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Buddhism Without Belonging: Functional and Digital Forms of Religious Engagement Among Chinese Youth

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Abstract

This convergent mixed-methods investigation explores the changing place of Buddhism in Chinese youth lives in the post-pandemic era using data from a national survey (N = 2812) and semi-structured interviews (n = 24). Although traditional religious affiliation is still generally low among participants, Buddhism still serves as an important psychosocial and symbolic resource. In contrast to doctrinal commitments, youth connect with Buddhism through emotional identification, ritual adaptability, and virtual arenas. Results indicate a unique profile of symbolic-affective religiosity, whereby Buddhism is selectively taken up as an emotional regulation tool, moral guide, and existential reassurer. This form of engagement is frequently enabled by digital rituals, smartphone applications, and social media interactions, highlighting the mediatized character of modern spiritual engagement. Subgroup analysis reveals considerable heterogeneity among this population with differences by region, gender, level of education, and religion of family background, which implies that "Buddhist youth" in China must be conceived as a pluralistic and fluid category. The study contributes to scholarship on youth spirituality and post-institutional religion by emphasizing the functional rather than theological dimensions of religious engagement among East Asia's younger generations.

Keywords: functional religiosity; Chinese youth; digital Buddhism; symbolic-affective spirituality; Buddhist coping function; social media and religion

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Academic Editors: Eduardo Duque, José Francisco Durán Vázquez and Francis Davis

Received: 30 June 2025
Revised: 21 August 2025
Accepted: 22 August 2025
Published: 27 August 2025

Citation: Ouyang, Danna, and Jingyi Xie. 2025. Buddhism Without Belonging: Functional and Digital Forms of Religious Engagement Among Chinese Youth. *Religions* 16: 1108. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16091108

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1. Introduction

In recent years, a notable cultural shift has become evident in China, marked by the growing fascination with Buddhist elements among youth. This shift can be seen in the rising number of young people visiting temples, the widespread popularity of mobile applications like Wooden Fish Tapping (Lin and Lü 2024), and the increasing adoption of Buddhist-inspired practices such as incense burning rituals, "Zen-style" coffee breaks, and minimalist approaches to life like danshari recently seen on social media platforms like Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo (Xuan and Chen 2022).

However, rather than expressing religious faith, these practices tend to be casual, symbolic, and recreational, pointing to a broader trend of desacralized religious engagement. For many youths, Buddhist symbols and rituals mean more of a coping with stress, making wishes, or connecting socially rather than an expression of one's belief (Chen 2023). In response to this trend, temples have started youth-oriented programs and activities such as AI-driven chat services, mindfulness camps, and cultural immersion projects catering to the needs of younger visitors (Wei 2025).

This changing spiritual environment has much to do with China's modern socio-economic and psychological environment. In the post-pandemic world, increasing economic insecurity and intense social competition have added to pervasive youth anxiety. Drawing on Rosa's (2018) Societal Acceleration theory, the rapid pace of technological and societal change has fostered a sense of existential disorientation. Many young people, caught between burnout and ambition, turn to Buddhism as a way of emotional stabilization and existential meaning (Lü 2021). The popularity of digital wooden fish apps and ritual items like temple wrist beads exemplifies a kind of symbolic consumption. (Qin and Dai 2022) It shows that embodied spiritual practices provide instant psychological relief.

Within this context, it can be seen that from a structured religious institution to a fluid cultural resource, Buddhism has undergone a functional transformation. This phenomenon is referred to as functional religiosity. Buddhist elements are not embraced for theological belief or institutional affiliation, but are rather employed to navigate psychological stress, moral uncertainty, and everyday challenges.

Based on religious function, identity formation, and digital religion theories, this study expanded and modified a well-validated scale of Buddhist identification and coping attitudes to (1) determine the hallmark features of Buddhist identification among young Chinese today, (2) study the psychological, moral, cultural, and social functions of Buddhism among young Chinese today, (3) investigate how Buddhist identification, especially in digital environments, shapes the functional influence of Buddhist practices., and (4) determine trends and variation in Buddhist involvement among different social subgroups, including geography, education, and previous religious involvement.

This study contributes to broader scholarly debates on changing modes of belief in contemporary societies, particularly under the "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) doctrine. Here, it also shows how Buddhism is getting restructured to address the affective and moral demands of young generations in China's rapidly changing cultural environment. Finally, it points out that religion still has significant functions to play even in very secular and digitally mediated environments, of supporting youth in navigating the world with purpose, balance, and meaning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Youth and Religion in Contemporary Society

More than the last two decades, there has been increasing scholarly interest in shifts in the religious dispositions of young people globally (Casanova 2019). The most common of these is a reduction in traditional religious membership among younger cohorts, especially in secularized and post-industrial worlds, along with an increase in individualized, mobile, and frequently non-institutional spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Smith and Denton 2009). Phrases like "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) and "believing without belonging" (Davie 2007) have been used to characterize young people who have dropped out of formal religion but still pursue meaning, ethical guidance, and psychological sustenance through spiritual or pseudo-religious resources.

A connected international trend, especially evident in Buddhism, is the movement to put practice before belief. Meditative and healing practices like mindfulness have been made secular and comprehensively embraced as mainstream psychological therapies among young people (Kabat-Zinn 2003). In China, studies have revealed that college students' application of Buddhist breathing techniques to reduce anxiety has effects similar to cognitive-behavioral therapy (Li et al. 2023), indicating the instrumental utility of Buddhist practice even outside religious settings.

East and Southeast Asia, although informal ritual engagement by the young remains constricted, religiosity retains its hold through festivals, family rituals, and symbolic

practices (Cheng 2020; Xie and Zhang 2024). Buddhism, more specifically, remains a font of moral reflection, emotional solace, and cultural identity-even for those not identifying themselves as religious believers in a doctrinal context (Zheng 2024). This points to the sustained existence of embedded, ambient religious forms that more conventional measures of religiosity tend to overlook yet continue to occupy salient positions in daily life.

2.2. Buddhism and Functional Religiosity

Within the sociology of religion, the functionalist approach has long played up the role of religion in yielding meaning, moral direction, social integration, and coping (Malinowski 1979). More contemporary research has applied this framework to modern Buddhist contexts, positing that even de-institutionalized or symbolic modes of Buddhist practice can serve important psychological and social functions, particularly under conditions of uncertainty or crisis (Silverman 2020; Cheah and Suh 2022).

Religion also serves a meaning-making role, as empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated that people frequently use religious systems as a resource for interpreting and withstanding life's most challenging experiences (Greil et al. 1989; Segall and Wykle 1988; Schuster et al. 2001). Precisely, religious coping strategies have been identified to be related to improved health and well-being in various populations confronted with significant life stressors (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005; Pargament 2010).

Within Buddhism, these functions manifest in various culturally embedded ways. For example, Cheah and Suh (2022) observed that young Buddhist practitioners in the United States reframe the doctrine of impermanence as a cognitive strategy for managing existential anxiety under conditions of social and economic precarity. Similarly, Friedrich-Silber (1995) notes that the karmic narrative in East Asian Buddhism functions as a non-theistic moral order, helping to maintain ethical boundaries in secular societies.

In other cases, Buddhist concepts are adapted as psychological tools: Wang and Tan (2024) found that Singaporean youth translate "compassion" into a form of emotional regulation in workplace environments, while Tan et al. (2023) report that urban white-collar workers in China use the notion of "letting go" (suíyuán) to cope with career pressure, a form of what they term "passive agency."

Beyond moral and psychological roles, Buddhist symbols and objects also serve esthetic, fashionable, or social functions. For instance, Covell (2005) describes how Buddhist prayer beads are worn as fashion accessories by youth in Kyoto, rather than as markers of religious commitment. In China, temple-produced cultural products often repackage ritual objects as vessels of "positive energy," such as incense ash-infused glass ornaments sold at Yonghegong Temple (Yang and Wu 2022).

Symbolic-affective religiosity is described as a style of religious practice less defined by formal membership in institutions or adherence to doctrine and more by emotional bonding, cultural affinity, and the selective appropriation of religious symbols and practices for personal signification. This builds on research which has characterized contemporary religiosity as increasingly individualized, experiential, and affectively grounded, and often located beyond conventional institutional boundaries (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Davie 2007). It is in tandem with Davie's (2007) "believing without belonging," albeit it also includes the symbolic and esthetic aspects Ammerman (2014) identifies as core to lived religion in late modernity. Among Chinese youth, symbolic-affective religiosity appears in rituals like amulet wearing, Buddhist-themed online content consumption, or temple rituals for emotional solace—activities driven by cultural resonance and affective gain more than institutional religious duty. By placing emphasis on both symbolic consumption and emotional involvement, this theory represents the hybrid, post-institutional character of Buddhist identification that is present in the data.

2.3. Youth Buddhism in the Chinese Context

Young Chinese today are growing up during an era of accelerated socio-economic change, characterized by high-level academic competition, an ambiguous employment market, and reconfigured family life. Research indicates that large numbers are increasingly adopting Buddhism and other manifestations of "light" spirituality as ways of dealing with psychological distress, creating symbolic order, and envisioning other modes of existence (Sun 2025; Liu et al. 2025). Post-pandemic times have further strengthened this trend, with growing interest in Buddhist practices, visiting temples, and online modes of religious participation (Ding et al. 2025).

