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PORTRAYAL OF MALE PROTAGONIST AND MASCULINITY IN PAKISTANI DRAMAS

Corresponding & Author 1:	MAIRA MAQSOOD , M. Phil Scholar, Department of Communication and Media Studies, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan. Email mairamaqsood10@gmail.com , ORCID ID: https://orcid.org.0009-0004-0619-6750
Author 2:	Dr. Shazia Hashmat , Assistant Professor, Department of Communication and Media Studies, FJWU, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan. Email Address: Shazia.hashmat@fjwu.edu.pk ORCID ID: https://orcid.org.0009-0002-3384-670X

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Abstract

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In Pakistan's drama industry an iterative incessant pattern has been followed in the portrayal of a stereotypical male-dominated society, where men solely exercise complete power and women endure various forms of maltreatment, oppression, and discrimination, including abuse, blackmail, and sexual violence inflicted upon them by men (Tabassum & Amin, 2020). This study delved into the dynamics of masculinity and the portrayal of male protagonists. The study examined the current trends in portraying male protagonists in Pakistani dramas. It was also interpreted as how masculinity is portrayed in Pakistani dramas through the characters of male protagonists. A qualitative content analysis was conducted using non-probability purposive sampling. Dramas of the last 3 years were analyzed (Using IMDB Ratings and YouTube views). Dramas with over 7 points rating out of 10 on IMDB and over 20 million YouTube Views were selected. One drama of each year was selected with high viewership and showed an unconventional male protagonist. A total of 128 episodes of 3 dramas were taken as a sample. After analyzing all the results, it was concluded that famous Pakistani dramas with high viewership and ratings set some harmful trends and examples in the entertainment industry. They promote unrealistic physical standards, emotional suppression and shallowness, and aggressive and violent nature in the portrayal of male protagonists by glamorizing them with the unethical use of power and wealth. This research will open new venues for researchers to investigate the emerging dynamics in the Pakistani drama industry.

Keywords: Protagonist, Masculinity, Gender, Portrayal, Representation.

Introduction

The portrayal of gender in Pakistan's drama industry has been evolving and revolutionizing over the past several years (Mushtaq, Shah, & Naureen, 2021). This transmutation and reconfiguration have been adored, relished, and found delightful by drama audiences (Nasir, Zia, & Arshad, 2023). The audience finds pleasure in watching, perceiving, discussing, and retaining the narratives portrayed in these dramas in their real lives (Malik, 2020). An emerging trend in Pakistani dramas has been witnessed that gives a kickoff launch to an unconventional male protagonist. Who manifests unorthodox traits, showing a combination of dominance, cruelty, abuse, playboy behavior, and a privileged lifestyle marked by wealth and attractive appearance. But in its total disparity, women are depicted as shy, timid, and innocent who passively tolerate the toxic behavior of men (Noor, 2022). It is the need of the hour for the drama industry to lock onto the storyline, narratives, virtues, standards, values, and thoughts they're transmitting into society. It has been noticed that research on female characters in Pakistani dramas is more frequent but research on male characters is in its infancy. Much of the existing research on masculinity in dramas has predominantly focused on Western contexts. Discussions of masculinity need to be reconsidered through a critical examination of the global economy of knowledge (Cheng, 2019; Connell, 2014; Rahman, 2016; Saikia, 2017). There is a need for more studies that explore masculinity in non-Western cultural contexts (Mutua, 2018) Therefore, this study is going to examine the new unconventional trends in portraying male protagonists in Pakistani dramas that can influence the gender role perceptions and individual behaviors of audiences in society. This study is going to conduct a content analysis of famous Pakistani dramas aired in the last 3 years portraying unconventional

male protagonists, to evaluate the new trends prevailing in the Pakistani drama industry.

Problem Statement

There should be some stipulations and principles to outlaw and censor portrayals that promote toxic detrimental traits and crimes by gold-plating them into the beauty, wealth, and power of an unconventional protagonist. The harmful and pernicious gender stereotypes and behaviors not only limit the potential of true progress but also raise questions about the impact on the audience and the overall core message being conveyed. Therefore, it is a critical need to analyze and address the unconventional trends in the Pakistani drama industry. And for that, there should be proper studies and research to highlight such portrayals, augmentation, and promotion of such characters in Pakistani dramas.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the current trends in portraying male protagonists in Pakistani dramas (Aye Musht e Khaak, Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi, Tere Bin).
2. To interpret how Pakistani dramas (Aye Musht e Khaak, Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi, Tere Bin) are portraying masculinity.
3. To examine whether boundaries between positive characters and negative characters blurring in Pakistani dramas (Aye Musht e Khaak, Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi, Tere Bin).

