers in China build and enhance relationships with their peers through music? Are there unique
characteristics of the Chinese indie music scene that influence this process? In addition, while the potential for music to exacerbate social conflicts has been noted, few studies have empirically investigated this issue within actual music communities. How might conflicts arise in the context of the Chinese indie music scene, and how do they impact social relationships? In this research, I aim to delve into these complexities and ambiguities within the Chinese indie music scene. By doing so, I hope to provide a detailed understanding of music’s role in social relations, moving beyond an oversimplified interpretation of music as a mere social glue.

2.1.3 Digital Music Activities

The rise of digital platforms has revolutionised the ways in which individuals engage with music, providing new opportunities for music discovery, consumption, and social interaction (Nowak, 2016; Tofalvy and Barna, 2020). The Internet’s early days saw music fans using mailing lists and Usenet discussion groups to communicate, which set the foundation for today’s vibrant online music communities. In the 1990s, fansites and online forums dominated the online music interaction landscape, signifying a transition towards more direct and continuous engagement between music lovers (Baym, 2007, 2015). This period also saw the advent of P2P technologies, heralding a seismic shift in music consumption. Online music downloads, primarily facilitated by file-sharing activities, surged in popularity (Alderman, 2001; Condry, 2004). This was epitomised by platforms like Napster, which allowed users to find and share MP3 files, receive music without paying for it, and engage in Inter-Relay Chat (Prior, 2015a).

The dawn of the 21st century was a defining era in online music engagement, primarily driven by the advent of Web 2.0 technologies. The rise of SNSs and
social media platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter marked the development of music culture within the broader transformation of the digital media landscape (Mjøs, 2013). Characterised by their open, collaborative, and participatory attributes (Beer and Burrows, 2007), these platforms fundamentally altered the way cultural production and consumption were perceived and conducted. The role of musicians within this online environment has evolved, with artists increasingly focusing on gathering fans and followers into shared spaces to foster new connections and interactions (Beer, 2008; Baym, 2012, 2018). Digital platforms have posed a challenge to the traditional role of industrial gatekeepers, as they promote the decentralised distribution and encourage musicians to engage in self-promotion and entrepreneurial endeavours as a form of creative labour (Siciliano, 2020). The dynamic nature of this digital landscape also enabled music enthusiasts to evolve from passive consumers to so-called ‘prosumers’, actively participating in shaping the music culture (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Nakajima, 2012).

Among the many transformative dynamics brought about by the emergence of SNSs and social media platforms, two particularly influential shifts warrant attention. First, these platforms have fostered virtual spaces that bridge the traditional gap between fans and musicians, cultivating a sense of proximity (Beer, 2008) and leading to more ‘mutual, equal and voluntary connections’ (Baym, 2012, p. 312). Consequently, fans can engage more directly with their favourite artists, contributing to the bands-and-fans dynamic (boyd, 2007; Baym, 2018). Second, these platforms played an instrumental role in nurturing fan relationships and fostering community construction, enabling fans to actively create and distribute content related to their preferred music (Shklovski and boyd, 2006; Beer, 2008; Gauntlett, 2011). Social media provides a space for music fans to connect with others who share similar musical tastes and preferences, facilitating the formation of music-based communities and a sense
of belonging (Baym, 2007; Click, Lee and Holladay, 2013; Waldron, 2018). Baym’s (2007) study on Swedish music fandom demonstrates that, in the Web 2.0 era, music communities have evolved to be widely dispersed across multiple online communication platforms. These fan communities no longer adhere to traditional site-based or network-based models. Instead, they occupy a hybrid space that bridges the gap between the two, distributing themselves ‘throughout a variety of sites in a quasi-coherent networked fashion’ (Baym, 2007). Thus, the rise of social media has reshaped the landscape of online music engagement, facilitating a more interactive and participatory culture.

In recent years, music streaming platforms, such as Spotify, Apple Music, and China’s NetEase Cloud Music, have become primary channels for music consumption. These platforms provide users access to a vast range of musical content while leveraging big data and algorithms to deliver personalised listening experiences through music recommendations (Morris and Powers, 2015; Arditi, 2021; Hesmondhalgh, 2022). This phenomenon has given rise to the concept of ‘algorithmic culture’, which examines how algorithms shape and mediate people’s cultural practices (Striphas, 2015), with profound implications for music socialising practices. The potential of algorithmic culture lies in its ability to enrich music discovery and social interactions. By exposing users to new artists, genres, and scenes, they can expand individuals’ musical horizons and facilitate the formation of new social connections (Seaver, 2022). This aspect of algorithmic culture may enhance a greater sense of belonging and interconnectedness among music enthusiasts as they engage with diverse musical styles and navigate the complexities of the global music landscape. In this context, Hagen and Lüders (2017) argue that music streaming services, such as Spotify and Tidal, facilitate human connection and peer influence, thereby reinforcing the role of weak and absent ties. For example, sharing playlists publicly on these platforms connects individuals who lack personal and
social connections, turning these absent ties into valuable sources of music discovery and recommendation within music streaming platforms.

However, as with any technology, the rise of algorithmic culture and its emphasis on personalisation brings several challenges. For example, it raises concerns about the potential formation of ‘filter bubbles’ in cultural consumption (Bruns, 2019). As algorithms on digital platforms analyse user preferences to recommend content that aligns with their existing tastes, there is a risk of inadvertently constraining musical exploration and diversity (Hesmondhalgh, 2022). While scholars have raised the risks of algorithms in shaping the socialisation practices of music, these discussions may somewhat neglect the role of user agency and the diversity of tastes among listeners. Users are not passive consumers of algorithmic recommendations; they actively engage with these technologies, shaping their listening habits and social interactions based on personal preferences and values (Hagen, 2015; Morris and Powers, 2015). Moreover, users can also reflexively employ algorithmic recommendations to forge complex socio-technical relationships with these systems, highlighting the complex interaction between human agency and algorithmic culture in music socialisation practices (Freeman, Gibbs and Nansen, 2022). In the context of China, streaming music platforms are a significant means of music consumption. However, there is a lack of research in English-language academia regarding how people incorporate these platforms into their daily lives. This study aims to address this gap and provide insights in this regard.

The relationship between online and offline music socialising practices is complex and multifaceted, with digital and physical spaces often complementing and reinforcing one another (Baym, 2015; Prior, 2018). Online platforms can facilitate the organisation and promotion of offline music events, as well as provide a space for post-event discussions and the sharing of
experiences. For example, social media platforms are widely used for advertising concerts and festivals, connecting fans with artists, and facilitating the exchange of music-related information and experiences (Baym, 2012, 2018). In turn, offline music events can stimulate online interactions by fostering the development of shared interests and networks. Attending live performances can create a sense of belonging and shared identity, which can subsequently be reinforced and expanded through online engagement (Lingel and Naaman, 2012). Furthermore, offline music events may catalyse online fan communities, where individuals continue to connect, discuss, and share their passion for music. Thus, it is essential to consider both online and offline music socialising practices to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of indie music in shaping the social lives of its enthusiasts.

The digital revolution in music, as outlined in this section, has brought about profound changes in the ways individuals engage with and experience music. The rise of digital platforms, the influence of algorithmic culture, and the interplay between online and offline music socialising practices have reshaped the landscape of music consumption, interactions, discovery, and community formation, all of which are essential aspects of music socialising practices. However, most of the research on streaming platforms has been focused on mainstream music genres, leaving a gap in understanding how indie music lovers engage with these platforms and how these platforms influence indie music culture. Moreover, existing studies often overlook non-Western contexts, making it difficult to fully grasp the global implications of the streaming phenomenon. Especially in the context of China, with its unique digital landscape and burgeoning indie scene, our understanding remains fragmented. This research will specifically address these gaps in the context of the Chinese indie music scene.
2.1.4 Live Experience in Music Socialising

While digital platforms have expanded the possibilities for music activities and social interactions, they coexist with, rather than replace, the live music experience, whose physical and embodied experience remains significant. Live music is not only an essential and profitable part of the music industry but also a valuable cultural experience for audiences, supporting social interaction, identity formation, as well as the understanding of one’s own and other’s feelings (Frith, 2007).

The concept of ‘liveness’ has been a subject of significant interest and debate within the sociological investigations of live music experience. While various definitions and interpretations of liveness exist, the term generally refers to ‘a temporal relationship, a relationship of simultaneity’ which unfolds around the act of ‘perform[ing] in real time’ (Auslander, 2002, p. 21). Historically, interpretations of liveness have positioned live music and recorded music at opposite ends of the spectrum, often implying a value judgement that equates liveness with authenticity. The understanding of liveness is established with the development of recorded music because ‘the ascent of “liveness” as a distinct musical value coincided with the decline of performance as both the dominant medium of music and the prototype for recording’ (Thornton, 1995, p. 49). This is particularly emphasised in musical subcultures where authenticity is particularly asserted. As Thornton (1995, p. 71) contends:

[T]he term also asserted that performance was the ‘real live thing’. Liveness become the truth of music, the seeds of genuine culture. Records, by contrast, were false prophets of pseudo-culture.

However, due to the profound and extensive influence of digital technology on contemporary music production and consumption, scholars have developed a
more nuanced ontological understanding of liveness. Auslander (1999),
drawing on Baudrillard’s concept of simulation, suggests that live and
mediatised have become mutually dependent and imbricated, which are no
longer distinguishable but have collapsed into each other. Following this line of
thought, Sanden (2013) argues that liveness is a flexible concept that depends
on the perception and interpretation of individuals rather than on fixed
definitions or binary oppositions between live and recorded modes of musical
experience. This points to the experiential nature of liveness, which lies at the
core of the live music experience, putting our mind and body together
(Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

In light of the evolving concept of liveness, contemporary music environments
featuring digital platforms and streaming services create new forms and
possibilities of liveness based on real-time access and interaction across
different locations (Zhang and Negus, 2021), which manifest the networked and
mobile nature of liveness in current socio-technological contexts (Couldry,
2004). However, this also raises questions about how authenticity and other
cultural aspects of live music are valued (Zhang and Negus, 2021), as well as
how structural factors, such as media penetration, capitalist exploitation, and
social alienation, may challenge live music (F. Holt, 2010). The digitalisation of
the live music experience not only restructures the cultural significance and
boundaries of live music (Bennett, 2012) but also reshapes the perception of
the self and identity of fans (R. Bennett, 2015).

In live music experiences, liveness plays a crucial role as an emotional catalyst,
fostering a sense of unity and belonging among audience members through
shared experiences (Vandenberg, Berghman and van Eijck, 2021). The
emotional intensity and immediacy of live music can foster connections among
attendees as they collectively immerse themselves in the music and its
emotional landscape (Benzecry and Collins, 2014). Consequently, the emotional function and value of music facilitate social bonding and cultivate a sense of empathy among audiences (Clarke, DeNora and Vuoskoski, 2015). Understanding the emotional power of live music is essential for comprehending how live music events foster social connections and impact the broader cultural landscape.

Moreover, live music performances provide a platform for the co-construction of meaning that goes beyond emotions. Recent literature emphasised the active role of the audience in live music events, highlighting their participation in shaping the meaning and significance of performances and thus fostering connections among attendees (Pitts, 2005; Brown and Knox, 2017). At the same time, audiences interpret and respond to the music and the social context in which it is performed, contributing to the collective understanding of the performance (Duffett, 2003). Live performances can thus be viewed as a form of social interaction where both performers and audience members participate in the creation and negotiation of meaning (Toynbee, 2000). This dynamic process underlines the significance of live music as a space for social interaction and cultural expression. For instance, in a study of rock clubs in New York City, Holt (2014) suggests that live music clubs are not only sites of musical performance and consumption but also sites for cultural and social values that reflect and shape urban life. The global COVID-19 pandemic has brought a new dimension to this dialogue. With restrictions on live gatherings and performances, the music industry has adapted, bringing live music into homes through digital platforms. This shift has not only altered the way live music is consumed but also influenced how audiences engage with music and each other. While it has introduced barriers to traditional forms of participation (Zhao, 2022), it has opened up new possibilities for audience interaction and engagement, potentially reshaping the co-construction of meaning in live
performances (Rendell, 2021; Vandenberg, Berghman and Schaap, 2021).

These academic works demonstrate a growing focus on the experiential and interpretative nature of liveness, suggesting it is not (only) the object characteristics of performance but (also) the subjective perceptions and emotional responses of individuals that shape the essence of live music experiences. In light of this, the literature review has illuminated an opportunity to investigate how Chinese indie music lovers interpret and engage with live music in their music socialising practices. This thesis will probe into the interactive processes and emotional responses evoked by live music performances and how they contribute to identity formation, social connections, and the collective sense-making process.

2.2 Theoretical Underpinnings

2.2.1 Music in Action

Before delving into the contemporary strands of thought in the sociology of music, it is necessary to acknowledge its roots in the works of classical sociologists such as Comte, Spencer, Simmel, and Weber. These scholars incorporated music into their broader social analyses, providing early glimpses into the social dimensions of music (see Shepherd and Devine, 2015b). However, these insights were sporadic and isolated and did not form a coherent or continuous tradition. Moving forward to the 20th century, two intellectual movements, the Frankfurt School, notably Adorno (1938, 1962, 1991), and the Chicago School, represented by Becker (1951, 1963, 1974, 1982), significantly propelled the sociological understanding of music. The Frankfurt School delved into the role of music within capitalist society, probing its interplay with social and cultural power. However, their analysis often privileged an overarching critique of capitalism and the culture industry, potentially overlooking the
specificities of individual musical practices and experiences. In comparison, the Chicago School emphasised the embeddedness of music within social contexts, scrutinising music's role within social structures, institutions, and interactions, over and above its aesthetic appeal. Although rooted in different theoretical and methodological orientations, both schools made significant contributions to understanding the social dimensions of music. The 1970s and 1980s saw a growing advocacy for the serious study of popular music, led by scholars such as Shepherd et al. (1977), Small (1977), and Frith (1978, 1983). This marked the development of the sociology of music as a vibrant sub-discipline, wherein scholars employ various theoretical frameworks and research methods to explore the manifold aspects of music.

In the contemporary scholarly landscape, two dominant lines of thought have emerged in the sociology of music. The first involves investigating the relationship between music, or musical culture, and social structures, represented by cultural studies (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1995) and Bourdieu's (1983, 1984, 1993) theories. This structural perspective has profoundly influenced the development of contemporary music sociology (Prior, 2011, 2013). Although these perspectives offer valuable insight into the role of music in reproducing social inequalities, they have been criticised for underestimating individuals’ agency in their musical experiences (see reviews in Section 2.1.1). Thus, some scholars advocate for a 'cultural turn' in sociology, urging the field to focus on meaning, feeling, and experience (Alexander and Smith, 2003; Jacobs and Spillman, 2005). This emphasis shifts the gaze from structural analyses towards exploring the active role of both

5 These works have been reviewed in Section 2.1 and thus will not be repeated here.
Accordingly, an alternative thread of thought emphasises the individual’s role in the realm of music, highlighting their ability to shape social actions and attribute meanings within a given context, which is the approach followed by this study. This perspective differs from viewpoints concentrating on social structures or overarching trends and patterns that determine human behaviours. Here, music is seen as both a resource for social action and a medium for social practice. DeNora (2011, 2016) refers to this perspective as ‘music in action’, which accentuates the interplay between individuals’ subjective experiences with music and the dynamic and influential nature of music in human life, illustrating the intricate relationship between music and practice. As DeNora (2016, p. 390) puts it:

*The ‘in action’ focus is addressed to the question of how culture ‘gets into’ action and vice versa and how this process can be observed and explained. The impetus is ethnographic, focused upon actual social interaction, the real stuff that people do in, with, because of culture.*

This perspective examines the role of music in shaping the self, emotions, and social interactions in everyday life, with a particular focus on how music intertwines with action and social contexts (DeNora, 2000). Drawing on DeNora’s (2000) concept of music as ‘a technology of self’, this approach explores the multifaceted ways in which individuals actively engage and interact with music to create, maintain, and transform their identities and sense of self. As a technology of self, music offers various affordances and opportunities for self-reflection, self-expression, and self-presentation, pointing out the dynamic and ongoing negotiation between individuals, music, and their social contexts. Hennion’s (2001) work complements this view by underscoring the significance
of taste and attachment in the construction of individual and collective identities. Through analysing the practices of amateur music lovers, Hennion argues that their attachments and ways of doing things can engage with and shape their subjectivities rather than simply mirroring their social labels. This emphasises the active role of music listeners in constructing their music practices, which in turn shape their social experiences and relationships.

Therefore, music functions as ‘a constitutive ingredient of social life’ (DeNora, 2003a, p. 151). It not only passively serves as a backdrop to our actions but also actively functions as a social and cultural resource in people’s everyday life. Echoing this perspective, Hennion (2012, 2015) calls for a shift in the sociology of music, moving beyond the analysis of music as a cultural product or artefact to focus on the processes by which music becomes an active participant in social life. Hennion refers to this as ‘musical mediation’ (also see Born, 2005, 2015), which highlights the ways in which music mediates social interactions, relationships, and identity construction. In Prior’s (2011, p. 132) summary, this approach ‘argues for a shift from an analysis of “what” music does to “how” it matters in particular social settings’.

DeNora and Hennion both stress the significance of individual engagement with music, positing that musical experiences result from the interaction between people, music, and their social contexts. This perspective aligns with Christopher Small’s (1998) concept of ‘musicking’, focusing on processes and activities of music engagement by individuals and communities. Musicking, according to Small, encapsulates the entire range of activities and experiences associated with music, including listening, performing, dancing, discussing, and even the broader social and cultural contexts in which these activities unfold. Through the concept of musicking, Small conceives music not just as an art form or source of entertainment but as a dynamic activity deeply entwined with
human life, offering invaluable insights into the dynamic and interactive nature of musical experiences and their social implications.

Much previous music sociology research has examined music's influence on people's social experiences and individuals' active role in shaping their musical experiences, as advocated by DeNora, Hennion, and others. For example, Benzecry's (2011) exploration of Argentinean opera fans provides insight into how they use music as a resource and medium for agency and identity construction through their passion for opera. And the impetus for this way of thinking also often comes from outside sociology. Finnegan's (1989) music-ethnographic study of music-making in an English town, for instance, scrutinises the myriad ways people engage with music in their everyday lives, spotlighting the role of music in shaping social experiences, relationships, and identities. More recently, the focus of research has moved to how digital technologies (re)shape people's musical experiences and their engagement with them (Bull, 2007; Prior, 2014; Nowak, 2016).

While sociologists such as Rojek and Turner (2000) criticised the 'cultural turn' in sociology, arguing that it represents a 'decorative sociology' that overemphasises aesthetic dimensions and inadequately captures the comprehensive perspective of sociology, it is important to note that this critique may not fully appreciate the intentions of the cultural turn. These critics argue that the emphasis on cultural and aesthetic aspects detracts from a deeper understanding of social structures and power relations, which are central to the discipline. Responding to these critiques, DeNora (2016) argues that the 'in action' approach, while focusing on people's actions, reactions, and interactions with culture, also examines their ability to cope with circumstances. This perspective reveals the potential to provide insight into the impact of social forces on individuals, thereby addressing the concern that the 'cultural turn'
neglects the role of social structures. DeNora argues that by examining how music influences individuals’ actions and experiences within their broader social context, the music-in-action approach offers a more detailed understanding of the interplay between culture, agency, and social structures. Considering these counterarguments and responses, I suggest that it is crucial to acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between music, individuals, and society. While the music-in-action perspective and its focus on individual agency and cultural practices have made significant contributions to the field of music sociology, it is also important to consider the role of social structures and power relations in shaping musical experiences and their broader social implications. Individual music practices should therefore be examined in relation to the wider social, cultural, and technological contexts.

As a critical extension to this discussion, it is crucial to acknowledge that power structures within the music industry and culture often revolve around issues of inequality. These inequalities cover a variety of aspects, such as the marginalisation of women (Frith and McRobbie, 1990; McClary, 1991), social stratification (Bourdieu, 1984), and racial dynamics within music scenes and industry (Hughes, 2015). Moreover, these power relations are also evident in the centre-periphery dynamics that have traditionally privileged Western music, both classical and popular, often at the expense of non-Western music cultures (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000; Regev, 2013). Despite the growing recognition of the need for a more inclusive and global perspective in the sociology of music, there is still scarce research that critically examines non-Western contexts such as China. This gap in the literature points to the need for more research that focuses on musical experiences and practices within diverse socio-cultural contexts. This research contributes to the emerging academic field of music sociology and related disciplines in the context of China (e.g., de Kloet, 2010; Fung, 2013; Jian, 2018; Lu, 2018), exploring how Chinese listeners navigate,
resist, and potentially reconfigure social structures and power relations (see also Baranovitch, 2003; Moskowitz, 2010). It underscores the importance and relevance of understanding the ways in which music listeners in China engage with and respond to these dynamics, shedding light on the intricate interplay between music, individuals, and broader social contexts.

This research aims to investigate the daily musical experiences, interactions, and practices of Chinese indie music lovers and attempts to examine how ‘large’ social forces manifest on and influence them. Accordingly, the music-in-action approach, which situates music and musical practices within the actions of social actors, is well-suited for this study. In DeNora’s (2000, p. 24) words, this approach ‘conceptualize[s] musical forms as devices for the organization of experience, as referents for action, feeling and knowledge formulation’. By considering music as an activity rather than an object, the approach of music in action helps us understand how music is integrated into music lovers’ practices, thereby discussing the relationship between music, music lovers, and their everyday lives.

**2.2.2 Symbolic Interactionism**

While various theoretical lenses exist to study music-related practices, this research predominantly employs symbolic interactionism, a framework that foregrounds the importance of scrutinising micro-level interactions within a specific social context. It offers a robust analytical tool for conducting an in-depth examination of social interactions, communication, and experiences among social groups like Chinese indie music lovers, thereby enriching our understanding of music-related practices and their dynamics.

Symbolic interactionism has its roots in the early 20th century, primarily through
the works of George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, and Erving Goffman. Each of these theorists contributed substantially to the development of this sociological perspective, providing a foundation for understanding human interaction and social behaviour. Mead’s (1934) seminal work focused on the process of social interaction, indicating the importance of symbols, communication, and interpretation in shaping human behaviours. He posited that individuals develop a sense of self and an understanding of society through interactions with others, as they interpret and respond to each one another’s gestures, expressions, and actions (Mead, 1934). Furthermore, Mead (1934) contended that during interaction processes, individuals continually engage in mindful action, manipulating symbols and negotiating the meaning of situations. This emphasis on social interaction and the role of symbols in constructing meaning laid the groundwork for the ongoing development of symbolic interactionism as a sociological approach.

Building upon Mead’s ideas, Blumer (1969) systematised the principles of symbolic interactionism by outlining three central premises. The first premise emphasises that ‘human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them’ (Blumer, 1969, p. 2), thus establishing the centrality of meaning in human actions. The second premise adds depth to this by asserting that ‘[t]he meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows’ (ibid), thereby situating the generation of meaning within the realm of social interaction. Lastly, the third premise recognises that ‘these meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he

6 While there may be many different definitions and labels of Goffman’s research (Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2009), I am particularly concerned here with the contribution of Goffman’s research to symbolic interactionism.
encounters’ (ibid). This premise acknowledges the active role individuals play in shaping and reshaping their world through interpretation. Together, these premises highlight the dynamic nature of social interactions, where actors continuously create, re-create, and interpret experiences in ongoing interactions, thereby establishing a clear theoretical framework to investigate social phenomena.

Adding a complementary perspective to this discourse, Goffman (1959), although not strictly adhering to the symbolic interactionist tradition, introduced an innovative analytical approach that has deeply influenced our understanding of social interaction, identity, and self in everyday life. His method of ‘dramaturgy’ uses the metaphor of theatre to decipher the strategies individuals employ to present themselves to others and manage impressions in various social situations. By casting interactions as performances, Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967) added a new layer of complexity to our understanding of symbolic interactionism, suggesting the subtleties and nuances of social interactions that underpin the negotiation of identities and behaviours. Thus, in synthesising the contributions of Mead, Blumer, and Goffman, we see a clear evolution and expansion of symbolic interactionism from a theory focused on symbols and meanings to a broader framework capable of exploring the theatricality and performance aspects of social interactions.

Drawing on symbolic interactionism, numerous studies have been conducted across various sociological domains, including identity and social roles (Stryker, 2001; Burke and Stets, 2009; Serpe and Stryker, 2011), deviance (Becker, 1953), culture (Denzin, 1992; Becker and McCall, 1993), as well as music (Becker, 1982; Finnegan, 1989; DeNora, 2000; Fonarow, 2006). Although not always explicitly stated as symbolic interactionist research, these works were significantly inspired by symbolic interactionism and contributed to the
enrichment and development of the symbolic interactionism framework. However, one of the critiques levelled against early symbolic interactionism was its seeming neglect of macro-level social structures and power dynamics (Stryker, 1980). It overestimates the value of everyday life by assuming that society is simply constructed by micro-interactions, thereby underestimating broader factors that exert a profound influence on society (Gouldner, 1970). Notably, this critique suggests a potential blind spot in symbolic interactionism that could limit its ability to contextualise the music socialising practices of indie music lovers within the broader social landscape of China.

In response to this criticism, some contemporary interactionists have sought to incorporate elements of structural analysis and to explore the interplay between individual agency and broader social structures in shaping human behaviour, which they refer to as ‘structural symbolic interactionism’ (Stryker, 1980, 1997, 2008; Hausmann, Jonason and Summers-Effler, 2011; Serpe and Stryker, 2011). This perspective adds a structural dimension to the ‘traditional’ symbolic interactionism framework. Stryker (2001), integrating the insights from role theory, argues that individuals occupy multiple roles in a given society, and these role form part of a larger social structure. Society, constituted by a network of these roles, influences individual behaviours as they act in ways consistent with their understanding and expectation of these roles. Simultaneously, individual actions and interactions also shape and redefine these social roles, creating a constant interplay between the individual and society. Structural symbolic interactionism contextualises individual agency within the broader social structure, highlighting how the meanings individuals construct are influenced by their roles in society. This perspective provides a framework for understanding the intricate relationship between individual actions and social structures, indicating a potential pathway for mitigating this limitation in the present study.
Symbolic interactionism is pivotal in this research as it underscores the importance of individual experiences and daily interactions, recognising the agency of individuals in shaping their social world and suggesting that people are active participants in constructing and negotiating meanings, identities, and social relationships. This framework, therefore, offers a distinctive lens through which I aim to examine indie music lovers’ music socialising practices in China. The relevance of this theory is closely tied to the key themes this study explores: identity and social relations. By investigating these themes, we can better understand how broader social interconnectedness is evolving in contemporary society. These themes are related to how indie music lovers interpret the meanings of music and how they perceive the role and value of music in their lives and social interactions. Two key aspects are spotlighted when analysing music socialising practices through a symbolic interactionist lens:

First, the creation of the meaning of music is derived from social interactions. In addition to the meanings that are carried by music, such as the semantic meaning of lyrics, symbolic interactionism suggests that the meaning of music may also arise from social interactions among music audiences. These interactions can take various forms, including chats, posts, comments, and other interpersonal communication, which contribute to the construction of shared meanings and experiences among indie music lovers. By analysing the meanings derived from social interactions, symbolic interactionism allows researchers to explore how music socialising practices shape and maintain individuals’ self-concept, identity, and social relationships within the indie music community.

Second, the interpretation of the meaning of music is also part of symbolic interaction. Symbolic interactionism posits that meanings are not inherent in cultural products like music but are created through individuals’ interpretative
processes. While the lyrics, melody, rhythm, chords, and instruments provide the raw material for interpretation, the meaning derived from these elements is mediated by an individual’s cultural competence - a skillset developed through education, cultural exposure, and social experiences. This is then connected to elements of social structure. By examining the interpretation of meanings in music, symbolic interactionism can help us understand how music lovers derive personal and social significance from their engagement with indie music and reflect the role of social factors in this process.

In general, the employment of the symbolic interactionist framework is informed by its valuable perspective for examining the complex interplay between music, identity, and social relations. This approach provides a solid foundation to probe into the constitution and interpretation of the meaning of music and the meanings it conveys. By adopting this approach, I aspire to shed light on indie music’s multifaceted role in its enthusiasts’ lives and the broader social interconnectedness in contemporary society, thus making a distinctive contribution to the existing literature on symbolic interactionism and indie music studies.

### 2.2.3 Reflexive Modernisation and Social Interconnectedness

In an attempt to understand and interpret the profound changes occurring in the world since the 1990s, including changes in socio-cultural, economic, technological, and political environments, some scholars, such as Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994), proposed the theoretical concept of reflexive modernisation. Although it emerged from a description of Western societies, some of its core ideas can be used by us in other social contexts as well. This process, characterised by a heightened awareness of the consequences of modernisation, leads to the reconfiguration of social institutions, values,
practices, and individuals. It has significant implications for individuals’ engagement with music and related cultural practices, as well as for their understanding of social interconnectedness.

Reflexivity has far-reaching consequences on social structures, which have been explored by various scholars over the years. Throughout history, societal shifts have often been correlated with novel conceptions of time and space. Giddens (1984, 1990, 1991) argues that the historical trajectory of modernity can be distilled as a process of time-space distanciation, signifying the perpetual expansion of time and space in society. Time-space distanciation describes a feature of modern societies, where the experience of time and space has become more abstract, disembedded, and fragmented than in traditional societies and where time is no longer bound up with space. Giddens argues that this distanciation is driven by advances in communication and transportation technologies, which dissolve spatial barriers and create a unified space that combines disparate locations within a singular temporal dimension. In traditional societies, time and space were closely interconnected and experienced as relatively stable and localised. Individuals’ daily activities, interactions, and sense of community were primarily shaped by their immediate physical environment. However, in modern societies, the compression of time and space has created new possibilities for social action. The ability to travel quickly across vast distances and communicate instantaneously over long distances has led to the globalisation of social relations and the creation of new forms of social and cultural connectivity.

Consequently, time-space distanciation facilitates the disembedding of social relations, restructuring them across indefinite spans of time and space (Giddens, 1990). This metamorphosis in societal structures gives rise to reflexive modernity, which is characterised by constant reflection and
adaptation in response to changes and challenges of modernisation (Giddens, 1991). Different sociologists have brought distinct insights to the concept of reflexive modernity, focusing on different aspects such as agency, risk, and globalisation (see Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994). And here, I am particularly attentive to the impact of reflexive modernity on individual social actors. The emancipation from temporal and spatial constraints, as well as rigid social norms and traditions, results in alienation and fragmentation. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, 2009) claim that as traditional, predetermined social identities dissolve, individuals are prompted to select their behaviours and identities to accomplish re-embedding within the context of what they term ‘precarious freedoms’. This viewpoint is particularly useful in my research for understanding how Chinese indie music lovers negotiate their place in a society that is in constant flux. These arguments on reflexive modernity would enrich my investigation of how music practices, particularly within indie music, can serve as a mechanism for negotiating identity and social ties in contemporary Chinese society. These theories can help me frame the ways in which indie music lovers in China engage with their music and shape their social behaviours within a social world that is increasingly defined by reflexivity.

Another influential theorist who examined the transformation of social structures is Bauman (2000), who also scrutinised the new characteristics of time and space in modern society. He argues that modernity liberates time from space and makes it the tool to conquer space; hence, the relationship between time and space becomes dynamic. Bauman proposes the theory of liquid modernity to describe the constant mobility and shifts in identities, social relationships, and economy in contemporary society. For Bauman, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a coherent identity over time and space, as individuals can fluidly change their roles. This condition leads to the formation of ‘cloakroom communities’ and ‘carnival communities’ to achieve sociality.
These terms describe a form of transient and temporary social connections that are formed for a specific purpose and a limited period of time. Individuals come together to partake in a specific event or activity and disperse once it ends. These forms of community reflect the fluid and dynamic nature of social relationships in the era of liquid modernity. Consequently, as Beck suggests, the liberation and freedom of individuals force people to make choices. However, Bauman contends that this liberation re-examines society and community under the premise of accepting individualisation. In other words, liquid modernity not only concerns achieving individual freedom but also examines how people collaborate and establish a shared foundation to reconstruct the public sphere.

Building on these perspectives, more recent scholarship continues to explore the implications of reflexive modernisation in various contexts (e.g., Beck and Grande, 2010; Elliott and Urry, 2010). These works highlight the importance of understanding the complexities of social transformations as societies meet the challenges and opportunities presented by globalisation, technology, and shifting cultural landscapes. Reflexive modernisation has led to the increasing individualisation of social life, where traditional forms of social organisation and solidarity are replaced by more fluid, dynamic, and personalised networks of relationships (Giddens, 1991). Beck (1992) argues that alongside the transformation of sociality patterns, private relationships with socialisation agencies have emerged as a product of individualisation. In his elaboration on reflexive modernisation, Beck (1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) suggests that individualisation is a fundamental feature of modern society, proposing the concept of institutionalised individualism. Based on the idea that individualisation is a high-level socialisation product (Schroer, see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), institutionalised individualism views individualisation as a structural characteristic of a highly differentiated society. In this perspective,
individualisation does not hinder social integration but provides possibilities for it (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This differs from Durkheim’s concept of organic solidarity and the cult of the individual, which sees society as an integrated whole with individuals deriving their identity largely from their social roles. In contrast, Beck’s idea of institutionalised individualism sees individuals as autonomous entities capable of reflecting on and adapting to their social conditions, and it is this reflexivity that allows for new forms of social integration in modern societies. In this context, music becomes a critical resource for individuals to construct and express their identities, negotiate their social positions, and establish meaningful connections with others (DeNora, 2000; Hennion, 2001). The music-in-action approach, which emphasises the importance of individual engagement with music in shaping social experiences, relationships, and meanings, can be valuable in investigating how individuals use music in the context of reflexive modernity.

As societies continue to evolve, the rise of digital technologies has played an essential role in intensifying the reflexive modernisation process. Widespread adoption of digital technologies, especially the internet, has led to significant shifts in the ways individuals access information, communicate, and participate in social and cultural practices (Castells, 2001; Wellman and Haythornthwaite, 2002). Castells (1996, 2001) suggests that the emergence of a network society, characterised by the prominence of digital networks in organising social, economic, and political life, has profound implications for cultural practices and social relationships. In the context of reflexive modernisation, scholars have confirmed the role of digital technologies in fostering new forms of social connectedness and cultural participation, which can both complement and challenge traditional notions of sociality. Online platforms allow music lovers to connect with others who share their interests, exchange experiences and tastes, and engage in a variety of music-related social activities. However, they also
present challenges to traditional sociality notions, as online interactions often entail different dynamics, norms, and expectations compared to face-to-face encounters (Turkle, 1995, 2011; Baym, 2015). Castells (2001) and Wellman (2002) introduce the concept of networked individualism, referring to the increasing importance of personalised networks of relationships facilitated by digital technologies. In this context, music serves as a crucial resource for individuals to navigate the complexities of networked individualism, enabling them to construct and express their identities, negotiate their social positions, and establish meaningful connections with others.

In my research on Chinese indie music lovers, the ubiquity of digital technologies has emerged as a significant factor shaping the ways they engage with music and with each other. Online platforms serve as critical spaces where music lovers can connect with others who share their interests, exchange experiences and tastes, and participate in music-related social activities. Drawing attention to the role of digital platforms and networks in the social fabric of reflexive modernisation helps to illuminate these dynamics, pointing to the importance of the personalised networks of relationships facilitated by digital technologies in the contemporary social landscape.

This multidimensional exploration of the literature offers a critical grounding, illuminating the intricate dynamics between music, identity, and society; the inherently social character of music; the influence of digital platforms on music engagement; and the enduring significance of live music experiences. The literature review establishes a nuanced framework from which we can delve into the socio-cultural complexities of the Chinese indie music scene. The burgeoning academic interest in music as a powerful social mechanism and the
agency of individuals in music practices becomes apparent through this review. However, this discourse also illuminates areas of contention and gaps in current understanding, such as the multi-layered impact of music on identity construction, the ambiguities of music’s role in social relations, and the unique engagement dynamics within niche genres like indie music in non-Western contexts like China. By utilising insights from the existing literature, this thesis aims to probe into these under-explored areas, specifically focusing on the social experiences of Chinese indie music lovers.

The research adopts an interactionist perspective while also considering elements of structure and inequality. The theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism forms the backbone of this study, emphasising the importance of individual experiences, interactions, and meanings in shaping social activities within the indie music scene in China. It recognises individuals as active participants in constructing and negotiating meanings, identities, and social interactions. The perspective of ‘music in action’ allows for a deep investigation into individual agency, exploring how it attributes meaning to music and shapes social actions within specific contexts.

Simultaneously, the study acknowledges the impact of social structures on musical experiences, highlighting the vital role of individuals in navigating these structures and constructing their identities and social relationships. The concept of reflexive modernisation further enhances the understanding of how social-structural shifts and transformations in society are impacted and navigated at the individual level. It unveils the growing significance of individualised social experiences and personalised networks facilitated by digital technologies, demonstrating how individuals shape their identities and social relations within these transformative contexts. This aspect emphasises the importance of considering the wider social, cultural, and technological structures that shape
individual experiences and interactions within the indie music scene.

The concept of reflexive modernisation, as understood in Chinese social discourse, can further deepen our understanding of how social-structural shifts and transformations in Chinese society are impacted and navigated at the individual level (Yan, 2010; Kipnis, 2012). This notion becomes particularly salient considering the profound societal changes and diversification brought about by China’s rapid modernisation processes. Chinese modernity is often characterised by its distinctive path and features, shaped by the country’s historical context, cultural traditions, and contemporary political and economic changes (Buzan and Lawson, 2020). It is within this complex landscape of China that the dynamic between individuals, society, and music practices needs to be explored, providing a more context-specific understanding of music experiences in contemporary Chinese society.

In essence, this study adopts an interactionist approach while enriching it with critical considerations of structural elements such as power, structure, and inequality. By doing so, it provides a multi-layered understanding of the intricate dynamics between music, individuals, and society. This perspective holds great promise for contributing substantial insights into the sociology of music and advancing our understanding of how individuals navigate and negotiate complex social landscapes in their musical engagement.
Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter delineates the research methodology and methods employed in this study. It begins by presenting the methodological approach adopted, underscoring the rationales for selecting a qualitative approach in scrutinising music socialising practices and the abductive research strategy in guiding the research design. Following this, the chapter offers a detailed description of the research methods and analytic procedures. Furthermore, I engage in a reflexive examination of my dual role as both the researcher and an insider within the indie music scene in China, drawing on the reflexive turn in qualitative research. This reflexivity helps recognise the ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded in the data collection and analysis processes (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003) and addresses the complexities of the researcher-participant relationship. The chapter concludes with critical reflections on the relationship and connection between micro and macro research, which situates the findings of this research within broader sociological debates and highlights the value of this study in contributing to the understanding of indie music lovers’ socialising practices.

3.1 Methodological Approach

The journey of exploring the indie music socialising practices within the Chinese indie music scene began with a choice: the qualitative research approach. I selected it for two primary reasons. First, as a study investigating individual practices and perceptions, qualitative research facilitates the exploration of intricate social phenomena and the meanings that individuals ascribe to their experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The meaning-giving process aptly identifies the value and significance of the practice, aligning with the central theme of this study. Second, as a study employing symbolic interactionism as
a theoretical framework and instrument, qualitative research is congruent with its interactionist orientation.

The compatibility of the qualitative approach with the symbolic interactionist framework is evident in four aspects. First, both symbolic interactionism and qualitative research emphasise the meaning-making process, aiming to comprehend how individuals create, interpret, and attach meaning to their experiences through social interactions (Blumer, 1969). Qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, helped me to probe these meanings, uncovering rich and detailed data on indie music lovers' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions (Seidman, 2013). Second, symbolic interactionism posits that social interactions play a critical role in shaping human behaviour (Mead, 1934), and qualitative research methods, particularly participant observation, provide valuable insights into the dynamics of these interactions (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 2011).

Third, symbolic interactionism recognises the importance of individual perspectives and subjective experiences in constructing reality. In the same vein, qualitative research methods inherently prioritise the voices and experiences of participants, capturing the unique ways in which individuals interpret and make sense of their social world (Bryman, 2012). Finally, both symbolic interactionism and qualitative research are sensitive to the role of context in shaping social interactions and meaning-making processes. They acknowledge that cultural, historical, and social factors significantly influence individuals' experiences and interactions. Qualitative research methods are inherently context-sensitive, allowing me to explore the various factors shaping how music lovers perceive and understand their social environment (Maxwell, 2013). To conclude, qualitative research methods are well-suited for this framework because they share a common objective: exploring the intricacies of
human experiences and social processes. By employing qualitative methods, I can gain a deeper understanding of the complex processes through which music lovers create and negotiate meanings within their social world, which lies at the core of symbolic interactionist theory and constitutes the main focus of this research.

While it is true that symbolic interactionism is predominantly associated with qualitative research, it is not limited to this paradigm. In fact, the pragmatic use of multiple methods and perspectives is a crucial methodological orientation of the symbolic interactionist methodology, as Blumer (1969, p. 41) elaborates:

Because of its flexible nature, exploratory inquiry is not pinned down to any particular set of techniques. Its guiding maxim is to use any ethically allowable procedure that offers a likely possibility of getting a clearer picture of what is going on in the area of social life.

Some scholars argued that symbolic interactionism and its epistemological stance should not be restricted to qualitative research exclusively (Maines, 2001; Ulmer and Wilson, 2003). They suggest that quantitative and statistical perspectives on interactionism are not inherently incompatible and that a principled and critical use of quantitative research can even strengthen the interactionist framework. Maines (1993) argues that numbers, like words, are equally served as narrative techniques in sociological research and contribute to constructing a complete story. From this perspective, it is important to acknowledge the potential benefits of adopting other approaches. However, it is critical to note that although qualitative and quantitative studies both contribute to a broader narrative, they do not necessarily present identical perspectives or follow the same trajectory. Their respective aims and methodological frameworks often dictate their starting point and the overall
contours of their research narratives. Quantitative approaches typically concentrate on numerical data and statistical analysis, which are designed to provide an objective measurement of complex social phenomena with quantifiable variables. However, there can be challenges associated with this focus. It is sometimes criticised that this process may constrain and oversimplify the depth and contextual understanding of these phenomena, potentially leading to reductionism (Bryman, 2012). Accordingly, I agree with Hennion’s (2001) assertion. In a study of music lovers, he critiques the quantitative social analysis of this population, arguing that the possibility of measurement arises from the fact that music lovers are stripped of their individuality and categorised solely based on their socio-professional status. In this process, music is perceived solely as a product of passive consumption, and individuals are only passive consumers. However, as I have argued at length in the Literature Review, both music and individuals have enormous potential to play an active role in music practice.

In my research, the storytelling is more focused on the meaning-making, social interactions, subjective experiences, and context sensitivity of music socialising practices. A qualitative approach is, therefore, more appropriate in the context of an ‘ethnographic turn’ in popular music studies (Bennett, 2002). By employing a qualitative approach, I attempt to generate rich and detailed descriptions that capture the nuances of social interactions, personal experiences, and cultural contexts (Bryman, 2012; Creswell and Poth, 2018) that have shaped indie music socialising in China.

Applying qualitative methods and the symbolic interactionism framework was a conscious choice, not just because of its theoretical alignment but due to its ability to create a dialogue between the researcher and the participants. Thus, these orientations were not merely a methodological framework but an
instrument of understanding, a lens that not only allows me to observe but to participate and interact. In the field, I was not a distant observer; instead, I was an active participant, seeking not just to record research participants’ descriptions but to understand, probe, and engage with them and their music journeys. The interviews I conducted were not merely data collection; they were a microcosm of social interaction, a meeting point of experiences, meanings, and interpretations. I saw each interaction with a music lover as an opportunity to delve deeper into their understanding of their world. Thus, I was less interested in asking structured and pre-determined questions than in letting our conversations flow organically, following the twists and turns of our shared exploration.

Throughout this process, I became aware of the dynamics of qualitative research. Each interview was a unique interaction influenced by a myriad of factors, from the contacts and chats we had through social media prior to the interview and the rapport we built through the exchange of ideas during the interview to the specific social environment around us. I understood that my sociological researcher role inherently affected the co-constructed narrative. Symbolic interactionism emphasises that meaning is not fixed but constantly negotiated. Applying this understanding, I continually sought to identify emerging patterns, themes, and relationships in the interviews and observations, abstracting and re-interpreting these through the lens of the empirical data collected. This was not a one-time and linear process but a cycle, an ongoing interaction between my interpretations and music lovers’ narratives. Therefore, the abductive research strategy served as my compass during the data collection and analysis processes, allowing me to move back and forth between theory and data, between the roles of the researcher and co-participant in meaning-making processes.
In recognising that music practices are deeply rooted in individuals’ everyday lives, I was following in the footsteps of music sociologists such as DeNora (2000) and Frith (2012). Their arguments have been so successful that the profound ‘intertwinement of music and everyday life is now widely accepted’ (Nowak, 2016, p. 42) and have guided the majority of recent scholarship in music sociology. My journey, too, was about exploring everyday concepts, meanings, and motives, which is the essence of an abductive research strategy (Blaikie, 2010). While my personal experiences may have influenced my perception of music socialising, rather than starting with a hypothesis, I immersed myself in the complex tapestry of daily music practices, allowing the context and details to build a coherent picture gradually. This strategy aligns with symbolic interactionism’s emphasis on the ongoing negotiation of meaning, providing a more detailed sketch of daily music practices.

The abductive strategy more closely integrates empirical data with theories (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012), providing an alternative to the commonly used deductive and inductive strategies for studying social phenomena. Typically, a deductive approach starts with a theory or hypothesis and then tests it through empirical data. On the other hand, an inductive approach begins with empirical observations, and from these observations, general patterns or theories are derived. In contrast, the abductive approach, which guided my research, represents a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning. But unlike strategies that follow a single direction, whether from theory to data or from data to theory, the abductive approach is an iterative process, moving back and forth between data and theory, looking for the most plausible explanations (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012).

As researchers (e.g., Blaikie, 2010; Ong, 2012; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012) have expounded, an abductive research strategy starts with open-ended data
collection, abstracting patterns from the data, and then uses existing theories to interpret the data and form tentative interpretations of the social phenomenon. However, it acknowledges the possibility of new findings. This tentative interpretation is, therefore, being further tested and explored in a new round of data collection. And when surprising new factors emerge from the data, the research will modify the initial theory or generate a new one and re-evaluate it. Thus, the abductive strategy moves back and forth between empirical observations and theoretical frameworks until the most plausible explanation is found. It is a dynamic and iterative process that appreciates the richness and complexity of social phenomena.

As the journey progressed, the iterative nature of the abductive strategy made itself evident. It was not merely a strategy to collect data and generate theories but also helped me to adapt my methods and research focus to capture the emerging insights more accurately from interviews. I found that the unexpected findings and questions that emerged were not distractions or detours but important signposts, guiding me to identify gaps in the current literature, uncover unexpected patterns, or develop novel interpretations of the phenomenon under in-depth investigation. The abductive strategy allows the research to adapt its methods and focus during the fieldwork to better capture these emergent insights, developing an understanding of a particular phenomenon from the participants’ view while simultaneously supplementing such understanding with the researcher’s further viewpoints (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). The adaptive and reflexive features of the abductive approach were well suited to the study of music socialising. In the context of a vibrant, dynamic, and evolving Chinese indie music scene, I found myself not just observing, but actively engaging with the social dynamics and music lovers’ social interactions, absorbing new perspectives and adapting my sociological interpretations in light of them. In the iterative explorations between participants’
perspectives and my own, abductive reasoning provided the rhythm and flow that ensured a comprehensive and deep understanding of indie music socialising.

3.2 Research Methods

This section delineates the research methods used in this study. Adhering to the qualitative approach and abductive strategy, the present study employs semi-structured interviews and online ethnography as primary means of collecting and analysing empirical data. Here, I will elaborate on the specific research methods and corresponding sampling strategies.

Semi-Structured Interview

In alignment with the abductive reasoning approach, I avoided positing initial hypotheses prior to the study but instead constructed and validated knowledge through iterative data collection and analysis (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Therefore, using semi-structured interviews was deemed appropriate as it allowed for a series of predetermined questions and themes and open-ended discussions to gain insight into participants’ music socialising practices. This method not only granted me the flexibility to further explore and dissect music lovers’ experiences, opinions, and ideas but also enabled me to ask follow-up questions, tailoring the interviews to individual interviewees. This dynamic balance between structure and flexibility allowed me to dig into emerging themes and patterns while maintaining the integrity and consistency of the interviews (Brinkmann, 2013). Indie music socialising practices vary across contexts and individual narratives, and semi-structured interviews helped me delve further into the unique socio-cultural contexts of each research participant (Bryman, 2012). This is crucial for interpreting and understanding the music socialising practices of Chinese indie music lovers, as it allows for an
understanding of how specific individual experiences and cultural factors shape socialising practices.

The interviews for this study were conducted in Beijing, which is not only the capital city of China but also the economic and cultural centre of northern China. This research setting provided a distinctive urban context for the investigation of the Chinese indie music scene and the practices of music lovers within it (see Chapter 4). From September 2019 to May 2020, I conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 31 Chinese indie music lovers who were long-term residents of Beijing (see Table 3.2.1). Each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. The data collection process was divided into two phases: face-to-face interviews and online interviews due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
During the first phase, from September 2019 to January 2020, I conducted 13 face-to-face interviews, typically at cafés, beverage stores, or participants’ workplaces, according to their convenience. Research participants for this phase of the interviews were recruited through interactions on various social media platforms in China, such as Douban, Sina Weibo, and WeChat. On Douban and Sina Weibo, I searched keywords related to recent indie gigs in Beijing and selected social media users who had posted pertinent information

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or pictures from the event to contact\textsuperscript{7}. The selection was semi-random, based more on the availability and relevance of posts at the time of the search. I sent recruitment messages to these selected users via private messaging functions on the platforms, introducing myself, indicating the purpose of the study and the criteria for prospective interviewees, and inviting them to participate in a face-to-face interview if they were interested in the research and felt they met the requirements. If they responded positively, I engaged in further brief talks with them to confirm their status as indie music lovers and their compliance with the recruitment criteria. In addition, I also posted recruitment messages in various indie music-related WeChat groups. Before conducting the interviews, I provided the Information Sheet and Consent Form to the interviewees to obtain informed consent from them.

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second phase, from February 2020 to May 2020, entailed a shift to online interviews. Consequently, I interviewed the remaining 18 participants via the voice-calling service on WeChat, a widely used communication platform in China (Chen, Mao and Qiu, 2018). This dual approach to data collection allowed the research to continue despite the challenges posed by the pandemic while also ensuring that participants’ perspectives were captured in diverse settings, enriching the data and allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the music socialising practices of Chinese indie music lovers. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated government restrictions, live music performances and public events were...

\textsuperscript{7} It is necessary to note that this sampling method might lead to a sample primarily composed of individuals who are active on social media. It might shape the data and, consequently, the findings of the study. However, one of the themes of this study was to explore the interplay between indie music lovers’ online and offline music practices, so the sampling of this cohort was appropriate for the purposes of this research.
were prohibited; thus, the previous recruitment and interview methods were inapplicable. Accordingly, the second phase of interviews was conducted online. With the application of digital devices in research, several authors have considered the use and effects of online methods in data collection (James and Busher, 2009; Salmons, 2014; Fielding, Lee and Blank, 2017). Although the method of distant interview is often described as ‘second best’, it has been shown that it can and should be seriously considered as a preferred alternative to face-to-face interviews. Distant interviews can provide participants with a sense of anonymity and privacy, which may encourage them to share more personal descriptions (A. Holt, 2010). During the special circumstance of social distancing, digital methods can offer a valuable alternative choice while maintaining data quality and rigour (Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman, 2020).