Notably, such engagement is not primarily driven by theological belief, but rather by what Hervieu-Léger (2000) terms "symbolic religiosity," which is the use of religious symbols, spaces, and practices for emotional, esthetic, or cultural purposes. For example, youth may engage with virtual "wooden fish" tapping not out of doctrinal devotion, but as a ritualized way to symbolically purify anxiety or misfortune (Stanley 2017). Also, going to temples can be evidence of seeking inner tranquility or direction in life, but not necessarily religious devotion (Zhang et al. 2024). Buddhism is therefore more practiced and interpreted as a malleable cultural tool, a means of destress, expression of identity, or resolving personal conflicts, than a stubborn system of belief (Sodargye and Yü 2017).

In the context of limited access to formal mental health services, Buddhism has also become an alternative spiritual coping space for many young people (Shen 2023). It functions as a kind of psychological toolbox, offering techniques such as "letting go of the ego" to deal with pressures of social competition (Yang 2021).

Intergenerationally, the landscape of religious values in China has shifted significantly. Following the post-reform era, younger generations have exhibited decollectivized spiritual aspirations (Madsen 2011). With many parents (especially those born in the 1980s) having experienced a "faith vacuum," members of Generation Z are increasingly engaging in self-generated practices that diverge from traditional family-based religious transmission. Among today's youth, Buddhist elements such as karma, compassion ethics, and mindfulness are often selectively appropriated and integrated into daily life, without affiliation to any religious institution or formal doctrinal instruction (Guan et al. 2022).

2.4. Digital Platforms and the Functional Transformation of Buddhism

The extensive use of digital technologies has greatly transformed the channels by which Buddhist practice is performed and perceived (Laliberté 2016). Campbell and Connelly (2020) proposed the theory of "platformed religion", which holds that social media creates religious agency by actively deconstructing conventional religious authority. This is seen in China with phenomena such as "youth-led sutra interpretation" on social media like Xiaohongshu, with users posting short videos providing individuals' explanations of Buddhist scriptures, which in effect dissolves the interpretive monopoly traditionally reserved for the monastic elite.

Digital innovations like livestreamed rituals and digital offerings have also made Buddhist experiences possible across geographical limits (Lim 2020). At the same time, algorithmic recommendation systems have reconfigured the process of forming faith communities, substituting spatial-temple-based affiliation with interest-centered digital clusters, like the Douban group "Buddhism for Youth" (Shee 2025).

In China, digital religion is experiencing a unique shift marked by a range of salient trends. Initially, there is the functional reworking of religious symbols. For example, Beijing's Yonghegong Temple consecrated prayer beads have passed around on Douyin in the form of "unboxing" videos, moving from sacred ritual artifacts to affectively charged cultural consumer products (Chen 2023).

Second, conventional Buddhist resources are being transformed into instant psychological regulators. The highly popular "electronic wooden fish" app, initially derived from monastic aid instruments for contemplation, has been redesigned as a stress relief device using sounds. Research studies have found that the neuro-regulatory impact of its use far surpasses conventional music-based relaxation programs (Tian and Ke 2025), pointing towards the re-functionalization of Buddhist resources by digital means.

Third, the line between the sacred and the secular becomes ever more blurred. Consecration rituals now include QR code scanning and digital input of birthdays; Buddhist wallpaper programs that guarantee "good fortune" are all the rage. Such practices illustrate what can be termed "functional sacredness", which is a kind of mediated religiosity wherein the sacred is used to serve im-mediate mundane purposes (Caijing Insight Think Tank 2025; Skulsuthavong 2025).

2.5. Research Gap

Although earlier studies have illuminated the evolution of religious trends among Chinese youth, many of them rely on qualitative approaches, use small samples, or focus on general spiritual patterns instead of the specific forms of Buddhism. Furthermore, few investigations utilize large-scale empirical data to examine the functional aspects of Buddhism among younger generations in China systematically.

This research will seek to bridge this void by carrying out an extensive mixed-methods evaluation of more than 2000 young individuals from 21 provinces in China and examining the psychological, social, and cultural roles that Buddhism plays. By combining a proven measure of religious identification with behavioral data on digital media, this study adds empirical richness and theoretical nuance to current debates among scholars regarding youth religiosity, symbolic religion, and the adaptive roles of Buddhism in contemporary East Asian societies.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in a multidimensional theoretical framework combining both classical and recent contributions to study the ways religion operates in the lives of Chinese youth nowadays. It especially borrows from three related threads of thinking, namely, functionalist theories of religion, symbolic and affective religiosity ideas, and recent studies on digital religion.

Second, functionalist theories of religion are the starting point, pointing out the psychological, moral, and social functions that religious activity and beliefs can have. These theories propose that religion is not merely a system of belief but also a process whereby people deal with emotional tension, create moral systems, and create a sense of community. Second, the research includes the principles of affective and symbolic religiosity, which transcend doctrinal or institutional membership to stress experiential, personal, and emotionally engaging approaches to participation. This framework is especially helpful in describing how young people are involved with Buddhist traditions in informal, personalized, and emotionally expressive contexts.

Lastly, the system engages with recent studies on digital religion and mediated spirituality that analyze how technological spaces have reshaped both access to and forms of religiosity. In the digital era, online worlds provide new sites for religious exploration, with users being able to encounter spiritual content in fragmentary, symbolic, and customizable ways.

To ensure that these three strands are presented in a cohesive manner rather than as separate discussions, the present study consolidates them into an integrated analytical structure that visually demonstrates their interconnections. The inclusion of a synthetic visual

model allows readers to see at a glance how functionalist theory, symbolic-affective religiosity, and digital religion perspectives combine to explain the predictors and moderators of Buddhist Coping Function among Chinese youth.

2.6.1. Functionalist Theories of Religion

From the functionalist perspective, religion is not necessarily a system of supernatural beliefs but a principal social institution aimed at responding to individual and collective psychological, moral, and existential needs (Parsons 1964). As functionalist theory goes, religion contributes to bringing humans together, makes sense when there is uncertainty, and maintains psychological hardiness by means of ritual activity, shared symbols, and moral accounts. This model is especially insightful in the context of religious youth, as it provides a particularly useful paradigm through which to understand how religion can function less as an issue of faith and more as a workable survival strategy in high-anxiety, high-stress transitional societies.

Drawing on this work, Pargament's religious coping theory (1997) develops a more psychologically sophisticated model, separating Positive Religious Coping (PRC), for example, receiving spiritual support, reframing stress in religious terms, or benevolent reappraisal, from Negative Religious Coping (NRC), such as spiritual discontent, punishing oneself, or perceived abandonment. The Brief RCOPE scale (Pargament 1997) makes these constructs measurable and has been extensively validated across a range of religious and cultural contexts.

To investigate the function of Buddhism as a coping strategy among Chinese young people, we modify and expand the positive aspect of the Brief RCOPE scale by omitting items with high theistic assumptions that are incompatible with mainstream Buddhist cosmology. The emergent framework, dubbed herein as the Buddhist Coping Function (BCF) model, is composed of items that pertain to comforting oneself using Buddhist teachings, ritual observance (e.g., chanting), karmic reasoning, and online involvement in Buddhist activities. This modified model allows us to measure how Buddhism, traditional and online, functions as a psychological and emotional support system for adolescents facing social stress, uncertainty, and moral questions.

While the NRC dimension was excluded due to theistic underpinnings, we acknowledge that culturally specific forms of negative coping—such as guilt or perceptions of karmic retribution—exist in the Buddhist context. These were not measured here due to the lack of an established, psychometrically validated Buddhist-adapted subscale, but we recommend future research to develop such measures for greater comprehensiveness.

2.6.2. Theories of Religious Identification

In the context of today's youth, functionalist explanations account for how religion is still meeting psychosocial needs despite weaker formal belief structures and institutional identification. In China, young people's involvement with Buddhism is increasingly framed within constructs like "post-institutional religion" (Roof 2001), "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) (Fuller 2001), and "believing without belonging" (Davie 2007). These ideas indicate a change in how most youth selectively, emotionally, and culturally appropriate religious symbols and religious practices—even at a distance from traditional labels or institutional allegiance.

Symbolic religiosity (Hervieu-Léger 2000; Gauthier et al. 2013) is a specific concept here. Symbolic religiosity involves the employment of religious symbols, rituals, and language not to convey theological belief but as devices for identity formation, affective resonance, or cultural continuity. In order to develop this idea further, we coin the expression "affective religiosity", which highlights the emotional importance of religious components, like

comfort in chanting, peace in incense ceremony, or calmness in visiting temples, without necessarily having strong religious self-identification.

In this study, the researchers aim to identify types of Buddhist identification through affective-symbolic affiliation, as opposed to formal conversion (Xie and Ma 2023; Cheah and Suh 2022). To quantify this, we modify and update a previously tested Buddhist Identification Scale, originally created for Southeast Asian Chinese populations, in order to capture the distinctive cultural and generational features of present-day Chinese youth.

In the integrated model, these symbolic-affective dimensions interact with functionalist factors and digital practices, illustrating that Buddhist identification is shaped simultaneously by cultural-emotional engagement and practical coping functions.

2.6.3. Digital Religion and Mediatized Buddhism

Drawing on the discipline of digital religion, this research investigates how religious belief, practice, and identity are mediated across digital platforms and techno-logical interfaces (Campbell 2013; Cheong et al. 2012). Within China, the accelerated integration of mobile apps, short video websites, and digital temple services has radically remade the means through which individuals, especially young people, access, share, and perform Buddhist practice.

This study integrates digital religion into the explanatory framework by treating online Buddhist participation as a valid and unique mode of spiritual practice. In particular, the study explores how digital media (e.g., wooden fish clicking apps, livestream rituals), social media sites (e.g., Xiaohongshu, Douban, Weibo), and symbolic online practices help to forge new Buddhist selves and accomplish religious roles.

