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From Cultural Experience to Aesthetic Cognition: A Multidimensional Model of Ethnic Music Preference

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Abstract

This study examines factors associated with ethnic music preference (EMP) within the context of Chinese ethnic music. The model includes six antecedent constructs: cultural background (CB), psychological traits (PT), social and contextual factors (SC), repetition and familiarity (RF), musical functional experience (MF), and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition (PC). Participants were recruited from the general population and included both music enthusiasts and non-specialist listeners. Data were collected through an online questionnaire, yielding 302 valid responses across diverse age and educational groups. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) supported the reliability and validity of the measurement model, and structural equation modeling (SEM) indicated good overall model fit. CB, PT, SC, MF, and PC significantly and positively predicted EMP, whereas RF showed no significant direct association with preference. Cultural background, psychological traits, social and contextual factors, musical functional experience, and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition were all associated with ethnic music preference. Repetition and familiarity, however, showed no significant association.

1. Introduction

Ethnic music refers broadly to musical traditions embedded in particular cultural and social contexts and is often characterized by culturally specific melodic, rhythmic, timbral, and performative conventions transmitted across generations. As part of the world's diverse musical heritage, such traditions carry historical memory, symbolic meanings, and forms of collective identity within the communities from which they emerge (Guo, 2024; Bohlman, 1988). Because many ethnic musical traditions are sustained through oral, performative, and community-based transmission, they communicate not only musical knowledge but also social values, cultural memories, and shared systems of meaning (Nettl, 2005; DeNora, 2000; Folkestad, 2002). These traditions remain closely connected to rituals, festivals, and everyday cultural practices, while also continuing to evolve through social change and intercultural contact (Zhivitsa, 2022; Chen & Shen, 2025). This cultural embeddedness suggests that listeners' responses to ethnic music may depend not only on its sonic characteristics, but also on the cultural knowledge, experiences, and meanings through which it is interpreted. Studies of diasporic communities have shown that traditional music remains closely tied to cultural belonging and collective memory. Annual musical gatherings among Appalachian and Cajun communities, for example, continue to affirm regional and ethnic affiliations, while musical practices in South Asian immigrant communities help maintain cultural ties across generations (Erdely, 1979; Shum, 2023).

Ethnic music is now encountered in a wider range of settings. Family traditions, rituals, and community activities remain important forms of transmission, while schools, conservatories, concert venues, and digital media have created additional opportunities for exposure. These settings

differ in how music is encountered and understood. Family and community environments can shape musical engagement through shared cultural practices and intergenerational influence. Such experiences may also contribute to the development of cultural identity and music preferences (Ting et al., 2023).

Formal education has also become an important setting for encounters with ethnic music. Classroom instruction may introduce listeners to traditional instruments, stylistic conventions, and the historical or cultural contexts in which particular musical practices developed (Guan et al., 2025; Beng & Chee, 2023; Rector, 2026). Such exposure may affect how unfamiliar musical forms are understood and evaluated.

At the same time, ethnic music competes for attention within media environments dominated by commercial popular genres and standardized forms of cultural production. Ethnic musical materials are increasingly incorporated into contemporary and cross-genre music, where traditional melodic, rhythmic, and performative features are reworked for new listening contexts. Similar patterns can be found across several musical traditions. Irish traditional music, West African musical practices, and flamenco have all been adapted within contemporary, experimental, or transnational settings while retaining recognizable stylistic features (Vallely, 2011; Agawu, 2003; Manuel, 1988). These forms of circulation expose listeners to ethnic musical materials in settings that may differ substantially from their original performance contexts. Broader dissemination can therefore change how such music is encountered and interpreted, especially when cultural background information is limited (Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008).

The expansion of ethnic music into new settings also raises questions about how it is received outside its original cultural contexts. Digital platforms have made a wider range of music available to listeners, while recommendation systems, streaming playlists, and promotional practices tend to direct attention toward commercially established genres (Prey & Lee, 2025; Gao & Damdindorj, 2024). Digital platforms have also created new opportunities for the dissemination of traditional musical forms, although their visibility and reception may depend on how cultural content is presented and circulated online (Cen et al., 2024). Wider availability, therefore, does not necessarily translate into sustained listening or preference.

This makes the listener an important part of the problem. Exposure to ethnic music may lead to different evaluations depending on a listener's cultural background, psychological characteristics, social context, prior familiarity, uses of music, and understanding of its aesthetic and cultural meanings. Existing work has examined many of these factors separately, but their relative contributions to ethnic music preference remain unclear. The present study, therefore, examines ethnic music preference through six dimensions: cultural background, psychological traits, social and contextual factors, repetition and familiarity, musical functional experience, and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition.

2. Related work

2.1 Music Preference

Music preference has long been studied in music psychology and the sociology of music (LeBlanc, 1982). Early studies often treated preference as an individual response to musical stimuli, with emphasis on aesthetic judgment, emotional reaction, and perceptual pleasure (Rawlings & Ciancarelli, 1997; LeBlanc, 1982). Later research gave greater attention to the social and cultural

conditions in which preferences develop (Shepherd & Sigg, 2015). Music preferences are shaped by both individual dispositions and the environments in which listening takes place. Family socialization, music education, peer groups, and media use can influence what listeners encounter and how they learn to evaluate different kinds of music. Repeated exposure to these environments can gradually produce relatively stable patterns of musical taste and evaluation (Lamont & Crich, 2022).

Previous studies have examined several broad sources of variation in music preference. These include intrapersonal factors such as personality, cognitive style, and affective needs; sociocultural influences such as education, family background, and cultural norms; and situational factors such as listening context, social presence, and media use. Familiarity has also received considerable attention. According to the mere exposure effect, repeated contact with a stimulus can increase liking as the stimulus becomes easier to recognize and process (Zajonc, 1968). This principle has been widely applied to research on musical preference.

Music preference also reflects the cultural environments in which listeners develop. Through repeated participation in particular cultural settings, listeners acquire expectations and evaluative habits that influence how they perceive musical structure, timbre, and style. When musical features are consistent with these culturally acquired expectations, the music may be easier to interpret and more readily accepted across cultural contexts (Klarlund et al., 2023). Social position can further shape musical taste through differences in education, cultural exposure, and access to cultural resources. Research on cultural capital has shown that these differences are associated with variation in genre preference, listening practices, and aesthetic evaluation (Coulangeon, 2003).

Psychological characteristics are another well-established source of variation in music preference. Openness to experience, for example, is associated with preferences for complex and stylistically diverse genres, whereas extraversion tends to be linked with more energetic and rhythmically driven music (Vella & Mills, 2017). These findings indicate that relatively stable individual differences can contribute to variation in musical taste. Music is also selected for practical and emotional purposes, including mood regulation, stress reduction, self-reflection, and concentration (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008; Schäfer & Sedlmeier, 2009). Repeated use of music for these purposes can strengthen preferences for music that reliably serves particular psychological or situational needs.

2.2 *Music preference models*

LeBlanc (1982) proposed the interactive theory of music preference, which explains musical preference through physiological, psychological, social, and cultural influences. Listener characteristics such as auditory ability, musical aptitude, and training affect how musical stimuli are perceived and evaluated. Preference also develops through social experience, including family influence, peer interaction, and music education (LeBlanc, 1982; Lamont & Hargreaves, 2021). The model provided an early framework for examining music preference across several levels of influence.

LeBlanc's framework also recognizes the role of musical features. Tempo, timbre, consonance, rhythmic organization, and other structural properties can affect how music is perceived and evaluated, and may therefore contribute to preference judgments (LeBlanc, 1982).