In conducting online interviews for this research, I discovered that while the method of online interview was employed as a contingency measure in response to COVID-19, it was also able to serve as a strategic option to enhance data collection efforts. Online interviews proved easier for recruiting participants, partly because the social limitations imposed by the pandemic increased people's availability and willingness to engage. Additionally, this mode of interaction often led to greater openness among interviewees. The perceived security and privacy of the digital space encouraged participants to share their stories more freely (Sipes, Roberts and Mullan, 2022). The absence of a researcher’s physical presence made interviewees feel more comfortable, potentially yielding richer qualitative data.

However, online interviews also present limitations. The absence of physical presence hinders the perception of non-verbal cues and subtler forms of communication, which are crucial in qualitative research. Interpreting non-verbal gestures, expressions, and other embodied information becomes more
challenging, requiring heightened attention to verbal nuances and inflections (Hine, 2015). In comparison, face-to-face interviews offered unique opportunities for social interaction. These in-person encounters allowed me to ‘friend’ participants in real life, fostering deeper engagement. Face-to-face settings provided a more comprehensive understanding of participants’ experiences, as they allowed me to observe and respond to a broader range of communicative cues. Therefore, it is essential to recognise the distinct advantages and limitations of the online interview method, ensuring that the methodological shift contributes effectively to the overall research process.

Given the shift from face-to-face to online interviews, I found myself navigating different dynamics, a scenario well-documented within the digital methods literature. For instance, the online interviews required an adjustment in terms of developing rapport (Weller, 2017; Jenner and Myers, 2019), ensuring participants felt comfortable in the virtual environment (Shapka et al., 2016), and ensuring data quality (Lindsay, 2022). Additionally, the recruitment itself, which moved from an individual-oriented approach to a group-oriented approach in virtual communities, allowed for an engagement with broader potential participants. During this phase, I joined more WeChat groups related to indie music and posted recruitment messages therein. Despite the different interview formats between the two phases, I ensured that the music lovers recruited in both phases met the same criteria. Generally, participants share the following characteristics:

- They were engaged in the indie music scene for more than six months.
- They actively participated in both online and offline indie music activities.
- They were indie music amateurs rather than practitioners in the music industry.
They had resided in Beijing for more than a year.

Of all 31 research participants, 17 were female and 14 male, with a mean age of 23 years, and all interviewees had obtained or were pursuing a university degree. In general, this suggests that the study focused on a specific group of young and educated individuals with a specific interest in indie music. This higher level of education potentially places these participants in a distinctive position to consume indie music, as they may hold more cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which has important implications for cultural consumption. This will be further explored in depth in the discussion of how they construct music-lover identity in Chapter 5. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that educational attainment and the possession of cultural capital should not be equated with middle-class status. My research revealed a diverse array of socio-economic backgrounds among participants, coupled with varying motivations and forms of engagement in indie music activities. This diversity suggests that involvement in indie music extends beyond straightforward correlations of cultural tastes with social class. Such an observation challenges a strictly Bourdieusian interpretation of cultural engagement.

The predominance of educated individuals within the participant group, while potentially perceived as a limitation, accurately reflects the demographics of Beijing’s indie music scene. The recruitment strategy, particularly in the online interview phase, involved engaging with various WeChat groups central to this music scene. The prevalence of university students and recent graduates in these groups likely shaped the sample’s demographic profile. However, this is not indicative of recruitment bias, but rather a representation of the indie music scene in Beijing. This assertion is also supported by the findings from the initial phase of participant recruitment, which employed random selection across various social media platforms and also primarily attracted educated individuals.
Moreover, the prevalence of educated individuals among indie music lovers is intrinsically connected to the genesis and development of indie music tastes in Beijing and, by extension, China. Interviews reveal that these musical preferences often develop during undergraduate years, a period following high school that allows for personal exploration without the constraints of prior intensive educational competition and pressure. This phase affords ample time and exposure to a diverse range of cultural content and forms. Meanwhile, the unique setting of Chinese universities plays a crucial role in this cultural exploration. These institutions, often semi-confined environments, facilitate rich cultural exchanges as students engage with a wide range of peers. It is within these spaces and through these networks that undergraduates encounter a variety of cultural activities and dialogues, significantly shaping their music preferences. Consequently, the characteristics of the participants – predominantly young and educated – reflect a key dynamic in the formation of indie music tastes.

However, it should be acknowledged and noted that the findings of this research may not be universally applicable to individuals with different backgrounds. While these research participants are representative, they are not the only audience group for indie music. For instance, if the study had centred around other demographic groups, such as migrant workers, rural residents, or older adults, the findings might have significantly differed. These groups may have varied access to cultural resources, distinct lifestyle patterns, and different interpretations of indie music culture due to their distinct social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the findings of this study, while providing insights into the group investigated, should be interpreted within this context of young and educated indie music lovers in urban China, taking full account of the impact of age, education, and potential class status on the participants’ engagement with and perceptions of indie music. These socio-demographic
factors may shape their experiences and interpretations of indie music socialising in ways that might not apply to a wider or different demographic within the Chinese indie music culture.

The interviews primarily focused on investigating each interviewee’s experiences as an indie music lover, their motivations for participating in indie music activities, and their socialising practices within the indie music scene. During the interviews, I usually first asked them to recount their journey of discovering and engaging with indie music. By doing so, I attempted to understand their interpretations of indie music and the identity of indie music lovers. Building on this foundation, I further engaged with their narratives of their personal practices and experiences related to indie music. In general, the interview topics encompassed the following themes:

- The context in which everyday music socialising occurs.
- Involvement in indie music socialising activities.
- Roles that are undertaken in different music socialising contexts.
- Views of ‘self’ in various music socialising activities.
- Experiences of social relationships in music socialising.
- Methods of coping with different relationships in music socialising.
- Perspectives on the impact of technology on their music socialising practices.

The interviews followed a micro-sociological approach well-established in previous music sociology studies. For instance, DeNora (2000), in her study of individuals’ everyday interaction with music, used an ethnographic approach involving in-depth interviews and participant observations. The study uncovered how individuals use music as a tool to manage their identities and moods in the context of everyday life. Benzecry’s (2011) research on opera fans
in Buenos Aires offered another instance of this approach, which underscored the emotional aspects of music consumption and the evolution of a ‘passionate attachment’ to music. By addressing these themes and placing them in the context of everyday practice, this study captured the complex and multifaceted nature of indie music socialising practices and gained valuable insights into the factors shaping music lovers’ experiences in the Chinese indie music scene.

Following the abductive research strategy, data collection and analysis were conducted in parallel (Bryman, 2012). Unlike a typical analysis that occurs after data collection, my fieldwork was an ongoing cycle of interviews followed by immediate analysis. This approach facilitated the open analysis of data rather than simply applying concepts imported from the literature (Roulston, 2014). After each interview, I prepared an interview transcript and coded the data for analysis using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Coding consisted of two main stages – initial coding and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006; Thornberg and Charmaz, 2013). This two-step coding process ensured that each interview was thoroughly analysed and new findings were diligently sought. Data collection for the interviews was stopped when I had no new findings in three consecutive interviews, indicating that data saturation had been reached.

**Online Ethnography**

Music sociology has significantly benefited from the application of ethnography, as ‘ethnographic methods provide an especially handy tool for sociologists interested in examining how people consume music in real time within spatial contexts of social interaction’ (Grazian, 2004, p. 207). The main purpose of conducting online ethnography (Hine, 2000, 2015; Postill and Pink, 2012; Pink et al., 2016) in this study was to supplement the interviews and collect data...
related to indie music lovers' digital music socialising practices, such as their online behaviours and language. This approach facilitated a more in-depth exploration of the complex interplay between individual experiences and broader social and cultural contexts, further enriching the study's findings (Hine, 2015).

The online ethnography for this study was divided into two interconnected parts. The first component encompassed an overarching observation of the virtual indie music scene, wherein I assumed the role of a researcher analysing the routines, mobilities, and socialities (Postill and Pink, 2012) of Chinese indie music lovers within the digital sphere. Data was gathered from a diverse range of public social media platforms that facilitate open discussions, thus obviating the need for special access permissions (Hine, 2015), including Douban, Sina Weibo, Bilibili, and Zhihu. The second component involved active participation in the digital activities of my interviewees as their social media ‘friends’ after the interviews. Before the interview, I sought permission from each interviewee to follow their social media accounts, including Weibo, Douban, WeChat, and NetEase Cloud Music. I did a preliminary analysis of their posted music-related content on these platforms, took fieldnotes and discussed them in the interview. Following the interviews, I maintained an ongoing engagement with the interviewees’ social media activities regarding indie music, enabling the collection of longitudinal data to discern patterns, shifts, and developments in

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8 The discussion of the challenges and ambiguities of informed consent and privacy in online research is highly debated, and many scholars have suggested the need for new ethical guidelines (see Orton-Johnson, 2010; Sugiura, Wiles and Pope, 2017). In the online ethnography of this study, I protect data sources in two ways. First, I anonymised any online data that was included in the thesis. Second, all online data used in the text has been translated into English, which further reduces the risk of disclosure.
indie music lovers’ music socialising.

The combination of data collected from interviews and online observations enhanced the validity and reliability of the research findings, effectively mitigating potential biases or constraints inherent in single-source data collection methods (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). This multi-faceted approach to ethnography offered a comprehensive understanding of indie music lovers’ social experiences.

3.3 The Researcher Role: Investigating the Chinese Indie Music Scene as an Insider

Bennett (2002) pointed out that sociological studies of music often fail to reflect on the role of the researcher, the relationship between the researcher and research participants, and the potential consequences of these on the data and analysis. Recognising these potential problems, my work sought to engage with the reflexive turn (Venkatesh, 2013; Flick, 2014) in sociological and qualitative research, which emphasises the importance of acknowledging the researcher’s subjectivity and using reflexivity as a tool for ensuring rigour in data collection and analysis.

As both a sociological researcher and an insider in the Chinese indie music scene, I occupy a distinctive position, which has implications for the data I collected and the analysis I undertook. As a researcher, my academic background and expertise in sociology provided me with the necessary theoretical and methodological tools to investigate the subject matter. However, at the same time, my position as an active listener and participant in the Chinese indie music scene brought a certain complexity to the research process. This dual identity brought both benefits and challenges, particularly when studying the cultural meanings of indie music, as it is essential to balance
the insider and outsider perspectives to capture the complex interplay between music, social practices, and cultural meanings.

My insider identity enabled me to access a nuanced understanding of the socialising practices of music lovers, as described by Hodkinson (2005), who argues that insiders can provide valuable insights into subcultural dynamics and meanings. This insider knowledge has enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural practices, values, and norms governing the indie music scene in China. The insider perspective has enabled me to access and interpret the subtle dynamics and nuances of this culture and group in ways that might elude an outsider. However, it also presents potential challenges that need to be addressed. As an insider, I may possess preconceived notions and assumptions about the music socialising practices in the Chinese indie music scene. Berger (2015) mentions the risk of insider bias, arguing that researchers with close connections to their research subjects might unintentionally influence data collection and analysis. At times, my empathy towards participants and my personal biases influenced my interpretations, leading to an unintentional alignment with their viewpoints. To counteract this, I have been vigilant in maintaining awareness of my researcher position and continuously challenging my assumptions, practicing reflexivity to maintain the integrity and trustworthiness of the research findings (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018). During data analysis, I have endeavoured to adopt a more reflexive stance, distancing myself to critically assess the data and my preconceptions. For instance, when participants expressed views positioning indie music as culturally superior to pop, I endeavoured to interpret these perceived hierarchies as indicative of a two-sided issue – one involving not just external perceptions but also the attitudes of indie music lovers themselves. By balancing my insider insights with an analytical and less partial lens, I aimed to contribute a balanced perspective to cultural sociology research,
Acknowledging both the advantages and limitations of my insider position.

Regarding the relationship between myself and the research participants, I acknowledged my dual role as both a researcher and an indie music lover peer. I was transparent about this dual role from the outset of the study, which allowed for a reciprocal and dynamic interaction between myself and the participants. To navigate the complexities of this relationship, I aimed to establish rapport and trust by being open about my experiences, engaging in genuine dialogue, and actively listening to the participants’ perspectives. This approach not only fostered a more egalitarian relationship between me and the participants but also created an environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and opinions. As an active listener and participant, I share a common interest and passion for indie music with research participants, enabling me to better understand the symbolic meanings and cultural significance of indie music in the context of participants’ lives, which is a key concern of cultural sociology. This shared passion created a sense of camaraderie, encouraging participants to openly discuss their experiences and perspectives and ultimately enriching the data collected for this study.

However, as suggested by the principles of symbolic interactionism, these interactions were not merely about data collection but also spaces where meaning was dynamically created, managed, and negotiated. The interactions with participants were essentially social situations where participants, conscious of their ‘front-stage’ self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), might have sought to present their ‘best side’. Therefore, I had to navigate these social dynamics, gaining a well-rounded picture of their experiences and perspectives on their everyday engagement with indie music (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). By doing so, I attempted to understand both the ‘front-stage’ and ‘back-stage’ elements.
As a researcher, I had to manage a careful balance, asserting my authority to steer the conversations in fruitful directions while encouraging participants to openly express their views. During the course of interactions, misunderstandings or misinterpretations inevitably arose. To navigate this, I actively engaged in ‘meaning repair’, checking my understanding of the participants’ narratives, asking for clarifications, and encouraging participants to correct me if they felt I had misunderstood their viewpoints. For instance, in interviews, for particular terms that music lovers bring up, such as musical friends, collectivity, and resonance – concepts that will receive particular attention in later chapters – I would usually restate and paraphrase them in my own words or ask them to elaborate further. This allowed for misconceptions to be addressed in real time, and the meaning of the term was co-constructed through the conversation, thus capturing and expressing participants’ views more accurately.

Throughout the study, I made conscious efforts to remain attuned to these dynamic interactions and reflexively considered how they might influence the data collected and subsequent analysis. By acknowledging the complexities of my dual role and employing rigorous methodological strategies, I have maintained the integrity and credibility of the research findings as much as possible. Simultaneously, drawing on my unique insider perspective allows me to provide a rich understanding of the participants’ music socialising practices, which contributes to the broader field of cultural sociology by shedding light on the ways in which music operates as a cultural form within a specific social context.

3.4 Considerations on Micro-Macro Research

As illustrated in Section 2.2, the present study employs music-in-action and
symbolic interactionist frameworks, both accentuating the significance of individual practices in everyday life. This micro-sociological focus permits a thorough investigation of the music socialising practices of indie music lovers in China, delving into the ways they negotiate their identities and interactions within and beyond the indie music scene. However, symbolic interactionism has faced criticism that it overlooks broader social factors that also contribute to understanding society. In this context, interactionists have developed a social structural symbolic interactionism (Serpe and Stryker, 2011) to reconcile the disparity between the influence of broader social structure and individuals’ subjectivity (see literature review in Section 2.2.2). As a result, social structural symbolic interactionists acknowledge the reciprocal relationship between society, self, and social interaction, positing that ‘society shapes self, which shapes social interaction’ (Serpe and Stryker, 2011, p. 231). In other words, they admit the primary position of society in people’s everyday lives, asserting that both symbolic and structural frames are integral to this perspective.

In the context of this study, acknowledging the reciprocal relationships between society, self, and social interaction, it brings to light the structures that shape the Chinese indie music scene. This is evident in the ways in which broader social factors, such as Chinese cultural traditions, technological developments, and market forces, influence indie music lovers’ engagement with music, their identity construction, and their social interactions. Simultaneously, the study also echoes the structural symbolic interactionist stance that the self shapes social interaction, as it demonstrates how individual indie music lovers, through their distinct musical practices and social engagements, contribute to shaping the indie music scene in China. The interaction between indie music lovers and the broader social structures is a recurrent theme in this study, illustrating the dialectical relationship between individual agency and social structures.
Inspired by social structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980, 2008), this research also attends to structural considerations within music socialising practices. Moving away from a focus on the conflict of various forces within the field through a Bourdieusian lens (Bourdieu, 1993), this study seeks to discern the impact of external forces at the individual level. In other words, it seeks to identify the opportunities and limitations presented by external factors and assess their impacts on individuals’ daily music socialising practices (DeNora, 2016). By adopting this approach, I attempt to achieve a balance between comprehending the role of individual agency and acknowledging the broader structural constraints that shape music socialising.

During the research, I paid particular attention to the role that indie music lovers occupy within the indie music scene in China. Inspired by Stryker’s (1980, 2001) concept of role-identity salience hierarchy, I analysed the narratives of participants to understand the role they identify with and how they rank different roles within the scene. This involves unpacking how participants negotiate their identity as music lovers and how the identity is shaped by and, in turn, shapes the structure of the indie music scene in China. Simultaneously, I delved into the ways in which music lovers narrate and make sense of their experiences within indie music practices. Through these narratives, I aimed to capture the structural influences on individuals’ music socialising in everyday music experiences and their responses to these influences.

Through scrutinising how participants navigate the constraints and opportunities presented by external factors, such as social norms, this study shed light on the ways in which individuals actively construct and negotiate their musical and social lives within a broader structural context. The focus on the individual experiences of music lovers enables an examination of how the macro-level forces extend to the micro-level practices, illuminating the interplay
between structure and agency in the music socialising process. This approach not only provides a more comprehensive understanding of the indie music scene in China but also offers valuable insights into the broader sociological debate on the relationship between micro and macro perspectives. By recognising the interdependence of individual agency and structural constraints, this study contributes to a detailed understanding of the social processes that shape the practices and experiences of indie music lovers in China.
Chapter 4 Mapping the Landscape: Indie Music in China

Indie music has become a significant cultural phenomenon in contemporary China, influencing the cultures and social practices of young people. This chapter delves into the multifaceted nature of contemporary indie music in China, exploring its origins and developments, live music experiences, and the impact of streaming platforms on the listening behaviours of Chinese indie music lovers. By examining the social, cultural, and technological factors that have shaped indie music and its practice, this chapter aims to provide a preliminary understanding of the significance of this genre and its enthusiasts' engagement with it.

Indie music has been a source of inquiry for scholars and enthusiasts. It has been generally defined as music created outside the mainstream music industry, often characterised by a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos and a focus on artistic expression rather than commercial success (Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Hibbett, 2005; Fonarow, 2006). Section 4.1 introduces the concept of indie music, tracing its origins in the West and its development in China and discussing the factors that have contributed to its growth. This section also delves into the research participants' perspectives on indie music as both a genre and an ethos, providing a fundamental understanding of the Chinese indie music scene.

One of the defining features of indie music is its vibrant live music culture. Indie music venues have emerged as essential spaces for artistic expression, social network building, and cultural exchange. These venues provide a platform for emerging musicians to showcase their works while also serving as major sites for offline music socialising for indie music lovers. Section 4.2 explores the live music experience of indie music lovers in Beijing, describing the urban music environment and the role of small music venues in shaping indie music practice.
and culture. This section investigates how the live music experience influences indie music lovers’ understanding and appreciation of indie music, highlighting the importance of live music experience as one of the central components of indie music practice for its enthusiasts.

In the last decade, the rise of streaming platforms has transformed how indie music is distributed and consumed. While these platforms have expanded the accessibility of music, they have also shifted the way people engage with it. Streaming technologies significantly impact indie music lovers’ listening behaviours and influence their taste formation. Section 4.3 analyses the music-listening practices of these individuals, discussing how streaming technology has changed the way people access and use music and discussing how indie music lovers interact with algorithmic technologies on streaming platforms.

This chapter serves as a background for discussing indie music and music socialising practices in China and simultaneously as an empirical exploration. It weaves together the participants’ experiences with social and theoretical contexts, sketching a foundational understanding of the landscape of indie music in China. This chapter thus intends to present a micro-sociological analysis of the structural elements influencing indie music and music socialising. Intertwining these aspects can provide a richer and more detailed portrayal of the complex interplay between individuals and larger socio-cultural dynamics within indie music.

4.1 Defining Indie Music

Indie music has been considered by insiders to be: (1) a type of musical production affiliated with small independent record labels with a distinctive mode of independent distribution; (2) a genre of music that has a particular sound and stylistic conventions; (3) music that communicates a particular ethos; (4) a
category of critical assessment; and (5) music that can be contrasted with other genres, such as mainstream pop, dance, blues, country, or classical. (Fonarow, 2006, p. 26)

To understand how indie music lovers practice indie music and how they socialise through it, we must comprehend the genre first. In this section, I provide an overview of indie music, briefly reviewing its origins in the West and its history in China, which serves as a fundamental basis for our understanding and investigation. I then present the research participants’ interpretations of indie music, focusing on two dimensions – indie music as a musical genre and an ethos. By doing so, we can shift our understanding of indie music from a historical narrative to everyday life, particularly within the specific context of indie music in China, and view it through the lens of indie music lovers themselves.

The term ‘indie music’ encompasses multiple layers of meaning, posing a considerable challenge to its definition and explanation. This challenge is not unique to indie music, as defining any music style is fraught with difficulties. However, indie music stands out from other styles and genres due to the origin of its name. Unlike others, indie music is named not after its style but after the process behind its production, at least at the time it is named. The emphasis on the production process in the naming of indie music is noteworthy because it stresses the musicians’ control over their creative process in music production and reflects the values and ideals of the indie aesthetic. The emergence of indie music can be attributed to a series of socio-economic, musical-aesthetic, and technological factors. By exploring the historical context and its unique production process, we can better understand indie music and what makes it compelling to its enthusiasts.
The roots of indie music can be traced back to the late 1960s in the US and the UK, when bands emerged exploring lo-fi and experimental sounds, creating a distinctive departure from mainstream rock and roll (Hibbett, 2005). This musical movement emerged amidst significant societal shifts during the 1970s in both countries, such as the oil crisis, stagflation, and rising unemployment. These conditions incited resistance to prevailing socio-economic structures, particularly among youth culture (Clarke et al., 1976; Cohen, 1997; Worley, 2013). These attempts led to the rise of punk music and culture, represented by garage rock in the US (e.g., The Stooges, MC5) and pub rock in the UK (e.g., Dr. Feelgood, Eddie & The Hot Rods), which began to shape the musical landscape and facilitate the development of indie music. These bands rejected the elaborated musical styles favoured by the avant-garde and hard rock at that time and instead advocated for more straightforward forms of music within the rock music. The aesthetic of punk, emphasising simplicity and rawness, serves as both a result and an expression of the genre’s distinct position within the music industry, representing resistance against the perceived over-commercialisation and industrialisation of popular music (Shonk and McClure, 2017). This led to the claim of DIY in punk music, inspiring many young people to pick up instruments and form their own bands. The music produced by these bands provided a rich accumulation of musical aesthetics on which indie music could be built.

In addition to DIY, the punk movement also espoused the proposition of ‘technical accessibility’, made possible by technological advances in the 1960s and 1970s that led to a significant drop in the cost of making music and records. With studio bookings becoming more affordable for bands without a label contract, some of them began to record and produce music independently. For example, on the back cover of their first record, released in 1977, The Desperate Bicycles wrote that it had cost only £153 to make their first single
and encouraged more enthusiasts to make their own records (see Figure 4.1.1). During the same period, the consumer market saw the introduction of multi-track recorders such as the TEAC 2340 model, further lowering the barriers to music production. In this context, independent production of albums became possible, enabling musicians to produce music autonomously without relying on large, capital-controlled music companies. However, it is important to note that while technological progress created possibilities for the establishment of indie music, it was not the sole, decisive factor in the formation of indie music as a genre. As I am trying to illustrate, the emergence of indie music resulted from a complex, multifactorial interaction.

Figure 4.1.1 Back cover of The Desperate Bicycles' first single

For popular music, it is not sufficient to solely create a piece; it also necessitates effective circulation. The invention of the phonograph and the microphone
marked the birth of modern popular music. These innovations allowed music to be reproduced and circulated on a large scale with recordings, expanding beyond live performances (Chanan, 1995; Toynbee, 2000). At the beginning of the popular music business, controlling record distribution meant controlling the music market (Lopes, 1992; Bishop, 2005). Consequently, the so-called Big Five\(^9\) music companies emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, dominating the music production mode and most distribution channels and acting as gatekeepers to the global music market (Hull, 2004).

As Frith (1986, p. 272) claims, technological advancements have resulted in ‘the decentralization of music-making’ and have become ‘a source of resistance to the corporate control of popular music’. The more widespread availability of technology and gradual price reductions allowed bands to make their records. However, the release and distribution of these records, especially large-scale distribution, still required corresponding outlets. The large music companies, with a monopoly on the market, often lacked the motivation to distribute records that were not produced by them. This restricted the distribution channels available to independent bands. But the emergence of independent labels since the 1970s has broken the monopoly of major labels and established alternative distribution networks, consisting of smaller record stores and independent distributors across the UK, Europe, and the US (Fonarow, 2006). These networks have been crucial in the development of indie music, enabling independent musicians to bypass the entry barriers imposed by major labels.

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\(^9\) The consolidation of several business deals resulted in the reduction of the previously known ‘Big Five’ music companies (Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, EMI, Warner Music Group, and BMG) to the present-day three dominant companies in the music industry (Universal Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Warner Music Group).
and gain access to a broader audience (Hesmondhalgh, 1999).

In the mid-1980s in the UK, the term ‘indie’ was coined and adopted as an abbreviation of ‘independent’, reflecting the emphasis on independent production and distribution that characterised the emerging genre. The advocacy of independent production and distribution challenged the dominance of the mainstream capitalist music industry, although this movement later developed a more intricate relationship with major labels (see Hesmondhalgh, 1999). The point I wish to make here, however, is that as we can see from its origins, indie music originated as a subgenre of rock music, born out of a rebellion against the dominant rock genres controlled by the music industry at the time. Indie music can be seen as a contrasting concept that exists in opposition to other established genres while possessing unique musical aesthetics, cultural specificities, and economic structure. Thus, comprehending indie music depends largely on understanding its relationship to the genre it opposes. From this perspective, indie music in China is more often equated with rock music as resistance against pop music.

Contrary to what most people assume, the origin of popular music in China was not late, as indigenous popular music in the modern sense emerged as early as the 1920s, influenced by early American popular music and jazz (Chen, 2005; Cheung, 2008). However, from the late 1930s until the early 1980s, popular music stagnated and even disappeared in (mainland) China, mainly in two phases. The first was during the period of the anti-Japanese war (1937-1945) and the subsequent Chinese civil war (1946-1949), nearly destroying China’s mass entertainment industry for over a decade. The second phase was after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, when music became a tool for political and cultural propaganda in the context of the Cold War, reaching its peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (see Cheng, 2023). In this
period, music in China was subject to strict ideological control, almost entirely in service of politics (Bryant, 2005). Chinese people were forbidden, or more aptly, had no access to other music. It could be said that this almost half a century was a vacuum period for popular music in China.

The situation has significantly improved under the reform and opening-up policy since 1978. With the implementation of a series of opening measures, restrictions in the cultural field have gradually relaxed. Due to commonalities in language, cultural references, and historical backgrounds, popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan was first introduced and widely disseminated throughout mainland China in the early 1980s (Brace, 1992). From that point until the beginning of the 21st century, popular music in mainland China was strongly influenced by popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan (Fung, 2007).

At the same time, rock music began to spread and develop in China, gradually reaching its first peak (Baranovitch, 2003). With the opening up of the economic sphere, China’s socialist social system underwent significant changes in the 1980s. Rock music entered China and, after localisation, became a means for young people to reflect on themselves and find a new faith. In contrast to mainstream popular music, which primarily focused on themes of love between young men and women, Chinese rock music embraced countercultural themes during this period. It explored topics related to social and political issues, such as individualism, social injustice, and criticism of the establishment, challenging the cultural norms and values of mainstream society (Brace, 1992; Brace and Friedlander, 1992). For example, the songs of CUI Jian (崔健), who is regarded as the father of Chinese rock, are interpreted as praising communist idealism on the one hand and criticising its political oppression on the other (Brace, 1992; Brace and Friedlander, 1992; Liu, 2016). The lyrics of Chinese rock of this period were reflective and critical of current society while exploring themes of
faith and freedom. These songs expressed the struggles of young people in
China who yearned for greater freedom and a better life. However, from the
late 1990s, Chinese rock gradually faded into the underground music scene.
Although there is an ongoing debate regarding the reasons why Chinese rock
music faded out of the mainstream public landscape during that time (see
Baranovitch, 2003; de Kloet, 2005a), this topic is not within the scope of this
study. But it is worth noting that during this time, the term ‘underground music’
almost exclusively referred to rock music, as it was considered the avant-garde
of the rock culture in China (de Kloet, 2010).

When rock left the mainstream horizon, pop music further occupied the main
space of popular music in China. Since the beginning of the 21st century,
Chinese pop music has increasingly been influenced by Japanese and Korean
pop (Chen, 2017; Sun and Liew, 2019). Chinese pop music has adopted the
so-called idol model and the fan economy from the Japanese and Korean music
industries (Fung, 2009; Zhang and Negus, 2020), which has gradually
dominated the Chinese popular music market. As a result, pop and popular
music are almost synonymous concepts for most Chinese people, as reflected
According to IFPI’s investigation, the top three favourite music genres in China

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10 Here, I take two representative rock songs from that time as examples.

The opening lines of CUI Jian’s Nothing to My Name:
‘I used to ask endlessly, when will you go with me?
But you always laugh at me, I have nothing.
I want to give you my dreams, as well as my freedom.
But you always laugh at me, I have nothing.’

The opening lines of HE Yong’s Garbage Dump:
‘The world we live in is like a garbage dump.
People are like insects fighting and grabbing here.’
are pop, oldies\textsuperscript{11}, and C-pop, demonstrating the dominance of various pop forms in the music market in China.

While pop may now be virtually equivalent to popular music in the Chinese context, it is important to delve deeper into what characterises pop music. Pop music, as Frith (2001, p. 94) summarises, ‘is music accessible to a general public … It is music produced commercially, for profit, as a matter of enterprise not art’. This interpretation suggests that pop music can encompass any style of music that receives broad popularity. Despite this, I would argue that pop music should be distinguished from popular music in a broader sense and instead be recognised as a specific genre. This genre of music is defined by its adherence to ‘the Tin Pan Alley tradition of the three-minute song formula structured around narrative typifications, basic chord structures, harnessed to powerful commercial interests’ (Rojek, 2011, p. 1). This understanding of pop music illuminates its significant difference from indie music, despite their shared roots in popular culture.

Since the 2000s, there has been a gradual shift in rock music terminology in China, moving from ‘underground’ to ‘indie’ music. The term indie began to gain wide acceptance and usage among Chinese music enthusiasts. Contrasting the formulaic and commercial orientation of pop, indie music is often perceived as deviating from the mainstream music industry. Of course, it needs to be acknowledged that if we simply define indie music as a genre of music produced independently by musicians, then conceptually, much music from other genres could fit this criterion as well. However, indie music is not solely

\textsuperscript{11} ‘Oldies’ generally refers to popular music from the past, usually from the 1980s and 1990s in China. It should be noted that most of the popular songs of this period were also pop music derived from Hong Kong and Taiwan.
defined by being independently produced at the industrial level. In the context of China, it encompasses a specific musical-aesthetic expression which is more often associated with rock music, as a 22-year-old female interviewee, Maggie, commented:

When I say indie music, it’s primarily referring to indie rock. While something like rap may also be considered independent music, [in terms of] its mode of operation, we typically don’t say it as ‘indie’. We might say it is an independent rap group or something similar. But the style ‘indie music’ is a bit narrower.¹²

The connection between indie and rock music in China has been shaped by several factors. First, local indie labels, such as Maybe Mars (兵马司), played a critical role in this shift. By positioning themselves as indie labels, they have attracted many new musicians from the Chinese rock scene who have then gradually become representative figures of Chinese rock music. This has blurred the differences between rock and indie music in China. Second, due to its limited visibility in the popular music market, rock music has been relatively marginalised within the mainstream music industry in China. As a result, rock music has adopted an ‘independent’ stance in production and distribution, distancing itself from those ‘non-indie music’ genres and the mainstream music industry dominated by major labels. This dynamic has helped to solidify rock music as a distinct counterpart to mainstream pop music, not just in China, but as part of a global phenomenon (Frith, 1996a; Kärjä, 2006). Chinese indie music lovers’ understanding of indie music is precisely built upon its

¹² In Mandarin Chinese, both ‘independent’ and ‘indie’ are referred to as ‘独立’ (dú lì). Therefore, the exact meaning of the words used cannot be accurately reflected in Maggie’s original Chinese expression. In the process of translation, I chose different words according to my understanding of the specific context in which she was speaking.
oppositional relationship with pop music. To sum up, while indie music originated as a genre that countered mainstream rock music in Europe and America\textsuperscript{13}, in China, it is seen as an \textit{alternative to mainstream popular music, particularly pop}.

The act of classifying, as noted by Strauss (1977), not only informs our interaction with the subject but also creates a set of expectations and values associated with the classified entities. While we have gained some understanding of indie music, defining it in the Chinese context remains a complex task. Different from the situations in Europe and America, China lacks a well-established and reliable music chart system. This absence makes it challenging to curate a representative list of songs from indie music charts to gain a general understanding of the genre. Additionally, the tagging system used by streaming music platforms also lacks a publicly recognised classification mechanism, diminishing the consistency and transparency in genre categorisation within the digital music space. Consequently, the absence of an established standard for indie music has resulted in various definitions of its boundaries by music lovers. Looking at the music genres that indie music lovers referred to in this study, ranging from pop-punk to Chinese metal, from post-rock to hardcore, although they described all of these genres as indie music, there are considerable differences in musical styles. \textit{The concept of indie music, therefore, is a non-fixed but created, fluid, and temporal one for this research and its participants.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{13} I am referring to the origins of indie music, or more specifically, \textit{indie rock}. The word indie has more connotations in contemporary European and American music scenes; for example, indie pop opposes mainstream pop music. In China, however, the term indie is tied to rock music in most contexts.}
Fonarow (2006, p. 39) characterises indie music as ‘an espousal of simplicity and austerity, a hypervaluation of childhood and childlike imagery, a nostalgic sensibility, a technophobia, and a fetishization of the guitar’ when describing it as a genre in the British context. However, this standard may have changed over time and may not apply to indie music scenes in other regions. The specific style of music proposed by the Chinese indie music lovers who participated in this study may not always match Fonarow’s description. For instance, some Chinese post-punk bands, such as Re-TROS (重塑雕像的权利), incorporate variations in sound that are more flamboyant and dramatic, and their performance styles do not always centre around the guitar. Whereas some other bands, such as Joyside, follow Fonarow’s concept more closely. When discussing the categorisation of indie music, despite the differences in the specific styles, the research participants shared one thing in common: they often referred to its niche nature. For example, Jane, a 19-year-old female interviewee, said:

*All I can say is that if [those music are] mainstream, [indie music] is ‘non-mainstream (非主流), but which is a bit of an unpleasant word*¹⁴. *It could be called niche (小众) music, I suppose, as opposed to mainstream.*

Similarly, other participants, such as Mike, a 20-year-old male participant, summed up this style:

*I come up with two words, one is indie, and the other one is alternative (另类).*

¹⁴ ‘Non-mainstream’ (fēi zhǔ liú, 非主流 in Chinese) usually refers to an online subculture among some Chinese youth, which is criticised by many others as decadent and bizarre, and therefore has a somewhat derogatory connotation. See reviews by Qiu (2013).
‘Non-mainstream’, ‘niche’, and ‘alternative’. According to these interviewees, indie music can be expressed in multiple ways. Nevertheless, all these terms convey or represent a distinctly contrasting connotation as opposed to ‘mainstream’, ‘mass’, and ‘common’. Accordingly, some rock music that has entered the mainstream music market may not be considered ‘indie’ by those who consider themselves indie music lovers. In other words, Chinese indie music lovers view indie as a subset of rock music rather than an exact equivalent: indie music belongs to rock music in terms of style, but its niche nature is particularly emphasised. This niche nature has critical explanatory implications for the behaviours of these music lovers.

As previously mentioned, indie music is an inherently contrasting concept. The research participants’ interpretations of indie music are significantly influenced by their perception of pop music and the differences between indie and pop. In the next part of this section, I will provide some necessary descriptions of indie music lovers’ views on pop music. However, a caveat here is that their criticisms of pop music may be subjective, if not strongly biased, as their individual opinions and experiences significantly influence their perceptions. These criticisms reflect how indie music lovers construct their musical worlds based on these categories, which is significant in understanding the role of indie music in their lives and the larger cultural context. I would argue that, as a sociological study, we should not try to make judgements about the correctness or fairness of their claims but rather, more importantly, seek to understand their logic and interpret their views based on that understanding. Thus, instead of strictly defining a music genre, we can explore how individuals experience and comprehend the genre and scene with which they engage.

In their accounts of indie music, participants offered diverse interpretations; but in general, they mostly referred to the spiritual or ideological core underlying it,
which they identified as the so-called ‘indie ethos’. It encapsulates and represents a range of contradictions and conflicts with the dominant culture\textsuperscript{15}. As indie and rock music overlap largely in China, some music lovers also summed it up as ‘rock ethos’ or ‘rock spirit’. This notion has been explored in depth in research on early Chinese rock. Baranovitch (2003, p. 40) concludes that rock spirit is a ‘loaded term that basically meant a rebellious attitude … equating it with fearlessness and spite for authority and thus encapsulating the political significance of rock in authoritarian China’. This rebellious spirit relates to the countercultural tendencies of rock music, which is grounded in the punk movement in the West during the 1960s and 1970s. When rock music was first introduced to China, shortly after the country’s reform and opening up, this tendency against mainstream culture was inevitably linked to that particular social context, reflecting young people’s discontent with the structure and circumstances of their society. However, this study has found a change in the situation.

During the interviews, the interpretations of the indie ethos among contemporary Chinese indie music lovers varied, but few participants mentioned politics or other social issues in relation to indie music. The connotation of social rebellion once commonly associated with rock music was notably absent from their expressions. Instead, it was replaced by a resistance focus solely on musical and cultural dimensions. For Chinese indie music lovers, the indie ethos has evolved into a cultural belief and pursuit, primarily reflected in the values of independence and authenticity that indie music embodies and represents. These two themes of indie ethos are congruent with Fonarow’s

\textsuperscript{15} A related argument is that indie music is characterised by contradictions, encompassing both its external conflict with mainstream culture, which it sees as ‘other’, and its internal reliance on the mainstream in its conceptualisation process.
(2006) concise statement. However, they differ slightly in their specific interpretations, which I will explore below. I want to add here that a discussion of the ethos of indie music does not entail an essentialist way of thinking that attempts to conceptualise or discover the essence of Chinese indie music explicitly. Instead, I aim to examine the indie ethos’s connotations and thus shed light on how Chinese indie music lovers construct their understanding and interpretation of contemporary indie music amid tensions and conflicts.

A prevalent viewpoint amongst interviewees was that indie music represents a pursuit of independence, separating from mainstream (pop) music and the system that underpins it. Fonarow (2006) argues that the spirit of independence relates to the autonomy of indie bands, the artistic control over their musical works, and the minimal external interference in the production and distribution of their music. Undeniably, independent control over music gives indie music its name and serves as a hallmark of its resistance to the mainstream and authority. However, for the Chinese indie music lovers interviewed, this aspect was not considered the most important or, rather, not their primary concern. Instead, they placed more emphasis on the musical composition rather than the production processes. As the interviewee Mike (20, male) said:

*Indie now seems to mean that you can sign with or belong to a label, but you must have your own ideas, your own thoughts, or something unique in your style.*

Here, in considering record labels, Mike does not differentiate between so-called indie and mainstream labels. In fact, many ordinary music lovers do not even consider or know about the label behind bands. For them, the distinctions between indie and mainstream music are primarily based on musical forms and contents rather than different orientations between art and commerce that may be associated with different labels. Of course, to a considerable extent, the form
and content of music depend on the production mechanism behind them, and thus these should not be considered separately. Nevertheless, the interviewees did not seriously consider the influence of production mechanisms in this regard. The lack of concern about labels from the interviewees suggests that, for indie music listeners, and even enthusiasts, the definition of indie music may be more fluid and less tied to specific production mechanisms. These participants may establish their understanding of indie music more on its form and content, including elements like artistic freedom, innovation, and experimentation. This perspective challenges the more rigid, academically informed definition of indie music that is directly linked to its production mechanism. However, it does not necessarily invalidate the importance of considering the production mechanism when studying indie music from an academic standpoint. Conversely, it highlights that the definition of indie music is multifaceted and can be approached from different perspectives depending on the narratives.

These indie music lovers suggested that pop music has entered a phase of high similarity and those pop songs have become a kind of ‘formulaic’ music. In contrast, the appeal of indie music lies in its ability to create more diverse music expressions that transcend clichés, precisely what they see as a manifestation of indie music’s independence. While some indie music may also lack originality, especially in pieces that are considered to be plagiarised, music lovers asserted that indie music, as a whole, prioritises innovation and personalisation over catering to market demand. As a result, indie music can break away from traditional boundaries and create a more diverse and varied range of music. In this view, indie music lovers’ perception of pop music tended to be negative, often described as ‘meaningless’, ‘tiresome’, and ‘boring’ due to its increasing similarity. These comments manifest the repertoire of terms and ideas constructed by the mass culture framework of thinking (Ang, 1982). They gradually became the common sense of indie music lovers, influencing their
attitudes and perceptions of pop music.

On a lyrical level, pop was criticised by indie music lovers for being too thematically homogenous, mainly focusing on the theme of love between young people. And on a musical level, they thought that most pop music was produced with a series of common arrangements, losing its attractiveness. As Ken, a 27-year-old male indie music lover, said:

_You can hear that there’re a lot of popular elements in these [pop] songs. It feels a bit like an assembly line job, which makes it unpleasant to listen to._

Ken aptly pointed out the nature of pop music as industrially produced music. Since the days of Tin Pan Alley, popular music has been characterised by mass production and labour division, forming a cultural product (see Suisman, 2009). While arguably homologous to rock, pop music still retains the highly capitalist and market-oriented nature of a commercially driven cultural product. Frith (2001, p. 96) notes that pop music ‘is not driven by any significant ambition except profit and commercial reward. Its history is a history of serial or standardised production and, in musical terms, it is essentially conservative’. If we recognise popular music production as a field of art in which economics and aesthetics are opposed to one another (Bourdieu, 1983), the tension between the two in pop music is evident in the prioritisation of commercial success over artistic innovation. To appeal to a broad audience and maximise profits, pop music often relies on formulaic structures and widely accepted melodies and chords rather than taking creative risks and pushing boundaries. Consequently, this can result in a lack of diversity and originality within the genre. However, in academia, the rise of ‘poptimism’ reminds us of the importance of recognising the diversity and depth of pop music (Wilson, 2012; Barna, 2020). It has been argued that many pop songs have achieved critical acclaim and profoundly
impacted our societies and culture. Pop is, therefore, not a simple ‘valueless’ form of culture. But this perspective seems to be overlooked or neglected by interviewed indie music lovers.

For participants of this study, the niche nature of indie music turns into its advantage. Because it does not have to cater to the majority, there are more opportunities and a greater tolerance for experimenting with new musical possibilities. As a result, indie music is perceived more diverse than pop. It does not confine itself to a particular, established format, providing music lovers who are dissatisfied or bored with mainstream pop music with alternative options. One participant commented:

_"I think those [pop] songs that are being made now, they’re getting more and more the same. They’re all the same. But indie, or rock, whatever you call it, is completely different from what I’ve heard before, from what those people are making now. It’s a refreshing feeling for me."_ (Kay, 20, female)

Similarly, another interviewee said:

_"For those indie bands, for example, when a song is released on an album, it’s like that, but they would have adaptations and different styles in every performance. I mean, my perception of indie is that I constantly try to incorporate new elements and experiment. It’s like experimental music. I have my own thoughts on everything rather than sticking to a fixed style."_ (Leonard, 24, male)

Claims like those made by Kay and Leonard were quite common in the interviews. One potential understanding of this narrative is that their choice of indie music is not or not exclusively a pursuit or choice of an anti-capitalist production system or the so-called counter-cultural ideology associated with indie music. Instead, it is simply a strategy to navigate and challenge the
stereotypes of mainstream pop music. These excerpts imply the typical ‘art’ discourses that indie music lovers often employ to discuss and defend the value of indie music. This echoes the discourses of ‘rockism’, which defend rock music with the language of art, despite its deep connection to popular culture (Frith, 1996a). These discourses prioritise difficulty, variety, and experimentation over formulaic approaches to music-making. This reflects a broader trend in the narratives surrounding indie music among its enthusiasts, who strive to elevate the genre to the level of ‘high’ culture.

The discourse of ‘indie as art’ is similarly reflected in another aspect of indie ethos – authenticity. Authenticity has been extensively explored in popular music studies and analysed in the context of various genres, including rock (Tetzlaff, 1994; Weisethaunet and Lindberg, 2010), punk (Moore, 2004), hip hop (Pennycook, 2007), and even pop (King-O’Riain, 2021). According to Keightley (2001, p. 131), authenticity is ‘a term affixed to music which offers sincere expressions of genuine feeling, original creativity, or an organic sense of community’. Authenticity holds significant importance within the indie ethos, as it becomes one of the criteria by which indie/rock music is distinguished from other genres. As Keightley (2001, p. 131) argues, authenticity is ‘the compass that orients rock culture in its navigation of the mainstream … [which] draw lines of division within the mainstream of popular culture – lines which divide rock from pop, and even within rock culture, divide some versions of rock from others’. Arguably, authenticity is one of the fundamental factors that differentiate rock, or indie, from pop music.

While authenticity has been defined in various ways (see Newman and Smith, 2016), I tend to follow the interpretation provided by Vannini and Franzese (2008), who suggest that authenticity should be understood as the state of being true to one’s self. Interpreting their argument from a symbolic
interactionist standpoint, being authentic means congruence between one’s internal self and external social expression or between the I and the me (Mead, 1934). From this perspective, authenticity is not an inherent attribute of indie music but a product of the discursive practices and social interactions that characterise and give shape to indie culture. To make it clearer, authenticity is a construct that is continually produced and reinforced through interactions and social exchanges within the indie community. It is a subjective quality, negotiated and perceived through individual and collective understandings rather than being a fixed or intrinsic characteristic of the music itself. Thus, the perception of authenticity within indie music is a social process as well as a musical judgement.

Researchers have made attempts to interpret authenticity within music from two perspectives. On the one hand, as described in Fonarow’s (2006) study of British indie music, indie’s authenticity is often perceived as an imagined experience of working-class culture by middle-class youth. On the other hand, authenticity refers to the quest for authorship in an era of mechanised reproduction. In the context of this study, participants placed greater emphasis on the latter interpretation. They stressed the musicians’ capacity to convey their genuine emotions and experiences through their music, thereby exhibiting a sense of personal authenticity in their musical expression. In one case, the participant stated that:

*I think maybe [indie music] gives people that kind of power. In other words, [...] you think they’re more authentic [...] You either talk about some social phenomenon, or what you’ve seen, heard, or some of your own thoughts or the like. These things must come from real life, don’t engage in those fake ones.* (Mike, 20, male)
Here, Mike articulated his interpretation of the message conveyed by indie music: it is a reflection of what musicians see and hear, a portrayal of real life through music. The real life and realness embedded in indie music give it the ability to connect and communicate between musicians and listeners. Therefore, ‘being real’ is considered the spirit that indie music aspires to and sets it apart from other music genres. When music lovers seek authenticity through indie music, it also implies that the opposite form of music – pop – lacks it. However, it is worth noting that while indie music lovers share this perspective, it may not necessarily be a universal truth.

In fact, authenticity is a subjective and fluid concept rather than a fixed or objective criterion. It continuously evolves alongside the concept of indie music itself. Therefore, it becomes challenging to determine whether the music regarded as ‘authentic’ by indie music lovers truly reflects the musicians’ intentions. The lack of knowledge about the musicians’ creative process poses difficulties in answering this question, not only for this study but also for most indie music lovers. The notion of authenticity in music is deeply intertwined with the emotional experience it evokes. This concept extends beyond the music’s inherent qualities, encapsulating the personal connection and emotional resonance that listeners cultivate when engaging with the music, making authenticity a profoundly subjective and experiential attribute. As Liza, a 23-year-old female interviewee, remarked: ‘The intuitive feeling it gives me is a very free state, a state of expressing an authentic self’. Thus, the ‘authenticity’ of indie music does not necessitate objective validation; what truly matters is that it elicits an emotional response that the listener perceives as authentic.

To encapsulate interviewees’ perspectives, indie music is defined not by its production mechanisms but by its capacity to provide an alternative to mainstream pop music, which is seen as formulaic and lacking creativity. The
perceived independence of indie music is marked by its emphasis on originality and its openness to experimentation, a stark contrast to the perceived monotony of pop music. Moreover, the significance of authenticity in the indie ethos further distinguishes indie from pop. Authenticity, as understood by Chinese indie music lovers, is tied to the capacity of musicians to convey their genuine emotions and personal experiences through their music. It is not a fixed or objective criterion but rather a fluid concept. This illuminates the complexity and diversity of perceptions and interpretations of indie music among its enthusiasts in China, indicating the multifaceted nature of the genre.

In general, the distinction from mainstream popular music, particularly pop music, has significantly influenced indie music lovers’ perception of indie music. The impact of the indie-pop dichotomy on music socialising practices will be explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters. However, before that, in the next section, I will examine and discuss a crucial element that shapes indie music lovers’ music socialising practices: the live music culture and experiences.

4.2 Live Music in Beijing

Live music experience emerges as a recurring theme throughout the interviews, highlighting its significance to indie music lovers’ music practices. The live music experience directly influences their understanding of indie music and, to some extent, frames and shapes their behaviours in music socialising. Various studies have assessed the value of live music, not only as an important sector of the music industry (Frith, 2007; F. Holt, 2010) but also in terms of influencing individuals’ cultural and social participation (Lingel and Naaman, 2012; Vandenberg, Berghman and van Eijck, 2021). In recent years, digital technology has profoundly reshaped the landscape of live music and the live
music experience (Bennett, 2012; Jones, Bennett and Jones, 2015), promoting scholars to reconsider the meaning of liveness in-depth (Auslander, 1999; Duffett, 2003). Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the context of the live music experience and its significance for Chinese indie music lovers.

Local live music culture and the urban environment are inextricably interconnected and mutually constitutive. As Cohen (2012) notes, live music contributes to the city, becoming an active part of the city’s culture. Music venues play a critical role in shaping the local music scene and function as a creative resource within the discourse of space and place (Bennett, 2004). Recently, with the increased emphasis on music as a driver of urban regeneration, there has been a growing recognition of music venues’ cultural, social, and economic values (Cohen, 2007; Lashua, Cohen and Schofield, 2010). This recognition is usually connected to the concept of the ‘music scene’, which represents a ‘cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist’ (Straw, 1991, p. 373). A music scene encompasses a series of urban and digital infrastructures such as labels, venues, rehearsal rooms, online communication platforms, and related social networks, demonstrating its connection to cultural production and consumption (Stahl, 2004; Prior, 2015b). Analysing a music scene entails examining diverse music practices from multiple perspectives. However, this section does not intend to provide an exhaustive analysis of the indie music scene in Beijing. Instead, the focus of this section is on understanding how indie music lovers’ live music practices fit into Beijing’s distinctive urban music landscape from a cultural consumption perspective. It aims to explore how live music venues, as integral components of the city’s cultural environment, shape the music socialising practices of indie music lovers.

