

Rabiz by Default: Armenian Identity Between
Cultural Memory and Musical Shame

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Abstract

This research paper explores the cultural significance and identity politics of rabiz music in Armenian society, how its widespread presence and controversial reception shape notions of national identity and belonging. While rabiz is often stigmatized, shamed, glorified and celebrated, this paper argues that the genre operates as a spectrum rather than a monolithic category, revealing nuanced layers of cultural and musical hybridity and history. The objective is to investigate how rabiz, often consumed by default, functions hegemonically in shaping taste, gender and social norms and ideas of Armenian identity. Employing critical and multimodal discourse analysis, this study examines rabiz songs, music videos, lyrics and content, artist interviews, digital media commentary, audience reception particularly on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, as well, on constitutional level, on broadcasted radio channels. The cultural dominance of the genre often leads to “musical flattening”, where the genre becomes a default mode of expression in Armenian social norms and traditions. This masks its transnational influences and suppresses critical engagement, closing up the conversation around the genre. This study discusses that rabiz is both widely rejected and deeply internalized, and even often consumed passively as a background music. It also demonstrates how gender roles and patriarchal ideas are perpetuated through rabiz lyrics, shaping the listener's identity. The paper concludes by calling for a more nuanced and critical engagement with rabiz, recognizing it as a diverse and evolving phenomenon rather than a fixed and static form. Moving beyond shame and celebration, this research invites a broader discourse that overcomes cultural ignorance and explores the genre’s potential as a site of complex identity formation.

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Introduction

Music has always been a relative form of art, where expression in different modes and contexts differ. For many, music taste is a way of self-portraying and a medium through which people can get to know themselves better. Sometimes, for some people, it is a place to get daily dopamine or feel comforted, validated, and seen. Many people are not actively aware of these factors, giving them less importance, but musical understanding and expression are an inseparable part of people's lives.

Music and music preferences are some of the most subjective and individual choices people make. Even an artistic notion like music can create an agenda around it, as well as status, reputation, and even political perspectives, that leave the initial idea of music and go into external factors, creating a particular treatment around it. Those external factors always participate explicitly or implicitly in our choices when we make simple music choices. However, musicians, artists, or producers have the capacity and resources to target the dynamics of “external factors” and take advantage of them for their benefit of gaining popularity and selling music.

But music is not only a personal choice: its presence can be passively present in different aspects of life, just like people who do not smoke but are exposed to secondhand smoke from their environment. Exposure to the rabiz music genre is typical. In many cases, people do not make themselves put on rabiz music but are exposed to it. That is why they do not always control the music they listen to, but others do. It is everywhere: from neighbors' houses to public transportation and taxis, family occasions, and weddings.

Rabiz is a popular music genre that has been active in Armenia since the last several decades. Since Soviet times rabiz has been developed and continuously performed and listened

to in Armenia. With time, rabiz gained so much popularity and presence in Armenian culture, simultaneously creating controversies and taboos around it. Now, rabiz is still active, and the socio-cultural notions created around it in the cyber world and everyday life are still relevant. While staying relevant, rabiz still creates harsh opinions about it, closing up natural discussions and open conversations about it amongst professionals and the general public. Those opinions and notions around rabiz are expressed in secret or public ways often surrounded by shame and propaganda.

This paper aims to explore what lies between controversial understandings around rabiz, viewing it from a discourse analysis perspective using what has been done and written in digital media about rabiz, how people are reacting to it today, and what artists themselves shared during interviews. This research aims to understand how people perceive rabiz music, how the genre functions within society and how it connects to Armenian national identity. What narratives it creates around Armenian national identity and how the lack of understanding and ignorance around the rabiz genre reflects people's perception of it.

Literature review

Music definitions and Genealogies of Rabiz

It is crucial to identify that the controversy around the significance of the rabiz genre has affected academia as well, as there are very few professional musicological analysis and scholar research regarding rabiz music.

The word *Rabis* itself is the abbreviation form of the organization called Trade Union of Art Workers (Rabotniki Iskustva) where Soviet artists were united in musical, theatrical, pictorial and in other arts. Like other unions in the USSR, this organization served a dual purpose: first, to support the material well-being of its members, and second, to provide them with educational and cultural opportunities. (Beskin, 1936). In the “Երաժշտության եվ երաժշտական գործիքների տեղը հայոց կենցաղում” by Anahit Kirakosyan, there is also a reference to the history of Rabotniki Iskustva.¹ Besides stating about the organization called as such she also explains how the following events unfolded. According to this article, in the 1920s, the organization collected highly professional musicians, and when they got an invitation to perform in newly developed philharmonic ensembles. Later, they incorporated other musicians too, like conventionally “classical” musicians playing violin, then the synthesizers² were introduced and became a part of rabiz music. (Kirakosyan, 2022)

Abrahamyan further explains the origins and dynamics of rabiz. In his analysis the term “Rabis” originally referred to the republic trade union committee and later came to include the Bureau of Orchestra Musicians (BOM) in Armenia. Despite administrative changes, musicians

¹ Rabotniki Iskustva (Работники искусства, Rabis)- Soviet era term commonly used to refer to people employed in cultural and artistic fields such as music, theater and performance.

² Synthesizer - Electronic musical instruments like pianos, also called electronic keyboards, are used for sampling arrangements and making pre-recorded tracks. These were commonly used, especially during weddings.

continued to identify with the original “*Rabis*” designation, while Abrahamyan explains the “rabiz” term with “z” is an Armenization of the term, which has been persistent within local communities. In the early Soviet period, the *Rabis* encompassed some of the most skilled performers of Armenian national and Oriental music, using traditional instruments such as *duduk*³, *kamancha*⁴, *tar*⁵, *dhol*⁶, etc. However, by the late 1930s and 1940s, as professional musicians migrated to more prestigious state ensembles, nonprofessional performers filled the void, leading to the emergence of new, hybrid musical culture. This evolving style, eventually referred to as rabiz, blended Armenian national, *gusan*⁷ and *maqam*⁸-inspired musical languages, often characterized by emotional melismas, improvisation, and a rich modal palette.

