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Popular music as desecuritising discourse: a YouTube analysis of Coke Studio across South Asia

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ABSTRACT

The study examines how Coke Studio Pakistan fosters desecuritisation between India and Pakistan through YouTube audience interactions. Drawing on scholarship about popular culture in international conflicts, this study situates music as a tool for reshaping the non-material dimensions of protracted rivalry. Applying securitisation theory, the paper analyses comments on three iconic performances *Pasoori*, *Afreen Afreen*, and *Chaap Tilak*. The research employs a mixed-methods sentiment and content analysis. Findings reveal that 40–47% of comments promoted peace and cultural kinship, while hostile remarks were rare (1–2%) and often discouraged. Desecuritisng discourse received significantly higher engagement, reflecting audience endorsement of cross-border solidarity. The research positions YouTube as a contested yet transformative space where cross-border affinity is frequently observed. By showcasing organic expressions of shared identity and emotional reciprocity, the study underscores the digital platform's potential to reshape protracted conflicts via cultural exchange, offering a bottom-up counterpoint to securitised geopolitics.

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Introduction

Decades of hostility between India–Pakistan have entrenched perceptions of rivalry, sustained by securitisation narratives framing each other as existential threats.¹ Yet beneath these state-driven discourses lies a vibrant undercurrent of cultural exchange, evident in the shared consumption of films, music, and digital media. This paper examines how Coke Studio Pakistan, a transnational music platform, fosters desecuritisation narratives and audience interactions on YouTube, challenging the India–Pakistan conflict's 'non-material' dimensions manifested in identities, emotions, and collective memory, Press-Barnathan (2017).

The study analyses YouTube comments on three Coke Studio performances – *Afreen Afreen*, *Chaap Tilak*, and *Pasoori* to identify desecuritisation themes advocating peace, cultural kinship, and reharmonisation. Methodologically, we combine computational sentiment analysis with qualitative insights to reshape conflict narratives. While prior

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scholarship highlights cultural diplomacy's soft power (Nye, 2021), this research explores organic digital discourse, where laypersons perform desecuritisation through emotional solidarity, a phenomenon underexplored in International Relations.

Ethnomusicologist Thomas Graves (2024) has closely studied cross-border YouTube comments on Sufi music (qawwali) videos, including some from Coke Studio. He documents a remarkable trend of Indian and Pakistani commenters exchanging messages of unity, often using stock phrases like 'Love from India' or 'Love from Pakistan' and declaring that 'music has no boundaries'. Such comments explicitly reject the divisive logic of the border. Graves (2024) interprets this phenomenon as affective solidarity, an emotional form of people-to-people bonding that transcends the geopolitical divide. These findings suggest that popular music on platforms like YouTube can serve as a bottom-up peacebuilding mechanism, even if limited in scope, by allowing citizens of adversarial states to interact in a shared emotional language of music and love.

While governments continue to use cultural soft power and, at times, enforce cultural barriers (Bhutto, 2023), the organic consumption and interaction by the public often defy these barriers. The case of Coke Studio and its Indo-Pak audience is emblematic of this dynamic. It stands at the crossroads of cultural diplomacy, peacebuilding, and digital communication. This study builds on the above scholarship by explicitly framing these cultural interactions regarding securitisation theory, examining how the audience discourse might represent a desecuritisation of the India–Pakistan conflict narrative from the ground up.

While our argument is anchored in securitisation theory, the phenomenon under study is fundamentally communicative. We therefore integrate insights from fan studies and participatory culture and from postcolonial publics. It tracks how cultural flows and platformed interaction are shaped by power, identity, and mobility. This interdisciplinary lens allows us to explore not only whether audience discourse looks peace-oriented but also how branded, algorithmic practices together enable or constrain such talks. Second, we examine why emotional warm exchanges do not automatically translate into structural transformation (Appadurai, 1996; Bennett, 2014; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012; Shohat & Stam, 2014).

Theoretical framework: securitisation, desecuritisation, and digital audiences

Securitisation theory and its extension to popular culture

Buzan, Waever, and Wilde (1998), though the Copenhagen School developed securitisation theory, it frames security as a speech act, constructing existential threats. Desecuritisation, on the other hand, reverses such narratives. Desecuritisation can occur through various paths. It might be achieved by reframing the issue by changing narratives or simply by letting the securitised issue fade away from public consciousness (Buzan et al., 1998).

In the India–Pakistan context, one can easily identify decades of securitisation moves (Constantin & Carla, 2024). Each state's elites have repeatedly depicted the other as a great threat to territorial integrity, to national unity, even to civilisation or religion. Pakistan's establishment securitised India as a perennial aggressor bent on undoing

Pakistan, while Indian leaders securitised Pakistan as a sponsor of terrorism and instability. Kashmir has been securitised by both sides as a core issue tied to existential identity (Kaunert & Khan, 2024).

Traditionally, securitisation theory has focused on formal political actors (state leaders, government officials) and formal speech acts (speeches, policy statements). However, in recent years, scholars have argued for expanding the framework to non-traditional actors and media, noting that security narratives now circulate in a far more decentralised communication environment (Baele & Thomson, 2017; Balzacq, 2010; Bourbeau & Vuori, 2015). Our study takes up this expanded view by considering a popular music platform and social media commenters as relevant actors/audiences in the securitising dynamics.

To clarify our theoretical interpretation, we are not suggesting that Coke Studio is literally engaging in diplomatic negotiations or policy advocacy. Rather, we posit that Coke Studio Pakistan serves as a desecuritising actor in a cultural sense. By producing content that highlights shared cultural touchstones (music genres, languages, poetic heritage) and by explicitly embracing messages of love and unity. Coke Studio does not directly address territorial or military issues; instead, it addresses the social and emotional dimension of India–Pakistan relations. It portrays Pakistan (to its viewers, including Indians) not as a menace but as a vibrant, pluralistic society rich in arts and culture. In doing so, it strives to ‘capture discursive space’ from extremist or negative narratives. The show’s producers, by emphasising themes of Sufi love, tolerance, and pan-South Asian musical hybridity, are attempting to recast Pakistan’s image and foster a sense of common cultural identity. This aligns with what Gupta (2016) calls using love and shared culture to counteract narratives of religious or civilisation clash.