For operationalizing this view, a standalone dimension on Mediatized Buddhism and Digital Religion was added. To measure new forms of digital engagement among Chinese youth, like applying Buddhist mobile apps, watching vlogs of temples, and attending online symbolic rituals, an exploratory 5-item subscale termed Digital Participation was designed and developed. Although this subscale has not previously been tested, construction took place using qualitative pre-research and in light of existing literature on online religion. The internal reliability and factor structure of the subscale in this research was evaluated to offer initial psychometric validation and to investigate its potential to add to the wider understanding of digital religiosity.

In the consolidated visual model, Digital Participation serves as the operational link between mediated religious spaces and the coping functions outlined in the functionalist component of the framework. This connection demonstrates how online environments are not peripheral but integral to contemporary

2.6.4. Integrated Analytical Model

Based on a multilayered theoretical framework, the current research builds on and synthesizes three interconnected approaches: (1) classical and modern functionalist theories of religion; (2) symbolic and affective religiosity and changing religious identities theories; and (3) developing research into digital religion and mediatized spirituality.

These views together shed light on the ways in which Chinese youth appropriate Buddhism not as theoretical believers, but as practical pursuers of meaning, emotional solace, ethical guidance, and lifestyle consistency in a high-stress, post-pandemic world. Religion here is a cultural and psychological resource, mediated through symbolic practices and digital media, and not institutional allegiance or theological commitment.

With this integrative framework as a foundation, a composite analytical model that consists of seven major dimensions of Buddhist participation, based on and built from the Buddhist Identification Scale (Xie and Ma 2023) and the Buddhist Coping Function subscale

(Brief RCOPE adapted) Perceptions of Buddhism (PB), Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV), Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS), Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP), Emotional Engagement (EE), Digital Participation (DP) was developed.

Every dimension was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). According to this model, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: *Perceptions of Buddhism (PB) positively predict the Buddhist Coping Function (BCF).*

H2: *Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV) positively influences the BCF.*

H3: *Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS) is positively associated with the BCF.*

H4: *Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP) strengthens the BCF.*

H5: *Emotional Engagement (EE) in Buddhist-related content and rituals enhances the BCF.*

H6: *Digital Participation (DP) positively contributes to the BCF.*

H7: *Demographic and contextual variables moderate the relationship between predictors and the BCF.*

Figure 1, which also serves as the conceptual framework of the study, presents a synthetic visual model that consolidates these theoretical strands into a single analytical structure. This diagram shows how functionalist predictors, symbolic-affective elements, and digital religion practices converge to influence the Buddhist Coping Function, with demographic and contextual factors as moderators. The visual representation enhances clarity, reduces fragmentation, and helps readers quickly grasp the logical flow of the study's conceptual framework.

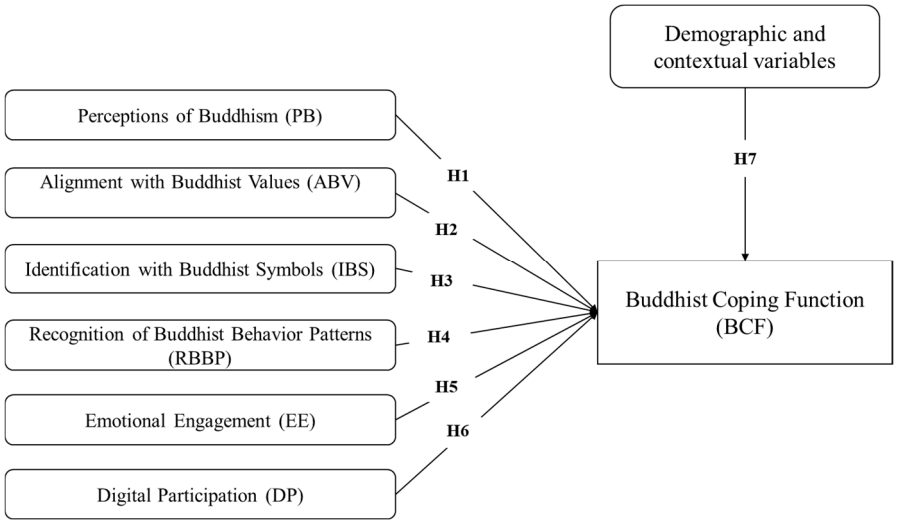


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Buddhism Function Among Young Chinese.

3. Results

3.1. Patterns of Buddhist Identification Among Chinese Youth

The survey results reveal that Chinese youth show a generally moderately high degree of Buddhist identification on six dimensions according to the survey findings. As can be seen in Figure 2, the patterns of the mean scores indicate specific patterns under which young people relate to Buddhism.

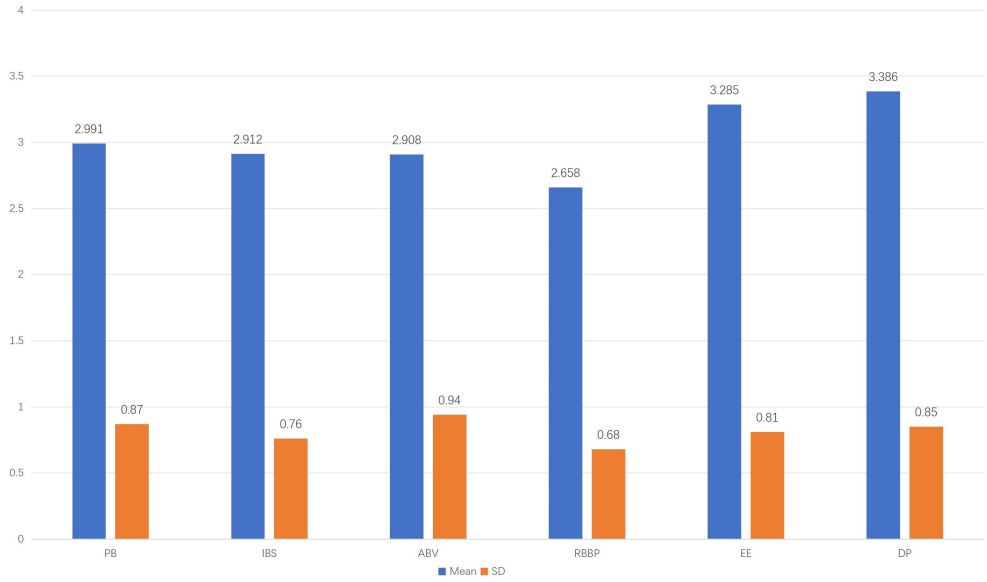


Figure 2. Distribution of scores across dimensions of Buddhist identification. (X-axis: Dimensions of Buddhist identification; Y-axis: Mean scores (on a 5-point Likert scale).

Further scrutiny of the scores reveals that Digital Participation (DP) and Emotional Engagement (EE) recorded the highest average scores in all aspects at 3.386 and 3.285, respectively. The lowest score was, however, recorded by Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP) at 2.658. This dispersion means that Chinese youths are more likely to practice Buddhism through emotionally meaningful experiences and digital sources, in comparison to ritualistic practices or doctrinal methods.

Item-level analysis provides further support for these trends. Within the Perceptions of Buddhism (PB) factor, the highest rated item was "I find Buddhism approachable and familiar" (M = 3.246), indicating an overall positive and culturally familiar construct of Buddhism. In the Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS) factor, the most highly rated item was "I wear or collect items with Buddhist symbols (e.g., amulets, prayer beads)". This item got a mean of 3.082, indicating the need for bodily, symbolic identification with Buddhism.

In the Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV) category, the item "I agree with core Buddhist values such as compassion, altruism, and non-attachment" (M = 2.966) got the highest rating, which was an expression of moderate but significant alignment with Buddhist ethics. While the lowest scoring overall was the RBBP factor, even the item "I frequently chant sutras, copy scriptures, or bow to the Buddha for blessings, relief, or peace of mind" had a moderate mean rating of 2.888, suggesting some continued presence of traditional practice, but less frequently.

Emotional and digital factors stood out as the strongest. The EE factor was dominated by the scale "I think the Buddha or Bodhisattvas" (M = 3.422), indicating a high emotional dependency on Buddhist deities for solace and support. The top item in the DP dimension—"I use Buddhist-related apps, like wooden fish tapping or incense simulators", registered 3.652, the highest reading among any item on the survey, pointing out how technology is becoming more significant in religious expression.

Considered collectively, these results suggest a symbolic-affective mode of Buddhist identification among young Chinese today, where participation is defined increasingly by affective association, symbolic familiarity, and online engagement rather than by formal doctrinal subscription or ritual observance. This developing trend registers greater cultural changes in the manner of religion gets lived and performed in a digital, post-

pandemic world. The implications of these results will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent sections.

3.2. Digital Buddhism as an Emerging Practice

Survey data indicate that digital Buddhist practices are expanding rapidly among Chinese youth, forming a distinct mode of religious engagement. Descriptive statistics for the Digital Participation (DP) items are presented in Figure 3.