Hargreaves, Miell, and MacDonald (2005) later developed a reciprocal feedback model in which music preference is shaped by ongoing relations among the musical stimulus, the listener, and the

listening context. Musical features such as rhythm, melodic contour, and familiarity influence perception, while listener characteristics—including prior experience, expertise, and self-concept—affect how these features are evaluated. Social setting, listening purpose, and cultural norms further influence the judgment made in a particular situation. Preference is treated as part of a continuing process: earlier evaluations can affect later music selection, listening duration, and repeated exposure, which in turn contribute to subsequent preferences.

Compared with LeBlanc's (1982) interactive theory, the reciprocal feedback model proposed by Hargreaves, MacDonald, and Miell (2005) places greater emphasis on the development of preference over time. LeBlanc's framework identifies several broad sources of influence, including physiological characteristics, psychological traits, social and cultural background, and musical features. The reciprocal feedback model focuses more closely on how these influences operate during actual listening experiences. Musical stimuli, listener characteristics, and situational conditions interact during evaluation, and the resulting preference judgments can affect later music selection, listening duration, and repeated exposure. In this sense, the two models address related but different questions: LeBlanc's model is mainly concerned with the factors associated with preference, whereas the reciprocal feedback model gives greater attention to the processes through which preference is maintained and revised over time (LeBlanc, 1982; Hargreaves, MacDonald, & Miell, 2005). Used together, the two frameworks provide a useful basis for examining both relatively stable influences and context-dependent changes in musical preference. However, both models were developed largely in relation to Western listeners and mainstream or art-music repertoires. Their treatment of culturally specific meanings, identity-related experience, and knowledge acquired through participation in particular musical traditions is comparatively limited. This creates a difficulty when they are applied directly to ethnic music preference, where cultural understanding may be closely tied to how the music is perceived and evaluated.

Ethnic music preference is shaped by more than stylistic features alone. Listeners may also respond to the cultural meanings, identity associations, and forms of familiarity attached to a musical tradition. These meanings are often learned through repeated participation, oral transmission, ritual practice, and other culturally specific forms of musical experience. To extend existing models of music preference, the present study draws on cultural background, psychological traits, social and contextual influences, prior familiarity, musical functional experience, and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition. It also incorporates ideas from cultural cognition theory. Schema activation refers to culturally learned expectations that guide perception and interpretation. Cultural consonance concerns the degree to which individual experience aligns with shared cultural patterns. Embodied familiarity refers to perceptual and sensorimotor familiarity developed through repeated participation in culturally familiar practices. Together, these concepts provide a basis for examining ethnic music preference as a culturally informed form of evaluation rather than a response to musical structure alone. The present study, therefore, tests a six-construct model in which cultural background, psychological traits, social and contextual factors, repetition and familiarity, musical functional experience, and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition are examined as distinct predictors of ethnic music preference.

2.3 Ethnic Music and Cultural Identity

The relationship between ethnic music and cultural identity has received sustained attention in ethnomusicology and the sociology of culture. Ethnic music is often closely tied to the cultural

settings in which it develops and is performed. Music can also contribute to the development and expression of personal and social identities (MacDonald et al., 2002). Its musical forms and performance practices may carry culturally specific symbols, historical associations, and social values (Bohlman, 1988). Cultural identity is frequently used to explain how listeners and communities interpret such music. Music can contribute to social identification and a sense of cultural belonging while retaining its aesthetic and expressive functions (Folkestad, 2002). Through recurring symbols, narratives, and performance practices, ethnic music can help maintain shared cultural references within a community. These meanings may also shape how the music is understood when it is encountered by listeners from different cultural backgrounds.

Within specific cultural and historical settings, individuals develop a sense of cultural belonging through sustained socialization and participation in shared practices (Tajfel, 1978; Jenkins, 2014). Music forms part of this process because it carries meanings that are learned through listening, performance, and communal participation. Historical narratives, social values, and collective memories may be expressed through musical structures, performance conventions, and ritual use. Repeated engagement with ethnic music—through listening, singing, dancing, or instrumental performance—can gradually familiarize individuals with its tonal patterns, rhythmic organization, and timbral qualities. These experiences also contribute to the cultural knowledge and emotional associations through which listeners understand the music and relate it to a wider sense of group belonging (Stokes, 2004; Turino, 2008).

Cultural identity can influence how listeners engage with ethnic music. Listeners who are familiar with a tradition's symbols, historical narratives, performance contexts, and aesthetic conventions may attend to different features and interpret them in different ways. For these listeners, ethnic music is connected with meanings and memories that extend beyond its immediate acoustic qualities. Such knowledge can deepen emotional response and strengthen the association between the music and a listener's sense of cultural belonging (DeNora, 2000).

Greater familiarity with the cultural meanings of ethnic music can strengthen emotional engagement and increase the likelihood of positive evaluation. Listeners who lack relevant cultural knowledge or prior experience may find the music more difficult to interpret, particularly when they are unfamiliar with its symbolic references, stylistic conventions, or performance context. Klarlund et al. (2023) describe this gap between the listener and the musical tradition as "cultural distance." The concept refers to differences in cultural knowledge and experience that may affect how music is understood and evaluated, rather than to stylistic differences alone.

Under conditions of globalization and increased intercultural contact, cultural identity is often less territorially fixed than in the past and may draw on several cultural references at the same time (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009). Listeners may therefore engage with locally rooted musical traditions alongside transnational and hybrid forms. This can produce more varied patterns of music preference, because cultural familiarity and identification are no longer tied to a single social or geographic setting. Ethnic music may retain its role as a marker of heritage and group continuity, while also being reinterpreted in new musical and social contexts. These changes affect how listeners recognize, evaluate, and attach meaning to ethnic music, especially when traditional and contemporary cultural references overlap.

3. Methods

3.1 Model Development and Hypotheses

Research on music preference has identified several broad sources of influence, including cultural background, individual psychological characteristics, listening context, familiarity, and the functions that music serves in everyday life (North & Hargreaves, 2008; Bornstein, 1989). These factors are especially relevant to ethnic music, where preference may also depend on how listeners understand culturally specific aesthetic features and meanings. Based on the literature reviewed above, the present study organizes these influences into six constructs: cultural background (CB), psychological traits (PT), social and contextual factors (SC), repetition and familiarity (RF), musical functional experience (MF), and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition (PC). Each construct represents a distinct aspect of the listener's experience with ethnic music and is examined as a predictor of ethnic music preference (EMP). The following hypotheses specify the expected relationship between each construct and EMP.

The proposed model brings these strands of research together within a six-construct framework. Cultural background (CB) captures the listener's broader cultural environment and prior cultural exposure. Psychological traits (PT) refer to individual differences relevant to music engagement and evaluation. Social and contextual factors (SC) concern the settings and social conditions in which ethnic music is encountered. Repetition and familiarity (RF) represent prior exposure and perceived familiarity with the music. Musical functional experience (MF) refers to the emotional, social, and personal uses that listeners derive from music. Perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition (PC) capture listeners' evaluation of musical qualities together with their understanding of culturally specific meanings. These six constructs are examined as distinct predictors of ethnic music preference (EMP). The following hypotheses specify the expected relationship between each construct and EMP.

H1: Cultural background (CB) is positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

Cultural background refers to the cultural environment in which individuals grow up. It includes family influence, social surroundings, and broader cultural experiences. Over time, these experiences can affect how listeners understand and evaluate different kinds of music (Garfias, 2004). Cultural identification may also influence musical response. Listeners who feel a stronger connection with a cultural tradition may respond more positively to music associated with that tradition (Folkestad, 2002). Cultural background is therefore expected to be positively associated with ethnic music preference.

