

SCREENED REALITIES: A QUALITATIVE LIBRARY ANALYSIS OF PAKISTANI DRAMAS, CULTURAL TRANSMISSION, AND THEIR PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT ON BEHAVIOR AND MENTAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

Pakistani television dramas play an important role in the cultural and psychological landscape of society, serving not only as entertainment but also as potent agents of socialization. This qualitative library-based study looks at the historical evolution of Pakistani dramas, their role in establishing cultural values, and their psychological effects on behavior, identity formation, and mental health. The project uses thematic analysis of secondary literature written between 2015 and 2026 to investigate portrayals of gender roles, family dynamics, interpersonal interactions, and mental health. The communal nature of television viewing in Pakistani households is highlighted, with families frequently watching programs together to reinforce shared meanings and emotional bonds. The findings show that, whereas traditional dramas promoted social cohesion and moral development, contemporary productions increasingly emphasize sensationalism driven by rating competition, often normalizing toxic behaviors and misrepresenting psychological conditions such as depression and anxiety disorder. The study focuses on dramas' positive and negative psychological impacts, emphasizing their dual function in cultural continuity and distortion. The implications for media control, psychological practice, and cultural reform are addressed.

Keywords: Pakistani television dramas, cultural transmission, psychological impact, mental health, social learning

Introduction

Television dramas in Pakistan have long served as a societal mirror, reflecting cultural values, social institutions, and collective aspirations. Dramas have played an important role in developing

public consciousness and behavioral norms since the beginning of the Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV). Classic productions like Waris, Tanhaiyan, and Dhoop Kinare were not only critically acclaimed, but also culturally

transformational, with narratives based on realism, moral integrity, and social responsibility. These dramas stressed topics like family togetherness, resilience, education, and ethical behavior, which benefited viewers' psychological growth and societal awareness (Ullah, 2024).

On the contrary, the rise of private media channels and growing commercialization has transformed Pakistani television's present landscape. The competition for Television Rating Points (TRPs) recently shifted the focus from meaningful storytelling to sensationalism, which prioritizes dramatic intensity, conflict, and emotional exaggeration in order to catch audience attention (Kim, 2017). This trend has resulted in narratives featuring poisonous relationships, inflexible gender stereotypes, and ethically ambiguous characters, prompting is concerned about the psychological impact on viewers (Luqman, 2025).

One distinctive aspect of Pakistani media consumption is the collective viewing culture, in which families frequently watch dramas together in common spaces. Unlike individualistic media consumption habits found in Western countries, Pakistani households frequently engage in communal viewing experiences, allowing for interactive discussion, emotional sharing, and intergenerational interpretation of information. This joint activity has the potential to improve family relationships and foster a sense of emotional connectivity. However, it also increases the internalization of depicted norms, as continuous exposure in a trusted social setting strengthens belief systems and behaviors (Zahra & Arbab, 2025).

From a psychological point of view, repeated exposure to dramatized narratives shapes cognitive schemas, emotional regulation, and behavioral modeling. According to Social Learning Theory, people learn behaviors by observing and imitating role models. Characters in Pakistani dramas frequently serve as powerful models, and viewers, particularly adolescents and young adults, internalize their actions, attitudes, and emotional expressions (Shabbir et al., 2021). Furthermore, the representation of mental health issues in Pakistani dramas remains a major

concern. Psychological illnesses including depression, trauma, and anxiety are sometimes simplified or exaggerated, resulting in misconceptions and stigma. Such misrepresentations can reduce mental health awareness and prohibit help-seeking behavior in countries where psychological conditions are already stigmatized (Luciano, 2023).

This study aims to present a thorough qualitative evaluation of Pakistani dramas as cultural and psychological phenomena. The study aims to better understand how these narratives change behavior, influence mental health, and contribute to identity formation in the Pakistani cultural context by evaluating their historical evolution, thematic substance, and societal impact.

Literature Review

Historical Evolution of Pakistani Dramas

PTV's early Pakistani dramas were distinguished by their short episode length, good scripting, and meaningful storytelling. These dramas frequently addressed issues in society such as education, class inequalities, and women's rights in modest but influential ways. Audiences were able to connect closely with characters and stories because of their realistic portrayal and slower pacing. Modern dramas, on the other hand, are typically longer, more commercially oriented, and centered on intense emotional experiences. The shift reflects broader socioeconomic trends, such as media privatization and audience fragmentation (Park et al., 2018).

Family Viewing Culture and Social Bonding

In Pakistani culture, watching television is frequently a shared family pastime. This shared experience encourages emotional bonding, debate, and a common interpretation of social standards. Families that watch dramas together can enhance their bonds, generate shared experiences, and provide possibilities for informal learning (Kamal, 2022).

