

Article

Fun, Trendy, Upbeat: Musical Tastes, Social Conditioning, and Contemporary Worship Music for Kids

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Abstract: This article examines the correlation between “trendy” musical features and contemporary worship songs for kids. We engage in music video analysis, comparing three songs from a range of contemporary worship children’s ministries to critically examine the messages that their children’s covers convey. Further, we question how contemporary worship music videos form children’s preferences and musical tastes, drawing on Lucy Green’s writing on musical taste formation and intersonic properties (2008). We argue that when children’s religious and musical experiences are formed by adults’ assumptions of their preferences—including that they prefer fun, cool, and trendy music—their overall experience of Christian music may be limited.

Keywords: contemporary worship music; children’s preferences; musical taste; YouTube; music video analysis

1. Introduction

An eight-year-old sits at their kitchen table watching YouTube videos on their iPad. They have just finished watching a kid-friendly version of the hit pop song “New Rules” by Dua Lipa. The video featured children close in age wearing trendy clothes, dancing, and singing along on a manicured set. While the original song includes numerous references to drunkenness and casual sex, all of this has been removed for this child-friendly cover. Up next is a video that is both strikingly similar and completely different. This video, of the contemporary worship song “This Is Amazing Grace”, is a cover by Bethel Kids. It opens with another similarly aged boy, rolling out of bed to get ready for an outing. The background music is synthy and easy to dance to, and within the first 20 seconds we hear a “drop” like we would find in Electronic Dance Music (EDM). We watch the boy get ready for the day with a sign beside his desk that reads “Man Cave”, no adults are in sight. Both videos portray fun, independence, and energy.

The first video highlighted is an example of Kidz Bop, a popular North American musical group that covers hit pop songs for children, removing references to topics like drugs, sex, and alcohol and creating a product for secondary consumption that is more appropriate for kids (Bickford 2008). Since the early 2000s, these songs have topped charts, reached certified gold, and provided a struggling music industry with an area for growth (Bickford 2020). Kidz Bop covers enact what Cook and Kaiser call “anticipatory enculturation”, which are sites for children to enact adult behaviors in distinct settings. The songs offer tweens a way to engage the music they hear on the radio in a way that is age-appropriate (Cook and Kaiser 2004). Perhaps due to the pervasive influence of Kidz Bop, Christian music ensembles have also taken to creating kid-friendly versions of songs



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within contemporary worship music—a liturgical and musical movement that produces church music, which closely mimics secular popular music characteristics.¹ These kid-friendly versions of songs are evident in both their popular musical characteristics and “cool” cultural features. Megachurches at the fore of the industry—like Bethel, Hillsong, and Elevation—and worship bands like Rend Collective, have developed dedicated children’s music ministries, which release versions of their popular songs for kids and teens. Unlike Kidz Bop, however, these ensembles cover songs that are inherently kid-friendly due to their faith-based content. Without references to sex, drugs, or alcohol to remove, what are contemporary worship kids’ ensembles changing to produce songs for children? What adult phenomena are these covers anticipatorily enculturating children to?

In recent years, worship videos of children performing songs written for adults rose to popularity, such as the ones we examine in this paper. In these church contexts, this could be evidence of a phenomenon described as “Kids Getting Older Younger” (Schor 2004), which describes social constructs that propel children away from childhood and toward adulthood at a young age (Bickford 2015). These recent worship videos encourage children to worship in a trendier version of the way that adults do, or encourage them to be older at a young age. Videos like these are part of a larger body of worship music videos, which have become one of the most influential formats of contemporary worship music. Monique Ingalls suggests that “worship videos bring music, text, and images together in a new form of online piety that challenges the distinctions between public and private devotion, online and offline worship, and audiovisual consumption and production, creating new pathways for audiovisual devotional practice and more broadly influencing trends in congregational singing” (Ingalls 2016, pp. 293–94). Building on Ingalls’ suggestion, we conduct a music video analysis to consider the explicit and implicit messages found in worship music videos for children, ultimately exploring how these messages impact children’s experience of the church and its music.