The YouTube commenters on Coke Studio videos, in our framework, constitute an audience-cum-co-authors of the desecuritisation process. In securitisation theory, the audience’s reaction is crucial. If the audience refuses to buy into a securitising move (like a gesture of friendship), it must be accepted or reciprocated by relevant audiences to have an effect. The unique aspect of digital media is that the audience is no longer passive, as it engages in conversation. On YouTube, viewers do not just silently accept the message; they comment, debate, and even create new meanings. This makes the comment space an extension of the speech act. A feedback loop where audiences can amplify, reinterpret, or conversely reject the intended narrative of the content.

In the case of Coke Studio, if Indian and Pakistani viewers respond with comments that echo and build upon the show’s ethos of harmony, the audience in effect becomes a secondary desecuritising actor. Through their collective voice, they push the discourse further towards normalisation and away from securitisation. Conversely, if comments were hateful or nationalistic, that would indicate resistance to desecuritisation, perhaps even attempts to re-securitise the space. Thus, analysing audience comments gives insight into the social acceptance (or contestation) of desecuritising narratives at the popular level.

Affective solidarity vs. desecuritising discourse

To maintain the analytical precision, we treat desecuritisation as a speech act with illocutionary force that negates threat predicates, reclassifies the other (from enemy to

neighbour, kin, or partner), and returns the issue to ordinary politics (Balzacq, 2010; Buzan et al., 1998; Hansen, 2012; Wæver, 1995). Likewise, Affective solidarity refers to warmth, empathy, and cultural kinship across borders. On its own, it doesn't perform these moves. Its analytical value lies in reshaping the audience side of (de)securitisation. By humanising the other and recalibrating perceptions of danger. Additionally, it lowers the threshold for accepting non-threat framing and supplies the affective infrastructure for a subsequent discursive change.

For the operational boundary, we code an utterance as *desecuritizing* when the solidarity is 'Other addressed' and indicates an explicit 'boundary-negating' and/or 're-classificatory move', e.g. direct salutation across the border, kinship formulations, invocations of shared cultural community, or normative calls to keep enmity out of the space, thereby publicly indexing non-enmity and normalisation. Expression of generic enthusiasm or admiration that lacks such contention remains *affective solidarity*. This preserves analytic precision while recognising a causal pathway from feeling to framing affective solidarity, enabling audience uptake of desecuritising claims and, when coupled with explicit negation/reclassification, constitutes desecuritisation proper.

Fan studies, participatory culture, and postcolonial digital publics

In the online spaces, the audience does more than consume. They organise, remix, and mobilise around media, forming communities that often travel across borders. This participatory activity strengthens prosocial norms and shared identities, yet it confers direct institutional leverage; most of the work remains cultural rather than formal politics (Bennett, 2014; Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). Our case reflects this pattern. A dense layer of appreciative, affiliative talk builds community and normalises cross-border affinity. On its own, this is not a policy change, but it alters the common sense of how the other is seen.

One such example is comparative work on the Korean Hallyu wave. K-pop fandoms often act as informal cultural ambassadors while intersecting with state agendas and platform logics (Jin & Ryoo, 2014; Oh & Lee, 2014). Episodic mobilisations show political capacity, but the daily baseline affects independent words. The Coke Studio arena sits on that baseline: sustained warmth and recognition, with occasional explicit political articulation, inside a brand-curated environment.

Postcolonial media scholarship helps explain reach and unevenness. Transnational 'mediascapes' connect dispersed publics while reproducing hierarchies of visibility and voice (Appadurai, 1996; Shohat & Stam, 2014). Diaspora composition and YouTube's translation circulation aid the travel of kinship narratives, while language moderation rules and advertiser concern shape who is heard and what rises. Para-social theory clarifies how felt intimacy with artists and formats underwrites cross-border empathy in such a space (Baym, 2015; Cohen, 2001; Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956). These ties matter for uptake, as they supply the affective infrastructure that makes desecuritising claims intelligible and acceptable, even if translation into offline change remains contingent on organisational pathways.

Taken together, we read the Coke Studio comments arena as a platformed, brand-safe, postcolonial public in which fan practices generate affective solidarity and, at times, desecuritising discourse. This situates our analysis beyond IR alone.

The peace-oriented talk we observe is co-produced by audience participation and platform governance as much as by geopolitics, which explains both the prevalence of unity narratives and their limited traction beyond the communicative sphere.

Desecuritisation in digital spaces and the role of non-elite actors

The rise of social media has complicated and enriched securitisation theory by introducing new actors and arenas of speech. Umansky (2024) argues that platforms like Twitter and YouTube can ‘reverse the top-down dynamics of securitization’, empowering non-elites to speak about security (or insecurity) in influential ways. Traditionally, security was thought to be ‘articulated in an institutional voice by the elites’, but Umansky’s study of Twitter discourse on Amazon fires showed that lay actors-activists, celebrities, and ordinary citizens could act as significant security agents by framing the issue in security terms and rallying public concern.

Applying this idea to our case: if social media enables laypersons to perform securitisation moves, they likewise enable laypersons to perform desecuritisation moves. In other words, one does not have to be a state official to contribute to changing the security narrative; one can be a YouTube commenter whose heartfelt message of cross-border brotherhood, if it resonates widely, becomes part of a collective desecuritisation speech act.

The concept of audience in securitisation theory is also expanded in the digital era. Originally framed by the Copenhagen School as a monolithic, territorially bounded entity whose acceptance legitimises securitisation claims (Léonard & Kaunert, 2010). Audiences are now recognised as networked, transnational, and interactive. For instance, a Coke Studio vision’s audience spans Pakistani nationals, the Indian diaspora, and the global listeners, reflecting a digitally mediated ‘dispersed citizenship’. It is a phenomenon where individuals negotiate identity and politics across geographic divides in online spaces.

For Indo-Pak relations, YouTube serves as a rare meeting ground where citizens of both nations can directly ‘dialogue’, even asynchronously and anonymously with each other, circumventing physical world restrictions like travel bans and political hostility. This fosters conditions for digitally mediated solidarity, where emotions such as empathy, nostalgia, and cultural affinity circulate across borders. It is important to note that digital space also carries securitising narratives. The same social media platforms that host ‘Music Has No Boundaries’ comments may simultaneously amplify nationalist fervour. For instance, during the 2019 Pulwama attack and subsequent India–Pakistan tensions, social media in India became a battleground for war-like rhetoric (Malhotra, 2020).