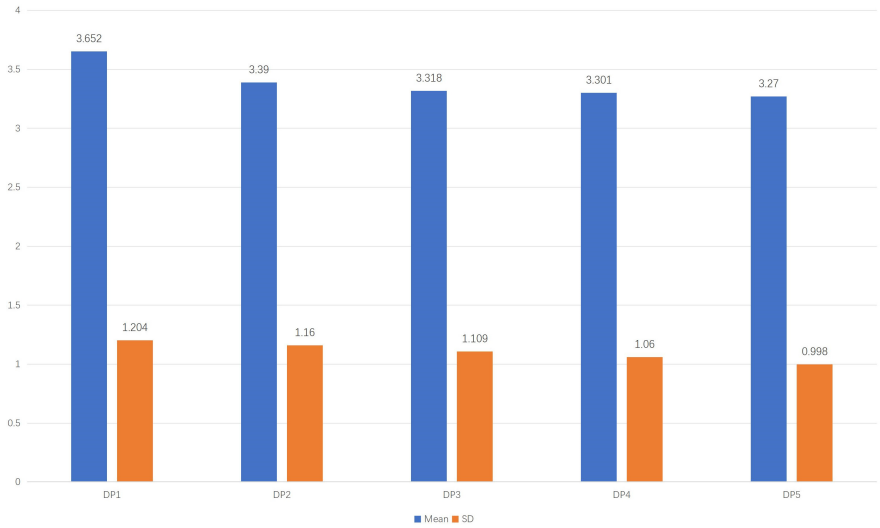


Figure 3. Levels of Engagement in Digital Participation Activities. X-axis: Individual DP items; Y-axis: Mean scores (on a 5-point Likert scale).

Figure 3 illustrates the average (mean) responses for each survey item measuring participants' level of Digital Participation (DP). Each item was rated on a Likert scale, where higher scores indicate greater frequency in engaging with the corresponding digital activity. The figure shows a quick comparison of which digital participation activities were most and least prevalent among participants. Among all DP items, the highest score was for using Buddhist-related mobile applications (M = 3.652), followed by consuming Buddhist content via social media (M = 3.390) and sharing or liking Buddhist-themed digital media (M = 3.318). Participating in online Buddhist activities such as meditation (M = 3.270) was rated the lowest among all items. These results show that youth prefer digital practices that are self-paced, private, and require minimal social interaction, such as app-based rituals and algorithm-curated content consumption. By contrast, activities with higher ritual visibility or weaker perceived utility, such as collective online meditation, are less favored.

This pattern aligns with the dynamics of the "accelerated society" (Rosa 2018), in which young people seek convenient, individualized, and time-efficient spiritual resources that can be seamlessly integrated into daily routines. Digital Buddhism, in this sense, functions as an on-demand, low-threshold coping mechanism, one that reflects broader trends in both secularization and spiritual personalization.

3.3. The Coping Function of Buddhism in Youths' Lives

The findings of the Buddhist Coping Function (BCF) subscale reveal that Buddhism serves a notable psychological and emotional function in the lives of Chinese youth. The mean score of BCF was comparatively high (M = 3.63, SD = 1.187), which means that numerous participants engage Buddhist beliefs and practices as available coping resources during stressful, confusing, or adverse life conditions. Figure 4 shows the mean scores of the BCF per item.

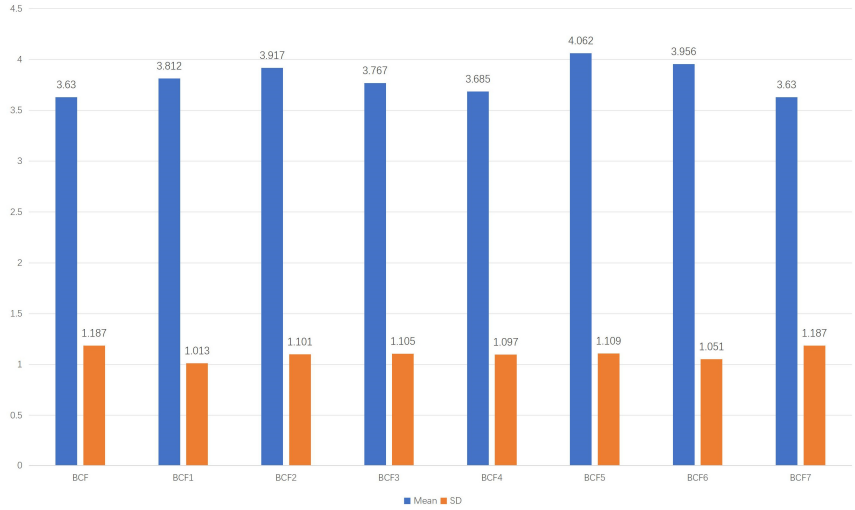


Figure 4. Most Common Buddhist Coping Approaches Among Respondents. X-axis: Individual BCF items; Y-axis: Mean scores (on a 5-point Likert scale).

Figure 4 shows the average (mean) ratings of each Buddhist Coping Function (BCF) item in the survey. Higher scores mean that participants agreed more strongly or used that coping approach more often. Of all the items, the highest was for BCF5 ("I hope that the Bodhisattva will bless me with success and help me fulfill my wishes", M = 4.062), then BCF6 ("Buddhism helps me find inner peace during times of stress and anxiety", M = 3.956) and BCF2 ("I believe current hardships are trials arranged by the Buddha", M = 3.917). These answers propose a largely defensive, comforting, and rerestorative function for Buddhism in adolescent coping mechanisms.

Significantly, these results capture both the non-theistic nature of Buddhism and the local accommodation of Buddhism in Chinese society today. Although classic Buddhist theory lacks stress on personal salvation by divine agency, Buddhist deities like the Buddha or Bodhisattvas are seen as psychospiritual sources of solace, encouragement, and karmic meaning-making by numerous young respondents.

This coping model differs from Judeo-Christian models and discloses a cultural specificity: Chinese youth tend to appropriate Buddhist ideas like karmic trials, repentance, and inner harmony, redefining them as affectively potent weapons of uncertainty, guilt, and desire. Through such means, Buddhism serves as a symbolic-therapeutic system, one that is affectively rich, spiritually negotiable, and culturally inscribed within non-institutionalized youth.

3.4. Sociodemographic Patterns of Buddhist Engagement

Statistical tests revealed significant differences in Buddhist identification and functionality across several sociodemographic subgroups, including education level, geographic region, religious background, and familial Buddhist transmission.

3.4.1. Education Level

Among all variables, education level was significantly associated only with general perceptions of Buddhism (PB). ANOVA results showed no significant variation across educational groups in dimensions such as coping function, emotional engagement, digital participation, or value alignment. However, individuals with higher education levels reported more positive impressions of Buddhism. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. ANOVA Results of Education Level and Buddhist Identification/ Functionality.

Factor	F	*p*
Buddhist Coping Function (BCF)	1.431	0.188
Emotional Engagement (EE)	0.155	0.993
Digital Participation (DP)	0.880	0.522
Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS)	1.098	0.361
Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP)	0.649	0.716
Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV)	1.328	0.233
Perceptions of Buddhism (PB)	25.707	0.000 **

"**" indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$).

3.4.2. Geographic Region

Geographic variation was statistically significant across all seven dimensions, with participants from southern provinces (especially Zhejiang and Fujian) reporting the highest overall levels of Buddhist identification and functional engagement. Interestingly, Jiangxi scored highest in perceptions of Buddhism (PB), while Zhejiang consistently ranked highest in most other subscales. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. ANOVA Results of Geographic Region and Buddhist Identification/Functionality.

Factor	F	*p*
Buddhist Coping Function (BCF)	78.488	0.000 **
Emotional Engagement (EE)	99.041	0.000 **
Digital Participation (DP)	54.390	0.000 **
Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS)	12.916	0.000 **
Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP)	18.310	0.000 **
Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV)	52.053	0.000 **
Perceptions of Buddhism (PB)	57.784	0.000 **

"**" indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$).

3.4.3. Familial Religious Transmission

Participants from families with Buddhist-leaning elders showed significantly higher scores across all dimensions, particularly in Buddhist Coping Function and Emotional Engagement. This suggests that intergenerational cultural transmission plays a critical role in shaping young people's symbolic and affective Buddhist identities. Results can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. ANOVA Results of Family Background and Buddhist Identification/Functionality.

Factor	F	*p*
Buddhist Coping Function (BCF)	204.594	0.000 **
Emotional Engagement (EE)	416.002	0.000 **
Digital Participation (DP)	258.327	0.000 **
Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS)	27.179	0.000 **
Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP)	81.355	0.000 **
Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV)	173.524	0.000 **
Perceptions of Buddhism (PB)	247.275	0.000 **

"**" indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$).

3.4.4. Institutional Religious Affiliation vs. Functional Engagement

Although individuals who reported formal religious affiliation consistently scored higher across all dimensions, a noteworthy proportion of self-identified non-religious youth also reported strong engagement, particularly in digital participation and coping-related

dimensions. This finding lends empirical support to the concept of post-institutional Buddhism. Results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of Buddhist Identification Dimensions by Religious Affiliation.

Dimensions	Religion Identity		Sum.
	No	Yes	
Buddhist Coping Function (BCF)	3.791	4.098	3.833
Emotional Engagement (EE)	3.203	3.805	3.285
Digital Participation (DP)	3.330	3.744	3.386
Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS)	2.883	3.096	2.912
Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP)	2.629	2.847	2.658
Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV)	2.865	3.177	2.908
Perceptions of Buddhism (PB)	2.912	3.488	2.991

"Sum." refers to the overall mean score combining both groups ("No" and "Yes").

3.4.5. Reconciling "No Religion" with "Belief in Buddhism"

An intriguing result emerged, a total of 1533 respondents (54.51%) reported "no religious affiliation" while also stating they "believe in Buddhism." This suggests that many youths do not view Buddhist belief and non-religious identity as mutually exclusive. For these individuals, Buddhism may be seen less as a formal religion and more as a cultural, psychological, or ethical resource. This underscores the rise in functional, symbolic, and culturally embedded forms of Buddhist identification. Results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Distribution of Buddhist Belief by Religious Affiliation Status.