(Abrahamyan, 2006) What makes rabiz unique in the Armenian context is its variety of influences of transnational music styles: Greek, Azerbaijani, Indian, Russian, Moldovan, and more. These stylistic borrowings were tied to specific subcultures and diasporic histories, such as the popularity of Indian film music in Yerevan’s working-class districts in the 1970s or the Greek influence of rabiz style embraced by repatriates from Istanbul and the Balkans, overall the minority or diasporic presence in Armenia. (Abrahamyan,2006) Altogether, this shows how rabiz developed through layered cultural events tied to diasporic presence, cultural and musical influences, making it a complex reflection of Armenian musical traditions and beyond its national borders.

Interestingly, he also explains that the labeling “rabiz” did not emerge internally but rather externally, where rabiz musicians did not call themselves one in that wording. He connects this

³ Duduk- traditional Armenian woodwind instrument, known for its deep and mournful sound.

⁴ Kamacha- traditional bowed string instrument, predominantly used in ashugh/gusan musical art

⁵ Tar- a long necked stringed instrument popular in Armenian, Persian and Caucasian music

⁶ Dhol - can be referred any one of double-headed percussion instruments/drums, is widely used in Armenian music

⁷ Gusan- singer, poet, bard, similar to ashugh

⁸ Maqam- musical genre in Arabic music which is also widespread in Iranian and Turkish music

with the existing oppositions in the city in the 1970s, the hippies and the rabiz. He says the distinction “was naturally drawn by the hippies themselves.”(Abrahamyan,2006, pp 106-107)

These observations make me rethink why, even today, the labeling and the usage of the term still receive negative feedback and are not widely accepted by some musicians.

Abrahamyan divided rabiz into two “joyous” and “sad” categories, which limits it to only two groups. Interestingly, it divides it into the particular aspects of music, where they differ and go in different directions. In this, the main differences would be the arrangements of the songs where the “joyous” one is more about the dance songs that are played during gatherings and the “sad” ones are typically very melancholic songs about love, heartbreak, etc. One can come up with numerous categorizations of rabiz according to various aspects. (Abrahamyan, 2006) This perfectly opens a discussion about the environment where rabiz develops, which is crucial in viewing the perceptions around it.

Comparing Rabiz with Other Genres

Looking at different musical genres from other countries, some countries have similar musical habits, like rabiz music from Soviet times. Romanian *manele*,⁹ Bulgarian *chalga*¹⁰, and Turkish *arabesk*¹¹, though different, have similarities in style, arrangements, and song structure, through to music video styles, themes, and performance. In the article “Music of the New Times: Romanian Manele and Armenian rabiz are icons of post-communist changes” by E. Breteque and

⁹ manele-Urban Romanian ethno-pop music combining traditional Romanian music with Middle Eastern, southern Balkan musical elements

¹⁰ chalga-Bulgarian music genre, traditional Bulgarian music influenced by Arabic, Turkish, Greek, Serbian and other musical traditions, etymology derives from the Turkish word meaning playing a tune or musical instrument

¹¹ arabesk(arabesque) - style of popular Turkish music influenced by Arabic music traditions

A. Stoichita, these two music genres share many similarities, such as having “oriental” sound, using electronic sound effects and synthesizers, being performed in family-oriented gatherings: weddings, christenings, etc., in restaurants and wedding venues. The lyrics and content of the songs also share similarities, for which was being brought the example of Grisho Asatryan’s Armenian rabiz cover of the Romanian *manele* song “Made in Romania” by Ionut Cercel. Just like rabiz, *manele* is also always in an improving stage and is always developing and making new music.(Stoichita 2012) The article mentions that Romanians view those *manele* sounds as Gypsy and Turkish-influenced; similarly, in the Armenian context, it is also often connected with non-Armenian musical influences.

On this matter, they refer to Bela Bartok’s analysis about tune circulation. So many tunes travel through regions such as Kosovo, Bulgaria, Turkey, Greece, and many other countries, so cultural belonging and identity make sense on a broad and regional level. Bartok’s statement from 1970 helps us understand the idea of musical belonging in a wide context very well. However, some nuances in Bartok’s statement from Stoichita’s article are not acknowledged. While it is hard to go and find the belonging of musical tunes, it is still crucial to identify the characteristics in musical or cultural components while evaluating musical identities because if we disregard any belonging, there would be only one kind of music and one kind of everything. If we apply this to rabiz music, it is not hard for musicologists to “find the tune” because even if the history of rabiz music is very dense, it is still a short period and comparatively new phenomenon. The only purpose of the identification of tunes to specific nationalities and cultures is to identify the overall national identity of each nation and create the notion of “otherness” through which one can differentiate oneself from another on a national level. The article interestingly takes out “Romanianness” from *manele*, through the “Gypsies” component, saying

“that gypsies had a long tradition of performing for non-gypsies” tearing them apart as two different identities, in one music. (Stoichita 2012, p.7) Meanwhile, the “non-Armenian” component still hasn’t been found in rabiz, or “the other” does not want to be addressed. Hence, in the case of rabiz music, the blind eye on diverse musical identities clashes with the notion of identity and frames it further to political and national matters, giving it a common ground to develop vague and ignorant ideas around rabiz, closing possible discussions and conversations that will affect the perception of it, avoiding possible confrontation of it being non-Armenian.

The Turkish genre *arabesk* similarly occupies a space in national and cultural identity debates. Betul Yarar presents *arabesk* as a powerful musical-cultural phenomenon, again emerging in the mid-20th century as a popular music style combining Turkish folk melodies with Middle Eastern and Arab musical influences, from which the term “*arabesk*” comes. There is a stigmatization of *arabesk* by cultural elites, labeling it as “decadent” music, which, despite this status, provides a valuable insight into Turkey's social realities and evolving national identity narratives. (Yarar, 2007)

Bulgarian *chalga* in Bulgarian culture, similarly to rabiz, falls into the discussion of cultural belonging. In her article, Ekaterina Dikova harshly criticizes the connection between *chalga* and Bulgarian music, describing it as an “anti-cultural phenomenon” that influenced how other nations perceive Bulgarian music. In her words, *chalga* sounds exotic to non-natives and attracts people. It is also played in nightclubs, which she contrasts with the long musical tradition of folklore and classical music that play a crucial role in Bulgarian music. Even though Dikova harshly criticizes the *chalga* genre, calling it “deprived of all culture,” her frustration with cultural understanding around Bulgarian music is understandable. (Dikova,2010, p. 91)

The tendency of changing the music traditions is “stealing the show” from authentic Bulgarian musical and cultural experience.