Setting aside Beijing’s centuries-long reputation as the cultural centre of China,
the city has played a significant role in the history of Chinese rock and indie music over the past four decades since the emergence of rock music in China. In the 1980s, Beijing witnessed the establishment of China’s first cover rock band, Wanlimawang (万里马王), and the subsequent formation of two earliest Chinese local bands, Qiheban (七合板) and Budaoweng (不倒翁) (Amar, 2018). In 1986, CUI Jian performed his song *Nothing to My Name* at Worker’s Stadium in Beijing, a landmark event that brought rock music to the fore-stage of the Chinese music sphere (Brace, 1992). Since then, rock music has gradually become a critical part of Chinese popular music, spreading from Beijing to other cities. Most of the influential figures in the early Chinese rock scene either came from Beijing or began their musical careers there. At present, many influential labels and institutions that contributed to the development of Chinese indie music are also based in Beijing. Examples include Maybe Mars (兵马司), Modern Sky (摩登天空), and Midi (迷笛). As a result, Beijing can be considered a pivotal city in shaping the history and trajectory of Chinese rock and indie music (Huang, 2001; de Kloet, 2005b).

The prominent and distinctive position of Beijing in the Chinese indie music scene justifies selecting Beijing as the location for this study. On the one hand, Beijing’s remarkable musical history is a representative narrative of the development of indie, and even popular music, in China. As the capital city, Beijing holds a certain prestige and influence, both culturally and economically. This prestige attracts a diverse range of musicians and music practitioners, contributing to the city’s vibrant indie music scene. Moreover, the city’s strong economy means that both musicians and venues have more resources and opportunities, allowing the indie music scene to thrive. Meanwhile, the city’s abundant musical and cultural resources contribute to the formation of a large and diverse music audience base. These make Beijing not only a leading city...
for Chinese indie music but also a microcosm of the nation’s indie music culture. On the other hand, however, Beijing’s unique position in the indie music scene has also shaped a distinct urban music landscape, setting it apart from other Chinese cities. This, in turn, influences the music practices of indie music lovers in Beijing. As such, an analysis of indie music lovers in Beijing may not be representative of other areas in China. In this study, it is necessary to consider this dual characteristic when interpreting the described music socialising practices.

An urban music environment is inherently linked to the numerous music venues scattered throughout the city. Small music venues, in particular, play a significant role in sustaining a vibrant indie music scene for bands, audiences, and the overall urban ecosystem (Miller and Schofield, 2016). Depending on the local context, small music venues vary significantly in form and capacity. In China, the mainstream small music venues are known as livehouses, which originated in Japan in the 1970s. Varying in size and typically accommodating audiences ranging from 100 to 1000 people, livehouses feature with their professional effects, including specialised stage lighting, high-quality sound systems, and technical equipment that enhance live music performances. This provides a level of professionalism that surpasses that found in other small venues like pubs. Moreover, the function of these elements extends beyond merely enhancing performance quality; they contribute to crafting a unique atmosphere and ambience that appeals to both indie music bands and their audiences. By creating an environment that is simultaneously professional and intimate, livehouses provide a conducive platform for emerging bands to develop their career and for music lovers to immerse themselves in musical experiences. Simultaneously, the small space makes livehouses highly adaptable, granting them the flexibility to reconfigure spatial organisation in response to the specific needs and preferences of the indie music market. This
flexibility, coupled with their tailored atmosphere, positions livehouses as particularly well-suited venues for indie music performances – a distinctive advantage over larger venues such as concert halls and stadiums. Accordingly, these livehouses are particularly significant in the indie music culture, for both musicians and audiences.

From the perspective of musicians, livehouses play a unique role in nurturing emerging bands. Their flexible forms of economic organisation provide ample opportunities for bands to perform and eventually contribute to the development of the scene. Compared to larger, more established music venues, livehouses, typically run by small business owners or independent operators, have more adaptable business models and management structures that are open to experimentation. Their operations fulfil the requirements of lesser-known bands as well as the broader indie music market. For example, livehouses are more willing to take risks on new and untested bands, providing flexible performance schedules and splitting options, as well as more personalised marketing and promotional services. Such flexibility enables bands to access performance opportunities, cultivate their fanbase, and ultimately contribute to the growth and diversity of the indie music culture in a particular area. This is particularly important for those ‘obscure’ bands that are not widely known yet. As Maggie (22, female), a devoted indie music lover, put it:

> Basically, at least in China and Japan, they [livehouses] are the core of the scene […] Most of the indie bands, they can’t go to big stages or festivals right from the start. While livehouse, for bands, is a very major venue that gives them a steady stream of performing opportunities. For audiences, it also gives us more resources to see gigs.

As Bennett (1980) notes, bands typically start their careers by playing at small
venues and gradually build up their fanbase and experience before moving on to larger stages. Livehouses, as representative small venues, provide an invaluable stage for this developmental process while enhancing a city’s social and cultural vibrancy (Behr et al., 2016; Behr, Brennan and Cloonan, 2016). In the meantime, they contribute to fostering a sense of community among music lovers and musicians, facilitating the development of the local indie music scene.

In addition, from the perspective of indie music lovers, small music venues are highly valued for their ability to provide live music experiences that large venues cannot replicate. Because for them, attending live gigs is not just about listening to music but also encompasses actively participating in it. Ian, a 21-year-old male participant who frequently attends live gigs, shared his experience watching an indie music performance held in a large venue, aptly illustrating this point through a counter-example. Shortly before the interview, Ian had attended a joint concert by Penicillin (盘尼西林) and Sunset Rollercoaster (落日飞车) at the Workers’ Stadium in Beijing. In terms of the venue’s space, unlike the layout of livehouses, the stadium has fixed seating for audiences. This difference in venue layout directly changes audiences’ musical experiences. As Ian put it:

*I think the live performance is able to, at the very least, standing in most cases, not constrained by sitting [...] In the Worker's Stadium, many music lovers said in [online] groups that you had to sit on the chair and were not allowed to jump [pogo]. Then you felt pretty upset. You couldn’t feel that way. I think the most striking difference is that live music can bring you a kind of feeling that you cannot get through records, through listening to music [...] They [sitting on chairs in live music and listening to records] make no difference for me [...] It is not just about standing up, but the atmosphere behind it.*
The Workers’ Stadium is an iconic venue in the history of Chinese rock, as it was here that the genre began to enter the public landscape in China. Thus, performing at this stadium is often considered a rite of passage, a pilgrimage for many rock and indie bands. However, while this stadium may hold special meanings, the essence of live music is perceived lost in large venue performances by Chinese indie music lovers. Ian suggests that the act of standing during live indie music performances is essential, as it allows for greater engagement and participation in the live performance. Ian’s point can be understood as emphasising the importance of *embodiment* in the live music experience. It transcends auditory stimulation and engages the entire body. By attending to live music’s embodied and performative practices, music lovers can deepen their understanding of both the music and their bodies across different contexts (DeChaine, 2002; Leman and Maes, 2014, 2015). For indie music lovers, live performance is more than just watching and appreciating; it is also a cultural engagement. However, the availability of seating in large venues fundamentally hinders embodied participation in music. This also reflects the discursive and empirical distinction between stadium rock and indie music from the perspective of indie music lovers. It is no surprise then that when Ian explained his perception of indie music, he directly linked it to ‘music performed in live; …] music performed in livehouses’.

Of course, it is undeniable that some of the large outdoor performances, such as music festivals, often have a large standing area in front of the stage where audiences can more readily achieve embodied participation in the performance. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether large venues are always as detrimental to the audience experience as Ian suggested. Nevertheless, my point here is that a venue’s characteristics can significantly shape the nature of indie music experiences. The spatial configuration of the venue influences audiences’ ability to interact with the music on an embodied level, a quality that
many indie music lovers, like Ian, find central to their appreciation of the genre. In livehouses, the proximity to the stage, musicians, and other audiences, as well as the intimacy of the performance, allow audiences to engage in a more attentive dialogue with the music. The standing, moving, and even dancing that occur in these settings not only embody the music but also allow for more fluid and spontaneous reactions to it, which tend to be more limited in large venues. Thus, while large venues and music festivals have their unique allure, they may not always align with the expectations and requirements of indie music lovers seeking a more intimate, immersive, and embodied experience. This draws our attention to the significant role that livehouses play in shaping the live music experience and the social practices that revolve around it.

According to the *China Music Industry Development Report: 2017*, there were at least twenty livehouses in Beijing, making it the city with the highest number of livehouses in China. The availability of music resources, such as the presence and accessibility of various music-related amenities, services, and performances in a city, is mainly determined by the number of music venues. Beijing’s abundance of livehouses provides greater opportunities for music lovers to experience live indie music. This unique advantage has solidified Beijing’s position as the centre for Chinese indie music, attracting music lovers from other regions to relocate to the city, as a manifestation of ‘the Matthew effect’. As Anna, a 25-year-old female participant who previously studied and  

16 The Gospel of St Matthew states: ‘For to all those who have, more will be given’ (Matthew 25:29). This inspires sociologist Merton (1968). He coined ‘the Matthew effect’, referring to the phenomenon where those who already have an advantage or are successful tend to accumulate further advantages or success over time. Beijing’s well-established position as the centre for Chinese indie music has attracted increasingly more indie music lovers to the city, making it even more attractive to other musicians and music lovers.
worked in Shenzhen but eventually moved to Beijing for music, explained:

Anna: After working in Shenzhen for half a year, I still wanted to come to Beijing. There are live gigs in Shenzhen, but there are more in Beijing.

Researcher: So why Beijing but not, for example, Shanghai or [other cities]?

Anna: There aren’t as many bands in Shanghai as in Beijing. On the whole, the indie music in Beijing is much more active than anywhere else.

Here, for Anna, Beijing’s vibrant indie music scene offers more opportunities to engage with indie music and attend gigs, which is a critical factor that attracts her to move to Beijing. As the number of indie music lovers in Beijing grows, the number of dedicated indie music livehouses also increases, which, in turn, further contributes to the growth of indie music in this city. During my fieldwork in Beijing, I observed that the smaller the venue, the more specialised or exclusive the livehouse is in terms of the music genre. For example, School and DDC are representative livehouses in Beijing’s indie music scene that can accommodate only 100-200 people but almost exclusively feature indie/rock performances. Larger livehouses, such as Omni Space and Tango Club Level 317, have a capacity of up to 1,000 people and offer a more diverse range of music genres to audiences, ranging from indie/rock to pop, hip-hop, folk, and all other popular music genres.

From the perspective of music styles, larger venues might be more suitable for certain genres, such as pop. These larger livehouses can afford to host more diverse genres, allowing the venue operators to be less concerned about

17 Unfortunately, Tango Club Level 3 was closed in 2022.
vacancies of the venues and therefore generate a more stable income. In contrast, smaller livehouses must establish a distinctive musical feature and stylised music scene to draw specific audiences, endeavouring to create a loyal audience base. This strategy enables small livehouses to convert cultural capital into economic capital (Whiting, 2021) while fostering their uniqueness in the genre and culture.

Although anchoring a music venue to a specific genre and its enthusiasts can be a feasible and reasonable option, it may not necessarily be the best strategy for livehouses in other regions, especially in the majority of small and medium-sized cities in China. This is because the music market in those areas may be less developed than it is in Beijing, and the audience base for indie music may not be large enough to sustain such a business strategy. Consequently, livehouses in these areas often try to cover a broader range of music performances to ensure their ability to survive in a commercial environment in the first place. During an informal discussion with a founder of a performance label that mainly operates in small cities near Beijing, we talked about the conditions of the music markets in different regions. He mentioned that even though they organise indie music gigs with lower ticket prices and put in more promotional efforts, it can still be challenging to sell all the tickets in these smaller cities compared to Beijing. In contrast, in the current indie market in Beijing, tickets for many gigs are highly sought-after and quickly sold out, despite the rising ticket prices. According to a report by Beijing Business Today (2023), the average price of livehouse performances in Beijing, which used to start at ¥50 RMB (approximately £6) and be capped at ¥200-¥300 RMB (£24-£36) previously, has now increased to around ¥180-¥600 RMB (£21-£71). This highlights the distinct nature of Beijing in the Chinese indie music market.

Dedicated indie livehouses in Beijing have created opportunities for more
obscure bands to perform, resulting in a notable feature of the city’s indie music scene: the considerable number of lesser-known bands that have managed to gain a foothold in the live music market. When comparing indie music scenes between Beijing and Shanghai, Ken (27, male), who previously lived in Shanghai for two years, commented:

**In Beijing, it’s probably a bit more underground, a bit more grassroots. In Shanghai, you have to be a big name to be able to do gigs […] In Beijing, a lot of bands are some kinds of campus bands that aren’t very well known, that don’t even release any songs on the internet, will go and perform.**

The vitality of a region’s indie music scene cannot be easily gauged by the performances of well-known bands – after all, these bands typically have enough appeal to support a gig wherever they perform. Rather, a city’s receptiveness to indie music can be better evaluated by its capacity to support lesser-known bands, in other words, by the willingness of venues and audiences to accept them. For some indie music lovers, it is the gigs of these lesser-known bands that make Beijing appealing. As Anna further articulated:

**Most of [indie] bands are in Beijing, so I am able to listen to a lot of live gigs from bands that aren’t so famous and aren’t ready to tour.**

One way of making sense of Anna’s comments is to consider these live music experiences as part of the accumulations of what Thornton (1995) refers to as ‘subcultural capital’. Anna states that Beijing offers more ‘rare’ and ‘unique’ resources not temporarily available elsewhere. For many music lovers, every live performance is unique, as musicians may perform the same songs differently at various gigs. Noticing and understanding these nuances represent that they have seen the same band perform multiple times, which can be considered a form of subcultural capital. For Anna, these gigs of lesser-known
bands are imbued with similar meanings. They are not only part of her music experience but also a signifier of asserting her uniqueness within the indie music lover group. As Thornton (1995, p. 27, emphasis added) claims, ‘subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being “in the know”’. Attending these live gigs becomes a way for indie music lovers, such as Anna, to construct a distinction between themselves and their peers and establish their unique identity.

The discussion of livehouses and their pivotal role within indie music culture elucidates the dynamic interplay between Beijing’s urban musical landscape, live indie music culture, and the music socialising of indie music lovers. The centrality of live music in the lives of indie music lovers extends beyond the music itself, encompassing a broader range of social, cultural, and embodied dynamics. These live music venues are spaces where music socialising practices unfold. The prominence of live music within the indie music culture holds significant implications for our understanding of music socialising. As noted by participants such as Ian and Anna, live music allows for a deeper engagement with the music and fosters a distinct sense of connectedness with the music and the scene.

Having analysed the offline sphere for music socialising in some detail, we are now in a position to turn to the online space. In the next section, the focus will shift to the increasingly prevalent role of digital technology in the listening practices of indie music lovers. Specifically, I will examine how streaming music platforms have transformed the way indie music lovers access and consume music.

4.3 Music Listening on Streaming Music Platforms

Sociology has two classic lenses to analyse music: viewing music as an object
or commodity (Beer, 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018) and interpreting music as an activity (DeNora, 2000; Benzecry, 2011). These perspectives emphasise the materiality and sociality of music, respectively. The materiality of music often stems from its production and consumption as a cultural product (Straw, 2002, 2012). More fundamentally, however, the materiality of music is grounded in the ontological claim that the existence of music relies on physical vibrations. This viewpoint highlights the role of physical materials in mediating music, emphasising the specific environments and artefacts that facilitate this process. While the ontological discussion surrounding music’s materiality is considerably more complex than this simplified declaration (see McKinnon, 2021), some studies advocate for viewing music and its material carriers as an integral unity (Wallach, 2003). Such an approach recognises that, despite its intangibility, music can be conceptualised as an object by examining the physical artefacts associated with it (Goodwin, 1992; Sterne, 2012). This suggests a symbiotic relationship between music and its tangible carriers.

However, a contrasting school of thought within sociology posits that music should be understood primarily as an activity, a process of doing, rather than an object with fixed qualities (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Small (1998) draws attention to the importance of social actors and interactions within ongoing music activities in his concept of ‘musicking’. He states that ‘[m]usic is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing “music” is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it at all closely’ (Small, 1998, p. 2). Building upon this perspective, some sociologists propose a more radical ontological view that understands music as a human experience and perception. For instance, Crossley (2018, p. 605) claims that:

*The existence of sound is dependent upon perceptual systems which translate...*
vibrations of air into conscious (sonic) experience. Sound is an intentional object. It exists for perceiving subjects and only for them. There is no sound and therefore no music in the absence of a perceiving subject: an audience. Vibrations of air can exist without a perceiving subject but they are not yet sounds and certainly not music.

Crossley’s statement here underlines the inextricable role of perception in defining music, asserting that without a conscious audience to interpret it, the vibrations remain a mere physical phenomenon devoid of musical essence. Nevertheless, several empirical studies (e.g., Bull, 2007; Prior, 2014; Hagen and Lüders, 2017) integrate both pathways or blur their boundaries to explore how people use music in their everyday lives. These studies demonstrate that the materiality and activity of music are not in conflict. What is at stake here is how people use music to give meaning to themselves and the world. The concept of musical mediation (Born, 2005; Hennion, 2012) embodies this perspective, which considers music to be shaped in complex ways. In the following pages, this section will discuss how streaming technology has influenced the music-listening practices of Chinese indie music lovers, the new possibilities it offers, and how music incorporates its materiality and activity within streaming music platforms.

Over the past half-century, we have witnessed a digital transition in music consumption that has profoundly changed how we access and use music and has significantly impacted our attitudes toward it (Prior, 2015a; Nowak, 2016). This digital transition began with CDs (Hosokawa, 1984), progressed through the controversial mp3 era (Alderman, 2001; Sterne, 2012; Arditi, 2014), and eventually brought us to streaming media in the 2010s (Morris and Powers, 2015; Hesmondhalgh, 2022). The proliferation of streaming music has been so rapid and influential that, for many young adult participants in this study,
streaming music was even a form of music that was taken for granted. The period when streaming music platforms began to be widely used coincided with the dramatic spread of smartphones. As mobile internet penetrated every aspect of people’s lives, mobility and connectivity became a pervasive state, with music included in this process.

Looking back at the broader context, the mobility of music has also been well represented in previous music devices such as Walkman and iPod (Hosokawa, 1984; Bull, 2007). Smartphone-based streaming music platforms continue this trend, despite not being hardware devices themselves. These platforms can be accessed through smartphones, seamlessly integrated into people’s lives, eliminating the need for a separate device to carry music. However, supported by the mobile internet and smartphones, streaming music platforms have brought about several other changes to music and the way people use and approach it. Two of these are particularly striking. Firstly, through subscriptions, streaming music platforms have significantly reduced the barriers to accessing music, giving users almost unlimited access to music resources (Arditi, 2021). However, this shift may also have brought users new consumption norms and platform controls (Morris and Powers, 2015; Maasø and Spilker, 2022). Secondly, streaming music platforms rely on big data and algorithms to provide music recommendations, which has altered how users interact with music (Lüders, 2021; Freeman, Gibbs and Nansen, 2022). These two points will be unfolded in the following pages.

In terms of accessibility, streaming platforms have revolutionised the way music is accessed, enabling individuals to enjoy a vast library of music from any location and at any time. While some may argue that digital downloads have previously made music readily available, this often depends on the digital ability of the user as well as the accessibility of the resource. The extensive collections
of music on streaming platforms, combined with their user-friendly nature, have significantly reduced the barriers to accessing musical resources for most people.

In China, there are two main types of streaming music services. The first type, represented by Apple Music, or the only platform of this model, requires users to subscribe to the service before they can use it. The other type, more prevalent in the Chinese digital music market, is the so-called ‘free and paid’ model employed by almost all major local streaming music platforms, such as QQ Music and NetEase Cloud Music. This model allows users to access the platform for free, with most music available at no cost. Unlike Spotify, these platforms do not insert audio ads but instead limit the sound quality of the free music\(^\text{18}\). Users who want to listen to music not offered in the free music library or those seeking higher-quality music will need to subscribe to a membership service.

While it may not be reasonable to compare the price of music subscriptions between different countries due to the disparity in average income and purchasing power, a comparison of the cost of a monthly music subscription to that of a physical album reveals that the price of a subscription to a streaming music platform in China is often very low. For example, in the UK, an individual subscription to Apple Music or Spotify costs £9.99 per month at the time of writing, roughly equivalent to a physical CD. In comparison, in China, the cost of streaming music platforms ranges from ¥8 RMB to ¥28 RMB per month, depending on the specific platform and the membership benefits. This is almost

\(^{18}\) This lies the difference between the ‘free and paid’ and the so-called ‘freemium’ models. For further discussion of ‘freemium’, see Benlian and Hess (2014), Sato (2019), Wagner, Benlian and Hess (2014), and Voigt, Buliga and Michl (2017).
one-third of the price of a CD in China, if not less. The low price has allowed
many Chinese music listeners to gain unlimited access to legal music at an
affordable price or even for free. According to the China Internet Network
Information Center’s (2022) statistical data, the user size of streaming music in
China reached 729 million in 2021, penetrating 70.7% of the total number of
internet users.

It is important to note that while low prices make it easier to access music, these
services also bring about a significant shift in the experience and possession of
music. On streaming platforms, users do not own the music but only have the
right to listen to it or use it, representing a critical shift in the way music is
consumed (Barr, 2013). Whilst music lovers did not directly elaborate on the
impact of this change in interviews, the feeling of ‘possession’ remains
important to them. On streaming platforms, music lovers develop a sense of
‘possession’ in a different manner. It is no longer directly linked to legal
ownership but is predominantly shaped by their ability to listen to and manage
the music in accordance with their personal preferences (Hagen, 2015). Central
to this experience is self-made playlists, which music lovers actively use to
create personalised collections of music. These playlists can range from a
simple compilation of favourite songs to more elaborated categorisations based
on music genre, listening scenario, or mood. As George, a 26-year-old male
interviewee, said:

*I make my playlists on NetEase. For example, what kind of playlist would I listen
to when I sleep, what playlist I listen to when I’m in a good mood, and what music
I might want to listen to when I’m on vacation and have a drink by myself. This is
the most vital way I organise my songs.*

By categorising and organising the music into different playlists, George
transforms these songs from arbitrary, generic music resources in the streaming library into the music he can control. While it may be argued that it is impossible to collect music in digital formats and on streaming services due to the lack of ownership (Burkart, 2008), George’s act of ‘playlisting’ creates a more personalised experience. This not only enhances his enjoyment of the music but also reshapes his relationship with the streaming platform. It changes the way he perceives it, shifting it from a source of passive music consumption to an interactive platform that enables him to take control of his listening experience. Through this ‘playlisting’ process, users reshape their relationship with streaming music, giving them a sense of psychological ownership of the music even if it does not legally belong to them (Pierce, Kostova and Dirks, 2003). By rearranging the resources on the platform, music lovers create their own content and gain limited control over an infinite amount of music.

The personalised ‘playlisting’ experience exemplifies the increasingly blurred boundaries between the materiality and activity of music. The act of playlist curation allows users to impart a sense of materiality onto the music they consume, even in its digital, non-physical form. The ‘objectification’ of music is embodied in the way users select and curate songs into personal playlists, transforming them from generic resources into something that has personal meaning and significance. Simultaneously, this act also underscores the activity aspect of music, as the process of selecting, organising, and categorising songs into playlists involves creative participation and interaction with the music. Music lovers are not passive consumers but active participants in their musical experience. They are ‘doing’ music in a meaningful way, exhibiting the sociality of music as Small (1998) theorised in ‘musicking’.

In the context of unlimited access to music, another approach to gaining a sense of possession is reverting to the traditional method of purchasing
physical recordings. This method fundamentally addresses the issue of ownership, but participants who buy physical recordings indicate that their primary motivation is collecting rather than listening. They continue to use streaming platforms to listen to music both before and after making purchases, whereas physical recordings are acquired more as cultural signifiers or even experiences. When discussing his experience of buying CDs, Craig, a 30-year-old male music lover, put it:

**Craig:** Firstly, I had listened to it [on a streaming platform] and thought it’s good before I bought this disc.

**Researcher:** Would you listen to it [the CD]?

**Craig:** Not listening, actually. Just collecting. I won’t listen to it once I’ve bought it back.

**Researcher:** Do you have a device to play CDs?

**Craig:** Not really.

**Researcher:** So why did you buy those discs?

**Craig:** It’s purely a collection, with a potential future opportunity for signing. There’s also a curiosity about what the back of the album looks like, the disc itself, and the lyric book. It’s totally like that. When you listen to an album on the internet, you can just view the cover, and there’s no other information. I bought the disc just to see the lyric book, to see the disc, to see the back cover. I just want to see all those, and then the disc can be shelved.

Craig mentioned that his motivation for buying CDs stems from the desire to appreciate the complete visual experience that digital versions of the album fail to provide. One explanation for Craig’s behaviour is the accumulation of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995), which allows him to acquire information
that cannot be simply obtained from the internet. There are similarities between this phenomenon and the engagement with live music discussed in the previous section. And in addition, from another perspective, the act of purchasing CDs can be interpreted as an accumulation of objectified cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Here, the CDs’ materiality manifests as a symbol of musical collections. In this context, owning CDs lies is not for the utility of listening but rather for the experiential pleasure of collecting and possessing them. This reframes the act of collecting as a nuanced form of possession, one that is less about practical control or use (Baudrillard, 1968) and more about a connection to the music.

In this sense, creating and curating streaming music playlists share similarities with collecting physical recordings, as both represent crucial elements of individual identity shaped by a love for music and notions of its cultural value (Shuker, 2004; Hagen, 2015). In the act of collecting CDs, music lovers may value the physicality of the CDs, the artwork, the act of placing them on a shelf, and the potential for these items to serve as visual reminders of their musical tastes, interests, and experiences, even if the discs are not actually used for listening. Here, the materiality of music is not about the medium that carries the sound but once again interweaves with the personal experience and aesthetic, cultural, and sentimental value embodied in the artefact.

Transposing the discussion to the interplay between indie music lovers and platform algorithms, music recommendation emerges as a central theme. In the pre-streaming era, previous music mediums, from the gramophone to the iPod, aimed to provide a music experience across time and space, allowing individuals to listen to music in various settings. Streaming music platforms have taken this further by providing users with a vast and diverse selection of music. However, such a situation poses challenges for both platforms and users. Although there may be slight variations in the ‘exclusive content’ offered by
different platforms, there are considerable overlaps in their music libraries (see Tang and Lyons, 2016; Qu, Hesmondhalgh and Xiao, 2023). As a result, one goal of these platforms is to transform from merely music players to comprehensive music service providers, attracting users and increasing their loyalty. This transformation involves using big data and algorithms to predict users’ listening behaviours and even shape and modify their music preferences (Webster, 2020). Meanwhile, discovering preferred music from the vast amount available on streaming platforms has become an everyday task for many users. In this context, music recommendation has emerged as a common option for both the platforms and users.

Before examining the impact of music recommendations on music-listening behaviour, it is important to have a general understanding of the types of music recommendations available on streaming music platforms. While all these platforms offer similar features, this study focuses specifically on NetEase Cloud Music (thereafter ‘NetEase’), as it was the platform used by all 31 participants in this research. Although some participants also used other platforms such as QQ Music, Xiami Music\(^\text{19}\), and Apple Music, NetEase was the streaming music service they collectively used. Therefore, it is the most appropriate platform to examine as an example in this study. It is worth noting that although NetEase operates on a ‘free and paid’ model, the practice of selling listening data to third parties, as discussed in several studies using Spotify as a case study (Vonderau, 2019), is not evident or at least not directly observable on the platform. Therefore, the datafication of listening practices discussed here, as well as the corresponding music recommendations, is

\(^{19}\) Xiami Music ceased its service at the end of 2021 due to operational issues.
limited to the music level.

To provide practical music recommendations, the platform must collect data on users’ musical preferences and use this information to predict their listening behaviours. The most straightforward approach is to ask users to select their preferred genres of music when they first enter the App after creating an account. This type of data is explicitly provided by the user. Additionally, preference data is also collected based on users’ listening behaviours on the platform. This includes actions such as creating playlists, liking/disliking songs, skipping tracks, and other interactions that are automatically captured, recorded, and analysed by the platform.

NetEase has not publicly disclosed the specific details of its music recommendation algorithm, and there is limited research studying it in detail. Instead of speculating on the algorithm, I would like to take a closer look at how users engage with and use the platform’s music recommendations. Upon entering the App’s homepage, users are greeted with various forms of music recommendations that occupy a significant portion of the functional area. Figure 4.3.1 provides an example of NetEase’s homepage at the time the research was conducted, demonstrating its key features.

• Function 1 is ‘Daily Recommendations’, which is a personalised playlist of 30 tracks customised to each user’s musical tastes. This playlist is automatically generated every morning.
• Function 2 is ‘Private FM’, an internet radio feature that provides music recommendations based on the user’s personal preferences collected by the platform.
• Function 3 is ‘Recommended Playlists’, which presents users with a selection of playlists along with specific information such as the genres and
bands included. These recommendations encompass playlists created by other users with similar musical tastes and some system-generated playlists.

- Function 4 recommends singles based on a specific song that a user has recently listened to.

These four functions dominate the platform’s homepage and represent the core features of NetEase, highlighting its emphasis on music recommendations. All of these functions provide recommendations based on users’ recent music-listening behaviours. They rely on the platforms’ pre-inputted music metadata and collected listening behaviours of other users with similar musical preferences to generate recommendations.
Playlists play a crucial role in these recommendations as a key component of the platform’s functionality. Not only does NetEase automatically categorise and generate playlists based on music metadata, but public playlists created by users also contribute to the recommended content. This means that on streaming music platforms, playlists serve not only as a tool for users to curate their own music experience but they also feed into the platform’s broader functionality. As a consequence, personal music collections are melded into the platform’s content, leading to an ecosystem of ‘prosumption’ (Ritzer and
Jurgenson, 2010). In this context, the act of creating a playlist transcends mere personal curation. Users can choose to make their playlists public, enabling them to be searched for and potentially recommended by the platform. This adds an additional layer of functionality whereby users’ personally curated lists contribute to the recommendations provided by the platform. The ability to make playlists public creates a reciprocal relationship between the platform and its users: personal music tastes contribute to the platform’s content, and the platform amplifies these tastes back to the user base. NetEase further enhances this dynamic interaction by providing social features around playlists. The platform displays the number of times each playlist has been played, which offers a gauge of popularity. Moreover, users can engage with playlists created by others by saving them, commenting on them, and sharing them. They can even delve further into the music community by visiting the personal pages of playlist creators, following them, or engaging in private chats. Through these mechanisms, playlists facilitate more than just the curation of music. They foster social interaction, facilitate the creation of algorithmic recommendations, and serve as content themselves within the NetEase ecosystem.

Furthermore, the platform’s algorithm not only translates individual musical tastes into data but also impacts users’ musical preferences through the algorithm. This dynamic interaction between users and the platform emerged as a recurring theme in the interviews. For many participants, an important aspect of the attractiveness of music recommendation is its ability to connect them more closely to the music they love, particularly niche and dispersed music rarely appearing on the mainstream media landscape. By starting with their interests in some particular songs, music recommendations bring them into a broader world of indie music. The recommendation algorithm functions as a tool or assistant to help them discover and explore their musical tastes. Simultaneously, the algorithm gradually and subtly reshapes their musical
preferences over time. As Francis, a 21-year-old male participant, put it:

[I] listen to music on NetEase, and it recommends you listen to music of the same genre based on its algorithm. It just goes deeper and deeper into that direction, and then I no longer listen to music in other directions. So I'm listening to more and more of a certain type of music and less and less of other styles.

Here, the platform’s algorithm acts as a mediator in Francis’s relationship with his musical preferences. Through guided listening practices facilitated by the algorithm, Francis’s musical tastes are not only gradually deepened but also potentially reshaped. These algorithmically influenced musical preferences become an integral part of his music-lover identity through an increasing accumulation of listening experiences. Therefore, in this context, musical tastes are not innate but rather gradually developed or discovered through active engagement with music. Helen, a 27-year-old female music lover, shared a similar perspective, stated:

Ever since I’ve had these [Daily Recommendations and Private FM], I can’t remember whose songs I’ve listened to. Because it matches songs I like so much, and it just captures my taste increasingly more accurately. I have collected numerous songs [from the recommendation], sometimes I even don’t know what I like. That's not entirely precise. I should say that as long as the songs it recommends are good, I don't really care who sings them or which band they are. (Helen, 27, female)

For Helen, the recommendation algorithm places greater emphasis on the music itself and diminishes the role of the musician in shaping her musical tastes. When discovering her musical preferences, she valued whether the recommended music accurately matched her personal preferences, regardless of the fame or popularity of the band. Through this process, her preference for
indie music is driven primarily by the music itself rather than external factors, representing a journey of self-discovery. In these cases, music recommendation is used by indie music lovers as a ‘technology of the self’ (DeNora, 1999, 2000). DeNora uses this term to describe how individuals use music as a tool to create, manage and reflect upon their identities, showcasing self-reflective practices. Helen’s statement suggests a significant level of self-reflexivity among music lovers when using music recommendations. They are fully aware of recommendation systems’ existing and potential impact on their listening practices and self-formation. As a result, they actively and positively respond to and use the algorithms rather than merely accepting them obediently.

In addition, many participants also mentioned their attempts to ‘train’ the algorithm on streaming music platforms. As Flora (21, female) said: ‘There is a process of AI domestication, and then it gets more and more submissive and recommends more songs pleasing to hear, more those niche stuff.’ Upon realising the algorithms’ impact on their own music preferences, some music lovers have begun to reverse the process by trying to shape the algorithm in a more personalised manner, making it more relevant to their individual needs. Leonard (24, male) provided a more specific description of the process of training the algorithm:

*I do press the ‘liking’ button for some songs, not only because I think they’re good, but because I want them to be recorded in the backend so that it can recommend more songs like these to me. Or sometimes, like when there’s a song I don’t like in the Daily Recommendations, I make sure to click the ‘block’, although it’s a bit inconvenient, hiding in the options menu. But to make it recommend fewer songs like that, I definitely will.*

Here, the recommendation algorithm is not a one-way imposition on Leonard’s
everyday music listening. This excerpt indicates that Leonard does not want to accommodate the algorithm but instead desires to control its variables to make it more adaptable to him. This proactive approach to music recommendations allows users to modify inputs and interact with algorithms to create a more personalised music-listening experience, even without altering the underlying code. As a result, users’ relationship with streaming music platforms becomes more reflexive based on their understanding of the platform’s capabilities and underlying logic.

In terms of the materiality of music, streaming platforms physically mediate access to music through the internet, smartphones, and data networks. Music becomes an objectified cultural product, accessed, used, and manipulated by the platform and users through these material means. However, it also takes on an added layer of materiality as data. Each song, album, playlist, or user behaviour becomes an informational unit represented in databases and algorithmic processes. Music lovers’ interactions with this data inform the algorithms on these platforms, shaping future recommendations and thereby forming a feedback loop. Accordingly, the materiality of music extends from the physical vibrations of sound to the digital representations of music and user behaviours. On the activity side, music is experienced and shaped through the actions and interactions of users on the platform. When music lovers create playlists, interact with recommendations, or even train the algorithms, they participate in the practice of music dynamically and performatively. The algorithm becomes a site of ‘musicking’, where music lovers can actively navigate, manipulate, and respond to music recommendations. This includes both the unconscious influence of algorithmic processes on users’ music preferences and tastes and the intentional manipulation of algorithmic outcomes through likes or dislikes. In this light, streaming music platforms become a space where the materiality and activity of music intermingle and
inform each other. These cases illuminate the evolving complexities of music’s materiality and activity under the impact of streaming technologies. They show how these aspects of music are not binary or mutually exclusive but dynamically intertwined, influencing and shaping each other, especially in the streaming age.

The discussion sheds light on how music tastes and identities are no longer static or pre-determined. Instead, they’re fluid, evolving through the active and conscious engagement of individuals with music facilitated by streaming music platforms. The continual reshaping of musical tastes and identities indicates the role of technology as an essential tool for self-discovery and self-expression in the realm of music. In essence, the streaming age has fundamentally reshaped our relationship with music. It led to a more participatory, personalised, and dynamic music consumption experience, where music’s materiality and activity are inextricably intertwined. This complex interplay, facilitated by the rise of digital platforms, has profound implications for our understanding of music and its culture, as well as the role of technology in shaping and redefining it.

In this chapter, I have conducted an examination of the indie music genre and discussed two particular contexts that inform the music socialising practices of indie music lovers in China: live music experiences in the urban setting of Beijing and streaming music practices within the digital realm. It is through these practices that indie music lovers engage in a continual negotiation of their understanding and perception of indie music. They reconfigure these perceptions within the broader cultural landscapes, considering indie music’s relationship with other musical genres and styles. This negotiation takes place through culturally infused and embodied participation in live music events and through the interplay between streaming technologies and their everyday music
listening.

This chapter has scrutinised the constructions of indie music and contexts of meaning-making for its enthusiasts. By foregrounding the subjective experiences and individual perceptions that indie music lovers develop in their everyday music practices, this chapter endeavours to challenge conventional delineations of musical genres and cultures. As we deepen our exploration into the music socialising practices among Chinese indie music lovers, we must acknowledge the challenges inherent in rigidly defining a music genre or culture. However, we can probe into how they experience, interpret, and engage with the music genre and culture in which they participate, how they assign meaning to the music, and how they discover themselves within these processes. This perspective enhances our understanding of the socio-cultural context of Chinese indie music lovers’ music socialising practices, providing the basis for the analysis that follows and also contributing to a broader academic discourse concerning the fluidity and dynamic nature of music globally. In the forthcoming chapter, I will elaborate on how indie music lovers comprehend themselves and construct their identities.
Chapter 5 Indie Pursuits: Constructing Indie Music Lover

Identity

This chapter explores the complex identities and self-perceptions of indie music lovers within the Chinese indie music scene. By examining their relationships with music, self, and others, this chapter seeks to uncover the underlying social factors and motivations that shape indie music lovers’ music preferences and their music socialising practices. Section 5.1 delves into the research participants’ perspectives to examine how they construct an understanding of the music-lover identity by differentiating themselves from other music listeners, such as trend followers and fans. By interpreting the concept of indie music lovers within a sociological framework, this section explores how indie music lovers perceive music as a social agency that shapes their identity and sociality beyond being merely a form of entertainment or recreation. Section 5.2 shifts the focus to the relationships between the taste and the self. Here, Bourdieu’s theory on cultural taste is employed as inspiration to analyse how social factors influence the music preferences of indie music lovers. However, instead of adhering strictly to Bourdieu’s analytical framework, this section is approached from a perspective that focuses on the significance of individual agency and choice in forming and expressing cultural tastes. Through examining indie music lovers’ cultural competence and mobility across different genres and forms of culture, I argue that the taste practice offers the possibility of internalising structural factors as part of the self, highlighting the significance of everyday activities and proactive participation in this process.

5.1 Building Identities in Comparison

Before delving into and discussing the views of the interviewed music lovers, I should first explain the term ‘music lover’ from the researcher’s perspective and
why it is deliberately chosen to refer to this specific group of individuals in this study. Labelling this group as music lovers is premised on the assumption that there are significant differences among music listeners. Several empirical studies have explored these differences and classified and analysed various groups of music listeners accordingly. For example, in her analysis of the American punk counterculture, Fox (1987) categorised members into four groups – hardcore punks, softcore punks, preppie punks, and peripheral audiences – based on their different perceived commitment to the scene. Similarly, Wells and Hakanen (1991) classified music listeners into mainstreamers, heavy rockers, indifferents, and music lovers, according to their perception of the emotional effects of music and the genres and ways in which they engage with it. Scholars in different contexts have employed different criteria and approaches to categorise music listeners, often implicitly or explicitly ascribing values to these groups, thus creating a hierarchy of perceived importance, legitimacy, or authenticity, which reflects a value judgement. It is essential to acknowledge that these value judgements and hierarchies may not be universally accepted or applicable, as they are often context-specific and influenced by the researchers’ perspectives or the cultural values of the society in which the study is conducted.

As a sociologist, it is not my intention to establish a hierarchical structure amongst music listeners; however, an analysis of the participants’ discourses in this research reveals an explicit manifestation of value judgements. These judgements are demonstrative of perceived variances amongst different groups of indie music listeners, thus introducing an intriguing layer of complexity to the broader cultural conversation. These differences are evident in commitments, behaviours, and attitudes towards indie music, as well as the roles of music in their lives. In this section, the analysis is grounded in the indie music lovers’ accounts while simultaneously drawing upon existing sociological research.
One particular analysis of the concept of ‘music lover’ by Hennion (2001) appears to capture the participants’ understanding in this study, thereby assisting in clarifying their interpretations.

In recent years, the term ‘music lover’ has become widely accepted as a label for the core audiences within the Chinese indie music scene. This label was also endorsed by the interviewees in this study. When discussing and defining the identity of a ‘music lover’, participants often made comparisons with two other types of music listeners – ‘trend followers’ and ‘fans’. By exploring their identity construction processes, I argue that indie music lovers engage with indie music as a meaning practice, and they shape their music-lover identity through continuous comparisons with others. This process involves not only distinguishing themselves from these other categories but also asserting their values, tastes, and commitments to the indie music culture. In the rest of this section, I will gradually unfold the meaning of the ‘indie music lovers’ label and how it differs from that of ‘trend followers’ and ‘fans’ through the lens of the interviewees in this study.

While the term ‘music lover’ is commonly used in everyday language, it has not been extensively adopted in the previous sociological literature. However, among the few relevant studies, some definitions and explanations provided by Antoine Hennion contribute to our understanding. Hennion (2001, p. 1) draws on the concept of ‘music lover’ to explore the taste practices of ‘active practitioners of a love of music, whether it involves playing, being part of a group, attending concerts or listening to records or the radio’. In an earlier paper, Hennion and his colleague use another term, ‘music amateur’, to refer to the same category of individuals who put their passion for music into practice (Gomart and Hennion, 1999). It is evident that while Hennion provides some explanations, he also uses the term ‘music lover’ interchangeably with similar
others. However, one consistent aspect of Hennion’s ideas is particularly worth drawing upon for this study: the importance of practice in understanding this group of music listeners’ commitment to music. Regardless of how the group is named, what matters is their active engagement in music practices, which shapes their relationship with music and the broader world. As Hennion (2004, p. 142) states:

What great amateurs enable us to see more easily, owing to their high level of engagement in a particular practice, is a range of social techniques that make us able to produce and continuously to adjust a creative relationship with objects, with others, with ourselves, and with our bodies; in other words, a pragmatic presence vis-à-vis the world that makes us and that we make.

In Hennion’s account, for music lovers, the relationships between music, self, and others, as well as the relationship with the surrounding world, are shaped by their music practices. These practices are a manifestation and reflection of their love for music. Adopting a similar position, Benzecry (2011, pp. 8–9, emphasis in original) argues, ‘[t]he love for something is a particularly strong and productive metaphor. More than driving action, it allows for a particular organization of action and selfhood’. Music lovers, therefore, are not passive consumers of culture but actively engage with the art world through various music-related activities while maintaining a deep emotional connection with it (Benzecry, 2011).

Building upon this perspective, I propose a refinement and expansion of the concept of ‘music lover’ within the specific realm of indie music in China. The definition of a ‘music lover’ should extend beyond solely considering the listener’s level of commitment to music. Instead, it should place greater emphasis on individuals who perceive indie music as a meaning practice. More
specifically, the term ‘indie music lover’ in this study refers to music listeners who use indie music as a social agency and a technology of self (DeNora, 1999, 2000), which plays an influential role in the process of self-construction and the formation of social relationships. For them, indie music practices such as listening to music and attending gigs transcend mere entertainment or recreation; these practices are given socio-cultural connotations regarding personal identity and social interactions. In other words, indie music lovers practice music as a kind of para-entertainment, a ‘serious leisure’ (Stebbins, 1982, 1992), which they consider to distinguish themselves from so-called trend followers.

The commercialisation and widespread growth of various music festivals, as well as the popularity of online shows about rock/indie music, have propelled indie music into a popular trend and fashion among young people in China in recent years. After experiencing marginalisation since the 1990s, as indie music, rock music has once again started to gain recognition in mainstream Chinese media. Consequently, it has attracted a broader audience, including individuals previously not part of the indie music audience base who are referred to as ‘trend followers’ by the participants in this study. By doing so, indie music lovers use the presence of trend followers as a reference point to define and distinguish their own identity and value within the indie music scene. We should not deny the positive role played by mainstream media in promoting indie music and expanding its audience. Some trend followers may also transition into indie music lovers through deeper exposure and knowledge. However, many interviewees believe there are still irreconcilable differences between themselves and trend followers, particularly in their attitudes towards indie music. For instance, Eric, a 32-year-old male indie music lover, described these differences when discussing the composition of audiences in live music settings:
There are some people who are not there to listen [to the music], but mainly to feel the atmosphere. To put it bluntly, they are simply there to have fun […] They are one group of people; we, who come to listen to the music, are another group.

Similarly, Cathy, a 21-year-old female interviewee, put it:

I've been a bit confused lately. As you know, many people go to gigs these days, I don't think they like rock or indie music much. Really. Fifty percent of them, at least. Like young people like going to clubs, they treat going to livehouses as a club-dancing thing […] They purposely doing all kinds of ‘rock acts’. I’m not saying I’m discriminating; I think it's silly […] Because it's originated in foreign countries, and many [Chinese] people don’t particularly know about it, so some people go and do that for the sake of entertainment, I think it’s a sacrilege to the music […] I can't say they don’t love music, but many of them just go to have fun.

Although Cathy states that she does not intend to discriminate, her depiction still implies a strong value judgement about the motivations and behaviours of different attendees at indie music gigs. The value judgement is established as a powerful tool for differentiating between those who perceive themselves as ‘true’ music lovers and those they perceive as trend followers or novelty seekers. Cathy’s statement implies that there is a ‘right’ way to appreciate indie music, and attending live gigs solely for entertainment purposes is seen as somehow disrespectful. From the perspective of music lovers, indie music is not deemed essential to trend followers; instead, it is perceived as a stimulus for an entertainment experience that can readily be replaced by other things. Thus, from the perspective of research participants like Eric and Cathy, trend followers engage in indie music activities as a casual leisure experience, described as an ‘immediately, intrinsically rewarding, short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it’ (Stebbins, 1997, p. 18).
An underlying connotation in their narratives is that indie music has recently undergone rapid commodification and industrialisation in China, potentially undermining its cultural attributes. The indie music consumed by trend followers is seen as a cultural product, while the indie music for music lovers themselves is perceived as ‘pure’ culture. Such an understanding of indie music is highly subjective and restrictive. It is important to recognise that the relationship between indie music and the mainstream cultural industry is more complex than a simplistic narrative of ‘pure’ indie being corrupted by external mainstream forces during its commercialisation and subsequent attraction to mainstream media (Hesmondhalgh, 1999). Nevertheless, mass culture theory has been adopted by indie music lovers to define trend followers and establish differentiations from them. This aligns with the discursive repertoires used to deride lovers of soap operas, as highlighted by Ang’s (1982) classical study.

Adorno (1991) argues that in the process of cultural industrialisation, the autonomy of culture has largely eroded, and culture consumers have become victims of what he terms ‘regressive consumption’. As a result, according to Adorno, individuals are now controlled by cultural products and passively consume cultural-industrial goods. It is within this discourse that music lovers draw the line between themselves and trend followers. From music lovers’ viewpoint, Adorno’s description applies fittingly to those who are seen as trend followers and consume music as mere entertainment. These music lovers argue that the ‘indie ethos’ has been commodified and marketed by mainstream media, turning it into a symbolic commodity for sale. They contend that this approach is more likely to attract individuals who do not genuinely understand and embody the indie ethos, thereby reducing indie music to just another passing trend in a cycle of fads for these novelty seekers. According to them, trend followers’ consumption of indie music is passive and transient, leading to the erosion of its distinctive (sub)cultural nature. From this perspective, trend
followers’ current preference for indie music is simply driven by the desire to follow trends, implying that there is no essential difference between indie music and any other form of popular music.

In contrast to trend followers who are perceived as consuming indie music as a cultural product, the participants in this study – indie music lovers – place more emphasis on the significance of indie music culture within their music practices. In this context, it connotes the spiritual ‘indie ethos’ embedded in indie music, as discussed in Section 4.1. The quest for independence and authenticity is explored previously through music lovers’ definitions of indie music, which encapsulates the cultural connotations associated with the genre. And here, as a cultural phenomenon, the indie ethos is reflected in the practices of indie music lovers, influencing their understanding and construction of their identity.

Discussing the relationship between music and identity, Frith (1996b, p. 122) asserts that ‘[i]dentity […] comes from the outside not the inside; it is something we put or try on, not something we reveal or discover’. According to Frith, identity is not an innate attribute possessed by social actors but rather a fluid and chosen one. This perspective aligns with Goffman’s (1959) notion that identity is a performative act that individuals engage in throughout their everyday lives. Music can be instrumental in this process by helping us construct an imagined self. Each music genre embodies specific cultural meanings, and it is through music that we assimilate these cultural connotations and incorporate them into the identity that we aspire to develop. As Frith (1996b, p. 123) aptly articulates:

\[\text{[A]}n \text{ identity is always already an ideal, what we would like to be, not what we are. And in taking pleasure from black or gay or female music I don’t thus identify as}\]
black or gay or female (I don’t actually experience these sounds as ‘black music’ or ‘gay music’ or ‘women’s voices’) but, rather, participate in imagined forms of democracy and desire.

Frith illuminates the potential of music to facilitate the construction of an ideal self. I would like to add to this statement by emphasising that this power of music relies on an individual’s adequate understanding of the music and a clear awareness of the cultural meanings it carries. If one listens to LGBT songs without understanding the underlying gender and sexual identity issues, how do these songs differ from others? Different styles and genres of music not only differ aesthetically but, more importantly, they convey and embody differences in socio-cultural aspects (not to mention that the aesthetics are directly related to this difference). As detailed in Chapter 4, indie music is not markedly distinct from other rock music in terms of its musical style; rather, it is the economic structure and cultural connotations that set it apart as a distinct genre. For indie music lovers, their emphasis on understanding the cultural implications of this genre is exactly what shapes their identity and differentiates them from others.

As Flora (21, female) put it:

Indie music lovers, I think they are the ones who first have a worldview in terms of music. They know what they like and have an independent judgement […] They should form an inherent perception rather than being carried along and listening to whatever others listen to. They can be influenced by others, such as what others recommend. They are going to listen to it, but they will not follow the trend.

Here, Flora identifies music lovers based on their appreciation for the individual interpretation of the underlying meaning conveyed by indie music. Once again, this criterion reveals the differentiation music lovers establish between themselves and trend followers, drawing on notions of cultural superiority and
By positioning themselves as individuals with independent judgment and elevated cultural understanding, indie music lovers emphasise the significance of cultural comprehension in shaping their musical preferences and identity. However, this distinction also signals the potential dangers of cultural elitism among music lovers, who may perceive themselves as superior to other music listeners. Likewise, Kyle (24, female) stated that:

*They [indie music lovers] must have an understanding of the music, a judgement. It’s something they choose sensibly, not just a passing interest that they like a bit. They must understand the core of indie music. They can have any interpretation they want, but they must have [their own] understandings.*

Both Flora and Kyle emphasise that music lovers make independent choices, striving to be free from the influence of others or current mainstream popular culture as much as possible. This is an embodiment of the ‘indie ethos’ that indie music encompasses and proclaims. I interpret this self-determined choice as a vital component of the ideology and discourse within the indie music culture and an essential expression of proactive indie music practice. Research participants perceive this proactivity as a stark contrast to the passive music consumption influenced by the capitalist operations of the culture industry. Through active music practices, music can be used by music lovers to construct their identities.

