

Audience Perception of Social Issues Portrayed in Contemporary Pakistani Television Dramas: A Quantitative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: Study was aimed to explore the correlation between responding to Pakistani television dramas and an audience's estimation of the realism, awareness and comprehension of social issues.

Methodology: Using a quantitative approach, this study investigates how viewers' perceptions of societal concerns are affected by their exposure to Pakistani television shows. A total of (n=342) respondents, all of whom were 18 years of age or older, were given a structured questionnaire to determine how often they watched dramas and how they felt about the realism, optimism, and awareness-raising potential of the social concerns shown. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, one-sample t-tests, and linear regression were used to analyze the data.

Findings: The findings showed a strong positive correlation between audience perception and drama exposure, especially when it came to perceived realism and social consciousness. Despite having a tiny effect size, regression analysis showed that exposure significantly influenced audience impression. Education and gender also surfaced as relevant demographic factors influencing perception.

Conclusion: The study comes to the conclusion that viewers' perceptions of societal concerns are shaped by Pakistani television shows in a subtle but significant way. These results highlight how crucial content realism and media accountability are to promoting educated public conversation.

Keywords: Exposure, Societal Issues, Audience Perception, Television Plays, Pakistani Media, Theories of Cultivation, and Quantitative Analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Media, and most especially television dramas, have always been a strong influence on shaping the opinion of the public, cultural norms, and social issues as raised within a particular society. Indeed, television dramas have provided much entertainment for the Pakistani people, with a much stronger social commentary and awareness further than just their entertainment value (Abbas & Mahmood, 2021). Some of the major issues being faced in Pakistan, apart from storytelling, by dramas these days are domestic violence, gender inequality, child abuse, mental health, and changes in family dynamics (Umer, Butt, &

Sohail, 2024). As the socio-political fabric of Pakistan changes with time, the stories that are being told through the dramas increasingly resemble present-day realities, so that one can study how the audience perceives and thus internalizes these stories (Safdar et al., 2022; Safdar et al., 2018; Shabir et al., 2013).

Audience perception would certainly be an important component of media studies around the world as far as social issues representation goes. Cultivation theory states that viewing television for longer durations affects people's perception of reality on its content (Qayyoom & Khan, 2021). In Pakistan, with an extensive spread of viewership of television amongst the people in urban and semi-urban communities, it has been significant as well as nuanced in the way dramas affect societal perceptions. It remains important to study the frequency of audiences watching dramas along with their attitudes and perceptions in the context of the sensitive socio-cultural situation of the country, to see how these narratives shape their attitudes and understanding of serious and extreme social problems (Safdar et al., 2016; Shabir et al., 2015).

Previous studies have regarded the dynamics of television dramas in Pakistan from various angles. For example, divorce has been studied (Abbas & Mahmood, 2021), liberalism (Manzoor, Jabeen & Hanif, 2018), extramarital relations (Arafat, Sial & Zafar, 2020), marginalized voices that face violence (Ullah, Saeed & Sarhadi, 2024), and the representation of women (Tariq & Husnain, 2025). While such studies have tended to focus on themes or content analysis, not many have ventured into quantitative assessments of how audience perceptions associate with certain dimensions-global like realism, positivity, and influence over social awareness.

Perceived realism for social issues is how well audiences find the issues dramatized in dramas. Cultivation theory propounds that frequent viewing of television narratives eventually leads to what is termed "mainstreaming," whereby those heavy viewers will come to believe that the television representation is a reality distinct from their lives (Qayyoom & Khan, 2021). Within a Pakistani context, where things like honor killing, gender discrimination, and much more sensitive cultural taboos prevail, audience perceptions regarding the realism would significantly shape the contents of their reactions towards and association with such things.

The other significant aspect is a clear positive representation of social issues, as some dramas highlight the societal problems, while others showcase it from a constructive lens-emphasizing on, emphasizing resilience, change, and empowerment instead of hopelessness and despair (Ejaz et al., 2023). Positive representation is very important in bringing social change as it identifies issues and provides the audience with some hopeful and possible solutions. Thus, it is vital to understand whether the audiences can recognize and value such positivity to evaluate the broad social impact of television dramas (Shabir et al., 2015a; Safdar et al., 2015).