H2: Individual psychological traits (PT) are positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

Psychological traits refer to relatively stable individual differences in personality, emotional tendencies, and cognitive style. Previous research has linked these characteristics to variation in music preference. Openness to experience, for example, is often associated with preferences for complex and stylistically diverse music (Vella & Mills, 2017). Emotional goals can also guide music selection, as listeners may use music to regulate mood, seek stimulation, or support reflection. These

differences are likely to affect how listeners evaluate and respond to ethnic music, particularly when the music is unfamiliar or culturally distinctive. On this basis, psychological traits are expected to be positively related to ethnic music preference.

H3: Social and contextual factors (SC) are positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

Social and contextual factors refer to the settings and interpersonal conditions in which music is encountered and evaluated. These may include ceremonial events, community-based cultural activities, peer interaction, and digital media environments. Previous research has shown that music preferences can vary across social situations because listeners respond to different expectations, purposes, and patterns of interaction (Rentfrow, 2012). Peer approval and group norms may also affect music selection, particularly when music is used to express social identity or affiliation. Such influences can become stronger in shared listening settings, where preferences are visible to others and may be reinforced through repeated group interaction (Tekman & Hortaçsu, 2002). In the case of ethnic music, participation in cultural events, community practices, and socially shared listening experiences may therefore be associated with stronger preference.

H4: Repetition and familiarity (RF) are positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

Repetition refers to repeated exposure to a musical style, whereas familiarity reflects the extent to which listeners recognize and understand its characteristic features. Previous research on the mere exposure effect has shown that repeated contact can increase liking by making a stimulus easier to process and more predictable (Garcia-Marques & Mackie, 2007). In music, repeated listening may also help listeners become familiar with recurring rhythmic, tonal, and timbral patterns (Madison & Schiölde, 2017). This may be particularly relevant to ethnic music, whose stylistic conventions can initially be unfamiliar to listeners from different cultural backgrounds. Continued exposure can reduce this sense of unfamiliarity and make the music easier to anticipate and evaluate. Greater familiarity may therefore be associated with a stronger preference for ethnic music.

H5: Musical functional experience (MF) is positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

Musical functional experience refers to the emotional, social, and personal purposes that music serves for listeners. These purposes may include mood regulation, social connection, and self-expression. Music preference has also been associated with the use of music for emotion regulation (Cook et al., 2019). Previous research has shown that listeners often prefer music that meets their personal or situational needs (von Georgi & Polat, 2013). Ethnic music may serve similar functions, particularly when it is associated with familiar cultural meanings, shared activities, or forms of identity expression. For example, it may provide emotional comfort, strengthen a sense of connection during communal participation, or support the expression of culturally meaningful aspects of the self. When listeners experience these functions repeatedly, they may develop a stronger preference for the music. Musical functional experience is therefore expected to be positively associated with ethnic music preference.

H6: Perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition (PC) are positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

Perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition refer to listeners' evaluations of musical qualities and their understanding of the cultural meanings associated with the music. Aesthetic evaluation may involve features such as timbre, structural coherence, melodic expression, and overall musical appeal. Cultural cognition concerns the extent to which listeners recognize symbolic references, historical associations, and sociocultural meanings embedded in a musical tradition. Previous research has shown that musical understanding involves more than the perception of sound alone and is influenced by culturally acquired knowledge and expectations (Gruhn, 2005). When listeners are familiar with the meanings and conventions of a musical tradition, they may be better able to interpret its expressive features and evaluate it within an appropriate cultural frame. This may strengthen emotional engagement and contribute to more positive aesthetic judgments (Budd, 2005). Perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition are therefore expected to be positively associated with ethnic music preference.

3.2 Research Model and Hypotheses

Given the social and cultural characteristics of ethnic music, this study proposes a six-construct model of ethnic music preference. The model includes cultural background (CB), psychological traits (PT), social and contextual factors (SC), repetition and familiarity (RF), musical functional experience (MF), and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition (PC). Ethnic music preference (EMP) is specified as the dependent variable, while CB, PT, SC, RF, MF, and PC are treated as distinct but related predictor constructs.

The structural model examines the proposed relationships between each predictor and EMP. The corresponding hypotheses are summarized in Figure 1.

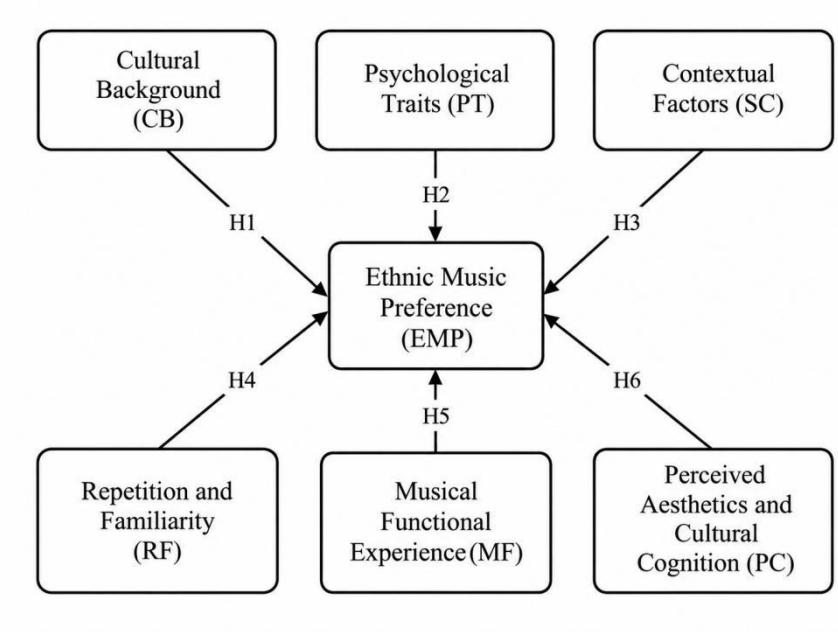


Fig. 1. The proposed research model.

Based on the proposed model, six hypotheses are formulated to examine the relationships

between the antecedent constructs and ethnic music preference (EMP):

H1: Cultural background (CB) is positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

H2: Individual psychological traits (PT) are positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

H3: Social and contextual factors (SC) are positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

H4: Repetition and familiarity (RF) are positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

H5: Musical functional experience (MF) is positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

H6: Perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition (PC) are positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP).

3.3 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section 1 collected demographic information, including age, gender, and highest educational attainment. Section 2 measured the six antecedent constructs: cultural background (CB), psychological traits (PT), social and contextual factors (SC), repetition and familiarity (RF), musical functional experience (MF), and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition (PC). Section 3 assessed the dependent variable, ethnic music preference (EMP).

The questionnaire was designed with reference to established principles of psychometric survey construction, with attention to measurement coverage and response burden (Lenzner et al., 2010). Measurement items were adapted from established scales and related studies, including Schäfer and Sedlmeier (2009) and North and Hargreaves (2008), and were revised to fit the context of ethnic music. Each construct was represented by three to five items, resulting in a total of 34 items. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Item wording was adjusted where necessary to improve clarity and contextual relevance. For example, an item concerning early exposure was revised from “I believe that in my growing environment (e.g., family or community), I was frequently exposed to ethnic music” to “During my childhood and adolescence, I was regularly exposed to ethnic music through family traditions, community events, or local media.”

