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The Digital Narrative: Morality and Human Development through Television and Film

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ABSTRACT

Pakistani television and film hold significant potential to shape public opinion and social norms. This research examined the impact of fictional and non-fictional narratives in Pakistani media on viewers' moral and human development. The study argued that much of the popular content produced by the Pakistani film and drama industry fails to contribute to a progressive, informed, and morally uplifted society. Using Cultivation Theory as the primary framework, this study investigated how repeated exposure to specific themes influenced viewers' perceptions of reality, moral choices, and awareness of social progress. A quantitative online survey of 100 respondents found that while a portion of the audience perceived dramas as reflective of society, many remained neutral or skeptical. The findings suggested that dramas often focused on negative, repetitive themes, such as jealousy and revenge, instead of promoting moral growth or social awareness. The research concluded that media in an Islamic democratic society like Pakistan has a duty to create content that educates and empowers, and it offered recommendations for media creators and regulators to align their narratives with ethical and intellectual advancement. .

Keywords: Digital Narrative, Morality, Human Development, Television, Film

Introduction

Pakistani television and film have immense potential to shape public opinion, behavior, social norms, and the moral and intellectual development of society. The social fabric of Pakistan is ideally rooted in Islamic moral teachings concerning public relationships and justice.

This research examined the fictional and non-fictional narratives within Pakistan's film and drama industry and their impact on viewers' moral and human development. The central argument of this research was that a significant portion of the popular content produced in this industry fails to contribute to a more progressive, informed, and morally uplifted society.

This critical assessment did not intend to directly implement Islamic laws but to analyze whether the distributed content aided in moral and human development.

Statement of the Problem

Pakistani media appears to be lagging in global advancements within the film and drama industry. Despite being a powerful tool for shaping society, it often fails to use its potential to enhance public perception and behaviors that contribute to a healthy moral structure and education leading to human development.

The majority of current narratives are based on business and commercial interests rather than on national improvement. This often leads to sensationalism and melodramatic plots instead of addressing complex issues, moral dilemmas, and social responsibility, which are necessary for future survival.

The Pakistani digital narrative seems to be underutilizing its potential to act as a positive stimulant for societal betterment by cultivating critical thinking, a good moral compass, and awareness of the developing world.

Purpose of Study

This research aimed to examine how the Pakistani film and drama industry affects the audience's perception of reality, shaping their behavior, thinking, and moral values. Furthermore, it sought to understand the extent to which content and narratives contribute to social awareness and global advancement.

Media's core responsibilities are of great value, and this study encouraged the industry to create more practical and valuable content that can aid in building a better environment by inspiring empathy, morals, and critical thinking that resonate with the nation's core values, motivated by Islamic principles for human development.

Research Questions

RQ1. To what extent do the narratives in Pakistani television dramas and films influence the moral frameworks and developmental stages of their viewers?

RQ2. How can a more purposeful approach to storytelling, aligned with the high moral teachings and principles of Islam, be integrated to foster positive social change?

RQ3. How do the larger global film industries reflect on the idea of morality and development?

Assumptions

This research is based on several assumptions:

- Digital media has a profound effect on public behaviors and thinking and is a powerful tool when used appropriately.
- Consumers are significantly affected by television and other digital media.
- Good storytelling can contribute to the audience's moral and intellectual growth.
- The content in Pakistani digital media, particularly film and drama, influences the shaping of societal norms, values, beliefs, and global understanding.
- The quality of content matters significantly, as people become what they ingest, see, and hear, whether intentionally or unintentionally.
- While narratives in Pakistani drama and film may be seen as less attractive in the digital age, those that lean toward negativity are potentially more likely to be publicized.

Limitations

This study was a short-term research project rather than a longitudinal study due to time constraints. It faced a few limitations that may affect the generalizability of its findings.

Subjectivity of Interpretation: "Morality" and "human development" can be subjective concepts for both the researcher and the audience.

Scope of Content: The research focused specifically on drama and film and may not represent all Pakistani media content.

Audience Diversity: The diversity of the audience, including socioeconomic background, age, and demographics, posed a challenge, as this research may not have fully captured the entire nationwide audience.

Definition of Terms

"Morality: Refers to the principles distinguishing between right and wrong or good and bad behavior, as depicted in the narratives of dramas and films, with a specific focus on their alignment with the high ethical standards of Islam."

"Human Development: The process of expanding people's choices and opportunities,

including their ability to acquire knowledge, live a healthy life, and participate in political and cultural life.” In this study, it refers to the development of critical thinking, empathy, and global awareness, which are also central to an individual's holistic development in Islam.

“Narrative: A spoken or written account of connected events.” In this study, it refers to the plot, themes, and storytelling elements of television dramas, films, and other media content.

Significance of Study

This research is significant for several reasons;

Academically: It contributes to the body of knowledge on media effects in a developing nation, offering a specific case study of Pakistan's media landscape.

For the Media Industry: The findings could serve as a valuable critique and a guide for creating content that is not only entertaining but also socially responsible and meaningful.

