

YouTube Coke Studio Pakistan: Negotiating Identity, Blurring Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study is about Coke Studio Pakistan, a Coca-Cola-Sponsored music platform that curates its music on YouTube. The article argues that the YouTube channel of the Coke Studio is a space of unprecedented 'interaction' between South Asians that share the love for regional music. In that, their engagement with *Afreen Afreen*, the second most consumed song on Coke Studio's official channel, has been evaluated through the lens of citizenship studies.

Methodology: For analysing the comments, data coding began with a quantitative approach that informs its main principal methods of thematic analysis and textual analysis. The themes ranged from their love for music to issues that shape the regional politics. The idea was to identify the themes that transcend the animosity between the two countries and celebrate their mutual love for music, while also acknowledging themes (contentious issues) that shape politics of the region.

Findings: The study argues that whilst the song itself can be seen as an act of citizenship, the comments section offers a rich canvas for observing citizen interaction. Through comments, the audiences perform across the spectrum of cultural citizenship and agonistic publics. The comments section becomes a space of opportunity to not only celebrate the music but also to reflect on regional politics.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the exchanges on YouTube are the first steps towards enabling people-to-people contact. It is part of a learning process to co-exist with the adversary who differs in their opinions yet has the right to exist and preserve their sovereignty.

Keywords: Cultural Citizenship, YouTube Publics, Coke Studio Pakistan, South Asian Politics.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most fascinating affordances of the online media is to connect the publics of adversarial nations. It can be through daily news, a long-term political discourse of the global issues, but also through entertainment. Usually, it is through entertaining content that publics connect to people of other countries. In this, language plays a crucial role in allowing avenues for consumption. In the case of South Asia, a

large proportion of the population speak the same language and share similar (if not the same) cultural descent. It, therefore, becomes difficult not to consume each other's media. Theoretically, such populations are 'people of the same descent', who may not be 'politically integrated in the form of state organisation' are still the same nation (Habermas, 1994: 22). Whilst the similarities between Indians and Pakistanis are strikingly high, the government on both sides of the border continue to stress on their distinctive identities. In fact, the official discourse of national identity thrives on creating an 'adversary' out of the other. Other than using the state functionaries, curriculum and constitution, a mammoth task is to create a discourse on nationalism as 'a form of collective consciousness which both presupposes a reflexive appropriation of cultural traditions that has been filtered through historiography and *spread only via the channels of modern mass communication*' (1994:22, my emphasis). In postcolonial countries, culture offers a strong domain to curate a project of national consciousness that unifies any differences that exist within a newly formed nation (Hoefte and Veenendaal, 2019). In South Asia, Bollywood offers a rich tapestry of patriotic discourses, whilst in Pakistan, such discourses occasionally seep through films, music and drama serials. Through decades, the regional publics have continued to consume each other's media via unofficial channels. There have been very few instances where content has been procured through official channels. Largely at an elite level, it included rare cultural exchanges and some so-called track 2 diplomacy initiatives between the two rival states (see Bahera, 2000 and Kermani, 2010). However, the pattern has shifted with the advent of the Internet, more so with YouTube. Any media content produced in Urdu, Hindi or Punjabi resonates with the audiences not only within the region, but with the South Asian diaspora in the West. Such consumption via digital media also facilitates people-to-people contact in online social spaces.

1.1 Aim of the Study

Coke Studio is a Coca-Cola-sponsored music platform that brings together Pakistani musicians to produce music that resonates with South Asians across the globe. Studies have interpreted Coke Studio as an initiative for corporate peace (Colliers, 2014), as an attempt towards cultural diplomacy (Chakrabarty, 2010, Kermani, 2010, Akhter, 2016), and as a space to mediate cultural memory and national narrative (Mahmood and William, 2020). This study follows the research question of *how South Asians appropriate Coke Studio in YouTube's comments section, and how their appropriation can be viewed through the lens of citizenship studies*. I conceptualise that 'appropriation' is here as a complex process involving active consumption ranging from fandom and citizen engagement to presumption, but the focus of the study is on 'citizen engagement'. Focusing on *Afreen Afreen*, Coke Studio's second most viewed song (see its official YouTube channel), the intention of this study is to evaluate how the content (song) is an act of citizenship, but more importantly, how the audiences' engagement with it can be studied via the lens of citizenship studies, which I now address.