In this essay, we argue that there is a clear correlation between “cool” cultural features and contemporary worship music designed for children, and we express concern that this is limiting for children’s musical preferences and ultimately their experience of church. By analyzing several videos from a range of contemporary worship children’s ministries, we critically examine the messages that their children’s covers send and consequently question how these videos form children’s preferences. Scholars suggest that individuals’ YouTube preferences can become part of their identity (Burgess and Green 2009); these videos have a meaningful impact on the way that children and youth experience their faith. When children’s religious and musical identities are formed by their YouTube preferences, and those preferences include a certain type of worship musical feature, implications for their experience and perception of Christianity may arise. What can we learn about expectations for children’s experiences of Christian music by analyzing worship music videos? How might an emphasis on fun and play form children’s preferences long term?²

2. Music Preferences and Popular Music Formation

We are not the first to observe a correlation between fun and children’s worship videos. Daniel Jesse’s recent study examined children’s worship in the four megachurches that dominate song production on CCLI and Praise Charts: Hillsong, Passion, Elevation, and Bethel. Jesse draws upon children’s worship ministry research that investigates the use of “fun” in children’s worship as a way to market the church to children and families (Jesse 2024). In Jesse’s analysis of these churches’ worship music, he notes the popular music influence within the musical compositions, “with guitars and drums building into the chorus while more subdued but still upbeat in the verses and bridge” (4). Through the use of particular musical elements, as well as each church’s emotional focus on “fun” when

singing together, Jesse suggests that children are being emotionally formed and regulated by the decisions of adults (11). We build upon Jesse's assertions in this article, suggesting that some of the children's emotional formation in worship is also due to their association and "musical taste" for popular music influences.

Lucy Green's research on the role of popular music and informal music-learning practices in the classroom acknowledges children's familiarity and preference for the incorporation of popular musical genres within different formal contexts. In her study of popular musicians' acquisition of musical skills, Green explores musicians' informal learning practices, attitudes, values, and experiences in formal music education contexts (Green 2002). Although Green's research focuses on the incorporation of popular musical practices within formal musical education contexts, she examines how a shift in teaching culture and approach might engage more children to make music. Green's work is applicable because she suggests that children's musical tastes and preferences tend to align with popular musical elements. In this case, those preferences might be solidified and enacted through CWM culture. Something similar to Kidz Bop worship videos exists for Christian worship music, where music is presented that presumably helps children associate worship with trendy and popular musical characteristics.

Foundational to our theoretical framework is Green's finding that students tend to prefer musical genres with inter-sonic properties and musical materials with which they are familiar (Green 2008). Green writes that as students listen to music, they form mental musical patterns, attending to the music's inter-sonic properties and developing levels of familiarity. Listeners develop musical meaning and experiences once they have a level of competence and understanding of the music (87). In Green's research, children in the classroom appear to connect most with popular music as genres that they are familiar with outside of school and, therefore, attempt to learn popular music repertoire in a way that mirrors popular musicians' practices. In her research findings, children described their dislike of classical music, likely resulting from an unfamiliarity with inter-sonic meanings. Ultimately, students were limited in their musical repertoire preferences as they restricted themselves to a selection of mainstream popular music, influenced by perceptions of musical taste in place (90). It was not necessarily cultural connotations or extra-musical references, such as lyrics, that drew students in, but the inter-sonic properties and relationships within the musical materials solidified the musical tastes, as influenced by culture, in place.

Based on Green's work connecting inter-sonic meanings to musical taste, we observe the problem that children are being formed to view Christian music and the Christian experience as fun, cool, and trendy, limiting their capacity to engage with more complex emotions such as grief, anxiety, or fear in a Christian context. Various scholars suggest that musical elements within the liturgy have a formative aspect contributing to the shaping of worshippers' unconscious, and we acknowledge the multitudinous implications of the musical elements situated within worship (Benjamins 2021). Such a process of formation is unconscious and tacit in nature, not determined by the leader's intentions.

We employ the concept of taste to critically analyze children's CWM albums by exploring the decisions made to make such albums more "kid-friendly". Many of these CWM albums contain popular musical elements that, at times, relate to children's increased ability to make musical meanings and connections with them due to their musical associations. Children develop stylistic familiarity with music through repeated listening, and over time, positive experiences of inter-sonic meanings—its sonic properties and relationships—occur (Green 2008).