It is undeniable that engaging in indie music practices provides indie music lovers with a sense of entertainment and enjoyment. But more importantly, indie music is also deployed as a tool for selfing through the practice of developing an understanding of the connotations of indie music. Talking about this issue, Neil (19, male) said: ‘[a]s a music lover, you at least taking the music as part of yourself’. For him, engaging in indie music is closely linked to the process of
selfing. This statement is consistent with those of previous research claims that music is deeply and emotionally connected to an individual's private self (Hesmondhalgh, 2013) and is an experience of self-in-process (Frith, 1996b). In this process, the cultural significance of indie music integrates with personal identity, and both their meanings become familiar. Indie music truly becomes a technology of self (DeNora, 1999, 2000) for these indie music lovers. In one case, Helen, a 27-year-old female participant, expressed her thoughts:

Maybe the music style I like affects me in a certain aspect, personality, for example. But at the same time, the reason why I like this song at this stage is probably precisely because I myself have changed in a certain way. It's mutual, I guess.

Music resonates throughout various stages of one's life. In Helen's reflection on her relationship with indie music, it becomes evident that there is a reciprocal process where her musical preferences shape her self-concept, while her evolving self also influences her taste in music. This mutual relationship highlights the interplay between cultural and individual elements in forming and expressing personal identity. Helen's reflexive understanding of this interplay enables her to engage in further music practices consciously. For these music lovers, due to this reciprocal relationship, music becomes a medium through which they mediate their selves. Adopting the identity of a music lover becomes a way of positioning themselves in everyday life. It should be noted that this interplay between music and the self is not exclusive to indie music but is manifested in any proactive music practices. As DeNora (2000, p. 20) claims, 'music is in dynamic relation with social life, helping to invoke, stabilize and change the parameters of agency, collective and individual'. Nevertheless, different music genres embody and convey distinct connotations. The distinct cultural significance of indie music, as expressed here by indie music lovers,
sets it apart from other cultures and cultural products.

Continuing the analysis, it is important to acknowledge the presence of another distinct group of listeners in the context of indie music – the fans, who also use indie music as a tool for selfing. For indie music lovers, these fans play a significant role as another critical reference point alongside trend followers in constructing their self-definitions. In academia, the term ‘fans’ has been more extensively used and researched than ‘music lover’ (e.g., Baker, 2009; Baym and Burnett, 2009; Fung, 2009). Thus far, several studies have demonstrated that being a fan or engaging in fandom practices can have positive effects on individuals, including empowering them on various affective levels (Grossberg, 1992) and anchoring a narrative of self (Stevenson, 2006). However, before acknowledging these positive effects, fans are often attributed a range of negative characteristics, such as hysteria, deviance, disreputability, and danger, as Jenson (1992, p. 9) states: ‘[f]andom is seen a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction’.

In this study, most interviewed music lovers did not explicitly mention these negative comments. Instead, the distinction they emphasised between music lovers and fans was rooted in the difference in the objects of their obsession, which ultimately reflects music lovers’ perceived hierarchies of cultural values again. In their accounts of the characteristics of fans, the interviewees asserted that fans tend to prioritise the artists themselves rather than their musical creations. As Jane (19, female) stated:

*I think, anyway, that people who listen to niche music don’t seem to like to describe themselves as fans. Because a fan might be more into a specific band or a specific person. Especially fans in pop music, they might like a certain person in particular, and then they might be willing to know more about that person, like
what they ate today, what they like, where they went. Fans might be willing to know more about those things. But [as] a music lover, I like their music. I’m not particularly interested in anything else about the person.

For the majority of participants, exemplified by Jane, fans’ affection is directed towards the musicians themselves, their personalities, or even their appearance. Accordingly, fans’ love for music emanates from their deep attachment to the artists, where their love for the artists extends to their music. In contrast, music lovers are primarily interested in the music and consequently in musicians, or even, as Jane said, they may not be interested in the musicians themselves at all. Jane specially mentioned fans in pop music as an example, highlighting a current trend – the infiltration of fandom culture from pop music into the indie music scene. The commercialisation of indie music has not only attracted trend followers to the genre but also introduced the phenomenon of fandom and its associated fan culture from the realm of pop music.

The term ‘fans’ was introduced into the mainstream Chinese language around the early 2000s, coinciding with the rising prominence of the pop(ular) music industry. The popularity and development of the concept of fans and fandom in China are closely intertwined with the idol culture and economy prevalent in the East Asian region (see Zhang and Negus, 2020). The word ‘idol’ illustrates that fans or fandom typically revolved around a specific artist, which is also evident in previous scholarly works on the subject (Baker, 2009; Mcdonald, 2009; Garde-Hansen, 2011). In fact, apart from pop music, the phenomenon of fervent fandom is also prevalent in rock music. As music critic Ellen Wills (2011, p. 77) elaborates in her discussion on rock music, ‘[i]t’s my theory that rock and roll happens between fans and stars, rather than between listeners and musicians’. Undoubtedly, in the realm of rock music, from Elvis Presley and The Beatles (John Lennon) to Queen (Freddie Mercury) and Nirvana (Kurt Cobain),
numerous rock musicians have become idols to their followers, who, in turn, identify themselves as fans. The relationship between idols and fans is commonly assumed as a form of ‘non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance’ (Thompson, 1995, p. 219). In comparison, music lovers in this study have shown little interest in establishing a special relationship with musicians, as their attention to musicians often begins with music and may also end with it. The following comment from Maggie (22, female) exemplifies the perceived distinctions between music lovers and fans:

*Music lovers, as the name suggests, they pay attention to you only because they like your music. They like [you] only if your songs are good; if not good enough, they will easily turn to someone else. Because it's the songs they like, not the person. But fans, I think initially they like the person because of music, [but later,] they may still like you even if your songs are not good, because they like your charisma. As long as your name is here, they will buy it.*

This clear distinction, exemplified by Maggie’s comments, establishes a necessary contrast that aids in comprehending the identity of indie music lovers. During the interviews, music lovers often struggled to define themselves precisely but found it easier to articulate what they were not. Among indie music listeners, indie music lovers generate an understanding of their self-identity by contrasting themselves with trend followers and fans. This process of self-definition specifies the relational nature of identity, as individuals develop their sense of identity through the narratives of the group they belong and describe themselves in relation to other groups (Tajfel et al., 1971; Somers, 1994). However, in fact, their attachments to indie music, understandings of themselves, and interpretations of indie music practices vary for each individual music lover. The music-lover identity is just a label or one of the many labels they carry. It may not fully encapsulate their understanding of themselves within
music practices, but it can be useful in giving them an answer to the question, ‘Who are we?’ Talking about this, Nora (20, female) put it:

> Although there may be a lot of people resenting being labelled, thinking, ‘I don’t want something to limit me. I have so many possibilities.’ But labelling is an unavoidable process when you, as an individual, need to be known to other people, and to other groups in society. Labelling is first a presentation, a manifestation of your identity to a certain extent. Moreover, if you want to know more [about indie music], the label [of music lover] will also help you to find some peers. So, it has a certain role to play.

As we conclude this discussion, it is essential to remember that the indie music lover’s identity is complex, multifaceted, and inherently individual. While the process of categorisation or labelling might simplify our understanding, it also risks reducing the richness and diversity inherent in these individual identities. However, as Nora highlights, these labels play a crucial role in the socio-cultural sphere, enabling individuals to express their identity, connect with like-minded peers, and navigate the broader social landscape. The label becomes not a reductionist tag but an important signpost in the ongoing journey of self-discovery and social connection for indie music lovers.

This section has explored the intricacies of Chinese indie music lovers’ engagement with indie music as a meaningful practice, revealing the complex processes through which they construct their music-lover identity. A key aspect of this construction is the continuous comparison with other listeners, specifically trend followers and fans. By embracing the ‘indie ethos’ embedded in indie music practices, music lovers position themselves as individuals with independent judgement and elevated cultural awareness. This comparison not only serves to distinguish indie music lovers from these ‘others’ but also allows
them to assert their values, tastes, and commitments to the indie music culture. The findings underscore the relational nature of identity construction among indie music lovers. As they engage with indie music, they navigate the dynamic interplay between cultural connotations of music, their personal preferences, and the envisioned self they strive to embody. This process involves an ongoing negotiation between the individual's interpretation of the music and its embedded cultural meanings, which, in turn, shape their identity as music lovers. In the next section, I will analyse the relationship between indie music and the self from a taste perspective to provide a more holistic view.

5.2 Taste as Practice

In the interpretation of symbolic interactionist scholars, social actors are conglomerations of multiple identities, and individuals choose a 'salient identity' according to the specific social context to guide their social behaviours (Serpe and Stryker, 2011). For example, indie music lovers do not, and cannot, prioritise music at the centre of their lives all the time. While the indie music-lover identity is a crucial part of their self-definition, it does not encompass their entire being. Because identity is situational and multifaceted, most symbolic interactionists view it as a role social actors perform. In this context, identity is typically understood as internalised expectations of external roles, as self-meanings that develop in response to the meanings of those roles and counter-roles (Stryker and Burke, 2000). It has been suggested that role-identities are imagined perceptions of oneself as occupants of particular social positions and corresponding behaviours (McCall and Simmons, 1966). This interpretation is crystallised in Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy theory, which emphasises that identities and behaviours are dramaturgical performances enacted by social actors in response to different occasions and assumed expectations of each other.
The explanation of identity in symbolic interactionism is of great value to sociological research and has supported a large number of studies (e.g., Ezzy, 1998; Stryker, 2001; Serpe and Stryker, 2011). Nevertheless, a limitation of this theoretical orientation is that it assumes ‘either there is no real, substantial existing self, just endless equally unreal external images or […] the self does perhaps exist, but as something “inside”, rarely visible’ (Raffel, 2002, p. 193). In such a logic, identity is perceived as separated from the self. As observed in the previous section, from a symbolic interactionist perspective, the identity of a music lover is a role constructed by individuals based on the meaning they attach to indie music, which serves as a symbol in identity construction. While this interpretation is valid and endorsed by the current study, it raises questions regarding whether a preference for indie music is solely motivated by the symbolic meaning the music conveys and whether the identity of indie music lovers is only constructed in response to internal and external expectations. In this section, I attempt to address these questions by analysing the selves of indie music lovers from an additional perspective – taste – to complement the interpretations of symbolic interactionism and better understand how participants’ preferences for indie music are established and connected to their internal selves.

In criticising Goffman’s pathway of analysing identity and self, Raffel (2002) draws upon Levinas’ philosophy and stresses the importance of enjoyment in understanding the self within a sociological framework. Raffel advocates for a more internal and positive perspective in understanding the process of selfing. According to this viewpoint, objects associated with the self, such as indie music in our case, are not (merely) utilitarian symbols used to define individuals or establish what they are not. Instead, these objects hold the potential for individuals to derive enjoyment from them and to use them as means of experiencing the existence of the self. In Raffle’s (2002, p. 187) own words:
In enjoyment [...] there is always both a human self and a thing. And yet it would not be right to describe the self’s experience of the thing as just the (Sartrean) sense that it is not that thing. In enjoyment I do not feel at all negative about my self; I feel positive, filled, satiated, happy. Nor do I feel distant or alienated or separate from the thing I am enjoying. Instead I feel in contact with it, related to it.

Raffel’s argument pinpoints a potential contradiction in symbolic interactionism regarding the relationship between the self and the objects used to construct it. This contradiction arises from the separation and alienation between the self and these objects. In a symbolic interactionist view, although these objects are used and perceived as elements in the selfing process, they are not interpreted as being truly integrated into the self. In comparison, the concept of enjoyment provides an alternative reading of the relationship between the self and these objects. Through this lens, the objects used to construct the self are deciphered as something we experience based on our inner positive feelings, leading to a process of integration of the two. In this context, enjoyment refers to the immediate realisation of satisfaction, fulfilment, and contentment that these objects bring to oneself (Raffel, 2002).

Within a sociological framework, the concept of taste can be adopted to analyse individuals’ enjoyment and preferences for certain cultures. An analysis of taste can thus help us understand the factors contributing to music lovers’ enjoyment of indie music20. In this regard, Bourdieu’s discourses are essential in any

20 However, I would like first to acknowledge and emphasise that taste is a complex concept, psychological (Fingerhut et al., 2021) and neurological (Rose and Abi-Rached, 2013) factors also play significant roles in its establishment. This research, as a sociological study, is only a preliminary analysis conducted on a sociological level. Its focus is on examining the social factors that shape and influence the musical tastes of indie music lovers.
sociological study of cultural taste. In his influential work *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) challenges Kant’s view that taste is an aesthetic judgement or an individual’s ‘subjective’ judgement of pure beauty. Instead, he argues that cultural taste is socially structured, shaped by and reflects an individual’s position in the social hierarchy, or in other words, their social classes. While Bourdieu’s analysis of music is not extensive and is based on the cultural consumption habits of 1960s France, he identifies music as a compelling illustration of the concept of taste. In his own words, ‘nothing more clearly affirms one’s “class”, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 18). Bourdieu denies the notion of an objective ‘good taste’ and instead illustrates that the ‘legitimate’ tastes within a society are those of the ruling class, thus correlating the different tastes with the social hierarchy. According to his viewpoint, an individual’s cultural taste is, therefore, largely determined by social structural factors, particularly the role played by the economic, social, and cultural capital that one possesses.

Regarding the sampling method, this study did not intentionally recruit indie music lovers from different social classes. However, the participants exhibited a certain degree of different personal backgrounds, ranging from middle-aged business executives to undergraduate students who grew up in working-class families. Although the majority of participants were young adults, the demographic data did not reveal any significant similarities in terms of their socio-economic background. However, it is important to note that their educational backgrounds were relatively similar, as they all possessed or were pursuing at least an undergraduate degree. While these participants may not represent all Chinese indie music lovers, they do reflect a higher level of education among members of the Chinese (specifically, Beijing’s) indie music scene compared to the general Chinese population. The majority of interviewed music lovers developed their preference for indie music during their
undergraduate years. This, to some extent, reflects the importance of university life as an active force in shaping cultural practices, highlighting the role of education in forming indie music lovers’ tastes. At the same time, it also exposes a paradox that exists within the indie music scene – the juxtaposition between a love of popular culture and the possession of high cultural capital.

Previous studies examining the relationship between social classes and cultural tastes have often categorised culture into highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow, corresponding to the cultural tastes of the dominant, middle, and lower classes, respectively. Bourdieu (1984) argues that culture stratification is more than a simple categorisation; more importantly, it leads to social inequality and reinforces class divisions. The higher the level of culture, the greater the cultural (and/or economic) capital required for participation. For example, sociologists typically use classical music, such as symphonies and operas, as a hallmark of high social class, as it is associated with the cultural practices and products of individuals occupying higher positions in the social hierarchy (Bennett et al., 2009). Typically, those with higher cultural status have greater access to opportunities and channels for acquiring knowledge about classical music or receiving formal music training. In Bourdieu’s (1986) terminology, such knowledge and skills are referred to as embodied cultural capital, accumulated through education and ultimately reflected in an individual’s long-lasting dispositions. Through their knowledge and skills, individuals of higher cultural status are able to appreciate and participate in classical music, differentiating themselves from the rest of society. Bourdieu’s framework links taste to the cultural capital possessed by individuals, with highbrow culture usually referring to cultural forms that require a high level of cultural capital for appreciation, while lowbrow culture, conversely, requires less cultural capital for engagement. This forms the foundation of Bourdieu’s analytical framework of cultural tastes.
In this research, Chinese indie music represents a complex and intriguing case. While it embodies an ambition of resistance against the encroachment of the cultural industry on music, it cannot fully extricate itself from being a product of popular culture. Drawing upon a Bourdieusian framework, indie music can be understood as a form of middlebrow culture situated between the highbrow and lowbrow ends of the spectrum (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont, 1992). Being a part of mass culture and contemporary popular culture, it may be perceived as lacking the intellectual and aesthetic refinement typically associated with highbrow culture (Levine, 1990). But meanwhile, its deviation from mainstream preferences results in more obscure contents and forms that require specific knowledge from its audiences. As expressed by George, a 26-year-old male indie music lover:

*Fewer people comprehend or appreciate the content or emotion it conveys. I’ve been listening to Sound Fragment (声音碎片) a lot lately. They released a new album at the end of last year. There is a song titled ‘Galaxy Gazing’ (《望星空》), for instance. The lyrics are about litterateur or poets, and people may not pay much attention to these subjects in general. They may be more receptive to a song that discusses love, right? The content, the musical content, or the lyrics likely resonate with a smaller audience.*

George finds that the distinctive lyrical content in indie music often delves into less conventionally approachable themes, demanding a certain degree of cultural and intellectual engagement from its listeners. Moreover, these lyrics extend beyond the sonic boundaries of the music, often referencing or interweaving with other cultural and intellectual elements, such as literature or poetry. In the same vein, another interviewee, Brad (24, male), alluded to the distinction between music genres in terms of cultural hierarchy when comparing pop and indie music:
[Pop music often] expresses those love stuff. ‘I broke up with you today, I’m sad, but I will still love you tomorrow.’ It’s kind of vulgar, right? I’m not saying that I am or that indie music is highbrow, but there are some … For example, some domestic metal bands incorporate classical Chinese poetries into their music as lyrics, and so on […] Those lyrics are very intriguing. It’s not necessarily to be about politics or something, but these are definitely more poetic.

Coincidentally, both George and Brad referred to the close connection between the lyrics in some indie music songs and ancient Chinese poetry. They consider the lyrics of indie music to be more ‘insightful’ than pop music, which distinguishes indie music from pop. One possible explanation for this distinction is that, in their examples, indie music is often linked to other cultural forms, such as literature, which requires listeners to possess a certain level of literacy to fully grasp the content and the meaning of the music. Of course, this connection is not always present, and indie music lyrics are likely to cover a range of themes, with love being a common one. Nevertheless, examples of George and Brad shed light on some of the characteristics of indie music and its enthusiasts. Their discussions about indie music draw on discourses of the arts. This tendency mirrors the practices of some rock critics who utilise and lean on discourses of high art to valorise specific forms of rock music. As noted by Frith (1996a), the distinction between art and pop music is not a matter of inherent quality but rather a product of cultural processes and social judgements that create and maintain hierarchies of value.

In this light, the association between indie music and high art discourses can be seen as an attempt to elevate the cultural value of the genre, situating it within a more esteemed position in the cultural hierarchy. By linking indie music with traditional art forms such as poetry, the genre acquires an intellectual and aesthetic depth that sets it apart from mainstream pop music. This association
not only challenges conventional categorisations of cultural value but also reveals the fluid and complex nature of the relationship between different cultural forms and their perceived worth. In the same vein, in terms of musicality, indie music also imposes certain expectations on its listeners. As George proceeded to explain:

Another song by Sound Fragment, ‘To My Lost Friend’ (《致我的迷茫兄弟》), which is a song with an irregular musical structure from a musical point of view, has seven bars in a phrase. It’s like, for example, if you compare it with language, it’s written in seven short sentences and then arranged into a poem. Perhaps such a genre is not well received by the average audience’s listening habits. They are more accustomed to phrases with, say, eight or four bars. The presence of a song with seven bars in a phrase is not readily accepted in terms of listening habits.

In this instance, George’s extensive knowledge of music and other art forms is exemplified through his understanding and interpretation of these songs’ lyrics and musical elements. His cultural competence extends beyond music and encompasses a broader understanding of culture. It becomes apparent that cultural capital plays a significant role for indie music lovers like George. In this context, cultural capital refers not only to knowledge specific to indie music but also to foundational knowledge and competencies that can be adapted to appreciate multiple cultural forms and contents. This contrasts with the concept of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995), which is utilised to distinguish hierarchies among listeners within a specific music style. It is pervasive across cultures in the form of specialised knowledge pertaining to a particular music style. In comparison, the cultural capital exhibited by indie music lovers in this study manifests as an understanding and knowledge of culture across various cultural and musical forms. Some interviewees indicated that their musical practices were not exclusively focused on or confined to indie music; they had
also gained experience or even in-depth knowledge of other music styles. In one case, Dan (26, male) stated:

*I listen to everything, the good stuff actually [...] I do cover a very wide range. I even listen to Peking Opera [...] Like Shajiabang (《沙家浜》), Red Detachment of Women (《红色娘子军》) [Humming a snippet of the Red Detachment of Women [...] I can also listen to classical. For example, I can still recite the score of Die Forelle [...] I would say I'm musically literate enough to listen to everything, but I choose what I like more.*

Here, Dan recognises his musical literacy as a form of cultural competence that transcends specific music styles, enabling him to listen to and comprehend different styles of music. Dan’s case appears to embody the characteristics of cultural omnivorousness, which accentuates the diversity of tastes and cultural engagement by breaking down previously hierarchically delineated cultural categories and genres (Peterson, 1992). However, on closer examination, I would argue that Dan exemplifies something closer to ‘cultural mobility’ rather than ‘cultural omnivorousness’. He moves between his cultural repertoires, transitioning from classical to indie music while expressing his tastes in similar ways.

According to Emmison (2003, p. 213), cultural mobility refers to ‘the capacity to navigate between or across cultural realms, a freedom to choose or select one’s position in the cultural landscape’. Here, Emmison draws attention to the difference between tastes and knowledge, which Bourdieu does not address. He asserts that individuals with knowledge do not necessarily possess omnivorous tastes; instead, they exhibit similar traits of univorous taste found in lower socio-economic classes. The key difference is that individuals with higher cultural capital have access to a broader range of musical and cultural
options, enabling them to navigate various musical cultures. However, they do not indiscriminately participate in all those cultures; rather, they select music that aligns with their subjective aesthetic standards. This precisely explains what Dan stated earlier. For him, there is no hierarchy between indie music and other ‘highbrow music’ such as classical music and Peking Opera; the range of music he listens to is determined solely by whether the music meets his subjective aesthetic criteria. However, not all indie music lovers exhibit Dan’s ability to traverse multiple musical genres. For most interviewees, this competence is primarily observed within popular music culture. In addition to listening to indie music, they also engage with pop, hip-hop, electronic, and other popular music genres. In general, while they predominantly listen to indie music, they are still willing and capable of appreciating other music genres in this field.

My explanation is that this ability to move across genres is a form of cultural capital, which is closely linked to one’s educational background. The extensive education these music lovers have received has equipped them with the capacity to cultivate subjective aesthetics and make informed choices regarding cultural consumption. This phenomenon also sheds light on why individuals with comparable backgrounds might not appreciate indie music as the research participants do. In this context, social-structural factors, represented by cultural capital, emerge as influential factors in the formation of taste. They provide social actors with a range of choices among various music styles and genres by developing cultural knowledge and competence.

Ultimately, choice is the central issue. The selection process designates indie music lovers’ musical tastes, and the selection practice internalises these preferences into their sense of self. The way in which individuals discuss and express their musical tastes significantly influences both their taste and self.
While I acknowledge the significance of cultural capital, as posited by Bourdieu, it is crucial to consider the role of individual agency and selection in the formation and expression of cultural tastes. This sheds light on an alternative perspective regarding the impact of cultural capital on taste formation: cultural capital does not necessarily determine one’s tastes but provides opportunities and possibilities for making taste choices and selections. In other words, cultural capital can be regarded as a resource that equips individuals to navigate the cultural landscape and make informed decisions about their preferences. This viewpoint acknowledges the significance of Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital while simultaneously emphasising the importance of individual agency in the process of taste formation. By recognising the role of personal choice, this perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between cultural capital and taste, suggesting that cultural capital does not dictate tastes outright but instead creates a context where individuals can exercise their agency and develop their cultural preferences.

Music lovers elaborate on the intricate ways they incorporate their indie music preferences into their daily lives and practices, thereby shaping their motivations and realisations of music engagement. During the interviews, participants discussed their understanding of the interplay between taste practice and self. Actively embodying a preference for indie music becomes a means of cultivating and preserving their identity as music lovers. For instance, several interviewed indie music lovers detailed their participation in live music performances as a distinctive manifestation of taste practice central to their self-identification as music lovers. Liza (23, female), who moved to Beijing from another city for work and residence, highly valued the unique livehouse environment in Beijing and the possibilities it offered to attend live gigs frequently:
I used to wonder if I could still call myself a music lover if I ever went back to work in my hometown and I no longer had opportunities to go to live gigs one day. I believe the answer to that question is no. Or rather, it feels like there’s a piece missing.

In Section 4.2, I examined the influence of live music on the development of the indie music genre and culture; here, Liza points out the importance of live music experience in shaping the identity of indie music lovers. For her, live music is not just a distinctive musical experience and a fundamental aspect of indie music culture; more importantly, it is a taste practice connected to her perception of self. Similarly, another interviewee, Leonard (27, male), put it:

**Researcher:** Do you ever think there is a marker for you that you recognise yourself as a music lover?

**Leonard:** There is one. The first time I went to a livehouse […] My university, although it was in Beijing, I spent my first three years at the Changping [a suburb district of Beijing] campus, which was far from the city centre. So, I could only attend music festivals on holidays at first. Through those, I got familiar with a lot of bands. From my senior year, I moved to the Chaoyang [one of the central districts of Beijing] campus, which was closer to livehouses in town. Thus I got more opportunities to attend gigs at night.

**Researcher:** Actually, I don’t quite understand. You mentioned you went to several music festivals before. Don’t you think that could be an indication that you recognise yourself as a music lover?

**Leonard:** I attended music festivals […] The atmosphere there, to be honest, it’s pleasant, a lot of people, it’s nice. But it’s a different kind of feeling […] However, livehouse turns [indie music] into a part of my life.
Leonard does not elaborate any further here, but his statement implies that attending livehouse gigs is considered a landmark event in the process of forging a music lover's self-identity. And what he particularly emphasises is that as a milestone, this participation in live music is not to be a one-off but instead a daily and regular practice. Moreover, this practice carries an additional layer of meaning, as it is not a passive or aimless involvement but a proactive participation. For indie music lovers, the practice of taste is more than simply ‘listening’. A more central criterion is whether one’s taste translates into subsequent proactive action. Talking about this issue, another interviewee said:

You can’t say you’re a music lover if you just like it. But if you like it, you think it’s good, and then you start digging and digging and digging. This is something. That may be a music lover. (Neil, 19, male)

Here, Neil’s words direct our attention back to the topic of cultural capital, as the further exploration of indie music he describes here is essentially an accumulation of labour. In line with Bourdieu’s (1986, p. 241) perspective, which suggests that all forms of capital are accumulated labour, both ‘in its materialized form or its “incorporated,” embodied form’, Neil views music practice, or taste practice, as a means of accumulating cultural capital. And if we take proactivity as a necessary condition for practice, we can observe that indie music necessitates precisely more active participation from music lovers. Discussing the accessibility of pop and indie music, Bella (25, female) made the following remark:

[T]he manner in which you are exposed to music differs. Pop music, because it’s popular, it is called pop music. It’s prevalent, it’s easily singable, it’s catchy song. So, there are certain, effortless ways, to encounter pop music. But you may need to exert more effort to get involved in indie music.
As Bella indicates, pop music benefits from the support of the cultural industry, enabling it to dominate mainstream media channels. This extensive exposure makes pop music more accessible and comprehensible to the general public. In contrast, indie music receives limited, if any, attention from mainstream media outlets, posing challenges to its dissemination in the first place. Therefore, developing indie music taste relies heavily on proactive engagement and practice.

I argue that Bourdieu’s account of cultural taste offers some open-ended answers to the formation of taste or enjoyment and its relationship with the self. It is essential to acknowledge the complex interplay between structural factors and individual agency and the potential for individuals to internalise and adapt these factors to create a unique sense of self and identity. In the analysis of this section, I sought to expand upon Bourdieu’s work on taste and cultural capital while emphasising the crucial role of everyday practices and proactive participation in shaping and maintaining one’s musical taste and identity. In addition to reflecting structural factors, taste also offers the possibility of internalising them as part of one’s self. For Bourdieu (1977, p. 86), habitus is ‘a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class’. In this study, habitus still underlines the social environment in which individuals are located and their response to it. However, it also illustrates individuals’ ability to internalise the structure and transform them into agency. This process of internalisation is fundamental to the construction of taste and enjoyment, as highlighted in this section, which emphasises the importance of practice, everyday experiences, and proactive participation. This section demonstrated that it is through continuous engagement and active involvement in indie music culture that individuals internalise their taste preferences and consolidate their perceptions of self and identity. This perspective not only
enriches the Bourdieusian understanding of cultural taste but also offers a more comprehensive view of the relationship between taste, identity, and cultural capital.

In conclusion, this chapter has undertaken an in-depth examination of the complexities and nuances of the indie music-lover identity. The analysis has centred on two core arguments that delineate the distinctive aspects of the indie music lover identity. First, this identity is constructed and continually reshaped through a process of comparison with others. It is through this constant process of comparing that indie music lovers perceive their distinctiveness and define their identity. The self-perception of indie music lovers and the value they attribute to indie music contribute significantly to this comparative process. This process is not only confined to understanding the self in relation to others but also involves reflecting on the cultural value of indie music and its hierarchical position in the broader musical landscape. Second, as observed in this chapter, indie music lovers do not merely consume music passively; instead, they actively engage in a practice of taste, which helps them internalise the societal and structural aspects of indie music into their identity formation process. Taste, in this context, goes beyond mere preference – it becomes a social practice, a method through which structural factors are absorbed and transformed into cultural competence and, eventually, the definition and perception of oneself.

Together, these two arguments elucidate the dynamic role of indie music as a potent social force. Indie music extends beyond mere entertainment – it is a social agency that shapes relationships, influences self-perceptions, and aids in the construction of individual identities. By understanding the active participation and choices of indie music lovers in shaping their cultural practices
and identities, we gain valuable insights into the evolution of cultural tastes and practices over time, as well as how individuals utilise these practices in the construction of their social identities. The next chapter moves on to examine Chinese indie music lovers’ social relationships and social interactions regarding music, investigating how they navigate themselves through music in intricate social relationships.
Chapter 6 Tuning In: Interpersonal Musical Interactions

In the previous chapter, we established the significance of indie music-lover identity as a crucial aspect of self-construction and self-understanding for research participants. Identity, a fundamental concept in social sciences, plays a critical role in shaping individual behaviours, interpersonal interactions, and subjective understanding of social relationships and the world (Giddens, 1991; Jenkins, 2008). Identity is not only an internal sense of self but also has external manifestations in behaviours and actions (Giddens, 1991). This understanding of identity underscores the need to examine the potential functions and roles of indie music in the social lives of its enthusiasts. A wealth of research has proven the sociality of music and its significance in the human experience (Born, 2012; Brabazon, 2012; Shepherd, 2013; Prior, 2015b). Music, in its various forms, provides a platform for social interaction and connection (Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Schäfer et al., 2013; Hagen and Lüders, 2017). In light of this, our focus on indie music should encompass its potential to serve these social functions. This chapter explores the role of indie music in its enthusiasts’ social interactions, analysing how indie music lovers use music to negotiate and navigate interpersonal relationships.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section examines the relationship between indie music practices and everyday lives. It identifies two distinct self-narratives: one group of music lovers perceive indie music practices as an integral part of their everyday experiences, and another group regard indie music as a separate practice and experience parallel to everyday life. The second section investigates the impact of indie music on the friendships of indie music lovers and dissects how and why they categorise their social relationships into two separate networks: musical friends and daily friends. The third section focuses on the formation and development of musical friendships.
among indie music lovers and particularly discusses how these friendships provide support and connectedness even though they can be shallow and discontinuous. Overall, this chapter demonstrates that indie music lovers deploy music as a tool to create meaning and shape their social lives. The chapter argues that indie music lovers in China construct different self-narratives and social relationships around their music practices, reflecting their diverse ways of coping with the challenges and complexities of contemporary society. By dissecting indie music’s role in these social relationships, this chapter aims to gain a more in-depth understanding of the impact of indie music on its enthusiasts and their social experiences.

6.1 Negotiating Boundaries Between Musical Practices and Everyday Lives

This section delves into the intricate relationship between Chinese indie music lovers’ music practices and everyday lives, focusing on how these individuals negotiate the boundaries between the two. The objective is to shed light on the varied strategies music lovers employ to navigate the interplay between their passion for indie music and the broader contexts that inform their life experiences. The relevance of this analysis stems from the accepted understanding of music as a powerful medium, one that not only provides entertainment but also influences and reflects the self-concepts and identities of those who actively practice it, as exemplified in the preceding chapter. To further examine this aspect, the concept of self-narrative is employed in this section as a lens to scrutinise the life experiences of Chinese indie music lovers. Self-narrative, as elucidated by Giddens (1991) in his seminal work on self-identity, refers to the stories individuals create and tell about themselves and others, an endeavour to make sense of their life experiences. Through this reflexive exercise, individuals not only construct and comprehend their self-
identity but also use these narratives to contextualise their lives within broader cultural and social frameworks. By deciphering the self-narratives of Chinese indie music lovers, we can gain valuable insights into their motivations and viewpoints regarding their engagement with indie music. Moreover, it helps us to understand how music lovers use music to derive meanings and establish a sense of control in their everyday lives.

Negotiating the boundaries between music practices and everyday lives entails a range of voluntary and, sometimes, compelled choices by indie music lovers, who interpret the role of indie music in this process in diverse ways. In this study, two divergent and even conflicting self-narratives emerged: one group of individuals perceived indie music practices as an integral part of their everyday lives, while another group considered indie music as a separate social experience parallel to their everyday activities. These different self-narratives among music lovers contribute to their varied approaches to engaging with indie music and varied comprehension of their life experiences.

Beginning with the first category of self-narratives, approximately one-quarter of the participants expressed in their interviews that they view music as a constitutive part of their daily routines and social interactions. They seamlessly weave music practices into their lives, underlining music practices’ substantial role in their social existence. For them, engaging in music practice is a way of structuring and shaping their everyday lives. These music lovers establish meaningful connections between music and their lives through a range of practices. These practices include incorporating music into their daily routines, such as listening to music during commutes or engaging in discussions about new releases with peers. Additionally, regular attendance at live music performances further enhances their connection to the music and its cultural context. By adopting a lifestyle closely intertwined with indie music, these music
lovers intersect the music with their everyday narratives. As a result, music practices are no longer exceptional activities outside of their everyday lives but rather constitute them. Depicting his personal experience, Ken, a 27-year-old male participant, articulated:

_Over time, it just becomes integrated and becomes a part of your lifestyle. If you only go [to livehouse] occasionally, like three or five times a year, you might feel that way [a detachment from everyday life]. When I first started listening to it and didn’t go very often, I felt it. But in 2019 and the past couple of years, I’ve been going a lot, so that feeling has faded away. It’s become a part of my routine, like going out for a drink with friends. It’s that simple now._

Ken’s narrative provides an illustration of the gradual assimilation of music practices into his daily routine, eventually blurring the boundaries between music engagement and other aspects of life and constructing a symbiotic relationship between them. Indie music, in this case, evolves from being an occasional activity to becoming an integral part of the daily rhythm. It demonstrates the potential of music activities to become inextricably linked to an individual’s lifestyle. Moreover, this integration indicates the substantial role music engagement can play in structuring the overall organisation of one’s life, providing empirical evidence supporting DeNora’s (2000, p. 44) concept of music affordances – the ‘specific materials to which actors may turn when they engage in the work of organising social life’. This integration positions music as a crucial resource in shaping perceptions and experiences of everyday life, reinforcing the idea that music practices have the potential to influence social experiences among indie music lovers. In this respect, the pursuit of pleasure through music activities becomes intertwined with the attempt to shape and control one’s life. This is stated by another music lover, Nora (20, female):
Indeed, going to livehouses and music festivals can give you a great feeling, like, ‘Wow, the vibe was amazing!’ But in reality, it’s just a part of life. It’s not superior to other parts, nor does it give you an overwhelmingly intense feeling. Maybe I feel particularly happy and enjoy myself in this state, in this period of time and in this part of my life. In other states, I may not be as happy or enjoy myself as much.

However, there won’t be a strong contrast between them.

Nora experiences a profound sense of happiness and joy when participating in livehouse gigs and music festivals. However, she does not perceive music as inherently more important than other life facets. This implies that Nora seeks out these musical experiences as enriching parts of her existence rather than allowing them to overshadow or dominate other aspects. For these participants, music activities are perceived not as isolated incidents but as integral threads woven into the fabric of everyday life. This perspective allows for a harmonious integration of music into daily routines, enriching rather than disrupting their overall life experiences. As such, music is intertwined with identity as a way of life. As Anna, a 25-year-old female participant, stressed:

[indie] music is part of my life, an element of who I am as a person.

This reflection exemplifies how closely lifestyle and identity are interwoven, with indie music practices becoming an integral part of participants’ self-perception. By engaging regularly and frequently with indie music activities, these participants construct and maintain a coherent self-image that reflects their personal values and interests. This self-image, in turn, governs their lifestyle choices and reinforces the significance of indie music in their self-narratives, signifying an intentional life-construction strategy. This notion resonates with insights from cultural studies scholars like Fox (1987) and Hodkinson (2002), who propose that the commitment level to a particular subcultural lifestyle is a
crucial criterion for evaluating the level of membership and authenticity of an individual within that subculture. Embracing indie music as an integral part of everyday life enables these music lovers to manage their roles and identities (Lahire, 2010), narrating and presenting the self to themselves and others.

Beck (1992) argues that in late modernity, individuals constantly negotiate multiple social roles and identities, which can be challenging and even anxiety-provoking. For the aforementioned research participants, crafting and maintaining a coherent indie music lover image serves as a compass, providing a sense of consistency amid life’s multifaceted intricacies, helping them mitigate contemporary society’s complexities and manage feelings of disorientation. Contrarily, many other interviewees consciously separate their music practices from their daily lives as another strategy in response to the pressures and anxieties. This approach, however, reflects a different way of constructing their self-narratives.

Moving on to the second group of indie music lovers interviewed in this study, it is found that while their commitment to indie music is as strong as the first group, their accounts of indie music’s role in their lives differ significantly. In stark contrast to the previously discussed participants, this group described a continuous shuttle between music and other life aspects, illustrating a more dynamic and transformative role of music in their self-narratives. Rather than perceiving indie music practices as a constituent of their everyday lives, they view it as a separate, parallel experience. For this group, the sense of self is not a static or stable construct but changes depending on specific circumstances. By consciously detaching their engagement with indie music from their everyday routines, they highlight a reflexibility to adopt different identities and behaviours contingent upon differing scenarios. This flexibility facilitates more intentional control over their life experiences. This distinct
perspective is particularly accentuated in their recounting of live music experiences. For instance, Liza, a 23-year-old female participant, explained that participating in live music activities allows her to express a different self and experience a sense of freedom and joy that is seldom encountered in everyday life:

*When I go out [to livehouses], I am in this way. When I come back, I return to a ‘normal’ student again […] The things you might do in the live scene are very different from at uni […] I feel like I can unleash my true self in such a setting, and I can find some special joy that I wouldn’t feel in my life, the kind of freedom and unrestrained happiness.*

Here, music practices act as a vehicle to explore Liza’s various personal states and identities, distancing her from ‘normal’ everyday life as a university student. The fluidity of her experience exemplifies the separation between indie music activities and everyday life. This boundary-drawing process is particularly noteworthy as it reveals the capacity of music to generate meanings and mould one’s identity. Bauman (2000) argues that identity in modern society is perceived as fluid and fragmented, necessitating constant construction and reconstruction through various sources of information, consumption, and experience. He describes contemporary society as a ‘liquid modernity’ characterised by ever-evolving social structures and institutions, which require individuals to be adaptable and versatile in identity construction. In this context, music serves as a critical tool for these indie music lovers in forming their identities and self-concepts. Sociologists contend that music practices not only mirror an individual’s cultural taste and identity but also actively shape their social life, influencing social interactions, relationships, and dynamics (Lizardo, 2006; Hennion, 2007). The efforts of these interviewees to differentiate their music activities from everyday life suggest that they perceive, or ascribe, indie
music as a meaningful and unique space and experience in their overall social lives.

Here, the crux is how to conceptualise the ambiguity of the term ‘everyday life’. In colloquial language, ‘everyday life’ is understood as everything experienced on a daily basis. But in academic literature, the term has been given more additional and varied connotations. Bennett (2005) summarises two distinct approaches to the concept of everyday life in sociological research. One approach views everyday life as a space dominated by structural forces, as observed by Durkheim and Marx. The other approach considers it a domain that individuals can actively experience and manipulate, as Schütz, Berger, and Luckman advocated. This group of indie music lovers’ perception of everyday life aligns more with the later interpretation. By establishing a boundary between music practice and everyday life, these interviewees illustrate the power of music in creating meaning, shaping personal experiences, managing individual lives, coping with stress, and navigating emotions. This point is reinforced by Kyle, a 24-year-old female indie music lover, who expressed the following sentiment:

*It separates my mental states. The more I listen to it, the more it separates me from my life. For example, when things don’t go smoothly in my life, especially in the past two years, I turn to music and escape from reality.*

Here, Kyle underlines her proactive engagement in music practices to carve a clear demarcation between her music experiences and everyday life. By leveraging music as an escape route from reality, she illuminates the pivotal role that music assumes in shaping music lovers’ perception of the world and their navigation strategy within it. This stance reflects the multifaceted correlation between one’s music practice and life experience while emphasising
the agency of indie music lovers in shaping their life narratives.

According to Giddens (1990, 1991), the reflexivity of contemporary society has heightened individuals’ role in shaping their own lives. Individuals are increasingly compelled to engage in an ongoing process of self-examination and self-construction, navigating a constantly changing social landscape. For music lovers like Liza and Kyle, ‘everyday life’ is not a single, all-encompassing social space and experience. The generalised ‘everyday life’ is fragmented into different parts in their constant self-examination and self-construction, and it is converted into complex, diverse, and interconnected experiences shaped by personal choices and narratives about themselves. Hence, within their narrative, ‘everyday life’ is understood in a narrower sense, specifically referring to those realities that occupy the majority of their daily experiences. As a result, musical life is constructed as a space of escape and/or transcendence from reality.

Escapism is a significant reason for separating music practices and everyday life among these music lovers. Music offers them a refuge in today’s fast-paced and high-pressure modern society. As shown in Kyle’s earlier example, these music lovers use music to temporarily escape from the stressors of daily life, immersing themselves in a world filled with melodies, lyrics, and emotions that resonate with their inner selves. Retreating into this separate space brings solace and rejuvenation, assisting them in coping with reality. Participants who separate indie music practice from everyday life perceive it as a means for emotional management and temporary respite from daily stressors. Eric, a 32-year-old male participant, expressed that:

_For myself, if I were to go to a livehouse or listen to a CD that I really like, it would make me forget all the unpleasant things. It would be more enchanting for me. It’s a way to get my mind off things that I’m not happy about._
Here, Eric's perspective reveals that indie music practices are not just a form of musical or cultural participation but also a tool for managing life experiences. During the interviews, participants frequently depicted music as an emotional outlet. For them, music practice goes beyond appreciating its distinct sound and culture; it becomes an emotional and psychological resource. This perspective reflects DeNora’s (2000) argument that music can provide a sense of control over one’s environment. In previous excerpts, both Eric and Kyle find solace in music, using it as a space where they can momentarily forget their troubles and immerse themselves in an enchanting experience. This finding is also supported by several psychological studies that suggest music listening is often used as a means of escape, providing a sense of transcendence for many listeners (Hays and Minichiello, 2005; Lonsdale and North, 2011).

Here, another interpretation of Eric’s case is that he perceives indie music practices as an enchanting force that allows him to forget unpleasant aspects of life. Weber argues that modern society has undergone a process of disenchantment, where the mystery and spirituality of the world have gradually been stripped away, replaced by a more impersonal, secularised, and alienating world (see Jenkins, 2000). In this context, music serves as a counterpoint to disenchantment, providing a sense of enchantment and meaning in Eric's world. However, some may contend that indie music is actually a manifestation of modernity’s influence, reflecting the search for individuality and self-expression in an increasingly fragmented society rather than a counterpoint to it. In this regard, I argue that Eric’s experiences of attending live performances or listening to his favourite CDs represent a re-enchantment of his world (Saler, 2009), where music provides emotional connection and transcendence. As Bauman (2000) suggests, individuals in modern society often seek ways to cope with the uncertainty and insecurity brought by rapid social change. Eric’s engagement with music can be seen as one such coping mechanism.
The role of music as an escape and source of transcendence not only influences individuals’ engagement with indie music but also shapes their social interactions with others. The interviews indicate that the desire for a separate space for music engagement often leads to the formation of niche communities within the indie music scene. These communities consist of like-minded music lovers and provide a supportive environment for them. As Kyle further noted:

*This music is quite a niche. I couldn’t talk about it with people [in everyday life]. So I started going to livehouses, and there, I met a lot of people who were just like me […] People actually feel a sense of loss in that case. You come back from a livehouse, you may feel a sense of lost when you return to your life. […] For some younger music lovers, they might feel like saying, ‘I am totally dependent on music to continue my life’. Or something like that.*

Kyle’s comment highlights the formation of alternative social relationships associated with indie music practices. Through attending live music and other music-related events, indie music lovers are able to construct and reinforce a sense of shared identity and belonging, which is essential for individual emotional well-being and social cohesion. These communities offer a supportive environment for individuals who struggle to connect with others based on their niche music interests. By participating in these communities, indie music lovers can form social connections and find a sense of belonging within their chosen music scene. Alternative music socialising spaces like livehouses enable indie music lovers to engage with their passion outside conventional social settings, further reinforcing the division between music practice and everyday life.

The establishment of exclusive spaces and the emergence of alternative social relationships allow and encourage the development of distinctive forms of
participation and expression with indie music. Individuals may adopt distinct personas or engage in unconventional forms of self-expression during their music socialising practices to maintain a distinction between different aspects of their lives. As Liza further stated:

The things and activities you do at a live gig are vastly different from what you normally do. At uni, you go to classes, have meals, and go back to your dorm, and there’s not much opportunity to express your self in an intense way. But at a live, the setting, the atmosphere of the performance, and the energy of the crowd can be very intense and lively.

Liza notes that the things and activities she engages in at a live gig differ from her usual experiences at university, where opportunities for intense and multiple self-expression are limited. This contrast illustrates how the boundaries between live music experiences and university life shape and restrict her social interaction and identity (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). By participating in live music events, Liza can explore a different facet of the self that may not be accessible in her daily university life. This differentiation enables her to navigate and negotiate her identities, adopting a persona that aligns with the emotional intensity and energy of the live music contexts. The adaptation of distinct personas and unconventional forms of expression during music socialising practices once again demonstrates the agency of individuals to shape their own lives and identities. By exploring different aspects of their identity through music, individuals make their own life choices and decisions.

This section has explored two distinct views on the relationship between indie music and everyday life among Chinese indie music lovers. On the one hand, some interviewees adopt a more integrated approach, where their involvement in indie music becomes an integral part of their identity and lifestyle. On the
other hand, which has received more attention, another group of participants demonstrate a clear separation between their indie music practice and everyday lives, perceiving it as a tool for escape and transcendence. However, it is also important to consider the possibility that these views are not mutually exclusive and that some individuals may engage with indie music in multiple ways, sometimes seeking escape and at other times integrating it into everyday life. A plausible explanation for these differing self-narratives could be attributed to the distinct biographical portraits or stories individuals construct about themselves and their lives. These narratives are deeply intertwined with participants’ identity formation and self-discovery and their ways of making sense of the world around them, as well as their coping mechanisms.

Examining the two distinct self-narratives more closely, we can see how each group of indie music lovers constructs their biographical portraits around their relationship with music. For those who view indie music practices as a lifestyle, their self-narratives emphasise the role of music in their identity formation and self-discovery. One may argue that the emphasis on self-narratives and identity formation might oversimplify the multifaceted ways individuals engage with music. Some individuals may participate in music for social reasons, such as connecting with musical friends or experiencing collectivity, rather than solely for personal identity formation. However, in the cases explored in this study, music lovers recount experiences where music provides a platform for articulating their thoughts and emotions, leading to a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Their biographical portraits may include moments of empowerment or liberation through music, highlighting how indie music becomes a constituent of their life story and sense of self. In comparison, another group of participants who view music as a form of escapism construct an alternative narrative that illuminates the distinction between their music experiences and everyday routines. For these individuals, music represents a
refuge from the pressures and constraints, providing a temporary escape from the challenges they confront in daily life. Their biographical portraits may depict moments when music offered solace, transporting them to an alternative reality where they could forget their struggles and experience a sense of transcendence and re-enchantment. In this case, music is perceived as a parallel realm, separate from the mundane aspects of everyday life, and imbued with transformative potential.

Of course, the construction of these biographical portraits is also influenced by social and cultural contexts that shape individuals’ lives (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). Nevertheless, despite the variations in self-narratives, all participants in this study demonstrate the potent influence of music in shaping their personal and social lives. This reminds me of DeNora’s summary of the relationship between music and everyday life, which I use to conclude this section:

At the level of daily life, music has power. […] Music may influence how people compose their bodies, how they conduct themselves, how they experience the passage of time, how they feel – in terms of energy and emotion – about themselves, about others, and about situations. (DeNora, 2000, pp. 16–17)

6.2 Friendship Separation and Interactions with Daily Friends

In the following two sections, I will examine in-depth the social relationships and social interactions of Chinese indie music lovers. Having discussed the role of music in shaping the self-narratives of these individuals and its significance in their life experiences, it is now necessary to explore how their relationships with others are influenced by their music practices. Thus, this section investigates the ways in which Chinese indie music lovers define and categorise their social relationships, which are influenced by and simultaneously have an impact on their music practices.
Previous research by music sociologists, such as DeNora (2000), Hennion (2007), and Nowak (2016), has examined the significant role of music in individuals’ social lives. Building upon these works, this section argues for a more nuanced and multifaceted relationship between music and social connections. Music can play a pivotal role in the formation and development of social relationships across a range of contexts (Lizardo, 2006; Baym, 2007; Wilks, 2011). Nevertheless, based on this foundation, I argue that it is also necessary to acknowledge that music’s impact on social interactions may not always be positive and may even hinder social connections in certain situations. This argument draws attention to the need to consider the diverse ways people engage with music within different social networks. To understand music’s multifaceted role, I follow a critical perspective proposed by Hesmondhalgh (2007, 2008). This perspective evaluates the impact of music on individuals’ self-narratives and social interactions by examining the underlying factors, mechanisms, and intricacies that shape these relationships while also considering the potential adverse or complex effects of music. Through this lens, this section endeavours to illuminate the interplay between indie music and social relationships. It underscores the importance of embracing a multi-dimensional approach in decoding this intricate interplay, allowing for a more holistic understanding of the dynamic and nuanced role that indie music plays in shaping social connections.

A significant aspect of this analysis involves exploring the influence of music on shaping social networks. Given this, it becomes particularly relevant to investigate how indie music lovers’ social relationships are affected by their musical preferences. Kyle (24, female) provided insightful reflections on how her taste in indie music has influenced her social life:

*You will make a distinction in your heart. These people are my music-lover friends,*
the friends I met in music. And others are friends in my life. They may have helped me at work or are very close to me in daily life, but they belong to different circles. There is a significant, obvious boundary. I can’t tell whether such a boundary is good or bad, it distinguishes anyway.

Here, for Kyle, music is an indicator of where she draws social boundaries. It is used as a frame of reference to differentiate her social relationships and to assist her in navigating through them. Kyle’s experience suggests that some indie music lovers categorise their social relationships into two distinct networks: ‘friends in music’ and ‘friends in life’²¹. It is essential to consider that this categorisation may not be universal for all indie music lovers, as individual experiences can differ significantly based on factors such as cultural background and personal history. However, different self-narratives, such as the previously discussed relationships between music practices and everyday life, do not to be found to have a decisive influence on this process. Many participants who integrated indie music into their everyday lives also mentioned experiencing a separation within their friendships.