Meanwhile, Kendra Sundal suggests viewing *chalga* as “a multicultural and transcultural identity” where different cultural influences intersect and blend. At the same time, Sundal refers to Stratelova’s description of *chalga* as “a metaphor of modern Bulgaria” as well as a “dimension of culture”. Besides the post soviet identity, she also acknowledges the influence of the Ottoman Empire and the cultural assimilation processes that had been practiced towards cultural minorities of that time. Sundal also highlights that *chalga* shows Bulgaria's worst reality, confronting socio-economic flaws, political corruption, and unresolved social issues. (Sundal, 2012) Just like in rabiz, the understanding of rabiz from a cultural perspective is similar to Bulgarian *chalga*. It serves a similar role of disturbed national identity, challenging purist national, musical, and cultural narratives.

Rabiz Music in Armenian Identity

Armenian rabiz plays a significant role around the notion of Armenian identity and Armenianness. Abrahamyan described music as something omnipresent, having no boundaries entering the ear. This characteristic of music explains how popular music can be so influential and the power its popularity and prevalence can carry. He argued that the word rabiz would describe how people dress, the way they talk, habits, tastes and so forth. (Abrahamyan, 2006) He viewed rabiz not as mere entertainment but as a factor truly contributing to identity and how Armenians see themselves in society: in what social hierarchy order and social groups.

In “I go. I return. I am confused:” Reflections on Armenian Music Ideas in Multi-sited Research,” by Ortensia Giovanini, examines the Armenian Diaspora community in Italy, France and Armenia. Here, the notion of how the community was formed and how she says “process of

becoming” is a vital component, because we can consider that mostly the people in those cities are from displaced communities who seek connection to their culture. Giovannini acknowledges music as a vital function, calling it “social glue,” especially for diasporic communities.

(Giovannini, 2021, p.7, p.15) Observing the Armenian community in Milan, she evaluates that folk traditions are lost, where the only remains are mythical understanding of Armenian music being Komitas above all, also with the narrative of genocide survivors is symbolically present in the music picture: Komitas primarily being performed in classical form with piano arrangements in a grave tone, and duduk being the symbol of authentic music and sadness. Hence, Western classical music often serves as a collective role at an institutional level. Meanwhile, in more informal occasions, she acknowledges the contrasting and the alternative of previously described traditional Armenian music, being “kef” (meaning gathering in Armenian) and rabiz music, by referring to Adriaan’s classification of cosmopolitan genres. She views them as sharing similarities to music from Greek, Armenian, Turkish, or other countries sharing the Ottoman past and generally featuring up-tempo 6/8¹² dance songs and slow melancholic ballades accompanied with instruments like electronic keyboards (synthesizers), dhol, clarinet, etc. This creates a fun repertoire, “enhances the sense of belonging to the transnation,” allowing younger generations to create a unified social group. (Giovannini, 2021, p.16). Overall, her research opens up the dynamics of the connection between music and Armenian identity, where rabiz is portrayed as the alternative to traditional Armenian music that is taking its place in the construction of a new identity.

¹² 6/8- There is a cliché of 6/8 (վեց-ութ) tempo being an indicator of rabiz music, mainly because many rabiz songs were written in that specific tempo, and so the association was created. While many songs indeed were written in 6/8, it wasn’t the main indicator of what “made them rabiz.” In fact, 6/8 is used in many other genres, including Armenian national dance music, classical music, jazz music, etc.

Andy Nersesian's "A Look at the Emergence of the Concept of National Culture in Armenia: The Former Soviet Folk Ensemble" explores the role of the state-oriented folk orchestra in Soviet Armenia, arguing that despite the Soviet's intentions, it became an essential role in Armenian national identity. (Necessian 2000) While Soviet national policies theorized nationalism and cultural construction, they also enabled cultural assimilations in regional ways, taking Armenia not as a whole and individual but similar to its neighboring countries. Still, in his article, Necessian argued that the folk ensemble became a way of expressing and solidifying Armenian national identity, particularly about the "other".

Cultural Convergences

Talking about the different varieties of rabiz music and how they intersect and clash with cultural identity, one has to really acknowledge the possibilities of difference in rabiz. In rabiz, so many songs are upgraded/ covered songs of Armenian folk or ashugh songs that do not belong to the rabiz genre per se but are performed in specific arrangements and manner to rabiz. Acknowledging this process is very important because it creates confusion when hearing negative comments about rabiz when the listener recognizes the song as an Armenian song and is not false. One of the instances of this process is when, for example, Tatul Avoyan's interpretation of "Qanqaravor Ynker" (Armenian song written by ashugh Djivani) is so much different from Arsen Grigoryan's interpretation. Or "Alagyaz" or "Sareri Hovin Mernem" (Armenian folk songs) is sung in folk and rabiz arrangements so the listeners can easily not see the nuanced difference and fine lines between rabiz and Armenian ashugh songs.

Like Nersesian, who examines the state-oriented folk ensemble's contribution to national identity during the Soviet era, Brigita Davidyants illustrates how Komitas shaped national musical narratives of Armenian musical traditions. Speaking of Armenian folk, we have to acknowledge that some Armenian folk or songs written by ashughs¹³/*gusans*, are themselves influenced by other nations' culture and by time it got standardized as Armenian. Ashughs originally were musicians wandering in different places. Davidyants, in her paper, clarifies this as “Komitas did not consider ashugh art to be “real” Armenian music as it was strongly influenced by Middle Eastern art,” referring to Shahverdyan's earlier analysis.(Davidyants, 2015, p.15). Therefore, the hybridity of musical and cultural standing of their music was expected.