Thus, we approach the YouTube comment section as a contested terrain, not inherently utopian spaces of peace but reflections of broader societal tensions. What makes the Coke Studio’s comment sections intriguing is the prevalence of positive cross-border interactions that defy the hostility typical of Indo-Pak online encounters (Rainie, 2021). We conceptualise commenters offering praise and kinship across borders as engaging in desecuritisng speech acts, even if informally, while any

comments that assert hostile views would represent continued securitisation attempts by segments of the public.

Methodology

Research design and case selection

This study employs a mixed-methods design, combining large-scale computational text analysis using R Studio (version 2024.12.0.467) with qualitative content analysis. We focus on three performances from Coke Studio Pakistan, i.e. *Afreen Afreen*, *Chaap Tilak*, and *Pasoori*, which are based on YouTube views, contextualisation, cultural aspects of the songs, and comment counts. To mitigate selection bias, we compared comment sections of ten other Coke Studio Pakistan tracks (e.g. *Alif Allah*, *Tajdar-e-Haram*) and found similar peace-oriented discourse, confirming that desecuritisation themes are not unique to the selected cases. By comparing these cases across different years and musical styles, we can discern whether desecuritisation narratives are consistent features of Coke Studio's audience reception rather than anomalies. We retrieved comments with the official YouTube Data API from the songs' release date till March 2025. In total, ~200,000 YouTube comments were collected (after cleaning, around ~120,000 unique comments remained for analysis). For each video, we extracted comments alongside metadata such as like counts, comment counts, and timestamps. To maintain linguistic consistency, we retained comments only in Latin script (i.e. English or Romanized Hindi/Urdu), to avoid transliteration error and ensure reliable sentiment and lexicon analysis (Bhuiyan, Ara, Bardhan, & Islam, 2017).

Keyword-based (de)securitising analysis

Drawing on the Umansky's (2024) method for social media discourse, we categorised comments as promoting peace, conflict, or neutrality using keywords. Desecuritisation terms (e.g. 'love', 'Unity', 'Brotherhood') and securitisation terms (e.g. 'war', 'border', and 'terrorism') were adapted from her framework and expanded with India–Pakistan-specific terms like 'Kashmir' or 'Pyaar' (Hindi/Urdu words for love). Keyword analysis helped to overcome the lexicon limitation of Syuzhet analysis, which contains English words. Each comment received a score based on the number of peace terms (e.g. 'Love from India') versus conflict terms (e.g. 'Never trust Pakistan'). While subtle language nuances exist, manual checks confirmed this method worked well, as hostile comments were rare and explicit. Comments were classified as:

- (1) Desecuritising terms: More peace terms
- (2) Securitising terms: More conflict terms
- (3) Neutral: No clear political language (e.g. 'Great song')

Sentiment analysis

Sentiments were analysed using Syuzhet (Jockers, 2017) and NRC lexicons (Mohammad & Turney, 2013). Syuzhet assigns each sentiment score from -1 (negative) to $+1$ (positive) based on the lexicon of positive/negative terms. The NRC lexicon categorised comments into ten emotions (e.g. joy, anger, trust). Cross-validation confirmed consistency. Mean Syuzhet scores for all songs were strongly positive (>0), aligning with overwhelmingly favourable feedback. Dominant emotions (joy, trust) further underscored the corpus's upbeat tone.

Qualitative analysis of top comments

While the quantitative analysis maps the broad landscape of the comment, we also performed a qualitative reading of comments to capture nuances and narratives that a keyword might miss. We manually examined a subset of comments, prioritising the most liked comments (top thirty comments) and additional comments of interest. We identified recurring themes and patterns in how people articulate desecuritisation. Some themes we looked for inclusion are expressions of cross-border friendship or love, references to shared culture, or music transcending boundaries. We also noted instances of securitising comments (though few) to understand their context. The qualitative insights were used to illustrate and corroborate the quantitative findings. In what follows, we integrate some of these exemplar comments (anonymised) to demonstrate how online audiences perform desecuritising speech acts in this unique setting.

Scope and considerations

Our mixed methods approach carries known constraints. Lexicon reads words at face value, such as sarcasm, irony, emoji, and negation scope invert sentiment in code-mixed, transliterated talk. Inclusion of Romanized Hindi/Urdu for the keyword analysis reduces but does not fully solve the problem. We filtered to the Latin script to ensure stable parsing. Manual scans and consensus coding helped catch obvious misreads. We retrieved data for each video's upload date till March 2025, which captured any tonal shift during that period. The results capture aggregate tendencies rather than event-linked cycles.

Platform and sampling dynamics also matter. Focusing some close reading on top-liked comments privileges high-visibility talk and may understate minority or dissenting positions. YouTube's moderation and ranking system likely downranks or removes some hostile content, shaping what is most visible. We lacked demographic and geographic metadata, due to YouTube's privacy concerns, so any national or diasporic readings rely on self-presentation in text. Finally, external validity is bounded as this is a branded, music-fandom space on YouTube. The pattern appears across three tracks and ten spot checks. We present the corpus as a salient slice of a wider conversation, not a population proxy, and outline these limits to guide future, longitudinal, and multilingual designs.

Quantitative findings

Securitisation–desecuritisation distribution

The keyword-based (de)securitising analysis reveals a striking predominance of desecuritising discourse in Coke Studio Pakistan YouTube comments. Across the three song cases, we found that roughly 40–47% of comments were classified as desecuritising, 51%–58% as neutral, and only 1–2% as securitising. In other words, an absolute majority of users either stayed away from political conflict talk or actively pushed a peace-friendly narrative, and virtually no one engaged in hostile rhetoric. For example, in Pasoori's comments, about 45.8% of the ~75k comments fell in the desecuritising category, versus 53.8% neutral and a mere 0.4% securitising. Afreen Afreen showed a similar pattern: 40.1% desecuritising, 58.1% neutral, and 1.8% securitising. Chaap Tilak, the smallest dataset, had the highest proportion of peace comments at 47% desecuritising, 51.4% neutral, and 1.66% securitising. [Figure 1](#) illustrates these proportions. Simultaneously, desecuritising comments received 2–3x more likes than neutral/securitising ones, indicating audience valorisation of unity.

The consistency across all three cases strengthens the findings of the song's differences, the audience behaviour is notably uniform. The research notes that YouTube's community guidelines, which prohibit hate speech and cyberbullying (YouTube 2023), likely contributed to the scarcity of securitising remarks. Automated filters and user-reported removals may have excised overtly hostile comments before data collection. While this suggests platform policies shape discourse, the high engagement with peace-oriented comments (e.g. likes) indicates authentic preferences, as moderation alone cannot generate positive interactions. Nearly half the commenters use the language of love, unity, and shared identity, while overt antagonism is extremely scarce. In total, out of ~116k cleaned comments, only around a thousand contained any securitising words.