The effects of social awareness become the third dimension under consideration in the study. Dramatic productions increase the audience in their dimensions understanding the audience has of societal issues, and the more sensitive they become to them. Such research came as Waheed and Saima (2021) have suggested that exposure to dramas revolving around issues like child abuse and transgender rights can shape hearts and minds towards topics that have been largely neglected.

There are gaps in the literature that this study seeks to fill. Although several qualitative assessments have sought to explore the content of dramas, for instance, those of Zeb, Khan, & Ajmal (2021) and Shahwar & Eijaz (2025), little has been ventured in audience interpretation and perception in terms of quantitative examinations. One of the most glaring gaps in this arena is integrated assessment, which is concerning perceived realism, positive representation, and influence on social awareness, where audience responses to these dimensions are examined as audience responses to television dramas. This study thus aims to fill the gap quantitatively and analyze audience perceptions, namely, frequent exposure to Pakistani dramas and correlations against these dimensions.

With the increasing diversity of drama content from commercialized tales of urban experiences to socially aware storytelling contemporary Pakistani drama industry offers a wealth of research opportunities. Increased reach to local content through satellite channels and digital streaming makes it increasingly critical to appreciate audience perception of social messages carried in these dramas. Moreover, significant generational and cultural shifts occur within Pakistani society. A younger audience introduced to both traditional and modern narratives may view drama content differently than the elder generation (Nazir, Ali, & Farooq, 2019). Meaning that studying audience perception is not only significant to media research but also presents useful information for policymakers, media producers, and social activists wishing to engage the media for societal development.

Therefore, it intends to look, in a quantitative manner, at how exposure to Pakistani dramas compares to audience perceptions concerning the following three dimensions: perceived realism of social issues, positive representation of societal challenges, and awareness-raising potential. This in itself is a window to appreciate the role media plays in shaping societal attitudes and perceptions in Pakistan.

1.1 Problem Statement

While television dramas hold an important place in Pakistani society, little quantitative research has analyzed the influence of exposure to such dramas on audiences' perception of social issues. The majority of the existing research limits itself to content analysis or narrative critique rather than investigating the audience empirically. Thus, gaining insight into whether audiences believe these portrayals to be realistic, whether they see it in a positive light, and to what extent these dramas are responsible for raising social awareness becomes crucial.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This research fills the existing gap in the literature on media effects that looks at the cognitive and emotional responses of audience members to social issues read through the lenses of Pakistani dramas. It fills up critical gaps in local media studies by concentrating on quantitative measures of audience perceptions concerning realism, positivity, and awareness. Therefore, those results might help drama producers design their productions to provide entertainment but in a responsible way that shapes public consciousness.

1.3 Objectives of the Research

- To find out the correlation between responding to Pakistani television dramas and an audience's estimation of the realism of social issues.
- To measure the effect of Pakistani television dramas on the audience's awareness and comprehension of social issues.

1.4 Research Questions

- To what extent does exposure to Pakistani television dramas correlate with audience perception regarding the realism of social issues?
- To what extent have Pakistani television dramas influenced the awareness and understanding of the audience regarding societal issues?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

For a long time now, audience perception has been at the heart of most media and communication studies, especially when evaluating the societal attitudes, awareness, and behavior that certain televised content might inspire. Earlier studies often discussed how television dramas could subtly influence social change; they helped frame public understanding of key social systems or societal values. Charmaraman (2007), for instance, found that portrayals of marriage, family roles, and occupation in Thai television dramas significantly shaped adolescent viewers' perceptions about several other social attributes and expectations.

This work laid early foundations for considering how fictionalized content works to trigger cognitive and emotional responses within the viewer toward society.

With time, academics started to investigate how accurately and deeply such characters were depicted. In their study, Black and Barnes (2015) showed that exposure to award-winning television dramas improved the public's theory of mind and increased their understanding of people's emotions and inner motivations. By association, this result grounded studies of viewer perceptions in the theory that the presence of realism in media strengthens cognitive empathy. In line with this, Cambra-Badii et al. (2021) looked at how health sciences students engaged with medical dramas and stated that no matter their fictional status, such programs were influential in shaping professional ethics and bioethical learning. Such results are evidence that viewers perceive television programs as realistic sources of information. There is a considerable amount of research in Pakistan that analyzes the social impact of Urdu television dramas on difficult or contested subjects. Abbas and Mahmood (2021) looked at the frequent presentation of divorce in Urdu dramas and noticed that audiences' ideas about marriage and marital stability could be altered. The study by Siddiqui and Hussain (2023) indicates that chronic dramatization of divorce episodes on television contributed to lessening the stigma associated with it. Accordingly, these findings coincide with the sub-variable of perceived realism, as repeated exposure changed viewers' perceptions of real-world families.