Do You Believe in Buddhism?	Yes (1.0)	No (0.0)	Not Sure (2.0)
No religious affiliation	1533	265	631
Religious affiliation	383	0	0
Total	1916	265	631

3.5. Correlation Analysis Between Dimensions

The data reveal that Buddhist identification operates through multiple pathways in shaping the perceived functional utility of Buddhism among Chinese youth. Correlation analyses demonstrate significant associations between various dimensions of identification and the coping function of Buddhism.

Interestingly, the Digital Participation factor significantly relates to Emotional Engagement (mean difference = 0.43, $p < 0.01$) and Identification with Buddhist Symbols (mean difference = 0.43, $p < 0.01$), implying that digital exposure not just provides emotional bonding but symbolically externalizes Buddhist identity as well. This indicates that digital spaces perform a significant facilitation function for affective and lifestyle religiosity.

Emotional Engagement is most strongly associated with Buddhist Coping Function ($r = 0.321$, $p < 0.01$). Interviewees often mentioned that a temple visit, recitation of sacred texts, or using Buddhist apps made them "feel calm," "leave study or work pressures behind," or "gain confidence in coping with life." This verifies that Buddhism serves as an emotional and psychological moderator, especially under high-pressure conditions.

Digital behaviors also have a strong positive relationship with coping function ($r = 0.111$, $p < 0.01$). The more often people practice Buddhism digitally, the more likely they are to see Buddhism as providing tangible functional benefits—either in emotional stabilization, daily rituals, or symbolic reassurance.

Notably, Identification with Buddhist Symbols is not strongly correlated with functional perception ($r = 0.023$, $p = 0.215$), even though the average scores in this dimension

are comparatively high. This can suggest that these symbolic practices—such as amulet or bracelet wearing—have evolved into esthetic or cultural signifiers instead of expressions of theological faith, because of growing secularization and commercialization of Buddhist symbols among young people.

Identification of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns is statistically significant but weak with respect to perceived function (r = 0.067, $p < 0.01$). While such practices are not typical, when they do happen, they continue to influence feelings of reassurance and moral clarity, particularly when they are practiced as a routine, like scripture copying or prayer.

Identification with Buddhist values of compassion, karma, and non-attachment is also strongly connected to coping function (r = 0.162, $p < 0.01$). Youth identifying with these values are more likely to seek alleviation of guilt or uncertainty through moral reflection and ritual repentance, further establishing Buddhism as a soft moral guide.

Lastly, overall attitudes toward Buddhism are strongly related to perceived functional value (r = 0.202, $p < 0.01$). The more positively people perceive Buddhism generally, the greater the chances that they will report being affected by it and endorse its psychological and moral advantages. For specific correlation coefficients, see Table 6.

Table 6. Correlation Coefficients Between Buddhist Identification and Coping Function.

	Buddhist Coping Function (BCF)
Emotional Engagement (EE)	0.321 **
Digital Participation (DP)	0.111 **
Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS)	0.023
Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP)	0.067 **
Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV)	0.162 **
Perceptions of Buddhism (PB)	0.202 **

"**" indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level ($p < 0.01$).

3.6. Thematic Analysis Results on Lived Experiences of Functional Buddhism

To deepen the understanding of Buddhism's functional role in the lives of Chinese youth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 participants who reported moderate to high involvement in Buddhist-related practices, both online and offline. Several interwoven themes emerged, illustrating how Buddhism is embedded in their emotional lives, moral reasoning, lifestyle aspirations, and digital routines, often in pragmatic, non-doctrinal ways.

(1) Buddhism as a Tool for Mental Health and Emotional Regulation

One dominant theme was the use of Buddhism as a tool for mental health and emotional regulation. Many interviewees described engaging in rituals such as incense offering, temple visits, or wooden fish tapping not out of religious obligation, but as strategies for psychological relief. As one undergraduate student noted, "*I'm not a believer, but tapping the wooden fish helps calm me down. It's like an emotional support ritual*" (Interviewee #03, female, 22). Similarly, a 28-year-old entrepreneur reflected on turning to the temple after facing a major business failure: "*I tried so hard and got nothing in return. . . I just wanted to come to the temple to calm down*" (Interviewee #11, male).

(2) Moral Cleansing through Acts of Merit

Another recurring theme involved moral cleansing through acts of merit, particularly scripture copying, incense offerings, and app-based donations. In the absence of formal avenues for ethical resolution, these practices serve as mechanisms for personal atonement. "*I once harmed someone due to unavoidable circumstances. Now I frequently copy scriptures at home to ask for the Bodhisattva's forgiveness*" explained a 30-year-old civil servant (Interviewee

#06), while a 25-year-old freelancer confessed, "*I must be so unlucky because of the wrongs I committed in a past life. I've donated money through Buddhist apps. . . hoping that the Buddha will forgive me*" (Interviewee #15).

(3) Buddhist Minimalism as an Aspirational Lifestyle

For others, Buddhist simplicity became the ideal lifestyle, providing a respite from the pressures of society and the weariness of being. A 26-year-old software engineer had this to say about finding solace in the temple, "*I just needed to break everything. The temple gave me peace, order, and calm—things I couldn't find elsewhere*" (Interviewee #08). One illustrator repeated this, enjoying the monks' peaceful daily routines, "*I like to sit and listen to the monks' everyday conversation. It's such a calm way of life that feels so different*" (Interviewee #21, male, 27).

(4) Buddhism as a Vessel of Hope and Resignation

Another prominent theme was Buddhism as a tool of hope and resignation against moribund aspirations and socioeconomic uncertainty. A 25-year-old new graduate reported, "*I was an excellent student, but nothing has turned out. I just pray to the Bodhisattva for assistance*" (Interviewee #04). Similarly, a young business owner explained, "*I do not hope to be rich; I do not want to lose money. I pray the Buddha to bless my shop*" (Interviewee #10, male, 23).

(5) Digital Buddhism as Light-Touch Psychological Support

Finally, numerous respondents explained their use of digital Buddhism as light-touch psychological support, drawing inspiration from light-hearted or symbolic Buddhist materials on sites like Douyin and Xiaohongshu. A 29-year-old scientific researcher said, "*If the first post I see on Xiaohongshu is a video of a Bodhisattva, I feel like I'll be blessed for the rest of the day*" (Interviewee #18). Another interview participant, a graduate student, explained the shared ritual of posting commentaries on temple livestreams prior to exams: "*We don't actually think it does anything, but it's reassuring. Each entry has hundreds, if not thousands, of comments*" (Interviewee #09, female, 24).

For many young Chinese, Buddhism represents a malleable system for managing uncertainty, articulating morality, seeking esthetic sanctuary, and promoting communal reassurance in a secularized, increasingly digitally entwined world.

4. Discussion

The research findings demonstrate a hybrid and complex pattern of Buddhist identification among young Chinese. While official religious affiliation continues to be low, the evidence shows popular Buddhism spread on emotional, symbolic, and digital planes. This represents a profound transformation in the role and shape of religion for young generations in China, toward more emotional, instrumental, and personalized forms of religious attachment.

4.1. Buddhism as a Functional Spirituality

The findings of this study are consistent with broader global trends identified in the literature on "post-institutional religion" and "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) identities (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Davie 2007). For many young people in China, Buddhism appears to function not as a doctrinal commitment, but as a form of functional spirituality, a culturally grounded "toolbox" for navigating uncertainty, regulating emotional states, and making moral decisions in an increasingly competitive and anxiety-ridden society.

Importantly, this functionality should not be mistaken for shallow utilitarianism. Rather, it is deeply embedded in cultural memory and tradition. Survey data reveal that a majority of respondents found Buddhism to be generally "approachable" or "familiar"

(M = 3.246 on a 5-point Likert scale), suggesting a broad cultural affinity. Furthermore, the high levels of symbolic identification and emotional engagement observed in the Buddhist Identification Scale (particularly Factors 1 and 2) indicate that youth are drawn not merely to Buddhist teachings, but to how Buddhism feels and is esthetically and emotionally presented—through tranquil rituals, serene imagery, and the karmic promise of cosmic order.

This sentiment is further supported by the coexistence of "non-belief" and "Buddhist affinity" among participants, which reflects a demand for spiritual grounding rather than institutionalized religious conversion. In this sense, Buddhism for contemporary Chinese youth functions as a "soft religion"—a refuge that offers meaning and reassurance without requiring rigid belief systems or formal commitment.

This functionalist perspective also opens up to engagement with Durkheim's classic thesis on religion (Lelis 2024), which highlighted its function in promoting collective coherence, moral control, and reinforcement of common values. Even when divested of institutionalized forms, as is the case for a lot of youth associations with Buddhism today, the symbolic-affective practices outlined here continue to perform integrative roles. Digital rituals, moral thought through karmic logic, and collective symbolic repertoires on social media are used as collective effervescence to create a sense of membership and moral direction that breaks down traditional belief. Thus, the results not only confirm a functionalist interpretation of Parsons' system maintenance focus but also demonstrate how Durkheimian processes of solidarity and meaning-making continue in a post-institutionalized, individualized religious context.

4.2. Emotional Relief and Psychological Resilience

This Durkheimian view, that religion provides the cement of social solidarity and moral anchoring, is reflected in the lived experiences of participants who, in framing their Buddhist practices—whether offline or digital—not as acts of doctrinal observance but as shared cultural resources for navigating life's pressures-blended individual coping needs with a sense of connection to a larger moral and symbolic community. Interview accounts showed that temple worship, incense sacrifices, and even smartphone rituals were portrayed as occasions of shared reassurance where individual emotional comfort was interwoven with the reassurance of being part of a tradition that others appreciate and do as well. In this regard, the emotional and psychological benefits found in this study are not only of an individual order but also communicate with a broader, culturally situated web of meaning and belonging.