Sentiment and emotional analysis

The general sentiment of the comments is overwhelmingly positive. [Figure 2](#) shows a right-skewed sentiment distribution, with most comments scoring above 0 on the sentiment scale. A large fraction even hit the maximum of the scale for very positive short comments (words like amazing, masterpiece, and love contribute to high scores). Very few comments had a net negative sentiment score, and those that did were often criticisms of the song's technical aspects or expressions of sadness (not necessarily hate). The average sentiment score per song was well into positive territory, underlining the upbeat tone. The finding reinforces that these Coke Studio comment sections show a high prevalence of positive-affect expressions relative to many public online forums.

Prominent emotions

The emotion category analysis further illustrates this. We aggregated NRC emotion counts across all comments: joy was the most dominant emotion expressed, followed by trust and anticipation, which are all positive emotions. Many comments convey

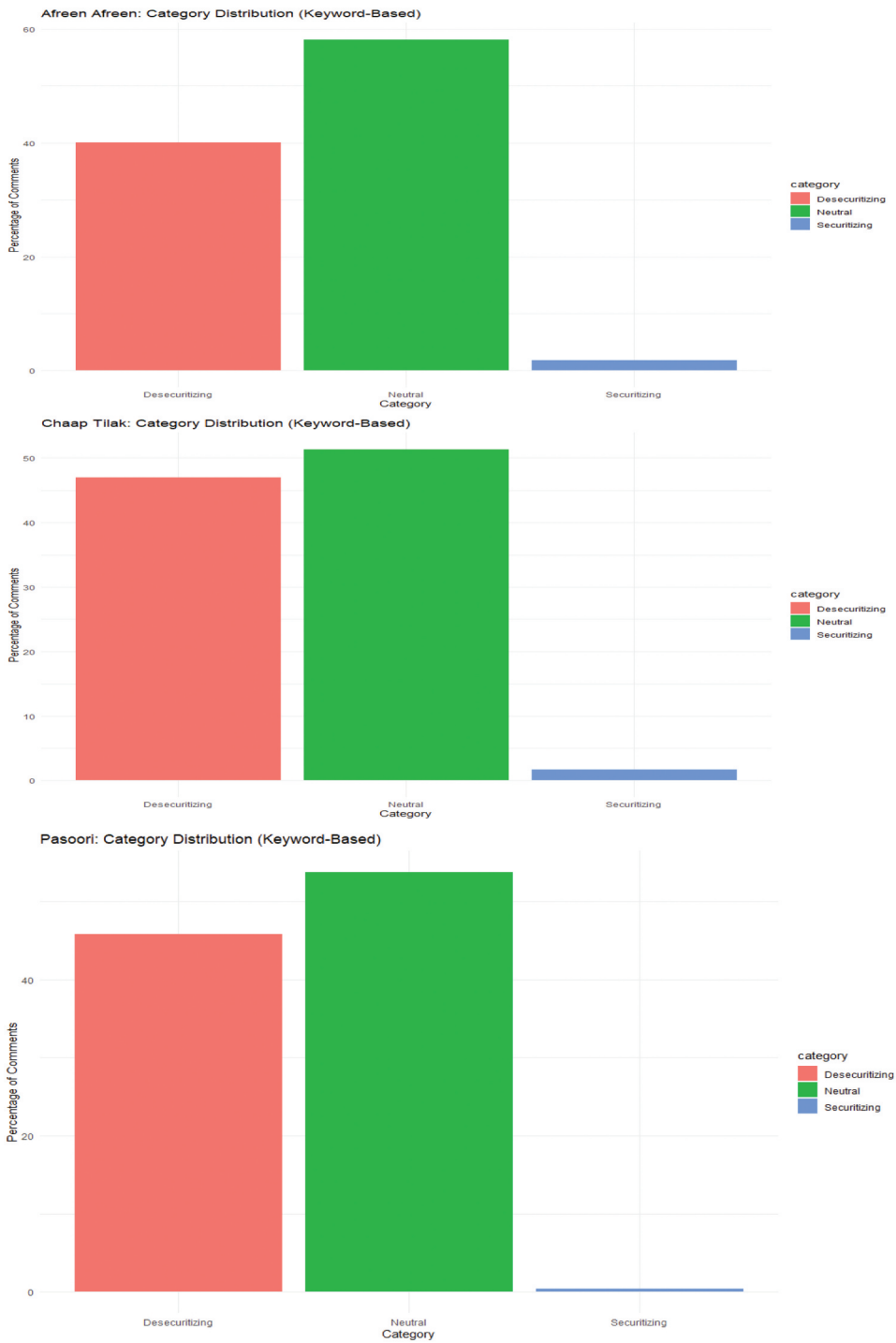


Figure 1. Securitisation–desecuritisation distribution: stacked bars showing the percentage of desecuritising, securitising, and neutral comments for each song based on keyword classification.

