

Original Article

Higher Education Research & Development Perceptions of Gender Dynamics in Pakistani Dramas Among the Younger Generation.

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Abstract

Background: This study investigates the perceptions of male and female undergraduate and postgraduate students regarding the portrayal of toxic masculinity, misogyny, and abuse in Pakistani television dramas. Pakistani dramas, known for their cultural influence, have faced criticism for reinforcing problematic gender stereotypes. The study, grounded in the recognition of media's impactful role in shaping societal norms, aims to provide insights from the younger generation, both consumers and shapers of cultural narratives.

Methodology: A qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions was adopted. Purposive sampling strategy ensures diversity among 70 participants, encompassing various genders, academic disciplines, and educational levels. Thematic analysis is employed to derive patterns and themes from participants' responses.

Results: The thematic analysis reveals significant findings under three main themes including Perceptions of Gender Roles in Pakistani Dramas, Impact of Media Portrayals on Attitudes and Behaviors and Suggestions for Promoting Healthier Depictions of Relationships.

Conclusion: The study emphasizes the crucial role of media in shaping cultural narratives and societal attitudes. The recommendations provided offer actionable steps for fostering a more inclusive and equitable media environment. As media continues to wield considerable influence, responsible navigation of narratives is essential for promoting a healthier society.

Keywords

Higher Education Research, Gender Dynamics, Pakistani Dramas, Young Generation.

Introduction

The landscape of Pakistani television dramas has long been a powerful medium for cultural expression, entertainment, and storytelling. With loaded narratives, these dramas have played a significant role in shaping societal perceptions, reflecting cultural values, and influencing individual attitudes¹. However, concerns have been raised about the content of Pakistani dramas, particularly regarding the portrayal of toxic masculinity, misogyny, and abuse. Pakistani society is a complex interplay of tradition and modernity, where cultural norms, gender roles, and societal expectations often intertwine. Television dramas, as a reflection of society, possess the potential to either challenge or reinforce existing norms. Over recent years, critics have observed the persistence of certain problematic portrayals, such as the depiction of men as aggressive and domineering figures and women as passive, subservient characters²⁻⁶. This study aims to shed light on how these portrayals are perceived by the younger generation, a demographic that consumes media prolifically and is at a crucial stage in the formation of its own social and cultural values. The rationale behind this research lies in the recognition of the media's influential role in shaping societal norms and individual perspectives. As Pakistani dramas continue to captivate audiences and wield considerable influence, understanding how they contribute to the discourse on gender dynamics is crucial. By gaining insights from the younger generation, who are both consumers and shapers of cultural narratives, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the responsible portrayal of gender in media⁷. The primary objectives of this research are to explore the nuanced perceptions of male and female undergraduate and postgraduate students regarding the portrayal of gender roles in Pakistani television dramas, investigate the impact of these portrayals on societal attitudes and individual behaviors, specifically in relation to toxic masculinity, misogyny, and abuse as well as to provide recommendations for fostering healthier and more responsible depictions of gender dynamics within the Pakistani media industry^{8,9}.

Methodology

The participants were selected purposefully to ensure diversity in terms of gender, academic discipline, and educational level. A total of 70 participants, consisting of 35 male and 35 female undergraduate and postgraduate students, were recruited from various universities across Pakistan. Efforts will be made to include individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds and regions to capture a broad range of perspectives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather detailed and personalized insights into participants' views. Interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions exploring participants' perceptions of gender dynamics in Pakistani dramas, their reactions to specific portrayals, and any observed impact on their own beliefs and behaviors. Focus group discussions were organized to complement the individual interviews, providing an opportunity for participants to engage in dialogue and share diverse opinions. The discussions were moderated using a set of predetermined questions, addressing themes such as the influence of media on societal norms and potential recommendations for change. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and recurring themes within the qualitative data. Data was coded systematically, and themes were generated based on patterns, connections, and variations in participants' responses. Coding and theme development was an iterative process, involving multiple readings of transcripts to ensure accuracy and depth. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study, and their voluntary consent was obtained before participation, their identities kept confidential, and all data anonymized during the analysis and reporting phases. The study's findings may be limited to the perspectives of the selected participants and may not represent the broader population. The influence of other media forms beyond dramas are not explored in this study.