Research Questions

1. What are the present trends in portraying male protagonists in Pakistani dramas (Aye Musht e Khaak, Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi, Tere Bin)?
2. How are Pakistani dramas (Aye Musht e Khaak, Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi, Tere Bin) portraying masculinity?
3. How Pakistani dramas (Aye Musht e Khaak, Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi, Tere Bin) are using heroic and anti-heroic approaches for protagonists?
4. Are boundaries between positive protagonists and negative protagonists blurring in Pakistani dramas (Aye Musht e Khaak, Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi, Tere Bin)?

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to the advocacy of gender equality by highlighting how media representations can reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles. It will also help the media regulatory authorities such as PEMRA to make rules and laws for banning such portrayals in dramas that can cause societal issues and promote problematic behaviors like women abuse, toxic masculinity, kidnapping, and forced marriages. It may inform policymakers about the need for guidelines and regulations to promote responsible and inclusive content creation in media. This will ensure the development of policies aimed at reducing the impact of toxic masculinity in society through media. It will also help drama makers to understand the flaws in the industry and to improve storyline and content creation. The findings of the research may help them to promote more empowering and diverse portrayals of male protagonists. This study will also be a needed addition to the literature to deeply understand the trends, problems, and flaws in the Pakistani drama industry.

Literature review

The complex mix of ideologies, behaviors, actions, values, virtues, and norms that are interconnected socially with the idea of being male is perceived as Masculinity and is opposite to the idea of femininity (Waling, 2019). The concept of Toxic masculinity was introduced by a pioneer Dr. Bliss in the 1980s. He initiated the Mythopoetic Men's Movement to liberate and unburden men from societal expectations referring to masculinity in the contemporary world (Roberts, 2019). According to Oxford University Press, the Word of the Year 2018 was "Toxic". It has been more frequently searched with a rise of 45% on oxforddictionaries.com (Albrecht, 2020). In the earlier times of Pakistan's drama industry, the drama makers used to deliberately focus and chose topics based on the social dilemmas and changing behaviors in society (Butt, Abbas, Ashiq, & Sarfaraz, 2021). The quality of dramas

was at its height in the golden era of industry because wealth, vulgarity, and romance weren't the focus of makers. Rather they focused on portraying and preserving the real ideologies of Pakistan by presenting real-life stories (Zeb, Khan, & Ajmal, 2021). In contrast to that era now there are so many entertainment channels portraying enormous themes and generating different ideologies (Butt et al., 2021). Now the drama makers have shifted their emphasis from quality production to business and revenue generation. The excessive commercialization of the drama industry has resulted in a decline in the quality of TV dramas (Ashfaq, 2022). Our drama makers consistently seize opportunities to glorify the toxic male leads in their productions (Bhutto, 2022; Minhas, Shahid, Ali, & Minhas). As an outcome, exposure to toxic masculinity can consequently cultivate the idea that such toxic behaviors are not only the norms but are also appropriate ways of conduct (Harriger, Wick, Trivedi, & Callahan, 2021). The role of the problematic unconventional male leads in normalizing violence against women and the widespread of such hazardous roles is one of the most concerning aspects (Jalal, 2022). The well-known writer of Pakistan Nemrah Ahmed, bluntly and directly condemned on Twitter the unfolding and continuous promotion of toxic unconventional male protagonists in dramas. In her Instagram stories, she highlighted how these toxic male leads portrayed a distorted version of love, reducing a woman's worth to how she is perceived by men (Jalal, 2022).

Theoretical framework

Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation

In 1999, K. Bussey and Albert Bandura extended their social cognitive theory and named it the Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). The theory elaborates, that there are three essential ways through which gender is developed, understood, and shaped (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Sajid, Minhas, &