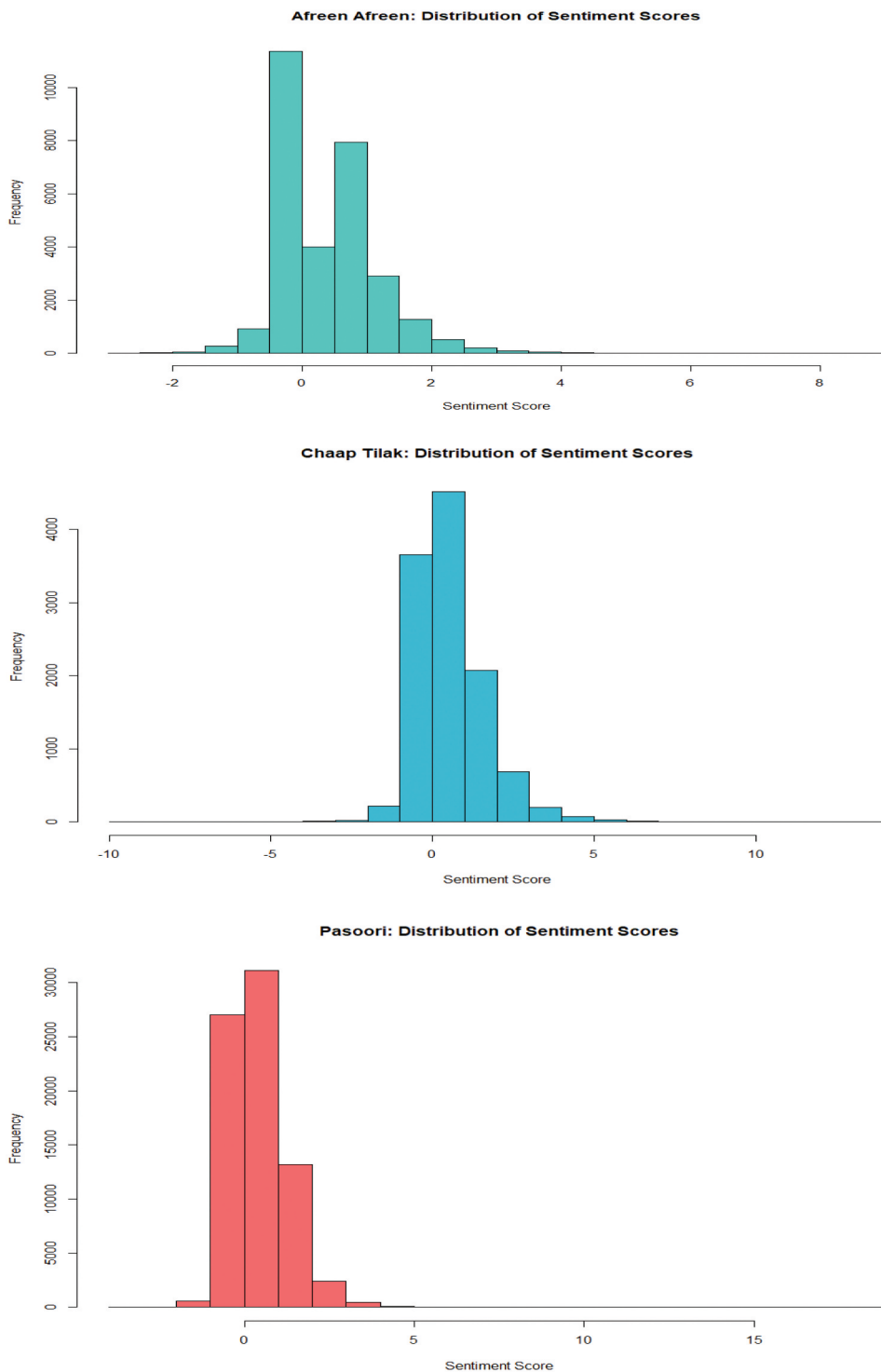


Figure 2. Sentiment score distributions: histograms of Syuzhet sentiment scores (−1 to +1) for comments on Pasoori, Afreen Afreen, and Chaap Tilak, illustrating predominantly positive sentiment.

appreciation, trust, or admiration, and anticipation. Emotions like anger, fear, and disgust were almost marginal in frequency, appearing only in the tiny subset of hostile comments or in a few isolated contexts. The sadness appeared occasionally, but often in a positive context expressed as a part of a hopeful wish that things change. On the whole, positive sentiments and emotions eclipse negative ones in this dataset. It quantitatively demonstrates the ‘feel-good’ atmosphere of the Coke Studio audience. Figure 3 emotion distribution for each song confirming that joy-related words and trust-related words are far more frequent than any fear or anger terms.

Geographical pattern

The country mentions analysis adds more layers of insight. We observed that Indian and Pakistani commenters often explicitly signalled their identity or greeted the other side. Phrases like ‘Love from India’ or ‘Love from Pakistan to India’ are common in the database. In total, India and Pakistan are mentioned 12,011 and 7416 times, respectively, as shown in Figure 4. But notably map also shows significant mentions of other countries. Commenters from Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and other neighbouring countries chimed in, often using the Coke Studio discussion to express a broader regional kinship. One user wrote, *‘Separated by boundaries united by music-brotherhood of mankind’*. By stringing together all these country names, the commenter underscores a vision of transnational solidarity, affirming that the shared cultural heritage of South Asia transcends political borders.

This is desecuritisation at the border level. It dilutes the Indo-Pak rivalry by folding it into a larger context of regional brotherhood. The reference to the ‘brotherhood of mankind’ universalises the sentiment, aligning with humanistic values rather than nationalist ones. Such comments received many likes, indicating that the audience embraces this inclusive identity. The maps for Afreen Afreen and Chaap Tilak similarly show a scatter of global, including diaspora-heavy countries like the UK, USA, Canada, and Australia. For example, we saw comments like ‘watching from the USA’, or ‘watching from the UK’, and adding ‘much love for Pakistan’, reflecting diaspora viewers acting as informal ambassadors of peace. These patterns indicate that Coke Studio’s reach is global, and its message of unity is picked up by South Asians worldwide, who often act as cultural mediators in the comments. The prominence of diaspora audiences (e.g. comments from the USA, UK) highlights their role as cultural mediators. However, the lack of verified demographic data limits our ability to disentangle domestic and diasporic contributions to desecuritisation narratives. This warrants caution in generalising findings to broader populations.

Qualitative illustrations of desecuritisation narratives

The quantitative findings clearly show a comment space dominated by positive, peace-oriented interaction. The qualitative examination of top comments provides concrete examples of how users articulate desecuritisng narratives in their own words. The most liked comments in each video encapsulate the prevailing sentiment and are worth examining closely.