1.2 Problem Statement

Coke Studio Pakistan on YouTube offers a platform to celebrate South Asian music. It not only draws audiences from Pakistan and its diaspora, but also Indians and all those understand Urdu. Its comments' section has become a space for celebrating music but also reflecting on regional politics. It offers an unprecedented space for encounter between Pakistanis and Indians that can be evaluated through citizenship studies.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on affordances on YouTube. It argues that content that draw regional audiences to YouTube can lead to unprecedented forms of encounters in the comment section. In that, audiences of countries who otherwise have hardly any opportunities to meet each other get to hear each other out, discuss issues in the form of heated debates, but also in moments of appreciation for each other's craft. Therefore, the main argument that the study will follow is that YouTube's comment section is the space of possibilities and opportunities for Indians and Pakistanis.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The sites of citizenship have always been an area of interest for scholars working in citizenship studies (Turner, 1997; Benhabib, 1998; Hermes, 2005; Pain, 2009; Stahaeli, 2010; Askin, 2016). Scholars continue to locate spaces where people perform citizenship practices. These might be public or private spaces, mediated and physical, within physical national boundaries, or beyond the remit of the states such as in digital spheres (c.f. Stahaeli: 2010). Stahaeli (2010) stresses the importance of ‘how people negotiate many citizenships that frame their lives and that they, through their practices and acts’ but reminds us that ‘there are no stable, fixed answers to the questions of where citizenship and citizen-subjects are located (399)’. Previously, I have argued that in order to address citizens on a specific issue, one needs to locate the spaces where they are invested (Cheema, 2018). I located television genres as the spaces where women invested their time as audiences (cultural citizens and gendered publics). I argued that to engage women with gender issues, TV producers need to address them through drama serials and interactive talk shows, while women as audiences acted in pro-civic ways to engage with women issues. Once again, I return to citizenship studies in relation to the media content that brings together Indians and Pakistanis, but in this study my focus has transitioned to digital media. Klaus and Lünenborg (2012) acknowledge that new digital media and especially the Internet has provided new means to individual actors as well as marginalized groups to publicly voice their opinions and to become involved in politics (197).

From the theoretical spectrum of citizenship studies, I use cultural citizenship and agonistic publics as the two main concepts to evaluate the Coke Studio Pakistan. The choice of the case study is unique in the sense that whilst the focus of the article is on the comments section and how that offers a discursive space for practices of cultural citizenship, the content that is commented upon can also be read as ‘an act of citizenship’. An act that ‘disrupts habitus, creates new possibilities’ through creative expressions that are ‘potentially transcultural’ (Isin and Nielson, 2013: 13). In his interview to the BBC, Rohail Hyatt, the producer of Coke Studio confirms that his creative rationale was to revisit the musical heritage of the region. By celebrating this shared musical heritage, the composer has not only revived the history of music in Pakistan but also challenged national narratives (Muslim only) occupying the mainstream Pakistani media. He shares that “The transcending power of music is very endearing. Our roots come from many places” (also see, (BBC Radio Urdu 2015, hosted by Fun rise, 2019, YouTube). With 75 years of animosity between India and Pakistan, the two countries have hardly created spaces of interaction between the people. What follows in the comments section is not just love for music and celebration of culture but also friction on political issues that the findings will share later. Whilst the study acknowledges Coke Studio as an act of citizenship because it disrupts the existing habitus by transcending volatile boundaries, challenging status quo, and garnering appeal for regional music that shares years of history, it mainly focuses on how audience engagement resonates more with the concepts of cultural citizenship and agonistic publics.