A similar notion exists in the understanding of mugham too. Instrumental mugham¹⁴ is a recognized form of Armenian music, whereas nothing is mentioned about the vocal mugham tradition in Armenian music. The instrumental mugham was written by Nikoghayos Tigranyan for piano, some of which were influenced by music prevalent in the cities of Transcaucasia in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is crucial to acknowledge Tigranyan's significant role in the notation of mugham for piano and other instruments and to elevate it from folk tradition to a higher musical position. Mazmanyanyan referred to Qushnaryan's who wrote “Մուղամաթը առավելագույն մուսուլմանական ժողովուրդների արվեստն է: Այն կարծիքը, թե մուղամաթի զարգացման գործում որոշ մասնակցության բաժին պատկանում է նաև ոչ մուսուլմանական ժողովուրդներին, մասնավորապես հայերին, զուրկ չէ հիմքից, մասնավորապես եթե խոսքը վերաբերում է այդ արվեստի համեմատաբար

¹³ Ashugh - Middle Eastern minstrels who were musicians, authors, and singers who usually composed and performed their own music.

¹⁴ Mugham(mughamat) - musical genre which has both instrumental and vocal ways of performance, known for overly melismatic and throaty, ornamented singing in vocal art

ազելի ուշ շրջանի ձևերին: (Mughamat is primarily the art of Muslim people, The view that non-Muslim people, particularly Armenians, are contributors of the development of the genre has a strong foundation, especially in latest forms of it.)”(Mazmanyanyan, 2000, p. 42) He continued that mugham art, hence being played and composed by Armenian musicians and composers like Tigranyan, had its musical tonal-rhythmic similarities and influences to Armenian national music traditions.

Media and Digital Transformations

Media transformations and the start of digital media have affected media consumption. Besides rabiz, other musical genres nowadays go through the same consumption process by the public. Before mass media, radio, print media, discs, vinyl, and TV were coordinated with major labels, which controlled the distribution channels of music to create dominant narratives /sounds. But today, while there are still institutionalized mass media mediums, new platforms like YouTube, Apple Music, Spotify, TikTok, and Instagram/Facebook have changed how people discover and consume music. There is no unifying musical genre or list of genres that can force the collective experience for listeners and make it mainstream. That is why it is hard to musically understand the dominant genre that is popular in Armenia or diaspora communities and further find out the popularity of rabiz music in general. While Apple Music/Spotify music platforms may not be popular amongst Rabiz music listeners, YouTube, and social media websites, on the other hand, are the platforms where people willfully create, publish, share, comment, and view the content of rabiz music.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing a combination of multimodal discourse analysis alongside digital ethnographic methods to explore the representation and perception of rabiz music within contemporary Armenian popular culture. Grounded in cultural discourse theory and communicative practice frameworks, the research critically examines how rabiz music functions both as a musical genre and as a socio-cultural phenomenon, reflecting and shaping cultural identities and attitudes.

The primary sources of data encompass a range of digital media platforms, reflecting the multimodal aspect of modern musical consumption and discourse. These include two artist interviews from YouTube, singer, music artist Araksya Karapetyan's interview hosted in Youtube platform program called Bats TV, and the other in a journalistic interview from Slaq.am with music artist and singer Tatul Avoyan. Those interviews were chosen based on the relevancy of the topic of where both artists briefly talked about their understanding of rabiz music connecting it with Armenian identity, music traditions and socio-cultural role of rabiz in Armenia. Furthermore, two televised programs involving musicologists, music artists and singers, discussing rabiz music were chosen, also accessed through YouTube, analyzing mainstream media framing and public debates surrounding the genre as well as cultural taboos, common practices and stereotypes developed around rabiz. The data from these sources are supplemented with detailed textual argumentations from the participants of the programs. In addition, data from four music songs ("Mi Gna" by Hayko and Super Sako, "Aghjik Te Tgh", "Alisa" by Artash Asatryan, "Du Mer Sery Moracar" by Karush and Gaya Harutyunyan) and their multimodal analysis has been conducted to understand the intertextual meanings, as well as lyrical content, themes developed in the songs, gender and power dynamics. The recycling motifs of older rabiz

works, highlighting the genres' tendency of plagiarism and cover culture were discussed through chosen data of popular Armenian singer's newest released song: Iveta Mukuchyan's "Ser Ani" or "Ser Ka Erknqum Yerevan," Arame's "Qaminer," Silva Hakobyan's "Ov Uni" .

Building on this, this study integrates audience reception analysis by exploring the comment sections on Instagram reels from Armenian blogger Kamila Aharonyan related to Tatul Avoyan's concert event, as well as commentary on some of the selected YouTube videos. The analysis of comments reveals diverse perspectives and cliches around rabiz music by its listeners and viewers, expanding on the notions of pride, criticism, offering layered understanding of the influence and the role of rabiz in Armenian cultural discourse. Additionally, to contextualize the qualitative findings within the current musical landscape, statistical data drawn from Radio Box website, showcases top-performing rabiz songs and provides the genre's popularity and reach in population. This multi-source data collection allowed a rich and layered understanding of rabiz music as a cultural phenomenon, combining artistic perspectives, media discourse, lyrical contextual analysis and audience interaction across different digital platforms. All data were collected ethically from publicly available sources without personal identifiers, ensuring respect for privacy and intellectual property.

Rabiz in Context: Identity, Cultural Narratives and Musical Landscape in Armenia

Rabiz as Cultural Practice: How It Participates in Identity Construction

Speaking of Armenian identity, we must acknowledge that rabiz is an active participant in identity construction. It is instrumentalized as a tool in creating identity and participates in identity-making as a tool rather than a reason per se. Hence, rabiz does not always create and shape the identity but incorporates it as a medium based on people's understanding of Armenian identity and past experiences. These experiences include upbringing, childhood memories, and family influence, which apply to Armenian diaspora communities and Armenians. Rabiz music can become a part of shared memory. People associate family members because of where it was listened to, such as family gatherings and wedding ceremonies. For example, people living their childhood in the 1990s have certain sympathy and warm memories of some of the songs of Aram Asatryan or Tatul Avoyan because they were mainstream then. We can always analyze their songs lyrically and musically and possibly find stereotypical meanings or non-Armenian musical elements. Still, this kind of practice would neglect a much broader understanding of this music, which is the collective memory and collective experience. This pattern does not start and end only in the 1990s; every generation has families who occasionally listen to rabiz music. Let's say the family's grandfather or father likes Paul Baghdasaryan and has always played his music in his car during family trips. His children have free will to listen to the music they choose, but, for a long time, if they listen to that specific rabiz song or any other song in that genre, there is a high chance that they will be listening to it in their adult life. This phenomenon applies to any music

genre besides rabiz. It is worth mentioning that even though the musical context is not always necessary for this case, some rabiz musicians started including patriotic themes, especially singers from diaspora communities, like the Russian language songs “Armyani Vsego Mira.” It is not the lyrics or the musical component of the songs but the comfort from the music they get because it has been with them in their childhood. This is not always the case, but it perfectly demonstrates how the musical element of rabiz may get neglected by people because of its penetrating nature, which can cause it to get smoothly internalized.