3.4 Preliminary Study

After the initial questionnaire was developed, five experts were invited to review the items for content validity. The panel included three ethnomusicologists with research experience in cross-cultural music cognition and two psychometricians with expertise in scale development. Each expert evaluated the items in terms of construct relevance, clarity of meaning, and appropriateness for different ethnic music contexts. Their comments were compared and discussed, and items were revised where recurring concerns were identified. The revisions mainly addressed ambiguous wording, contextual specificity, and the correspondence between individual items and their intended constructs. For example, the item "I believe that exposure to ethnic music in social settings influences my evaluation and preference for it" was revised to “Exposure to ethnic music during communal gatherings (e.g., festivals, rituals, or family celebrations) shapes my aesthetic judgment and listening preferences.” Another item, “I believe that listening to ethnic music can evoke emotional resonance,” was revised to provide a clearer reference to culturally meaningful emotional experiences.

4. Experiment

4.1 Participants

Participants were recruited from the general population and included both listeners with a strong interest in music and those without specialized musical backgrounds. Recruitment aimed to include variation in age, educational attainment, and cultural background within the sample.

The final analytic sample consisted of 302 participants. Of these, 146 were male (48.34%) and 156 were female (51.66%). Participants covered a broad age range: 16 (5.30%) were under 18 years old, 87 (28.81%) were aged 18–25, 76 (25.17%) were aged 26–30, 60 (19.87%) were aged 31–40, 34 (11.26%) were aged 41–50, 20 (6.62%) were aged 51–60, and 9 (2.98%) were over 60 years old.

Participants also represented several ethnic backgrounds. Most identified as Han Chinese (n = 249, 82.45%), while the remaining 53 participants belonged to several ethnic minority groups, including Manchu, Mongolian, Hui, Miao, Yi, Yao, Bai, Tujia, Kazakh, Dai, Qiang, and De'ang.

Educational attainment was distributed across five levels. Twenty-one participants (6.95%) had completed junior high school or below, 45 (14.90%) had completed high school or technical secondary school, 77 (25.50%) held a junior college qualification, 124 (41.06%) held a bachelor's degree, and 35 (11.59%) held a master's degree or above. Overall, 159 participants (52.65%) held a bachelor's degree or higher. The sample, therefore, showed substantial variation in age and educational attainment, although Han Chinese participants constituted the majority (see Table 1).

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	146	48.34
	Female	156	51.66
Age Group	Under 18	16	5.30
	18–25	87	28.81
	26–30	76	25.17
	31–40	60	19.87
	41–50	34	11.26
	51–60	20	6.62
	Above 60	9	2.98
Ethnicity	Han	249	82.45
	Manchu	6	1.99
	Mongolian	3	0.99
	Hui	3	0.99
	Miao	6	1.99
	Yi	8	2.65
	Yao	3	0.99
	Bai	3	0.99
	Tujia	5	1.66
	Kazakh	5	1.66
	Dai	4	1.32
	Qiang	3	0.99
	De'ang	4	1.32

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Education Level	Junior high school or below	21	6.95
	High school / Technical secondary school	45	14.90
	Junior college	77	25.50
	Bachelor's degree	124	41.06
	Master's degree or above	35	11.59
Total	—	302	100.00

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the participants (N = 302).

4.2 Procedure

The study was conducted in several stages. Participants were recruited through offline community channels and social media platforms, including Xiaohongshu, Weibo, WeChat, and QQ. The study involved a non-invasive questionnaire and music-listening task. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. For participants under 18 years of age, additional consent was obtained from a parent or legal guardian. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants then accessed the study through a dedicated link or QR code and reviewed instructions describing the procedure and task requirements.

Before completing the questionnaire, participants received a brief introduction to the general context of ethnic music and viewed a standardized video lasting approximately 440 seconds. The video presented selected examples of Chinese ethnic music, including Jasmine Flower, The Flowing Stream, and Kangding Love Song. These pieces were selected as representative and accessible examples of Chinese ethnic music for the listening task. The same video was presented to all participants so that questionnaire responses were based on a common set of musical materials. The video served as a standardized listening stimulus rather than as formal instruction in ethnic music.

After viewing the video, participants completed the online questionnaire using the provided link. Submitted responses were screened before analysis. Questionnaires were excluded if they were incomplete, contained obvious repetitive or patterned responses, showed evidence of duplicate submission, or were completed in an implausibly short period of time. Responses that passed these checks were retained for the final analysis. Participants who completed the study received RMB 5 as compensation.

4.3 Materials

The listening stimulus was a 440-second video featuring selected examples of Chinese ethnic music. It was presented before the questionnaire so that all participants were exposed to the same set of musical materials. The video was compiled and edited by the research team from existing Chinese folk music recordings and included excerpts from works such as Jasmine Flower, The Flowing Stream, and Kangding Love Song. These pieces were selected because they are relatively well known, differ in regional and stylistic characteristics, and are accessible to listeners with varying levels of musical experience. The selection was intended to provide participants with a

common listening reference while avoiding reliance on a single regional tradition or musical style.

The video included several well-known Chinese folk songs from different regions, including Jasmine Flower from Jiangsu, The Flowing Stream from Yunnan, and Kangding Love Song from the Kangding region of Sichuan. These pieces were selected because they are widely recognized and represent different regional traditions. They also differ in melody, rhythm, timbre, and emotional character. Using several contrasting examples helped avoid reliance on a single regional or stylistic tradition. The excerpts gave all participants the same set of musical references before they completed the questionnaire.

The audiovisual materials were obtained mainly from publicly accessible folk music archives and established digital media platforms. The research team edited the selected excerpts to maintain consistent audio quality and playback conditions across the video. Visual content was kept simple, with the musical performance remaining the main focus. Narrative scenes and other prominent visual elements were limited to reduce their possible influence on participants' responses.

The video lasted approximately 440 seconds (about 7 minutes). This duration was chosen to provide participants with enough musical material to form an initial impression of the selected excerpts without making the listening task unnecessarily long. A shorter presentation might have provided too little exposure, while a substantially longer video could have increased fatigue and reduced attention. The final duration was therefore selected as a practical balance between adequate exposure and participant burden.

4.4 Results

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS Statistics 26. After data screening, 302 responses were retained for analysis, with no missing values in the final dataset. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all measurement items. Skewness and kurtosis were also examined to assess univariate normality.

Item means ranged from 3.51 to 3.81, with standard deviations ranging from 1.05 to 1.25. Skewness values ranged from −0.892 to −0.607, while kurtosis values ranged from −0.479 to 0.463. The absolute values of both skewness and kurtosis were below 1 for all items, indicating no substantial departures from univariate normality (see Table 2).

Construct	Item	Mean	S.D.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Cultural Background (CB)	CB1	3.642	1.172	-0.745	-0.182
	CB2	3.699	1.225	-0.707	-0.479
	CB3	3.603	1.187	-0.762	-0.171
	CB4	3.563	1.193	-0.818	-0.074
	CB5	3.586	1.122	-0.692	-0.051
Psychological Traits (PT)	PT1	3.745	1.208	-0.876	-0.022
	PT2	3.699	1.093	-0.824	0.259
	PT3	3.788	1.057	-0.892	0.463
	PT4	3.805	1.164	-0.887	0.03

Construct	Item	Mean	S.D.	Skewness	Kurtosis
Social and Contextual Factors (SC)	SC1	3.785	1.11	-0.827	0.106
	SC2	3.712	1.195	-0.792	-0.178
	SC3	3.705	1.16	-0.848	0.058
Repetition and Familiarity (RF)	RF1	3.616	1.246	-0.744	-0.34
	RF2	3.715	1.211	-0.828	-0.232
	RF3	3.662	1.206	-0.792	-0.233
Musical Functional Experience (MF)	MF1	3.642	1.096	-0.703	-0.043
	MF2	3.709	1.187	-0.786	-0.103
	MF3	3.689	1.191	-0.853	-0.027
	MF4	3.685	1.224	-0.813	-0.21
	MF5	3.719	1.101	-0.791	0.098
Perceived Aesthetics and Cultural Cognition (PC)	PC1	3.586	1.128	-0.614	-0.213
	PC2	3.632	1.165	-0.813	-0.037
	PC3	3.51	1.178	-0.607	-0.328
	PC4	3.666	1.149	-0.722	-0.206
Ethnic Music Preference (EMP)	EMP1	3.772	1.157	-0.891	0.117
	EMP2	3.715	1.178	-0.856	0.057
	EMP3	3.765	1.162	-0.811	-0.036
	EMP4	3.702	1.089	-0.814	0.167

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and normality assessment of measurement items.

