Nep-hop for peace? Political visions and divisions in the booming Nepalese hip-hop scene

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Abstract
The article explores the burgeoning Nepalese hip-hop scene – commonly known as nep-hop – as a discursive intervention in the post-war politics of Nepal. Its core argument is that nep-hop oftentimes demonstrates an ethos of peacebuilding through popular culture. Indeed, many songs explicitly criticize violence, war, and the political leaders who recently brought the nation to a civil war. Yet, this political critique appears to often fall on deaf ears, due to the fact that nep-hop is commonly decoded as a radically ‘alien’ and ‘vulgar’ genre by audiences in mainstream Nepalese society. Importantly, however, this should not be read as a rejection of the ideological content of nep-hop, but rather as a negative evaluation of the aesthetic form of the genre, which bars many Nepalese citizens from engaging with its political messages in a meaningful manner.

Keywords
audience studies, Nepal, nep-hop, peacebuilding, popular culture

The domestic hip-hop scene in Nepal is booming. The genre, which is commonly referred to as nep-hop, is increasingly popular across the South Asian nation, with new songs accumulating millions of plays on streaming platforms such as YouTube, and Nepalese youth attending nep-hop concerts en masse. There is, moreover, an abundance of aspiring rappers, and a growing number of music studios specializing in nep-hop production popping up in the urban areas of the nation. Among Nepal’s youth hip-hop fashion is ubiquitous and clothing vendors have rapidly shifted their supply to accommodate this vast demand. Still,
the genre also represents a point of contention in present-day Nepal, as evidenced by the recent (October 2019) arrest of leading Nepalese rapper VTEN on charges of spreading ‘anti-social values’ (*Kathmandu Post*, 2019b). The arrest is understood to have been politically motivated and endorsed by an increasingly repressive communist government, which has attracted widespread criticism for curtailing the freedom of speech in post-war Nepal (*VICE*, 2019; *Kathmandu Post*, 2019b). VTEN was eventually released from custody, yet the arrest indicates that the artist is a controversial fixture on the pop-cultural landscape of Nepal. Considering how popular and contentious the nep-hop genre is, it is somewhat puzzling that there have so far been no scholarly studies of it.

While there is clearly much academic work left to be done on nep-hop in general, the present study narrows in on the genre as a distinctly post-war pop-cultural phenomenon. As such, my primary concern in this article is what nep-hop songs have to say about issues of war and peace, and how the genre is received by Nepalese audiences. This line of inquiry presents an opportunity to engage cultural studies and peace studies in a timely interdisciplinary dialogue. In cultural studies, audiences have for long been equated with the dedicated fan, while instances of audience dislike and disengagement have often been pushed aside (Gray and Murray, 2016: 358). Moreover, audience studies have tended to be somewhat Western-centric, with ‘Americans. Brits and the occasional diasporic community’ (Gray, 2017: 82) commonly occupying centre-stage. Meanwhile in peace studies, scholars are beginning to unpack the relationship between popular culture and the post-war politics of peacebuilding (Bräuchler, 2018; McEvoy-Levy, 2018; Press-Barnathan, 2017). Underpinning this research programme is an assumption that popular culture may inspire a politics of peace in post-war settings. Yet, thus far the studies produced on the matter have been restricted to English-language sources, and they have moreover mostly been concerned with the discourses of popular culture, rather than with how they are received by audiences in post-war settings (McEvoy-Levy, 2018: 13). Overall, then, there appears to be a shared understanding in cultural studies and peace studies alike that we need to focus more on how audiences receive media texts (including their possible dislike) in non-Western contexts.

The article engages these research gaps through an in-depth exploration of the Nepalese hip-hop scene. It is organized as follows. *First*, it traces how peace scholars are increasingly forging analytical connections between popular culture and the politics of peacebuilding, before visiting the theoretical debate in cultural studies on how popular culture is received by its audiences. *Second*, the article sketches a brief outline of the recent political history of Nepal as well as the development of hip-hop within this particular context. *Third*, the study engages a close reading of the lyrics of three vastly popular nep-hop-songs, namely: Laure’s ‘Mero Solta’ (2013); VTEN’s ‘Churot’ (2016), and Sacar and Uniq Poet’s ‘King of Nep-hop’ (2019). The aim is to discuss the extent to which these songs carry political messages and, if so, to analyse their discursive work in the context of post-war Nepalese politics. *Fourth*, the article presents and discusses its primary empirical material, which consists of interviews and ethnographic ‘hanging out’ in Pokhara, Nepal. This section seeks to understand how interlocutors receive nep-hop music in their everyday lives. *Finally*, the article concludes by discussing how we may understand the relationship between nep-hop and the post-war politics of peacebuilding in Nepal, and indicates the implications for future research.
The main argument pursued throughout the article is that nep-hop often demonstrates an ethos of peacebuilding through popular culture. Indeed, many songs explicitly criticize violence, war, and the political leaders who recently brought Nepal to a civil war. Yet, this political critique appears often to fall on deaf ears, due to the fact that nep-hop is commonly decoded as a radically ‘alien’ and ‘vulgar’ genre in mainstream Nepalese society. These widely shared negative perceptions of the genre, I argue, block the pro-peace messages contained in some nep-hop songs from reaching the mainstream of Nepalese society, and thus, their political potential is somewhat limited. Importantly, however, this should not be read as a rejection of the ideological content of nep-hop, but rather as a negative evaluation of the aesthetic form of the genre, which bars many Nepalese citizens from engaging with its political messages in a meaningful manner.