For many families, maintaining Armenianness and national identity is integral to raising their children. That is why Armenians outside Armenia often listen to rabiz music to feel close to home and differentiate themselves from other nations to experience their own identity. In this case, the musical and textual meaning of the songs lose their importance and don't get much attention. Still, the singer's nationality and familiarity with the melodies play a bigger role. Interestingly enough, even though Armenian is the primary language of rabiz songs, in the Russian diaspora, many singers write and perform songs in Russian. Those are fascinating examples where language is not the central “Armenian identity marker” but the lyrics' meaning and the tunes and melodies or instruments used in the track.

Because this musical pattern has been very popular in Armenia and has been simply an accepted way of celebrating and living, people who leave the country start incorporating this in foreign countries. It again corresponds to the “true way of being Armenian” and fits the narrative of Armenian identity in Armenia. Hence, it becomes traditionalized and internalized and performs as an identity marker outside of Armenia as well. Again, it fuels the flattening of rabiz music as a musical genre but simplifies it to the extent of serving Armenianness.

When talking about the process that people are identifying “Armenianness” with rabiz, it is a reason behind it and does not happen unintended. It is fair to mention that there are so many songs about Armenian traditions, weddings, etc. The contexts where people are experiencing national values or are having collective experiences like weddings, war, gatherings, birthday parties, and even nowadays trending gender parties, baby showers etc. This is common ground for so many shared experiences that are celebrated or lived through certain music that can create a connection between family and nationality.

Rabiz and Shame : Rabiz Set by Default

The lack of a clear recognition and understanding of rabiz music significantly shapes how people perceive the genre. This often results in polarized attitudes, including outright rejection and stigmatization, uncritical acceptance of rabiz as the sole representation of “true Armenian” music, or internalizing it as the only authentic form of Armenian musical expression. These reactions reflect a form of selective awareness or willful ignorance, where the complexity and diversity of rabiz are known but not fully acknowledged and explored. As a result, strong negative attitudes toward rabiz can contribute to its marginalization and social stigmatization. It is important to recognize that musical preferences are inherently subjective and deeply connected to individual and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, criticizing someone’s musical tastes risks undermining their cultural knowledge and personal experiences. Conversely, promoting rabiz as the definite expression of Armenian music overlooks the diversity factor of the country’s musical landscape. Both extremes reveal gaps in understanding and highlight the need for a more nuanced and open-minded approach to rabiz music and its place within Armenian culture.

Armenian famous singer and artist Tatul Avoyan's recent concert at Karen Demirchyan Sports and Concert Complex has been actively discussed on social media platforms. Many people started shaming people who attended the concert. Armenian blogger Kamilla Aharonyan,¹⁵ with the username *Kamillayic*, also showed interest in the rabiz music genre in her other reels. She also attended the concert and published two videos about it. In the comments section people both were shaming the music choice or the or leaving encouraging or humorous comments, most shared the following opinions: What do people listen to when going to weddings then? If not Tatul. Why are they pretending not to like rabiz? Similar comments were under every post regarding Tatul Avoyan's concert in other social platforms like Facebook posts about the concert. So many people were convinced that it was shameful and horrible to attend the Tatul's concert, but judging from the fully booked concert house, so many people enjoyed it. There was a survey in the streets of Yerevan by Oragir News asking passersby, "Would you attend Tatul Avoyan's concert?" While the question itself is biased and contains the presumption that it is a dilemma to attend or not to attend an artist's concert, still so many people answered positively. One of the interviewees answered, "Yes,... there was an Armenian aura", to which the comment section was harshly bothered by the "Armenian aura" description, calling it rather oriental and non-Armenian, "whining," as they called it.

The same notion of rabiz being "a default" for Armenian celebrations goes further to interviews by rabiz singers who claim that rabiz is a necessity and a key component of Armenian identity. Tatul Avoyan rarely gives interviews, and during one of which, he surprisingly did not claim that rabiz is tasteful and overall good music. But he continued his thought with a question to the interviewer: "What do you listen to when you attend weddings or other celebrations." He also said that people cannot dance under jazz, rock, or Armenian national music, bringing an

¹⁵ Kamila Aharonyan - <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DIo0lIZCQxX/>

example of “Horovel,” an Armenian work song (Slaq.am, 2012, 10:10 min.). This controversial comment on music genres and rabiz is very one-sided and cherry-picked. The brought-up example of “Horovel” is not relevant to his claim and the question itself because even though it is an Armenian folk song, it especially after genocide is performed in a more tragic and sad context because of where the song was mainly coming from. His answer is very ignorant because while his opinion about other genres is subjective yet worthy of discussion, contrasting it with rabiz's music is one-sided and closing the discussion. He mentions an Armenian song, framing it in the only way other Armenian songs exist as if there are no other songs. And it shows a pattern of popular opinion amongst people and the artists of acknowledging rabiz as default and not a case of further discussion.

Compared to Tatul Avoyan, Araksya Karapetyan, famously known as Nana, has recently become more active on social media, giving interviews on different platforms. In one of her recent interviews, she claims that: “It is in our blood to sing melodies (sings nonsensical sounds like “տիգլը-տիգլը”) to play with our 1-year-old, 2-year-old babies.” (Bats TV, 2025, 16:20 min.) Again, she continues with the same notion of “default rabiz”, by contrasting rabiz music with Western non-Armenian music genres, in their words, jazz and rock. This again is framing rabiz as the only way of Armenian music, disregarding that there is more Armenian music other than rabiz. In the same interview, Nana also briefly mentions that she does not consider herself a rabiz, or the queen of rabiz, but a folk and pop singer, which continues our earlier discussion of the lack of usage of the term among the artists.