As Kyle indicates, her ‘friends in life’ (thereafter ‘daily friends’) are acquaintances and friends with whom she regularly interacts in various everyday contexts like work or daily routines. These bonds stem from shared experiences, mutual interests, or proximity, yet they do not necessarily revolve

²¹ It is necessary to clarify that in the participants’ discourses, the term ‘friends’ was used in a general sense. It can encompass a wide range of social relationships, including those among colleagues, schoolmates, and even family members. In the analysis, the sociological concept of ‘social relationships’ is employed to align with the participants’ use of the term ‘friendships’. This correspondence enhances our understanding of the participants’ perspectives by moving beyond a literal definition of ‘friend’/‘friendship’ and providing a foundation for further analysis of their social behaviours and music practices.
around common musical preferences. In other words, while Kyle may have strong connections with her daily friends in other aspects of life, her passion for indie music may not be reciprocated. In contrast, Kyle’s ‘friends in music’ (thereafter ‘musical friends’) refer to individuals who, like herself, have a deep love and appreciation for indie music. She typically forms these connections through attending gigs, participating in musical events, or engaging in online practices related to indie music. Unlike her daily friends, her musical friendships primarily hinge on their mutual passion for indie music. This shared interest fosters a rich exchange of ideas, perspectives, and emotions related to indie music, engendering a distinct and specific social connection.

Kyle’s excerpt illustrates the significance of both categories of friends, indicating the presence and value of different social networks in her life. It is not a matter of prioritising one group of friends over the other but rather recognising that different social networks fulfil distinct roles in her life. This aligns with studies on social networks, which demonstrate that individuals maintain a variety of social relationships serving different purposes and offering diverse forms of social support (Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Lin, 2004). This is particularly evident in the contemporary social context where the permeated networked technologies promote individuals to be connected to multiple social networks instead of a single, cohesive community (Castells, 2001; Wellman, 2001, 2002; Rainie and Wellman, 2012). This shift provides individuals with greater autonomy over their social relationships, allowing them to sculpt their own social networks according to their demands and requirements. In this context, it is crucial to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of the social networks

22 This section focuses on decoding indie music lovers’ relationships and interactions with their daily friends. The musical friendships will be further explored in the next section.
individuals engage with and the divergent role each network plays in their lives. When considering her own social life, Kyle intentionally segregates her musical friends from her daily friends. This strategic partitioning can be perceived as an attempt to preserve the integrity of each social circle and the different identities within them. By clearly demarcating these social spheres, Kyle successfully maintains relationships with both groups of friends, simultaneously navigating the varying social expectations and norms associated with each. This process ties into the literature on boundary-making in social interactions and its role in shaping identities (Tilly, 2004; Lamont, Pendergrass and Pachucki, 2015). It reveals the importance of social boundaries in shaping indie music lovers' interpersonal interactions and relationships, as well as their negotiation of contemporary social complexities.

Building on Kyle's separation of musical and daily friends, we can interpret this dichotomy as a manifestation of the socialisation process and the development of diverse social relations. Symbolic interactionists, such as Blumer (1969), argue that socialisation is an ongoing process shaped by the exchange and interpretation of symbols and meanings within specific social contexts. This viewpoint foregrounds the role of interaction and communication in moulding an individual's identity and interpretation of the world around them. In this view, socialisation is seen as a lifelong journey, where individuals perpetually encounter new social situations, adapting and adjusting their behaviours in response. In the case of Kyle, her deliberate differentiation between musical and daily friends can be perceived as a manifestation of different norms, values, and behaviours associated with each social group. Through her experiences within these different social networks, Kyle adopts varied symbols and meanings, influencing her self-perception and interpretation of these friendships. For example, her interactions with musical friends may reinforce her identity as an indie music lover and shape her music practices; in contrast,
her interactions with daily friends may reinforce her identity in other aspects, such as her career or family. This exemplifies that an individual’s self-perception is comprised of multiple identities linked to participation in different social networks, each with its agendas and expectations for members.

This multi-faceted self-perception, derived from interactions with different social networks, can also allude to the potential competition between one’s various identities (Stryker and Burke, 2000). As empirical studies have shown, the navigation through multiple identities and their associated social expectations can create tensions and complexities in one’s social life (Settles, 2004; Marcussen, 2006). Within this context, the delineation of social relations may not always be a self-initiated choice but, simultaneously, can be a reactive action in response to the discrepancies between different social networks. This reactive process becomes a way for indie music lovers to manage these tensions and navigate the varying expectations and norms of the different social groups they belong to. In this context, the differentiation of social relationships is not only about positioning and expressing oneself in different social contexts but also a response to the obstacles and challenges arising from different musical interests and perceived misunderstandings.

For instance, several participants in this study described their experiences of attempting to share their musical discoveries with their daily friends during their early stages of becoming indie music lovers. Unfortunately, some of these attempts resulted in negative interpersonal interactions. This is exemplified by Anna’s (25, female) experience:

*When I first started listening [to indie music], I didn’t like to [go to livehouses to] listen to it alone, so I used to ask many of my friends, but none of them replied to me. So I thought I’d stop asking. I was so sad. That’s when I started not posting*
songs or videos [on social media accounts]. Because I thought they didn’t like what I was posting, I just kept it to myself. I just felt so pathetic.

Here, Anna’s experience provides an example to illustrate the challenges and obstacles that individuals encounter when cultivating an emerging interest in indie music, especially when that interest finds little resonance among their close friends in daily life. In Anna’s account, differentiating social relationships can be seen as a defensive tactic to manage her social life. It becomes a dynamic process of adjusting and adapting one’s behaviours, driven by the feedback and reactions within that social network. This adaptation sheds light on a key motivation behind the social relationship separation of music lovers: the differences in musical taste between indie music lovers and their daily friends. Likewise, Kay (20, female) described her experiences of attending live music events with her daily friends:

   *Each of my [daily] friends can only be used once. They are all disposable. They go to livehouse with me as disposables. They only go once and never do it again because they don’t like this kind of stuff. The most extreme example is the person who accompanied me but played on her phone. Some were more respectful. Maybe they didn’t play on their phones, but they didn’t get involved in the music either. When we had fun, when we pogoed, they just hid or stood at a distance. They’ve been there once, and then they don’t want to go with me anymore.*

In the cases of Anna and Kay, their interests in indie music clashed with the musical preferences of their close friends in daily life, resulting in a sense of social distance and disconnection in the musical dimension of their friendships. In this context, musical tastes both create and reflect differences among social networks. Some scholars (Lizardo, 2006; Vaisey and Lizardo, 2010) have emphasised that cultural preferences and practices act as a source of creating
distinctions and divisions among individuals and social networks. Lizardo (2006, p. 802, emphasis in original) depicts social networks as functional relationships that ‘exist because of the cultural contents that they serve to transmit’. In other words, social networks are not merely about connecting individuals; they are also about sharing, distributing, and negotiating cultural contents, such as values, behaviours, and in our case, musical tastes. This perspective implies that social connections can be strengthened or weakened by the alignment or misalignment of shared cultural content. Hence, Anna and Kay experienced social distance due to conflicting musical preferences with their daily friends. In the context of indie music lovers, the significance of musical taste becomes more profound. Rather than being merely a passive preference, taste becomes a social tool that individuals strategically use to define and navigate their social networks. However, as music lovers’ experiences illustrate, there is also an inverse scenario where contrasting musical tastes can lead to discord within existing friendships. The disconnection from daily friends that these indie music lovers describe reveals the potential for cultural tastes to create divisions within established social networks. The function of taste, in this regard, adds complexity to indie music lovers’ social experiences.

Beyond taste, this study finds that differences in understanding and interpretation of indie music can also foster the separation between social networks of indie music lovers. In many cases, participants perceived that they possess a deeper understanding and appreciation of indie music, which is not shared by their daily friends. This phenomenon is exemplified by the experiences of Leonard (24, male), a postgraduate student:

Leonard: Because we study chemistry, biology, and other science and technology disciplines, most of us science and technology guys, aren’t particularly fond of this kind of stuff. I’m surrounded by these people, 95% of people who
study this area, in that way.

**Researcher:** So, your friends and schoolmates in your life, what are their attitudes toward you listening to rock?

**Leonard:** They didn’t say anything. They just didn't understand why I went to livehouses. They call me the ‘little prince of nightclubs’. I said I didn’t go to nightclubs. I didn’t even know which way the doors opened! I’m not saying that nightclubs are something [bad]. I just think they are not the same. I’ve never been to a nightclub, to be honest. I’ve heard from some of my classmates who have been, and I believe it’s a kind of occasion, just getting high with the DJ. It’s a kind of release, but I always feel that something is missing. It’s not the same thing as my release.

In this case, Leonard’s experience illustrates the negative perceptions and misunderstandings concerning indie music and its practices that prevail among his schoolmates, which lead to a sense of social distance. These misconceptions may stem from the different symbolic meanings they associate with such cultural practices. While Leonard perceives livehouses as distinct from nightclubs, his schoolmates conflate them, leading to a misunderstanding that potentially intensifies the perceived disconnection between them. This highlights the role of shared meanings and symbols in fostering social connections, as proposed by symbolic interactionism. Such an attitude towards indie music is not unique to Leonard’s personal experience but reflects broader social perceptions of subcultures within Chinese society. Cathy, a 21-year-old female participant, also reported encountering negative attitudes from her daily friends regarding her love for indie music:

*Actually, not many people like it. Anyway, a lot of people especially mind the things I like. Friends, family, and even my boyfriend. He doesn’t hate it, but he doesn’t*
want me to like it either [...] It's like my previous thoughts, like when I didn't understand it. I didn't like rock music before because I didn't know what it was. I only know about it from TV or from what people say. Just a bunch of noise, screaming, yelling. And the most important thing is, if you go to a gig, you know, there are all kinds of crazy behaviours.

Indie music is often perceived as a niche or alternative genre, which can result in its enthusiasts being marginalised by those who are not familiar with it. Cathy’s experience further illustrates how different symbolic interpretations of indie music can impact social interactions. The lack of shared understanding can lead to marginalisation and devaluation of Cathy’s interest in indie music, as her daily friends may not comprehend the symbolic meaning that indie music holds for her. The experiences of Leonard and Cathy exemplify the challenges faced by many indie music lovers in maintaining their daily social networks. They interpret the symbolic meaning of indie music and its culture differently from their daily friends, which can lead to feelings of isolation and detachment. As a result, they may feel compelled to seek out and form connections with others who share their passion for the genre and understand its symbolic values, thus creating separate social networks. To briefly summarise, the division of social relationships amongst the research participants is driven by differences in musical tastes between them and their daily friends and potential misunderstandings about indie music.

This separation incites indie music lovers to negotiate the tension between their musical preferences and social relationships, but they still encounter challenges. Among them, identity crisis is a notable one. By maintaining separate social networks, indie music lovers can preserve their sense of self and protect their musical identity from being compromised by misunderstandings or judgments from their daily friends. Nevertheless, the lack
of support and understanding from these daily friends still contributes to feelings of rejection and isolation, which may prompt individuals to suppress their music-lover identity in certain contexts, as illustrated in the previous example of Anna. These experiences can lead to a ‘social identity threat’, wherein individuals feel threatened when their self-view is challenged or unaccepted (Branscombe et al., 1999). This lack of validation can make it difficult for indie music lovers to fully endorse their interest in indie music and confidently express their indie music-lover identity.

As discussed in previous chapters, indie music is often associated with a sense of individuality and nonconformity. For many indie music lovers, this sense of uniqueness is a significant aspect that attracts them to the genre. However, managing the tension between the desire for individuality and the need to fit in can be challenging. It can lead to feelings of confusion and uncertainty about one’s identity. Anna’s example aptly illustrates this struggle, as she feels unable to fully express herself and be authentic with her daily friends due to the lack of acceptance surrounding her love of indie music. According to sociological theories of identity, the process of negotiating and constructing one’s identity is a necessary part of developing a stable and coherent sense of self (Oyserman, Elmore and Smith, 2011). However, the lack of acceptance and the presence of cultural misconceptions exacerbate this process for indie music lovers and make it more difficult, leading to feelings of self-doubt and insecurity, as experienced by Anna.

Goffman’s (1959) concept of impression management illustrates how individuals present themselves to others in order to be perceived favourably and maintain their social status. This concept is particularly relevant for indie music lovers who may encounter rejection from their everyday friends and experience misunderstandings. These individuals struggle to reconcile their
social identity and the expectations of others with their love of indie music. As a result, they may adopt a passive or defensive approach to manage impressions. In the context of indie music lovers, impression management involves carefully selecting which aspects of their music preferences to reveal or conceal in different social situations. They may downplay their passion for indie music or modify their behaviour and appearance to fit in and avoid potential judgement or rejection from their daily friends. This defensive approach reflects the tension between expressing their true musical identity and conforming to mainstream social norms and expectations. By engaging in impression management, indie music lovers aim to protect their social standing and avoid the negative consequences that may arise from being perceived as different or unconventional. However, this defensive approach can hinder their ability to fully express themselves and lead to a sense of internal conflict between their indie music-lover identity and the need for social acceptance.

Furthermore, another significant impact on the social interactions between indie music lovers and their daily friends is the presence of social barriers in the realm of music. While the term ‘social barriers’ is not universally defined, it is often used to describe various factors that impede social interactions, relationships, and integration among individuals or groups. In the interviews, a notable form of social barrier emerged: the communication gap that resulted from the lack of shared musical interests. This gap limits the depth and substance of social interactions between individuals and can lead to a lack of connection in terms of music. Commenting on this, Eric (32, male) said:

>[When the conversation is about music,] I might not say anything […] If we’re really good friends, I’d change the subject, just change it, and not talk about it. I’m afraid there will be misunderstandings or unpleasantness.
Similarly, this is evidenced in Kyle’s further comments:

*It’s more like, if music comes up in conversation by chance, we might make a few casual remarks, but we wouldn’t necessarily delve deeper into the topic. I also don’t want to bother someone who isn’t interested in something I like. It’s a matter of politeness, I think.*

Both Eric and Kyle choose to avoid music-related conversations with their daily friends to prevent potential conflicts or misunderstandings arising from discussing their music preferences. By refraining from imposing their musical interests on others, they demonstrate their awareness of the potential consequences that such discussions might result. However, it is crucial to note that indie music lovers are not merely passive ‘victims’ of misunderstanding, as they also have their own misunderstandings or prejudices toward other music genres, such as mainstream pop. This bias can contribute to social barriers between them and their daily friends who enjoy these genres. As Ella (24, female) put it:

*[We] rarely talk about music, to be honest. It’s not something we can talk about in-depth, and sometimes they might … Well, some people might like something that I, to put it bluntly, I just can’t accept it, or we [indie music lovers] might even be disdainful of it.*

Here, Ella’s perspective demonstrates that the communication gap is not exclusively generated from the side of daily friends but can also stem from the biases and misunderstandings held by indie music lovers. It emphasises that the social barriers between these two groups are not a one-sided problem but a multi-sided phenomenon that can manifest from various perspectives. This mutual misunderstanding between music lovers and their daily friends sheds light on the larger issue of taste hierarchy and cultural distinctions within society,
as discussed in Chapter 5, which further contributes to the formation of social barriers. This is echoed by Liza (23, female):

*There might be a bit of a sense of distance between me and my other friends [in terms of music], more or less. Especially for those friends who are into idols, there might be a strong feeling of mutual disdain. They have hinted that they don’t think this [indie music] is a particularly mainstream or legitimate style of music. Actually, I haven’t openly disdained them, and they haven’t openly disdained me, but I think we just don’t talk about this topic with each other.*

Although differences in musical preferences and misunderstandings may strain the relationship between indie music lovers and their daily friends, the impact appears to be limited to the realm of music and has not diffused into other aspects of their lives. The cases presented in this section suggest that disagreements over musical preferences do not hinder music lovers and their daily friends from interacting in other aspects and ways; they delicately manage the self-other dynamic and bypass music in their interactions. While the identity crisis and social barriers may cause tension and discomfort in interactions, indie music lovers still value and accept their daily friends as close companions, and vice versa, despite their divergent musical preferences. While the daily friends may not fully comprehend or appreciate indie music lovers’ interests in the genre, they do not necessarily view it as a detriment to their friendship. Indie music lovers also recognise that music is just one facet of their relationship and that there are other things that bring them together. As one participant stated:

*You can’t expect everyone to like this stuff, and you shouldn’t associate with them less [only] because they don’t like it. Just don’t talk about music. But there’s more to your life than just music. You have a lot of other aspects to interact with.* (Ella, 24, female)
Unquestionably, music plays a significant role in shaping individuals' social lives and relationships. While it has the power to bring people together, it can also be a source of tension and conflict in some relationships. This is particularly the case for Chinese indie music lovers, who may face unacceptance, misunderstandings, and disagreements in their everyday lives due to their niche musical preferences. These challenges associated with their tastes in music can lead to feelings of self-doubt and insecurity and may even result in social barriers with their daily friends. However, as demonstrated by the narratives of Kyle, Anna, Eric, Leonard, and others, indie music lovers who value their relationships with daily friends choose to navigate their musical differences in order to maintain those relationships. This exemplifies the importance of music as a potent social force and underscores the necessity of recognising and comprehending the complexities of musical preferences and their impact on social relationships. Ultimately, music is just one aspect of an individual's life, and other factors, such as work, occupation, gender, sexuality and more, also shape the social connections of indie music lovers in their life experiences. By considering the multifaceted nature of individuals' identities, we can foster greater empathy, respect, and inclusivity in our social interactions and relationships.

Concluding this section, it has provided insights into the intricate relationship between Chinese indie music lovers' music preferences and their social interactions. By exploring how these individuals categorise their social relationships and navigate potential challenges in their everyday lives, we have gained a deeper understanding of the role of music in shaping social connections. It is important to recognise the diverse ways in which people engage with music in different social contexts and the possible tensions that can arise due to divergent musical preferences. This section highlights the importance of considering multiple perspectives when examining the
relationship between indie music and social connections. As music continues to be a strong social force in people’s lives, it is crucial to further explore how indie music lovers interact with their musical friends. The next section will delve into this topic, providing insights into the distinct social dynamics of musical friendships.

6.3 Interactions with Musical Friends

Among indie music lovers’ social relationships, interactions with musical friends are particularly significant as they provide a sense of connectedness, a shared experience, and a validation. This section focuses on the dynamics of interactions between indie music lovers and their musical friends, especially examining how these friendships impact their participation in indie music and, conversely, how their engagement with indie music shapes their interactions with other music lovers. These two aspects are interconnected and can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. By dissecting the relationship between indie music lovers’ musical friendships and musical engagements, as well as the role music plays in it, we can better understand how music socialising functions within the context of indie music.

According to indie music lovers, a ‘musical friend’ is someone who shares their passion for indie music and connects and interacts with them on that basis. Traditionally, friendship is considered an informal and voluntary bond ‘based on spontaneous and unconstrained sentiment or affection’ (Carrier, 1999, p. 21). This notion of friendship also applies to the participants’ understandings and explanations of musical friends. However, at the same time, their descriptions of musical friends encompass an additional dimension: a pursuit and expectation of a harmonious relationship and high quality of interaction, which implicitly conforms to the traditional Chinese Confucian interpretation of
friendship (Lambert, 2017). This perspective highlights the critical role that interaction plays in the formation and sustenance of musical friendships. In music practices, Chinese indie music lovers create and use shared symbols, languages, and rituals associated with indie music to establish meanings and foster connections and relationships with one another. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the meaning and form of musical friends are not fixed or predetermined but rather constructed and negotiated through social interactions. This suggests that the connection between indie music lovers and their musical friends is formed by their interactions and communication rather than solely based on innate characteristics or pre-existing social norms. This understanding of musical friendship requires us to focus more on the acts of interaction between indie music lovers instead of the relationship per se.

During the interviews, participants mentioned that their perceived musical friends encompass a range of individuals, including casual acquaintances they met at gigs, close friends with whom they regularly discuss music, and online friends connected through SNS groups. Thus, while all participants recognised the importance of musical friends in their engagement with and understanding of indie music, the way in which they define and make sense of these friendships can vary considerably. Some participants perceive musical friends as a group of like-minded individuals with whom they can participate in indie music activities together, while others see them as a resource for discovering and sharing new music and information. Some find these friendships highly meaningful and long-lasting, while others consider them more superficial and temporary. Accordingly, the concept of musical friends cannot be universally defined or standardised. Its concrete meanings vary between individuals and contexts. This variability should be considered when decoding and analysing the connections and relationships among indie music lovers and their musical friends.
Although there are variations in their interpretation of musical friendship, all the music lovers interviewed agreed on its significance in their musical lives. A common view amongst interviewees was that musical friendships play a crucial role in providing emotional support and fostering a sense of belonging. This is especially crucial for those who have feelings of isolation and marginalisation in terms of music in other social relationships. Commenting on the necessity of musical friendships, Liza (23, female) said:

[Musical friends] are a form of companionship and someone to communicate and share with. Like some things I see or hear in this circle, or some interesting kinds of stuff, or some good songs, I need someone to share them with or someone to acknowledge me and give me a sense of validation.

Here, the value of musical friendships revolves around the social and emotional support they provide. For indie music lovers like Liza, peers with similar musical tastes help them foster a sense of understanding and companionship, which is experienced as a form of social support. Social support can be broadly defined as a network of relationships and interactions facilitating the exchange of emotional and informational resources between individuals (Caplan, 1974). In this framework, music occupies a unique position, acting as a catalyst that fosters mutual social and cultural understandings among individuals (Clarke, DeNora and Vuoskoski, 2015), thereby contributing to the enrichment of this supportive network. These friendships provide Liza with a company and a proper space for sharing her experiences, thoughts, and feelings about indie music, eventually serving as an avenue for self-expression. However, one point to stress is that there is no hierarchy between different types of friendships for indie music lovers, as discussed in the previous section. Different social networks cater to different aspects of music lovers' lives, with daily friends and musical friends both offering their unique forms of support. Here, the social
support provided by musical friends demonstrates the complementary nature of these relationships.

For those who use music as a medium of self-expression, sharing similar musical tastes makes it easier to communicate and convey emotions with their musical friends, developing a sense of connectedness between them. For example, engaging in discussions about songs that carry emotional weight or personal significance facilitates the generation of a profound mutual understanding between music lovers. Such discussions can deepen the bonds between music lovers as they share and empathise with one another’s experiences and feelings. By sharing the significance of certain songs or lyrics, musical friends can provide a supportive environment where individuals feel understood. It creates a space where they can openly express and explore their emotions through music, which in turn leads to a special emotional connection.

As exemplified by Kyle (24, female):

> When we walk on the street, for example, and drink together, I sing a song, and everyone can quickly join it. It feels like we have a tacit understanding between each other. They are the ones who can understand the emotions behind the song. And there’s a kind of unconditional trust between music lovers, as long as you listen to it, as long as you get me. I assume that you’re a sincere person, someone I can rely on. That’s how it feels, compared to other circles.

In Kyle’s experience, the shared interest in indie music nurtures emotional intimacy and closeness, even among individuals who may not have a deep familiarity with each other. Sociologists have observed that shared cultural interests, such as music, can be a form of social glue, bringing individuals together and providing a supportive environment for exploring personal identities (Hennion, 2007). This idea is supported by psychologists who suggest
that the innate desire for belonging and social connection is closely related to emotional ties between individuals (Lee and Robbins, 1995) and is an integral part of humanness or human nature (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Park, Haslam and Kashima, 2012). In simpler terms, shared interests can bring people closer, allowing them to better understand themselves and others and fulfilling their innate need for social connection. The shared appreciation and understanding of indie music serve as a common ground for these individuals to connect and form emotional bonds, allowing them to experience a sense of belonging within their musical friendships. This emotional connection contributes to the overall depth and meaningfulness of such social bonds. Hence, shared musical interests not only deepen social connections between indie music lovers but also facilitate emotional expression and understanding.

In addition, as exemplified in the previous case of Liza, musical friends are perceived as essential sources of validation for indie music lovers, affirming their identities within this niche subculture. It has been suggested that conversations and interactions with friends are integral to identity work, helping individuals construct their sense of self and project the hoped-for self (Anthony and McCabe, 2015). In the context of indie music lovers, this ideal self construction is heavily associated with their passion for indie music. These music lovers often find their preferences less broadly accepted in mainstream culture, making the validation they receive from musical friends crucial. As they engage in discussions and share their musical interests with like-minded individuals, indie music lovers continually refine their desired identity. This ongoing validation reassures them that their musical preferences are not isolated instances but instead resonate with a community that understands and appreciates their distinct musical tastes.

Subcultures offer individuals a sense of belonging and shared identity (Hebdige,
For research participants, the indie music subculture provides a space more welcoming of their identities and tastes, an alternative to mainstream cultural norms. In this context, musical friendships play an indispensable role in upholding and reinforcing shared values and practices within this subculture. As described in the previous section\textsuperscript{23}, indie music lovers may experience negative self-esteem when their musical taste is rejected by their daily friends. In this context, the validation and confirmation of identity can serve as a buffer against negative self-esteem and enhance the feeling of self-worth (Stets and Burke, 2014) to cope with identity crises. For these individuals, musical friends provide a sense of protection against feelings of isolation and lack of understanding.

Thus far, the impact of musical friends on the participants’ music practices has been examined. It can be argued that musical friendships facilitate indie music lovers’ engagement with music by providing a supportive and accepting environment. Within these friendships, they find a sense of belonging and connection among a network of fellow music enthusiasts who share their passion. This supportive environment allows them to freely express their musical preferences, discuss their experiences, and seek validation for their identity as indie music lovers. The presence of musical friends helps to create a space where indie music lovers feel understood, accepted, and valued for their niche tastes. By fostering a sense of connectedness and acceptance, musical friendships serve as a catalyst for music lovers’ continued engagement and exploration of indie music, ultimately facilitating further indie music practices.

\textsuperscript{23} See the excerpt from Anna in Section 6.2.
Moving on now to consider the formation and maintenance of musical friendships, it is now necessary to discuss the role of indie music engagement in shaping the relationships and interactions among indie music lovers and their musical friends. In an era where digital media permeates everyday life, indie music engagement takes on various forms. In the interviews, however, almost all music lovers emphasised the exceptional significance of the live music experience in their musical friendships. In fact, when referring to the live music experience, they were not solely referring to attending gigs but also to a series of offline and online interactions that precede and follow these events. Thus, the live music experience should be seen as an event that crosses the boundary between the online and offline realms (Bennett, 2012; Lingel and Naaman, 2012). Attending live music events has been recognised as a ritual of social interaction for music audiences (Vandenberg, Berghman and van Eijck, 2021). It is an intensely social experience that reinforces mutual attention and emotional experiences (Benzecry and Collins, 2014). Many indie music lovers make new musical friends during such interaction rituals. The shared experience of attending live music events creates opportunities for social interactions and connections. As Jane, a 19-year-old female participant, stated:

_Maybe at first, it's just chatting in a [WeChat] group. Then on one occasion, there's a gig, and we go to see it together. We get to know each other better, and then we become friends [...] Some others, as I just said, it's because of a certain gig, and then someone in the group might ask who's coming today, for example. Then we met up, and after that, we might hang out or something [...] And then we'd go to other gigs together._

Here, Jane elaborates on the pivotal role that gig attendance plays in her efforts to cultivate musical friendships. Gigs serve as a central social gathering place, enabling her to meet and establish relationships with others who share her
musical preferences. Prior studies (e.g., McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001; Lizardo, 2006, 2011) have noted the connection between shared interests and social bonds, a concept known as homophily. Homophily, defined as ‘a tendency for friendships to form between those who are alike in some respect’ (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954, p. 23), accentuates the alignment between cultural tastes and personal networks. For indie music lovers, gigs provide a conducive environment for cultivating homophilic relationships among indie music lovers. The intimate settings, shared experiences, and interaction opportunities at gigs create ideal environments for establishing social ties with fellow music lovers. As Jane exemplifies, these connections established at gigs often extend to other social activities, thereby deepening the bond between these individuals. By collectively partaking in gigs, individuals can gain a deeper understanding of each other, forming what Putnam (2000) terms as bonding social capital.

However, while close musical friendships were occasionally mentioned during the interviews, the majority of participants seemed to experience a greater number of more casual, less deep friendships within their musical-social space. It is essential to recognise that these shallow friendships do not undermine the provision of emotional support. In this context, live music events become a platform for constructing bridging social capital or ‘social lubricant’ (Putnam, 2000, p. 23), facilitating connections and fostering a sense of connectedness among individuals who might not have otherwise formed deeper bonds. For indie music lovers, these connections, characterised as weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), promote a sense of belonging and provide access to broader networks of people and experiences. Even without deep bonds, the emotional support derived from shared experiences can contribute to a sense of collectivity and validation among music lovers with similar musical interests. In this sense, shallow musical friendships act as ‘bridges’, connecting individuals across a
wider network. These relationships, formed through shared gig experiences, heavily rely on subsequent gig attendances for continued engagement and maintenance. Thus, *gig attendance not only forms but also sustains this form of musical friendship* among indie music lovers.

Within the friendships and interactions formed by indie music lovers around these live music events, a distinctive feature emerges – their discontinuous attribute. This discontinuity is manifested in two main forms. The first form is characterised by transient, incidental, and in-place connections among gig audiences. These connections are temporary relationships among music lovers. They are often developed through interactions with adjacent audiences, such as chatting and engaging in collective activities, or through discussions and interactions in online groups centred around the gig. These interactions are typically fleeting, and there is often no exchange of contact information for future reconnections. Consequently, these relationships tend to be short-lived, and the feeling of friendship experienced at the time may only exist at a specific moment. This aspect will be further examined and analysed in Chapter 8 on the sense of collectiveness. And here, the second form of discontinuous friendship is more noteworthy, as it manifests as an *intermittent yet long-term* relationship. This type of relationship also revolves around gigs and, precisely for this reason, its existence is connected by discrete live music events. As one interviewee put it:

> Some friendships are ‘fixed’. I mean, for example, if I go to watch a live of The Samans (萨满乐队) or Second Hand Rose (二手玫瑰), I know who will definitely go as well. I’ll send a message saying that we could meet at the livehouse [...] They are just some ad hoc friendships, just like ‘Christmas limited [goods]’. It is a feeling like they will appear in a certain period, your relationship will not be very strange. At that time, it feels like you are friends until death. (Harry, male, 20)
Here, Harry indicates these relationships are formed and sustained through live music experiences, highlighting the importance of cultural events and experiences in his social life. These experiences shape his relationships and emotional connections, and he strategically deploys cultural practices to build and sustain the social relationships he demands (Puetz, 2015). Harry describes these musical friendships as both ‘fixed’ and ‘ad hoc’. The term ‘fixed’ suggests a stable and consistent relationship. Harry knows that his musical friends will attend a specific gig, and he recognises that their relationships are tightly constructed around live music. This demonstrates a certain degree of stability and permanence in these friendships. Meanwhile, he uses the term ‘ad hoc’ to describe the relationship as being built and applied for a specific purpose on an ‘as-needed’ basis. These friendships are thus metaphorically referred to as ‘Christmas limited’, emphasising that they are limited to specific events or circumstances. While Harry’s descriptions may appear contradictory, a possible interpretation is that these friendships can be both ‘fixed’ in the sense that they are established through a shared interest in live indie music and ‘ad hoc’ in the sense that they only exist during those events. This suggests that musical friendships can be long-lasting but intermittent. This combination of fixed and ad hoc elements exemplifies the complexity of musical friendships, where multiple factors influence their formation and dynamics.

The establishment of musical friendships around live music events is not limited to offline contexts. In the digital space, many musical friendships also revolve around live music as a connecting anchor. This is evident in the previous excerpt from Jane, where she mentions the use of WeChat groups as a starting point for building musical friendships. Through interactions on social media, music lovers become aware of each other and get the opportunity to attend live music events together. Social media can be a platform for communication and coordination, bringing people together and fostering the formation of friendships.
Nevertheless, while social media offers the possibility of social connection, Jane’s case still reminds us that this possibility is significantly enhanced when it is connected to live music events, from a mere possibility to a fact. Live music events provide a tangible opportunity for potential connections made in the digital world to transform into face-to-face interactions. The shared experience of attending live music events strengthens the connections formed through online interactions, solidifying the foundation of these friendships. As a result, these friendships often illustrate a distinctly event-based nature. Talking about this issue, an interviewee observed:

*Especially online groups for gigs. You’ll find that they’ll be active on the day of the gig or a few days before. But a week later, it’s basically dead. The same goes for those so-called fans or music-lover groups, which are particularly vibrant when there’s a gig and quite silent when there are no performances.* (Brad, 24, male)

Brad’s observation illustrates the temporal aspect of these social connections among indie music lovers, as they are heavily influenced by the presence or absence of live music events. Again, this demonstrates to us that these social connections are not continuous but rather intermittent and tied to the occurrence of specific musical events. They are primarily formed, maintained, and activated around gigs and may not be as active or strong outside of those contexts.

Furthermore, it can be observed that the primary focus of communication among musical friendships is confined to music topics and rarely extends to other aspects of their lives. As Iris (24, female) commented:

*It’s just music. It’s very pure. Because we are friends who met by music, we only talk about musical things, only that and nothing else.*
Kay (20, female) provided her justification for the ‘superficial’ nature of these friendships:

*Anyone can like that music, so there can be a lot of people. However, if our backgrounds differ, for example, I may be a college student, and they may already be working or something else, our living environments and ways of thinking will be different. A deep friendship is definitely not only deep in music. There must also be, for instance, [similar] personalities. But maybe we just happen to get along better in music, we just happen to meet in music. If I want to have a deep friendship, there might be some incompatibility.*

In Kay’s case, the interactions between musical friends are predominantly shallow, focusing mainly on musical discussions and lacking depth in terms of shared life experiences and backgrounds. While common musical preferences contribute to a sense of connectedness and belonging, Kay’s account emphasises the importance of considering other aspects of individuals’ lives in understanding the dynamics of these friendships. These findings suggest that while a shared interest in indie music may be a starting point for forming musical friendships, it may not necessarily lead to deeper and more meaningful bonding. Hence, these musical friendships can be characterised as ‘flickering connections’ (Hayles, 2005; Beer, 2008), characterised by their transience and instability.

Based on these findings, I conclude that, for most participants in this study, musical friendship exhibits a similar form to what Lambert (2017) refers to as ‘event friendship’. In unfolding Confucian’s elaboration on personal relationships, Lambert uses the term ‘event friendship’ to depict an alternative form to close friendships, which:

*transform[s] routine interpersonal interactions into events; and […] extend[s] the*
circle of people with whom such events are created. The latter is possible because the basis for action is transferred from close friendship’s knowledge of character to imaginatively integrating all people and features of the situation into the event [...] Close friendships are often restricted and exclusive. In contrast, event friendship can be initiated with a much broader range of people. Furthermore, the practical ideal of achieving a quality of interaction is open with regard to who can participate. (Lambert, 2017, pp. 223–224)

While it is difficult to explore the exact influence of Confucianism on the Chinese indie music lovers interviewed in this study, the concept of event friendship can still be appropriated to understand the nature of their musical friendships. These friendships are characterised by their foundation in specific events rather than shared backgrounds, personalities, or life experiences. Despite the often shallow and fleeting nature of these interactions, individuals are willing to engage because of the pure and genuine connection they experience through their shared love for indie music. As Iris mentioned, musical friends only talk about musical things, and their interactions are ‘just music’ and ‘very pure’. This further emphasises the idea that these musical friendships are rooted in a shared interest in indie music rather than deeper personal connections.

In conclusion, musical friendships play an important role in facilitating indie music lovers’ engagement with indie music. The findings suggest that musical friendships among indie music lovers serve as a source of social and emotional support, as well as validation and confirmation of their identity as indie music lovers. For many of the participants, their musical friends provide a sense of belonging and social connectedness and an opportunity for self-expression. While these musical friendships may not necessarily lead to deeper and more meaningful relationships, they are still an important aspect of the social lives of indie music lovers. This section provides insights into the role of musical
friendships for indie music lovers and highlights the importance of understanding the interplay between musical friendships and indie music engagement.

This chapter has embarked on an exploration of the social dynamics of indie music practices. It presents an understanding of how indie music lovers navigate their social relationships and construct their self-narratives around their music practices. It has delved into the intricacies of indie music as a cultural and social phenomenon in China and its impact on identity, everyday life, and friendships. This chapter is structured into three topics, each presenting a different facet of the relationship between indie music lovers and their social experiences. First, the complex relationship between indie music practices and everyday lives has been examined, identifying two distinct self-narratives: music as an integral part of everyday life and music as a separate practice and experience parallel to daily activities. Second, the chapter has investigated the impact of indie music on the friendships of indie music lovers and analysed how they categorise their different social relationships. Third, it has explored the formation and development of musical friendships among indie music lovers and discussed how they create a sense of belonging and identity validation through shared musical experiences.

By focusing on these three aspects, this chapter advances our understanding of the impact of indie music on its enthusiasts and their social experiences in contemporary China. It contributes to the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of the social interactions and self-narratives in indie music culture. Furthermore, the chapter offers a rich perspective on the potential negative or complex effects of music on social interactions, such as the
separation of friendships and the identity crisis. It provides a lens to understand the challenges and complexities of contemporary society, enhancing our understanding of the ways in which music can act as a tool for individuals to construct meanings and shape their personal and social lives. The following chapter moves on to consider Chinese indie music lovers' social media practices, investigating their different motivations and strategies to engage with the digital world.
Chapter 7 Digital Echoes: Social Media Practices of Indie Music Lovers

This chapter delves into the multi-faceted ways Chinese indie music lovers use social media platforms to construct and present their musical experiences, identities, and social interactions. By examining the diverse motivations, practices, and strategies adopted by these individuals, this chapter sheds light on the profound impact of social media on the formation and reinforcement of their music-lover identity and their interactions with others.

The chapter is structured into three main sections, each focusing on a distinct aspect of the interplay between social media and the indie music experience. Section 7.1 investigates the phenomenon of self-curatorship, exploring how Chinese indie music lovers engage in intrapersonal interactions to create a narrative of their musical identity and experiences. This section also delves into the negotiation of public and private spaces in the digital realm, considering how individuals strike a balance between their online presence and private boundaries. Section 7.2 examines the emotional expression of Chinese indie music lovers through music on social media. It identifies the symbolic and contextual features of their music-sharing practices, discussing the intrinsic rewards of emotional expression and the role of imagined audiences in this process. Lastly, Section 7.3 explores the practice of self-presentation on social media among Chinese indie music lovers. It addresses the challenges and strategies involved in presenting oneself to diverse audiences, pursuing social validation and personal distinctiveness, and managing collapsed contexts on digital platforms such as WeChat Moments.

While each section of this chapter explores one aspect of indie music lovers’ social media practices, they can all be suited to Goffman’s (1959) framework of
the *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. In the digital environment, users of digital media are able to create and carefully curate their online personas through the content they post and the way they interact with others, giving rise to the concept of online self-presentation (Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 2006; Hogan, 2010). It is crucial to acknowledge that in the discussion in this chapter, although these practices are categorised explicitly, they are not entirely independent from one another. In fact, a single musical post on social media may encompass multiple facets simultaneously, and the motivations behind different musical messages posted by an individual may also vary in different contexts. It is, therefore, essential to recognise the interplay of these aspects and motivations when considering the social media practices of music lovers. However, by adopting a specific categorisation or a topological perspective, we can investigate each aspect in a more manageable and focused manner. Breaking down the different facets of these social media practices allows for an in-depth understanding of the complexities involved in the construction and reflection of music lovers’ identities and social interactions in the digital realm. This approach provides insights into the dynamics of social media practices within the context of indie music and the broader implications of how indie music lovers navigate and negotiate their identities, music practices, and social experiences in the digital age.

### 7.1 Self-Curatorship and Intrapersonal Interaction

In the first section of this chapter, I will delve into the phenomenon of self-curatorship and its impact on the social media practices of Chinese indie music lovers. The term ‘self-curatorship’ is used here to describe the process of consciously selecting, organising, and presenting personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions on social media to construct a digital narrative that reflects one’s identity and interests. This process involves two critical elements
– intrapersonal interactions and the management of boundaries between public and private spaces in the digital realm – which will be unfolded in this section. By analysing this phenomenon, the section provides valuable insights into the ways in which indie music lovers shape and cultivate their self-perceptions through their digital behaviours.

During interviews with Chinese indie music lovers regarding their social media usage, a recurring theme of ‘self-curatorship’ emerged in most conversations. Although the interviewees commonly used colloquial words such as ‘recording’ and ‘noting’ to describe this behaviour, my data analysis suggests that their actions and attitudes encompass a richer sociological connotation. Therefore, in my analysis, drawing upon previous discussions of the curation of self on social media (e.g., Kasch, 2013; Alperstein, 2015), the term ‘curatorship’ is employed to scrutinise this phenomenon in the context of indie music socialising practices in China.

In general, participants in this study highlight the significance of social media as a platform for documenting a range of personal experiences in their lives (Hogan, 2010; Nag, 2018), with music-related content being a significant component. According to indie music lovers, posting content related to music on social media, leaving comments on streaming music platforms, and rating albums are all ways they record their musical lives. By posting various forms of social media updates about their musical experiences, they create their own narratives in the digital space to preserve memories, feelings, and emotions. As Lesley, a 20-year-old female participant, stated:

*Recording life […] Leave something, good memories, in my [WeChat] Moments. I often look back at my Moments, for example, every half year or longer interval. I look through my photos and recall those beautiful memories […] It’s like a*
WeChat Moments is a prominent feature in the WeChat App, similar to Facebook Wall. While WeChat’s primary function is as an Instant Messaging platform, WeChat Moments is a social media feature built into this App (Xu, Yao and Sun, 2019). Here, Lesley describes using WeChat Moments to document her life and memorialise positive experiences. She values the documentation of her musical experiences and the ability to revisit them in the future. For Lesley, the use of social media serves as a form of personal narrative-building, evoking nostalgia and establishing an emotional connection to past experiences. As Garde-Hansen (2009, p. 141) points out, social media platforms can serve as a database for an individual’s life, representing ‘a collection of collections and collectives’. In this respect, documenting personal life on social media can be seen as a contemporary digital derivative of traditional diary-keeping or journaling practices (Humphreys, 2018). However, it simultaneously incorporates a public-facing aspect alongside private documentation, which will be further discussed later. Several other interviewees also made a similar analogy to diaries. For example, Iris, a 24-year-old female music lover, said:

*It’s more like diary writing, I guess, where you just want to record your feeling at that time […] Recording your thoughts after listening to the song […] It’s like a short essay about the song you’re listening to. What do you want to write about this song? What do you want to say?*

Here, Iris describes her behaviour of posting music comments on streaming music platforms. For her, social media provides a means to capture and archive her thoughts and emotions about music in various forms. Through this documentation, she constructs a narrative of her personal musical journey and develops an emotional connection with her musical preferences. This
introspective aspect of documenting oneself on social media is a fundamental characteristic of the self-curatorship phenomenon observed in this study. By using social media as a tool for documenting their lives, both Lesley and Iris engage in a process of self-reflection. In other words, as a record of the self, the act of posting these social media contents is self-oriented rather than focusing on social or interactive purposes:

You must feel something a little bit after listening to this album. And I don’t expect anyone to reply to me; it is my own records. Actually, there are quite a lot of people like this. You can’t say that you want to get a reply for every single comment. This is unreal. It’s just a record for myself. (Craig, 26, male)

Craig shares his perspective on writing music comments on streaming music platforms. In Chapter 4, we discussed that streaming music platforms not only act as music players but these platforms are also further extended to sustain social practices. Streaming music platforms should also be understood as a form of social media rather than just a technology for streaming music. In this context, commenting is a fundamental way of social interactions on streaming platforms, allowing users to share their opinions and engage in discussions about the music they are listening to. Although a much-debated question is whether or how social media should be understood as a ‘public sphere’ (Poell and van Dijck, 2016; Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga, 2020), commenting can be perceived as a public activity because it involves sharing one’s opinions and thoughts with a potentially large audience (Kruse, Norris and Flinchum, 2018).

24 It is worth re-emphasising that although the focus here is on the self-oriented aspect, these social media contents still have the potential to be social and interactive. The motive behind posting such content should not be understood as exclusive but rather multilayered. Music lovers are only emphasising this aspect of self-orientation in this context.
While music comments can be directed at specific individuals or groups, they are typically visible and open to any platform user. This means that comments can be read and responded to by a wide range of users, creating a public space for discussion and exchange.

Nevertheless, despite being a public activity, Craig, similar to Iris, is not motivated by a desire for interpersonal interactions when writing music comments. Instead, he views these comments as a personal record-keeping activity with little concern for the potential social consequences. In this context, by creating digital memory via digital life-streaming activities, social media is used to construct and engage with personal interests (Orton-Johnson, 2014). While there may be occasional replies from others, Craig’s primary motivation and purpose for music commenting remain focused on himself. This highlights a noteworthy aspect of indie music lovers’ social media practices – intrapersonal interaction. Commenting on this, Iris further stated:

   *It doesn’t mean to come into [interpersonal] interactions. […] And I do not look forward to getting responses, actually, because I know that there are very few of them like [indie] music in my friends, so these behaviours are more about recordings [of myself].*

Iris’s self-curatorship on social media reflects the individualistic nature of the digital archive, placing significant emphasis on personal preferences and individuality. Her lack of expectation for interactions or responses from others demonstrates a level of comfort in being authentic and true to herself. This act of self-curatorship can be seen as a form of intrapersonal communication, which is a helpful device to interrogate this phenomenon.

The concept of intrapersonal communication has its roots in psychological and linguistic research, and its definition has evolved over time to encompass
various interpretations in different academic disciplines. In linguistic studies, intrapersonal communication, also known as private speech or self-talk, is studied to examine the process of language learning and its psychological significance in the thinking process (Vygotsky, 1999; Lantolf, 2003; Lantolf and Yáñez, 2003). Communication scholars, however, interpret intrapersonal communication slightly differently. They concentrate on the internal process of communication, such as the messaging process and the interpretation of messages from others (Allen, 2017). According to Wenburg and Wilmot (1973, p. 20), who studied the communication process, intrapersonal communication is defined as ‘the communication with oneself’, and they suggest it as an arena in which ‘one receives signals that characterize one’s own feelings or sensations’. Based on this, they contend that intrapersonal communication is the foundation of all other forms of communication. Therefore, it can be argued that self-curatorship underpins other forms of social media practice, such as self-expression and self-presentation, which will be discussed in the following two sections.

The exploration of intrapersonal communication extends to the field of sociology, particularly through the lens of symbolic interactionism. It can be traced back to the theories of Mead (1934), who introduced the concept of an individual’s internal conversation with oneself in his influential publication *Mind, Self and Society*. This is also related to the relationship and interplay between the ‘I’ and ‘me’. Mead’s theory identifies the ability of humans to take on the role of others to reflect on themselves. ‘Me’, in his explanation, is shaped by an individual’s experiences of taking on the perspectives of others and imagining how they would be perceived in different situations. Internal conversation is one way in which individuals can engage in this reflective process. Building upon Mead’s idea, Blumer (1969) also touched on the notion of self-interaction, which refers to individuals interacting with themselves rationally and logically. Blumer
emphasised the structured nature of self-interaction, suggesting that individuals engage in this process in a deliberate and purposeful manner rather than simply acting impulsively. According to Blumer, self-interaction is an inherent element of human social existence. By considering themselves as cognitive objects, individuals are able to engage in self-reflection, which is integral to the formation of their self-identity. This ability enables individuals to act on themselves, shaping their self-concept and self-identity. Sociologists consider this self-interaction as a resource for self-management and self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). Goffman argued that individuals engage in a continuous process of self-presentation, actively constructing and managing their public image. Internal conversation plays a crucial role in this process, as individuals engage in self-reflection and self-interaction to assess how others might perceive their words, actions, and behaviours and to adjust their self-presentation accordingly.

For those indie music lovers, documenting their thoughts and emotions on social media is a way to engage in self-reflection. By examining their emotional and behavioural responses to indie music, individuals can gain insight into their personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions. This process plays a crucial role in constructing and strengthening their music-lover identity. Here, self-curatorial behaviours are seen as an internal conversation by indie music lovers, voicing themselves and displaying their musical tastes, personal sentiments, and emotions to themselves. While social media practices are typically considered social interactions between ‘I’ and ‘others’ (Hogan, 2010), in a self-oriented scenario, the agents involved in the intrapersonal interaction process turn to the ‘I’ and ‘me’. In other words, music-related self-oriented social media content is posted by the subjective ‘I’ and directed towards the objective ‘me’. The act of documenting oneself on social media transforms ‘I’ to ‘me’ because it shifts the focus from the individual’s subjective experience to how they are perceived by
the audience – the socialised subject. This process of externalising and reflecting on one’s subjective experiences contributes to the construction and strengthening of one’s identity as a music lover. Through this internal conversation, the nature of interaction shifts from interpersonal to intrapersonal, allowing music lovers to shift their roles and perspectives.

Although this intrapersonal interaction is underscored as introspective, it retains a social nature. In this context, the ‘I’ represents the spontaneous and creative aspect of the self, while the ‘me’ represents the organised and socially defined aspect. Through the act of posting and documenting personal musical experiences on social media, indie music lovers are able to integrate the two dimensions of the self. By sharing their experiences and engaging with themselves, they can construct a deeper understanding of who they are. The process of posting is therefore considered particularly significant because it represents one moment when intrapersonal interaction takes place. As Liza (23, female) stated:

*It has a process of posting. Writing is simply a matter of typing, but when it comes to posting on social media like Weibo, there is a specific process involved […] Regardless of the platform, I believe that this process is constantly reinforcing. When I see myself frequently posting about music-related topics, it strengthens and solidifies my perception of myself as a music lover.*

Liza’s remarks emphasise the importance of the posting process and the significance of revisiting these social media contents concerning the music-lover identity. Personal experiences recorded on social media create a chronological document of the self at various moments, ultimately contributing to the establishment of what I refer to as the ‘museum of self’. This term emphasises that one’s social media presence serves as a digitally curated self
(Kasch, 2013; Zhao and Lindley, 2014; Alperstein, 2015), exhibiting their experiences, tastes, and emotions over time. While this phenomenon applies to various digital archives and cloud collections with diverse materials, music holds a distinct position for indie music lovers within the ‘museum of self’. Sharing music-related content gives them a powerful means of expressing emotions and personal sentiments (as will be discussed in the next section). Thus, the musical materials shared on social media contribute to the ongoing construction of the ‘museum of self’ in a particularly meaningful and evocative way for the participants. Indie music lovers who engage in intrapersonal interaction on social media curate their experiences and construct their understanding of the self and the music-lover identity. In a museum, curators are responsible for selecting, organising, and presenting artefacts and exhibits to convey a specific narrative or theme. Similarly, indie music lovers select, organise, and present their personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions related to indie music on social media, creating a narrative that projects their music-lover identity. In this context, the ‘museum’ is a ‘memory institution’ (Lèvy, 2010), and the musical materials constitute a collection of semantics (Parry, Poole and Pratty, 2010).