As part of their study, Arafat et al. (2020) addressed dramas with themes of extra-marital affairs, stating that such narratives aim to convey moral lessons. In parallel, Qaiser et al. (2024) revealed that young people may develop their notions of family based on how family issues are represented in realistic dramas. Researchers in several studies have examined how dramas keep or revise traditional beliefs. Manzoor, Jabeen, and Hanif (2018) argue, in their feminist-oriented cultivation study, that frequent viewing of shows featuring strong and confident women increased the audience's support for gender equality. Ejaz et al. (2023) argued that the storytelling in dramas can either highlight or undermine patriarchal norms, which then changes viewers' gender-related opinions. Even though several experts hypothesize that innovative narratives can change cultural norms, Tariq and Husnain (2025) noticed that such dramas do not fully move away from traditional gender portrayals. According to the findings, viewers can pick up on intricate and mildly presented narratives.

How marginalized communities were shown in media greatly contributed to viewers' changing attitudes. In their study, Ullah et al. (2024) discovered that while the inclusion of violent content toward transgender people increased the audience's empathy, repeated stereotyped depictions reduced prospects for Waheed and Saima (2021) pointed out that dramas most often assign these characters to victim roles, which prevents more thought-provoking and influential portrayals. In this light, positive representation meant ensuring depth as well as respect in the representation of minorities. Audience reactions are also important because they contribute to raising social awareness. According to Liu et al. (2020), the analysis of audience opinions showed that dramas frequently motivated viewers to talk about social matters and, as a result, contributed to greater social value. Kamal (2022) pointed out that stories dealing with child molestation help young audiences recognize and react to these issues more effectively. Zeb et al. (2021) drew attention to the fact that dramas treating domestic violence prompted individuals to feel more comfortable discussing once-sensitive issues, which reflects a strong association between the exploration of such content in drama and a wider social consciousness.

Several scholars have conveyed concern about how social realities are sometimes depicted exaggeratedly. Shah (2021) argued that the way black magic is exaggerated in Urdu dramas could strengthen irrational viewpoints. Zulfiqar and Hafeez (2023) pointed out that persistent representation of rigid masculine and gender dynamics in drama may strengthen detrimental societal frameworks. The scholars were in favor of stories that strike a careful balance to avoid both over-dramatization and trivialization of sensitive subjects. Nazir et al. (2019) argued that dramas shown at prime time often make reality seem more dramatic than it is, hence shifting how viewers understand the world. Shahwar and Eijaz (2025) argued that the identification of religious and cultural themes was selective, which may influence viewers'

perspectives to be limited or prejudiced. Pájé's (2024) research looked at how legal dramas shape people's understanding of sexual violence. It was shown through the study that viewers use television stories as sources for their attitudes on justice and legal responsibility. This illustrated the sub-variable of influence on social awareness, stressing how dramatic content affects people's moral judgment and civic understanding.

Previous studies suggest that audience perceptions of Pakistani television dramas are largely affected by how realistic, positive, and informative they seem about society's issues they seem. On the whole, most of the published studies relied on qualitative techniques like analyzing content or discourse. To address this research gap, the present study used a quantitative method to analyze the link between watching Pakistani dramas and how adults in Pakistan perceive realism, representation, and awareness.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Cultivation Theory, put forward by Gerbner and Gross in 1976, formed the basis for this study. Cultivation Theory says that regular viewing of television programs can influence how viewers see the world around them. According to the theory, those who watch more television are more prone to view the actual world according to the recurring themes and ideas portrayed most frequently on TV. Cultivation Theory about Pakistani television dramas propose that repeated viewing of dramatized social situations may influence viewers' views about reality, positivity, and social awareness. Morgan and Shanahan (2010) argued that watching television serves to influence social norms, beliefs, and how audiences comprehend societal problems. As a result, Cultivation Theory served as an appropriate lens for this study by showing how habitual viewing of Pakistani dramas may change viewers' perceptions of how societal issues are presented.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study uses a quantitative, descriptive survey to analyze how Pakistani television drama viewers perceive the representation of social issues. The study selected quantitative methods to ensure that data from questionnaires could be measured and analyzed. The chosen design made it possible to examine connections between the extent of drama viewership and audience perception in regards to realism, positive image, and influence on social consciousness (Creswell, 2014).