Since adults manage the sounds children produce in worship (Van Leersum-Bekebrede et al. 2021), we examine which musical elements adults have assumed to be relatable for children. We suggest that adults' assumptions of children's musical tastes, in fact, solidify

the enactment of inter-sonic meanings and musical tastes in place; however, in some cases, this is done in problematic or limiting ways. In the following, we analyze “adult” and “kid” versions of three popular worship songs to critique cultural assumptions surrounding children’s versions of songs, considering the editorial decisions to make some versions more “kid-friendly”. We interrogate which musical elements adults have assumed to be relatable for children and suggest that more musically and textually expansive expressions may better strengthen children’s experience of the church and its music.

3. Using Music Videos as a Lens

In order to address our question about the differences between children and adult versions of contemporary worship songs, we conducted music video analyses of both versions of three songs, looking at a total of six videos. The songs were chosen because of their popularity in the mainstream of CWM (all of them were ranked on the CCLI Top 100), because they have both adult and children’s versions, and in order to represent a variety of churches and artists. They were also chosen because they represented songs that we perceived to enact a difference between children’s and adults’ songs, with an emphasis on fun in the children’s versions. To be clear, there are many more songs that could have been chosen, but we selected only a sampling that we suspected would capture our concern about children’s songs and “fun”. With only one exception (“My Lighthouse” by the Irish band Rend Collective), all of the songs come from “Big Four” megachurch contexts. These megachurches are widely considered to be the most influential and have the most prolific musical output ([Worship Leader Research Team 2023](#)).

Carol [Vernallis](#)’ (2019) recommendations for beginning music video analysis guided this analysis, laying a foundation for how to take notes on overall impressions and key themes in the videos we chose. Vernallis recommends watching music videos several times, considering how various elements converge in creating the overall message of the video, including color and texture, implied geography, lyrics, rhythm, props, and descriptions of race/class/gender/sexuality among others (265). In our case, several of the worship videos we examined do not completely resemble music videos—and in some cases function more as lyric videos. They are audio tracks that animate the text/lyrics but do so in ways that are embellished to communicate to the audience through the use of graphics, color, animations, and special fonts. In order to recognize that not all of the videos are music videos with a traditional narrative, we also draw upon William [Moylan](#)’s (2020) work on recording analysis. Moylan suggests three distinct components of recordings: the music and its performance (including rhythm, melody, harmony, dynamics, tone color and timbre, range and tessitura, texture, and fabric), the text or lyrics (including message and story, structure, sound and timbre, rhythm, pitch, and dynamic inflection), and the sonic qualities of the recording (including spatial properties, timbre, dynamic levels and relationships, rhythm). He suggests that these domains be examined individually but also considered together for how they converge to add layers of meaning ([Moylan 2020](#), pp. 35–36).

In order to organize our analyses, we created a spreadsheet that facilitated the comparison of several key video components in order to compare each set of videos. For each video, we created rows with the section of the song (introduction, verse 1, etc.) and columns to highlight the lyrics, narrative codes, musical codes, and visual codes of each section of the song. The columns for the kids’ version and the adult version were placed side by side so we could easily determine what the primary differences were for each of these components. We entered this project with the expectation that children’s versions of songs would represent a significant musical, emotional, and narrative departure from the adult versions, and ultimately noticed some key distinctions.

3.1. Song Analysis #1—*Ever Be*

The first song in our analysis (Table 1), “*Ever Be*”, was written by Bobby Strand, Chris Greely, Gabriel Wilson, and Kalley Heiligenthal in 2014, and published by Bethel Music Publishing on the album *We Will Not Be Shaken*. It gained significant traction in Christian music circles and was nominated for “Song of the Year” at the 2017 Gospel Music Association Dove Awards. The adult version we analyzed for this project was recorded by Kalley and Bethel Church and uploaded to YouTube on 3 February 2015. It is 5:29 in length, at 68 BPM, and in the key of D major.³ The children’s version was released by Bethel Music Kids to YouTube on 11 December 2015. It is 5:32 in length, at 68 BPM, and in the key of Eb major.⁴

Table 1. Song analysis of “*Ever Be*”.