While rabiz and its listeners often accuse people of forcing other genres onto them and constantly criticize, rabiz artists and listeners themselves always force rabiz to be the only Armenian music genre and get defensive when others do not like a genre, blaming other music

genres, for some reason "jazz and rock". Rabiz is popular for the sake of being popular. It is internalized and traditionalized in a way that functions as a default setting for playing music at celebrations, where most of the time, people assume that everybody wants to listen to rabiz at their weddings. It is displayed as the ultimate truth where the conversation around rabiz music is strictly closed, and if it is such, it goes to harsh hatred or glorification and nothing in between.

Now one of the reasons why these processes are happening is the cultural flattening of rabiz music. Simplification reduced rabiz to a single narrative, overlooking its stylistic and cultural variations. Because of the already mentioned ignorance and mixed understandings of rabiz, many dilemmas, shame, and hatred have been created, especially around the insecurity of foreign influence. It became a spectrum where each musician or their audience decided where they stand, some of them soft, some strong, based on their evaluation of rabiz. Even though the oriental singing manner is not the only characteristic of rabiz, the saturation of that specific aspect changes many things in peoples' perceptions. Hence, people flattened it under one term and one thing, to close possible uncomfortable knowledge around this broad and constantly developing genre.

On the other hand, as rabiz is always developing, besides repetitive songs, there are innovative and new songs where artists have their own individualism and mannerisms. For many musicians, rabiz happens to be an offensive term to be called as a musician; for some, it is okay to be called, but because of the negative connotation, they do not like to call themselves that. The Armenian talk show *Bats Tema*, hosted by Hrach Muradyan, hosted rabiz singers from different generations, opening a discussion of internal tensions around the rabiz genre. One major topic was the notion of shame associated with rabiz music, which also reflected their musical status of being called or not being called a rabiz musician. Alik Gyunashyan was hesitant and

unsure about the term, whereas Anetta Aghabekyan, who is a newly rising singer, claimed that she doesn't like to be called rabiz because there is a negative connotation, and she considers herself more of an Armenian pop singer than rabiz. Her latest song, "Gisherov Hishelov," has 22 million views on YouTube being released in 2023. Those two singers, having completely different musical standings, have completely different views on rabiz, which demonstrates how diverse rabiz music can get. The third guest of the show, Grigory Yesayan, also had different opinions on his musical journey and individuality. Unlike Anetta and Alik, he often sang in Russian and was mainly popular amongst the Russian Armenian community. (Bats Tema, 2025) Thus, while rabiz may seem repetitive, less creative, simple, or limited to dance (kef) songs, it is more complex than it may appear.

Rabiz Beyond Music: Power and Gender in Lyrics of Rabiz Songs

Songs are a form of expression, a way of utterance through which the songwriter conveys a meaning to the audience via music, chanting, lyrics, and other means of meaning-making techniques. The lyrics of the song are crucial aspects of the song's intended message.

In so many instances, the lyrics and the meanings behind the music are celebrating toxic masculinity, gender hierarchy, and patriarchy. Those themes, being constant for generations, vividly affect overall national notions around social norms, nationality, way of being Armenian, and the gendered meanings behind it. In a recent song by Artash Asatryan about gender parties called "Aghjik Te Tgha," a key line in the chorus repeatedly says - "there was "Տղա լինի հերն եմ ես, աղջիկ լինի տերն եմ ես." The meanings of two words "father" and "owner" is either used as synonyms being used interchangeably, assuming the "տեր" is taken the function

of the “father,” or it suggests the meaning of being a “protector”: which is the most mildened version, because “owner” and “protector” have different meanings. Still, even from the birth of a child, the song makes a clear distinction in fatherhood if the child would be a boy or a girl. It also suggests stereotypical ideas around girls’ and boys’ childhoods where “a girl needs someone in the form of protection, ownership or status for the childhood” by clearly contrasting it with the boy’s childhood - “being a father for him.” Given the already disadvantaged position of newborn girls, the song propagates an identity of parenthood for the parents first because, from the context, it fits today’s well-known gender party events. Also, the narrative is primarily framed through the father's perspective, disregarding motherhood, even though the singer’s gender does play a role in that aspect. Posted on YouTube, the majority of opinions in the comment section were positive, despite several remarks on that specific sentence. One woman wrote “Այսինքն եթե աղջիկ է տերն են բայց հայրը չեն, այ տղայի դեպքում հայրն են: Բառը կարծում եմ սխալ է ընտրված”, suggesting that the used words “father” and “owner” are problematic putting in that context. And another woman commented under that - “Շատ էլ ճիշտ ա գրված: Մեծ իմաստ կա էդ բառերի մեջ,” initially agreeing with the singer, with no specific explanation of what was the perceived “deep meaning.” (Asatryan, 2025) While some people are listening to the lyrics and have a critical approach, recognizing highlights on different approaches to fatherhood for girls and boys, the other woman sees great meaning in the line, which talks about the contrasting ideas in society and also why not the status that carries Artash Asatryan that people are either agreeing or believing in the same concept. Even though music and songs are very individualistic, those songs that are targeted to specific events in people’s lives do dictate their ideas to the public, especially from musical artists like the Asatryan family, who are influential with their songs in Armenian society.

The patriarchal framing of women's role in society is also evident in other songs by Artash Asatryan. As I previously argued in my "Mini Discourse Analysis: Artash Asatryan's Alisa", through the song "Alisa", themes of marriage, family, and gender dynamics are introduced from the perspective of the singer/songwriter. In YouTube, it has about twelve million views, which, compared to many other rabiz songs, is not a record-making rating, yet it remains widely circulated in various events or social media videos. The lyrics- "I will take care of you, what is your work for me. You grant me children, and I will give you my love, Alisa " (Առոք-փառոք կպահեմ, քո աշխատանքն ինչիսա, դու ինձ բալէք պարզևի ես քեզ սերս Ալիսա:) (Asatryan, 2012) convey different meanings and consequences to different audiences. From that perspective, "I will take care of you, I don't need you to work" feeds the man's dominant role in the family model and gives a family relationship a power dynamic where a woman's work is not needed.

The song "Alisa" portraying the process of talking to a woman to marry her, suggests a heavily patriarchal approach to relationships where the future husband depicts himself as a perfect suitor who is willing to provide for her and take care of her while inferiorizing women's agency both socially: where resistance is dismissed as playful, and within the family: where female roles are predefined aligning with the man's idealized vision of domestic life. In both "Aghjik Te Tgha" and "Alisa", Artash Asatryan's lyrics reflect deeply rooted patriarchal values that are not necessarily belonging only to Asatryan, but are existing notions in Armenian society. With these kinds of songs, they celebrate and consume these narratives by promoting and normalizing the power imbalances between genders. In this way rabiz music subtly but powerfully shapes cultural attitudes and opinions towards gender.