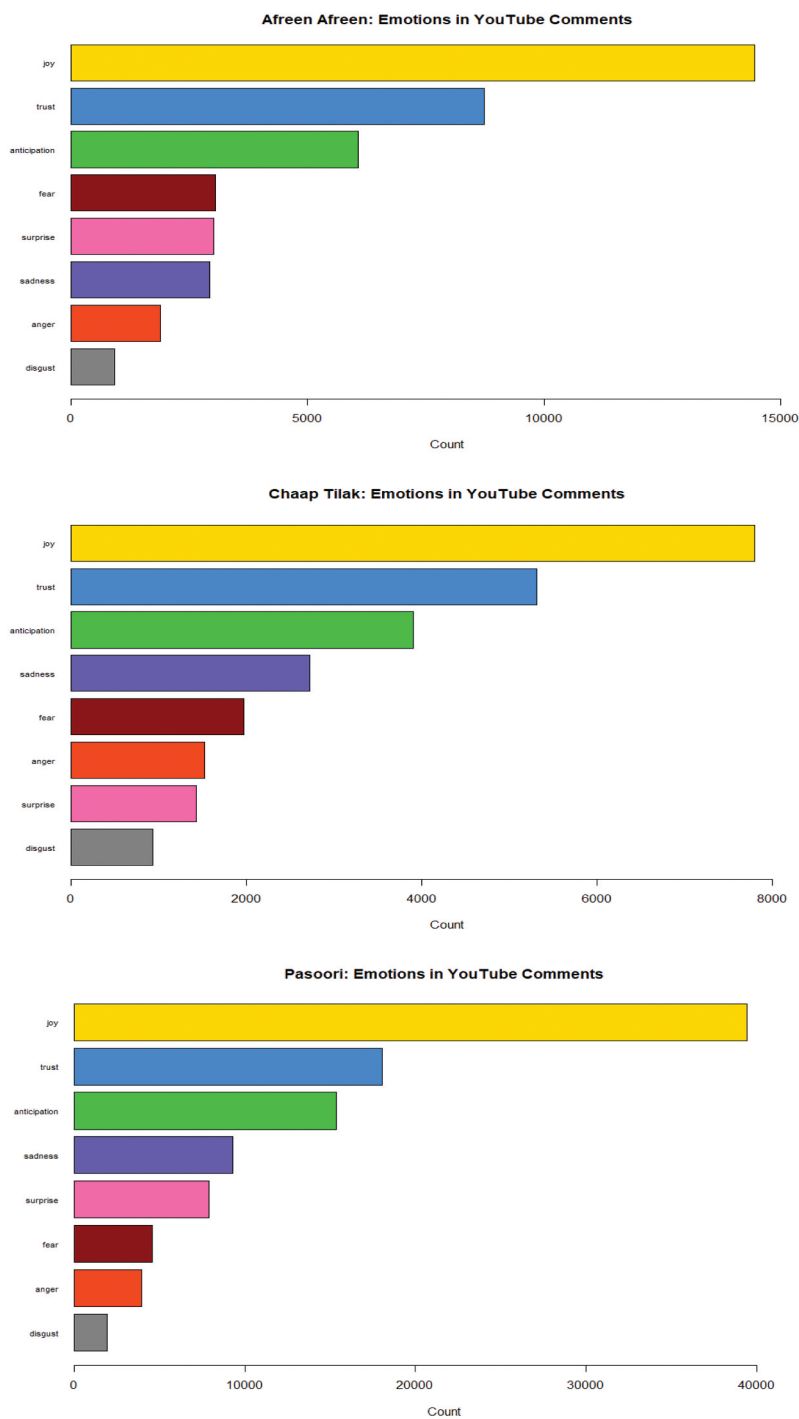


Figure 3. Prominent emotions: NRC lexicon bar charts showing dominant emotions (joy, trust) versus negative emotions across comments for each song.

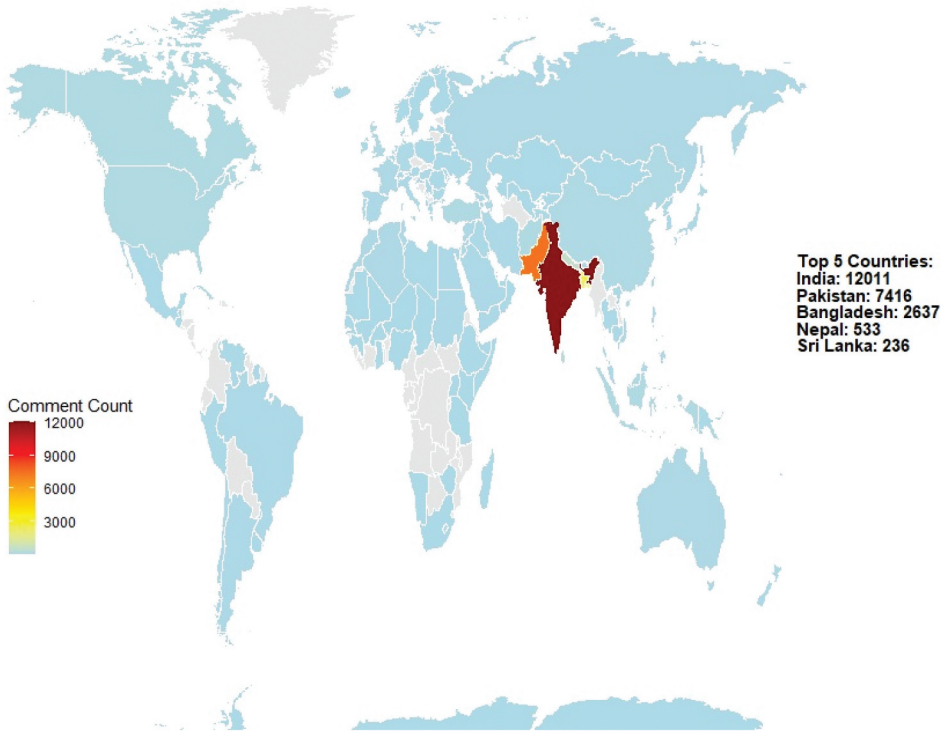


Figure 4. Geographic mentions: worldmap overlay of countryname mentions in comments, highlighting India, Pakistan, and other transnational audiences.

On Afreen Afreen's video, one top comment by an Indian viewer reads:

I laugh at those who say I am Indian but love this song- bro, young don't need to be Pakistani to love this song. Rahat sir's aura is beyond borders.

In this, the commenter first humorously dismisses the notion that music appreciation should be nationally bounded – 'I laugh at those' suggests that it is absurd to think an Indian wouldn't or shouldn't love Pakistani songs. The use of 'bro' creates a casual, fraternal tone, as if directly addressing Pakistani readers as friends. The phrase '*you don't need Pakistani to love this song*' explicitly rejects identity-based gatekeeping. In securitising terms, this is a desecuritisation move, as it normalises cross-border admiration and constructs a narrative where shared appreciation for art overrides the enemy images of the nations.

Another comment that is highly liked is:

thanks god you dont need visa to listen music in youtube.

The opening phrase succinctly captures the desecuritisation thesis. The political boundaries may divide us, but cultural music unites us. The use of kinship, as shown in the comment, is significant as it reframes international relations in intimate, familiar terms, thus downplaying the idea of 'other' as an existential threatening stranger. In securitisation theory, this is analogous to rearticulating relationships in

the story to cast the enemy in a new light. It transforms the India–Pakistan narrative from one of division to one of a shared cultural community, observing that popular culture can shape the ‘non-material’ dimension of conflict by changing identities and collective emotions.