	Musical Features	Visual Features	Narrative Features
Children’s version	Strong synth sound, bass, and drums contribute to EDM sound, and children’s voices.	Outdoor setting, children seen in canoes and around a campfire.	Strong emphasis on play, children are seen having fun throughout a full day, ending at night.
Adult version	Acoustic guitar and keyboard sound, addition of synth sound, adult voices.	Outdoor setting, adults worshipping in the mountains.	No strong narrative component.

The adult version does not follow a distinct narrative flow but rather features images of scenery that capture the idyllic location of its shooting at Shasta Lake, CA (Grubbs 2015). Common for worship music videos, the video focuses on the main worship leader (Kalley) but also features the congregation or audience singing. The children’s version follows a group of tweens as they go canoeing, roast marshmallows, and play together over the course of a day. At points they are seen singing, at other times they are just hanging out. The tweens are seen alone for the majority of the video; they are only accompanied by adults near the end of the video when they are around a fire. Both videos share a focus on creation, emphasizing the landscape around the singing. This video is emblematic of one of the most common types of kids’ music videos: a highly produced montage of children playing, running, and laughing to the soundtrack of the kids’ version of a worship song. In these videos, kids are often outside and are often playing in nature.

The lyrics of the song remain the same for both versions. The verses describe the faithfulness of God’s love, and the chorus responds with a repeated line: “Your praise will ever be on my lips, ever be on my lips”. The song relies on metaphors, many of which are connected to narratives of marriage: a “ring of solid gold”, “a vow that is tested”, “clothing me in white”, and “you will have your bride”. It is striking that in the context of a song that is adapted to be sung by children, these images remain: the song is rife with metaphors that most children would not have an immediate context for, and they become only aspirational images of what their future families or marriages might look like.⁵

Musically, the adult track relies on piano and guitar instrumental leadership. As the song progresses, a synth sound contributes to a full sonic texture. Kalley’s voice is the most prominent and is often heard extemporizing during interludes. The children’s track is distinct with influences of electronic dance music entering in verse two, such as a repeated bass sound, heavy percussion, and artificial or synthetic instrumental motives. The main vocal support comes from a main female singer, who is identified in the video description as a preteen named Josie. Her voice sounds young and relatively untrained. The instrumental outro features an artificially altered male voice singing “ever be on my lips” while Josie alternates singing “on my lips”.

3.2. Song Analysis #2—My Lighthouse

The second song in our analysis (Table 2), “My Lighthouse”, is a song written in 2013 by Chris Llewellyn and Gareth Gilkeson from the Northern Irish Christian folk rock band Rend Collective. The song has found significant resonance and success in North America, with frequent tours and numerous songs that have ranked on the CCLI Top 100. “My Lighthouse” became highly popular both in worship meant for adults, and especially in worship contexts for children. In response to their own experiences of parenting, the artists launched Rend Co. Kids in 2019 to share their music with a younger demographic. Ali Gilkeson says:

Gareth and I thought it was time to write some fun kids worship songs. And it was great because you have all these limitations when writing regular worship music, but you can just do whatever the heck you want with kid’s music! You can change time signatures, you can put random lyrics in, you can put pandas in the song. . . And so it turned out to be a really fun project. (Hailes 2021)

Rend Collective also teamed up with illustrator Natasha Debnam to create a children’s book version of the song, another resource to help bring their music to children. Despite its emphasis on reaching children, Rend Collective is not primarily known as a music ensemble for kids. The song received platinum status for selling more than 1,000,000 copies of “My Lighthouse”, only one of several indications of how widely successful this kid-friendly song is both to kids and adults.

Table 2. Song analysis of “My Lighthouse”.

	Musical Features	Visual Features	Narrative Features
Children’s version	Folk instruments with a big sound, “la la la” interlude and spoken pre-bridge. Adult voices.	Set as a lyric video with one main adult showing the actions. Still animations in the background.	No strong narrative component.
Adult version	Acoustic folk instruments, slower than the children’s version. Adult voices.	Set on a boat on water, musicians making music on the boat.	Follows the musicians through to nighttime, when they continue to make music on the boat.