4.5 Measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate the measurement model. The model contained seven latent constructs, each measured by multiple observed items. The analysis was based on the final sample of 302 participants. All standardized factor loadings exceeded 0.60 and were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). The results indicate that the observed items were adequately associated with their respective latent constructs.

Construct reliability and convergent validity were further examined using composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). CR values of 0.70 or above were considered acceptable for construct reliability, while an AVE value of 0.50 or higher was used as the criterion for

convergent validity.

Construct	AVE	CR
Cultural Background (CB)	0.587	0.876
Psychological Traits (PT)	0.564	0.838
Social and Contextual Factors (SC)	0.55	0.785
Repetition and Familiarity (RF)	0.674	0.861
Musical Functional Experience (MF)	0.588	0.877
Perceived Aesthetics and Cultural Cognition (PC)	0.588	0.851
Ethnic Music Preference (EMP)	0.547	0.828

Table 3. Composite reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model.

As shown in Table 3, AVE values ranged from 0.550 to 0.674, with all values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.50. CR values ranged from 0.785 to 0.877 and were above the 0.70 criterion. These results support the convergent validity and internal consistency of the measurement model.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion. Under this criterion, the square root of the AVE for each construct should exceed its correlations with the other constructs.

Construct	CB	PT	SC	RF	MF	PC	EMP
Cultural Background (CB)	0.766						
Psychological Traits (PT)	0.397	0.751					
Social and Contextual Factors (SC)	0.362	0.405	0.742				
Repetition and Familiarity (RF)	0.363	0.429	0.413	0.821			
Musical Functional Experience (MF)	0.411	0.439	0.429	0.401	0.767		
Perceived Aesthetics and Cultural Cognition (PC)	0.406	0.414	0.361	0.328	0.344	0.767	
Ethnic Music Preference (EMP)	0.442	0.459	0.432	0.412	0.472	0.399	0.74

Table 4. Correlations and the square roots of AVE. Note. Diagonal values are the square roots of the AVE; off-diagonal values are inter-construct correlations.

Table 4 presents the square roots of the AVEs together with the correlations among the constructs. For each construct, the square root of the AVE was greater than its correlations with the other constructs. The Fornell–Larcker criterion was therefore satisfied, providing support for discriminant validity.

Multicollinearity among the predictor variables was also examined. VIF values ranged from

1.312 to 1.650, well below the commonly used threshold of 5. No substantial multicollinearity was detected.

4.6 Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Model fit was evaluated using several indices (Table 5). The results were $\chi^2 = 371.839$, df = 329, p = 0.052, and $\chi^2/df = 1.130$. RMSEA was 0.021 (90% CI [0.003, 0.031]), RMR was 0.048, and SRMR was 0.036. CFI, NFI, TLI, and IFI were 0.989, 0.915, 0.988, and 0.989, respectively. GFI was 0.920, and AGFI was 0.901. These values indicate that the structural model fitted the data well.

Indicator	Criteria	Value	Indicator	Criteria	Value
χ^2	–	371.839	TLI	> 0.90	0.988
df	–	329	AGFI	> 0.90	0.901
p-value	> 0.05	0.052	IFI	> 0.90	0.989
χ^2/df	< 3.00	1.13	PGFI	> 0.50	0.745
GFI	> 0.90	0.92	PNFI	> 0.50	0.796
RMSEA	< 0.10	0.021	PCFI	> 0.50	0.861
RMR	< 0.05	0.048	SRMR	< 0.10	0.036
CFI	> 0.90	0.989	RMSEA 90% CI	–	0.003–0.031
NFI	> 0.90	0.915			
NNFI	> 0.90	0.988			

Table 5. Model fit indices for the structural model.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the six hypothesized paths. Five of the six paths were statistically significant (see Table 6).

Hypothesis	Unstandardized Coefficient	SE	z (CR)	*p-value*	Standardized Coefficient
H1: CB → EMP	0.161	0.066	2.427	0.015	0.169
H2: PT → EMP	0.158	0.076	2.067	0.039	0.165
H3: SC → EMP	0.218	0.089	2.455	0.014	0.198
H4: RF → EMP	0.081	0.061	1.332	0.183	0.096
H5: MF → EMP	0.171	0.076	2.233	0.026	0.162
H6: PC → EMP	0.174	0.075	2.302	0.021	0.166

Table 6. Structural path estimates and hypothesis testing.

Cultural background (CB) was positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP) (β = 0.169, p = 0.015), supporting H1. Psychological traits (PT) were also positively associated with EMP (β = 0.165, p = 0.039), supporting H2. Social and contextual factors (SC) showed a positive association with EMP (β = 0.198, p = 0.014), supporting H3. Repetition and familiarity (RF) was not significantly associated with EMP (β = 0.096, p = 0.183), so H4 was not supported. Musical functional experience (MF) was positively associated with EMP (β = 0.162, p = 0.026), supporting

H5. Perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition (PC) were also positively associated with EMP (β = 0.166, p = 0.021), supporting H6.

The structural model and the results of the six hypothesized paths are presented in Figure 2.

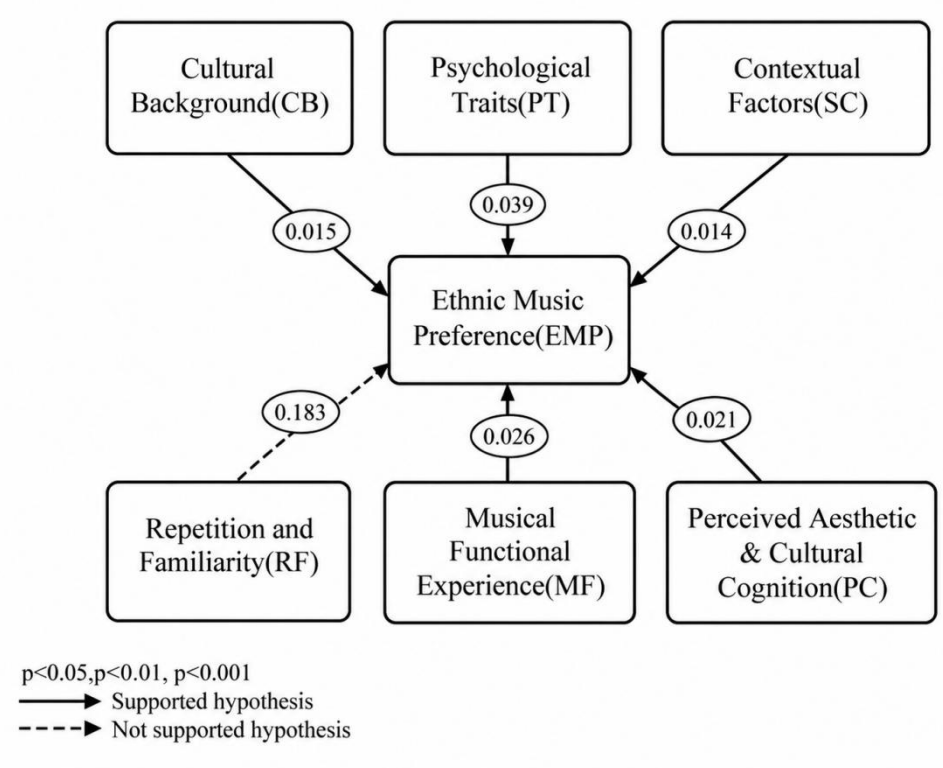


Fig. 2. Structural model and hypothesis-testing results.