One of the most prominent findings of this research is that Buddhist practices, both physical and digital, act as tools of affective coping for Chinese youth. Respondents often indicated that their use of practices like virtual wooden fish apps, incense ceremonies, or temple trips was not religious, but instead an attempt to regain inner peace during periods of stress. In a rapidly sped-up world with escalating academic stress, precarious work opportunities, and increased urban disaffection, Buddhist ceremonies provide a psychologically secure environment for a recentralization of the self and self-comforting.

This observation is consonant with long-standing patterns in the sociology of religion that contemporary religious practice tends to operate more at the psychological than theological level (Malinowski 1979; Silverman 2020). But in Chinese culture specifically, it is noteworthy that these rituals have been imaginatively translated into digital spaces, like app-based chanting, e-incense, or livestream temple services. Far from indicating religious decline, the translation reflects the persistence of religious desires through technologically mediated channels.

Results indicate that the Buddhist Coping Function (BCF) score averaged 3.63 on a 5-point Likert scale and was indicative of moderate agreement strength with items concerning seeking comfort through Buddhist ways. Notably, the highest endorsed item was: "I hope the Bodhisattva will bless me to succeed and fulfill my wishes" (M = 4.06), indicating that Buddhist symbols are being enlisted for emotional comfort as well as future optimism.

This empirical trend runs in favor of the claim that Buddhist practice in contemporary China increasingly serves as a cultural-psychological instrument, allowing youth to manage emotional adversity in symbolic and ritualized terms. Whether gaining protection from high-stakes tests, expressing remorse via online repentance, or appealing to karmic rationality in defending against failure, youth employ Buddhism as a non-institutional technology for constructing psychological resilience during a period of uncertainty.

4.3. Ethical Reflection and Soft Moral Guidance

In addition to the emotional security that Buddhism affords, numerous participants also used its moral system as a moral compass for daily choice-making and personal assessment. While temple-going or online rituals supplied psychological grounding, karmic thinking and Buddhist ethical theory offered a subtle but insistent moral gauge. These ethical considerations were phrased not in dogmatic, doctrinal language, but as pragmatic principles to be bent to suit individual circumstances—furthering the position that Buddhism functions as both an affective sanctuary and ethical point of reference. This manner allows the very same symbolic-affective religiosity to promote psychological resilience as it enables processes of ethical self-cultivation where young people can balance emotional needs and moral aspirations in a culturally relevant framework.

The research findings indicate that numerous youth approach Buddhist ethical thought—particularly karma—not as inflexible doctrines but as flexible models for moral thinking. Instead of understanding the law of karmic consequences to be punitive or deterministic, the respondents frequently explained it as a kind of personal guide for navigating day-to-day problems and social conflicts. Several interviewees reported turning to karmic reasoning when navigating moral dilemmas or seeking reconciliation after experiencing guilt or interpersonal conflict. For example, one university student shared, "*I don't really believe in literal reincarnation, but when I feel I've done something wrong or hurt someone, I'll donate to charity or avoid eating meat for a while—it just feels like a way to restore balance*" (Interviewee #11, female, 22).

Another participant noted, "When I'm stuck making a hard decision, thinking about karma makes me stop and consider how my actions affect others. It's not about sin or rules, just. . . being responsible for the energy I put out" (Interviewee #17, male, 25).

Quantitative results support these themes. Scale items under the factor of Cultural–Ethical Orientation produced a comparatively high overall score (M = 3.81), indicating that most youths concur with Buddhist moral principles although they are not religious by formal convention. Also, both Symbolic Consumption and Emotional Engagement dimensions were positively related to the Buddhist Coping Function, showing that aesthetic and affective connections to Buddhism can enhance ethical self-regulation practices.

These trends are in accord with what we call "soft moralization"—an internalized, sympathetic ethics based on self-knowledge and indirect consequence instead of strict dogma. Unlike the rigid moral codes in some institutional religions, Buddhism provides a permissive yet psychologically involving system for ethical contemplation, well adapted to the values of younger generations who value individual development, emotional intelligence, and moral complexity.

In a society in which normative tradition is more and more fluid and institutional moral authority unreliable, this kind of Buddhist moral practice offers a culturally rich and affectively accessible compass. It is consistent with what can be termed "ethical self-cultivation without religious conversion", providing moral anchorage in uncertainty—without demanding alignment with a believing system.

4.4. Faith in the Digital Media Landscape of Chinese Youth

Survey results reveal that Chinese youth demonstrate notable agency in remixing and reinterpreting Buddhism through digital platforms. Respondents reported engaging with Buddhist content on Douban, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo, favoring formats such as temple-run social media accounts, "wooden fish tapping" livestreams, and blessing videos that are liked and reposted.

From humorous wooden fish memes to temple lifestyle vlogs and karma-tracking apps, young people are constructing what Campbell (2013) terms "networked religion"—a flexible, decentralized, and self-curated form of spirituality. Unlike passive inheritance of tradition, youth are actively selecting, adapting, and re-signifying Buddhist symbols to meet their emotional and cultural needs.

Quantitative evidence supports this trend. The Digital Participation dimension in our survey, covering five behavioral indicators (e.g., using Buddhist apps, viewing temple content, attending livestream rituals), showed a mean score of 3.54, suggesting that digital and symbolic modes of Buddhist engagement are widespread and normalized among young users.

This shift reflects a broader transformation in religious communication, from top-down transmission to peer-based, media-mediated spiritual expression. On the positive side, short-form videos have made esoteric Buddhist teachings more accessible to mass audiences (e.g., over 10 billion views under the #Buddhism Topic hashtag on Douyin), while digital ritual tools offer low-cost emotional regulation for resource-constrained individuals.

However, three emerging risks merit attention. For example, phrases like "cyber merit" become viral memes, there is a risk that religious practices are reduced to fast-moving digital commodities, detached from their ethical or spiritual roots (Purser 2019). The widespread instrumental use of Buddhist symbols for psychological relief or success-seeking may lead to weakened religious depth, where higher symbolic visibility corresponds with lower religious commitment. Commercial practices such as livestream tipping challenge traditional temple ethics, while algorithmic targeting (e.g., pushing "let go of obsession" content to users flagged as depressed) may reinforce cognitive distortions and exacerbate mental health vulnerabilities.

Apart from commercialization, expansion in algorithmic spiritual material has far-reaching ethical and social consequences. Algorithmic platform arrangements, designed to maximize engagement, can selectively amplify specific forms of Buddhist discourse—habitually by prioritizing the visually compelling, the emotively evocative, or meme-compatible one—at the cost of more halting, reflective, or doctrinally subtle teachings. This can lead to a narrowing of religious experience, where users' exposure is dictated less by personal seeking and more by predictive algorithms. This algorithmic curation carries the risk of reinforcing instrumental or shallow uses, whereby spiritual practices are consumed in bite-sized, attention-grabbing pieces that may dilute their moral content. Socially, it may cut deeper into inequalities of access to various religious flows, favoring media from high-tech temples or social influencers and the exclusion of grassroots or traditional ones. These trends point to the importance of critically examining how digital infrastructures are not just passive conduits for religion but active intermediaries that affect form, meaning, and extent of modern Buddhist practice.

4.5. Subgroup Differences and the Diversity of Buddhist Youth

The subgroup analyses of this study affirm that there is no monolithic or homogeneous pattern of Buddhist participation among Chinese youth. Rather, specific types of identification and involvement are forged at the intersection of regional, educational, family, and gender-based variables, which demonstrate a highly diversified religious field.

Geographic location is one of the strongest predictors of Buddhist practice. Southern provincials like Zhejiang and Fujian reported greater emotional engagement, ritual observance, and value agreement than their northern provincial counterparts ($p < 0.01$). This can be taken as an indication of the historical embeddedness, cultural visibility, and institutional richness of Buddhist traditions in southern China, wherein temples, festivals, and folk practices remain deeply rooted in everyday life.

Educational level also influences the modalities of participation. Young people with a university degree and above were likely to participate in Buddhism in symbolic, esthetic, or virtual modes—like the wearing of amulets, following Buddhist accounts on social media, or using meditation apps—than through systematic study of doctrines or orthodox rituals. Their practices are selective, self-referential, and frequently wellness, mindfulness, or identity performance discourses aligned, indicative of a move from institutional religiosity towards cultural and therapeutic spiritualities.

Intergenerational transmission continues to play an important role. Attendees who grew up with Buddhist seniors scored significantly on all measures of religious involvement, particularly with respect to ritual observance, emotional connection, and perceived coping role ($p < 0.001$). This indicates the domestic embedding of religious values and implies that Buddhist worldviews are often socialized early and sustained symbolically, even within otherwise secular life environments.

Although fewer in magnitude, gender differences still emerged. On emotional involvement and digital engagement, women participants scored slightly higher than their male counterparts. This trend might be indicative of wider gendered patterns towards affective expression, interpersonal sensibility, and employment of digital media for affective communication. It is also congruent with previous research that has shown women are more inclined to draw on religious practices for spiritual consolation and relational meaning-making.

Together, these subgroup differences illustrate that "Buddhist youth" in China is not a unified category, but rather a heterogeneous and fluid constellation of practices, identities, and meanings. In doing so, internal diversity subverts easy explanations of a homogeneous Buddhist revival or moral turn and instead refers us to a fractured, reflexive, and locally situated spiritual sphere.