YouTube were analyzed one by one and the results were marked based on the presence or absence of variables given in the instrument/Coding Scheme. Then all the episodes were discussed one by one interpreting the presence or absence of the themes given in the variable scheme. The results were then excluded from the findings of the qualitative analysis. The variables and themes of the instrument were designed by getting inspiration from previous studies that have used CMNI-46 (Booth, 2022; Katz, Morrison, & Ó Beaglaoich, 2021; Parent, Gobble, & Rochlen, 2019; Wheeler, 2022) addressing toxic masculinity. The Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory (James R Mahalik et al., 2003) has emerged as a significant instrument that has contributed to the advancement of research on masculinity (Parent & Moradi, 2009). To shorten the original version of CMNI consisting of 94 items measuring 11 masculine norms, a shorter version of CMNI-46 was designed using confirmatory factor analysis. It is still in its original factor structure while retaining the depth and breadth of multiple subscales and consists of 9 subscales (Parent & Moradi, 2009). These 9 Subscales are: Emotional Control, Winning, Playboy, Violence, Self-Reliance, Risk-Taking, Power Over Women, Primacy of Work, and Heterosexual Self-Presentation (Levant, Hall, Weigold, & McCurdy, 2016). In this study, this abbreviated version of CMNI-46 by (Parent & Moradi, 2011) was used with some needed modifications according to the requirements of this study. Three other variables inspired by (Harriger et al., 2021) were used that are: Aggression, Avoidance of Femininity, and Masculine Physical Appearance to validate the presence or absence of toxic masculinity in the portrayal of male protagonists. Due to the absence of a standardized metric to assess the degree of toxic masculinity in men, the current study proceeded under the assumption that the highest scale endorsed on the Conformity to

Masculine Norms Inventory (CMNI-46) corresponds to the manifestation of toxic masculinity (Wheeler, 2022). And the presence of toxic masculinity validated by the existence or concurrence of other crafted codes/variables. The categorization scheme is given below out of which a coding sheet was designed.

Code	Rule	Indicator
Emotional Control	Emotional restriction and suppression	Hiding the feelings while talking to someone
		Tend to keep his feelings to himself
		Hate it when people ask to share his feelings
Winning	Drive to win to have a competitive spirit	He will do anything to win
		Winning is his priority
		Losing bothers him
Playboy	Desire for multiple non-committed relationships	Frequently change love partners
		Feels good when multiple girls praise him
		Enjoys to date more than one person
Violence	Physically beating or hurting others	Willing to get in a physical fight
		Act violently
		Justifies behaving violently
		Assaulting others
Self-Reliance	Self Sufficiency, desire to solve problems on one's own	Hate asking for help
		Never ask for help
		Ashamed of asking for help
		It bothers him when he has to ask for help
Risk-Taking	An inclination toward risky behaviors	Enjoy taking risk
		Frequently puts himself in risky situations
Power Over Women	Perceived control over women	Control the women in his life
		Perceives women as subservient to men
		Tend to be in charge of women
Primacy of Work	Viewing work as the primary focus in life	Work is the most important part of his life
		Likes to give all his attention to work
Heterosexual Self-Presentation	Importance of presenting oneself as heterosexual	Try to behave manlier
		Try to avoid any feminine trait
		Try to look masculine
Aggression	Physical aggression, expression of anger	Shows aggression through actions
		Shows aggression through facial expressions
		Shows aggression through non-verbal cues and body language
Avoidance of Femininity	Mockery of feminine behavior, suppression of vulnerable behaviors	Ridicule women
		Hides sadness

Reliability in content analysis is often ensured by employing multiple coders who independently analyze the data. This practice helps to minimize subjective biases and increase the consistency of the coding process (Krippendorff, 2018). To ensure the validity of the research, a multi-coder approach was employed and pretests were conducted during the analysis of the first five episodes of each drama. The consistency in the results obtained across different coders and pretests affirms the robustness and reliability of the findings.

Results

Emotional Control

Emotional restriction and suppression are established as one of the key variables of the

analysis. The male protagonists of all the dramas taken in the sample are shown while attuning and regulating their emotions in front of others, especially in front of the female protagonist. The first halves of the dramas showed relatively more emotionally restricted male protagonists as compared to the second halves of the dramas.

Winning

Winning is portrayed as a key factor in the portrayal of male protagonists in Pakistani dramas. The first drama "Aye Musht e Khaak" shows the win-at-all-costs mentality of the male protagonist and his inability to accept loss or defeat gracefully resulted in increased frustration, aggression, and further toxic traits. The male protagonist of the second drama "Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi" also showed winning as his priority. His obsession with power and control in acquiring dominance over others is highlighted. He became so destructive in gaining his ambitions without any regard for the consequences. (Iram, Saleha, 2024), The male protagonist of the third drama "Tere Bin" also had this characteristic of winning as a primary goal. He viewed life as a constant battle where success is measured by the defeat of the rivals. He relatively showed less focus on winning as a priority as compared to the other two protagonists.

Playboy

The male protagonist of the first drama in the sample "Aye Musht e Khaak" used his wealth, charm, flattery, and emotional manipulation without investing his real emotions in extra-marital affairs. This behavior of the male protagonist created a ripple effect in the storyline, as it caused emotional distancing from his wife, avoidance of intimate connection with his wife and his marriage broke due to his playboy behavior. This trait was not found in the other two protagonists. Both discouraged any other relationship or any other women approaching them except the female protagonists who became their wives later.