The adult version of the song was uploaded to YouTube on 3 July 2015 and is 3:53 in length. It is at 110 beats per minute, and in the key of C.⁶ The kids’ version was uploaded several years later on 20 September 2019 and is 4:09 in length. It is at 120 beats per minute, and in the key of C.⁷ Both versions are in the same key, with the children’s version only slightly faster. The lyrics of the song remain largely the same between both versions, developing the metaphor of God as a lighthouse. The chorus sings “My lighthouse, shining in the darkness, I will follow you!” The main differences come in the content of the videos, where one of the primary goals of the children’s version is for children to learn the actions that are shared. In that version, a male actor gives hand signs throughout the video that children could easily mimic.

A significant contrast between versions is that the children’s version has the unique addition of a spoken interlude. Over light instrumentals, a male voice is heard saying:

When you’re feeling lost, stuck out at sea.

The waves go high, the winds go strong, in your heart believe.

There’s a light that’s shining, it’s never going out.

Don’t give up now, don’t lose hope. The future’s looking bright!⁸

During this spoken interlude, the main actor is seen still giving unique hand motions. It is interesting that this section is included in the children’s version as it is likely not used in church congregations as much, where a spoken interlude might be less natural. In contemporary worship music, scripted and spoken interludes such as this are unique, and it is much more common to hear an extemporized reflection from the worship leader.

Narratively, the adult version of the song features the band on a boat with their instruments, where they appear to be having fun and making music. In verse 3, we see someone going hiking and swimming, emphasizing a connection to nature. It becomes nighttime by the bridge, which corresponds with the lyrics “Fire before us, you’re the brightest”. Fire flares are lit. The video closes with a shot of them all being sprayed with water. The children’s version of the song does not have a clear narrative: rather, it features a young man performing actions for the song with a variety of kid-friendly images presented as cartoons in the background: a rainbow over water; picturesque clouds; a kid riding a giant swan floatie; a dinosaur on a boat; two giraffes, two elephants, and Noah on an ark; a pirate on a pirate ship; a lighthouse on an island with someone flying a kite and another person around the corner; and two penguins. The background and the main presenter remain largely the same throughout the video.

The song matches Rend Collective’s established sound, which they describe as featuring “Native Irish folk instruments, some good old-fashioned rock’ n’ roll guitars, and even some synth-pop inspired elements” (Rend Collective 2014). Musically, the main difference between the adult and children’s tracks is the addition of a catchy sung interlude on “La la la lighthouse”. This phrase functions as an intro, outro, and interlude, acting as a “hook” to engage children and other singers. Unlike other children’s music covers, which feature children’s voices, in this one, the main singer of Rend Collective sings in his normal range. The kids’ version of the song is taken at a faster tempo than the adult version and features a fuller instrumental sound throughout.

3.3. Song Analysis #3—Who You Say I Am

“Who You Say I am” is the third song in our analysis (Table 3), performed by Australian praise and worship band Hillsong, and is written by Reuben Morgan and Ben Fielding. The song was included on their album *There Is More*, released in April 2018. The live music video analyzed in this paper was recorded during a Hillsong Worship & Creative Conference at Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia in March 2018. It was released on YouTube on 2 March 2018 and is 5:34 in length. It is at 86 BPM and in the key of G flat major.⁹ The kids’ version of “Who You Say I Am” is from the album *Can You Believe It!?*, which was released on YouTube on 21 September 2018 and is 3:58 in length. It is at 86 BPM and in the key of B major.¹⁰ The children’s version is shorter and in a slightly higher key, perhaps to be more accessible for children’s treble voices. While the adult video primarily features adults worshipping, the kids’ video is presented as a lyric video.

Table 3. Song analysis of “Who You Say I Am”.

	Musical Features	Visual Features	Narrative Features
Children’s version	Pad on a keyboard, repetitive short melody on flute, single male vocalist and children, rhythmic snapping.	Set as a lyric video with bright geometric shapes.	No strong narrative component.
Adult version	Acoustic guitar, electric guitar, female lead vocalist with six backup singers.	Indoor setting of adults in worship concert.	No strong narrative component.