Results

Themes:

The results of the thematic analysis are presented below in a detailed manner, highlighting key

themes and providing representative quotes from study participants.

Theme 1: Perceptions of Gender Roles in Pakistani Dramas.

Traditional Gender Norms:

Many participants expressed concern about the persistent portrayal of traditional gender norms in Pakistani dramas. Female characters were often depicted as dependent on male counterparts, reinforcing stereotypical roles. The participants noted that these portrayals may contribute to a limited understanding of the diverse roles women play in society.

"It's disheartening to see female characters in these dramas always relying on men. It sends the message that a woman's success or happiness depends on a man."

(Female Participant, Postgraduate)

Limited Diversity:

Participants highlighted the limited diversity in gender portrayals, with male characters often embodying hyper-masculine traits, and female characters adhering to conventional roles. This lack of diversity was perceived as contributing to a narrow and unrealistic representation of relationships.

"Why are all the men in these dramas either aggressive or overly romantic? We need more diverse portrayals that reflect the complexity of real-life relationships."

(Male Participant, Postgraduate)

Impact on Identity Formation:

Some participants shared personal reflections on how these portrayals might impact their own identity formation. The concern was that unrealistic expectations set by dramas could influence participants' views on relationships and contribute to the formation of unhealthy relationship norms.

"Growing up watching these dramas, I sometimes catch myself expecting my partner to fit these

dramatic stereotypes. It's not healthy, and I think we need more realistic portrayals."

(Female Participant, Postgraduate)

Theme 2: Impact of Media Portrayals on Attitudes and Behaviors.

Influence on Social Norms:

The majority of participants acknowledged the influential role of media, particularly dramas, in shaping societal norms. Participants believed that these portrayals contribute to the perpetuation of existing gender stereotypes and influence societal attitudes towards gender roles.

"Media is a powerful tool. If it keeps showing one type of relationship, people start thinking that's the norm. It affects how we perceive relationships in real life."

(Male Participant, Postgraduate)

Perceived Acceptance of Toxic Behaviors:

A subset of participants expressed concerns about the normalization of toxic masculinity and abusive behaviors in dramas. They believed that such portrayals might contribute to the acceptance of unhealthy behaviors in real-life relationships, especially among younger audiences.

"When you see the 'hero' constantly behaving in an aggressive manner and the heroine accepting it, it sends the message that it's okay. It's not okay."

(Female Participant, Undergraduate)

Role in Shaping Preferences:

Participants shared insights into how media portrayals influence their personal preferences in relationships. They discussed the potential impact of dramas on shaping expectations and behaviors, highlighting the need for more balanced and realistic portrayals.

"I think the dramas I watched growing up have influenced what I expect in a relationship. It's important for media to show a range of healthy relationships, not just extremes."

(Female Participant, Undergraduate)

Theme 3: Suggestions for Promoting Healthier Depictions of Relationships.

Diverse Storylines:

Participants emphasized the need for diverse storylines that break away from traditional stereotypes. They suggested introducing characters with a range of personalities and relationship dynamics to provide a more realistic and relatable representation.

"We need more variety. Not every story has to revolve around the same stereotypes. Show us different kinds of relationships, different types of men and women."

(Male Participant, Postgraduate)

Media Literacy Programs:

Many participants recommended the implementation of media literacy programs within educational institutions and as public awareness campaigns. They believed that enhancing critical thinking about media content could empower viewers to question and analyze the portrayals they encounter.

"We need to teach people to critically analyze what they watch. Media literacy can help us understand that what we see on TV is not always a reflection of reality."

(Female Participant, Postgraduate)

"It's frustrating to see the same old storylines in every drama. The strong, independent woman is rare. We need more characters who break the mold and show that women can be powerful in their own right."

(Female Participant, Undergraduate)

Industry Accountability:

Participants called for increased accountability within the media industry. They suggested that producers should be more mindful of the potential impact of their content on societal attitudes and should prioritize more responsible storytelling.

"Producers need to realize the influence they have on society. They should be held accountable for the content they put out, especially when it comes to reinforcing harmful stereotypes."