Youth religiosity in contemporary China, as revealed in this study, is best understood as: Pluralistic rather than doctrinal, culturally embedded rather than institutionally bound, individually negotiated rather than collectively prescribed.

Such findings not only echo global trends toward "post-institutional religiosity" and "spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNR)" identities but also shed light on the localized forms of functional religion that are uniquely shaped by China's socio-historical context.

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods to achieve a thorough and multi-dimensional representation of the functional role of Buddhism within young people in China during the post-pandemic era. A mixed-methods design is preferred because the research seeks not only to measure the statistical association between variables but also the inner, lived meanings and experi-

ences underlying Buddhist practice. Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered and analyzed independently but simultaneously. The outcomes of the two strands were then contrasted and combined during the discussion stage to cross-validate and make the findings richer.

5.2. Research Instrument

5.2.1. Survey Questionnaire

The questionnaire administered in this research was designed into three primary components, each intended to cover unique dimensions of participants' background, religious affiliation, and coping mechanisms associated with Buddhist involvement.

The initial section of the survey involved gathering participants' demographic data, such as geographic location, age, religious identification (if they had any), and their self-assigned belief or orientation towards Buddhism. These variables were significant control or moderating variables in examining patterns of Buddhist involvement and coping.

The second part consisted of an adopted form of the Buddhist Identification Scale, which was developed by the Xie and Ma (2023) for ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. For the purposes of this research, the scale was localized and adapted to fit mainland China's sociocultural context. The adapted instrument includes six core dimensions, namely, Perceptions of Buddhism (PB), Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS), Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV), Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP), Emotional Engagement (EE), and Digital Participation (DP). The Digital Participation dimension was one that was specifically developed for this study. It was guided by previous Buddhist involvement measures and current scholarly debate on religion online and mediatized Buddhism, especially that involving young adults' religious practice.

The third part of the questionnaire measured the Buddhist Coping Function (BCF) through a modified version of the Brief RCOPE, which is a broadly used validation measure originally conceptualized by Pargament (1997) to assess religious coping mechanisms. Although the initial Brief RCOPE has both positive and negative religious coping items, only the five positively framed items were taken and reworded to present the non-theistic context of Buddhism. Mentions of "God" were rewritten utilizing ideas better suited to Buddhist worldviews, such as karmic explanation, spiritual self-cultivation, or devotionalism like chanting. Negative Religious Coping subscale, which is strongly based on theistic assumptions (e.g., divine punishment or abandonment), was not included, since such constructs are not congruent with mainstream Chinese Buddhist beliefs.

However, the research recognizes that some aspects of negative coping, like feelings of culpability, experiences of karmic punishment, or acceptance of unfavorable situations do occur in Buddhist settings and can impact practitioners' coping processes. Exclusion of these items was guided by concerns regarding construct validity. Translating theistic-oriented negative coping items directly might lead to conceptual bias or misinterpretation by respondents who lack such frameworks. Future work may overcome this limitation by creating a culturally derived negative coping scale that identifies Buddhist-specific moral guilt experience, karmic consequence experience, or spiritual doubt experience, which is both conceptually relevant and psychometrically robust in the Chinese Buddhist sample.

The modified BCF subscale was employed to examine the ways in which young people use Buddhist teachings or practices to cope with psychological stress, emotional adversity, or ambiguity. This subscale was added to measure Buddhism's psychological support function. Its internal consistency and construct validity were tested using Cronbach's alpha and exploratory factor analysis.

The finalized tool consisted of seven core dimensions, each scored on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). A summary of these dimensions and sample items is presented in Table 7 (1).

Table 7. Structural Information of the Questionnaire.

(1)			
Scale	**Dimension**	**Description**	**Number of Items**
Identification with Buddhism Structure Scale	Perceptions of Buddhism (PB)	Individuals' impression and evaluation of Buddhism	3
	Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS)	Individuals' inclination toward Buddhist symbols	3
	Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV)	Individuals' acceptance of Buddhist values	3
	Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP)	Individuals' recognition of social and cultural behaviors related to Buddhism	3
	Emotional Engagement (EE)	Individuals' emotional attachment to Buddhism	3
	Digital Participation (DP)	Individuals' online Buddhist practice, including app usage, content consumption, and social sharing	5
Buddhist Coping Function Scale (Adapted from Brief RCOPE)	Buddhist Coping Function (BCF)	The use of Buddhist beliefs and practices to seek strength, comfort, or meaning during stressful life events	6
(2) Themes of Semi-Structured Interviews			
Dimension		Description	
Perceptions of Buddhism (PB)		Inquiring about participants' Individuals' impression and evaluation of Buddhism	
Identification with Buddhist Symbols (IBS)		Inquiring about participants' Individuals' inclination toward Buddhist symbols	
Alignment with Buddhist Values (ABV)		Inquiring about participants' Perceptions of Buddhist teachings and values	
Recognition of Buddhist Behavioral Patterns (RBBP)		Inquiring about participants' Emotional and psychological experiences associated with Buddhist practices	
Emotional Engagement (EE)		Inquiring about participants' Personal motivations for engaging with Buddhism	
Digital Participation (DP)		Inquiring about participants' Use of digital platforms for Buddhist participation	
Buddhist Coping Function (BCF)		Inquiring about participants' Coping strategies linked to Buddhist belief or ritual	
Influencing factors (broad discussion)		Inquiring about participants' Social perceptions and family attitudes toward their Buddhist engagement	

5.2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

To gain deeper insights into the motivations, experiences, and subjective meanings that young people associate with Buddhist engagement, we conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with a subset of survey participants. All interviewees reported moderate to high levels of participation in Buddhist practices, whether in offline settings (e.g., temple

visits, chanting) or online environments (e.g., use of Buddhist apps, electronic wooden fish, Dharma videos).

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using NVivo 14.0. Both inductive and deductive coding strategies were used during the coding. Deductive codes were drawn from the theoretical framework and survey constructs (e.g., emotional engagement, digital participation), while inductive themes emerged from participants' own narratives. This coding approach helped identify recurrent patterns while remaining attentive to unexpected or context-specific insights.

5.3. Participants

Data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed through social media platforms popular among youth interested in Buddhist culture. A total of over 4100 responses were received from individuals aged 15 to 29 across 21 provinces in China. There were initially 4137 responses from 15- to 29-year-olds in 21 provinces of China. Following data cleaning, which entailed deleting responses from people beyond the targeted age bracket and entries with more than 70% repetitive or patterned responses, a final sample of 2812 valid responses was carried forward for analysis.

In terms of gender distribution, it can be seen that 52.73% were female, 44.49% were male, and 2.78% did not want to specify their gender. By age, the majority (46.16%) were between 18 and 22 years old, followed by 34.07% between 22 and 25, and 19.77% between 25 and 29, which is well within the focus of the study, being young people's viewpoints.

Interestingly, it is observed that a mere 13.62% of the interviewees reported having a formal religious affiliation, and yet a massive 86.38% reported that they did not belong to a formal religion. Despite this, an overwhelming 74.57% said that their family elders were Buddhist believers, which shows the presence of intergenerational religious influence without formal affiliation.

When asked, "Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?", 68.14% said "yes", 9.42% said "no", and 22.44% said "not sure". All these answers reflect a common pattern of self-claimed but non-institutionalized Buddhist identity among Chinese youth, corresponding with overall patterns of informal and individualized religiosity.

With respect to education, 61.56% of respondents had achieved a university degree or higher, with 21.05% having high school or below. Geographically, the sample had better representation from the southern provinces with 12.80% from Zhejiang and 10.42% from Fujian—provinces that are traditionally noted for their active Buddhist cultural heritage. More detailed demographic breakdowns are shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Demographic Profile of the Respondents.

Variable	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Variable
Gender	Female	1517	52.73	52.73
	Male	1251	44.49	44.49
	Secret	44	2.78	100.00
Presence of Buddhist Elders in Family	No	715	25.43	25.43
	Yes	2097	74.57	100.00
Buddhism Identity	None	265	9.42	9.42
	Maybe	631	22.44	31.86
	Yes	1916	68.14	100.00
Religion Identity	No	2429	86.38	86.38
	Yes	383	13.62	100.00

Table 8. *Cont.*

Variable	Options	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Variable
Age	18–22	1298	46.16	46.16
	22–25	958	34.07	80.23
	25–29	556	19.77	100.00
Education Level	Senior high school	177	6.29	6.29
	Undergraduate (currently studying)	415	14.76	21.05
	Junior college/Vocational (currently studying)	394	14.01	35.06
	Undergraduate (graduated)	346	12.30	47.37
	Junior college/Vocational (graduated)	323	11.49	58.85
	Graduate student (currently studying)	143	5.09	63.94
	Graduate (graduated)	792	28.17	92.11
	Senior high school	222	7.89	100.00
Total		2812	100.0	100.0

5.4. Reliability and Validity

5.4.1. Internal Consistency Reliability

The internal consistency of the full scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The results showed that the overall questionnaire, consisting of 27 items and a sample size of N = 2812, achieved a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.880, which is well above the acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally 1978). This indicates excellent internal reliability and consistency across the scale. The summary of reliability statistics is presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Cronbach's Reliability Analysis.

Number of Items	Sample Size	Cronbach's α Coefficient
27	2812	0.880

5.4.2. Convergent Validity

Convergent validity was assessed through Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) according to Fornell and Larcker (1981). CR for all seven latent variables was between 0.788 and 0.922, which was beyond the recommended 0.70. The AVE scores were between 0.559 and 0.776. Although the AVEs for Factor 2 (0.569) and Factor 5 (0.559) were slightly lower than the ideal standard of 0.60, they were within the acceptable range, and the other factors all had a result over 0.63. The results indicate satisfactory convergent validity of the constructs. The convergent validity results are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Model AVE and CR Index Results.