**Popular culture, peacebuilding and audience studies**

Peace studies is currently engrossed in a burgeoning ‘cultural turn’ which seeks to explore the political work that popular culture does in variegated post-war contexts (Bräuchler, 2018; McEvoy-Levy, 2018; Press-Barnathan, 2017). For example, McEvoy-Levy (2018) focuses directly on popular culture and its relationship to peace and peacebuilding. As such, the author reads a number of popular culture texts – including the *Hunger Games* and the *Harry Potter* novels – with the aim to uncover ‘discourses of nonviolence, relational empathy, and “positive peace” (as entertainment) that coexist with discourses of “militainment” and other militarized aspects of daily life’ (McEvoy-Levy, 2018: 13). Ultimately, the author is interested in exploring how ‘peacebuilding [is] rooted in popular culture’ (2018: 376). Likewise, Press-Barnathan (2017) unpacks the potential of popular culture in challenging violent conflicts and facilitating transitions to peace. Due to its unique characteristics of being able to convey information and generate/shape the emotions of a large number of people, the author argues that popular culture ‘is likely to play a role in shaping and changing societal attitudes towards the conflict’ (Press-Barnathan, 2017: 167). Press-Barnathan stresses that cultures of conflict, that is, ‘the socio-psychological infrastructures that sustain the conflict’ (2017: 170) are partially ‘sustained by the routine consumption of movies, books and music that resonates with them’ (2017: 170). Importantly, the reverse also applies, as popular culture can be a site for contesting cultures of conflict, by spreading counter-narratives that de-legitimize and de-naturalize violent conflict (Press-Barnathan, 2017: 175). Along these lines, the author notes that popular culture is adept at ‘helping people vividly imagine a future of cooperation, an alternative to the long years of the conflict’ (2017: 176). Thus, in these studies, peacebuilding is understood in a discursive sense, rather than in an institutional manner. This is also the approach taken in the present study, and hence its argument that nep-hop demonstrates an ethos of peacebuilding should be understood primarily as representing a discursive intervention in the post-war politics of Nepal.

The work of both McEvoy-Levy and Press-Barnathan is theoretically illuminating and it has indeed inspired the present study to a significant extent. Still, the authors explicitly acknowledge some limitations to their respective studies. McEvoy-Levy notes that ‘only English language sources have been used and I have not surveyed or interviewed young consumers or activists’ (2018: 13). Press-Barnathan, on the other hand,
Lundqvist stresses that, in order to better understand both the potentials and limitations of popular culture in peacebuilding, international relations (IR) scholars would benefit from entering into an interdisciplinary dialogue with ‘the field of communication that deals with audience studies; a crucial element not examined scientifically in IR’ (2017: 181). In order to ameliorate these shortcomings and thus contribute to an interdisciplinary debate on the role of popular culture in peacebuilding, the present article draws on non-English sources (nep-hop lyrics) and engages in interviews and informal conversations with consumers of the genre, seeking an understanding of how it is received in post-war Nepal.

Perhaps one of the most influential ways of thinking about audience reception of popular culture is Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1981 [1973]) which is generally considered a canonical text (Morley, 2006: 109). The starting point of the encoding/decoding model is that in order to study a media text properly, we need to explore not only how it is constructed (‘encoded’) but also how it is received by its audiences (‘decoded’). With regard to decoding, Hall makes a distinction between dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings, where the first refers to a text which is read entirely in line with the preferred meaning of its author(s); the second refers to a mode of reading which embraces the preferred meaning of the text, yet modifies certain aspects of it, while the third position refers to a reading which entirely opposes the text’s preferred reading. Importantly, an oppositional reading of a text does not mean that the reader does not understand its literal meaning, but rather, it should be taken as a rejection of its ideological content (Hall, 1981 [1973]). As stated above, Hall’s model has been vastly influential in cultural studies, yet, it has also attracted its fair share of criticism. Among other issues, the model has been noted to lack a sufficient differentiation of why consumers reject a preferred reading of a text. Thus, some commentators have argued that the model over-politicizes the reasons for an oppositional reading, while in fact the reasons for disagreeing with a preferred reading may have more to do with its aesthetic form than with its ideological content (Michelle, 2007: 187). Consequently, ‘researchers must distinguish between uncomplimentary responses to textual form [. . .] and critical responses to ideological content’ (Michelle, 2007: 192). Similarly – albeit not discussing Hall’s encoding/decoding model per se – Gray and Murray (2016) and Gray (2017) note that there is a shortage of accounts in cultural studies which unpack why audiences disengage from specific media texts; especially so in non-Western contexts. Criticisms aside, I agree with Michelle (2007: 187) that Hall’s model is still ‘fundamentally useful’ to audience studies; albeit with a more nuanced take on audience dislike and with an increased openness to non-western contexts, as discussed above.