In contrast, if undesirable behaviors are normalized on screen, the same approach can promote problematic fallacies. For instance, harmful marital dynamics may become socially

acceptable if they are frequently depicted and discussed within families.

Social Learning and Behavioral Modeling

According to the Social Learning Theory, viewers frequently imitate and observe the behaviors they see in Pakistani dramas. Characters frequently work as powerful role models, influencing how viewers communicate, resolve conflicts, and express their emotions. The internalization of both adaptive and maladaptive behavioral patterns can result from repeated exposure to such portrayals, especially in adolescents and young adults who are in crucial phases of their social and psychological development (Cherry, 2025; Eman & Azam, 2025).

Rating Race and Commercialization

The increasing competition for Television Rating Points (TRPs) has drastically altered the content and structure of Pakistani dramas. In order to increase audience, producers are increasingly relying on sensationalized storytelling, recurrent plotlines such as love triangles and family conspiracies, and over-dramatization of conflict. This "rating race" frequently moves the attention from meaningful and socially responsible tales to entertainment-driven content, which may jeopardize psychological correctness and contribute to the normalization of exaggerated and, in some cases, dangerous behaviors (Pervaiz, 2023).

In addition, commercial pressures can cause drama serials to be extended beyond their natural narrative arc, resulting in weakened narratives and excessive emotional intensity. This not only decreases the artistic and educational value of dramas, but also exposes viewers to recurring unpleasant themes, which may reinforce incorrect beliefs of reality, relationships, and social standards (Abbas et al., 2022).

Social Norms and Cultural Representation

Pakistani dramas frequently reflect and reinforce cultural norms based on collectivism and patriarchy. According to researches, these dramas operate as informal instructional tools, altering

viewers' perceptions of acceptable behavior (Sarwar et al., 2024). Female characters are frequently portrayed as obedient and selfless, whereas male characters represent authority and control. These representations support rigid gender roles and limit individual freedom.

Gender Roles and Psychological Impact

The portrayal of rigid gender roles has important psychological consequences. Women who are exposed to such narratives may internalize subordinate roles, resulting in lower self-esteem and assertiveness (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Men, on the other hand, may feel pressured to comply to standards of dominance and emotional suppression, making them more vulnerable to stress and emotional dysregulation.

Toxic Relationships and Behavioral Normalization

In Pakistani dramas, toxic behaviors such as jealousy, control, and emotional abuse are regularly romanticized and overly exaggerated. According to social cognitive frameworks, continuous exposure to such tales might normalize unhealthy relationship behaviors (Bandura, 2001). Viewers may begin to interpret these behaviors as expressions of love, prolonging harmful interpersonal relationships.

Mental Health Representation

Additionally, mental health issues are frequently poorly depicted in Pakistani dramas. Conditions such as depression and anxiety are oversimplified or dramatized, creating misconceptions (Abbas et al., 2024). The lack of nuanced depiction reinforces stigma and hinders help-seeking behavior, especially in conservative societies.

Furthermore, Pakistani dramas convey a varied picture of mental health, frequently alternating between sensationalized, inaccurate portrayals and, more lately, sympathetic, well-researched representations. While many dramas promote stigma by portraying mental illness as weakness, retribution for misdeeds, or exaggerated mental health disorders, others, such as *Ranjha Ranjha Kardi* and *Saraab*, have helped raise awareness,

although through flawed portrayals (Dutoya, 2018).

Objectives

- To evaluate the historical development of Pakistani television dramas
- To analyze the role of dramas in shaping cultural norms and family dynamics
- To examine the psychological impact of dramas on behavior and mental health
- To evaluate the influence of rating competition on content quality
- To identify both positive and negative effects of drama consumption

Research Questions

1. How have Pakistani dramas evolved from classical to contemporary form?
2. How does collectivistic family viewing influence psychological and social outcomes?
3. How behavioral and emotional patterns are shaped by drama exposure?
4. How are mental health issues represented, and what are their implications?
5. How does the rating race affect the content and its psychological impact?

Methodology

Research Design

The current study used a qualitative library research design that centered on a systematic review and interpretative synthesis of available material. This approach was deemed appropriate because the study sought to investigate the psychological and cultural influence of Pakistani television shows without gathering primary data. The approach enables for a thorough examination of patterns, meanings, and themes emerging from previously published academic work.

Inclusion Criteria

The study includes studies that met the following criteria:

- Peer reviews journal articles and papers
- Academic Journals
- Published between 2015 to 2026

- Focused on psychology, social science, media, mental health, cultural and behavioral studies
- Included relevant research studies on Pakistani society or comparable collectivist cultures.