Factor	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)
Factor 1	0.765	0.904
Factor 2	0.569	0.788
Factor 3	0.717	0.884
Factor 4	0.776	0.912
Factor 5	0.559	0.863
Factor 6	0.669	0.858
Factor 7	0.630	0.922

5.4.3. Construct Validity

To test the construct validity further, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.877, meaning sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's

Test of Sphericity was significant (χ^2 = 50,450.659, df = 351, $p < 0.001$), establishing data fit for factor analysis.

Seven factors were pulled out, in alignment with the proposed structure. The rotated eigenvalues were all greater than 2.0, and the seven factors accounted for a cumulative variance of 74.56%, which surpasses the traditional adequacy level (60%). The majority of factor loadings were greater than 0.60, and communalities (common variance) were predominantly greater than 0.60, indicating strong item-factor relationships. Outcomes of the exploratory factor analysis are shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Structural Validity Analysis Results.

Item	Factor Loadings							Communality (Common Factor Variance)
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7	
PB1	0.102	0.247	0.049	0.847	0.053	0.293	0.145	0.901
PB2	0.066	0.135	0.027	0.811	0.037	0.067	0.088	0.695
PB3	0.109	0.206	0.045	0.856	0.047	0.278	0.142	0.890
ABV1	0.088	0.132	0.123	0.205	0.205	0.320	0.764	0.811
ABV2	0.049	0.074	0.060	0.094	0.092	0.162	0.762	0.636
ABV3	0.038	0.073	0.035	0.070	0.096	0.074	0.770	0.621
RBBP1	0.023	0.046	0.024	0.077	0.866	0.064	0.154	0.787
RBBP2	0.032	0.027	0.041	0.022	0.897	0.052	0.115	0.824
RBBP3	0.020	0.041	0.011	0.021	0.903	0.050	0.069	0.825
IBS1	0.023	0.072	0.900	0.057	0.056	0.091	0.106	0.841
IBS2	−0.006	0.008	0.945	0.022	0.026	0.022	0.051	0.898
IBS3	−0.005	0.018	0.902	0.025	−0.004	−0.015	0.029	0.815
DP1	0.080	0.637	0.043	0.306	0.046	0.389	0.149	0.683
DP2	0.010	0.771	0.007	0.124	0.027	0.094	0.071	0.625
DP3	0.043	0.778	0.006	0.116	0.046	0.057	0.062	0.630
DP4	0.026	0.798	0.040	0.052	0.025	0.078	0.024	0.649
DP5	0.003	0.865	0.033	0.099	0.008	0.105	0.055	0.774
EE1	0.087	0.189	0.073	0.278	0.169	0.717	0.310	0.765
EE2	0.168	0.185	0.013	0.143	0.025	0.840	0.132	0.807
EE3	0.247	0.188	0.037	0.249	0.048	0.767	0.204	0.792
BCF1	0.675	0.112	0.069	0.185	0.070	0.233	0.191	0.602
BCF2	0.800	0.007	0.006	0.045	−0.001	0.058	−0.007	0.646
BCF3	0.823	0.022	−0.015	0.003	0.017	0.057	0.069	0.687
BCF4	0.809	0.026	−0.023	0.022	0.024	0.078	0.007	0.663
BCF5	0.791	0.012	0.007	0.076	0.004	0.056	0.020	0.635
BCF6	0.874	0.002	−0.001	0.015	−0.006	0.054	−0.009	0.767
BCF7	0.926	0.014	0.001	0.032	0.020	0.034	0.018	0.861
Cumulative Variance Explained (%) (After Rotation)	17.861%	29.977%	39.459%	48.771%	57.965%	66.793%	74.556%	-
KMO Value				0.877				-
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity Value				50,450.659				-
df				351				-
p				0.000				-

6. Conclusions

6.1. Conclusions and Implications

Drawing on a convergent mixed-methods design, including a nationwide survey and semi-structured interviews, this study investigates the evolving role of Buddhism in the lives of Chinese youth in the post-pandemic era. Findings reveal that while formal religious affiliation with Buddhism remains limited, a distinct pattern of utilitarian and symbolic engagement has emerged, characterized by emotional resonance, cultural familiarity, and digital mediation.

Instead of operating as a rigid dogmatic system, Buddhism for most young people is a psychosocial option. It provides means of regulating emotions, moral contemplation, and cultural transmission, often accessed via esthetic symbols, cyber space, and selective ritual participation. This "soft religion" is rooted in cultural tradition yet responsive to

contemporary living, allowing young people to find comfort, meaning, and identity without conversion or institutional affiliation.

Quantitative findings indicate that emotional and digital engagement are the most salient forms of Buddhist identification, where app-based ceremonies, social media engagements, and symbolic practices are favored over orthodox behavioral norms. Buddhist Coping Function scores indicate Buddhism's function in giving psychological reassurance, hope, and moral anchorage in times of stress and uncertainty. Qualitative accounts also attest to its application for mental health assistance, moral purification, aspirational minimalism, and symbolic solidarity under socioeconomic duress.

Subgroup analyses uncover wide variation in Buddhist involvement, driven by geographic, educational, and family backgrounds. Southern provinces, greater educational attainment, and intergenerational religious transfer are associated with stronger identification and functional practice. Notably, numerous respondents place a "no religion" identity alongside Buddhist belief, highlighting the decoupling of cultural-religious identification from formal membership.

Placed in a global context, these trends are echoed in broader currents in "post-institutional religion" and "spiritual-but-not-religious" identities, where youth synthesize tradition and personalization, new media, and therapeutic purpose. This is not evidence of decreased religiosity but rather a shift toward pluralistic, culturally embedded, and digitally mediated beliefs and practices. The Chinese experience is part of a wider scholarly discussion regarding religious traditions and how they evolve toward the cultural rationalities of late modernity without giving up their symbolic and affective energies.

6.2. Limitations and Future Directions

Although this research adds to the expanding knowledge about present-day religious activity in young Chinese, some methodological and conceptual limitations should be taken into consideration.

One of these limitations concerns participant recruitment. The low early response rate led to the employment of small incentives to induce survey completion. This could have caused self-selection bias: the people drawn in by Buddhist-themed presents were probably already partially predisposed toward Buddhist culture. On the other hand, religious followers might have been hesitant to join, and the unconcerned might have stayed away altogether. Consequently, the sample can be suspected of overestimating culturally sensitive but not necessarily religious individuals and underestimating both extremes of the belief spectrum. In addition, since the survey link was shared mostly via the Internet and voluntary response was encouraged, the pool of responders generated might not be as representative of the general population among Chinese youth. Those who were more highly rated on internet literacy, had more free time, or were already interested in the subject may have been more likely to take part, whereas those who were less active on digital platforms or had less of an incentive to do so may have been systematically underrepresented. Such self-selection reduces the external validity of the results and invites caution when generalizing the findings to young Chinese in general.

Second, while more than 4000 responses were gathered, just 2812 survived the validity screening because of problems like careless completion, ineligibility by age, or uniform answer patterns. Subsequent surveys should seek to carry out stratified sampling over a broader array of platforms and offline locations with a view toward greater representativeness. Combining online and offline recruitment could mitigate some of the biases inherent in a purely voluntary and internet-based sample, helping to include less digitally connected youth.

Third, the analysis relies on cross-sectional data, which restricts the capacity to capture longitudinal changes in Buddhist involvement. Longitudinal research is required to examine how youth religiosity develops as a result of individual, social, or political transformation. Tracking the same cohort over time would also allow researchers to determine whether observed associations reflect stable patterns or temporary shifts influenced by situational factors such as political climate, educational stage, or personal life events.

Fourth, the research only included Chinese youth participants. Cross-cultural comparison with other East Asian societies can be done to reveal both convergent and divergent paths of youth Buddhism under various historical and sociopolitical contexts.

Fifth, while the current study draws on a considerable amount of contemporary literature, the theoretical construction is based primarily on East Asian and Chinese scholarship, with relatively less cross-referencing to eminent Western views concerning contemporary religiosity. Such limited cross-referencing could have limited the study's ability to position Chinese youth Buddhism within wider global discourses on religious change, post-institutional religiosity, and symbolic-affective religiosity. Subsequent studies need to have a more evenly balanced literature foundation that may equally draw from Chinese and Western scholarship traditions to advance the comparative and theoretical richness of the analysis.

Finally, future studies can investigate how Buddhism cuts across other social movements and identifications, such as gender, class, internet activism, and ecologicalism. Such methods may show how Buddhist symbolism and practice are being harnessed to navigate the complex balancing acts of contemporary life, and how religious re-sources are being re-framed in a more uncertain world.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, D.O. and J.X.; methodology, J.X.; data curation, J.X.; writing—original draft preparation, J.X.; writing—review and editing, D.O. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the corresponding author's affiliated university. (Approval No. FNU-20240120087). The protocol for the study, survey questionnaire, and interview schedules was submitted with an informed consent statement for the participants. The review ascertained that full details of the aims, procedures of the study, and participants' rights, including the right to withdraw without penalty at any time, were given to all the participants. Written informed consent was sought from all the participants before being involved. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were strictly ensured, and all identifying information were removed from the dataset. The study was carried out in complete adherence to the regulations on human research ethics by Fujian Normal University.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original data presented in the study are openly available in [Havard Database] at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/WZVPIT.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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