Politics, civil war and hip-hop in Nepal

Since 2006, Nepal has been formally at peace following a decade-long Maoist insurgency. The stated aims of the insurgents were to abolish the monarchy; establish a people’s republic and elect a constituent assembly which would draft a new, more inclusive, constitution for Nepal (Lundqvist, 2019: 479). The civil war ended through a negotiated settlement between the belligerent parties, resulting in the 2006 comprehensive peace agreement. Roughly 17,000 people were killed in the Nepalese civil war. Moreover, some 1500 people went ‘missing’ during the insurgency, and both Maoist combatants
and government forces – including the Nepalese police force – have been implicated in these enforced disappearances (Fullard, 2008; The Diplomat, 2018). The civil war also saw an alarming number of cases of torture being reported, again with both warring sides allegedly perpetrating the crimes (Human Rights Watch, 2008). The transitional justice process following these war crimes has been highly politicized, and this has resulted in very little tangible progress for the victims and families, who are waiting for justice to be served. This state of affairs has often been ascribed to the fact that many of the political actors involved in the civil war have remained part of the political establishment in the post-war phase (Selim, 2018: 52). This has entailed a heavily politicized Nepalese post-war society, with political actors seemingly unwilling to cooperate in a democratic fashion.

While the civil war formally ended in 2006, its legacy lingers on in present-day Nepalese society in myriad ways. Perhaps most notably, there is a lack of consensus on how the civil war should be evaluated and remembered. Several top-down programmes have been initiated by Maoist political leaders which seek to portray the civil war as a justified and heroic struggle for social justice. This can be seen in the many martyrs’ gates that have been erected across cities and villages in Nepal, honouring those Maoist combatants who died during the insurgency and lauding its Maoist ideology (Lundqvist, 2019; Robins, 2014). The Maoist party also holds a public function each year to celebrate the civil war which is generally well attended by Maoist politicians (Himalayan Times, 2019). Among non-Maoist politicians, however, there is much resistance to the idea of glorifying the insurgency (Kathmandu Post, 2020). Outside the realm of high politics, the Maoist insurgency is evaluated and remembered in diverse ways, and thus we cannot conclude that it is generally celebrated or condemned. What can be observed, though, is a strong tendency towards anti-politics among Nepalese citizens in post-war Nepal, as people often express a marked disillusionment with the corrupt political system and its apparent inability to improve their everyday lives. This popular tendency has been documented in several previous studies (e.g. Lundqvist, 2019; O’Neill, 2016).

Gradually, since spring 2018, the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) has solidified its hold on government in Nepal, following the merger of two previously competing leftist parties; one of them being the former Maoist insurgents. As such, the government of Nepal appears to be quite stable at the present moment (2020), with most commentators anticipating that this new ‘super party’ is likely to rule the nation for the foreseeable future (Kathmandu Post, 2018b). While this is good news for Nepalese political stability overall, the NCP government has been criticized for its increasingly authoritarian tendencies (The Diplomat, 2019). One obvious example of this tendency is the manner in which freedom of speech is currently being curtailed in the nation, with everything from video games (PUBG – PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds) to music videos on YouTube being banned through direct political intervention (Kathmandu Post, 2019c; Reuters, 2019). It is in this political context that Nepalese rapper VTEN was recently arrested, as noted above, on charges of spreading ‘anti-social values’ (Kathmandu Post, 2019b). While this brought him and the genre briefly into the (inter-)national spotlight, nep-hop is actually a rather recent phenomenon in Nepal which has received scant media attention in the past. In fact, it was only little over two decades ago – in 1994 – that Girish-Pranil released the first Nepalese hip-hop album Meaningless Rap (Kathmandu Post, 2015).
Since then, the scene has grown incrementally in popularity and it is currently brimming with up-and-coming artists and a vast audience hungry for new rhymes and beats (Kathmandu Post, 2019a). This growing popularity is evident, inter alia, in the millions of plays that new nep-hop releases commonly boast on YouTube – undoubtedly the most common platform for distributing new popular music in present-day Nepal.