3.1 Population and Sample

The study's population involved adults who were 18 or older and had previous experience of watching Pakistani television dramas. Inclusion in the sample was limited to respondents who watch Pakistani dramas without regard for their watching frequency. Those who had no experience with Pakistani dramas were not allowed to participate. Minors under 18 were excluded since they usually do not have independent access to the digital devices required to respond to the online questionnaire. In addition, making this decision helped to ensure that only individuals with independent access to the internet and the necessary cognitive ability took part. A purposive sampling technique was used in the study to recruit 350 individuals. Purposive sampling was chosen because it helped to approach and include only those participants who met the inclusion requirements. having reached the age of 18, having prior experience with Pakistani TV dramas, and having the skill to complete the online survey. This method of sampling aided the researcher in collecting the needed and informative data for this study.

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Data collection relied solely on a structured questionnaire dispensed through Google Forms. Each question in the questionnaire had five possible responses on a Likert scale and was designed to examine audience opinions on three sub-dimensions. realism, favorability, and the effect on social awareness.

Before beginning the form, respondents were told about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality in their data. Participation was entirely voluntary. Data collection over the internet allowed more people from various places to participate, and it was completed within the allocated time frame.

3.3 Data Analysis Techniques

The data were coded and entered into SPSS for appropriate analysis afterward. To summarize the demographic details and ways in which participants were exposed, descriptive statistics were adopted, showing frequencies, means, and standard deviations of the data. In order to study the connection between drama exposure and audiences' perceptions of several sub-variables, both Pearson correlation analysis and linear regression analysis were employed (Field, 2013).

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Adherence to ethical principles was maintained in all parts of the research that involved people. All participants were told before taking part that their involvement in the study is voluntary, their data will remain confidential, and what the research aimed to accomplish. No participants' data were obtained, and the data were restricted to academic contexts as required by research ethics (Bryman, 2016).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The sample characteristics are shown in Table 1 (N = 342). Most of the respondents were female (76.9%), and males accounted for 23.1%. Most participants were in the 18–25 age range (71.1%), and the next largest group was those between 26 and 30 years (26.3%). Just 2.6% of participants were ages 36 through 40, and nobody was over 40 or younger than 31. About 45% of those surveyed had received a Master's degree or higher, 24.9% had a Bachelor's degree, 17.3% completed Intermediate, and 12.9% said they had only Matric.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 342)

Sr. No	Questions	Options	f	%
1	What is your gender?	Male	79	23.1
		Female	263	76.9
		18-25	243	71.1
		26-30	90	26.3
2	What is your age?	31-35	0	0.0
		36-40	9	2.6
		41+	0	0.0
		Matric	44	12.9
3	What is your education?	Intermediate	59	17.3
		Bachelor	85	24.9
		Master & above	154	45.0

4.2 Correlational Analysis

The relationships among gender, age and education, watching Pakistani dramas and the audience's view of social issues were investigated using correlation coefficients. As age rose, there was a significant negative change in gender ($r = -.527, p < .01$), but gender had a significant positive tie with education ($r = .674, p < .01$). Being male was linked to more favorable audience recognition ($r = .366, p < .01$), but to less drama exposure ($r = -.137, p < .05$). A strong connection was found between the amount of education and how people perceive the news ($r = .226, p < .01$). Importantly, watching dramas showed a very slight but statistically significant link with Perception ($r = .126, p < .05$).

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix among Key Variables (N = 342)

	1	2	3	4	6
Gender	1	-.527**	.674**	-.137*	.366**
Age		1	-.228**	.064	-.215**
Education			1	-.012	.226**
TV Dramas (IV)				1	.126*
Audience Perception about Social Issues (DV)					1

** .01 level (2-tailed), * .05 level (2-tailed)

4.3 One-Sample t-Test

A single sample t-test was used to see if the mean values for exposure (TV dramas IV) and audience perception (audience perception about social issues DV) differ significantly from zero. Results indicated that, for both exposure and audience perception, the mean score was much greater than zero: exposure (M = 4.59, $t(341) = 51.35$, $p < .001$); audience perception (M = 36.84, $t(341) = 105.76$, $p < .001$). Both variables had strong 95% confidence intervals, which confirmed the findings.