(Male Participant, Postgraduate)

Table 1: Thematic Analysis Codes and Sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-theme	Example Code
Perceptions of Gender Roles	Traditional Gender Norms	TG1: Damsels in Distress
	Limited Diversity	LD2: Lack of Independent Women
Impact of Media Portrayals	Impact on Identity Formation	IF3: Unrealistic Expectations
	Influence on Social Norms	ISN4: Media Shaping Norms
	Perceived Acceptance of Behaviors	PAB5: Acceptance of Toxicity
	Role in Shaping Preferences	RSP6: Media Shaping Preferences
Suggestions for Healthier Depictions	Diverse Storylines	DS7: Need for Diverse Stories
	Media Literacy Programs	MLP8: Promoting Media Literacy
	Industry Accountability	IA9: Holding Industry Accountable

This table provides an organized overview of the thematic analysis codes and sub-themes derived

from the qualitative data collected during the study. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and recurring themes in participants' responses, offering a structured framework for understanding their perspectives on the portrayal of gender roles in Pakistani television dramas.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the perceptions of male and female undergraduate and postgraduate students regarding the normalization and promotion of toxic masculinity, misogyny, and abuse in Pakistani dramas. The discussion will explore the implications of these findings, compare them with existing literature, and propose recommendations for the media industry.

The persistent portrayal of traditional gender norms in Pakistani dramas, as highlighted by the participants, has potential implications for societal attitudes. The reinforcement of stereotypical roles, such as submissive women and hyper-masculine men, may contribute to the perpetuation of rigid gender norms. This, in turn, can influence how individuals perceive their own roles within relationships and society. The impact on identity formation, particularly among the younger audience, is a noteworthy concern. Participants expressed how these portrayals might contribute to unrealistic expectations, influencing their perceptions of self and others. This raises questions about the potential long-term effects on the formation of healthy relationships and the development of gender identity¹⁰⁻¹².

Participants unanimously recognized the influential role of media, especially dramas, in shaping societal norms. The findings align with existing literature that suggests media content plays a significant role in the construction and reinforcement of cultural norms. The concern raised by participants about the potential acceptance of toxic behaviors in real-life relationships reflects the need for a nuanced understanding of media's impact on behavior. The portrayal of aggressive and dominating male characters, often labeled as the 'hero,' raises

questions about the inadvertent promotion of harmful relationship dynamics. The acceptance of such behaviors within the dramatized context may, as participants noted, contribute to a normalization of toxicity in actual relationships^{13,14}.

The participants' reflections on how media portrayals influence their personal preferences in relationships underscore the potential power of media in shaping societal expectations. The study suggests that the media may play a role not only in reflecting existing preferences but also in actively shaping them. This has implications for individuals' attitudes and behaviors, particularly in the context of forming and maintaining relationships. The unanimous call for diverse storylines, featuring a broader range of characters and relationship dynamics, suggests that the media industry can play a crucial role in reshaping societal attitudes. Producers should aim to break away from traditional stereotypes and present narratives that reflect the complexity of real-life relationships. This can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender roles and foster healthier relationship expectations^{4,13}.

The participants' emphasis on the need for media literacy programs aligns with recommendations from scholars advocating for critical media engagement. Integrating media literacy into educational curricula can empower individuals, especially the younger generation, to critically analyze and question the portrayals they encounter. This can enhance their ability to discern between fictional narratives and real-life expectations, promoting a more discerning and informed viewership. The participants' call for increased accountability within the media industry highlights the need for producers to be mindful of the potential impact of their content. Industry stakeholders should engage in ethical storytelling that considers the societal consequences of perpetuating harmful stereotypes. This may involve the establishment of guidelines or self-regulatory measures within the industry to ensure responsible content creation^{10,15}.

Limitations and Future Research

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study, including the potential bias introduced by the purposive sampling method and the focus on a specific demographic. Future research should explore the views of a more diverse sample, including individuals from different age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographical regions. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into the long-term effects of media portrayals on individuals' attitudes and behaviors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the need for a critical examination of media portrayals and their potential impact on societal attitudes and behaviors. The recommendations provided, including the promotion of diverse storytelling, the implementation of media literacy programs, and increased industry accountability, offer actionable steps for fostering a media environment that contributes positively to societal norms and relationships. As media continues to play a significant role in shaping cultural narratives, it is imperative to navigate these narratives responsibly to promote a more inclusive and equitable society.

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