A close reading of three popular post-war nep-hop songs

Below, I engage in a close reading of the lyrics of three major post-war nep-hop songs. The close reading allowed me to explore in depth the relevant lyrics and ‘attend in detail to the ideas, debates, politics, and practices that are inherent in it’ (Nicholson, 2017: 184). Hence, rather than reading the text as an atomized cultural artefact – a common critique of the conventional close reading – I employ the method to shed light not only on the internal features of the text but also on how it is ‘situated in society’ (Gray, 2003: 69). The aim of the close readings offered below is to illustrate the type of political content that the nep-hop genre contains, as well as to contextualize said content within the overarching Nepalese socio-political setting. Importantly, this is not to say that all nep-hop songs have political (or pro-peace) messages. Certainly, this is not the case. Still, the songs surveyed in this study – as well as the general perception of its interlocutors – suggest that nep-hop songs at least often discuss political matters. The selection of the songs reviewed below have hinged upon three main criteria: (a) the songs should be popular (as indicated by at least 5 million plays on YouTube); (b) the songs should deal explicitly with issues of war or violence so that they can speak meaningfully to the peacebuilding literature, and (c) the songs should be fully or partially in Nepali language, in order to move beyond the English-language bias identified in the literature review above.

Laure’s ‘Mero Solta’ (2013): problematizing individual sacrifice in war

Laure’s song ‘Mero Solta’ (‘My Friend’) came out in 2013. This was his first big hit, which paved the way for him becoming one of the leading lights on the nep-hop scene. The song, which has accumulated over nine million views on YouTube as of October 2020, is an old-school rap banger with a chorus sung by collaborating artist GUN ACE. The lyrics of ‘Mero Solta’ follow the protagonist – supposedly a childhood friend of Laure’s – as he struggles to live up to the expectations of his village-dwelling father. The father wants him to become a soldier in order to acquire the status and wealth that the family is desperately lacking. In fact, the family has acquired a large debt, and this is what directly compels the protagonist to join the army. As such, the narrative illustrates the burdensome situation of many Nepalese youth who have to navigate the ‘tensions between their own desires and the demands and expectations of the larger kin network’ (Skinner, 1990: 9). In ‘Mero Solta’ this burden soon becomes unbearable, as the protagonist eventually dies in the war. His body is then brought back to the home village, where his death is grieved by his extended family.

There are a number of striking features about the lyrics to ‘Mero Solta’, but perhaps most saliently there are the notions of duty and sacrifice which reverberate throughout the entire song. As such, the protagonist has to give up on his own desire in order to
please his parents and to fulfil his duty towards them: ‘quashing his own desires, he was burning in the pyre of fate’ (*man ko chahana maari, u bhagya ko jwala maa dankid-aithyo*); ‘on his shoulders rests the family’s hope, the fear of failure on top of it all’ (*usko kadh ma pariwar ko aash asafalta ko thiyo traas*). Not only is this sense of duty connected to the family but also to the nation, as the protagonist ultimately sacrifices his life fighting for the nation: ‘the blood of the enemy is libation to his motherland’ (*satru ko ragat desh lai arpan*). Thus, it is clear from the lyrics that individual sacrifice is necessary for the survival of the nation. While this is portrayed as a great tragedy in ‘Mero Solta’ the song is also laden with notions of heroism and martyrdom. Thus, we learn that ‘a young soldier’s sacrifice will now inspire greatness, his grave will be immortalized’ (*yuva yoddha ko balidan, sadha bahar rahancha mahan, amar bannecha usko chihan*).

In this manner, we fathom that sacrifice may certainly be a vast tragedy on an interpersonal level, yet, it becomes something bigger than that – even something glorious – when suffered in the name of the nation. Still, the tension between the individual and the collective represented in ‘Mero Solta’ is never fully resolved, for it is obvious throughout the lyrics that the protagonist had other dreams and desires than the collective, and that these remained unfulfilled until his death. Ultimately, then, the song showcases the darker side of war, which involves the ultimate individual sacrifice and the communal grief that follows from this. Hence, the song’s lyrics can be read in direct juxtaposition to the political forces in post-war Nepal which have attempted to glorify the insurgency and its ideology through various memorialization practices, as already discussed.

**VTEN’s ‘Churot’ (2016): speaking up against police brutality**

VTEN’s song ‘Churot’ was released in 2016 and since then it has grown into something of a pop-cultural phenomenon in Nepal; inspiring everything from memes to home-choreographed music videos. As such, it certainly speaks to how catchy the song and its beats are, but also, it speaks to how the lyrics tap into something that Nepalese people experience all too often, namely: police brutality and corruption. As of October 2020, the song has attracted over seven million views on YouTube.