Ignorance Around Rabiz Genre

Through time, many musical genres developed in Armenia side by side with rabiz music, which have their own names not only in the Armenian context but also in international music. For example, many genres were called **քաղաքային** (urban), **շալսոն** (chanson), or the famous **Էստրադային երաժշտություն** (performing arts genre, estrada, similar to pop music). While all the genres are recognized and acknowledged, rabiz music has almost no insight, academic standing or research around it. It's only one category named rabiz or sometimes on Television or by the musicians itself not being acknowledged as rabiz music but Armenian Pop music. Whereas in rabiz music, there are heavily layered varieties of different musical, lyrical and contextual specific songs, many of them being written in the prior and following 1970s-2000s , clearly having vivid differences enough to have subdivisions/subcategories based on decades at least. But the thing is not about the urge to have categories for it but the absence and total ignorance and disregard towards it. It also talks about the lack of interest in perceiving it as such and lack of not paying attention to it as such, which influenced our cultural understanding and perceiving it as a music genre. Then, the word "rabiz" serves as an umbrella term for many other variations of it.

Presented as Armenian, but most of the rabiz music is full of non-Armenian musical aspects and cultural understandings that are new to Armenian culture and music which is thoroughly discussed earlier in the literature review. The problem is not the foreign influence that is incorporated into the music but the representation of it as something truly Armenian which results in replacing the Armenian national musical traditions. This is done by musicians

themselves or the listeners and audience as a way of engaging people in their art and attracting them to their music. The problem is not the existence of rabiz but the true perception of it as the only Armenian music.

In the TV show *Azat Goti*, artists, musicologists, composers and musicians were debating around the topic of the rabiz music genre, and during one of the musical performances Anna Mayilyan, an Armenian classical singer, left the stage refusing to stay and listen to the performance, implying that literally she could not stand the music. (*Azat Goti*, 2013) Inserting shame, taboo, and hate in the equation of rabiz drives people away from proceeding with a conversation around it and viewing it as a musical genre on its own. This kind of non-constructive criticism shaped around rabiz music created its shameful label where rabiz musicians or listeners can get offended by the term or get defensive when being called such.

This kind of extremist perception from both ends leads to the flattening of rabiz music and perceiving it as one thing, disregarding any characteristics, nuances, historical backgrounds, musical components, etc. makes it easier to incorporate it in their discourse and evaluate it by only one component, for some “pure Armenian” and for others, “shameful non-Armenian.” However, while rabiz music itself does not harm, the interpretation does function in musical identity construction externally: with the example of the song “Mi Gna”¹⁶ and the comment section. It is crucial to acknowledge that the intentions and consequences around the portrayal of rabiz music are different. While it itself is a culturally dense musical genre, in certain songs, it forces national belonging, which is mostly based on the artist's nationality.

In the multimodal analysis of the song “Mi Gna,” one of my conclusions was that it created a certain representation in foreign media, where people confused Armenian music with others and were not able to identify if the chorus of the song is Armenian. Viewing the comment

¹⁶ Mi Gna - a song by Spitaktsi Hayko, Super Sako and Maitre Gims, YouTube- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v>

section under the song, some of them got introduced to it through this song and were surprised by how it sounded. Still, even if they acknowledged the similarities between the chorus melody (perceived as Armenian culture) and their culture (listeners), it simply resulted in the conclusion that they and Armenians are identically similar and left no space for discussion of what made Armenians part Armenian other than the language. (Gharibyan, 2024) This, cancels the notion of Armenian representation that Armenians are feeling proud of in the comment section. It is unfortunate how Armenians, being in the area of comment sections by other Balkan or Muslim countries (some of whose cultural traditions influenced rabiz), were unable to bring any cultural counterclaim and were unifying around religion in comments because they were “failing” to identify Armenian through the very music of the video.

The Question of Authenticity and Originality in Rabiz music

While being constantly claimed as the only Armenian music, a vast number of rabiz songs are plagiarized by different artists from different musical and national backgrounds. In this regard, the TV show *Bats Tema* by Hrach Muradyan hosted rabiz artists and also a DJ Mac (Garos Makaryan), who is actively researching old and new songs and the possible versions and variations of the same songs. He constantly reveals the songs that are plagiarized from Armenians or vice versa. During the show he noted an important pattern in how people react to plagiarism, saying that people negatively respond to the instances when he makes videos of rabiz/non-rabiz songs that are plagiarized by other artists from Armenians and when Armenian artists plagiarize from others. While the picture changes when he makes the videos of the opposite process, the comment sections are full of prideful feelings of superiority as if

“everybody is borrowing from us.” (Bats Tema,2025). While going back to the earlier mentioned idea of “finding the tune” by Bartok, it is important to mention that in plagiarized songs, instances make it even harder to identify song tunes’ accountability because there is no referencing culture, especially amongst Armenian artists. Thus, besides the musical belonging, the identity component of rabiz songs, even not claimed as such, is fluid and very prone to unoriginality, both from borrowings to the extent of creating repetitive and cliché songs. This component of rabiz, in a way, explains the large amount of songs compared to other musical genres written in Armenia. Like the repetitive themes in rabiz, giving an example of Razmik Amyan, an influential and popular Armenian singer, there are similar processes even in nowadays released songs by singers who have been known to the public for a long time. Thus, specifically not being active in the rabiz genre, artists like Arame, Silva Hakobyan, Iveta Mukuchyan, and Zaruhi Babayan in recent years released new songs that were different from their original way of songs. In no particular order, songs like Iveta Mukuchyan’s “Ser Ani” or “Ser Ka Erknqum Yerevan,” Arame’s “Qaminer,” Silva Hakobyan’s “Ov Uni,” and many other songs share very similar musical patterns, and once again emphasize how similar processes stagnate the music industry, lacking the creativity and originality, let alone content of the repetitive phrases and words in the lyrics.