Cultural citizenship is largely about revisiting traditional forms of citizenship via discourses of identity and inclusion (Turner, 1997; Hermes, 1998; Pakulski, 1997; Stevenson, 2001). Pakulski interprets cultural citizenship as a capital that affords symbolic representation and visibility of marginalized group in public spaces (1997). Stevenson, on the other hand, brings it closer to media and warns that the ‘demands for cultural citizenship both focus on the spheres of media and education... be excluded from cultural citizenship is to be excluded from full membership of society’ (2001: 3). Bringing ‘cultural citizenship’ to the heart of the debates on popular culture, Hermes defines the concept as ‘the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture’ (2005: 10). I argue that Coke Studio Pakistan enables that community building, bonding and celebrating, as well as behaving in pro-civic ways to address issues of political nature. Likewise, the online interaction between citizens can enable a renewed form of regional identity for South Asians. I do not see strict theoretical separation between cultural citizens and discourse-led publics. In fact, I stress that both are

equally relevant terms to critically reflect on participation of users/commenters on social media (c.f. Cheema, 2020, also see, Warner, 2002). Based on their impulsive responses and episodic deliberation on political issues, these YouTube commenters can also be divided into ‘agonistic publics’ where they are constantly defining and redefining ‘the other’ by attaching positive and negative attributes to them (Mouffe, 2000, p. 33). A public, according to Habermas and Dewey ‘exists as discursive interactional processes; atomized individuals consuming media in their homes do not comprise a public, nor do they tend to contribute much to the democratization of civil society’. For both Habermas and Dewey, in order to maintain a viable democratic environment a citizen must engage with other citizens in the public sphere (quoted in Dahlgren, 1995: 19). Discussing the anatomy of public in present times, Benhabib calls Lippmann’s and Dewey’s public citizen a ‘faceless speaker and listener in an anonymous public conversation’ (1998: 204). This can also translate in many ways on social media. For instance, facelessness on YouTube offers an opportunity to express sentiments freely without fear of constant surveillance, like Indians expressing appreciation for Pakistani art without fear of being judged by the state, or Kashmiris in India showing solidarity to Pakistan without fearing being tracked down makes YouTube a somewhat democratic public sphere.

3. METHODOLOGY

For this study, *Afreen Afreen*, the second most viewed song on Coke Studio’s official YouTube page was selected. It was released on 16th August 2016 and so far, has 432,069,413 views (432 million – as of date). The lyrics of the song focus on the physical beauty of the beloved that corresponds with a typical beauty standard for South Asian women. The song was originally sung by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, a renowned Qawwali singer who is considered one of the greatest performers of South Asian Sufi music (Britannica, Online). The Coke Studio version was sung by his nephew, Rahat Fateh Ali Khan, who is continuing the family tradition of Qawwali rendition. Both singers remain hugely popular among the South Asian population in the region and beyond.

For analysing the comments, data coding began with a quantitative approach that informs its main principal methods of thematic analysis and textual analysis. The themes ranged from their love for music to issues that shape the regional politics. The idea was to identify the themes that transcend the animosity between the two countries and celebrate their mutual love for music, while also acknowledging themes (contentious issues) that shape politics of the region. I believe this is an unprecedented trend whereby YouTube is allowing people-to-people contact between Indians and Pakistan to revisit issues that are otherwise restricted to political elites. Initially, I downloaded all the comments from 16th August 2016-March 2020. In total, 91944 comments were downloaded. Key themes were then quantified, and colour coded by the number of cells in Excel. The table below shares themes that are crucial to this study. The rationale to identify both positive and negative themes is to assess how the platform (Coke Studio) allows moments of deliberation on issues that are important to the region. These range from their love for music to issues that shape the regional politics. In other words, the idea is to identify the themes that transcend the animosity between the two countries and celebrate their mutual love for music, while also acknowledging the themes (contentious issues) that shape the politics of the region. I believe this is an unprecedented trend whereby YouTube is allowing people-to-people contact between Indians and Pakistanis to revisit issues that are otherwise restricted to political elites. Each theme was closely read, and representative comments were then extracted for the study. The table (below) shows the number of themes, their mentions and colour coding.