The lyrics to ‘Churot’ start off in a playful manner with VTEN rapping about how he needs a *churot* (cigarette) in the morning, in the evening, when having tea, and when hanging out with his friends; he constantly craves a fag. VTEN also notes how this applies to most people in Nepal, as ‘everyone is a smoker, from children to old-timers’ (*bacha dekhi budo, sable tanchha churot*). In the second verse, though, the mood of the song shifts markedly, as VTEN recounts how the protagonist wakes up late in the night and decides to go out for a smoke, when ‘suddenly a police van drew near, I felt scared and nervous’ (*cops ko van aayo ekkasi sarara, dar lagna thalyo mero jiu kamyo tharara*). The policeman starts harassing the protagonist, who in turn tries to explain that he is only smoking a cigarette, not a joint. The policeman does not let the protagonist leave but instead hits him on the cheek and then proceeds to forcibly empty his pockets. The officer takes what little money the protagonist has and then hits him again. The narrative ends with the police officer lighting up the cigarette which he confiscated from the protagonist, who is now free to go home, but laments the fact that he is now completely out of cigarettes: ‘damn, I had to give my last cigarette to the police’ (*bhako euta pilot pani, khosera khai diyo*).
There are many interesting things to note about the song ‘Churot’. Here, I mainly want to highlight how it discusses police brutality as a barrier to individual enjoyment. According to the lyrics, everyone really wants to smoke; to enjoy themselves. The lyrics state explicitly that ‘nobody is ready to sacrifice their enjoyment from smoking’ (payobo ne chhoddain, bachha dekhi budole). But, the law enforcement system in place in Nepal makes this enjoyment precarious, as we see in the introduction of the police character in ‘Churot’ – a character who arguably represents the repressive power of the state. Alas, the violent and corrupt police officer is not merely a fictional character of the song, he is to a large extent an accurate representation of how the police operates in Nepal; a nation where police corruption, brutality, torture, and impunity is rife (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Kathmandu Post, 2016, 2018a). These illicit police practices escalated during the civil war, but they have continued in the post-war period as well (TRIAL International, 2019). To speak openly of police brutality under such circumstances may be understood as an act of resistance vis-à-vis the culture of conflict (Press-Barnathan, 2017: 170) embodied in the police force. As such, the song renders visible the illicit — and often hidden — violence of the authorities, and thus, we can arguably read it as a call for a more accountable police force.

Sacar and Uniq Poet’s ‘King of Nep-hop’ (2019): the politics of anti-politics

The song ‘King of Nep-hop’ was released in early 2019 by rappers Sacar (a.k.a. ‘Lil’ Buddha’) and Uniq Poet. It received widespread critical acclaim on the Nep-hop scene and it was further boosted by a front page article in the nation’s primary daily the Kathmandu Post (2019a). ‘King of Nep-hop’ is, as the title suggests, mainly about establishing who rules the genre, and accordingly the lyrics are saturated with smack talk, dissing of other rappers, and ego-boosting. Moreover, it includes quite a few explicit references to drugs and sex, as well as a rather coarse vocabulary overall. The song’s narrative flows like a stream of consciousness with a freestyle vibe to it, as Sacar and Uniq Poet address a wide variety of issues in successive rapped verses over the course of roughly 10 minutes. At the time of writing (October 2020) the song has attracted around seven million views on YouTube, and thus it is already up there among the most popular nep-hop songs of all time, only 18 months after its release.

Without any pretence to cover the totality of the intricate narrative of ‘King of Nep-hop’, in this section I touch upon one of its main themes, namely politics and social struggle. Uniq Poet is the lead figure here, as he makes a quite strong case against the political leaders of the nation:

I refuse to further fall down deep in this void of political bullshit; the drama that they brought. We were dragged into it helpless, and they thought that they could just use us as pawns or puppets, fuck the system, I was born above it!

Here, it is clear that Uniq is referring implicitly to the Nepalese civil war and its aftermath of political turmoil, as right after these lines he goes on to say that ‘[I’ll] raise an army by myself where we fight for education, employment, and public health’. Obviously
this ‘army’ should be understood in direct juxtaposition to the two armies that wreaked havoc on the nation during the recent civil war. Importantly, Uniq clarifies that with his own army he is ‘not talking about violence, I’m talking about the mind-set, [I’m] talking about the prospect of a sign of progress’. Thus, this verse contains a strong critique of the political actors who made the Nepalese citizens suffer from the civil war, as well as the politicians’ inability to build a functioning post-war state with adequate social welfare provision. The political vision that the song conveys, then, is a kind of anti-politics (see also Lundqvist, 2019: 489), where grassroots movements are called upon to secure basic welfare provision, while rejecting conventional party politics for only bringing violence and disorder to the nation and its people. Hence, the song may help Nepalese citizens ‘imagine a future of cooperation; an alternative to the long years of the conflict’ (Press-Barnathan, 2017: 176).