Other themes that emerged are shared cultural heritage and religious tolerance. One commenter wrote,

I thought that both religions hinduism and islam teach tolerance but but by the comments we can clearly see that no one of you jealous and full nationalist pride have learned the divine lesson of love and understand of your religionshere is a place to listen to good music so why bring all this religious war.

This response reminds everyone that love and understanding are core values of both religions and scolds the instigators for not embodying those values. The tone is one of disappointment rather than attack, trying to educate rather than insult. It’s essentially reclaiming the narrative: instead of letting a comment threat devolve into religious bickering, this user asserts that the forum’s purpose is music and unity, not conflict. By doing so, they perform peer moderation that reinforces the norm of desecuritisation. Such moderation by users was noted multiple times whenever a negative comment popped up; it was either ignored (left without engagement) or someone replied with a peace message. The community thus positively polices itself, upholding the low-incivility norms atmosphere. This is significant, as it shows the audience actively resisting securitising speech acts. Another user wrote,

whenever i hear hatred between india and pakistan i come here to purify my soul.

This gracious acknowledgement nurtures a cordial, inclusive tone, emphasising goodwill and reciprocity. It stands in stark contrast to the angry exchanges one might see on news videos or nationalist forums. The norms of this community discourage securitisation language – any time a user posts something hostile, it is intended to be ignored or gently rebutted by others, often with an appeal to keep the discussion positive.

Similarly, themes of shared culture and mutual appreciation are abundant. For example, on *Chapp Tilak*, an Indian user wrote:

Listening from India- this song feeds my soul. We share such a beautiful culture. Love to Pakistani brothers and sisters for keeping it alive.

This comment emphasises a shared cultural heritage (the song is a Sufi devotional beloved in both countries) and thanks the Pakistani platform for nurturing it. By talking about ‘brothers and sisters’, the user invokes a familial bond, directly countering the idea of the ‘other’ as an enemy. It’s desecuritisation through kinship metaphor-framing Indians and Pakistanis as one family culturally. Such comments received warm replies like ‘Love you too bro from the other side’, creating a positive feedback loop.

Collectively, the top comments and many others paint a consistent picture. Audiences are performing desecuritisation through simple, heartfelt messages of love, unity, humour, and shared humanity. They often explicitly address the India–Pakistan divide, but to bridge it (‘beyond borders’, ‘no visa for music’, ‘brothers and sisters’). They also celebrate the music in ways that credit the ‘other’ side. For instance, many Indians and

Pakistan's talent thank Pakistan for such songs, and Pakistanis in turn appreciate the love from India.

It's important to note that securitising comments, though few, did appear, and qualitatively tended to fall into a couple of categories: 1) Jingoistic one-liners (e.g. 'Never trust Pakistan' or 'Pakistan/India is our enemy')- these were downvoted and sometimes met with a response like 'Not here, please'. 2) Tit-for-tat arguments that started when someone brought up a political issue. It was clear from the qualitative analysis observation that the community's unwritten rule was that political rants are unwelcome in these music videos. One could almost call it a form of ontological security in the community where it maintains its identity as a peaceful space by expelling or neutralising hostile elements. The qualitative findings reinforce that Coke Studio's YouTube comment space is an example of culturally inflected, low-conflict interaction. Mehta (2022) Quantitatively confirms the anecdotal perception of comparatively amicable interaction of these comment sections. It breaks down the 'us vs them' narrative, illustrating desecuritisation speech acts performed by non-officials.

Discussion

YouTube as a space for desecuritisation

The above findings indicate that YouTube comment sections for Coke Studio Pakistan act as an active arena for desecuritisation in the India–Pakistan context. In securitisation theory, successful desecuritisation means moving issues out of the militarised, existential threat realm back into the domain of normal politics (Wæver, 1995). What we observe in these online interactions is a bottom-up form of desecuritisation, where hundreds of ordinary citizens implicitly and sometimes explicitly reject the narrative of the other country as an enemy. Instead of echoing the hostile rhetoric that often dominates official discourse, commenters almost uniformly take a friendly or neutral stance. This demonstrates the potential of social media to invert the top-down dynamics of securitisation.

Traditionally, elites such as politicians and officials have driven securitisation by portraying the other as a threat, and the public either accepts or is influenced by these narratives. Here, however, we see non-elite actors, i.e. laypersons on YouTube pushing back against those securitised narratives. Some commenters use hyperbolic rhetoric (e.g. music as a cure-all). We treat such lines as expressive sentiment rather than empirical evidence of conflict transformation. This kind of audience attitude is a crucial component of any desecuritisation process because desecuritisng moves require audience acceptance to take hold (Buzan et al., 1998; Côté, 2016; Hansen, 2012). In this case, the 'move' is essentially Coke Studio presenting cultural elements, and the audience is emphatically accepting and amplifying that move. It's a vivid demonstration that the public, when given a chance to interact freely, may not always mirror the antagonisms of their governments, a finding that echoes recent scholarship proposing that lay actors on social media can serve as 'security agents' in their own right.

The results support the idea that popular platforms can enable what Umansky (2024) calls 'lay securitizing (or in our research desecuritizing) agents', where everyday people partake in shaping security discourse. The commenters are, in effect, performing acts of peace-building communication. Over time, these repeated micro acts can accumulate

into a broader collective desecuritisation. Importantly, these findings highlight a distinction between the official geopolitical narrative and the popular cultural narrative. At the level of states, India and Pakistan remain adversaries with periodic crises, defence posturing, and minimal official dialogue. In contrast, at the level of digital popular culture, we witness an alternative story, showing shared enjoyment and humanisation. This lends credence to arguments in the literature that popular culture can shape the 'hearts and minds' in conflict scenarios (Press-Barnathan, 2017). The study provides empirical evidence of popular music influencing public perceptions between rival states. The comment sections effectively become venues where some users articulate cross-border affinity; we do not evaluate downstream diplomatic effects, embodying what Joseph Nye calls the power of attraction or soft power. In our research, it is wielded not by the state, but by the public themselves (Mattern, 2005; Nye, 2004).

The emotional tone of discourse is a crucial factor in its impact. Emotions play a significant role in international politics (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014). The fact that Joy and love dominate these interactions suggests that participants might come away from the experience feeling warmer towards the other country than before. One could argue that each positive emotional interaction is a small step towards desecuritisation. This resonates with Hansen's (2012) perspective that desecuritisation often requires 'rearticulating' the relationship in new, non-threatening terms. In these comments, the rearticulation is happening organically: enemies are being rearticulated as friends and cultural siblings, hence desecuritisation.