Table Number 1 – *Initial Data Coding*

Sr. No	Key themes	Mentions	Colour coding
1	Love	15294	Green
2	Music	2630	Blue
3	Kashmir	647	Red
4	Baloch/Baluchistan	326	Dark Green
5	Boundaries	134	Dark Yellow
6	Terrorism	92	Orange
7	Nationalism	8	Grey

The comments section does not just manifest the love for music and celebration of culture, but also friction between people on political issues. What one sees in the comments section is the overarching public of Urdu music created by the Coke Studio who share much more than their love for music. It also has in common: associations with Urdu music (language), a certain genre of music (Sufi music mainly), and affiliation with a specific region (South Asia). Yet there are also factors that divide this public. These include their allegiance to their respective states, and further to their class, caste, ethnic and religion-based communities.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 *To Transcend or not to Transcend Physical Boundaries*

I begin the discussion with positive comments suggesting the region's shared acknowledgement of the standard/quality of Pakistani music. The first set of exchanges is extracted from the comments emerging around the theme of boundaries. With three wars between the two countries, the borders between India and Pakistan are the second most dangerous in the world (World Atlas). There are two patterns that have emerged in this theme, the first one reflects on how music and arts, with their strength to unite people, can make boundaries insignificant, while the second reinforces the importance of physical borders. I will start with the positive comment.

@Sanjay Tushaar reiterates this with 'Perfect example of the importance of art.. See how art (music) is uniting everyone .. That's the reason we need to encourage art .. Art has the power to erase boundaries.. India and Pakistan .. please invest more in making art alive... Love (LIKES 25) 2018-10-04T20:51:57.000Z (Tweet no. 8934).

The phrase 'that's the reason' emphasises how art has the potential to transcend not only physical boundaries but also to suppress the animosity that is reinforced by the customary boundaries. In this regard, Kermani (2010) also stresses that culture can even improve the relations between the two countries. In his interview to the BBC, Rohail Hyatt, the producer as well as the composer of Coke Studio also laments Pakistan's disowning of its subcontinental musical history. He reflects: 'People tell me that Coke Studio has received very positive response from India. To that, I argue that of course, we share language and taste for music, they feel that it is relatable, so what's wrong with this I wanted to start with subcontinental history of music that goes back thousands of years to Mohenjo Daro or Harappa, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions' (BBC Radio Urdu 2015, hosted by Fun rise, 2019, YouTube). By celebrating shared musical heritage, he has not only revived the history of music in Pakistan but also challenged national narratives communicated in mainstream Pakistan media. This reaffirms Isin and Nielson's argument that 'we cannot define acts of citizenship as already inherently exclusive or inclusive, homogenizing or diversifying, or positive or negative. These qualities arise after or, more appropriately, through the act. In fact, we as interpreters ascribe these qualities to those acts' (2013: 38).

Whilst the intention of Hyatt (the composer) was to engage people beyond the border, and spread love through music, his act (of producing the music) triggered performances by South Asian audiences as cultural citizens. The landscape created in the comment section of the YouTube video, becomes a chaotic space of interaction and emotional encounters between Indians and Pakistanis. Another line of argument

reflected via several comments acts to remind people and reinforce the importance of boundaries. Take for instance, the exchange between Nirmalya Sengupta and Swapnil Sakpal. Sengupta commends the singer with words like *'Rahat Fateh Ali Khan sir is a legend and momina has a beautiful voice. Music, art knows no boundaries. Love from India'* (sic), with the comment receiving 132 likes. To this, Sakpal agrees that art may have no boundaries but also reminds: *'But terrorism does'*. To further contextualise his argument, he engages another user by reiterating why boundaries are needed between India and Pakistan:

XXXX 80000 not even lost life in Panipat battle. So don't talk out of context... I hate Pak policy... Double std.at 1 time u consider officially Taliban as a friend.... FYI India never officially accepted Taliban govt. But at the Same time u attack them in fata n wazristan..... At least we are better that not maintaining double standards.. Jay Trump N Modi...