‘Chowking’ and interviews in Pokhara

In this section I draw primarily on interviews and informal conversations to discuss how interlocutors in present-day Pokhara experience nep-hop in their everyday lives, or in other words: how nep-hop is received by its consumers. Pokhara is a metropolitan city in the mid-western part of Nepal. The city is jam-packed with youth culture, and hip-hop music and fashion are among the most popular expressions thereof. Thus, it was quite straightforward to talk to people about nep-hop during my stay in the city, not only in formal interviews, but also in more informal situations. As examples of the latter, I struck up conversations with city dwellers in restaurants, at music clubs, and in the chowk – the open market area at the junction of two roads. In Pokhara, the chowk often features a large tree where people sit down in the shade to relax at mid-day and during the evening. I noticed that young people often sat there with their smartphones listening to music; commonly nep-hop. While sitting there myself, I sometimes ended up chatting with these urbanites about the latest nep-hop songs and artists, or about the best venues in the city for enjoying nep-hop performances. As such, I gradually came to think of this as ‘chowking’; a method which proved useful as a complement to formal interviews where interlocutors would at times feel overly self-conscious about being ‘quizzed’ on the nep-hop scene. Instead, ‘chowking’ provided an opportunity for relatively spontaneous, casual, and open discussions about the genre. These informal conversations were written down from memory and treated as part of the empirical material which this article draws upon. Hence, the present study is epistemologically situated within an ethnographic tradition where ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz, 1998) and ‘small talk’ (Driessen and Jansen, 2013) form vital parts of the methodological toolkit.

Analytically, the study employs a strategy where the analysis grows out of an iterative process involving the empirical material and the theoretical underpinnings. While theory initially sets the scene for the study and determines what the researcher ‘looks for’ there is also ample room for the empirical material to unsettle the theoretical starting point through ‘surprise, puzzle, or anomaly’ (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012: 180). In this study, the ‘vulgar’ and ‘alien’ narratives about nep-hop served as such empirical anomalies which could not be satisfactorily understood through Hall’s (1981 [1973]) original model. This pushed me to engage further with theoretical advancements in audience
studies, where I eventually found fruitful ways to theoretically account for the empirical findings of this study.

In addition to the informal conversations, 25 semi-structured interviews were carried out with interlocutors in Pokhara in spring 2019. The interviews were recorded and then selectively transcribed. Ten interviews were carried out with women, while 15 were carried out with men. Moreover, 18 of the interviews were conducted with people below the age of 30, while seven interviews involved interlocutors between the ages of 30 and 60. In terms of occupation, 12 interlocutors held jobs in working-class sectors, whereas eight worked in middle-class sectors. The remaining five interlocutors were students. Overall, when selecting interviewees for the study, I sought to construct a sample which was representative of Pokhara’s demography. The underlying rationale was that I wanted to gain an understanding of how nep-hop is received in broader Pokharan society; not merely by its dedicated fan base – even though there are also nep-hop fans among my interlocutors. Still, the sample should not be treated as generalizable for it is far too small for that, and moreover, while local representativeness was aimed for it was ultimately not entirely achieved. Thus, I do agree with Morley that while ethnography is generally ‘a fine thing’ (2006: 106) for exploring audience reception ‘we should not mistake the vividness of the examples it offers us for their general applicability’ (2006: 106). With that said, a number of salient themes emerged from the interviews and the informal conversations which will be discussed below.

The ‘vulgar’ and ‘alien’ form of nep-hop

During my time in Pokhara, I learned that nep-hop was commonly talked about as something that does not quite fit into mainstream Nepalese society. Interlocutors spoke of this tension in myriad ways, as they tried to pinpoint exactly what is ‘wrong’ with nep-hop. First off, nep-hop was often portrayed as something that is inherently alien to Nepal – something that has come from the outside and which is thus not authentically Nepalese. One interlocutor, a young male musician, put it in the following manner: ‘logit [Nepalese folk music] is connected to the cultural heritage of Nepal, but nep-hop is not. You cannot compare these genres. Nep-hop is just a copy of Western culture’ (Interview, 9 May 2019). Statements like this were common in both interviews and informal conversations, and they were often coupled with notions that ‘our’ cultural heritage is being threatened by the forces of globalization. Thus, the advent of nep-hop was treated as symptomatic of this larger problem: ‘traditional culture is being destroyed, it is vanishing day by day, while Western culture is very popular right now [. . .]. It is an effect of globalization; throughout the world traditional cultures are becoming less and less popular’, as stated by a middle-aged male doctor in the Bagar neighbourhood of the city (Interview, 7 May 2019). Remarks like these gave a view of globalization as a dangerous, homogenizing force, which will inevitably replace the rich cultural heritage of Nepal with bleak copies of Western culture. Nep-hop, according to this narrative, represents just such an ‘alien invasion’ on the pop-cultural scene of present-day Nepal. This resonates with a widespread concern about the homogenizing impact of Americanization on popular culture found in various local settings across the globe; a concern which has been critically interrogated by cultural studies scholars and found wanting in complexity and nuance (Chun,
2012; Pennycook, 2007). Still, among many interlocutors in this study, this narrative aptly captured their views on nep-hop as an alien pop-cultural form.