Ethically: It provided a framework for how media producers can fulfill their duty to align content with the ethical and legal expectations of Pakistan's Islamic-democratic identity.

For Pakistani Society: The study could initiate a broader conversation about the media's role in shaping national identity and future generations. It underscored the urgency of creating narratives that inspire, educate, and empower, rather than merely distract.

Literature Review

A review of existing literature highlights various aspects of media's influence on Pakistani society. A study by Dattoo (2010) found that urban youth in Karachi are active interpreters of global media, with a mix of global and local dynamics shaping their views on gender roles, cross-gender socialization, and Muslim identity.

Hashmi and Ammar (2024) explored how reality television influences the moral development of urban Pakistani youth. Their study found that while 45% of participants reported positive effects, 30% noted negative impacts on ethical behavior, concluding that reality TV blurs the line between fiction and reality and influences moral choices.

Montpellier (2024) examined how religious piety is communicated through visual representation in Pakistani dramas, noting that producers' practices generate religious visual idioms despite their denials of creating religious content. The study found that dramas play a central role in the formation of religious culture and identity in the country's digital mediascape.

Another study by Siddique, Bhatti, and Ali (2023) investigated the portrayal of women in dramas from ARY and HUM TV. Their findings suggest that both channels reinforce stereotypical portrayals, reflecting media's strong influence on gender perceptions in Pakistan.

Eckersley et al. (2006) emphasized the strong impact of film and television on the spiritual and moral development of young people. While the media can promote diversity, many stories convey harmful influences and conflicting morals. The authors stressed that societies are shaped by stories, making it vital to critically assess how media influences moral and spiritual growth.

Gaps to be filled

While previous studies showed how Pakistani media influences youth identity, morality, gender roles, and religious values, they often remained limited to single themes. There was a lack of comprehensive exploration into how both fictional and non-fictional content collectively affects not only moral values but also human development, including critical thinking, empathy, and social progress awareness.

This research aimed to fill this gap by critically examining selected dramas and films to evaluate whether they strengthened or weakened morality and human development, using Islamic moral principles as a guiding framework. The study argued that media can become a tool for building an

ethically conscious, socially responsible, and intellectually progressive society, moving beyond mere entertainment.

Theoretical Framework

This research primarily used Cultivation Theory, introduced by George Gerbner. The theory suggests that repeated exposure to media shapes people's perceptions of reality. It posits that television and film are not just entertainment sources but also long-term teachers that influence how viewers think, act, and understand the world.

Constant exposure to repetitive stories, such as those focusing on family conflicts or sensationalism, can lead viewers to believe these portrayals reflect real life. This theory was highly relevant to this research because it explained how repetitive themes in Pakistani media can influence viewers' moral choices and their understanding of progress. For example, if content repeatedly showed jealousy and revenge, it cultivated those ideas in the audience instead of promoting empathy and responsibility. Given Pakistan's identity as an Islamic democratic country, where media is expected to uphold high moral standards, this theory helped highlight the gap between current narratives and the ethical, educational storytelling that could uplift society.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This research used a Quantitative method for my research design and with purposive sampling method, selecting participants who were regular viewers of Pakistani media. A total of 100 online survey responses were collected, with 95 valid responses analyzed using pie charts.

Population

The target population included individuals knowledgeable about Pakistani media, such as urban youth, consumers, creators, and media professionals. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who were regular viewers of Pakistani media.

Data Collection

By employing the non-probability purposive sampling technique, the data collection tool utilized was a questionnaire, distributed digitally on platforms like Gmail, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. The online survey was conducted using Google Forms.

Ethical Considerations

The privacy of participants was respected, and their responses were used solely for research purposes. Participation was voluntary, with data collected through a consent-based online survey.

Data Analysis & Interpretation

The data collected from the online survey by utilizing close-ended questions was analyzed to identify patterns and trends, revealing how people perceive the effects of Pakistani dramas and films on morality and human development.

Survey Graph & Results

Results

Preferred Platform for Watching Pakistani Dramas

4. What is your preferred platform for watching Pakistani dramas?

47 responses

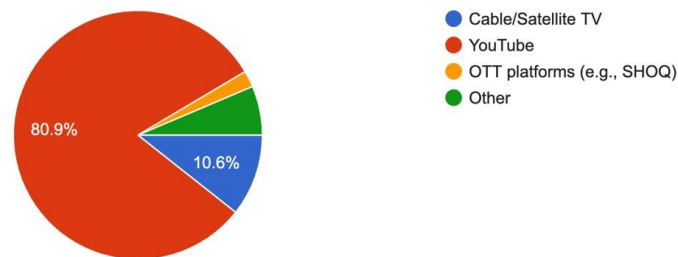


Figure 1.1 Popular Platform for Pakistani Drama's

The survey revealed that the majority of respondents (80.9%) preferred to watch Pakistani dramas on YouTube. A smaller proportion reported using Cable/Satellite TV (10.6%) and OTT platforms (6.4%). This indicated that YouTube was the most popular medium for accessing Pakistani dramas.