Unlike mere documentation, which involves recording events and experiences without a specific purpose or intent, curatorship entails an intentional and reflective approach to selecting and presenting artefacts. For indie music lovers who engage in this practice, it goes beyond mere documentation; it involves self-reflection and introspection, requiring a deeper understanding of oneself and one’s identity. This is why I term this social media practice ‘self-curatorship’. The contents shared by indie music lovers, such as texts, photos, and videos, are uploaded onto social media platforms, where they are transformed into an online exhibition of the self (Hogan, 2010). Importantly, this exhibition is not (only) for external audiences but (also) for the socialised ‘me’ and the future self,
emphasising the self-to-self nature of self-curatorship. These contents are stored on social media and can be revisited by the creators later, allowing for reflection and reminiscence. As Gillian (23, female) noted:

*Maybe, in the future, I will read these and have a look at what I liked, and then see if I still like it now.*

Following her assumption, I questioned Gillian if she had read any content that she posted a few years ago, and she replied:

*Yes, I do. It feels like I haven’t changed much in terms of my behaviours and preferences. I’ve always liked metal, and that’s who I am.*

As Gillian indicates, the process of self-curatorship through social media plays a significant role in shaping and maintaining her self-perception. By engaging with social media as self-tracking technologies, Gillian constructs, monitors, and maintains her digitally mediated self (Lupton, 2014, 2016). In her case, using social media as a platform for self-curatorship allows her to create a personal archive of her musical tastes and preferences, especially focusing on metal music. In studies on digital museums, scholars argue that digital spaces not only involve the digitalisation of collections but also create new ways for people to access, engage, and interact with cultural heritage (Marty, 2008). Similarly, the concept of the ‘museum of self’ for music lovers aligns with this perspective. By revisiting her personal archive in the future, Gillian can reflect on her past experiences and evaluate the continuity or changes in herself over time. This manifests a ‘projective subjectivity’, projecting one’s subjective experience into the future. In this case, when music lovers share music-related content on social media, they engage with ‘future anteriority’ (Derrida, 1994), imagining a future version of themselves that will look back and reinterpret the content based on the context of that future moment. This perspective
emphasises that these posts function as a form of self-reflection and self-interaction not only in the present but also in the future. They become a means through which music lovers engage with their evolving selves and identities, projecting their subjective experiences forward and creating a narrative that allows for self-interpretation over time.

As Giddens (1991) elaborated, in late modernity, the self becomes a reflexive project where individuals actively form, reflect upon, and monitor themselves, forming their self-narratives through ongoing life experiences. Gillian’s remarks highlight a key aspect of the self-curatorial process for indie music lovers on social media: they are both the curators and (one of) the visitors of their own ‘museum of self’. By revisiting their past posts, they are able to reflect on their personal growth, reassess their music-lover identity, and re-examine self-conception. According to Giddens, the self is a product of both past experiences and future projections, and the act of self-reflection helps individuals reconcile these different aspects of the self. Through self-curatorial practices, research participants actively engage in the construction and maintenance of an aestheticised self (Lash, 1994; Lash and Urry, 1994) that is grounded in their reflexive music-lover identity. The ‘museum of self’ created through self-curatorial practices on social media is precisely a representation of this reconciliation and a manifestation of the reflexive project of the self.

Moving on to consider the specific digital environment that affords self-curatorship, it is important to acknowledge that while it is characterised as a form of intrapersonal interaction, it still possesses a public aspect. The content music lovers curate can also be accessed by other audiences, albeit perhaps in a limited way. The tension between public and private spaces in the digital realm is a widely debated topic (Papacharissi, 2010; Rainie and Wellman, 2012; Baym, 2015), and it is especially relevant to the self-curatorial practices on
social media. While documenting and revisiting personal experiences enables indie music lovers to reflect on themselves, it raises questions about the relationship between public and private spaces in the digital environment and the extent to which these spaces may be contradictory or reconciled.

In the internet age, using public media to record one’s life is not new. Before social media, other digital platforms such as blogs and personal websites also played the role of life recorders, allowing users to express their emotions, thoughts, or other ideas (Nardi et al., 2004). However, the critical distinction between social media and its predecessors is that it is explicitly created to build interpersonal relationships, with interactions being a central feature of its use25. Nevertheless, the behaviours and attitudes of the aforementioned music lovers point to the inconsistency of using social media as a platform for personal documentation and publicly posting such content. Through self-curatorship on social media, indie music lovers engage in a private act that simultaneously possesses a public nature.

Public space, in social sciences, is often given political connotations. Habermas (1992), for example, defines public spaces as social sites or arenas where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated, while Foucault (1986) stresses the power dynamics within public and private spaces. In a digital context, while civic issues continue to be a central theme (Papacharissi, 2002; Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010), the public space has been increasingly viewed as a digital environment where individuals can share information, opinions, and personal content with a large audience (Marwick and boyd, 2010; boyd, 2011).

In this digital context, academic discussions of public space highlight the theme

25 Although the underlying business model has always revolved around collecting user data for various purposes.
of accessibility. This aligns with the understanding of public space in urban studies (Pasaogullari and Doratli, 2004), which considers it as a site that is accessible and accommodating to individuals of diverse backgrounds, allowing them to engage in various activities (Madanipour, 2010). Here, I emphasise the importance of accessibility in defining online public space, as it allows individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate in social and cultural discussions. However, for indie music lovers who seek an environment where they can archive and express themselves without constraints, managing the boundaries between public and private spaces in the digital realm becomes a strategic endeavour.

Participant Craig’s musical and digital engagement case provides an entry point for discussing the interplay between public and private spaces in the digital environment. Craig, an enthusiastic young man with a passion for pop-punk music, leads a Chinese music lover group of a British band. He operates and manages the group’s account on Weibo. Despite his strong interest in music, Craig experiences limited musical engagement from his daily friends, who have different musical tastes. This prompted him to explore alternative social media platforms and networks, specifically those related to music, to express himself. For Craig, the primary motivation for his online engagement is not necessarily to receive responses from others. Instead, he values having a space separate from his personal acquaintances, where he can freely document his thoughts without concern for the reactions or responses of his daily friends. This digital realm thereby evolves into more than just a repository of his reflections on music. It becomes a sanctuary of personal musical experiences, providing a sense of privateness within the public domain of social media.

In a completely open public space, the platform’s weak interpersonal connections minimise the importance of personal identity. This leads to two
outcomes: first, assuming the participants’ assumptions are correct, their posts are less likely to attract others’ attention; and second, even if someone notices these contents, it is challenging to discern the user’s true identity. In this way, they reduce the sensitivity of the content posted in public spaces. This is one of the reasons why many music lovers have multiple accounts for one single social media platform. As Nora (20, female) states:

The things about music, at the moment, I repost mostly but say less on this Weibo account. This is because I’ve recently registered an alternate account where I talk crap […] Because I think there are too many people following my main account, but there are certain things I just want to say to myself, or I just want to say it. I don’t want anyone to comment on those.

Nora expresses her frustration with the limitations of her main Weibo account, as she wants to share certain things while avoiding the attention or interference of others. In response to this dilemma, she created an alternative account as a solution. This alternative account provides her with a space to express herself freely without the pressure of receiving judgement or criticism. This implies the inherent tension between public and private spaces in the digital environment, where individuals seek to maintain a level of control over their online presence and the information they share. The distinction between Nora’s main and alternative accounts reflects a desire for more personal and private online space while still benefiting from the advantages of a public platform. This aligns with research findings on the so-called ‘finsta’ (‘fake’ Instagram accounts) phenomenon, where users create alternative social media accounts to express themselves in a more off-the-cuff, emotional, and ‘inappropriate’ way (Kang and Wei, 2020; Huang and Vitak, 2022). Accordingly, these accounts allow for a more authentic and ‘unfiltered’ form of self-expression (Dewar et al., 2019). This act can be conceptualised within the framework of self-presentation (Goffman,
but what is particularly highlighted here by indie music lovers is the creation of a personal territory within public spaces.

An issue that must be addressed here is how music lovers construct an understanding of private space. It is worth noting that there is no agreement on this issue among the interviewees in this study. Some, like Nora, argue that private space in the digital environment can be public as long as it remains unknown or unacknowledged by others, such as on open, public social media platforms (e.g., Weibo). Whilst a few others consider private space as existing in a semi-public form within interconnected and mutually recognised social relationships, such as on SNSs (e.g., WeChat), where it is not anonymous, but the publicness is controlled and managed to some extent. However, two other participants explicitly stated that their self-curatorship behaviours occur more often in the notes Apps on their smartphones, as private space must be unconditionally non-public. As participants illustrated, private spaces in the digital environment can be created through various means, including filtered networks and restricted access to certain content. Despite their different understandings, security is a keyword in defining private space. In other words, in the digital context, a socially safe environment where individuals have control over their online presence and the information they share can be understood as a private space. For example, when discussing with Kyle (24, female) why she considers an entirely open social media platform like Weibo to be a private space, she said:

*I differentiate between private and social spaces based on the people in it […] They’re close friends [on Weibo], or they’re just friends who are music lovers. They’re filtered and refined. While the [social network in] WeChat Moments is far more sophisticated.*
Kyle considers Weibo as a private space because her account is only followed by close friends and musical friends, creating a ‘filtered’ and ‘refined’ network. This filtered network provides a sense of privateness and security, allowing Kyle to have greater control over her social media content and interactions. Although Weibo is a more open and public platform, Kyle assumes that due to the vast amount of information present, the content she posts will not attract the attention of anyone other than her filtered followers. In comparison, she describes WeChat Moments as a more complex network. Kyle underlines the challenges of self-presentation and audience management that she needs to navigate on WeChat Moments. WeChat Moments includes a broader social network that encompasses acquaintances, various groups of friends, family members, and other online connections. Consequently, Kyle needs to carefully consider the content she shares on WeChat Moments and how it might be perceived by the diverse audience members in a collapsed context (the discussion of this phenomenon will be further expanded in Section 7.3).

Kyle’s distinction between private and public spaces on Weibo and WeChat Moments underlines the importance of privacy boundaries in the digital realm, which are the lines between the self and others in terms of sharing personal information (Millham and Atkin, 2018). This simultaneously exemplifies the impact of platform structure and affordances (Hutchby, 2001), such as social network attributes and content visibility, on users’ interpretation of privacy online (Choi and Sung, 2018; Costa, 2018). Managing privacy boundaries ‘is not about setting rules and enforcing them; instead, it is the continual management of boundaries between different spheres of action and degrees of disclosure within those spheres’ (Palen and Dourish, 2003, p. 131). The so-called safe space is also a paradoxical space, as it entails a relational work that is contextually embedded and reflexive (The Roestone Collective, 2014). For indie music lovers, creating private spaces within the digital public sphere
represents the process and result of carefully managing their digital privacy boundaries. This allows them to regulate the flow of personal information and maintain control over their digital selves.

This can be understood through the lens of symbolic interactionism, specifically the concept of ‘backstage’ (Goffman, 1959). The concept of backstage is a key component in dramaturgy, referring to a space where individuals can be their authentic selves and behave in ways that are not visible to the public. In the digital context, the private spaces created by indie music lovers can be understood as a form of backstage area where they can genuinely express and record themselves without fear of judgement or criticism. It is essential to acknowledge that creating private spaces within the digital public sphere is not a straightforward process. It is influenced by a range of factors, including personal preferences, social norms, and cultural values. Individuals strive for a balance between the back and the frontstage. By doing so, they manage privacy boundaries in the digital realm and establish a basis for their self-curatorship on social media.

In this section, we have delved into the phenomenon of self-curatorship among Chinese indie music lovers in the context of their social media usage. We have explored the interplay between self-curatorship, intrapersonal communication, and the negotiation of public-private spaces. By chronicling their musical experiences and journeys through social media posts, these participants engage in self-reflection and reinforce their perceived identity as indie music lovers. The examination of self-curatorship has raised important questions regarding the concept of private space in the digital realm and the tension between public and private domains. Social media practices are complex and diverse. While this section provides an initial investigation of Chinese indie music lovers’ self-oriented social media practices, there is much more to
uncover. The subsequent section will delve into the topic of self-expression on social media among indie music lovers, further expanding our understanding of their digital practices.

7.2 Self-Expression and Imagined Audiences

In this section, the discussion shifts to another significant aspect of indie music lovers’ social media engagement: their capacity to articulate themselves through music on these platforms, commonly referred to as self-expression by participants. In this context, self-expression refers to the act of portraying oneself in a manner that aligns with one’s self-perception. Scholars increasingly recognise the importance of self-expression in modern society (Inglehart and Oyserman, 2004) and identify it as a significant determinant of social media engagement (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). Social media allows users to express their identities, preferences, opinions, and experiences to others, making it a compelling avenue of self-expression in the digital age. The interviews revealed that in the context of indie music socialising, emotion and sentiment are the predominant elements that comprise music lovers’ digital self-expression. Indie music lovers communicate their feelings and emotions through music to themselves and others on the platform. Accordingly, this section focuses primarily on emotional self-expression as a key area of discussion. Through a series of interviews with participants, this section investigates how music is used to convey emotions and establish connections with others and how the temporal and situational contexts of emotional experience shape the self-expressive practices of indie music lovers. The section also delves into the symbolic value of music in expressing emotions on social media and how the act of sharing music serves as a signal or a signifier of music lovers’ emotional state. These discussions eventually shed light on the role of the imagined audience in the process of self-expression.
During the interviews, I observed that indie music lovers particularly emphasised the ability and function of music in communicating emotions. Interviewees suggested a profound connection between music and emotions, suggesting that one of the core values of music lies in its capacity to communicate personal emotions as cues that others can interpret and comprehend. By using music as a tool for emotional expression, music lovers externalise their emotions in a subtle manner and disclose them on social media. One participant, Ken (27, male), aptly noted this phenomenon:

*I listened to a very upbeat song when I was very delighted and thought I could use it to express my mood, so I posted it. This was how I felt. I wanted others to know my feelings.*

Ken expresses himself through music and conveys his feelings to others by selecting a song that reflects his current emotional state. Through this mode of expression, Ken can connect with others on an emotional level. Research has shown that music has the capacity to elicit and communicate a broad spectrum of emotions, including joy, sadness, anger, nostalgia, and more (Juslin and Västfjäll, 2008; Lundqvist, Carlsson and Juslin, 2009). It is widely recognised that music can function as a potent instrument for communication and expression, enabling individuals to convey themselves in ways that may be challenging to express verbally. Music has the power to transcend language and cultural barriers, making it a valuable tool for emotional communication (Scherer, 1995). By expressing their emotions through music, music lovers seek to establish a sense of shared understanding and connection with others. This notion was similarly expressed by another interviewee, Leonard (24, male):

*I feel like this song really captures my current state of mind and mood, as well as my current surroundings. For example, if I’m walking in a park and the weather is*
nice, and I see everyone, the elders and children, playing around and everything seems nice. Then I happen to hear a song like the ones from the band Reflector (反光镜乐队), you know, the kind that is really joyful. I just feel really good. I might share it with others.

Here, this excerpt highlights Leonard’s emotional connection with music. Music resonates with him because it not only properly reflects his emotional state but also simultaneously strengthens it. Leonard describes that certain songs can encapsulate his current state of mind, mood, and surroundings and, at the same time, help him connect with the world around him on a deeper level by enhancing his emotional experience. As Bull (2007) argues, music plays a crucial role in urban lives, enriching people’s experiences and navigating them in urban environments. This suggests that the value of music encompasses not only the auditory aspect but also the emotional impact and the memories or associations it evokes. For Leonard, sharing music that echoes his emotions becomes a way to validate his emotional experiences (Juslin and Laukka, 2004; Saarikallio, 2008). In this way, music offers him a possibility to engage with his emotions and the world.

When examining how indie music lovers use music to express their emotions, it can be observed that they generally emphasise the use of music to reflect their current emotional states. This emphasis heavily influences their social media practices and content management. This can also be reflected in Leonard’s case, which illustrates how his emotional state is influenced by his immediate surroundings when he encounters certain types of music. This suggests that the music he listens to and his emotional responses to it are not fixed or static but a fluid experience. Leonard’s account proves the dynamic and time-sensitive nature of emotional expression through music, which can vary depending on the time, place, and situation in which it is experienced. As
Leonard further explained:

*The music I share [on social media] mostly reflects my mood at the time, I think a certain song is really good. Sometimes, however, I share a song when I can’t sleep at night, but when I wake up the next day and think, ‘This song is terrible!’ It happens.*

Leonard’s narrative shows the influence of context on his emotional responses and expressions through music, indicating the time-sensitive nature of emotional expression and its effect on the use of music to convey emotions. His statement suggests that the music he shares on social media reflects his immediate emotional state, indicating that his mood at a given moment shapes his musical choices. Expressing emotions through music is subject to change and can be influenced by shifting circumstances (DeNora, 2003a, 2006). Leonard’s experience demonstrates that the emotional impact of music is not solely determined by the inherent qualities of the music itself but often depends on the temporal and situational contexts in which it is experienced. While a particular song may elicit a strong emotional response at one moment, the same song may not produce a similar effect in a different context. This feature significantly shapes the self-expressive behaviours of indie music lovers. As Harry (20, male) commented:

‘To sing a sombre song instead of crying’. Because I think among things that are good at conveying emotions, music is the fastest. It can quickly convey my mood to others [… But] I might delete them […] I think the songs I share have a

26 This is a Chinese idiom (长歌当哭, cháng gē dàng kū), which means using long singing or poetry to express grief and indignation instead of shedding tears. It describes the act of using music to express one’s feelings.
limited life. They only represent my specific emotions on that day. I just feel like sharing the particular song with everyone that day. If you listen to that song today, you won’t be able to experience the same situation. I think it’s unnecessary.

With greater control over their auditory experiences, music lovers curate their personalised emotional soundtracks tailored to specific contexts and emotional states. This highlights the impact of digital devices on the relationships between music, emotion, and context (Bull, 2000, 2007). Harry’s use of music to communicate his emotions is rooted in the immediacy and intensity of his emotional experiences. He emphasises that music is a fast and effective medium for expressing his feelings. However, he also acknowledges that the songs he shares on social media have a limited lifespan and can only capture his specific emotions at that particular moment. This implies that emotions are transient and fleeting, and the music used to express them can only provide a glimpse of the emotional state during that time. While Leonard’s and Harry’s comments differ in their expressions, they both underscore the significance of the temporal feature of emotional expression through music. Their comments illustrate the need to consider the specific context when analysing such digital behaviour (DeNora, 2010), suggesting a potential inquiry into the duration of the emotional expression when they are intrinsically linked to the context. Within the realm of digital media, the consideration of affordances (Hutchby, 2001) – the specific capabilities and possibilities that a technology or object provides to its users – becomes crucial. Thus, unfolding the interplay between music, emotion, and context necessitates an examination of digital affordances.

From a technological perspective, the functions of social media platforms significantly influence the time-sensitive nature of music lovers’ self-expression. The design of these platforms encourages constant refreshing and updating (van Dijck, 2013), amplifying the temporal aspect of users’ social media
behaviours. Baym (2015) points out that digital platforms foster new forms of communication and social connection, with users able to share their experiences and express their emotions more easily than before. Nonetheless, the structure of social media, such as features of the ‘like’ button and comment sections (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013), not only facilitates but also shapes and reconfigures online interactions. In addition, algorithms used by many platforms prioritise certain types of content, such as images, videos, or posts with high engagement. In contrast, content lacking these characteristics risks being relegated, posing a perceived ‘threat of invisibility’ for users (Bucher, 2012).

This ever-evolving landscape of digital interaction subtly shapes the nature of emotional expressions relayed through music on these platforms. Far from being lasting testimonies, these emotional expressions become ephemeral and fleeting snapshots, mirroring the rapid changes in users’ experiences and emotions within the digital realm. Therefore, the music shared on social media is often short-lived and tied to specific moments. A song that encapsulates a user’s current emotional state might be shared on their social media timeline, but its significance can swiftly diminish as their emotions transition. While social media has provided an avenue for music lovers to express their emotions, the transience of these experiences and emotions can devalue these expressions in retrospect. Therefore, it is crucial to note that the time-sensitivity and temporality of these emotional expressions are not merely a consequence of music lovers’ fluctuating emotional states but are significantly moulded by the very design of these digital platforms. Self-expression is a complex interplay between music, emotions, and technology, underscored by the evolving digital behavioural patterns of indie music lovers. Understanding this, we can better interpret the statement of the interviewees, as they negotiate the balance between temporality and retrospect, between the ephemeral and the lasting in their digital self-expressions. As one interviewee put it:
When I post something about my life, most of the time, I’m in a calm state. I will think about what I’m posting and how to present it. However, if I’m at a gig, I may just feel the band is amazing, and I need to capture it and share it right away. It’s not something I’ve thought through, so I might delete some parts when I come back later. (Kyle, 24, female)

Therefore, control over the timeliness and accuracy of the emotions conveyed by music is a vital consideration for music lovers in their self-expressive practices on social media. This control can significantly influence the perceived duration and intensity of the emotional experience. Talking about this issue, another interviewee said:

Sometimes, after sharing [a song], I just deleted it […] When I share a song, it’s often because I’m expressing a feeling I have at the time. But after a few days, I might feel like it’s too melodramatic or something, so I delete it. (Liza, 23, female)

In this excerpt, Liza describes her experience of sharing a song on social media to express emotions but subsequently deleting it. This behaviour sheds light on the fluidity of emotions and the dynamic nature of self-expression on social media, as well as the management of impressions in the self-presentation of music lovers27. Liza’s decision to delete the shared songs after a few days demonstrates how emotions can be fleeting, resulting in diminishing relevance or intensity over time. The constantly changing environment on social media, characterised by a continuous flow of information and content, may also contribute to the sense of transience and ephemerality (Morlok, Constantiou and Hess, 2018; Luria and Foulds, 2021). Liza’s actions suggest that as her emotions change, her perception of the relevance or value of her previous posts

27 Impression management and self-presentation will be analysed in detail in the next section.
also shifts. In this case, Liza feels her song-sharing posts can no longer accurately represent her emotional state, leading her to delete them. Both Kyle and Liza express a certain unease or discomfort with the fleeting nature of their emotional expressions on social media. By managing these digital contents and exercising the ability to delete them, they manifest a capacity of ‘digital forgetting’ (Mayer-Schönberger, 2011), which becomes a critical aspect of shaping their memory and identity. This reflects a desire to maintain control and protect their emotional vulnerability in the online realm.

The interviews also revealed another distinctive feature of emotional expression through music. In addition to the contextual attribute, indie music lovers employ music as a *symbolic representation* of their emotions rather than solely as a sonic stimulus. During the interviews, it was discovered that posting links to music on social media was the most common and straightforward approach for indie music lovers to express their emotions through music. When considering the process of sharing music on social media, one might assume that music lovers choose songs that accurately reflect their emotions and share them in the form of links that their friends on social media can open and listen to. In turn, these friends interpret the senders’ conveyed emotions through listening to the shared music. This process stresses the significance of the sound and musical elements of the shared music in conveying emotions. This assumption is premised on the notion that the emotional power of music is embedded in its sound and lyrics and therefore requires listening to achieve emotional communication. The interesting fact, however, is that the shared songs are seldom played by others, including those indie music lovers who themselves share musical links on social media. For instance, Mike (20, male) acknowledged, ‘I admit that I don’t really listen to a lot [of the songs that other people shared on social media].’ In turn, music lovers who share music on social media to express themselves do not anticipate or expect others to listen
to the music as well. Talking about this issue, Maggie (22, female) remarked:

*I never thought anyone would listen to this song […] I believe that most people who enjoy this song have probably heard it before, so there’s no need for them to click and listen to it again. As for those who don’t, they probably won’t even bother clicking on it. Honestly, I feel like my friends, who are the people on WeChat, are not very likely to listen to this song. They might just glance at it and move on.*

In interviews with music lovers, it was found that most of them assume their shared music would not be actively listened to by others on social media. This phenomenon introduces complexities to the emotional communication of music in the context of social media. Traditional research on music and emotions has primarily focused on the direct emotional effects of music on listeners at the sound level (Hunter, Schellenberg and Schimmack, 2010; Eerola and Vuoskoski, 2011), overlooking or under-appreciating the layers of complexity present in the digital environment. This study, however, illuminates the symbolic level of music communication: the utilisation of music as a symbol or representation of one’s emotional state rather than solely as a sound that elicits an immediate emotional response in the listener. This phenomenon carries two layers of meaning, unveiling the symbolic significance of music in expressing emotions.

The first layer of meaning highlights the importance of the symbolic value of music itself in conveying emotions. When music is employed as a symbol to convey emotions, it transcends the mere combination of notes and lyrics, delving into deeper or more complex layers of meaning. The symbolic meaning of music stems from its association with specific emotions or emotional states, often reflecting cultural, social, and historical contexts. For instance, an individual may choose a particular song or artist to represent their emotional
state or experience. The use of the song or artist as a symbol can carry emotional significance and convey it to others even if the music is not actively listened to because the emotional meaning of the song is symbolised in its title and the name of artists. Commenting on the symbolisation of music in the process of self-expression, Nora (20, female) said:

*After I shared it on my social media, I always had a premise that people wouldn’t listen to it. So if they don’t listen to it, it’s not a piece of music anymore. It’s just which song by which musician. It’s just a symbol.*

For Nora, sharing music has evolved into creating a symbolic representation of emotions rather than a shared experience of listening to music together with her social media followers. In this context, music is used more as a tool for personal expression and emotional communication rather than solely for shared enjoyment. This parallels the role of emojis in digital communication, where simple symbols are used to convey complex emotions and ideas (Seargeant, 2019; Logi and Zappavigna, 2021). Music shared on social media becomes a shorthand for music lovers to express their feelings, moods, and experiences without extensive verbal communication. In this way, music as a symbol allows for open interpretation, and others can understand the symbolic representation of emotions created through music based on their associations with it.

Accordingly, the second layer of meaning related to music communication on social media involves the act of sharing music links as a symbolic gesture to convey emotions. Here, the act *per se*, as a symbol of an individual’s emotional state and mood, can be seen as a form of self-expression and emotional communication with others. For instance, when someone shares a sad song on social media, they may not necessarily expect others to listen to it actively.
Instead, the act of sharing the song itself can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture of expressing their emotions to others. Here, I quote at length from an instance described by Dena (27, female):

*I don’t necessarily have to post a long message. I can just share a song to convey my emotions in a more subtle way. For example, every year, on the first day of autumn, I share a song about the season. So every year at the end of September, I share that Green Day song [Wake Me Up When September Ends]. But this year, I didn’t, because I felt like I’d shared it too many times before, so I chose a different Green Day song instead. But my friend understood what I was trying to say – he knew it was the end of September, and I should be sharing that song. He noticed that I chose a different one, even though it was also by Green Day. It’s interesting how he can read into the meaning behind my choices. When we talk, he might share something that happened recently, and I’ll interpret the songs he shares in response. I’ll try to figure out what he’s trying to say or which lyrics in the song resonate with him.*

In Dena’s case, the act of sharing a specific song at a specific time on social media symbolises her emotions in a subtle way. In her narratives, her friend understands the symbolism behind her act of music sharing, even if she chooses a different song. This illustrates the act of sharing a song can carry a deeper symbolic meaning beyond the song’s lyrics or other musical elements. The sharing of music links represents the transmission of emotional content from the social media user to the audience, regardless of whether the music is actually listened to. The behaviour of sharing music links functions as a signal or a signifier of the sender’s emotional state, which is then interpreted by the audience.

The importance of the symbolic value of music in expressing emotions on social
media lies in its ability to provide a deeper layer of emotional communication than the direct effects of music on listeners at the sound level. While the shared listening experience has traditionally been the focus of research on music and emotions, the symbolic representation of emotions through music can be equally significant. Through the act of music sharing, music lovers create a symbolic representation of their emotional state or experience. However, direct interactions resulting from such self-expression are not always essential and necessary, as many participants indicated that their primary intention was to gain a sense of being understood, which could be obtained even if they did not receive a direct reaction from others. Here, the narratives of music lovers emphasise the introspective significance of the act of self-expression. By sharing music for others to see, they convey their emotional states, which can be a validating experience in and of itself. As Maggie explicated:

**Maggie:** [My social media contents about music are,] on the one hand, about emotions, and, on the other hand, something more like a recording.

**Researcher:** Let’s talk about conveying emotions first. How do you assess whether your emotions are effectively conveyed?

**Maggie:** I think as long as I write and post them out, it’s good enough.

**Researcher:** So, it’s possible to put them out there without necessarily getting a response from others?

**Maggie:** Yes […] Most of the time, it just gets lost in the sea of [social media] contents, and I don’t get a response. But it doesn’t really matter to me. I still continue to do it this way.

Maggie’s perspective suggests that the act of writing and posting is sufficient
for her self-expression. Previous research has indicated that individuals who use music as a means of emotional expression tend to value the emotional power of the music they listen to and use it to validate their own emotional experiences (Juslin and Laukka, 2004; Saarikallio, 2008). However, this finding suggests that the act of emotional expression on social media is not necessarily driven by seeking immediate validation or responses from others. Instead, it is about the gratification of knowing or imagining that their emotions are communicated. Maggie uses music to express her emotions and share them with others, but she emphasises that she does not seek responses. Alternatively, she places greater value on the intrinsic worth of the act of expressing her emotions through music. In other words, she recognises the intrinsic meaning and value of self-expression, independent of external factors such as the reactions of others. Maggie perceives the act of self-expression as personally meaningful and fulfilling, even if it does not lead to tangible benefits or external validation. Similarly, another indie music lover, Liza, stated:

'It's not necessary to have a response from others. I feel like the expression of myself is already achieved when I post it. It's like a platform where I can express my emotions, a space for me. Usually, after I post it, I don't really check the notifications. Maybe after a long time, I'll take a look to see who liked it or who replied, but I don't really care about this aspect.'

Liza’s perspective exemplifies a fundamental element in the self-expression practices of indie music lovers, shedding light on the intrinsic value she attributes to the act of self-expression. She places significant emphasis on the process over the reception of her self-expression, suggesting an emphasis on the journey rather than the destination. According to neuroscientists, self-expression can be intrinsically rewarding because it activates neural and cognitive mechanisms associated with reward (Tamir and Mitchell, 2012). In
In this vein, the act of expressing oneself can itself be a source of satisfaction or pleasure. In Liza’s experience, her engagement with music as a form of self-expression reflects the values of expressive individualism (Bellah et al., 1985). In this context, music lovers find fulfillment and meaning in the act of expressing their authentic selves, regardless of how their expressions are received or understood by others. Turkle (2011) argues that technology has the potential to foster a culture of individualism, where people focus more on constructing and presenting their personal identities rather than engaging in ‘genuine’ social interactions. Reflecting this shift, Liza’s self-expression becomes a solitary and individualistic activity, offering her meanings and a sense of fulfillment from the process rather than the social connections or interactions it may generate. This may explain why Maggie, Liza, and other indie music lovers primarily engage in self-expression on social media to experience emotional release.

Thus far, it has been shown from the analysis that music lovers’ self-expression on social media represents a dual orientation – an outward projection towards their social circles and an inward projection towards themselves. These two facets are intertwined and play different yet complementary roles in the emotional communication of music on social media. On the outward level, sharing music on social media can be a communicative and interactive practice. Music lovers are not just sharing a piece of music but are also sharing an emotion, a personal feeling, and an experience associated with that soundtrack. This outward expression is not necessarily about seeking engagement or responses from others. Instead, it is about conveying a specific emotion or state of mind to others, often without the expectation of active listening or immediate feedback. The shared music acts as a symbol representing the sharer’s emotional state, which is decoded and interpreted by others. This outward expression does not solely depend on the responses it elicits. Even when the shared songs get ‘lost in the sea of [social media] contents’, as Maggie put
it, the act of sharing it is still perceived as meaningful.

This can be understood through the concept of the ‘imagined audience’. The imagined audience refers to the hypothetical individuals or groups that a communicator imagines as the intended recipients of their messages (Litt, 2012; Litt and Hargittai, 2016). This concept encapsulates the perceived audience that music lovers believe they are addressing, which may not necessarily correspond with the actual audience who views or interacts with their posts. When sharing music on social media, music lovers often have an imagined audience in mind, but it may vary for everyone. For example, in the previous excerpts, Neil imagined his audience as a supportive community that can offer a sense of understanding in response to the shared emotions, although they are complete strangers. While for Dena, her musical friends are imagined as the audience who can interpret the symbolism behind the act of sharing music. Imagined audiences play a significant role in shaping the content shared, the music chosen, and the emotions expressed (Litt, 2012; Stsiampkouskaya et al., 2021). They provide music lovers with a sense of potential reception and understanding, making the act of sharing music on social media meaningful to the sharer. For instance, Maggie continues to express her emotions through music despite her posts often being lost among others. This is because, for Maggie, the act of sharing is not just about receiving responses from her followers; it is about articulating her feelings and experiences to her imagined audiences. She believes her posts are potentially being seen and understood by someone, even if they do not directly interact with her. In the context of emotional expression through music on social media, these imagined audiences could be seen as a specific manifestation of the concept of ‘generalised others’ (Mead, 1934). When music lovers share music to express their emotions, they are not (only) communicating with a specific group of people but (also) with an internalised understanding of how others in society
might perceive and comprehend their emotional expression. Through this process, music lovers derive a sense of validation and satisfaction from knowing that their emotions are being communicated and potentially understood by others, even in the absence of direct interaction. The imagined audience thus becomes an essential element in self-expression, providing a sense of social connection and affirmation.

On the inward level, similar to self-curatorship, the act of sharing music represents a form of intrapersonal interaction. It is an act of introspection and self-understanding, a way for music lovers to make sense of their emotions and experiences. Here, the ‘me’ is a constituent part of the imagined audience as well. As previous excerpts illustrate, the act of sharing music on social media serves as a personal means for music lovers to express their emotions. This process can be intrinsically rewarding and emotionally fulfilling, even in the absence of external validation. From this perspective, the act of sharing music is more than just an attempt to communicate with others; it is also a way of engaging with oneself. When a music lover shares a piece of music, they are not only projecting their emotions outwardly but are also reflecting inwardly. They are exploring their own emotions, validating their feelings, and creating a personal narrative. In this process, music becomes a mirror, reflecting music lovers’ emotional states back at them and facilitating a deeper understanding of their emotions and experiences. Sharing music on social media becomes a form of self-narrative, where they tell their emotional stories through their choice of music. The act of sharing is cathartic, a means of emotional release. Through this process, they find personal fulfilment and derive intrinsic value from the act of expressing their authentic selves.

Thus, the self-expression of music lovers on social media encapsulates a dual-orientation, simultaneously facing outwards towards their social media friends
and inwards towards themselves. Both these facets offer unique and rich insights into the emotional communication of music in the digital age, revealing the complex dynamics of music as a symbolic tool for self-expression. They stress the role of music as a multifaceted medium of emotional expression, serving as both a means of communication with others and a tool for introspection and self-understanding. It bridges the gap between communal resonance and individual experience, subtly bringing together the social and the personal dimensions.

**7.3 Self-Presentation and Collapsed Context**

Having discussed self-curatorship and self-expression in the context of Chinese indie music lovers’ social media engagement, the final section of this chapter addresses the ways of self-presentation and the influence of ‘others’. If we consider self-curatorship as a form of backstage behaviour and self-expression as the lifting of a corner of the curtain that vaguely connects the front and back of the stage, then the self-presentation discussed here is the performance of indie music lovers on the frontstage. Participants acknowledge that their social media practices also encompass a motivation for presenting themselves. It is a conscious process of managing and controlling the portrayal of one’s image, personality, or identity to others (Goffman, 1959). For instance, during the interview, Flora (21, female) admitted, ‘I can’t say there’s no urge to showcase myself at all. It’s definitely there […] I think it’s just a natural human tendency, objectively speaking.’ Similarly, Kyle (24, female) expressed a desire to ‘showcase that there’s an exciting part in my life, to counteract the feeling of mundanity and dullness.’ According to these indie music lovers, self-presentation on social media functions as a means to express their musical tastes and articulate their identities as music lovers to others, signifying that their digital self-presentation is a deliberate and purposeful act (Hogan, 2010).
In sociology, self-presentation is a crucial concept concerning how individuals endeavour to influence others’ perceptions of them (Goffman, 1959). Early investigations of digital media emphasised the potential for individuals to engage in various forms of ‘role-playing games’, adopting different identities and multiple personas in anonymous virtual spaces (Turkle, 1995). This notion suggests that online self-presentation could significantly deviate from offline identities. However, more recent research examining comprehensive digital practices indicates that individuals generally present themselves consistently with their offline identities (Back et al., 2010; Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011). Although in this process, individuals often engage in more implicit self-presentation online, subtly conveying their selected identities rather than overtly showcasing them (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008). For Chinese indie music lovers, the music-related aspect of self-presentation on social media is often closely connected to their passion for indie music, linking their online presentation to their participation in indie music culture, their knowledge of it, and their unique identity as indie music enthusiasts.

During the interviews, many indie music lovers used terms such as ‘displaying’ and ‘showcasing’ to describe their social media practices, demonstrating how indie music lovers enact the concept of self-presentation in their online activities. In contrast to self-curatorship and self-expression, content created and posted for self-presentation primarily targets external audiences to influence others’ perceptions and attitudes towards oneself. However, the target audience is not homogeneous, as different social media content caters to different audiences. As already discovered in Chapter 6, indie music lovers often draw a distinction between their musical friends and daily friends. This differentiation also shapes their imagined audience on social media platforms. While both categories represent the target audience for music lovers’ self-presentation on social media, the motivations for engaging with these groups may differ substantially.
In general, contents posted for musical friends are often more symbolic, aiming to gain understanding while highlighting the individual’s uniqueness within the music-lover group. In contrast, contents shared with daily friends focus on presenting one’s musical taste, conveying a ‘complete’ self to others and potentially involving impression management behaviours. Self-presentation on social media thus accentuates the role of others in shaping indie music lovers’ digital practices.

Participants typically identified musical friends as their primary target audience when discussing their self-presentation on social media. They attributed this preference to the belief that musical friends were more likely to engage with their posts, resulting in likes and comments. Interviewees reported that receiving responses from their musical friends allowed them to feel understood and acknowledged, contributing to a positive self-presentation. As Ian (21, male) expressed:

[The target audiences are] musical friends who will most likely give me likes on social media. It’s interesting because they will like my posts regardless of whether it’s just an average song or not, simply because we share a common interest in music. However, if I post something that doesn’t have any common ground with my other friends, then it’s less likely to get likes from them.

In his self-presentation behaviours, Ian’s imagined audience for his music-related social media posts consists of his musical friends. Research has shown that individuals often use social media to seek social validation from others, particularly those who share their interests (Rui and Stefanone, 2013). Positive feedback received through social media can enhance individuals’ self-worth and confidence (Stefanone, Lackaff and Rosen, 2011), motivating them to continue engaging in social media activities to maintain this feeling of validation.
Nevertheless, more noteworthy, some music lovers expressed ambivalence about receiving feedback on their self-presentation on social media. While receiving feedback from others indicates recognition and validation, it also raises concerns about losing their unique identity. This dilemma can be attributed to the desire to belong and be accepted by others while simultaneously striving to maintain a sense of individuality and uniqueness (Hornsey and Jetten, 2004; Leonardelli, Pickett and Brewer, 2010) (see also Section 8.3). Nora (23, female) explained:

It’s actually quite conflicting for me. On the one hand, I don’t want people to think I’m showing off, but on the other hand, I do want to show my uniqueness.

In the same vein, Ken (27, male) voiced his concerns about the value of responses from others and how they relate to his self-presentation on social media:

I don’t think it’s just about the numbers [of responses]. Whether my shared songs get 100 or 50 likes, it doesn’t really matter at this point. Because I know everyone has different tastes, and even if I get a lot of like, it just means there are many people with similar tastes to me. And I don’t necessarily think that’s a good thing. You know what I mean? It means I might be becoming more like everyone else.

Ken’s perspective identifies the importance of maintaining a music lover’s individuality and personal identity, even in the context of social recognition and affirmation. For participants in this study, while it is essential to build a social network of music-lover peers and gain their understanding and validation, it is equally important to preserve their uniqueness within the group. By carefully selecting and curating their social media content, music lovers can balance their desire for group identification with their need for individual expression and distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991). As Ken further put it:
Let me explain a bit more. Sometimes when I post songs on my WeChat Moments, it represents my music taste, specifically my taste in indie, you know? I might post songs from some relatively obscure bands in the indie music scene that I like. This is something I want to clarify. I want to showcase my more elaborated music taste within the niche area of indie or alternative music to my [musical] friends.

In an effort to establish his unique identity within the indie music culture, Ken employs self-presentation tactics that demonstrate his possession of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). This can involve sharing unique and exclusive knowledge or experiences within the scene, showcasing his enthusiasm for lesser-known bands, and attending live performances of emerging musicians, all in an attempt to set himself apart from other indie music lovers. This tactic helps reinforce social connections and express a collective identity while also maintaining individual distinctiveness. Likewise, Harry (20, male) narrated how he displayed his particular musical experiences during his self-presentation on social media:

For example, the band NeonGarden (霓虹花园), their debut was at the Cactus Music Festival, and I was there. I found it very interesting, so I started paying attention to them. When they came to Beijing for their first performance here, I went to see them, and about ten familiar faces were also there. I don’t know why, but suddenly everyone knew about NeonGarden, which actually made me a bit upset. I was like, ‘How come you all know about them now?’ […] Because when I saw NeonGarden for the first time [at Cactus Music Festival], the vocalist broke his leg. So I took a photo of his leg and posted it, saying that his leg had recovered now. Actually, I was trying to imply that I had seen them perform even when his leg was injured. (Harry, 20, male)

Harry’s self-presentation can be seen as a Bourdieusian strategy where he
uses obscurity, scarcity, and ‘being in the know’ to position himself as culturally superior within the indie music subculture. By showcasing his early discovery and support of the band NeonGarden, Harry presents his subcultural capital among indie music lovers. According to Bourdieu (1986), capital is a resource that individuals can accumulate, invest, and convert into other forms to gain advantages within social fields. Harry’s actions exemplify a form of long-term investment in the band, demonstrating his dedication, adding to his subcultural capital within the scene, and transforming it into his position in the music-lover network.

One could argue that the demonstration of subcultural capital and unique identity is a way to establish a hierarchy within the indie music scene, where music lovers strategically emphasise the depth of their music knowledge to assert their cultural superiority. They exhibit their mastery of niche music knowledge and experiences, subtly asserting their relative position in the indie music culture. However, this interpretation may oversimplify the complexities involved in the self-presentation of indie music lovers. I suggest that it is more about exhibiting distinctiveness while establishing a sense of belonging within a subculture. Whilst showcasing unique musical tastes and experiences may provide a sense of cultural superiority, this behaviour is also intimately tied to their identity. For example, Ken’s self-presentation extends beyond merely asserting his status within the indie music culture. It is an intentional expression of his unique tastes in indie music, which he believes encapsulates a part of his identity. Similarly, while Harry’s self-presentation may initially seem like an assertion of cultural superiority, it can also be interpreted as a manifestation of his genuine passion for indie music. His early discovery and support of NeonGarden were not (just) for the sake of being ‘ahead’ of his peers but rather an authentic reflection of his musical interest and dedication to the genre. It becomes clear that indie music lovers’ self-presentation is not a simple social
game of dominance but rather a complex intertwining of individual expression and social validation. As Harry further acknowledged the importance of being mindful of one’s motivations and the potential pitfalls of vanity:

*Everyone wants to show off a bit, and I totally get it. I think it’s natural for people to want to display their uniqueness on social media. It’s not about proving your status or anything like that [...] I don’t want to brag, [but] I feel like I have that tendency sometimes, and I try to stop myself. I’m very aware of my vanity [...] and I think it’s just a desire to be noticed. It’s not necessarily a bad thing, but I think it’s important to keep it in check and be mindful of it.*

The self-presentation strategies employed by indie music lovers toward their musical friends on social media reflect the tension between the desire for group belonging and individual expression. While these strategies help strengthen social connections and reinforce a sense of belonging within the indie music subculture, it is essential for individuals to remain aware of their motivations and to balance their desire for recognition with the maintenance of their distinctiveness.

Shifting our focus to the digital practices of indie music lovers in their social interactions with daily friends, they often encounter another form of ambivalence regarding the extent to which they should reveal their indie music-lover identity. This ambivalence is related to the concept of the ‘collapsed context’ in digital environments, where the boundaries between different social spheres become blurred (Marwick and boyd, 2010; Vitak, 2012).

When presenting themselves to musical friends, indie music lovers tend to emphasise their knowledge and taste in music, signalling their distinct position within the indie music community. In comparison, when presenting themselves to their daily friends, the emphasis shifts towards presenting their identity as
music lovers, which they perceive as their ‘true self’. In the context of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), where identity is fluid, flexible, and continuously evolving, it is inadequate to consider a specific identity as the sole ‘true self’. Thus, a more reasonable sociological interpretation of music lovers’ expression is that by presenting themselves as indie music lovers to their daily friends, they are able to convey a complete picture of who they are. It is not necessarily about presenting a singular ‘true self’ but rather about expressing a particular aspect of their identity that is important to them. As Liza (23, female) illustrated:

My presentation targets people other than my musical friends. It should be people in my everyday life. They’re all the target of my presentation [...] I, even more, want to show them what kind of person I am and what my favourite thing is to convey this culture to them.

In self-presentation towards daily friends, Liza aims to feature her identity as an indie music lover, thereby emphasising the significance of music in her life. She perceives this aspect as essential in projecting a comprehensive self-concept to others. For participants like Liza, presenting oneself as an indie music lover is a way of conveying their identity in a more multifaceted and intricate manner. This may be particularly important for individuals who feel that their musical identity is not well understood or appreciated by others in their daily social circle.

Chapter 6 explored the intriguing phenomenon of Chinese indie music lovers compartmentalising their musical lives from their everyday lives and emphasised the distinction between musical and daily friends. Building upon this, this section investigates music lovers’ motivations and strategies for self-presentation when interacting with their musical and daily friends. These findings indicate that music lovers tend to view and approach these two social networks as distinct entities, exhibiting different identities and behaviours within
each social context. Nonetheless, the digital environment complicates this separation, especially on the digital platforms that serve as primary social spaces for these individuals. Goffman (1959) suggests that individuals engage in audience segregation in their daily lives, tailoring their self-presentation to different social groups. However, when these networks converge in the digital realm, the phenomenon of ‘context collapse’ arises, where individuals’ social networks merge, and people from diverse backgrounds form a single audience group for online communication (boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012). This context collapse complicates the separation that music lovers strive to maintain between their different social networks.

In the Chinese internet context, WeChat is considered a ‘super app’ (Chen, Mao and Qiu, 2018; Huang and Miao, 2021) and even a digital infrastructure (Plantin and de Seta, 2019) due to its amalgamation of multiple functions and features into a single application. This consolidation positions WeChat as a central sphere and component of digital life for Chinese mobile internet users, hosting the majority of their digital interactions and social relationships. Given that the indie music lovers interviewed disclosed that their social networks of musical and daily friends largely coincide with their WeChat contacts, it is both relevant and insightful to examine their practices on WeChat as a case for our analysis.

The absence of social cues, which are inherent to face-to-face communication, can lead to misinterpretations and communication breakdowns in a digital environment (Baym, 2015). Consequently, in the context of collapsed digital networks, misunderstandings have emerged as a significant challenge for online users in their interactions with others. Even though numerous strategies have been developed and widely implemented to address this deficiency and compensate for the limitations of digital media, misunderstandings persist in digital communication, necessitating ongoing attention and management by
users. Concurrently, on another level, as discussed in Chapter 6, many daily friends of indie music lovers hold misconceptions and negative impressions about indie music. These views not only affect their perception of indie music but also exacerbate their misunderstandings about the indie music-related content shared by indie music lovers on WeChat. This situation creates a reluctance among some participants to present themselves as indie music lovers to their daily friends on WeChat. Bella (25, female) exemplifies the complexity of digital interactions and the challenges posed by the lack of social cues in digital media:

I didn’t block them before. It just didn’t seem like a big deal to me. But then I realised that what I post can change how others perceive me […] Some people will change their views of you because of your hobbies. For example, in the eyes of my colleagues, I may be seen as a serious person; but because I posted something that night in the livehouse, I later found that people kept asking me about cool pubs nearby. It made me embarrassed.

Bella’s embarrassment arises from the unintentional breach of the boundaries between her different audiences on WeChat, resulting in an unintended self-presentation. In Goffman’s (1959) terms, Bella’s WeChat posts about her indie music experiences were intended for her musical-friend audience, who would likely appreciate and understand the content. However, when her daily-friend audience, consisting of colleagues and acquaintances, encountered identical
posts, they interpreted them as indicative of indulgent nightlife activities\textsuperscript{28}. Consequently, the exposure of her indie music experiences to these unintended audiences led to the formation of misconceptions about her personal life and preferences. The issue of misunderstanding makes self-presentation and identity management especially challenging. Therefore, Bella’s experience with misunderstanding on WeChat presents a broader issue with potential implications for the dissemination and reception of indie music content. The digital communication gap illustrated here can inadvertently reinforce societal misconceptions about indie music, curtail its reach, and undercut its cultural importance. As such, it underlines the necessity for more effective strategies for self-presentation and communication in the digital environment to facilitate a more accurate and appreciative understanding of indie music.

Context collapse has been shown to significantly impact the social value and emotional response associated with content shared on social media platforms (Loh and Walsh, 2021). It is challenging to accurately convey the full and ‘true’ situation and experience of attending an indie gig in a collapsed-context situation on social media. Therefore, controlling the flow of posts and tailoring impressions for the target audience becomes necessary. WeChat, for example, offers a feature for grouping friends, enabling users to share content on WeChat Moments selectively. This function allows users to target specific audiences when diverse groups converge in a single context on social media. Bella continues to share content about her indie music activities but in a more

\textsuperscript{28} A potentially relevant perspective is the gender dimension of Bella’s case. But I think this is not the central issue here. For example, the case of Leonard (24, male) in Section 6.2 refers to a similar issue of such a misunderstanding (equating livehouses with nightclubs). The gender factor may have some influence on the misunderstanding of Bella’s tastes and behaviours, but I think it may not be the decisive factor here.
controlled manner by excluding ‘formal’ relationships from her musical posts on WeChat. This approach is common among music lovers whose identity or taste conflicts with daily friends on social media, particularly in formal or significant relationships.

Davis and Jurgenson (2014) propose that context collapse can be further subdivided into context collusions and context collisions, depending on the specific conditions under which it occurs. Bella’s case represents a typical example of context collisions, ‘in which different social environments unintentionally and unexpectedly come crashing into each other’ (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014, p. 480, emphases added). In digital spaces, different contexts may collide, and performers may be unaware of the audience, making it difficult to adjust their behaviours and potentially leading to awkward situations (boyd, 2011; Thompson, 2020). As a result, social media users increasingly navigate the balance between privacy, intimacy, and self-presentation in digital environments (Livingstone, 2008), as demonstrated in various empirical studies (e.g., Litt, 2013; Taddicken, 2014; Quinn, 2016).

Furthermore, an interesting observation from the interviews was the nuanced attitudes of music lovers toward the persistence of social media content in collapsed contexts on WeChat. According to boyd (2011), social media platforms enable users to create and share content that remains available for extended periods, allowing others to access and view it later. This persistence of social media content can have different implications depending on users’ motives and purposes for engaging in social media practice. For instance, while persistence can benefit some indie music lovers engaging in self-curatorship by enabling them to reflect on themselves over time, it can also lead to the communication of emotions that may not be suitable for a wider audience at a later time. The persistence of social media content adds complexity to music
lovers’ self-presentation. On the one hand, it can result in negative consequences, such as privacy concerns or unwanted attention from others, as individuals may not always have control over how their posted content is perceived or used by others. As Kyle (24, female) stated:

For example, now you friended me, I am tempted to check if there’s anything particularly stupid and consider deleting it. Maybe I’ll check it out every two or three years, and then realise how dumb I used to be, and maybe I’ll delete some stuff.