While the issue of purported cultural westernization was indeed seen as a problem by several interlocutors of this study, another (interrelated) issue was nep-hop’s perceived ‘vulgar’ nature. Indeed, most of the interlocutors – no matter whether they liked the genre or not – mentioned this issue. What then, I asked, does this ‘vulgarity’ entail? Oftentimes, this probing question would give interlocutors pause, as they grappled with the issue of how to convey said vulgarity without also making themselves guilty of the very same vice. Thus, somewhat vague explanations would commonly ensue, which would usually sound something like this: ‘the ways of expression and the language in nep-hop is different from other genres. Nep-hop songs are a little bit vulgar, a little undisciplined in the context of our culture’ (Interview, 6 May 2019). When probed about exactly how nep-hop songs are vulgar our interlocutor, a 20-something male university student of music, offered the following clarification:

The lyrics are a little vulgar, a little rough, in comparison to our folk songs. We can freely watch the music videos of our folk songs when sitting together with our families, but we cannot do this with nep-hop songs because of the vulgar language; we would feel a little uncomfortable. (Interview, 6 May 2019)

Interestingly, the notion of the vulgar recurred during many interviews and informal conversations, as interlocutors explained that they really do like nep-hop music, but that they would never listen to these songs within the context of their families. Instead, they would listen alone, with like-minded friends, or with their headphones on. This speaks to the conservative power of the family in many parts of Nepalese society, which makes hip-hop lyric staples like sex, drugs, and dissing unacceptable in the social sphere. Indeed, as expressed by an interlocutor, a prominent male nep-hop producer in Pokhara: ‘most people cannot even talk about dating with their families [. . .]. Rappers talk about these things openly; they talk about drugs, sex, break-ups, and exes’ (Interview, 16 May 2019). As such, nep-hop songs often celebrate ‘drunkenness, promiscuity, illegality, disorder, negligence, and laziness; all behaviors that undermine the family’s goals’ (Taylor, 2012: 205). Thus, it makes sense that nep-hop is often considered taboo in the familial setting.

Moreno-Almeida (2018: 352) discusses the use of vulgar language in hip-hop music in the Moroccan context where she, too, argues that it serves as an obstacle for the genre to reach a larger audience. Thus, she notes that several Moroccan hip-hop artists have ‘sanitized’ their lyrics, removing vulgar words. Moreno-Almeida does not, however, find that hip-hop is decoded as an ‘alien’ genre in the context of Morocco. This suggests a salient difference between the Nepalese and the Moroccan pop-cultural setting; possibly indicating that Moroccan hip-hop in general has been more adept at localizing itself (see Pennycook, 2007). The case of nep-hop, then, could potentially amount to an instance of failed or limited localization.

Are we to understand the above as an oppositional reading, using Hall’s (1981 [1973]) terminology? I would argue that it is not, in fact, an oppositional reading of the ideological content of nep-hop that we are seeing here, but that it is rather a negative decoding of
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Thus, the genre appears ‘alien’, uses ‘bad words’, talks explicitly about sexuality and drugs, and so on. While this should arguably not be understood as an oppositional reading vis-à-vis the ideological content of nep-hop, the effect of this decoding is that nep-hop is barred from entering certain social spheres, including the family, as noted above. Obviously, this has significant implications for how influential the pro-peace messages contained in some nep-hop songs can be in Nepal, where the (extended) family remains the central social institution.

The allure of nep-hop

Despite dealing with some quite taboo topics, as discussed earlier, nep-hop is an increasingly popular genre in Nepal. Indeed, most of the interlocutors of this study argued that it was one of the most, if not the most, popular genre among young Pokharans at the time of the study (2019). Thus, it must certainly resonate with its fans in some meaningful way or other. Or, is it merely that nep-hop is seen as an expression of Western culture, as noted above, which makes it so appealing to its fans? Let us explore these questions below.

During fieldwork in Pokhara it became evident that many interlocutors share a deep affinity with nep-hop music and that it speaks to them on a very personal level. A young, male, restaurant worker, for example, put it in the following way: ‘I feel like VTEN’s songs are dedicated to me [. . .]. He raises issues of family-related problems, bad situations, friends, and relationships. This is why I feel like his songs are about me’ (Interview, 6 May 2019). Several other interlocutors agreed. For example, a young man who has recently moved from a small village in Baglung district to the city to pursue construction work shared a similar connection with VTEN’s musical oeuvre. Especially, he is fond of the song ‘Kathaa’, which he feels speaks directly to him: ‘“Kathaa” is about leaving your family in your home village to move somewhere else to work when you are very young’ (Interview, 16 May 2019). Clearly then, the song’s lyrics are an almost perfect representation of our interlocutor’s current (precarious) life situation, and thus, it is quite easy to understand why he feels so intimately connected to it. Our interlocutor says that the song makes him feel sentimental towards his family and the village life that he has left behind.