4.7 Demographic Characteristics Analysis

Independent-samples t-tests and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to examine differences in the study constructs across demographic groups. Gender differences were tested using independent-samples t-tests, while age and education differences were examined using one-way ANOVA. The results are presented in Table 7.

Demographic Variable	CB	PT	SC	RF	MF	PC	EMP
Gender	0.356	0.244	0.47	0.658	0.455	0.984	0.83
Age	0.664	0.637	0.783	0.029	0.216	0.562	0.693
Education	0.264	0.062	0.25	0.562	0.814	0.731	0.169

Table 7. Demographic group differences across the study constructs.

Exploratory subgroup analyses were conducted by gender and educational attainment. The aim was to examine whether the pattern of structural associations differed across demographic groups. Measurement invariance and formal between-group path comparisons were not tested. The subgroup results were therefore treated as exploratory. The subgroup analyses showed different patterns across gender and educational groups. Some structural paths were significant only in particular subgroups. These results should be interpreted with caution. They do not establish significant between-group differences or demographic moderation.

For educational attainment, different patterns were observed across subgroups. Among participants with a junior high school education or lower, social and contextual factors (SC) were positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP) ($\beta = 0.405$, $p < 0.05$). In the bachelor's degree subgroup, cultural background (CB) ($\beta = 0.880$, $p < 0.05$) and musical functional experience (MF) ($\beta = 0.841$, $p < 0.001$) were positively associated with EMP. None of the six structural paths reached statistical significance among participants with a college diploma or postgraduate education or higher.

Overall, the subgroup analyses revealed different patterns across gender and educational attainment. Some structural paths reached statistical significance only within particular subgroups. These results indicate heterogeneity in the associations with ethnic music preference, although they should not be interpreted as evidence of demographic moderation without formal tests of between-group differences in path coefficients.

5. Discussion

This study examined six factors associated with ethnic music preference in the context of Chinese ethnic music: cultural background (CB), psychological traits (PT), social and contextual factors (SC), repetition and familiarity (RF), musical functional experience (MF), and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition (PC). Five of the six hypothesized paths were statistically significant. Cultural background, psychological traits, social and contextual factors, musical functional experience, and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition were positively associated with ethnic music preference, whereas repetition and familiarity were not significantly associated with preference. These findings provide support for the proposed model and show that ethnic music preference is related to several cultural, psychological, and experiential factors.

More specifically, cultural background, psychological traits, and social and contextual factors were each positively associated with ethnic music preference. The findings indicate that preference is related to both personal characteristics and the social and cultural settings in which listening occurs. Cultural background may matter because ethnic music often carries meanings connected with shared history, collective memory, and cultural identity. Familiarity with these meanings can affect how listeners interpret the music and respond to it emotionally. Long-term participation in a cultural environment may also shape aesthetic expectations about melody, tonal organization, timbre, and expressive style. These expectations may make culturally familiar musical forms easier to recognize and evaluate.

Musical functional experience and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition were also positively associated with ethnic music preference. Listeners may respond more favorably when music serves emotional or social functions and when its aesthetic or cultural meanings are easier to understand. In the case of ethnic music, cultural knowledge may help listeners interpret unfamiliar musical features and connect them with recognizable meanings. Functional use may also contribute to preference when music is used for emotion regulation, social interaction, or other everyday purposes. These findings point to the importance of both musical use and cultural understanding in the evaluation of ethnic music.

Repetition and familiarity, however, were not significantly associated with ethnic music preference in this study. The finding indicates that repeated contact with ethnic music may not be

sufficient to produce greater preference on its own. Ethnic music often contains stylistic conventions, symbolic references, and cultural meanings that may be difficult for unfamiliar listeners to interpret. Repeated listening without relevant cultural knowledge may therefore increase recognition without necessarily leading to stronger appreciation. A similar problem may arise when listeners hear the same musical material several times but remain weakly engaged with its emotional or cultural content. Familiarity under these conditions may have only a limited relationship with evaluation. The result also calls for caution when applying the mere-exposure effect to ethnic music. The present study did not manipulate repeated exposure over an extended period, so the non-significant RF path cannot determine whether longer or more systematic exposure would eventually increase preference.

The exploratory subgroup analysis showed different patterns by gender. Among male participants, musical functional experience was significantly associated with ethnic music preference. None of the six structural paths reached significance among female participants. This pattern should be interpreted cautiously. A significant path in one group and a non-significant path in another do not show that the two groups differ significantly. The result may reflect differences in how listeners use music in daily life. These differences were not tested directly in the present study.

The education-based subgroup analysis also showed different patterns. Among participants with a junior high school education or lower, social and contextual factors were positively associated with ethnic music preference. In the bachelor's degree group, cultural background and musical functional experience were positively associated with preference. No significant structural paths were found in the high school or technical secondary school, college diploma, or postgraduate-or-higher groups. Previous research has linked education and cultural capital with differences in musical taste and cultural participation (Coulangeon, 2003). The present results should still be treated as exploratory. Differences in statistical significance across groups do not show that the groups differ significantly.

The findings show that ethnic music preference is associated with several cultural, psychological, social, and experiential factors. Cultural background and social context were relevant, together with psychological characteristics, musical use, and the perception of aesthetic and cultural meaning. Listeners may also differ in the cultural experience and forms of musical engagement they bring to ethnic music. These differences may be related to variation in how ethnic music is received across listeners and social settings.

5.1 Cultural Background (CB) and Ethnic Music Preference

In the present study, cultural background (CB) was positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP), supporting Hypothesis 1 (H1). Family environments and accumulated sociocultural experiences may therefore be relevant to how listeners respond to ethnic music. Previous research has reported similar patterns. Social interaction and feedback from others can contribute to the development of musical preferences (Glover, 2023). Music is also closely connected with identity construction and social relationships (Mashkin & Volgy, 1975). Cross-cultural research further shows that prior cultural experience is related to how listeners perceive and interpret musical stimuli (Morrison & Demorest, 2009). The present finding is consistent with this literature and points to cultural background as an important source of variation in ethnic music preference.

The association between cultural background and ethnic music preference can be understood in relation to experiences accumulated within particular sociocultural settings. Early musical exposure

often takes place in families and communities, where listening is connected with familiar people, shared activities, and emotional experiences. These associations may continue to affect later responses to music. Ethnic music is also commonly encountered in rituals, festivals, and everyday cultural practices, so exposure often involves participation as well as listening. Over time, such experiences may contribute to how individuals understand musical structure, meaning, and aesthetic value (Cross, 2012). Ethnic music can also carry meanings related to collective memory and cultural identity. Listeners with stronger identification with a cultural tradition may experience greater emotional resonance with its music, which may in turn be reflected in more favorable aesthetic evaluations (Chilvers et al., 2024). Cultural background may further affect how easily listeners interpret stylistic conventions and culturally specific meanings (DiMaggio, 1997). Familiar cultural schemas can make these features more recognizable and easier to understand. In this sense, the relationship between cultural background and ethnic music preference may involve accumulated experience, cultural identification, and culturally informed interpretation.