The comment has entirely departed from reflecting on the content, rather making links to Pakistan's policy vis-à-vis Taliban in the region. As a Deobandi Islamist movement that emerged in Pakistan and Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in Afghanistan, the movement is fighting for a *Shariah*-compliant rule in the region (BBC, 2022). While the group has a strong hold in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, its global reputation is that of a terrorist group. Though similar in ideology, Afghani Taliban are a much stronger group compared to the Pakistani Taliban (represented by Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, aka TTP) who still operate on the fringes. Whilst India has been sceptical of Taliban's strength and the impact it can have for the far-right politics in Pakistan, it has recently initiated contact with the Afghani Taliban. Since the comment was written in 2018, the commenter is referring to the old Indian policy on Taliban. Swapnil also refers to how Pakistan's policy on the Taliban varies with the countries they operate in. For Pakistan and other Muslim countries, the Afghani Taliban represent a force that has fought/is fighting to reclaim its homeland from foreign occupation, whereas Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan is viewed as a terrorist group that is bent on destabilising the parliamentary form of government in Pakistan. The comment ends with a reference to Jay Modi and Trump which can be translated as *'victory be to Modi and Trump'*. The expression that combines Modi and Trump, is reflective of the sentiments of the majority in India that supports populist ideals locally and globally. Interestingly, the commenter appears to be well informed of the local politics in Pakistan. What is also worth noting is how the commenter has used the space to take issue with Pakistan's policy on Taliban, but, at the same time, celebrate India's current leadership.

I would suggest that such written interventions/exchanges invoke practices of cultural citizenship. These practices are different from how earlier studies perceived cultural citizenship via popular culture and arts. The themes that occupy the comments section do not necessarily focus on the content i.e. music. It rather uses the space as an opportunity to register and to engage with neighbouring citizens on regional politics. In this, the findings follow Thelwall, Sud and Vis (2011) who have also found that music on YouTube largely draws positive comments while politics and religion can trigger heated exchanges.

4.2 Between Music and Political Realities

This brings us to the comments that feature music as their central theme. Consider how the user (Raj Nasir) says, *'The only reason Indians like Pakistan'*. Here, the use of 'only' implies that there is no other reason to like Pakistan. Music in this sense becomes an exceptional factor that binds the two countries. This is just a snippet from the 2630 comments on music that all praise Pakistan for its calibre of music (in line with the findings of Thelwall, Sud and Vis in relation to music, 2011). Chakrabarty (2010) also endorses how music has contributed to connect people at the grass-root level in South Asia. Indeed, this celebration of Pakistani music is quite at odds with its framing in the global/regional media as the safe haven for terrorists.

Likewise, another comment further reinforces Pakistan's hegemony over South Asian music landscape: *'Pakistan can rule down all over the world by their singers only'*. India is a regional hegemon, and it is

rare to see Indians acknowledge the supremacy/talent of their rival country on a public medium. However, it is also worth noting that the commenter is based in Srinagar, and the ID Ummat-e-Muslimah (translated Muslim Ummah) suggests that they are Muslim. A close reading of the themes suggests that Muslim commenters living on the Indian side of Kashmir are pro-Pakistan (c.f. Geelani, 2016 on the prevalence of this pro-Pakistani sentiment). Their appreciation for music can be seen as an expression of their allegiance to Pakistan: it becomes more apparent when tensions in the Kashmir escalate. Such pro-Pakistan comments are also an expression of enacting solidarity with Muslim religious identity (c.f. McCosker, 2014 on similar publics). Despite music's appeal, another user (Faisal Ahmed) who claims to be a Kashmiri living on the Indian side of Kashmir comments on the double standards of Indian commenters in this manner:

I am a Kashmiri, I see this thread inundated with many Indians expressing their love for Pakistani songs and singers which to me is absolutely marvelous. I wonder if this bubbly friendly attitude can be maintained by when the issue of Kashmir is brought up. I doubt it. And I'm seeing this a few months after the carnage that engulfed my Srinagar after a lecturer was beaten to death (which to be fair turned out to be a 'mistake'), after the sort of mass blinding you can only think of in your worst nightmares, after the death of more than hundred by trigger happy forces of India. My Pakistani brothers and sisters, try conveying this to a person from across the border and you can see that cold shrug we've gotten accustomed to. I don't hate these people. I've no doubt they are sincere in their appreciation but I'm heart broken when someone tried to ignore the elephant in the room and run circles around it by using the "love" a gazillion times (sic).

Consider how Ahmed begins by appreciating the song, but then his Kashmiri identity comes to the fore. He sees the comments section as a space where he can address both Pakistani and Indians on the issue of Kashmir. He utilises the opportunity to remind both nations of the atrocities committed in Kashmir by the Indian authorities. Referring to Pakistanis as 'brothers and sisters' implies distancing himself from Indians and their treatment of Muslims in Kashmir. By highlighting how Indians use 'love a gazillion times', the comment further reveals hypocrisies that run deep in both societies when the moment of consumption suspends their allegiance to their respective states and they come together as publics of Coke Studio.

Theoretically, I argue that such phrasing of comments reveals the intra-public divisions of Coke Studio. The public of Coke Studio cannot be seen as a monolith category that is simply there to rejoice *in* music. Rather, commenters bring with them their baggage of intersecting identities. Ahmed's tweet receives 176 likes which in turn suggests that there are other users who endorse his viewpoint. Under the theme of Kashmir, a recurrent pattern shows that users tend to briefly comment with 'love from Kashmir' or 'love from Indian Occupied Kashmir'. With a typical political backdrop of the region, such comments are strategically phrased. They choose not to comment on the music itself but to register their love/solidarity either to the content that is produced in Pakistan or for/with the Pakistani users. The comments are written in a way that draws the attention of other Pakistanis who empathise with the plight of Kashmiris. Most of these comments receive likes by other users but they can also be read as expressions that distance Kashmiri users from India.

In another comment, Rockstar 222 Rocky who seems to be a Pakistani also reminds readers of the treatment minorities face in India. He writes: '*Yes we are not killing innocents childs, women and specially shudras, dillats... free kashmir, Khalistan Zindabad*' (sic). Here, the use of 'we' implies that the commenter is a Pakistani. He then refers to two minority issues, such as, the caste crisis in India, and Khalistan movement that has its roots in Sikhs' resentments. The Khalistan Movement is a Sikh-led insurgency for a separate Sikh homeland that has so far cost '21,532 lives over a decade and a half'. On the Indian side, the mainstream media speculates on Pakistan's involvement in reviving the Khalistan movement (Mahajan, 2021, also see, Hashmi, 2015). This is not discussed in the Pakistani mainstream

media, therefore, the comment, with obvious references to *Khalistan Zindabad* (translated ‘long live Khalistan’) can reflect Pakistani public sentiment for a free Indian Punjab.

With such comments, YouTube emerges as a space where citizens are engaging in political questions that in fact occupy the mainstream media landscape in Pakistan and India but without any input from the ‘ordinary’ public – listeners, readers, audiences – as opposed to elites. Whether the input from the public/respective nations offers alternative viewpoints to the official ones is another debate but their participation can surely be seen as a reflection of users’ political sentiments in their countries. While users are engaging with issues of a political nature, most exchanges still resonate with the national narratives of their respective countries. It is also evident that pro-Pakistan comments are laden with references to internal conflicts in India, whether it is the immutable issue of Kashmir, casteism in modern day India or the recent rise of Khalistan movement in Indian Punjab.