Exclusion Criteria

The following sources were excluded:

- Non academic journals (e.g. blogs, opinions, social media posts & websites)
- Studies published before 2015 unless useful
- Research that are not related to psychology, mental health, media or culture
- Duplicate or inaccessible full articles

Data Analysis Approach

The study used reflexive theme analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to identify and comprehend reoccurring patterns in the selected literature. This technique allows for a flexible yet methodical assessment of themes concerning the psychological and cultural influence of Pakistani dramas.

1. Familiarization with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Constructing themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Ethical Consideration

Because this study relied exclusively on previously published data, no direct interaction with human participants was involved. Nevertheless, ethical norms were adhered to by:

- Properly citing all sources in APA 7 format
- Avoiding plagiarism through synthesis and paraphrasing and proper in-text citations
- Ensuring accurate representation of original other's findings

Rigor and Trustworthiness

- Multiple databases were used to ensure data diversity

- Inclusion and exclusion criteria were strictly followed
- Findings were cross-checked across multiple sources

- A transparent and systematic analytical process was maintained

Table 1

Thematic Analysis of Pakistani Dramas and Their Psychological Impacts

Themes	Description
Themes 1: Reinforcement of Patriarchal Norms	Dramas consistently portray male dominance and female submissiveness, reinforcing societal power imbalances.
Theme 2: Normalization of Emotional Suppression	Male characters are rarely shown expressing emotions or vulnerability, promoting unhealthy emotional regulation strategies.
Theme 3: Romanticization of Toxicity	Abusive and toxic behaviors are frequently presented as love, which influences viewers' relationship expectations.
Theme 4: Distorted Mental Health Narratives	Inaccurate mental health representations contribute to stigma, fear and misinformation.
Theme 5: Identity Shaping and Self Perception	Dramas depict unattainable standards that have an impact on self-esteem and identity formation.

Table 1 depicts the key themes identified through qualitative synthesis, and the following are detailed interpretations of each of each theme within the cultural and psychological context of Pakistani culture.

Themes 1: Reinforcement of Patriarchal Norms

Pakistani plays consistently depict male dominance and female submissiveness, supporting deeply rooted patriarchal norms in society. These representations frequently follow traditional societal expectations, with men positioned as decision-makers and authoritative figures, and women portrayed as obedient, self-sacrificing, and emotionally resilient in the face of tragedy. Within a collectivist cultural framework, such depictions are not just fictional, but also resonate with actual social standards, hence increasing viewer internalization (Tabassum & Amin, 2023).

From the point of view of psychology, repeated exposure to these dynamics may contribute to the formation of gendered cognitive schemas, in which women internalize lower self-worth and assertiveness while men feel compelled to maintain dominance and emotional control (Latki et al., 2023). However, it is vital to note that certain dramas include strong female characters who challenge repressive standards,

fostering empowerment and societal awareness. Thus, while patriarchal reinforcement can have a negative impact on mental health by perpetuating inequality and emotional suppression, selective progressive narratives can work as catalysts for beneficial cultural change.

Theme 2: Normalization of Emotional Suppression

Male characters in Pakistani dramas are usually shown as emotionally withdrawn, with few displaying vulnerability or mental distress. This normalizing of emotional repression is consistent with cultural ideals of masculinity, as emotional expression is frequently associated with weakness. According to Social Learning Theory, viewers, especially young men, may emulate similar tendencies, resulting to issues in emotional regulation and communication (Cherry, 2025; Akers, 2017). Over time, this can lead to increasing stress, anxiety, and unresolved psychological concerns, since people may resist seeking help for fear of being judged. In family viewing circumstances, these depictions are reinforced further by group approval, making emotional suppression look socially desirable. On the plus side, certain current dramas have begun to portray male sensitivity and emotional transparency, which can help mainstream healthy

emotional expression and eliminate stigma surrounding mental health. Nonetheless, the mainstream narrative continues to encourage stoicism, which could have long-term consequences for psychological well-being in Pakistani culture.

Theme 3: Romanticization of Toxicity

The romanticization of toxic behaviors is a common theme in Pakistani plays, with actions like jealousy, control, manipulation, and even emotional abuse portrayed as manifestations of love. This image has a tremendous impact on viewers' impressions of relationships, especially in a cultural environment where media serves as the primary means of social learning. Repeated exposure to such tales might cause people to accept problematic relationship dynamics, thus increasing tolerance for abusive behavior (Sadeeqa, 2025). Psychologically, this could lead to the development of insecure attachment styles, mistaken perceptions about love, and issues setting appropriate interpersonal boundaries. In collectivist family systems, where marriage and connections are extremely valuable, these depictions can have long-term consequences, molding expectations and actions throughout generations. However, several modern dramas have begun to counter these tendencies by emphasizing the effects of toxic relationships while simultaneously advocating self-respect and autonomy. As a result, although romanticizing poison offers considerable hazards to mental health and relational well-being, shifting narratives provide opportunities for corrective impact on society.