This excerpt highlights the importance of considering the potential long-term effects of social media content. As Kyle suggests, content that may have seemed harmless or even funny at the time of posting may later be perceived as immature or inappropriate, leading to regret and the desire to delete the content. This underscores the idea that individuals may be concerned about how their past social media content may impact their impression on others in front of future audiences.

On the other hand, while the persistence of social media content may pose potential risks and challenges, some other music lovers perceive this aspect more positively. They regard long-term posts on social media as cues for their self-image and use them as a tool to build connections and relationships with others in the future. Through self-presentation on social media, indie music lovers can exhibit their cultural preferences and attract like-minded individuals. As Ken (27, male) articulated:

Let me tell you about a situation. For example, if I meet someone new and they want to know more about me, they might check out my WeChat Moments. You know what I mean? This is one reason why I need to post on my WeChat Moments. I can’t just say, ‘we didn’t meet because of music, but do you like indie
That’s stupid, ha-ha. If I’m interested in someone […] I would check out their WeChat Moments, right? So if someone is interested in me, they would check out my WeChat Moments too. If we have similar interests, then we’ll have something to talk about.

In this case, Ken acknowledges the persistence feature of social media content, enabling him to maintain an updated and continuous record of his interests in indie music and related activities, which others can access and view at a later date. Ken notes that by posting on his WeChat Moments, he provides a long-term record of his interests, personality, and lifestyle that others can access and refer back to if they want to learn more about him. In this situation, self-presentation on social media provides social clues for potential friends in the future. By posting about his tastes in indie music, he provides a glimpse into his self-narrative, allowing others to determine whether they share similar interests and could potentially become friends. The persistence of social media content ensures that these social clues remain available to others. Ken’s case here exemplifies the public facet of self-curatorship in social media. Although the ‘museum of self’ primarily serves as a self-interaction space, its public facet allows others to access and engage. This phenomenon exemplifies the shifting landscape of private-public negotiation and the multiplicity of identity formation and presentation in the digital age.

Here, Ken’s case illustrates another form of context collapse, where social actors intentionally collapse and flatten various contexts in their online interactions. This is congruent with the concept of context collusion proposed by Davis and Jurgenson (2014), which suggests that social media users intentionally collapse the contexts to create new meanings and social interactions. In Ken’s case, this is achieved by appropriating past content and repurposing it for future audiences. This phenomenon shows the importance of
considering the potential long-term effects of social media content in collapsed contexts and the different ways in which individuals navigate and appropriate the affordances of social media platforms.

To summarise, the exploration of self-presentation among Chinese indie music lovers in the context of social media engagement reveals a complex interplay between the need for group belonging, individual expression, and impression management. These music lovers strategically navigate the boundaries between their musical and daily social networks, employing different motivations and strategies for self-presentation in each context.

In conclusion, this chapter has presented an in-depth examination of how Chinese indie music lovers employ social media platforms to document, reflect, express, and present their musical experiences, preferences, and identities. The chapter has delved into three imbricated aspects of indie music lovers’ social media practice: self-curatorship, self-expression, and self-presentation. The findings uncover multifaceted motivations for engaging with social media in contemporary social contexts. Reflecting on these findings, this chapter offers insight into how social media platforms have become an integral part of Chinese indie music lovers’ musical experiences and identities. It contributes significantly to the existing literature on sociology, particularly by expanding Goffman’s dramaturgy concept to encompass social media practices and providing more nuanced explorations. Most notably, this chapter has offered new perspectives on self-curatorship, which not only enriches our understanding of how individuals construct their identities in digital spaces but also highlights the importance of intrapersonal interaction and the negotiation of public and private spaces in this context. Moreover, it has provided a detailed
categorisation of the motives behind social media practices, emphasising the symbolic and contextual nature of emotional expression through music and the challenges of self-presentation in the face of collapsed contexts. By examining the intersection of music, identity, social interactions, and social media practices, this chapter enriches our understanding of how contemporary technologies reshape the ways individuals engage with culture and construct their understanding of self and social interactions. The following chapter moves on to consider how Chinese indie music lovers perceive and conceptualise their broader social interconnectedness.
Chapter 8 Striking Chords: Making Sense of Collectivity

As a form of culture, music embodies specific social attributes that originate from particular social groups and cater to them. According to Bourdieu (1984) and his followers (e.g., Bennett et al., 2009), musical tastes reflect the culture, group, and even social class to which an individual belongs. In the meantime, as a form of cultural product, music is not merely the product of artists but also the result of collaborative efforts and the interconnectedness of all those involved in music practices (Becker, 1982; Small, 1998). These perspectives collectively exhibit the inherent sociality of music. Sociality, as conceptualised by Long and Moore (2013, p. 2), is a ‘dynamic and interactive relational matrix through which human beings come to know the world they live in and to find their purpose and meaning within it’. Understanding the social nature of indie music requires a further examination of the interactions and connections among music lovers. This chapter aims to delve deeper into the social dynamics within the indie music culture in China, providing the final components of our understanding of indie music socialising. It allows us to comprehend how music lovers form social connections, engage in shared experiences, and navigate the delicate balance between collectivity and individuality.

Section 8.1 focuses on music lovers’ perception and construction of collectivity, highlighting its importance in scrutinising the social interconnectedness of this social group. It elaborates on the concept of ‘collectivity’ as a more apt lens than ‘community’ to scrutinise the social interconnectedness of Chinese indie music lovers. The section examines collectivity as both an empirical entity and an abstract awareness, exploring the social bonds and interconnectedness that emerge within the indie music culture. Section 8.2 delves into how Chinese indie music lovers achieve intersubjectivity through resonance in various scenarios and interactions. Resonance is presented as a valuable concept for
understanding how music lovers perceive their peers and experience a collective condition. It critically engages with the process of meaning exchange in music practices, enriching our understanding of shared musical experiences that contribute to the formation of an intersubjective interconnectedness. Lastly, Section 8.3 examines the significance of collectivity for indie music lovers and how they navigate the balance of collectivity and individuality. The exploration of these themes contributes to our broader understanding of the social nature of indie music and the role it plays in shaping social relationships.

8.1 Collectivity and Sense of Collectiveness

Blumer (1969) argues that concepts play a pivotal role in empirical science as they shape the context of a study and provide the foundation for formulating critical questions, collecting and analysing data, and interpreting research findings. Concepts not only aid in research design and data analysis but are also directly related to fundamental aspects of the subject’s characteristics. As Goertz (2006, p. 27, emphasis in original) contends: ‘[c]oncepts are about ontology. To develop a concept is more than providing a definition: it is deciding what is important about an entity’. Accordingly, the selection of concepts can significantly influence our understanding of the phenomena we investigate as sociologists.

In the realm of social sciences, the concept of ‘community’ stands as one of the most potent analytical instruments in scholars’ toolkits. Extensive research has been conducted on this topic, leading to numerous influential discoveries (e.g., Anderson, 1983; Crow, 2008). In music sociology and popular music studies, the term ‘community’ is widely applied in analysing audience groups within different regions or musical cultures and in interpreting the development of musical genres (Frith, 1981; Lena, 2012). It is also used to depict online
collectives of music enthusiasts (Baym, 2007; e.g., Lingel and Naaman, 2012; Dewan, Ho and Ramaprasad, 2017). Generally, the word community is employed to encompass various meanings of relationships among its members, often denoting positive qualities such as trust (Hsu, Chiang and Huang, 2012), safety, and security (Bauman, 2001). As Bauman (2001, p. 1) succinctly states, ‘[i]t feels good: whatever the word “community” may mean, it is good “to have a community”, “to be in a community” […] Community […] is always a good thing’. Yet, despite scholars frequently use and tacitly assume community as a concept with positive connotations, the term remains ambiguous and contentious. The meaning of community varies depending on the research context and purpose, with scholars often providing distinct and occasionally undefined interpretations of this concept.

One possible explanation for this complexity may lie in the fact that the concept of community has continually evolved to accommodate social changes over time. This ongoing transformation poses challenges for scholars to establish a universal definition. For example, Tönnies ([1887] 2001) defined traditional communities or Gemeinschaft in the late 19th century, highlighting factors such as kinship and geographical proximity. However, these elements are no longer seen as defining characteristics of communities in contemporary society (Bradshaw, 2008). Communities today often transcend these traditional boundaries, frequently extending beyond local, face-to-face interactions (Baym, 2007; Morimoto and Chin, 2017). This shift has been greatly influenced by technological advances, in particular the internet, which has emerged as a crucial tool and space for social and communal practices. This transformation results in the emergence of cybercultural communities (Barber and Callaghan, 2020; Jetto, 2020), providing platforms for various online communal activities, including those related to music (Waldron, 2018). In this context, digital technologies have reshaped the structure of communities, making them more
individualised and fluid: belonging to a particular community or not has increasingly become a personal choice (Willson, 2006; Parks, 2011). These changes have further complicated the ongoing debate around the meaning of community, making it more difficult to consistently employ this term.

In many recent empirical studies, scholars have acknowledged the contentious nature of community in terms of its definition; nevertheless, many of them have attempted to suspend the debate rather than provide a more definitive interpretation (e.g., Baym, 2007; Fernback, 2007). In this regard, Baym (2007) defends that ‘[u]ltimately it matters less what we call it than how well we understand it.’ While this compromise may seem pragmatic, I argue that the vague use of the term community could further exacerbate terminological confusion, ultimately making it more problematic to grasp the essence of the observed groups and individuals.

The difficulty scholars face in providing a universally accepted definition of community exemplifies the diversity and complexity of its connotations, making it almost impossible to propose a definition that encompasses all situations. Therefore, in alignment with the framework of symbolic interactionism and the abductive research strategy adopted in this study, I advocate for using concepts and definitions derived from those used by the social actors themselves. As Fernback (2007, p. 66) notes in his analysis of cybercommunity, ‘community is a mutable construct, determined by social actors who create meaning about it’. Fernback’s claim reminds us that it is the social actors who constitute the group that determines the meaning of its social formality. It is crucial to interpret the everyday language used by research participants rather than translate it into definitive concepts determined solely by researchers. Thus, my suggestion is that instead of falling into the conceptual trap of the term community or further reinforcing its controversy, it is more reasonable to adopt a new conceptual tool.
to analyse the sociality of Chinese indie music lovers. This approach circumvents the complications surrounding the definition of community while highlighting the pivotal role of social actors in the process of meaning-making.

During the interviews with participants, the term ‘collectivity’ was frequently employed by them. This choice of terminology may be attributed to linguistic disparities between Mandarin Chinese and English. In Chinese dictionaries, community (shè qū, 社区 in Chinese) resembles its English counterpart, referring to a group of interconnected individuals residing in a certain area. However, in colloquial Chinese, community primarily denotes geographically and administratively organised and bounded neighbourhoods, particularly in urban areas (Heberer, 2019). Although the word community is occasionally employed to signify groups with shared characteristics, such as football communities, ethnic communities, and LGBT communities, this is not common in everyday discourses. In contrast, the word ‘collectivity’ (jí tǐ, 集体 in Chinese) is often used in everyday Chinese expressions to describe an organised group of individuals, as opposed to ‘individual’ or ‘self’. In comparison to community, the term collectivity aligns more closely with the focus of this study. Hence, I will use the term collectivity throughout this discussion of the sociality of Chinese indie music lovers.

In comparison to the abundant studies on community, the concept of collectivity has received less attention within the discipline of sociology. As a result, its definition remains relatively underdeveloped. The limited research into it, however, opens up new analytical possibilities, potentially offering advantages over the often overused and contentious concept of community. Broadly speaking, collectivity can refer to any ‘bounded area of social order which is produced and recreated by actors who have a sense of membership of that social order’ (Haugaard and Maleseviç, 2002, p. 2). This definition
encompasses a range of social organisations, from small groups to social associations, from nation-states to global societies. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that each collectivity is unique and shaped by a multitude of factors. I argue that an analysis of collectivity should give more weight to the process and becoming, which helps avoid the pitfall of attempting to establish a universal definition and the problem of creating nebulous definitions similar to that of community. This study explores Chinese indie music lovers’ understanding of collectivity, which bifurcates into two perspectives: one group of participants perceives collectivity as an empirical reality, while the other group considers it an abstract awareness. I will first describe the construction process of each one and then go into the influencing factors behind the differences.

When asked about their perception of collectivity, approximately one-third of respondents depicted it as a gathering of embodied individuals rather than an abstract notion. In other words, for them, collectivity is a concrete reality defined by materiality. This viewpoint aligns with Jenkins’ (2002, p. 17, emphasis added) interpretation of collectivity, which posits that collectivities ‘emerge as a consequence of actual individuals doing thing together, in mutually meaningful and co-ordinated ways’. Jenkins’ argument underscores two fundamental attributes of collectivity: its meaningfulness and its materiality. From my perspective, these attributes are interconnected and resonate with the principles of symbolic interactionism, which postulate that meanings arise from interactions among individuals who are concrete and substantive beings. As Jenkins (2002, p. 19) further notes, ‘collectivities are […] definitively material: in the embodiment of individual members, in observable interactional patterns, and in the materiality of institutions’. This materiality is first and foremost manifested through specific, embodied individuals who constitute collectivity. This was also a point emphasised by this group of indie music lovers. They
suggested that the perception of music-lover collectivities tends to be amplified in offline as opposed to online environments, drawing attention to the importance of physical presence and tangible interactions.

In comparing her experiences of collectivity in WeChat groups and live music settings, Lesley, a 20-year-old female participant, articulated the stark difference between the two:

Lesley: It [WeChat groups] is virtual, you know, it’s online. But offline, it is reality. They [other people] are authentic and alive right here.

Researcher: So maybe this collectivity still has something to do with offline, with people who ‘really’ exist?

Lesley: You know, recently, during the COVID pandemic, people don’t go out, and then there are streaming music festivals. They played music for you at home. And we people were at home, we’re there, and we didn’t know what we’re watching. Pogoing for what? For loneliness? Fucking stupid!

Here, Lesley identifies a critical factor hindering the perception of collectivity in the online realm: the perceived lack of authenticity of other social actors. Authenticity, a multifaceted construct, involves a range of attributes such as sincerity, truthfulness, and genuineness (Molleda, 2010). The authenticity of digital communication is a contested topic in academia. Some scholars have raised concerns about cynical relations, emotional deception, and the presence of fake personas within digital spaces (Turkle, 1995). These concerns naturally extend to considerations of the self-concept in these environments, leading to an ongoing debate regarding the authenticity of the self in digital contexts (Williams, 2006; Vannini and Franzese, 2008). These potential issues might affect our perceptions of others and their authenticity online. Lesley’s
observation about inauthenticity is intrinsically tied to the mode of digital communication, primarily reflected in the virtuality of other social actors and the nature of interactions therein. The shift to online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified this issue, making the authenticity of digital collectivity into her concerns.

There has been a long-standing debate regarding the comparability of digital and face-to-face communication. Some argue that the virtual nature of the online/digital environment, especially the presence of anonymity, may lead to a crisis of trust and uncertainty among participants of online communication (Baym, 2015). However, in the context of this group of music lovers, it is not the mere virtuality and anonymity that trigger perceptions of the inauthenticity of others. Instead, their experiences stem from a perceived dichotomy between online and offline spaces and how they view the world. They consider the digital realm as deficient in providing ‘real’ meanings to social relationships. In contrast, they perceive the materiality and tangibility of the offline world as pillars of authenticity, crucial for constructing the notion of collectivity. In their view, these tangible experiences anchor their sense of authenticity, making the online-offline divide more than just a matter of spatial difference but become a division of perceived authenticity of social relationships. In this context, materiality and authenticity are intrinsically linked concepts. For these music lovers, the perceived authentic interpersonal relationships are forged through tangible interactions. The collectivity is grounded in the embodiment of individual members and observable interactions. The materiality of a collectivity, therefore, can be seen as a manifestation of the authenticity of the social actors involved and the relationships they form.

To gain a better understanding, we can contrast this collectivity as an empirical reality with the concept of imagined community proposed by Anderson (1983).
The concept of the imagined community originates from the analysis of the nation, which is considered the most representative form of an imagined community. Anderson (1983, pp. 6–7) argues that a nation ‘is imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion’. From this perspective, the existence of the community is not dependent on the relationships between its members but precedes them. In other words, it is the shared imagination of belonging to the same community that binds individuals together rather than a direct relationship between them. In such a community, the majority of members do not personally know each other except for a small group of members they are acquainted with. As a result, for an individual, most other members remain at an abstract conceptual level without immediate practical meaning. This abstraction is amplified in online communities where asymmetrical social relations often underlie their ‘imaginary’ nature (Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev, 2011).

From this perspective, the logic of the existence of collectivity is reversed: it is not the membership creating connections between individuals but the pre-existing relationships between them that generate the collectivity. Here, size may be an element, but more importantly, it emphasises the possibility of direct interaction between collectivity members. It highlights the significance of the quality of interactions and the depth of relationships between members in constituting collectivity. Commenting on his perception of collectivity, Francis, a 21-year-old male indie music lover, said:

> For me, the sense of belonging to a collectivity is probably more with the [musical] friends who go to the gigs with me together. I think we experience something together, we do something together, and then there will be a sense of belonging. It’s not like that kind of collective feeling with hundreds or thousands of people.
According to Francis, collectivity is an extension of existing friendships built upon communal experiences shared among musical friends. In the realm of indie music, this collectivity is formed not just around a common interest but also around shared, meaningful experiences and relationships among the members. These relationships are not superficial; they involve established meanings and bonds, reflecting the authenticity of these social relationships. Hence, the materiality of individuals within such a collectivity extends beyond physical presence. Materiality, in this sense, refers more to the notion that members of the collectivity are given interpersonal meanings, in other words, perceived as ‘authentic’. We can describe this ‘authenticity’ of relationships and shared experiences as the ‘thickness’ of collectivity. It is this thickness that marks the authenticity of relationships within the collectivity and provides a robust sense of belonging. Interestingly, this mirrors certain aspects of the indie music genre, which is often constructed as authentic, standing in contrast to formulaic pop music (see Chapter 4). Just as indie music is valued for its ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ qualities, the relationships within the indie music lover collectivity are similarly perceived. The genre’s perceived authenticity is echoed in the social bonds formed among its listeners, suggesting a symbiotic relationship between the music and its collectivity.

If we understand the materiality and authenticity of collectivity in this light, while this group of participants generally found it more challenging to perceive collectivities in a digital environment, it is not entirely impossible. For example, one interviewee, Flora (female, 21), mentioned:

\[I\text{ }think\text{ }it\text{ }will\text{ }feel\text{ }more\text{ }collective\text{ }if\text{ }the\text{ }[\text{WeChat}]\text{ }group\text{ }is\text{ }small,\text{ }not\text{ }too\text{ }many\text{ }people,\text{ }and\text{ }if\text{ }you\text{ }know\text{ }more\text{ }people\text{ }in\text{ }it.\]

Although Flora did not associate collectivity with a closer relationship such as
‘friends’ as Francis suggested, she still emphasised that membership in collectivity is based on knowing each other. In the digital environment, this ‘knowing’ may not necessarily involve face-to-face acquaintances in the physical world but rather establishing sufficient mutual meaning in the digital realm. Of course, this is not to say that small scales certainly generate a sense of collectivity but that small-scale gatherings can better facilitate ‘authentic’ relationships. Flora’s emphasis on ‘know[ing] more people in it’ suggests that if an individual can establish and access sufficient meaningful social relationships in a digital environment, then a collectivity can also be digitally constructed and perceived. Flora’s perspective illustrates the potential for digital collectivity, indicating that meaningful connections and mutual understanding within a digital space can contribute to the perception of collectivity as an empirical entity.

To summarise this type of collectivity, these music lovers’ perception of collectivity is largely influenced by the materiality or, more aptly, the authenticity of the group and members. This sense of materiality is rooted in meaningful relationships and shared experiences. For these participants, the materiality of collectivity highlights the depth of interpersonal relationships and shared experiences. It is shaped by mutual recognition and understanding of each other, which are established and reinforced through interactive processes. This sense of materiality is particularly manifested in offline settings, where the tangibility of interactions and experiences amplifies the perceived authenticity of interpersonal connectedness. But in online settings, the materiality is not completely negated but requires a different kind of effort to foster meaningful relationships that can give rise to a perception of collectivity.

For this particular group of indie music lovers, as represented by the interviewees quoted earlier, the perception and formation of collectivity are fundamentally tied to materiality. However, there is another perception of music-
lover collectivity among other participants that diverges from the emphasis on materiality and ‘authentic’ members. It reveals how collectivities can be formed in more imagined and hypothetical ways.

When discussing their interpretations of collectivity, more than half of the interviewees indicated that the main factor in perceiving collectivity was not necessarily the close ties but the assumed similarity between themselves and others. This hypothetical likeness arises from shared musical preferences and may extend to other aspects of their lives. For example, one interviewee expressed, ‘people who like the same song may, not necessarily for sure, but may share some similar experiences’ (Ella, 24, female). In this type of collectivity, the similarities among members are not explicitly affirmed but are rather derived from the social actor’s imagination of other music lovers. As Ken, a 27-year-old male indie music lover, put it:

*What is this called? Subculture? Whatever it is, this niche culture will make it possible for you to find and meet people who are very much like you, like-minded people. You have a lot in common. You have a sense of belonging. Yes, yes, there is such a kind of feeling […] You have common preferences, so it’s possible to have common traits […] Let’s say a song that’s a bit quirky, a special song, and just very few people like it. Then maybe the people who like this song have the same kind of characteristics. Or maybe this song has touched other people as well and has brought redemption to them. So, there’s a feeling of empathy.*

Here, Ken’s description of collectivity members surpasses the requirements of embodied individuals. For Ken, these members are not specific individuals that he can identify. What matters to him is not personal acquaintance with these individuals but rather his conviction that they must exist somewhere. This conviction underscores a sense of sharedness among these music lovers, a
feeling that transcends physical presence or pre-existed relationships. It is founded on the capacity to empathise with others who share similar musical interests. This sense of sharedness and empathy, even towards unknown others, is a powerful manifestation of collective resonance within indie music collectivity. The concept of resonance (see Rosa, 2019) captures the ability of music lovers to create a shared emotional experience, irrespective of their physical locations or personal connections. This aspect, which will be extensively explored in Section 8.2, portrays music as a unifying force that transcends temporal and geographical boundaries, contributing to the establishment and sustainability of collective flourishing (Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

However, it is important to note that for these participants, the perception of similarities among collectivity members is not solely dependent on their own imagination but may also emerge from practical interactions. Some participants also emphasise the importance of seeking recognition and validation of their musical preferences from fellow music lovers. As one interviewee expressed:

*For instance, once I went to watch a gig, but no one in the uni went with me, but I asked [in a music-lover WeChat group] that day if anyone else was going to watch it. And a bunch of people replied. Then we suddenly became like good brothers, this feeling […] I felt that maybe we all like something similar […] Even if we had not met and had not talked much before, knowing that there’re other people who also like these, there was a collective feeling. (Jacob, 20, male)*

For Jacob, his perception of collectivity is closely tied to the distinction between his everyday life and musical life. The music-lover collectivity becomes a place for him to find like-minded individuals. Jacob’s perception of collectivity is not necessarily influenced by face-to-face interactions or personal relationships. Instead, his feeling of collectivity is shaped by the responses he receives from
a broader and more inclusive group of music lovers, regardless of physical proximity or personal acquaintance. This indicates that collectivity extends beyond the boundaries of physical interactions and personal relationships. While these music lovers may not be embodied in the physical sense or known to each other personally, they are united by a shared passion, a collective identity, and a sense of mutual understanding. Despite the absence of personal knowledge or physical encounters, they remain cognisant of each other’s existence. Given these factors, it can be posited that for this group of indie music lovers, collectivity manifests more as an abstract awareness than as an empirical social entity. This form of collectivity represents a distinct social interconnectedness among indie music lovers. To distinguish between the two forms of collectivity, in the following pages, I will use the term ‘collectivity’ to refer to the empirical reality discussed earlier and ‘collectiveness’ to denote the abstract awareness of collectivity currently under discussion.

For this group of indie music lovers, the shift in perception of collectiveness from embodied individuals to imagined homogenous others significantly influences their interactions with each other. A caveat is appropriate and necessary here: interaction remains a crucial factor in both collectivity and collectiveness, with the difference lying in their interpretations of what constitutes interaction. In other words, the crux here is what kind of behaviour can be considered as interaction.

For those who perceive collectivity as an empirical reality, participatory interactions hold greater significance. In their view, participation is manifested through direct and immediate interactions characterised by reciprocity. They place value on active engagement and direct involvement, where individuals interact and engage with each other in a mutually responsive manner. This is not difficult to understand, considering their emphasis on embodied members
within the collectivity. This is not to suggest that direct interaction is unattainable in the digital and online environment; similar effects can also be achieved through means such as video calls. However, the more prevalent mode of online interaction among music lovers occurs through text-based communication, which poses challenges for direct interaction. This partially explains why they struggle to perceive collectivity in a digital context. In the online interactions we are discussing here, music lovers primarily engage in asynchronous communication concerning music. In many cases, there is a time delay between sending a message and its receipt, which hinders interlocutors from engaging in continuous, real-time interaction. For example, Paul, a 22-year-old male participant, exemplified this by stating:

_In music-lover [WeChat] groups, it’s actually quite difficult. You want to talk about something, but there are too many people in a group, and everyone has different objectives. So, it’s highly like that you’ll post a message and get interrupted by other people discussing different topics, or your message just gets lost in the endless messages. When others reply to you, it might be much later, and if you’re not paying attention, you could easily miss it. After all, there are too many messages in the group, and it’s impossible to read every single one._

In direct interactions, social actors play the roles of information sender and receiver simultaneously, thereby establishing a reciprocal exchange. However, asynchronous communication often leads to a separation between the sender and receiver roles, resulting in a unidirectional flow of communication. An illustrative example can be found in the music comment section on streaming music platforms. Music comments are posted by users, but they are only read when others choose to browse through them. The posting and reading of comments do not happen simultaneously, let alone replying, thus deviating from the requirement of immediacy associated with direct interaction. Moreover,
despite the existence of comment-reply functions on these platforms, participants reported that they seldom respond to music comments made by others. Reflecting on his experience in reading comments, Francis put it:

*I don’t think I have [perceived the presence of collectivity in music comments]. I know it’s essentially a social thing, but it doesn’t make me feel a collective presence. I probably feel independent from these people. I am just a spectator […] It’s essentially a form of social interaction, but I’m not involved in it. I’m just there as a recipient and not there to voice my thoughts.

For Francis, two interconnected dynamics are at work here. Firstly, the nature of asynchronous communication positions him predominantly as a passive recipient of information, merely consuming content without engaging in active dialogue. Secondly, his self-identification as a ‘spectator’ underlines his conscious decision to refrain from digital interactions. This choice further accentuates his passive reception, thus reinforcing his detachment from the process of direct interaction. His perception of reading comments as a non-interactive process contrasts with other participants who embrace collectiveness as an abstract awareness. For them, understanding and being understood by others despite the lack of immediate communication contributes to a sense of collective presence. This variation in perception and engagement indicates the complexity of interaction within digital platforms. One participant commented:

*Because nowadays, music Apps are socially featured, my requirements for music are not just listening to the song. Not like I listen to the song on the radio, but I listen to it on my phone now. I want to open up the comments. I want to see people who have real sentiments feel about this song. I’m curious. I have this desire to know. I want to know what other people think of the song, so it creates the feeling*
Iris stressed an important aspect of distinguishing streaming music platforms on smartphones from traditional listening methods, as she emphasised the significance of discovering others’ opinions about a song through music comments. For this group of music lovers, represented by Iris, through posting and reading comments, the act of listening to music transcends mere passive listening and evolves into interactive engagements with other listeners. Despite the predominantly one-way communication nature of this interaction, it does not hinder these music lovers from perceiving a sense of collectiveness. Liza (23, female) expressed similar sentiment by stating:

Even if we don’t know each other, and even if there’s no one-to-one discussion with each other, just reading their comments or reading their conversations, there’s this, a sense of belonging.

For her, the act of reading itself can be considered a form of interaction in which she does not necessarily need to take any active steps to respond to others’ expressions. Another interviewee, Kyle (female, 24), gave her explanation for this phenomenon:

For example, if they say something, then I see what they say and may have a thought, then I want to say, ‘Yes, yes, that’s right, and I think blablabla.’ I just omit the process of sending ‘what I think’. I have received what they said to me, what they said to everyone. I just didn’t output my own stuff, but I actually communicated with them.

Contrary to a traditional view where interaction is typically characterised by a visible exchange of communication, Kyle highlights a different aspect of interaction. In her statement, she suggests that interactions are not necessarily
about a visible exchange between individuals; instead, it can also be about an internal cognitive process where she forms personal responses and attitudes to others’ expressions. This excerpt suggests that Kyle engages with the content posted by others, processing and responding to it internally, even if she does not outwardly voice her thoughts. Her internal agreement, disagreement, or expansion of ideas in response to others’ comments signify an interaction for her, albeit one that remains internal. This form of interaction, which may not be outwardly observable, still contributes to her sense of involvement and belonging within the collectivity. This is similar to the introspective nature of self-expression discussed in Section 7.2. Thus, this group of music lovers recognises that an individual’s internal reaction to external stimuli can also be regarded as a form of social interaction. This introspective form of interaction deepens our understanding of collectiveness by accentuating how members can feel a sense of belonging and connection even in the absence of overt communication.

In the field of communication science, scholars have proposed concepts of parasocial interaction and relationship (Horton and Richard Wohl, 1956; Giles, 2002) to describe the asymmetrical nature of relationships between audiences and media performers, which is understood as an illusory experience. Many recent studies (e.g., Greenwood and Long, 2009) have shown that some individuals can experience a sense of belonging in solitude through non-reciprocal parasocial interactions. These studies resonate with the perspectives expressed by this group of participants.

So, for this category of music lovers, can collectiveness be regarded as an imagined community? It is possible to argue that there are still nuanced differences between them. There are certain similarities, particularly in the fact that individual members rely on their ‘imagination’ to construct both. Like an
imagined community, music-lover collectiveness is an idealised construct deeply ingrained in individual consciousness. However, the distinction between collectiveness and imagined community lies in the perception of the members of the group. In an imagined community, mutual understanding and a sense of shared presence are fostered through common languages, words, and media (Anderson, 1983). Music-lover collectivities may also involve shared language, terminology, and cultural products. Nevertheless, for this particular group of indie music lovers, the key aspect is that collectiveness exists within the individual’s mind. It is a personal experience rather than a mutual or collective recognition. This perspective is reflected in the language used by the interviewees.

This group of indie music lovers seems to prefer the phrase ‘sense of collectiveness’ instead of the sole word ‘collectivity’/’collectiveness’, which, to some extent, highlights the subjectivity within it. In other words, for them, collectiveness takes the form of a feeling. It is not an established socio-cultural group or an aggregation of individual music lovers within a specific temporal-spatial framework. Instead, it represents an internal sense within an individual’s consciousness. Four decades ago, Frith (1981, p. 164) reminded us that ‘[t]he rock “community” refers not to an institution, to a set of people, but to a sensation’. As a ‘feeling’, collectiveness is not standardised, nor can it be accurately defined or compared. This parallels Bauman’s (2000, p. 78) discussion of people’s ‘sense of fitness’ in contemporary society:

‘Arriving at an interpersonal norm would be a tall order anyway, since no objective comparison between individual degrees of fitness is feasible. Fitness, unlike health, is about subjective experience (in the sense of ‘lived’ experience, ‘felt’ experience - not a state or an event that may be observed from outside, verbalized and communicated). Like all subjective states, the experience of ‘being fit’ is
notoriously difficult to articulate in a fashion suitable for interpersonal communication, let alone interpersonal comparison.’

As Bauman suggests, like fitness, collectiveness is about subjective experience. It is a deeply personal, ‘lived’ experience that resists standardisation or uniformity. For these music lovers, their ‘sense of collectiveness’ is an intensely personal experience that cannot be externally defined or measured. Just as Bauman mentions the difficulty of articulating the experience of ‘being fit’ in a manner suitable for interpersonal communication, so too does the experience of collectiveness present similar challenges. It is not easily expressed or communicated to others, nor can it be compared or assessed objectively. It is a nuanced, complex, and deeply subjective feeling that each member experiences in their own unique way.

Moreover, it is also relevant to consider that the perception of collectivity (as an empirical reality) may also have a subjective attribute. After all, collectivity is not a rigid, uniformly defined construct as well. It is shaped and influenced by individuals’ individual experiences and interpretations. Participants’ perceptions of collectivity often originate from shared preferences, interpretations, and experiences of music, which are inherently personal. Therefore, even when considering collectivity as a concrete, empirical reality, its formation and perception involve elements of subjectivity. While collectivity might be grounded in materiality, its perception is invariably influenced by the subjective relationships of other members, lending it a depth that goes beyond its empirical existence. In this light, it is important to recognise that the distinction between collectivity and collectiveness is not as clear-cut as it may initially seem. While they may represent different aspects of indie music lovers’ understanding of collectivity – one grounded in empirical reality and the other in abstract awareness – both are inherently subjective, influenced by personal experiences.
and interpretations. As such, they provide a multi-dimensional understanding of the interconnectedness within indie music socialising.

In this context, subjectivity becomes a catalyst for deeper connection and understanding among indie music lovers. While it may be impossible to precisely convey or compare one’s personal experiences, the sharing of these experiences, however imperfectly, helps to build a shared language and understanding between music lovers. For example, indie music lovers might not be able to fully express how a particular song resonates with them on a personal level, but by sharing their feelings, they contribute to a collective interpretation and understanding of the music. Hence, subjectivity, instead of posing a barrier, becomes a bridge that connects individual music lovers through shared emotions and experiences. This aspect will be thoroughly explored in the subsequent section. This subjective and plural sense of collectivity does not necessarily need to be compared or measured against a standard. Instead, it is the diversity and depth of these personal experiences of indie music lovers that enrich the collectivity and foster a sense of belonging and mutual understanding.

To conclude this section, the perception of collectivity among Chinese indie music lovers manifests in two forms: as an empirical reality and as an abstract awareness. This section asserts that both forms of collectivity are valid and contribute to the overall collective experience among indie music lovers. They both enhance the richness of indie music collectivity, despite their differing interpretations of what constitutes collectivity and the interactions within it. However, the subjective feeling of collectivity, though not immediately quantifiable or comparable, is an integral part of the collective identity and experience, thereby fostering a more profound connection among music lovers. This section underscores that collectivity is not a fixed concept but a dynamic
state that arises from music socialising. In the next section, I will further dissect a significant element of music-lover interconnectedness – resonance.

8.2 Meaning Exchange, Resonance, and Intersubjective Collectivity

After outlining the differences between the two forms of perceived collectivity, this section aims to identify common elements within the participants’ narratives regarding the process of cultivating collectivity. The previous section has suggested that collectivity can be understood as a subjective state. Thus, the concept of collectivity among music lovers extends beyond a mere aggregation of individuals who share similar musical tastes or preferences. It encompasses a subjective comprehension of the present social context by each individual. However, this raises a seemingly paradoxical question: how do indie music lovers establish an intersubjective perception and experience of collectivity when it is inherently subjective and interpreted in pluralistic and distinct ways? This section will delve into this question and provide an answer.

To commence this exploration, I will examine two representative scenarios and the typical interactions associated with them, which were frequently mentioned by interviewed indie music lovers when discussing collectivity. These scenarios encompass digital discussions, such as in IM groups and music comment sections, and embodied collective activities in live music settings. By elucidating how Chinese indie music lovers exchange meanings within these specific scenarios and through interactive behaviours, I will introduce and expound upon the concept of ‘resonance’ to enhance our understanding of how music lovers perceive their peers and the collective state.

An essential aspect of comprehending the intersubjectivity among indie music lovers lies in understanding the exchange of meanings between them. In this respect, the act of interaction can be a practical starting point. One of the key
differences between the two types of collectivities discussed in the previous section is the interviewees’ varying interpretations of the concept of ‘interaction’. While different groups of music lovers understand and define interaction differently, they generally recognise that the formation and sustenance of interactivity are essential to any form of music lover collectivity. From the perspective of symbolic interactionists, all interactions revolve around social meanings. As noted by Blumer (1969), social actors interact with things based on the meanings they ascribe to them, which are shaped through social interactions and continuously maintained and transformed through interpretive processes. Thus, interaction and meaning are intrinsically intertwined, as they mutually shape one another. Analysing interaction, therefore, involves not only examining the act itself but also dissecting the underlying meanings that are constructed and inherent within these interactions. Such an analysis facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the process of exchanging meanings, thereby shedding light on the realisation of intersubjectivity among indie music lovers.

The first scenario we will analyse is the digital realm of music socialising, represented by IM groups and music comment sections on streaming music platforms. These digital platforms are commonly considered spaces where indie music lovers gather, providing opportunities for individuals who identify as music lovers to connect with each other and potentially cultivate collectivity. As one interviewee put it:

I think it’s kind of enjoyable to have such like-minded friends, so I joined a few [groups …] For example, I listen to Joyside, which is still a relatively obscure band. I liked them, but I hadn’t known many who listened to this band. But then I discovered this [WeChat] group later, and I felt like there was a sense of belonging or a feeling of finding companions. (Ken, male, 27)
Ken’s experience exemplifies many similar cases in which indie music lovers rely on IM groups and other digital platforms to connect with like-minded peers. As illustrated by Ken’s example, the popularity of digital platforms among indie music lovers exemplifies the transformative role of technology in their social interactions. This phenomenon can be understood through the lenses of the long tail effect (Anderson, 2009) and the social affordances of digital technologies in constructing personalised networks (Wellman, 2001, 2002). The long tail effect suggests that our culture and economy are shifting away from a focus on a limited number of mainstream products at the top of the demand curve towards a multitude of niche interests in the long tail. Digital platforms magnify this effect by providing a space and means for niche interests like indie music to thrive. These platforms create a virtual space where indie music lovers can gather and connect, facilitating the formation of personalised networks based on shared musical preferences. Ken specifically mentioned WeChat groups, but the internet allows music lovers to build networks that transcend a single platform, leveraging the distinct features and functions of different digital platforms (Baym, 2007). These platforms foster a sense of belonging and connectedness among individuals who may never, or seldom, meet in person but can forge a deep connection through their love for indie music. However, it is crucial to recognise that the digital space is not merely a neutral container for these networks; it actively shapes the nature of interactions within them. As argued by Baym (2015), different digital platforms offer various affordances and constraints that impact how users can connect and interact with one another.

However, as discussed in the previous section, the mere aggregation of individuals with similar attributes does not guarantee the emergence of collectivity. During my online ethnography, I encountered an unconventional WeChat group comprising indie music lovers. Interestingly, this group adhered
to a strict rule: only music sharing (typically in the form of links from streaming music platforms) was permitted, while any form of discussion was discouraged (see Figure 8.2.1). The motivations that drive individuals to join such a digital group, where interpersonal interaction is almost forbidden, may be sophisticated. Nevertheless, what is apparent is that collectivity is scarcely discernible within this group, primarily due to the absence of substantial and reciprocal interaction.

Figure 8.2.1 WeChat group: ‘NO TALKS ONLY MUSIC’

According to symbolic interactionism, meanings are constructed, negotiated, and transformed through interactions between individuals. But in an environment like this WeChat group, where interaction is unidirectional or
minimal, we can observe a disruption in the typical process of meaning-making. In this case, the restriction on discussion and interaction hinders the formation of collectivity. Without interactions about meaning, the process of shared meaning-making is stifled, and the space for mutual understanding and empathy, which are crucial for forming collective identity and experience, is significantly reduced. This example underscores the importance of the exchange of meanings in fostering a sense of collectivity among indie music lovers. It indicates that while digital platforms can provide spaces for music lovers to come together, the nature and quality of interactions within these spaces are critical determinants of whether a sense of collectivity can be realised. Thus, the creation and sustenance of collectivity in digital spaces can be seen as an ongoing process of negotiation and reinterpretation of meanings through interaction.

In the previous section, I discussed the role of indirect interaction in perceiving collectivity (collectiveness). However, unlike the complete absence of interaction, indirect interaction still involves a certain degree of exchange of meanings between social actors, even if it takes the form of one-way communication. The communal function of one-way communication is also evident in other aspects of our everyday life, such as television, radio, online videos, and podcasts, where meaning is transferred through the selective internalisation of information by the receiver. Nevertheless, in a group where discussion is virtually prohibited, the exchange of meaning between members is minimal. It is undeniable that the music itself, including its title, style, lyrics, and artists, conveys meaning, but this transmission of meaning is often vague and broad. Or, from another perspective, the opposite can also be true: the meaning contained in music sharing can be very specific, particularly in the case of subjective interpretation of lyrics. However, since recipients are not provided with clues to decode the message, they cannot effectively or fully
access the meaning it conveys. The lyrics of certain musical works, especially indie music, often employ heavy metaphorical language, necessitating personal interpretation based on individual understandings, which is inevitably tied to personal experiences and knowledge. Due to the highly personal and diverse interpretations of lyrics, they often differ significantly from, or sometimes over-interpret, the original intentions of the person sharing them. In the case of the ‘music only’ group, the value of the exchange of meaning in the music itself is almost lost due to the lack of accompanying information, such as the purpose and motivation behind sharing the music and interpretations of it. Simply showing the title and artists of a song does not provide others with substantial information.

If we observe other music-lover IM groups using the same criteria, we may come across similar cases, albeit less extreme than the one examined. When discussing the music-lover groups she joined, Nora (female, 20) mentioned a specific type of group:

There will be announcements of gigs, recent events, trends and so on [in WeChat groups]. Many other groups seem to be of a similar nature […] I don’t really talk in these groups […] For me, maybe the principal function and meaning of these groups is to get and receive information rather than communicate with others.

Here, Nora views these groups primarily from a functional perspective. For her, these groups serve as channels for receiving information and staying updated on her favoured bands and genres. In this case, as well, the exchange of meaning is absent. The exchange of meaning in a social context typically involves sharing ideas, perspectives, emotions, and interpretations. It requires communication and interaction between individuals to understand and derive meaning from shared information or experiences. However, Nora’s perception
of these groups focuses on receiving and consuming information rather than engaging in meaning discussions or interpersonal interactions\textsuperscript{29}.

A common denominator between the two types of digital groups described is that both revolve around specific musical interests but lack interaction or the exchange of meaning, thereby failing to generate collectivity among their members. While I cannot assert that every member of these groups is an indie music lover, it is reasonable to speculate that most of them share an interest in indie music. However, this shared attribute alone cannot be a core element for music lovers to perceive collectivity. In contrast, \textit{substantive interactions} are more conducive to creating interpersonal connections. Iris, a 24-year-old female interviewee, provided her perspective on the importance of interaction within music-lover groups:

\begin{quote}
They would really discuss some musical things in there [WeChat groups], and I would get involved, and then people would give some reactions. Overall, it’s just very participatory, and you do get to talk about some things [related to music …] The way I get to know people is through communication and interaction. So, when people communicate and interact with me, they make me feel close, which thereby gives me a sense of reliability and security.
\end{quote}

As Iris aptly narrates, communication and interaction can be crucial for fostering a sense of closeness and mutual understanding among individuals. Merely identifying as a music lover may not be sufficient to generate a sense of collectivity, let alone facilitate an intersubjective understanding of it among

\textsuperscript{29} It is possible that these music links and information may acquire an ‘afterlife’ or be re-purposed outside these groups, potentially facilitating interaction within other networks and contexts. But this remains a hypothetical possibility, and within the scope of the discussed groups, the role of these links as catalysts for interaction is not realised.
group members. While the music-lover identity may serve as a necessary precondition for the formation of collectivity, it does not automatically translate into a sense of collective identity or belonging.

In this context, I propose that regardless of whether interactions are direct or indirect, successful and effective interactions that foster collectivity are characterised by their ‘substantive’ nature. By ‘substantive interactions’, I refer to those that involve the exchange of meanings, sentiments, or perspectives, which contribute to a mutual understanding among the participants. Even in indirect interaction, such as asynchronous sharing of music or opinions, the potential to foster collectivity exists if the content conveys meaning and elicits empathetic or emotional responses from the recipients. Conversely, insubstantial interactions, although technically considered interactions, do not effectively contribute to the formation of collectivity because they lack the depth or resonance required to establish a shared understanding. Examples of this can be seen in the previously mentioned ‘music only’ group and Iris’s description. While these interactions can be considered a form of communication, they are insubstantial in that they do not facilitate the exchange of meanings or foster connections between group members. Therefore, the formation of collectivity, as well as the intersubjective understanding of collectivity, relies not solely on the form of interaction but more critically on the substantive quality of these interactions. It is the depth, meaning, and resonance within the interactions that contribute to a sense of shared understanding, mutual identity, and, ultimately, the cultivation of collectivity among indie music lovers.

Building upon this argument, it is important to understand that for indie music lovers, interaction is not just a mechanism of social engagement; it is a fundamental way to develop a sense of ‘mutual understanding’ among social
actors. This aspect of mutual understanding is precisely what they value most in perceiving collectivity. A participant’s response during the interview provides insight into this perspective:

*I certainly want to see what feelings this song takes to everyone and then see if there are sensations similar to mine, or if I will be moved by their stories […] They would use better words to express it, but of course, not those hypocritical words. I don’t know if you have ever felt that way. You have a feeling in your heart, but you don’t know how to convey it. Someday, suddenly, you see someone says this sentence that precisely expresses your thoughts.* (Kay, 20, female)

Here, Kay’s statement highlights a crucial point: in the digital context, specifically within the IM groups and music comments we are discussing, the exchange of meaning relies on linguistic and textual communication\(^{30}\). This reliance on language and words is so commonplace that we often ignore it. The significance of language and words in human communication is undeniable, as they have significantly facilitated interpersonal interaction. However, when our expressions and interpretations of meaning are based on language and words, they also have the potential to constrain our communication and hinder the development of mutual understanding. This constraint has two implications.

\(^{30}\) I admit that in digital interaction, besides written words, visual cues such as emojis and memes are often used. These visual cues add another layer of complexity to the interaction, enabling users to convey emotions and thoughts that may not be easily expressed through words alone (Tantawi and Rosson, 2019). However, it is crucial to recognise that these visual cues, although not linguistic in the traditional sense, serve a paralinguistic function. Paralinguistic features are components of communication that supplement verbal language, aiding in conveying meaning, expressing emotion, and signalling interpersonal attitudes (Pavalanathan and Eisenstein, 2016). While these visual cues enhance expressiveness, they are still part of a linguistic or semiotic system. They do not escape the constraints of language in digital communication.
Firstly, the use of language and words may prevent us from fully conveying the intended meaning. There may be meanings in our minds that cannot be adequately expressed and conveyed through language. In other words, there can be a gap between ideas/meanings and language (Bouzanis, 2023). This is illustrated by Kay’s statement, where her understanding of music already exists internally, but she is limited in expressing it in her own words and needs to seek better descriptions from others’ music comments to accurately convey her feelings verbally. In this case, meaning is not generated in the process of interpersonal interaction but requires an external and communicable form through appropriate language use. It could be argued that when we rely on texts to express and receive meanings, the meaning exchange turns into a semantic exchange.

Underpinning this, the second implication is that language and words can potentially limit social actors’ interpretation of meaning conveyed by others, leading to misunderstandings between them. An extreme example of this is the difficulty in achieving smooth communication between individuals who speak different languages. The gap between language and meaning can have a significant impact on the formation of perceived collectivity among indie music lovers. If members struggle to articulate their thoughts and feelings about a particular song, it may hinder their ability to connect with others on a deeper level, thus affecting the formation of a collective experience. Moreover, even when members find ‘better words’ to convey meanings, the language still requires others to interpret it, which can give rise to misunderstandings stemming from subjective interpretations.

To achieve an effective exchange of meaning, it is essential to convey and interpret what is being communicated accurately. Thus, in addition to substantive interaction, establishing mutual understanding also requires
**effective meaning exchange.** My most straightforward definition of effective meaning exchange is the ability of social actors to convey and interpret their communication with one another accurately. In some cases, while social actors may have differing opinions or ideas, they are able to understand and interpret exactly what the other person is saying in the communication process. This mutual understanding is vital for the cultivation of intersubjective collectivity among indie music lovers.

Commenting on the expert system proposed by Habermas and Giddens, Lash (1994) suggests that expert systems and legalised discourses are established to repair interrupted shared meanings. According to this perspective, language and words are seen as an additional system attached to meaning. This view suggests a form of separation, where the word is not the meaning itself but a vehicle for transmitting it 31. From this perspective, when shared meaning functions successfully, there is no need for additional expert systems and legalised discourses to intervene in the meaning exchange.

This can be observed in everyday life situations. For example, when two individuals do not know sign language but need to use gestures to communicate in a special situation, expressing their thoughts and understanding each other’s gestures become a communication challenge. To communicate effectively, a shared understanding – perhaps not requiring a perfect consensus but at least a practical level of understanding sufficient for

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31 I acknowledge that this view is radical. Language is, to a substantial extent, intertwined with meaning, even though there are instances where meaning can transcend it. But, as the previous case and analysis have demonstrated, language can also hinder effective meaning exchange. This makes it necessary to further examine how successful meaning exchange occurs and takes place.
the involved parties – must be achieved regarding the meaning of each gesture. However, if one person does not understand the meaning conveyed by the other person’s gestures, further explanation is needed, often relying on other communication systems such as the written word. Nevertheless, the written word itself is a symbolic system, creating a dilemma of using symbols to interpret symbols. This can lead to a cycle of interpretation where one symbol requires another for an explanation, which in turn requires another, potentially obscuring the original meaning. In contrast, when the expression of meaning can be understood by each other, additional explanations for the gesture are unnecessary. In this situation, the gesture itself embodies the meaning without the need for further symbolic interpretation.

My purpose in highlighting these potential complexities and limitations of excessive reliance on language and symbolic systems is to emphasise the need for music lovers to find alternative ways to engage with others and establish intersubjective mutual understandings. This demonstrates the importance of exploring avenues beyond linguistic communication to foster meaningful connections and shared experiences among indie music lovers.

Of course, this is not to say that meaning cannot exchange effectively in a digital environment. As previous excerpts illustrate, research participants are able to develop a sense of mutual understanding with other music lovers through various forms of communication. My critical discussion of linguistic communication only suggests that semantic expressions have the potential to be a limiting factor in the exchange of meaning and, therefore, influence the generation of an intersubjective collectivity. This can also help to explain the different viewpoints that music lovers have regarding collectivity in the digital environment, as discussed in the previous section.
In pursuing effective meaning exchange, it is worth exploring another interaction scenario of ‘collective activity’ in offline live music settings. Throughout the study, interviewees frequently mentioned their experiences in live music scenarios, especially the collective activities among audiences, which encompass various forms of physical engagement such as headbanging, circle pits, and pogoing. Sometimes, these collective activities also involve interactions between audiences and band members, as exemplified by crowd surfing. Music has the power to physically move people, which is commonly suggested as one of the humans’ psychological responses to music (Levitin, Grahn and London, 2018). Participants suggested that these collective activities are significant sources of perceiving interpersonal connections in live music settings. As Jane (19, female) put it:

*Interacting with everyone and with the band, such as pogoing together or catching these diving people together, I feel we can generate a connection […] Everyone has some eye contact and physical communication. We don’t need spoken language, but we create a sense of belonging.*

Body movements can be regarded as instinctive human responses to music, such as tapping, nodding, and even simple dances following the rhythm of the music. There is strong evidence of a close relationship between body movement and music perception, known as embodied music cognition (Leman and Maes, 2014, 2015). These bodily interactions serve as a non-verbal means of communication, facilitating a sense of connection and shared experience among participants in live music contexts.