An interesting exchange between two users, one from India and the other from Pakistan, emerged on the theme of Baluchistan. What triggers the discussion is the comment from Vishal Vishwakarma who uses the same strategy as pro-Pakistani users to incorporate references to internal conflicts in Pakistan. The comment ‘*Bro that time will come soon when People of Balochistan and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir will tell you who are the Butchers. You are like serpent for the whole world*’. Vishwakarma is referring to an ongoing insurgency in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan (UNPO, 2018). In the Pakistani mainstream media, there is open discussion of how the Indian intelligence agency (RAW) has infiltrated Baluchistan to facilitate the insurgency (see Khetran, 2017). By referring to Pakistan as the ‘serpent’, the comment echoes the global perception of Pakistan as a terror-sponsoring state. Ameer Hamza retaliates again to the comment saying that ‘*Khalistan referendum is coming and then people of Punjab will make history there and then we will talk*’. The Khalistan referendum never happened, but Pakistan’s sympathies for the Sikh insurgency in Indian Punjab is manifestly evident.

From the perspective of cultural citizenship, users’ comments allow us to rethink the performance margins afforded by previous studies on cultural citizenship. By that, I mean Hermes (2005) and (Cheema 2018) who have both identified how certain popular media can trigger acts of a pro-civic nature among cultural citizens but in this case, music has prompted comments on serious political issues. It is also worth noting that unlike Twitter/X, YouTube’s comments section allows the word limit of 10000 characters (approximately), allowing users to fully express themselves. Likewise, the factor of anonymity further strengthens free expression on politics.

Almost all politics-related comments either touch Kashmir or state-level involvement in each other’s internal matters. Roshan Arora Proud Punjabi Hindu comments on how Pakistani singers work for Indian composers thereby using Indian industry for making money. The commenter goes on to remind those Pakistani artists who work for the Indian industry that they must condemn their government for any excursions in Kashmir. Here, the user utilizes ‘Pulwama attack’, referring to an event in which ‘46 Indian soldiers were killed in Kashmir by Jaish-e-Mohammad, a Pakistan-based group’ (as claimed by BBC, 2019). In addition, the user also makes a point that Muslims, whether artists or otherwise, should condemn any act of terror in the name of Islam. In saying this, the user suggests that all Muslims should publicly denounce other Muslims who spread fear of any sort. While that may seem like a reasonable demand, the comment does not consider that ‘public denunciation’ should not be mandatory for all Muslim celebrities. The Pakistani government, on the other hand, refused any trace of insinuation or involvement in the attack. Once again, it also serves as a reminder that commenters hardly deviate from the official narrative that occupies the mainstream public sphere. In Roman Hindi/Urdu, the user also pointed out that Pakistan has become a slave to China (*Karo karo China ki ghulami karo* translated as *carry on with your slavery to China*). They add that earlier Pakistan was close to the US (*pehlay US k ghulam they ub China*, translated as *before you served the US and now China*). Here, the comment has drifted to a conversation on Pakistan’s recent economic policy showing government’s inclination towards building ties with China. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (referred to as CPEC) is ‘an assortment of infrastructure projects currently under development in Pakistan’ (CPIC Global). Both India and the US

have shown their anxiety on Pakistan's tilt towards China. This may result in minimising the American presence in the region. Time and again, both Washington and Delhi have expressed concerns on how CPEC would impact on India's sovereignty and US' presence in the region. Recently, Alice Wells, the U.S. principal deputy assistant secretary of the State for South and Central has openly expressed Washington's anxiety on Pakistan's closeness with China (Jamal, 2020; also see Pandit, 2018). Abdullah (a supposedly Pakistani user) strikes back by saying that CPEC involves other countries including Russia, England, UAE, Iran, Afghanistan. Whatever the detail or viewpoint, it is worth noting here how South Asian publics from both countries are seeking the opportunity to discuss the geoeconomic policy of Pakistan. Since the region is politically volatile and the mainstream media thrives on regional news, it is no surprise to see that the users are well-versed in politics. The discussion randomly ends when Asjad reminds commenters that they are here to enjoy music.