When interviewed about the background and meaning of the song, writer Ben Fielding articulated that the song was written in response to the all too prevalent presence of anxiety

and pressures among young people. As Fielding explains, “Who You Say I Am” addresses how God sees us and what He says about us, based on John 8, which focuses on the truth setting us free. Ultimately the takeaway message is that God has chosen us and that we have been set right because of the work of Jesus (Davis 2018). Reuben Morgan, the other songwriter, similarly described the context of the song on YouTube:

This song is about freedom. Free from the tyranny of self, free from the opinion of doubters, set free from the chains of our past and the hopelessness of life without God. God’s kindness has brought us in from the outside and made us royalty. God’s truth over us is final. Sometimes it’s good to remind ourselves what God says over us.

Both the adult and kids’ versions of “Who You Say I Am” have the same lyrics, with some words repeated in the outro of the adult version. The lyrics are quite repetitive in nature, as there are only two separate verses, and the chorus “Who the Son sets free; oh is free indeed” is repeated several times, as well as the bridge, which features the text “I am chosen, not forsaken, I am who You say I am. . .”.

Narratively, the adult version has the viewer watching a congregation worshipping at a worship conference with the camera zooming in on different instrumentalists and capturing the crowd with their hands raised. The band is quite large with a female lead, six backup singers, including two on acoustic guitars, and three other instrumentalists (drums, synthesizer, electric guitar). The video primarily focuses on the main lead but also features the audience at times. Overall, the narrative focuses on an intimate worship experience between the crowd and those leading. The children’s version of “Who You Say I Am” is only a lyric video with various geometric shapes zooming in and out of the video according to the lyrics. There is no clear storyline present. The shapes and range of bright colors draw in the viewer; however, the font is rounded and has a “kid-friendly” appearance. The mix of the chorus of children’s voices with the graphics of the video prompts the viewer to picture children singing joyfully together, confidently expressing their faith.

Musically, the adult version matches other Hillsong musical sounds with its popular musical elements, its build-up to the chorus, its initial drop in the bridge, and then build-up to the final chorus. The adult version contains driving instruments and a short repetitive electric guitar melody between verses and within the chorus. The impact of the worship experience is highlighted within an instrumental portion after one of the final choruses, where the keyboard/pad becomes prominent, other instruments cut out, and many musicians and members of the crowd pray out loud. The music builds to the final chorus again, and the song ends with the crowd clapping. The children’s version is much “lighter” overall with a more upbeat energy. It displays a joyful feeling with snapping in the background, small amounts of rhythmic drumming, and a light, repetitive melody on the electric guitar. A synthesizer later adds to the repetitive guitar melody, interlocking the two in harmony. Musically, it draws in the listener when the instruments cut out on “Who the” and all instruments join in on “Son”, and then each part slowly becomes softer, all meeting on the last word “Am” and fading out.¹¹

4. Discussion

Our analysis of three songs from different musical contexts reveals some similarities across the songs and allows us to draw some conclusions about the nature of children’s versions of contemporary worship songs.

1. First, we observe that there are no lyrical changes between any of the versions of the songs. While lyrical changes are a foundational component of Kidz Bop covers to make them appropriate for children’s consumption, the nature of these songs,

intended for intergenerational corporate worship, does mean that the lyrics can stay the same and still be appropriate for children. Instead of lyric changes, there are at times simple additions (such as the bridge for “My Lighthouse”).

2. Second, there is a strong element of “play” prominent in the children’s versions of the songs. Often the adult version of the song visually depicts “serious” worship—arms raised, pained expressions, eyes closed—and the children’s version depicts more playful worship—splashing, laughing, actions, dancing, creative fonts.
3. Third, we notice that the children’s videos more prominently feature sounds associated with electronic dance or party music, including a strong rhythmic pulse, melody or counter melody from a synthesizer, and a prominent bass line. This EDM sound is associated with youth and party culture.
4. Finally, there is a reduction in extemporized/improvised interludes in children’s versions, and sung interludes are more planned and have full involvement from children and not just extemporization from leaders.