Theme 4: Distorted Mental Health Narratives

The portrayal of mental health issues in Pakistani dramas can frequently be inaccurate, oversimplified, and dramatized, which contributes to pervasive stigma and misconceptions. Conditions like depression and anxiety disorder are frequently portrayed in excessive or unrealistic ways, with mental illness being associated with violence or instability. Such representations can alter public perception and dissuade people from seeking professional care for fear of being labeled or socially rejected

(Nawaz et al, 2023). In a society where mental health awareness is already lacking, these depictions might perpetuate misconceptions and hinder progress toward psychological well-being. However, some current shows have made a progressive turn toward more sensitively addressing mental health concerns, raising awareness and fostering dialogue. Positive depictions can play an important role in decreasing stigma and encouraging help-seeking behavior. Overall, while distorted narratives persist, the increasing inclusion of truthful and sympathetic representations points to a positive future for media's involvement in mental health promotion.

Theme 5: Identity Shaping and Self-Perception

Pakistani dramas influence viewers' identities and self-perceptions by promoting idealized norms of beauty, success, and social behavior. Characters are frequently depicted with idealized physical features, opulent lifestyles, and socially desirable characteristics, which might impact viewers' self-esteem and goals. From a psychological aspect, such exposure may result in decreased self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and identity uncertainty, especially among young viewers who are still developing their self-concept (Umer et al., 2024). These portrayals can increase pressure to conform to idealized norms in Pakistani culture, where society approval and family expectations are heavily influenced. At the same time, dramas can serve as excellent role models and motivate human growth by demonstrating resilience, ambition, and moral integrity. As a result, while the impact on identity development can be both positive and negative, the overall influence is determined by the structure of the narratives and the viewer's critical interaction with media-related content.

Discussion

The findings of the research show that Pakistani dramas function as potent socio-psychological instruments that both develop and sustain cultural realities. In the past, dramas like Tanhaiyan and Dhoop Kinare encouraged resilience, knowledge, and emotional intelligence,

all of which were beneficial to the advancement of society. These stories promoted healthy psychological development by providing viewers with positive role models and a realistic foundation.

On the other hand, modern dramas show a move toward commercialization and content creation that is motivated by competitiveness. Sensational stories that frequently feature conflict, betrayal, and extreme emotions have become more important due to the growing emphasis on TRPs. Such content may increase viewer interest, but it also helps normalize maladaptive behaviors, especially in interpersonal relationships (Abbas & Mahmood, 2021).

Another level of complexity is added by the social aspect of television viewing in Pakistani households. Watching dramas together can foster emotional closeness and shared understanding, reinforcing family cohesion. However, it additionally promotes a potent environment for the spread of social norms, where frequent exposure to problematic narratives can influence attitudes and beliefs on a personal and societal level (Tariq & Husnain, 2025).

From a clinical perspective, the misrepresenting of mental health concerns is especially troubling. When conditions are portrayed incorrectly, they add to stigma and ignorance, deterring people from seeking professional care. At the same time, dramas have the ability to serve as conversations for mental health awareness if handled properly (Abbas et al., 2024).

Additionally, Pakistani dramas exist in a constantly shifting equilibrium between tradition and modernity. A few pieces challenge society customs and promote progressive ideas, while others perpetuate old beliefs and stereotypes. This duality reflects deeper cultural changes in Pakistani society (Naz & Ameer, 2022).

Conclusion

Pakistani dramas have a strong cultural and psychological impact on society's behavior, identity, and mental health. Their impact has increased by group viewing patterns and commercial pressures. While they have the ability to effect positive social change, there is an urgent

need for ethical storytelling that balances enjoyment with psychological and cultural integrity. By combining traditional family values with current settings, these dramas create identity and behavioral patterns, particularly among young, while also serving as a double-edged sword for mental health and societal norms.

Implications

- Media policy and regulations
- Mental health awareness
- Cultural and psychological research
- Clinical practice (understanding influence of media of people)

Recommendations

- Involve psychologist and mental health experts in script and story development
- Promote accurate mental health representations
- Regulate excessive sensationalism driven by TRPs
- Encourage content that balances entertainment with education
- Develop public media literacy programs

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