Still, VTEN’s songs also appeal to interlocutors who cannot see themselves in the lyrics. A young woman who works in a coffee shop in the outskirts of Pokhara explains: ‘he makes songs that talk about the reality of our society; about social and political issues; about poverty; about hard work; about difficult life circumstances [. . .] this is the real situation’ (Interview, 17 May 2019). Thus, even though she does not personally identify with VTEN’s lyrics she feels passionately for his music, and this is partially due to the fact that his lyrics don’t shy away from telling ‘the truth’ about Nepalese society as she sees it (the fact that she thinks he is ‘so handsome’ is possibly part of the equation, too). Another interlocutor, a male student of music at Pokhara University, noted that: ‘nep-hop songs tell stories of social problems and the bad political situation in Nepal [. . .] that is why it is so popular with young people’ (Interview, 6 May 2019). Overall, many interlocutors argued that nep-hop artists commonly have strong social and political messages, which they generally considered were accurate representations of contemporary Nepalese society – warts and all. Thus, these interlocutors appeared to subscribe to...
a preferred reading (Hall, 1981 [1973]) of the ideological content contained in nep-hop songs and, importantly, they were willing to actually engage with it as they were not barred from doing so due to a negative decoding of the genre’s aesthetic form. Possibly, the emotional connection which many interlocutors have with nep-hop contributes to an openness to its political messages, for, as noted by Press-Barnathan, the emotional charge is one of the reasons why popular culture is so adept at ‘shaping and changing societal attitudes’ (2017: 167).

Concluding discussion

In this article I have explored the political narratives contained in three contemporary nep-hop songs. Taken together, these songs put forth a radical critique of the political system in Nepal and engage in a discursive rupture with the nation’s violent past. As such, these nep-hoppers openly criticize political leaders and other authorities such as the police, by highlighting their shortcomings when it comes to human rights, peacebuilding, and social welfare provision. Moreover, they hold politicians accountable for the large-scale violence of the past and articulate visions of a future which is not governed by political animosities. Furthermore, in some of these songs we find alternative readings of the civil war, which implicitly challenge the recent attempts made by Nepalese political leaders to glorify it via various memorialization practices. Through such alternative readings the darker side of the insurgency – its sacrifices and sufferings – are brought to the fore of contemporary Nepalese popular culture; reminding people of the perils of the past and the dangers of glorifying it. In a discursive sense, then, I argue that it is pertinent to speak of these nep-hop songs as embodying a ‘peacebuilding rooted in popular culture’ (McEvoy-Levy, 2018: 376). The present article, however, has also indicated that the broader nep-hop genre is often decoded as taboo in mainstream Nepalese society. This entails that those who enjoy listening to nep-hop songs have to do so in private, or in ‘safe spaces’ with like-minded friends. Illustratively, most interlocutors of this study argued that they would never listen to nep-hop in the context of the family as that would be considered highly inappropriate. This obviously limits the political influence that nep-hop music may have on Nepalese society, as it is almost entirely excluded from the most central of social institutions, that is, the family. This is regrettable, as many nep-hop songs articulate visions of alternative political orders which could possibly inspire ‘a better tomorrow’ (Wu Tang Clan, 1997) in post-war Nepal.

Furthermore, this study has affirmed the analytical value of distinguishing between decodings of media texts which take place primarily at the level of aesthetic form from those that take place at the level of ideological content, as suggested by Michelle (2007: 187). Indeed, I have argued that nep-hop’s ‘bad rep’ in mainstream Nepalese society is due primarily to its aesthetic form being decoded as ‘vulgar’ and ‘alien’, which bars many interlocutors from entering into a meaningful engagement with its coded ideological content. Having said that, one might ask whether it is actually possible to neatly delineate the aesthetic form from the ideological content of a media text, or whether the two are to some extent always intertwined? It is quite apparent from this study that the aesthetic form of nep-hop is saturated with ideological content once decoded in the context of mainstream Nepalese society. After all, this critical
decoding centres on matters of nationalism, sexual liberties and freedom of expression: all highly ideological issues. Yet, this decoding, in my opinion, should not be labelled an oppositional reading (Hall, 1981 [1973]), for it does not engage with the coded ideological content of nep-hop songs. Instead, it is a product of what the aesthetic form of nep-hop represents ideologically in the Nepalese context. Thus, while the distinction between aesthetic form and ideological content could at first glance appear simplistic, I argue that it holds up. Still, it is imperative that future research continues to critically interrogate this distinction, in order not to fall back on simplified, binary renditions of the relationship between aesthetic form and ideological content, which could otherwise be an unfortunate consequence of a shallow reading of Michelle’s (2007) argument.

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