The interpretation of music expressed through body movement holds greater potential for intersubjective understanding compared to the meanings conveyed through language. As illustrated by research participants, such
embodied movements are more easily understood by other indie music lovers, thus fostering ‘imagined affinities’ (see Fogarty, 2012). The embodiment can be seen as the process of enacting music scenes through the body (Driver and Bennett, 2015). The way we move to music, react to its rhythm, and express ourselves non-verbally can be viewed as manifestations of our cultural understanding and appreciation of the particular music. In live music settings, the etiquette of watching a performance requires a unique form of face-to-face communication that does not allow for the use of words. Here, body movement becomes a crucial channel of communication, despite conveying less precise and concrete information than words and language. For example, different audiences may interpret the music and atmosphere differently, but they all show it by nodding their heads in time to the drums. Here, the body becomes a primary vehicle for exploring the lived experiences of music (Holmes, Crossley and Park, 2023).

However, body movements alone are insufficient to convey the music lovers’ understanding of the music in detail. Each body movement contains a wealth of information. Every gesture, every motion, is laden with layers of possible meaning influenced by the individual’s personal experience, cultural understanding, and emotional state. In the language of information theory, the information entropy of body movements is high, reflecting the multitude of possible meanings each movement can convey. At the same time, because

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32 The phrase ‘use of words’ here refers to private conversations between audience members, such as whispering during a performance. It is common for audiences to sing along with the band at a gig. Although lyrics are also words, I tend to consider singing together as another form of collective activity rather than verbal communication. Because the purpose of singing together is not exchanging meanings between the audiences but rather audiences (and bands) participating in an activity together.
body movements carry a broad spectrum of meanings and are influenced by numerous variables, they can be ambiguous and diffuse in interactions. According to our previous analysis of mutual understanding, coordination among audiences must be achieved through effective meaning exchanges to establish collectivity. Given that the meanings implied by body movements are broad and ambiguous, how, then, is mutual understanding between audiences achieved?

A possible answer is that in live music settings, mutual understanding is established based on a *general emotion* carried and conveyed by collective activities rather than a specific interpretation of the music. This suggests a form of embodiment that revolves around shared emotional experiences. Commenting on collective activities in live music settings, one of the interviewees said:

> Especially everyone pogo. I sometimes pogo with them. We don’t know each other, but we radiate energy. (Flora, 21, female)

In this context, the word ‘energy’, as referenced by Flora, can be interpreted as an expression of collective emotions, a shared feeling that resonates among all gig attendees. This emotion is not solely inspired by the music itself but also arises in response to the overall atmosphere of the live music setting. Individuals express their emotions through body movements, and these emotions, in turn, contribute to the ambience and further synergise the emotions of others. Through this cyclical process, a shared emotion, or what can be more sociologically termed as collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1995), emerges from collective activities. After all, as Fonarow (2006, p. 196, emphasis in original) claims, ‘what is really at stake in indie performance […] is […] about *doing* versus *thinking*, *emotion* versus *rationality*.'
In this context, the exchange of meaning can, to some extent, be simplified when the content of the meaning is rooted in emotion rather than specific linguistic interpretations. This is not to suggest that emotions are purely universal or primal, as sociologists, such as McCarthy (1994), have identified the culturally and socially constructed nature of emotions. However, the experience of emotion can often transcend the boundaries of language, thus enabling a degree of shared understanding that might be more challenging to achieve through language alone. While the specific expressions and interpretations of emotions may differ between individuals because of their cultural and social backgrounds, certain emotional experiences, such as joy, sorrow, anger, or surprise, are recognised across individuals. In this sense, emotion may facilitate connections among music lovers that cut across the limitations of individual linguistic interpretations.

The shared emotional experience, even if mediated and shaped by cultural and social factors, can resonate with a broad audience, fostering a sense of mutual understanding. It is through this emotional connection, as complex and nuanced as it may be, that the complexity of communication can be somewhat mitigated, intensifying the sense of shared experience. In this perspective, music works at an affective level, connecting people by eliciting a common emotional understanding of the music, the live music context, and other audiences. In a participant’s words, ‘[i]f you have a sense of belonging, you must have resonance, you must have something in common’ (Kay, 19, female).

The word ‘resonance’ captures the core of the interconnectedness of indie music lovers. It is an emotional connection that streamlines the communication process, transitioning it from a hermeneutic message that requires interpretation to a cognitive one that is intuitively understood. It is processed and understood immediately without the need for interpretation or translation.
The shared emotional understanding and resonance create a unique bond that transcends the need for verbal or symbolic communication. It is a connection that is felt rather than explained. And *it is through resonance the intersubjective nature of collectivity can be effectively formed among indie music lovers.*

In the meanwhile, the concept of resonance carries another layer of meaning for indie music lovers. Let us review a typical scenario of a livehouse gig to explore the factors that contribute to the collective feeling experienced by music lovers. I take the example of my first ethnography at a livehouse. It was a Chinese post-rock band – Sparrow (文雀) – performing at the OMNI SPACE (疆进酒) in Beijing. OMNI SPACE is located in the Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Center, which consists of various performance venues of different sizes. The above-ground venues typically host classical concerts, plays, and musicals, while OMNI SPACE occupies one of the basement venues. To access the livehouse, audiences first enter the art centre’s lobby and then go downstairs via an escalator. As I stepped off the escalator and headed towards the livehouse entrance, I could hear the growing sound of rock music, which more or less contrasted with the ‘high culture’ atmosphere created by the ground floor. I arrived before the gig started, but the music was already playing through speakers to set the ambience. As I approached the door of the livehouse, the sound permeated the space, capturing the attention of everyone passing by, claiming the territory of indie music. Music, as a tool for defining atmosphere, resounded through the speakers, contributing to the making of the livehouse and shaping the space it occupies (Bennett, 2004; Clarke, 2013). After going through the ticket and security checks, I entered the livehouse, passing through the door and immersing myself in the realm of amplifiers.

The music played prior to the gig set the stage for the immersive experience that followed. While it was not excessively loud at this stage, once the
performance began, the speakers and amplifiers took on a new role. The invention of electronic microphones and amplifiers has been praised for facilitating the formation and development of modern popular music and shaping popular music culture (Lockheart, 2003). However, for general audiences, the experience of these electronic sound systems became more tangible – the low-frequency resonance generated by the loudspeaker boxes. Within the relatively confined space of the livehouse, everything seemed to vibrate with the amplified drums and basses. I could feel the vibrations coursing through my body, synchronised with the rhythm of the music. My chest cavity, clothes, and accessories, all became integrated with the live music, resonating with it physically.

In a recent acoustic experiment, the audio-induced vibrations were found to be positively connected to people’s perceived quality of the concert experience (Merchel and Altinsoy, 2014). But more importantly, these vibrations create an invisible connection between individuals and between audiences and the music, enhancing the overall sensory experience. The shared collective identity acts as a magnet, attracting individuals to the same space and event. However, it is when the music starts and the vibrations permeate the surroundings that a deeper connection is forged. The shared vibration extends beyond just an added layer to the music-listening experience. It is a powerful medium that enables or even ‘forces’ music lovers to connect with the music and each other, laying the foundation for a sense of mutual understanding and collectivity.

In the field of sociology, it was not until recent years that researchers began to theorise the concept of ‘resonance’. German critical sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2019) employs the term ‘resonance’ to elucidate the relationship between individuals and their environments in an ‘accelerated’ modern society. Resonance, according to Rosa (2019, p. 166), represents ‘a mode of being-in-
the-world, i.e. a specific way in which subject and world come into relation with each other.

Drawing on Rosa’s framework of resonance, the discussed scenarios and interactions highlight three distinct characteristics of resonance that explain the realisation of an intersubjective experience of collectivity among indie music lovers. First, resonance is imaginary and subjective, implying that collectivity involves a certain degree of autonomy. This leads us to reconsider interpersonal communication. Generally speaking, interpersonal communication is bidirectional, encompassing interaction between two or more social actors. However, the research findings suggest that while resonance involves multiple social actors, the communication is not entirely bidirectional or multidirectional; rather, it is more nuanced. Take live music settings as an example. Although there are physical interactions between audience members, the interpretation of others’ bodily movements and the perception of the live music atmosphere are individual experiences that can potentially lead to a diverse understanding of meaning. However, this diversity does not seem to hinder their coordinated perception of resonance and collectivity. The resonance relies on the implicit assumption of a mutual agreement or consensus. But does such a consensus truly exist? For participants, this is not a significant concern. Whether or not the consensus exists does not affect the formation of an intersubjective perception of collectivity. What important is an individual believes there is a consensus. As W. I. Thomas’s (Thomas and Thomas, 1928, p. 572) famous quote states: ‘If men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’. This is deeply linked to the viewpoint of symbolic interactionism, which directs attention to the significance of individuals’ interpretations of circumstances in comprehending their behaviours. One participant expressed this sentiment:
We may have the same feeling when listening to this song. I think it is a kind of inner feeling. (Kay, 20, female)

This resonance can also develop in the digital environment based on personal understanding. As Liza (23, female) put it:

When a group of similar people gather together, or when they discuss together, I can feel a sense of collectiveness [...] Even if we may not know each other, and there is no one-to-one discussion with each other, as long as I read their comments or watch their chats, there will be such a thing, a sense of collectiveness.

As Rosa (2019, p. 174) claims, '[r]esonance is not an echo, but a responsive relationship'. Although Rosa primarily focuses on the connection between individuals and the world, this statement can also be applicable to interpersonal relationships. For indie music lovers, resonance does not lie in the validation obtained through communication among multiple individuals but is grounded in an individual’s subjective response to the expressed meaning of others. This does not imply that interpersonal interactions are unnecessary; rather, it suggests that the formation of resonance is not exclusively dependent on others. Resonance, while being a shared experience, also encompasses subjective and imaginative elements.

Second, resonance is an emotional response rather than a mere exchange of meaning. While it can be argued that any form of relationship is rooted in affect, the emphasis here is on the emotional response as implicit cognitive feedback, distinct from the emotional relationship that stems from explicit meaning interpretation. DeNora (2000, 2006) points out that emotion has always been a central source of the power of music. Whether music is passively received or actively played, it evokes emotion. It is the shared experience of similar
emotions that strengthens the sense of belonging. As DeNora (2006, p. 19, emphasis in original) states, 'music does much more than depict emotions. It is a condition of affective experience'.

This raises the question of whether cognitive understanding of music can be expressed hermeneutically, particularly in scenarios that necessitate hermeneutic expression, such as a digital environment. I believe the answer is affirmative. If we browse the music comments on streaming platforms, we can easily notice that people’s interpretations of the same piece of music can vary significantly. But among these comments, there is one particular type that often receives favourable responses from other users – comments that describe an overall feeling of the song or depict the imagery evoked by it. For instance, on a streaming music platform, there is a comment regarding the song Morning (《早》) by Omnipotent Youth Society (万能青年旅店):

*I hear the sunrise. I hear a man wearing an old cotton jacket pushing a wheelbarrow through the early morning streets. The image is hazy. And I can also hear the morning glow and the faint mist.*

Although expressed through texts, this comment provides a sensory interpretation rather than a literal meaning of the song. It paints a vivid and evocative narrative that resonates with other listeners. This echoes Bull’s (2007) work on how individuals narrativize music in aesthetic terms, particularly his ideas on filmic cities and aesthetic experience, where music becomes a backdrop for our personally constructed narratives. Such comments lean more towards an emotional understanding rather than a strictly literal meaning, and they are more likely to be ‘liked’ by other users, thereby demonstrating a shared understanding in the collective emotional response.

*Third, resonance constitutes contextual collectiveness* instead of relational
collectiveness. In previous studies on collectivity and community, membership has been a significant concept (e.g., Hodkinson, 2002; Vandenberg, Berghman and van Eijck, 2021), representing a fixed relationship based on common attributes. Nevertheless, as illustrated in the aforementioned scenarios, identity is not prominently considered to be a core element that constitutes collectivity among indie music lovers. Instead, for these individuals, achieving a state of mutual understanding is more closely associated with resonance and the subsequent perception of intersubjective collectivity. Therefore, resonance is not a relation but a collective state that emerges based on a specific context.

Returning to the question of the common tie that binds music lovers together, it is now possible to argue that it is the state of resonance, which is subjective, emotional-based, and contextual, that engenders an intersubjective sense of collectiveness among Chinese indie music lovers. This section has explored the intricate dynamics of meaning exchange, resonance, and intersubjective collectivity within the context of Chinese indie music lovers. Central to the findings is the pivotal role of resonance as a shared emotional experience that transcends individual interpretations, facilitating the exchange of meaning and fostering a profound sense of collectivity. Resonance is not a mere reflection of shared emotions; rather, it is a subjective and imaginative response deeply rooted in the collective experience of music. It offers a novel lens for comprehending the intersubjective nature of social interconnectedness, going beyond conventional models of interpersonal communication and linguistic interactions. This shared resonance forms the foundation for a collective effervescence that permeates both live music settings and digital environments. Examining these dynamics broadens our understanding of the processes of meaning exchange and collectivity. Nevertheless, to capture the full picture, we must also grasp the perceived necessity and significance of collectivity in music socialising practices. As such, the concluding section of this chapter will move
on to discuss this aspect, exploring how these indie music lovers perceive the role of collectivity in their musical engagement and social interaction.

8.3 Collectivity and Individuality

Thus far, this chapter has focused on the perception and formation of collectivity among Chinese indie music lovers. It has elaborated on how these individuals constitute interconnected music-lover collectivities. Both previous sections of this chapter have underscored that the nature of collectivity among indie music lovers is subjective, manifesting in diverse forms and holding varying connotations for different individuals. However, in the meantime, they have also demonstrated that collectivity is a common phenomenon among Chinese indie music lovers and plays a vital role in connecting them. As I conclude this chapter, it is worth delving into another pertinent question: what does collectivity mean for indie music lovers? To address this question, this section will examine whether research participants perceive collectivity as essential for being an indie music lover and participating in indie music activities.

Throughout the interviews, most Chinese indie music lovers tended to generalise the meaning and value of collectivity in broad terms. They stressed the emotional arousal that stemmed from resonance and group interaction, which can be understood as collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1995 [1912]) in sociological terms. However, some participants explicitly depicted the positive role of collectivities in music in constructing and maintaining their sense of self. Music sociologists have noted the close correlation between music and the self, as music is both a means of constituting personal identity (Negus, 2012) and simultaneously an external expression of it (Nag, 2018). Nevertheless, scholars like Negus (1996a) remind us that it is not the music per se that constructs the self but rather the process through which people develop
interconnections through and with music. This perspective shifts our focus from the music itself to the ways individuals engage with it collectively. It highlights the significance of collectivity in the self-construction of indie music lovers. The argument here, then, is not just about the relationships between music and the self but also the essential role of collectivity in the formation and expression of identity. Commenting on the significance of collectivity, Harry (20, male) said:

*It’s actually important. I think [having] peers are still an especially important thing [...] It’s like sonar. You identify yourself by vocalising and bumping into people and then feeding back.*

Harry’s analogy vividly captures the essence of collectivity. We can conceive of a collectivity as a space that is composed of other music lovers, and the interaction with these individuals can be likened to a process of sound transmission. Sociologically speaking, the interactions among music lovers within a collectivity can be understood as a dynamic process of social exchange. By engaging in social interactions and receiving feedback from fellow members, individuals develop a sense of their own position within the social space. These interactions serve as a mechanism for indie music lovers to construct their identities, define their roles, and navigate their relationships within the collectivity. Through interactions with other members, Harry is able to internalise the social activity into an understanding of himself, revealing the reflexivity of the self-construction process (Callero, 2003).

Mead (1934, p. 134) argues that ‘[i]t is by means of reflexiveness – the turning-back of the experience of the individual upon himself [sic] – that the whole social process is thus brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it’. This reflexivity is particularly salient in the context of indie music lovers, where interaction and shared passion serve as both sources and products of collective
identity. Group interactions among indie music lovers not only establish a foundation for collectivity but also act as an essential means through which individuals perceive themselves as members of this distinct indie music collectivity. To further comprehend this reflexivity, Oyserman, Elmore and Smith’s (2011) conceptualisation of the self provides valuable insights. They propose that the self is a triadic entity comprising the act of thinking, the awareness of this act, and the self as an object of these thoughts. This implies that the self, while being an active subject capable of thinking, also becomes an object that can be contemplated. The self, therefore, is not a dichotomy of ‘I’ and ‘me’ but rather a complex entity that encompasses both aspects and allows for fluid transitions between them. Collectivities provide the necessary resources and social space for this transition to occur. The collective experience accelerates the introspective process, facilitating individuals in developing deeper self-awareness and contributing to their ongoing process of self-construction. This exhibits the crucial role that collectivity plays in shaping self-perception and identity amongst indie music lovers. As Jacob (20, male) put it:

> It [collectivity] can be a motivator. I think maybe if there’s no one around you who’s into punk music and you’re still listening to it constantly, you might doubt yourself. If you don’t have a sense of belonging and you’re just doing it on your own, it’s easy to give up. So maybe collectivity is a source of self-identity as well.

Jacob’s reflection unveils an additional facet of collectivity, underscoring its function as a motivator. Here, collectivity extends beyond a mere assembly of indie music lovers; it substantiates and reinforces their identities as music lovers. This aligns with scholars’ suggestion that proactive support-seeking can be an effective strategy for self-construction (McCall, 2003). This perspective offers a compelling insight into collectivity as a reinforcement mechanism that encourages indie music lovers to continually explore and engage with their
musical interests. Although the concept of musical friendship as a form of support-seeking was elaborated in Chapter 6, it is worth re-emphasising here.

However, it is crucial to recognise that collectivity does not uniformly exert a positive influence on all music lovers in all contexts. While for some, it acts as a source of identification and recognition, aiding in the construction of self, others may not perceive or value the role of collectivity in the same way. Helen (27, female) offered an alternative perspective:

_"I guess I simply think that if there are other people in the world who find this song enjoyable, then it's pretty good. But it doesn't mean that if I'm the only one who likes it, I would feel lonely or anything like that."_

Helen’s comment accentuates the individualistic dimension of music engagement. It highlights that while there is an opportunity for identity construction and self-affirmation through shared interests, it is not a universally accepted notion among all indie music lovers. Hence, the crux of the argument here lies not in the definitive role of collectivity but rather in its potential and possibilities. It calls for recognising the diverse perceptions that indie music lovers may hold about the role of collectivity in their musical experiences and identity construction. Such an understanding allows for a multifaceted interpretation of indie music collectivity, elucidating the diverse ways its members interact with and draw meaning from it. Helen’s assertion of individuality leads us to another layer of complexity in indie music lovers’ relationship with collectivity, as further indicated by another interviewee, Nora (20, female):

_"It's sometimes contradictory when you say you want to pursue a collective feeling. Sometimes you hope you'll find fellows [who] like the same music as you do. But when there are lots of them, you do sometimes think how come more and more_
people like them, so you don't feel special anymore [...] This feeling, although it is not particularly good, is an objective existence. So, collectivity is actually there, but it's not everything [that is involved in the music].

As emphasised in the preceding two sections, although collectivities can be diverse and subjective, they are grounded in one fundamental element and characteristic – the perceived similarity among its members. Intriguingly, however, this very similarity can engender ambivalent attitudes among indie music lovers toward collectivities. Nora’s account reveals that this ambivalence stems from the paradoxical relationship between the uniformity within a music-lover collectivity and an individual’s distinctiveness. Collectivity, for Nora, signifies a shared preference for specific bands and genres. This shared interest serves as the cornerstone of music-lover collectivities. However, as these collectivities expand and the commonalities among members intensify, Nora’s perceived distinctiveness begins to blur, as her uniqueness seems to dissolve into the expanding similarity. She finds herself in a paradoxical situation, yearning for both similarity and distinctiveness within the collectivity.

This paradox, previously mentioned in Section 7.3 concerning indie music lovers’ self-presentation on social media, echoes Simmel’s (1957) classic argument about the modern individual’s dual desire for both generalisation and specialisation. And here, Nora’s narrative can be interpreted as a nuanced desire for limited similarity as a quest for balance. She seeks to share certain affinities with a small-scale group, thereby maintaining a sense of belonging without compromising her individuality. This interpretation resonates with Jenkins’s (2008) work on social identity, which suggests that the interplay between similarity and uniqueness is not a binary opposition but rather a continuum. Indie music lovers like Nora navigate between these two poles based on their personal needs and the social context, reflecting what Jenkins
(2008, p. 18) terms as the ‘dynamic principles of identification’. This perspective offers a richer understanding of how individuals negotiate their identities within collectivities, enhancing our comprehension of the social interconnectedness among indie music lovers.

According to Turner et al. (1987, p. 50), social identity is ‘a shift towards the perception of self and an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person’. From this perspective, it can be said that the conflict between collectivity and individuality mentioned by Nora represents a conflict between social identity and self-identity. At the social level, social identity places the individual within a social category, distinguishing them from other categories and satisfying their need for belonging. At the individual level, self-identity sets the individual apart from everyone else and reflects their uniqueness.

In addition, this observed conflict can also be attributed to music lovers’ perceptions of indie music and the socio-cultural connotations it carries. Music functions as a diverse symbolic landscape, bearing different meanings for different individuals. Each person engages with and interprets musical genres in unique ways, often fostering a particular musical preference. As investigated in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, indie music lovers often attribute a relatively elevated status to indie music compared to other popular music genres for various reasons. The label ‘indie music’ is conceived as a distinction from mainstream popular music (Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Hibbett, 2005). Hence, for indie music lovers, their musical preference symbolises a minority, representing an unconventional and distinctive cultural choice and practice. This sets them apart from listeners of other popular and particularly mainstream music, thereby carving out a separate niche within the broader music listeners. This distinct musical preference forms the foundation upon which the indie music-lover
collectivity is constructed. Concurrently, indie music connotes an ‘indie ethos’ to these music lovers, generally suggestive of maintaining independence, uniqueness, and differentiation. This ethos may guide some indie music lovers, but it has also become a means for others to signal their distinctiveness. As a result, for many of them, indie music has evolved into a label of ‘particularity’, a status intrinsically linked to its niche nature. To maintain the perceived ‘specialness’ of indie music and the preference for it, it becomes necessary to uphold its niche character. It is within this context that the tension between similarity and uniqueness within the music-lover collectivity arises.

From this perspective, Nora’s perceived paradox between collectivity and individuality signifies a fear stemming from a gradual erosion of her uniqueness. For indie music lovers like Nora, a potential resolution lies in re-establishing their uniqueness within the boundaries of collectivities. The rapid commercialisation and popularisation of indie music in China in recent years have diluted its niche nature. Consequently, there has been a significant expansion of indie music lover groups, promoting some indie music lovers to construct their uniqueness through the subcultural capital they possess. As previously discussed in Section 7.3, subcultural capital provides a lens through which we can understand the self-presentation of indie music lovers on social media. It is employed by music lovers to strengthen social ties and express their collective identity while maintaining a sense of individual distinctiveness. And here, however, music lovers demonstrate an additional interpretation and use of subcultural capital as a strategy to navigate the tension between collectivity and individuality. This strategy may not aim to resolve the conflict outright but rather seeks a balance or de-escalation between the two. A particularly salient and representative form of subcultural capital among indie music lovers that addresses the collectivity-individuality tension is the so-called ‘treasure band’. As one participant, Lesley (20, female), vividly described:
It really is a treasure! It feels like you’ve found a vault, and you don’t want anyone to know about it, so you rush to hide it away.

The term ‘treasure band’ has emerged among Chinese indie music lovers over the last few years, coinciding with the expansion of indie music in the Chinese music market. However, this expansion has not been holistic, and only a few iconic bands have gained a wider audience. In this context, the term ‘treasure band’ often refers to bands that are favoured by music lovers but are not yet widely known. For individuals like Lesley, there is a desire to conceal their ‘treasure bands’ from the wider indie music listener group in order to prevent them from gaining popularity. This is where a paradox arises. On the one hand, these music lovers aim to preserve their uniqueness by minimising the exposure of their favoured bands. On the other hand, they also seek to demonstrate their uniqueness by showcasing the subcultural capital they possess (see also Section 7.3). In this context, subcultural capital is symbolically potent, with its owners strategically determining its display. Ian (21, male) exemplified this by stating:

I posted a [WeChat] Moment. I’ve been reading WeChat Moments for the past few days. There’re so many people who shared Accusefive (告五人), and I feel this ambivalence that one of my favourite treasure bands is about to be unearthed.

Here, Ian’s post about Accusefive, as they were starting to gain the attention of other music lovers, showcased his long-standing following of the band as a way of expressing his uniqueness. For Lesley and Ian, their notion of ‘treasure bands’ implies an ‘imagined exclusivity’. They believe that these bands have not been discovered by most other people, even though they are not the only ones who know them. Amongst the growing interest in indie music, knowledge of more niche, obscure bands became a manifestation of exclusivity.
This tension manifests the dual role of subcultural capital as both a protective shield and a performative tool. It protects the individual's distinctiveness within the collectivity by limiting the exposure of their favoured bands, thus keeping their niche. Simultaneously, it also operates as a performative tool that music lovers wield to display their distinct tastes and knowledge within the subculture. This dual role illustrates the intricate dynamics within indie music lovers' collective experiences, particularly in the context of a rapidly evolving and expanding indie music landscape. Nevertheless, this use of subcultural capital is not universally accepted. For instance, Kyle (female, 24) questioned:

A lot of people say, 'I'm panicking that my treasure band is going to be famous, and I don't want them to be discovered by anyone.' I don't think they're good music lovers. I'm pissed at them, and I want to ask them, how can you be like that? If the band you like can't afford to survive, what can you listen to?

Evidently, for some other music lovers like Kyle, maintaining one's distinctiveness through 'treasure bands' is more contentious. Considering that the indie music market remains a niche in China, increased exposure is critical for the survival of indie musicians, particularly those within even more niche sectors of the market. Therefore, how to strike a balance between maintaining an 'indie ethos' and achieving financial viability is a question that both music lovers and indie musicians need to keep exploring.

Additionally, when confronted with the tension between collectivity and individuality, many indie music lovers exhibit a more reflexive attitude during the interviews. According to Giddens (1990, p. 38), reflexivity refers to 'the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character'. Applying Giddens' conceptualisation to our context, a reflexive
attitude implies a persistent interrogation and reinterpretation of the notion of music-lover collectivity, commensurate with their evolving comprehension of indie music. A salient reflection of this reflexivity is the introspective questioning of the necessity for a music-lover collectivity. George (26, male) offered an illustrative perspective on this matter:

> It’s something that I think needs to be discussed, but it’s really not necessary to place yourself in a collectivity, especially in indie music […] Because indie music is about expressing your independent spirit, but if you want to express that independence through some sort of group and to put yourself in a group […] Everyone thinks differently. We are indeed a collectivity. That’s true. But don’t go looking for a certain group to get consolation within it. I don’t think that’s very necessary.

Instead of unreflectively embracing the notion of collectivity, many indie music lovers actively and critically engage with its meaning and significance based on their evolving understanding of indie music’s cultural implications. They underscore the importance of indie music as a platform for individual expression while simultaneously interrogating the value of collectivity. Here, as George notes, achieving ‘independence’ through collectivity represents an inherent paradox. He acknowledges the existence of a music-lover collectivity but, at the same time, negates the necessity of actively seeking it. In other words, he concedes the objective similarity among members of the music-lover collectivity but argues that this similarity need not and should not be intentionally pursued. The emergence of collectivity is a consequence, not the ultimate goal. As expressed by Kay (female, 20), ‘listening to [indie] songs is not for finding a sense of belonging after all.’

By reducing the significance of similarity, the conflict between collectivity and
individuality is also mitigated. However, it is important to note that interrogating collectivity does not equate to rejecting it. Research participants in this study adopt a more reflexive stance toward collectivity, exerting control over its influence. They recognise the positive role of collectivity in the construction and maintenance of the self and identity but do not overly rely on it. They embrace collectivity in a critical way, allowing it to enhance their indie music experience as an additional aspect rather than a defining factor. In this way, they exercise agency and individuality while appreciating the potential benefits of collectivity as the icing on the cake.

In this chapter, I have proposed the concept of ‘collectivity’ as an alternative to the traditional use of ‘community’ to examine Chinese indie music lovers’ social interconnectedness. The purpose of employing this term is not to settle the debate over the concept of community once and for all but rather to suggest an alternative and more practical conceptual framework for studying this particular culture and group of social actors. This chapter has demonstrated that collectivity is not an objectively organised form with universal criteria but rather a subjective understanding by indie music lovers of their social relations with each other. Thus, collectivity exists in diverse forms for different indie music lovers, but what unites them is the shared emotions or resonance they experience with one another.

It is also necessary to recognise that digital media, represented by social media, plays a role in the perception and formation of indie music-lover collectivities. While digital media can facilitate the extension of social relations and expand forms of interaction, allowing for an imagined sense of collectivity, it can also have destructive consequences in certain contexts. For some indie music
lovers, digital media has been instrumental in fostering social connections and enhancing their perception of collectivity. However, for others, digital media has stripped away the materiality of social relations and hindered effective meaning exchanges in social interactions, thereby impeding the collective experience.

The significance of collectivities lies in the process of their formation, in the understanding of oneself and of the music that indie music lovers acquire in this process. Collectivity has a generally positive effect on indie music lovers, but we also need to be aware of the conflict between collectivity and individuality that it entails and how music lovers react to it. This understanding will enable us to approach music-lover collectivities and their social nature in a more balanced and reflexive way.
Chapter 9 Conclusion

Having investigated the five main themes of this research – the context of indie music socialising, the formation of indie music lover identity, the negotiation of interpersonal relationships, the practice of social media, and the construction of collectivity – this chapter concludes this thesis with a general review. It comprises three main topics. First, it presents a condensed overview of the findings, returning to the research questions in light of the conducted research. It underscores the multifaceted role of indie music in shaping identities, fostering social relationships, and constructing collectivity among Chinese indie music lovers. Second, it clarifies the significance and contribution of this study. The research elucidates the concept of ‘music socialising’ within the context of Chinese indie music lovers, providing a comprehensive, multidimensional, and context-sensitive framework to explore everyday music practices. Lastly, it concludes by reflecting on the research, describing its limitations and suggesting potential avenues for future exploration. The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of cultural sociology and music sociology, particularly concerning indie music and music lovers, and encourage further investigation into diverse cultural contexts.

9.1 Answering the Research Questions

This study focused on investigating the everyday music engagement and practices of Chinese indie music lovers. It proposed the conceptual framework of music socialising to understand the multifaceted impact of indie music on their social lives. By adopting the lens of music in action and symbolic interactionism, this study examined various aspects of indie music socialising in China within the broader context of reflexive modernity. Through a qualitative research methodology encompassing in-depth interviews and online
ethnography, this research aimed to offer a detailed exploration of the experiences and viewpoints of indie music lovers in China. In this section, I will revisit the research questions and summarise the key findings of this study, offering a concise overview of the research outcomes.

1. In what ways do the socio-cultural practices of indie music lovers in China contribute to the construction and expression of their individual and collective identities?

Materials answering this question are found in several chapters, as the question of identity is so central to music socialising practices that it appears in different areas addressed by this study. The study reveals that Chinese indie music lovers engage in a range of socio-cultural practices that contribute to the construction and expression of their individual and collective identities. Several significant forms of these practices were identified, including attending live music events, engaging with indie music through streaming platforms, and participating in social media practices in different forms and purposes. By immersing themselves in indie music, music lovers cultivate a sense of belonging to collectivities that share similar tastes, values, and experiences, thereby reinforcing their perceived identity as indie music lovers. These practices are shaped by and respond to the broader socio-cultural contexts of contemporary Chinese society. For instance, the research illuminates how the growing popularity of indie music in China creates a distinction between music lovers and other listener groups and how the increasing importance of social media has introduced new avenues for self-presentation and has transformed the dynamics of these practices.

To comprehend the emergence and development of indie music as a genre that confronts and interacts with mainstream popular music, it is essential to
consider its historical roots. Indie music is deeply rooted in rock music and punk culture, and its development has been influenced by various socio-economic, musical-aesthetics, and technological factors. This understanding has been established through an examination of how indie music originated and evolved in the UK and the US, as well as its role as a counterpoint to mainstream pop music in the Chinese music scene. In this context, by examining indie music lovers’ perceptions of indie music, this study explores the ‘indie ethos’ they value and emphasise – namely, independence and authenticity. These factors significantly shape their understanding of music-lover identity and the construction of their self-concept.

Chapter 5 delves into the ways Chinese indie music lovers construct their identity by differentiating themselves from other music listeners, specifically trend followers and fans. Drawing upon the mass culture theory (Ang, 1982; Adorno, 1991) as their conceptual tool, these indie music lovers delineate boundaries between themselves and other audience groups, striving to create a ‘serious leisure’ (Stebbins, 1992) experience that attribute their music practices a unique cultural significance. In this process, indie music is used by music lovers as a social agency and a technology of self (DeNora, 1999, 2000) for self-shaping. It involves a dynamic and continuous interaction between indie music lovers’ self-perception and their musical preferences. Put simply, as these music lovers engage with indie music, they simultaneously shape and understand their identities. They are highly aware of this interplay, whereby the music they love influences their self-definition, and their evolving identities, in turn, shape their music practices. This complex and reciprocal relationship lies at the core of their interaction with indie music. Consequently, I argue that indie music lovers strategically construct their identities and engage in music practices by continuously reflecting on their experiences. However, the research also discovered that participants could be seen as engaging in cultural
elitism in the process of constructing their indie music-lover identity. This suggests the presence of a perceived hierarchy regarding musical taste and practice, with indie music lovers positioning themselves in a superior position within it. It is within this delineation and distinction that research participants gradually construct their social identity as indie music lovers and develop their understanding and interpretation of themselves and others.

Additionally, the research reveals the significant role of music preferences, or taste, in the formation and expression of individual and collective identities among Chinese indie music lovers. Tastes are shaped by a range of factors, including education and cultural capital. However, in this context, taste is not a marker or a tool for social class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984; Eijck, 2001) but rather a driving force that promotes music practices (Hennion, 2001). Individuals with higher levels of education and cultural capital are more likely to engage with niche or alternative musical genres, such as indie music, as they possess the necessary resources and competencies to appreciate and interpret the complex artistic and aesthetic aspects of this music, as well as the socio-cultural meanings behind it. In this perspective, taste becomes a practical choice for indie music lovers rather than a predetermined social attribute.

This ‘practice of taste’ highlights the self-reflexivity of indie music lovers, enabling them to continuously negotiate their position within a social landscape shaped by diverse musical tastes and affiliations. The advent of digital platforms and social media has further amplified the potential for reflexivity, providing individuals access to a broader range of music genres and communities while also engaging in more forms of self-reflexivity, such as self-curatorial practices on social media (as discussed in Chapter 7). These practices profoundly influence their perceptions of the self and social identity.
To summarise, this research demonstrates the diverse ways in which socio-cultural practices of Chinese indie music lovers contribute to the construction and expression of their individual and collective identities. By examining social and cultural contexts, as well as analysing participants’ experiences and practices, the study reveals that indie music serves as a space for developing a distinct sense of self and musical identity. The findings call attention to the role of music preferences and taste practices in identity formation, along with the significance of reflexivity and the adoption of digital media in constructing and negotiating these identities.

2. To what extent do indie music lovers use music as a means of negotiating and fostering social relationships? And in what ways does this relate to the broader social and cultural dynamics within their interpersonal networks?

The findings presented across the various chapters of this thesis illustrate that Chinese indie music lovers extensively and proactively use music to negotiate and manage their social relationships. By examining the construction of identities and self-understandings (Chapter 5), the negotiation of interpersonal connections (Chapter 6), and the role of social media (Chapter 7), a comprehensive understanding of how indie music lovers interact with their social networks and navigate broader social and cultural dynamics is attained.

The analysis reveals that indie music lovers employ music as a significant means of negotiating and fostering social relationships. Music preferences and tastes become a powerful social currency, enabling these individuals to establish connections with like-minded individuals and cultivate a sense of connectedness within their social circles. By engaging with indie music, they form emotional bonds with others who share similar interests and beliefs,
thereby strengthening social cohesion within their networks. The shared experiences of participating in indie music activities also provide a platform for them to express their emotions, opinions, and values, facilitating the formation of connections and, in turn, motivating further music practices.

During the investigation of indie music lovers’ social networks, it is found that music plays a crucial role in differentiating between ‘musical friends’ and ‘daily friends’. Musical friends are those who share a common interest in music and form the core of these individuals’ socio-musical lives. In contrast, daily friends may not share the same musical tastes with participants but still hold significant importance in their everyday lives. These distinctions impact the dynamics of their interpersonal relationships: musical friends often provide emotional support and validation, while daily friends may be associated with potential misunderstandings and conflicts regarding music. The research identifies that in their interactions with daily friends, indie music lovers often face challenges related to identity crises and social barriers due to differing musical tastes and mutual misunderstandings. This tension can manifest in feelings of isolation, disconnection, self-doubt, and a tendency to avoid discussions about music with daily friends. As a result, indie music lovers feel compelled to seek connections with musical friends who share their interests and can provide a sense of belonging and validation. This study reveals that indie music lovers employ various strategies to negotiate the complexities of these social relationships. These strategies include forming temporary and/or ad hoc social ties and cultivating reflexivity to navigate the social landscape. By adopting these tactics, they are able to maintain distinct identities within their interpersonal networks while simultaneously fostering connections with others.

Summing up the findings in relation to this research question, Chinese indie music lovers use music as an effective means to negotiate and manage social
relationships. Music serves as a means for differentiation, connection with like-minded individuals, and navigation of broader social and cultural dynamics within their interpersonal networks. These findings have significant implications for the broader sociological understanding of music's role in shaping social relationships, underscoring the complex nature of social connections and the multitude of factors that contribute to their development and sustenance. Indie music is a powerful tool for shaping and managing social connections, providing individuals with a shared interest and cultural experience through which they can bond and form musical relationships. However, the complexities and limitations of these connections arise from the interplay of individual tastes, backgrounds, and cultural capital, making the formation and dynamics of social relationships highly context-dependent. These chapters provide detailed answers to this research question, showcasing how music plays a central role in shaping the social lives of indie music lovers in China.

3. In what ways do indie music socialising practices influence participants’ perceptions and aspirations for broader social interconnectedness, such as community involvement?

Indie music socialising practices significantly shape music lovers’ perceptions and aspirations for broader social interconnectedness by fostering a sense of collectivity through various interactions and settings. To better understand these relationships, Chapter 8 introduced the concept of collectivity as a more appropriate framework for analysing the sociality of Chinese indie music lover groups. It more accurately captures their sense of belonging and connectedness compared to the vague and ambiguous notion of community. This study demonstrates that there are two forms of collectivity among Chinese indie music lovers: one as an empirical reality and one as an abstract consciousness. A crucial factor influencing this classification is the divergent
understanding and interpretation of ‘interaction’ by different individual music lovers. In other words, different definitions of ‘interaction’, especially whether it should be participatory, immediate, or reciprocal, largely shape their different comprehension of collectivity. However, it is suggested that both forms of collectivity are valid and contribute to the overall collective experience among indie music lovers.

In this study, the concept of resonance, drawing on established sociological works of Rosa (2019), helps explain how indie music lovers connect with each other and perceive their collective state. Resonance occurs when individuals engage in meaningful interactions, sharing emotions and experiences with others, which in turn create strong connections and a sense of belonging. This concept is particularly relevant in indie music socialising practices, as it recognises the importance of online and offline interactions in constructing a sense of collectivity. The resonance’s subjective, emotional, and contextual nature further complicates the relationship between indie music socialising practices and participants’ aspirations for broader social interconnectedness. Digital platforms play a crucial role in indie music socialising practices, providing an accessible space for indie music lovers to connect, discover new music, and exchange thoughts and experiences. These online spaces enable participants to form collectivity through virtual interactions, sharing symbolic resources and engaging in discussions that promote a sense of belonging. In addition to online interactions, live music settings offer unique, immersive experiences that foster strong physical and emotional connections among participants. These settings create opportunities for resonance and collectivity.

The role of collectivity in constructing and sustaining self-identity is also vital to consider, as it highlights the interplay between speciality and similarity in indie music socialising practices. The potential conflicts between collectivity and
individuality have been pointed out during the research, as indie music lovers may navigate tensions between the desire for belonging and the need for self-expression and uniqueness. This delicate balance demonstrates a negotiation of boundaries between their collective and individual identities. It is in this process that participants navigate their understanding of themselves in relation to the broader collectivity.

Reflecting on these findings, indie music socialising practices play a critical role in shaping participants’ perceptions and aspirations for broader social interconnectedness by fostering a sense of collectivity through various interactions and settings, such as digital platforms and live music experiences. The concepts of resonance and collectivity, informed by established sociological works, provide valuable insights into how indie music lovers connect with one another, perceive their connections, and aspire to be involved in broader social networks. The subjective, emotional, and contextual nature of collectivity and the interplay between individuality and collectivity further reveal the complexities and nuances of the relationship between indie music socialising practices and participants’ aspirations for social involvement.

**9.2 Implication of Indie Music Socialising**

The research’s findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Chinese indie music lovers’ social experience, particularly through the lens of music socialising. By examining how music socialising shapes identity construction, social relationships, and digital practices, this study attempts to fill several gaps in the current scholarship and offers new insights that help advance the field of cultural sociology and music sociology. This section outlines the key theoretical implications and academic contributions of this research. Specifically, to the broader cultural sociology and music sociology, the study’s academic
contributions can be seen in three main aspects: (1) providing a comprehensive understanding of music engagement through the concept of music socialising, (2) offering a multidimensional perspective to examine music’s role in individuals’ social lives, and (3) presenting a context-sensitive approach to the study of music and sociality.

One contribution of this research is its detailed exploration of the concept of music socialising. Music socialising is a concept that encompasses the various ways individuals engage with music as a means of constructing personal and social identities, forming and maintaining social relationships, and navigating the cultural, emotional, and digital dimensions of their lives. This research establishes a framework of music socialising by examining the social experiences and practices of Chinese indie music lovers, using this concept as a lens to explore the interplay between music, identity, sociality, and technology in a contemporary non-Western context. The framework of music socialising consists of three interconnected dimensions: identity construction, social relationships, and physical-digital practices. These dimensions were reviewed in the previous section’s answers to the research questions and thus will not be repeated here. By analysing how Chinese indie music lovers engage in music socialising practices along these dimensions, the research demonstrates the multifaceted nature of music as a socio-cultural practice, transcending mere cultural consumption.

This concept, however, not only informs our understanding of indie music but also provides insights into the socialising practices of music lovers across diverse music genres. While the specific socio-cultural practices might differ, the broad themes of identity, social relations, and collectivity could be applicable across genres. The case of Chinese indie music socialising has broader implications for understanding popular music more generally, as it is situated
within the larger realm of music sociology and popular music studies, adding depth and context to the growing body of scholarship in this field.

Drawing on the music-in-action approach (DeNora, 2000, 2003b; Hennion, 2001, 2012), music socialising emphasises the active role of individual practices in shaping their musical experiences and the social implications of these interactions. This aspect highlights the agency of music listeners in constructing meaning, forging connections, and transforming cultural practices through their engagement with music. Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959; Blumer, 1969; Stryker, 1980) further supports the understanding of music socialising by exploring the ways individuals interpret and attach meaning to their musical experiences and practices within specific social contexts.

One of the key strengths of the music socialising framework lies in its comprehensive understanding of music engagement. By focusing on the interconnected dimensions of identity construction, social relationships, and physical-digital practices, the framework provides a more holistic understanding of how music functions as a social and cultural force, enabling researchers to explore the multiple ways in which music shapes and is shaped by broader societal processes. It encourages researchers to examine the reciprocal relationship between music and society, acknowledging that music is not only influenced by social and cultural factors but also actively contributes to the construction and transformation of social reality. This recognition of music’s agency challenges the conventional notion of music as a passive reflection of society. It emphasises the active and dynamic role of music in shaping individuals’ social and cultural life. Rather than merely reflecting existing social values and structures, music exerts its own influence and significance, actively contributing to the dynamics of social and cultural contexts.
In addition, this study adopts and provides a multidimensional perspective on
the role of music in individuals’ social lives, encompassing an approach that
addresses multiple dimensions or aspects of the phenomenon, thereby
capturing its complexity and richness. This research explores the diverse and
interconnected ways in which music both shapes and is shaped by the social
lives of Chinese indie music lovers. The multidimensional perspective is
facilitated through several approaches in this study. First, by drawing upon
concepts and theories from various fields, including cultural sociology (e.g.,
digital media studies (e.g., Bull, 2007; Marwick and boyd, 2010; Papacharissi,
2012; Baym, 2015), and related disciplines (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Small, 1998;
Bull, 2007), the framework of music socialising connects the study of music to
broader social, cultural, and technological trends. This interdisciplinary
approach fosters a more holistic understanding of music’s role in contemporary
society. Second, the research acknowledges the variations and contradictions
within individuals’ musical experiences and practices. For instance, this study
demonstrates that music can serve as a source of social cohesion and
belonging while simultaneously acting as a potential source of conflict and
misunderstanding. By illustrating the diverse and sometimes contradictory
ways in which music can impact social lives, the research offers a more
nuanced understanding of music’s social role. Third, the study attempts to
examine the macro-level impact at the micro-level practices, examining the role
of music in individual experiences within broader social structures. This
approach enables the research to capture the interplay between personal and
social dimensions of music engagement, revealing the complex dynamics
between individual agency and structural constraints. It stimulates scholarly
discourse by inviting researchers to critically engage with the ways in which
music engagement is shaped by power dynamics, social inequalities, and
cultural hierarchies. By foregrounding these issues and following in the footsteps of scholars such as Hesmondhalgh (2008) and Negus (1996b; Negus and Velázquez, 2002), this research encourages a more critical and reflexive approach to the study of music. It prompts scholars to question the underlying assumptions and values that underpin popular music research and the broader field of music sociology.

Furthermore, this research adopts a context-sensitive approach to the study of music and sociality, emphasising the importance of understanding specific cultural, social, and technological understanding contexts in which music practices and experiences occur. This perspective recognises that music and sociality are deeply intertwined with the particularities of the environments in which they occur and that these relationships are shaped by various factors such as cultural norms, social structures, and technological developments. By adopting a context-sensitive approach, researchers can better account for the complexities and nuances of music-related social experiences and provide a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the dynamic at play.

This research presents a unique and valuable case study for understanding music's role in social experiences through its focus on the Chinese indie music scene. Tomlinson (1991) argues that globalisation and modernisation resulted in ‘cultural imperialism’ and that local cultures are being invaded by Western-centric consumer capitalism. From this perspective, Chinese indie music can be described as an adaptation of Western culture in China. However, the concept of ‘glocalisation’ proposed by Robertson (1992; Robertson and White, 2007) offers an alternative perspective. It posits a mutual shaping and interplay between global and local, thereby complicating our understanding of the role of culture in the processes of globalisation and localisation. By examining the specific cultural, social, and technological factors that shape indie music lovers’
lives in China, this study highlights the significance of research in non-Western contexts.

Existing literature on music and sociality often centres on Western contexts, leaving non-Western contexts under-explored and potentially oversimplifying the global dynamics of music and sociality (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000; Holt, 2008). This research is one of the attempts to rectify this imbalance and contributes to a more diverse and inclusive understanding of music and sociality (see also, e.g., de Kloet, 2005; Siriyuvasak and Hyunjoon, 2007; Mitchell, 2015). By examining the Chinese indie music scene, this research provides insights into how the dynamic of music-related social practices may differ across cultural contexts and how these differences can inform and enrich our understanding of the relationships between music, identity, and sociality. This study challenges the often implicit assumption that Western models of music and sociality are universally applicable, illustrating the need for more culturally diverse perspectives in music and cultural sociology.

By providing a roadmap for exploring various aspects of music engagement, the framework motivates researchers to investigate music socialising in diverse cultural settings, expanding the scope of music sociology and enriching its theoretical and empirical contributions. In conclusion, the music socialising framework represents a handy tool for comprehending and investigating the intricate ways in which individuals perceive, interact with, and derive meaning from music and their musical experiences. By offering a comprehensive, multidimensional, and context-sensitive approach, this framework not only advances the field of music sociology but also lays the groundwork for new insights and discoveries.
9.3 Final Reflections

This research, while shedding light on the social experiences of Chinese indie music lovers, comes with certain limitations that should be acknowledged. One limitation of this research is its scope and focus, which is primarily centred on Chinese indie music lovers and their social experiences. While this study provides valuable insights into this specific group, it might not be directly applicable to other music scenes, cultures, or places. The uniqueness of the Chinese indie music scene and its particular socio-cultural context may limit the generalisability of the findings to other countries or music genres. Another limitation is the sample size and demographics of the study participants. Although the research captures diverse experiences and perspectives, the sample may only be partially representative of the indie music scene in China, particularly in Beijing. As the participants of this research are primarily educated young adults, the sample may be biased towards people from specific backgrounds.

The methodology employed in this research, primarily consisting of qualitative methods such as interviews and online ethnography, may also pose limitations. While qualitative methods provide rich, detailed data on individual experiences and social processes, they can produce data that is specific and local in focus and may not allow for the quantification or generalisation of the findings to a larger population. Exploring other research methods that could not be employed in this study due to various constraints would have been beneficial. For instance, longitudinal studies observing music lovers’ changes over time, large-scale surveys for a broader perspective, or comparative studies with other music scenes could further enrich the understanding of music socialising. Further research could consider these alternative methods to address the limitations of the current study.
As with any qualitative study, researcher bias may also be a limitation. The researcher’s own background, experiences, and assumptions could influence the interpretation of the data and the presentation of the findings. Although efforts were made to maintain reflexivity and recognise personal biases throughout the research process, it is essential to consider the potential influence of my perspective on analysing the study’s findings.

During the course of the research, the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic affected the conduct of the study. However, for this research, it was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, social distancing forced the study to move from in-person to online, which made it difficult to observe and collect non-verbal social cues from music lovers during the interviews, which may have affected the conduct of the interviews and interpretation of interviewees’ expressions (James and Busher, 2006, 2009). On the other hand, however, the pandemic also provided an unexpected opportunity for deeper reflection on daily music practices. The interruption of everyday music experiences caused by social-distancing measures offered music lovers, and myself as the researcher, an opportunity to pause and reflect on the habitual aspects of our musical engagements. These reflections were a recurring theme in the online interviews, offering valuable insights into our understanding and practices of music. These reflections amplified our collective experiences and understandings of the social aspects of indie music, highlighting the adaptive resilience of music lovers and the fluid nature of music practices within a changing social context.

In conclusion, this research provides a multi-layered account of Chinese indie music lovers’ music socialising practices. It offers a nuanced understanding of the role of indie music in the formation of personal and social identities, the development of social relationships and interconnectedness, and the
navigation of online-offline practices within a distinct social context. The study delves into the socio-cultural significance of indie music in China, opening up fresh avenues for research in the intersection of music and sociality. Going forward, it is hoped that this study will inspire further research into music socialising across diverse genres and cultural contexts. Comparative studies examining indie music scenes in different countries or different social contexts would add depth to our understanding of music’s role and music listeners’ agency in shaping social experiences. Additionally, future research could also explore the impact of emerging technologies on music socialising and the evolving dynamics of the music industry in response to changes in the socio-cultural landscape.

The power of music as a social tool transcends geographical, cultural, and temporal boundaries. By shedding light on the indie music scene in China, this research has not only contributed to the academic field of cultural sociology but has also emphasised the universal language of music and its pervasive influence in shaping our social world. As we continue to navigate the ever-evolving landscape of music and society, the significance of these insights will become more pronounced.
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