The patterns observed can be situated in the broader literature on desecuritisation and the role of society. Early securitisation theory (Buzan et al., 1998) focused on speech acts by political leaders requiring audience acceptance. However, subsequent work has called for 'widening' securitisation studies to include bottom-up processes and cultural domains (Balzacq, 2010; Croft, 2006; Stritzel, 2007). Our study provides a concrete example aligning with these newer perspectives as it shows that securitisation is not only contested in parliament or official media but also in YouTube and fan communities. The audience is not a passive recipient of security discourse; it can be an active shaper, even a challenger.

Platform politics and algorithmic mediation

YouTube's design and business model shape what becomes visible in the comment field. Recommendation systems optimise for retention and advertiser suitability, which can privilege harmonious talk over controversy (Gillespie, 2018; Noble, 2018). Automated moderation removes some hostile content before it is seen, while comment ranking surfaces highly liked statements and pushes dissent to the margins. Community guidelines set norms that discourage overt hostility. Monetisation gives creators incentives to maintain a brand-safe environment, and in the case of Coke Studio, corporate sponsorship further aligns visibility with positive, low-risk affect. These dynamics do not negate the genuineness of peace-affirming comments, but they mean audience agency operates within parameters set by platform architecture and commercial imperatives.

Coke Studio's unity ethos sits inside this commercial apparatus. As a Coca-Cola franchise, the series delivers brand value, including reputation, reach, and corporate social responsibility, alongside any cultural aspirations (Anholt, 2007). Repertoire, artist

pairings, language choices, staging, and distribution are selected for broad appeal and brand safety. The result is a communicative environment that favours ‘unity in diversity’ narratives compatible with neoliberal multiculturalism while avoiding contentious critique. At the same time, the show performs elements of soft nationalism and nation branding of Pakistan, projecting a modern, hospitable cultural self (Mark, 2009; Nye, 2017). Corporate and state interests can therefore co-produce the stage on which cross-border feeling is articulated. Our findings should be read with this ambivalence in view. Desecuritising talk is widespread and meaningful, yet its visibility is also a function of platform governance and brand curation.

Whether such digital expressions transcend offline remains uncertain. Studies in digital peacebuilding warn that online solidarity can operate as a symbolic alibi rather than a lever for structural reform, offering affective satisfaction without institutional change (Hirblinger et al., 2024; Morozov, 2012; Richmond, Visoka, & Tellidis, 2023). We find little evidence that comment exchanges have influenced negotiations or policy. Track II diplomacy remains largely elite and institutional. Affective publics can form around shared sentiment (Papacharissi, 2014), but a durable impact requires pathways that exceed the platform. Generalisability is also bounded. Coke Studio likely attracts audiences predisposed to cross-border affinity; genre, platform, and national context matter. Comparative cues suggest differences for Coke Studio India, and more polarised dynamics on platforms with distinct moderation and network structure. Replication across scripts, platforms, and genres, paired with longitudinal surveys, is needed to test whether sustained exposure to desecuritising cultural contexts predicts measurable shifts in attitudes or behaviour.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Coke Studio Pakistan’s YouTube comment sections serve as comment spaces where desecuritising expressions are common within this case, providing a compelling counterpoint to entrenched India–Pakistan conflict narratives. By analysing audience interactions around three iconic performances, the research reveals that 40–47% of comments actively promoted peace and a shared sense of humanity, while negative remarks remained marginal. These desecuritising narratives are articulated through emotional solidarity, humour, and cross-border appreciation. It garnered significantly higher engagement, reflecting a collective audience endorsement of unity over enmity. Moreover, sentiment and emotion analyses underscored the overwhelmingly positive tone of these spaces, which were dominated by expressions of joy, trust, and admiration.

The findings align with an expanded understanding of securitisation theory by illustrating how non-elite actors on digital platforms can perform bottom-up desecuritisation. By reframing the ‘other’ as cultural siblings rather than existential threats, commenters actively subvert state-driven antagonism and contribute to the formation of a transnational affective community. This organic discourse demonstrates the communicative potential of cultural exchange to correlate with boundary-crossing talk; we do not infer offline behaviour or policy change. However, digital camaraderie may not directly translate to offline political shifts. Papacharissi (2014) cautions that effective online communities often lack the structural power to influence policy. Future studies

could employ longitudinal surveys to test if sustained engagement with desecuritising content correlates with reduced support for militarised policies (e.g. opposing cross-border strikes).

Furthermore, while the study focuses on a specific cultural platform, its implications extend broadly within the field of conflict resolution. Digital spaces, such as YouTube, empower ordinary citizens to participate in peacebuilding, offering a powerful counter-narrative to conventional, securitised geopolitics. Such online engagements reveal that grassroots interactions, facilitated by cultural exchanges, can bridge divides and challenge long-standing enmity. However, the extent to which this digital solidarity translates into tangible political change or influences enduring shifts in international relations remains an open question. For policymakers, these findings suggest that cultural platforms like Coke Studio could be integrated into Track II diplomacy initiatives. Non-governmental organisations might partner with artists to co-produce content celebrating shared heritage (Shahi, 2024), while states could ease visa restrictions for cultural collaborations, as seen in the Kartarpur Corridor agreement (Syed, Malik, & Kalim, 2022).

Future research should explore the durability of these digital interactions, their potential spillover into offline attitudes and behaviours, and their resonance across varied cultural and political contexts. Delving deeper into these aspects may yield insights into how sustained online exchanges can contribute to long-term peace and mutual understanding. Ultimately, this paper underscores the communicative potential of cultural exchange in reimagining protracted conflicts.

Note

1. All YouTube data analysed in this article were collected before the subsequent escalation of India – Pakistan tensions in April and May 2025. The study is an independent, scholarly examination of public, anonymised comments and does not endorse any political stance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethical considerations

This study analyses publicly available data from YouTube comments. All comments are treated as public discourse and are presented anonymised to protect user privacy. The research adhered to standard ethical principles for digital data, ensuring no personally identifiable information is disclosed. As the data is publicly accessible and the study involves analysis of discourse rather than intervention with human subjects, formal institutional review board approval was not sought. The authors declare no conflict of interest, and the analysis presents findings without endorsing any political stance.

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