Children’s versions of songs tend to portray narratives of “play”, “enjoyment”, and children in community with one another. Various musical elements are incorporated in children’s versions of adult CWM songs, such as electronic dance music, catchy interludes, rhythmic elements such as repetitive snapping, and young and untrained voices that represent children. While we are concerned that these videos are *prescribing* children to have imbalanced associations between Christian music and feelings of being fun, cool, and trendy, we also recognize that these videos are *describing* a broader Evangelical Christian emphasis on praise above other expressions, such as lament. For example, in his study of how sadness is not represented in the CCLI Top 25, Daniel Jesse (2022) suggests “that the church sings songs that are emotionally diverse so that those who are feeling emotions other than joy can have a voice and a language to express their emotions in” (16). It is not only children’s worship music that overemphasizes positivity; this is part of a larger trend in contemporary worship music and Evangelical culture at large. CWM for kids oversimplifies the experience of childhood, and this mirrors the oversimplification of personhood and human experience for adults who also worship with CWM (Ruth 2015; Sigmon 2022).

Drawing from our theoretical framework, children’s versions of songs are constructed based on assumptions of what is “kid-friendly” and preferable according to their musical tastes. While the lyrics of the CWM songs did not necessarily change, the shift in some musical elements represented an engagement in an “anticipatory enculturation” practice, using musical elements such as untrained children’s voices to allow children to engage and enter a space of adult CWM culture. These features work together to create a “kid-friendly” product that is fun, upbeat, and catchy. The use of certain popular musical elements, however, reinforces inter-sonic meanings and a specific genre of musical tastes in place. As Green recognizes, inter-sonic properties and relationships solidify children’s musical tastes. While such musical genres likely resonate with many children’s musical preferences, we wonder whose musical preferences are not acknowledged through such practices. In this case, it appears that the adapters of these songs assume that the elements of play, fun, EDM, and “coolness” will be appealing to children, creating a normative expectation of what children look for. The counterexample of children’s versions also solidifies the serious and emotional nature of the adult songs, which presents a significant contrast. Does the assumption that popular or “cool” musical elements will draw in child listeners limit its audience? Who determines these musical tastes and solidifies the preferences for inter-sonic properties? And should such practices broaden to include other genres?

5. Conclusions

Adults consistently manage the sounds that children listen to, whether in Kidz Bop covers or church music. We have explored three covers of contemporary worship songs for kids, interrogating what messaging the musical adaptations portray about what children are likely to be drawn to. We shared three specific covers of songs that lean into “cool” EDM influences and show children playing and laughing, videos that highlight our concern that Christian music geared toward children denies the listeners of emotional expansiveness and problematically cements church music as fun, cool, and trendy, at the expense of other complex emotions, such as doubt, fear, or lament. While this article has not considered the impacts of these covers on children’s worship experiences, we can assume that when children have expectations that worship is fun, cool, and trendy, their conceptualization of what worship is and should be will tend to separate even more from adults’ engagement in worship, which is often instead characterized by serious and emotional music. We hope that future versions of children’s songs will help present a more complicated, expansive vision of what being a child in the church could look like.

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Notes

- ¹ For more on the widespread reach of contemporary worship music, see: [Johnson and Thiessen \(2023, p. 208\)](#).
- ² A previous version of this paper was presented at the Christian Congregational Music Conference at Ripon College in Cuddesdon, UK in August 2023.
- ³ Ever Be—Bethel Music (Adult Version): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byEUIzfVLAs> (accessed on 12 February 2025).
- ⁴ Ever Be—Bethel Music Kids (Kids’ Version): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RG22jk-YUXY> (accessed on 12 February 2025).
- ⁵ Of note, another example of a song that does this is the children’s version of “The Blessing”, which continues to include the lines “may his favour be upon you. . . and your children”.
- ⁶ My Lighthouse—Rend Collective (Adult Version): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reAlJKv7ptU> (accessed on 9 August 2024).
- ⁷ My Lighthouse—Rend Co. Kids (*Hand Motions*) (Kids’ Version): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeJvKkBV6rY> (accessed on 9 August 2024), interlude starts at 2:32.
- ⁸ See note 7 above.
- ⁹ Who You Say I Am—Hillsong Worship (Adult Version): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lKw6uqtGFfo> (accessed on 9 August 2024).
- ¹⁰ Who You Say I Am—Hillsong Kids (Kids’ Version): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Y0LHTDVy5C0&t=0s> (accessed on 9 August 2024).
- ¹¹ See note 10 above.

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