5.2 Psychological Traits (PT) and Ethnic Music Preference

In the present study, psychological traits (PT) were positively associated with ethnic music preference (EMP), supporting Hypothesis 2 (H2). This finding indicates that differences in personality, cognitive tendencies, and emotional needs are related to how listeners evaluate ethnic music. Previous studies have reported similar associations. Langmeyer et al. (2012) linked personality dimensions to variation in music preference, while Kreutz et al. (2008) found that emotion-regulation goals were related to patterns of music use and preference. In the context of ethnic music, such individual differences may affect the musical qualities listeners attend to, the emotions they seek from listening, and the extent to which a musical style feels personally meaningful. The present result therefore supports the inclusion of psychological traits as one component of ethnic music preference.

The association between psychological traits and ethnic music preference may be related to several aspects of listening. Individuals with greater emotional sensitivity or stronger emotion-regulation needs may use music more often to manage or express emotions. Ethnic music often contains expressive features such as narrative content, poetic lyrics, and culturally specific modes of emotional expression. These features may make it especially meaningful for listeners who seek emotional engagement from music (Schubert, 2007). Openness to experience may also be relevant. Individuals higher in openness tend to be more receptive to unfamiliar or culturally diverse forms of music and may show greater interest in complex or less familiar musical styles (Bulut et al., 2022). This disposition may support a more favorable response to ethnic music, particularly when the music differs from a listener's usual musical experience. Psychological traits may also be related to the use of music for self-expression and identity. Ethnic music carries historical, social, and symbolic meanings that some listeners may connect with personal values or cultural affiliations. For listeners who place greater importance on self-expression, these meanings may become part of how the music is evaluated. Emotional needs, openness to experience, and self-expressive motivations therefore offer several possible explanations for the observed association between psychological traits and ethnic music preference.

5.3 Social and Contextual Factors (SC) and Ethnic Music Preference

In this study, social and contextual factors (SC) were positively associated with ethnic music

preference (EMP), supporting Hypothesis 3 (H3). This finding points to the importance of the social settings in which music is encountered and used. Previous research has shown that music use varies across different social contexts, and listeners often adjust their listening practices according to the setting and people around them (North et al., 2004). Social interaction may also affect how music is understood and valued. Boer et al. (2011), for example, linked music with identity expression and the formation of social bonds. Repeated participation in these social settings may contribute to more stable patterns of musical engagement and preference. In the case of ethnic music, peer interaction, community activities, and media environments may therefore be relevant to how listeners encounter and evaluate particular musical traditions.

The association between social and contextual factors and ethnic music preference may reflect the settings in which ethnic music is encountered. Festivals, community gatherings, live performances, and mediated environments often place music within shared activities rather than isolated listening. In these settings, music can support emotional expression, social interaction, and collective participation (North et al., 2004). Ethnic music is also frequently connected with rituals and community-based practices, where participation can make the listening experience more immediate and socially meaningful (Polzella & Forbis, 2014). Such experiences may increase engagement with the music and contribute to more favorable evaluations. Short-term context, however, should not be assumed to replace more stable forms of aesthetic judgment or cultural understanding. These may depend more heavily on prior knowledge, long-term experience, and accumulated cultural exposure (Carbon, 2010). The present result therefore points to social context as one relevant condition of ethnic music preference, especially in relation to how music is encountered, shared, and used.

Social and contextual factors appear to be relevant to how ethnic music is encountered, shared, and used in everyday settings. Participatory and socially embedded experiences may increase engagement with the music and contribute to more favorable evaluations. The present model, however, did not directly test whether social context has a weaker relationship with aesthetic evaluation or cultural cognition. The significant SC–EMP path therefore supports the independent relevance of social context within the broader pattern of factors associated with ethnic music preference.

5.4 Repetition and Familiarity (RF) and Ethnic Music Preference

In this study, repetition and familiarity (RF) were not significantly associated with ethnic music preference (EMP), and Hypothesis 4 was therefore not supported. The result indicates that familiarity alone may have a limited relationship with preference for ethnic music. This finding differs to some extent from the classic mere-exposure effect. Zajonc (1968) showed that repeated exposure to a stimulus can increase liking, and music psychology research has also linked greater exposure with stronger preference (Ollen & Huron, 2004). The relationship, however, may be less straightforward when listeners encounter unfamiliar musical structures or music from a culturally distant tradition. In such cases, repetition may increase recognition without necessarily producing stronger aesthetic or emotional responses. Johnston (2016) similarly suggests that familiarity does not always translate directly into preference when listeners have difficulty interpreting the musical material.

The non-significant relationship between repetition and familiarity and ethnic music preference may be related to the role of cultural understanding. Ethnic musical traditions often contain

distinctive tonal, rhythmic, and symbolic features that may be unfamiliar to listeners outside the relevant cultural context. Repeated exposure can increase recognition, but recognition does not necessarily lead to a fuller understanding of the music or a stronger preference for it. Cultural knowledge may become especially relevant when listeners need to interpret meanings that are not immediately available from the sound itself. Familiarity may therefore have a stronger relationship with preference when repeated listening is accompanied by greater understanding of the musical and cultural context. Another possible explanation concerns the difference between exposure and voluntary engagement. Hearing a piece repeatedly does not mean that a listener will actively choose it, seek it out, or incorporate it into everyday listening. This distinction may be particularly relevant for ethnic music, which can remain less prominent than mainstream popular genres in many contemporary media environments. Under such conditions, repeated contact may increase familiarity without developing into a stable preference.

The present findings point to a more conditional relationship between familiarity and ethnic music preference. Repeated contact may matter differently depending on what listeners know about the musical tradition and how they engage with it. Cultural understanding may help listeners connect familiar sounds with their broader meanings, while active listening and voluntary engagement may give repeated exposure greater relevance to preference. These conditions were not directly tested in the present study, so they remain possible explanations for the non-significant RF–EMP path. Future research could examine whether cultural knowledge, duration of exposure, and forms of listening alter the relationship between familiarity and ethnic music preference.

6. Demographic Differences in Ethnic Music Preference

The demographic analyses revealed relatively limited group differences in the study variables. No significant differences were found across gender or educational groups, while age differences were observed only for repetition and familiarity (RF). The subgroup analyses, however, showed that some structural paths reached statistical significance within particular gender and educational groups. These patterns indicate that the associations examined in the model may not be identical across demographic subgroups. Previous research has also linked demographic characteristics with variation in musical preference and listening behavior (North & Hargreaves, 2008). The present results add a more cautious picture, as demographic differences were evident in some subgroup patterns but were not consistent across all constructs or groups.

Age-related differences in music preference are often discussed from a developmental perspective. Adolescence is an important period for the formation of musical taste, and music can serve functions related to identity exploration and emotional expression. Preferences may become more stable later in life as musical experience and cultural knowledge accumulate (North et al., 2000). In the present study, however, age differences were limited. A significant difference was found only for repetition and familiarity (RF), while ethnic music preference itself did not differ significantly across age groups. Age may therefore be more closely related to patterns of exposure and familiarity than to preference itself in this sample. Gender has also been linked in previous research to differences in music use and emotional engagement (Vella & Mills, 2017). Such findings may offer some context for the subgroup result observed here. Musical functional experience was significantly associated with ethnic music preference among male participants, whereas no structural path reached significance among female participants. Even so, no overall gender differences were found across the measured constructs. The subgroup pattern should therefore be

interpreted cautiously and does not establish a general gender difference in ethnic music preference.