Some songs go backward and imitate the old style of Armenian songs by performing them in a rabiz-like singing manner. For example the song “Du Mer Sery Moracar” by Karush and Gaya Harutyunyan released in 2024 and on YouTube, has 22 million views and is popular in public places and played in radios as well. The song is a parody song for Pink’s Family Portrait song from 2013 (the origin of the song is not stated) by comedian Ashot Ghazaryan and singer

Armine Grigoryan called “Yntanekan Lusankar.” Some rabiz songs themselves are not original, and cover culture is taking over the rabiz music industry as well.

Also, in any genre, there are transforming periods, which is a natural process. For many years, rabiz was the one music genre in which people/musicians could actively earn money and enter the so-called show business. So if we look at rabiz as a musical genre of entertainment that is less creative, for many rabiz singers as a tool to earn money and get into the Armenian music industry. Most of the time, those songs are very cliched, repetitive and lack musical identity, individualism and do not offer new themes and creativity. This phenomenon especially occurs when musicians do not prioritize their own input and individualism but target their audience and create specific songs for certain audiences, something that was already done to ensure their success in the industry by getting likes and views on social media or orders to perform in many venues. In some cases, the songs are written by the same songwriters and sold to many singers. This repetitiveness sometimes comes with generations: children and grandparents of Aram Asatryan continued the similar way of music, or Razmik Amyan established his unique way of lyrical songs and started a pattern of similar songs for other singers (not only the songs but also the arrangements, lyrics and singing manners are similar as well as themes of content and in music videos). Also, those patterns are sometimes not always influenced by singers but by songwriters who are less known to the public. While it is accepted practice for the same songwriter to write songs for many different musicians, sometimes they do not compose for the singer, and in the end, it all becomes the same, and here is the line where it either becomes one of a kind or like everyone else. Other variations are similar to Russian lyrics; most of the time, the musicians are from the Russian diaspora living or being raised in Russia, so their songs are mostly in Russian mixed with Armenian or entirely in Russian.

We Don't Play It, But We Know It by Heart

While discussing people's choices, perceptions, and prejudices around rabiz music, it is crucial to consider how individuals are exposed to rabiz music even when they do not actively choose to listen to it. Although rabiz was an underground and marginalized music genre during Soviet times, after Armenia's independence, with time, it gained popularity and exposure on different media platforms like public television and radio.

In the case of radios, it is important to mention that Armenians during soviet times had access to foreign radio stations as well. Rabiz is everywhere: from public transportation and taxis to family occasions and weddings.

To better understand the significance of this phenomenon, I want to refer to Franco Fabbri's discussion around background listening and the music that is heard and is a part of our environment but is not the music we listen to in the book *Ubiquitous Music: The everyday sounds that we don't always notice*. He particularly accentuates the factor of "attention" in the experience of music processing, where when it is taken out, the musical experience changes, and the music itself can turn into a form of air pollution. To understand the difference, he explores the meanings of "to listen" and "to hear," depending on what mental state a person is in while the music is on. This distinction between hearing and listening helps explain how individuals can internalize rabiz music passively without consciously initiating it. While this paper further discusses all the situational aspects of background music, if we apply this "attention" aspect of rabiz music, it makes sense why some of us know the songs we have never personally listened

to. (Quinones, 2016) Indeed, this may apply to any musical genre, popular music that is widely played on digital and non-digital platforms.

One of the most influential sources of the constant exposure of rabiz music is due to its radio presence in Armenia. Radios as a media platform, especially in Armenian taxis, are barely consumed with “attention” but mostly as background noise or background music while driving. Now, we view Armenian radio channels as a way of listening to background music. Most people, against their will, listen to it or unintentionally hear it while using public transportation. On the website onlineradiobox.com, there is rich available data on music broadcasting in almost all Armenian radio channels, showing which song and when was played throughout the day. Today's radio channels are heavily saturated with rabiz music, such as Lav Radio, Radio Yeraz, Radio Yan, and Yerevan Nights Radio. On these radios, the most played or “TOP” songs are predominantly rabiz songs in the rabiz genre, like Oksy Avdalyan’s, Tatev Asatryan’s, Harut Pambukchyan’s songs, Arame, Lilit Hovhannisyan and others. The data always changes on this website because every day, there is a new playlist. (Online Radio Box, 2025). This, constant, often unintentional exposure through radio shows the passive presence of rabiz music in everyday Armenian life, shaping cultural family regardless of active listening or personal preferences.

Limitations

Artistic notion such as music creates an agenda around it, as well as status, reputation, and even political perspectives, that leaves the initial idea of music and goes into external factors, creating a certain treatment around it. This limits my research in a way where my attempt to research people's perception of music is met with notions of agenda and status, as well as cultural-social-linguistic aspects that can expand on infinite layers.

Another limitation was the lack of scholarly research on rabiz music and its significance in cultural aspects, as well as musicological analysis of it. While this project opened up many important discussions around rabiz music, its scope was limited. Unfortunately, there is a lack of scholarly work and literature, musicological analysis on rabiz, which constrains the deep theoretical analysis. I also mention in my literature review that the resources are limited and not efficient for the full picture, also because of the gaps between research and publications. Existing literature especially in anthropological and cultural perspectives was comparably outdated, which sometimes contrasted with practices and stereotypes that are not actively existing nowadays. The taboo surrounding rabiz appears to extend into academia as well, assumingly being considered as something unworthy of discussion.

In the future, more thorough research can be expanded to include more systematic interviews with musicians, listeners and critics, conducting cross-cultural comparisons with the similar genres like *manele* or *chalta*, as well as musicological observation and research would contribute to the bigger picture of the rabiz phenomenon.

Conclusion

Although rabiz music is often reduced to stereotypes and dismissed from academic and cultural consideration, it plays a complex and significant role in Armenian cultural life. This research set out to explore how rabiz music functions not only as a form of entertainment but also a cultural practice participating in Armenian social life and identity construction. Rabiz music is a dynamic and multifaceted spectrum that reflects national identity, gender and diaspora experience. It cannot be understood as a monolithic genre, instead it represents a continuously evolving and developing multicultural and transnational phenomenon yielding from historical memory, regional influence and social stigma. Through examining digital media discourse, artist narratives and audience reception, this study reveals how the perception of rabiz is closely tied to broader narratives of cultural belonging and Armenian identity.

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