Time Spent Watching Pakistani Media Content

5. Approximately how many hours per week do you spend watching Pakistani media content (dramas, films, news)?

47 responses

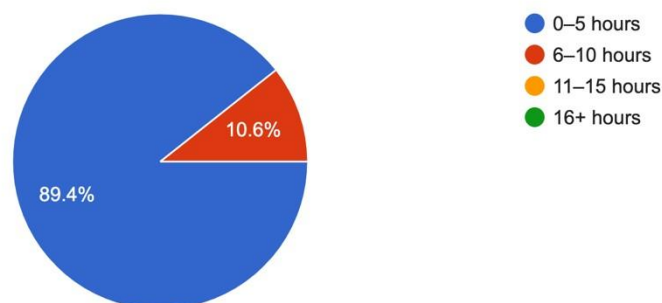


Figure 1.2 Daily Average Time Period of Engagement with Media Content

When asked about the number of hours spent weekly on Pakistani media (including dramas, films, and news), most respondents (89.4%) reported watching 0-5 hours per week. Another 10.6% reported 6-10 hours per week, while none of the participants indicated watching more than 10 hours. This suggests that the majority of participants consume Pakistani media content in relatively short durations.

Representation of Pakistani Society in Dramas and Films

7. Pakistani dramas and films accurately reflect Pakistani society.

47 responses

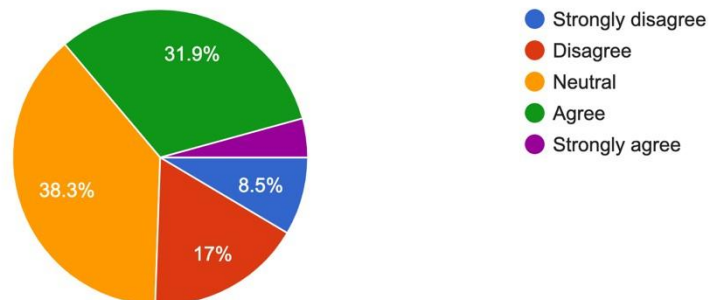


Figure 1.3 Percentage Representation of Pakistani Society in Dramas and Films Regarding the perception of whether Pakistani dramas and films accurately reflect society, 31.9% of respondents agreed, while 8.5% strongly agreed. On the other hand, 17% disagreed, and 8.5% strongly disagreed. A significant proportion, 38.3%, remained neutral. This shows that while a portion of the audience perceives dramas as reflective of society, many viewers are either neutral or skeptical about the accuracy of this portrayal.

Impact of Themes on Viewers' Perception of Real Life

13. Do you feel that repeated exposure to themes like jealousy, revenge, or family conflict in Pakistani dramas has influenced your view of real life?

47 responses

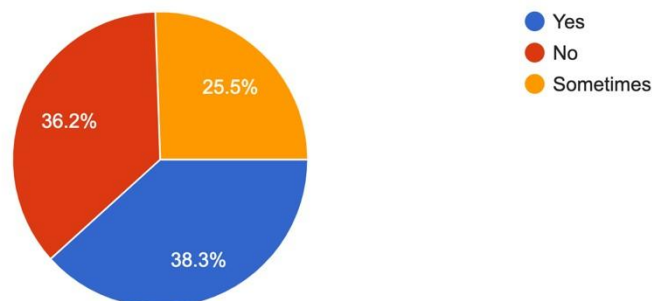


Figure 1.4 Impact of Themes on Viewers' Perception of Real Life

Finally, participants were asked whether repeated exposure to themes such as jealousy, revenge, and family conflict in Pakistani dramas has influenced their view of real life. The responses were mixed: 38.3% answered Yes, 36.2% answered No, and 25.5% indicated Sometimes. These findings suggest that while some viewers acknowledge an influence, others either deny it or report only occasional effects.

Findings

The study found that most viewers watched Pakistani dramas on YouTube for less than five hours a week. Opinions were divided on whether dramas accurately reflected real life, with many viewers expressing uncertainty. While repeated themes such as jealousy and revenge influenced some

viewers' thinking, others felt little to no effect. Overall, the study found that dramas affected viewers but often concentrated on negative, repetitive themes rather than promoting moral growth or social awareness.

Conclusion

Pakistani television dramas and films reached a broad audience, particularly online, but their impact on morality and development was mixed. They often emphasized themes of revenge, jealousy, and materialism, which could shape how people think.

Conversely, they rarely encouraged empathy, critical thinking, or awareness of global progress. Given that Pakistan is based on Islamic values, the media has a responsibility to create content that both educates and entertains, a potential that is currently not being fully realized.

Recommendations

- Pakistani media should focus on creating stories that are not only entertaining but also meaningful.
- Drama producers are encouraged to move away from repetitive themes of jealousy, revenge, and family disputes and instead highlight positive values such as empathy, responsibility, and problem-solving.
- The government and media regulators can play a vital role by setting clear guidelines and offering incentives for content that promotes education, morality, and social progress.
- Teachers and civil society should promote media literacy to help people learn to critically evaluate and understand what they watch.
- Future research should include a larger and more diverse audience and compare Pakistani media with international practices to help the industry learn how to balance entertainment with moral and intellectual growth.

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