5. CONCLUSION

Whilst the intention of Hyatt (the composer) was to engage people beyond the border, and spread love through music, his act (read music) triggered a range of ways in which regional audiences engaged as cultural citizens. The landscape created in the comment section of the YouTube video became a chaotic space of interaction where one observes a range of emotional encounters, emerging from the baggage of political history, and where encounters lead to unexpected happy, sad and annoying exchanges with the 'other. This is the 'other' separated by borders and with whom nations are not allowed to interact through official channels (c.f. Ahmed, 2012, also see Askin on emotional citizenry 2016). I argue that whether you locate physical or mediated spaces, the free mingling of people allows reinforcing as well as shedding of existing prejudices, thereby, giving rise to possibilities of re-politicising interactions. So far, I have argued that content can be read as an act of citizenship that allows performances in an emotionally laden rhetoric, which in turn enables practices of citizenship in the comments section.

What we have seen in the comments is on-going friction on issues that shape the region's internal and external politics. These issues have impacted South Asians' everyday lives for over 75 years. But what has changed recently is that now the publics have access to spaces (social media) where they can discuss issues that were previously only open for debate at the policy level. The study has found how the rich canvas of Coke Studio's YouTube Channel offers a space to perform 'emotional citizenry' via 'intercultural encounters' (c.f. Askin, 2016). In that, the word count offers room for longer exchanges on any topic. Unlike Twitter where there is a fixed number of followers responding to specific tweets, media content (in this case music) attracts an expansive of demographic from across the region.

Generally speaking, borders are a 'part of a larger dynamic of exclusion and 'othering' that is integral to nation states and the ways that citizenship is often imagined and reinforced through discourses of fear' (Pain, 2009 cited in Staeheli, 2010: 394, also see, Pain, 2009). In South Asia, these discourses of fear pervade media, curriculum, and religious seminaries, as well as through symbols of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995). With this, citizenship as an entitlement and a project is conceived in relation to the nation state. I argue that whether you locate citizens in physical or mediated spaces, the free mingling of people allows reinforcing as well as shedding of existing prejudices, thereby, giving rise to possibilities of re-politicising interactions. Pakistani music offers an exceptional stimulus for these politically heated exchanges between South Asians (c.f. Cheema 2015, 2018 and 2020 for a discussion on publics responding to stimuli). Following Tsing (2005), I conclude with the argument that episodes of friction should not be viewed as 'a synonym for resistance', rather that 'friction inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing' (6). In this context, I see heated exchanges on YouTube as the first step towards enabling people-to-people contact. It is part of a learning process to co-exist with the adversary who differs in their opinions yet has the right to exist and preserve their sovereignty. I also concur with Habermas who refers to 'democracy as a learning process', something that South Asians, in today's populist contexts, are struggling to deal with (Habermas, 2011). Such intercultural encounters between Indians and Pakistanis on social media also create moments for acknowledging 'common interests' that include a range of subjects from art forms to identity debates. In the South Asian context,

the importance of these encounters must not be underestimated: they enable occasions for negotiating the perception of the ‘other’ separated by volatile borders. In terms of theoretical implications, the study allows us to reflect on YouTube as a domain that allows more flexibility than Twitter in terms of word count. Those who comment are not bound by word to express their joy or anger on any given issue. This ‘affordance’ loosens up ‘the performance margin for citizen engagement’. Most importantly, it allows us to reflect on how ‘online acts of citizenship’ can enable ‘warring nations’ to find commonalities between each other.

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