Table 3: One-Sample t-Test Results for Main Variables

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
TV Dramas	51.350	341	.000	4.58772	4.4120	4.7634
Public Perception about Social Issues	105.756	341	.000	36.84211	36.1569	37.5273

4.4 Regression Analysis

To observe if exposure to Pakistani TV dramas affects what people think about social matters, a linear regression analysis was run. The model achieved significance, $t(341) = 2.334$ and $p = .020$. The regression coefficient for exposure (main_IV) was 0.490 with an SE of 0.210, so each step increase in exposure leads to a 0.49 increase in perception scores. The study showed a small impact of beta ($\beta = 0.126$). The confidence interval in our findings added to the reliability of our estimate. These results demonstrate that exposure to social issue-based dramas influences how viewers view different social issues.

Table 4: Linear Regression Coefficients Predicting Audience Perception (main_DV)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error				Beta	Lower Bound
1	(Constant)	34.596	1.023		33.824	.000	32.584	36.608
	main_IV	.490	.210	.126	2.334	.020	.077	.902

5. DISCUSSION

This research aimed to look at how Pakistani dramas might influence viewers' understanding of social issues. Many of the results showed important links between people's media use and their social perceptions. A small and significant positive relationship was found between drama exposure and

audience perception, as confirmed by correlation analysis ($r = .126, p < .05$). Exposure to social issue-based TV dramas seems to increase people's attention to these issues.

Gerbner and Gross's theory (1976) makes the same point: repeated viewing of the same type of media can alter how individuals perceive their surroundings. The findings of the current study agree with the theory by showing that television dramas help form viewers' views on society. Analysis of regression showed that dramas were found to strongly correlate with audience perception, with a beta coefficient of $\beta = 0.126$ ($p = .020$). Even a small amount of exposure seemed to impact the audience's explanation and view of common societal matters. It confirms previous studies by Abbas and Mahmood (2021) and Arafat et al. (2020), who noted how Urdu dramas shape thoughts and perspectives on families, males and females, and societal customs.

It was revealed by the t-test that both exposed and perceived variables scored much higher than the mean, confirming that many people in the study group interacted with drama social themes. These high mean values reflect recent findings by Liu et al. in 2020 and Zulfiqar & Hafeez in 2023 that indicate more audience awareness and concern for domestic violence, gender inequality, and child abuse resulting from what they see on programming. What's more, the demographic data sheds extra light on the statistics. The results indicate that females responded better to the social messages delivered in dramas ($r = .366, p < .01$). This can reveal that these issues better appeal to female audiences and can bring up stronger emotions in them. Moreover, higher levels of education were correlated with better ability to identify or grasp the social narratives shown ($r = .226, p < .01$).

Even so, some findings were not as reliable as others. The reliability for the Positive Representation part ($\alpha = 0.555$) was below the required value and which could suggest that a few items were understood differently than intended. So, it makes clear why we need better measurement tools for future studies.

The results show that Pakistani dramas play a real part in guiding their audiences to become aware of social issues. Although it is not major, the effect is supported and backed up by solid theory. The findings point out that people working in television need to understand media and present sensitive and truthful accounts of social matters.

6. CONCLUSION

It was examined whether adult audiences in Pakistan see social issues differently after watching Pakistani dramas on television. Responses were collected for the research from 342 individuals using a structured questionnaire. Although the result was modest, the research did find that drama viewing helped audiences perceive social issues positively, especially when it came to realism, awareness, and some positive representation.

Researchers found that dramas strongly influenced how viewers saw various social problems, which supports the basic ideas from cultivation theory. Gender and the level of education among the audience were important factors affecting these opinions. Resonance with social themes was common among female and educated respondents, yet how much a person watched still played a role in attitudes.

Television dramas, according to the study, do more than keep us entertained; they teach about society through their stories. Because an important sub-variable scores poorly on reliability, maturing the tools to assess food safety should continue. In general, the outcomes show that television drama can add value to how people in society understand key social issues. It seems from these results that shared stories and true-to-life portrayals can raise people's awareness and help create changes in society.

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Conflict of Interest

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