Educational background may also be related to differences in how listeners engage with ethnic music. Education can affect access to cultural resources, opportunities for musical participation, and familiarity with different forms of artistic expression (Bourdieu, 1984). These experiences may influence the kinds of information listeners draw on when evaluating ethnic music. In the present study, however, no significant differences in ethnic music preference were found across educational groups. The subgroup analysis instead showed different patterns of association within particular groups. Social and contextual factors were significant among participants with a junior high school education or lower, while cultural background and musical functional experience were significant in the bachelor's degree group. No comparable pattern was found in the college diploma or postgraduate-or-higher groups. The results therefore do not support a simple relationship in which higher education corresponds to stronger ethnic music preference.

Regional and developmental contexts may also be relevant to ethnic music preference, although these factors were not directly examined in the present study. Individuals who grow up in areas where ethnic musical traditions are more visible may have more opportunities to encounter such music in family, community, or ceremonial settings. Repeated contact in these settings can increase familiarity and may strengthen connections between music and cultural identity (Boer & Abubakar, 2014). Listeners raised in more culturally diverse environments may encounter a wider range of musical styles and develop more varied patterns of preference. These possibilities deserve further examination in studies that include regional background and developmental experience as explicit variables.

Overall, demographic characteristics showed a more limited and less consistent relationship with ethnic music preference than the main constructs in the model. Most group comparisons were not statistically significant, although some subgroup analyses revealed different patterns of association. These findings suggest that demographic characteristics may provide useful background information when examining variation in ethnic music preference, but they should not be treated as direct explanations on their own. In the present study, cultural background, psychological traits, social and contextual factors, musical functional experience, and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition showed more consistent associations with ethnic music preference.

7. Conclusion and Limitations

This study examined ethnic music preference in the context of Chinese ethnic music using a model that included cultural background (CB), psychological traits (PT), social and contextual factors (SC), repetition and familiarity (RF), musical functional experience (MF), and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition (PC). The proposed relationships were tested using structural equation modeling. Five of the six hypothesized paths were statistically significant. Cultural background, psychological traits, social and contextual factors, musical functional experience, and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition were positively associated with ethnic music preference, while repetition and familiarity showed no significant association. The findings show that ethnic music preference is related to a combination of cultural, psychological, social, and experiential factors.

First, both cultural background and psychological traits were significantly associated with ethnic music preference. Cultural background may affect how listeners interpret culturally specific musical forms, especially when prior experience provides familiarity with their meanings and conventions.

Psychological traits may also contribute to differences in how listeners respond to music, including the emotions they seek from listening and their openness to unfamiliar styles. The significant paths for CB and PT, therefore, show that both cultural experience and individual psychological characteristics are relevant to ethnic music preference.

Second, social and contextual factors were significantly associated with ethnic music preference. This result shows that the settings in which music is encountered and used are relevant to listeners' evaluations of ethnic music. Social interaction, community participation, and media environments may affect how frequently listeners engage with particular musical traditions and the meanings attached to those experiences. These contextual influences may be especially important in situations where music is shared, performed, or used for social and emotional purposes. The present model, however, does not establish whether social context operates more strongly through functional experience than through cultural cognition.

In addition, repetition and familiarity were not significantly associated with ethnic music preference. The result indicates that repeated exposure alone may not be sufficient to produce stronger preference. Familiarity may become more relevant when listeners also develop greater engagement with the music or a better understanding of its cultural meaning. These possibilities were not directly tested in the present model, but they offer plausible directions for future research on the conditions under which familiarity may contribute to ethnic music preference.

Finally, musical functional experience and perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition were both significantly associated with ethnic music preference. These two constructs capture different aspects of listeners' engagement with ethnic music. Musical functional experience reflects how music is used in everyday life, including emotional and social purposes, while perceived aesthetics and cultural cognition concern how listeners evaluate musical qualities and understand cultural meaning. Their significant associations with EMP show that both practical experience and cultural interpretation are relevant to ethnic music preference. The findings, therefore, support the value of considering how listeners use ethnic music, as well as how they understand and evaluate it.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the study used a cross-sectional self-report design, which limits conclusions about causal relationships and may increase the risk of common method bias. Second, the sample was drawn mainly from Chinese participants, with Han Chinese participants accounting for most of the sample, and the listening materials focused on Chinese ethnic music. These features may limit the generalizability of the findings to other cultural settings and musical traditions. Third, the educational subgroups differed substantially in size. The subgroup analyses were exploratory, and measurement invariance was not tested across demographic groups. Fourth, all participants viewed the same 440-second listening stimulus before completing the questionnaire. Although this provided a common listening reference, it may have influenced subsequent responses. Finally, the 34-item questionnaire was adapted from existing scales and related studies. Further research is needed to examine the stability of the measurement structure in other samples and cultural settings.

8. Future Research Directions

Future research can extend this work in several ways. First, studies conducted in different countries and cultural settings would help clarify whether the relationships identified here are consistent across populations. Cross-cultural comparisons could also reveal whether cultural background, social context, and musical experience are related to ethnic music preference in similar

ways across different musical traditions. Second, future studies may benefit from combining multiple methods. Experimental designs could be used to examine the effects of controlled exposure or contextual information, while interviews could provide more detailed accounts of how listeners interpret ethnic music. Larger samples would also make it possible to test subgroup differences with greater statistical precision. Using these approaches together would allow future research to examine both measurable patterns and listeners' subjective experiences.

Future research could also examine whether some of the relationships identified in this study depend on other variables. Cultural identity, for example, may help explain how cultural background is related to ethnic music preference, while media environments may alter the strength of associations between exposure, social context, and preference. These possibilities could be tested through mediation or moderation analysis in future studies. Digital media also deserves closer attention. Short-video platforms, streaming services, and algorithmic recommendation systems increasingly affect how listeners encounter ethnic music, how often they are exposed to it, and the contexts in which it is presented. Examining these forms of mediation may help clarify how contemporary media environments are related to the reception of ethnic music. Finally, future studies could draw on methods from cognitive science or neuroscience to examine processes involved in musical perception, cultural familiarity, and meaning interpretation. Such work may provide more direct evidence about the cognitive processes associated with ethnic music preference.

Declarations

Ethical approval

This study was reviewed by the Biomedical Research Ethics Committee of Hunan Normal University, which granted an exemption from formal ethical review (Approval No. LSK2025-577, dated May 28, 2025). The study involved a non-invasive music-listening task and an online questionnaire. The research procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Measures for Ethical Review of Science and Technology (Trial) (2023), issued by the Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China and other relevant authorities.

Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses was maintained throughout the study. For participants under 18 years of age, additional consent was obtained from a parent or legal guardian.

Regulatory reference

Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China et al. (2023). Measures for Ethical Review of Science and Technology (Trial) (Guo Ke Fa Jian [2023] No. 167).

https://www.most.gov.cn/xxgk/xinxifenlei/fdzdgknr/fgzc/gfxwj/gfxwj2023/202310/t20231008_188309.html

Consent to participate

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. Participants were informed of the study procedures, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidential use of their responses for research purposes. For participants under 18 years of age, additional consent was obtained from a parent or legal guardian.

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Data availability

The datasets and supporting materials for this study have been provided as Supplementary Information files accompanying the manuscript for peer review. These materials include the de-identified pre-screening dataset (N = 307), the final analytical dataset (N = 302), the variable codebook, the survey instrument and data-collection protocol, the data-screening documentation, and the statistical-analysis documentation. Direct personal identifiers have been removed from the shared datasets to protect participants' privacy.

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