Violence

Being engaged in violent behavior and willing to act violently can be a result of toxic masculinity. The male protagonists of all three dramas showed violent behavior by indulging in physical fights and assaulting others. It has been analyzed in this research as the portrayal of aggression through actions, expressions, and non-verbal cues. All the male protagonists of the dramas taken in the sample portrayed aggression to a very great extent.

Self-Reliance

The male protagonist of the first drama "Aye Musht e Khaak" always refused to seek help or guidance even in challenging scenarios. He always viewed seeking help and vulnerability as a sense of weakness. His self-reliance resulted in a lack of connection with others. Similarly, the male protagonist of the second drama "Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi" also never liked to take help from anyone. This trait caused him to struggle to make a healthy relationship with his partner, family, or friends. The third drama "Tere Bin" also showed this key trait in the portrayal of the male protagonist, but it was lesser in him as compared to the other two male protagonists.

Risk Taking

The male protagonist of the first drama "Aye Musht e Khaak" shows reckless behavior, taking risks without considering the potential consequences. He always made impulsive decisions, engaged in dangerous activities, and disregarded the safety and well-being of themselves and others. He always enjoyed taking risks and frequently put himself in risky situations. The male protagonist of the second drama "Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi" is portrayed as a self-centered person who puts himself and others in risky situations to get self-gratification. He indulged in criminal activities like kidnapping or harassing others, putting his father's reputation at risk and disregarding the probable consequences. The male protagonist of the third drama "Tere Bin" showed this trait more than the other two protagonists. He

willingly put himself in risky situations just to look manlier, fearless, strong, and invulnerable.

Power Over Women

The male protagonist of the first drama "Aye Musht e Khaak", showed his thoughts in favor of the submissiveness of women, especially female protagonists. This control manifested in decisions related to her career, her personal life, and even her interaction with her family and others. The male protagonist of the second drama "Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi" showed his overpowering nature more than the protagonists of the other two dramas. He reinforced his power over the female protagonist by threatening and intimidating her and her family. He used verbal and physical aggression to instill fear ensuring compliance and submission. The male protagonist of the third drama "Tere Bin" also showed this trait. He imposed traditional gender roles and expected the women around him to conform to societal expectations. He always tried to restrict women's freedom and autonomy reinforcing a power dynamic.

Primacy of Work

Strong ethics and focus on work are generally positive traits, but extremism of anything is noxious and detrimental. The male protagonist of the first drama "Aye Musht e Khaak" prioritized his business to the extent of neglecting his relationship with his wife. He wanted to control the female protagonist's life and wanted her to go abroad with him just because of his business in the US. The male protagonist of the second drama "Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi" didn't have this characteristic. He didn't work at all and was a trust fund kid with a silver spoon in his mouth since his childhood. So, this variable does not apply to his character in the starting episodes.

The male protagonist of the third drama "Tere Bin" had the trait of prioritizing work. But he didn't prioritize his work over humans in his life. He maintained a work-life balance to save his relations.

Heterosexual Self-Presentation

The male protagonist of the first drama "Aye Musht e Khaak" portrayed an exaggerated form of toxic masculinity. He had a casual approach to sexuality involving conquest and casual relationships without any emotional depth or connection. He used gaslighting and manipulation in his relationship with women to look more masculine and heterosexual. The male protagonist of the second drama "Kaisi Teri Khudgarzi" also showed this trait in him. He emphasized overstated chauvinism, virility, and manliness. He left his luxurious lifestyle and his house and tried to prove to his family that he was a strong courageous man. He also avoided feminine traits such as crying, looking sad, and vulnerable emotions. The male protagonist of the third drama "Tere Bin" also tried to behave manlier and more masculine. He reinforced traditional gender roles, where he expected the women around him to conform to stereotypical gender expectations. He tried to limit the role of women and prioritized them to be dependent and submissive over personal and professional aspirations.

Aggression

Aggression is another common trait among all the protagonists of the sample. They all showed aggression through actions, facial expressions, and nonverbal body cues. Most of the time all three male protagonists showed aggression through facial expression or nonverbal body cues. Aggression shown through actions was comparatively less by all of them. In most of the cases, they couldn't manage to control their aggression,

Avoidance of Femininity

Suppression of vulnerable behaviors and sneering at feminine behavior also remained common in all three characters of our sample dramas. They used to hide their sadness in several scenes just because they thought of these expressions or emotions as feminine behavior. They endured their pain, sadness, and sorrows alone without telling anyone or

hiding from others. Some of their dialogues delivered the idea of stereotypical thought that men can't cry or show emotions. In some of the scenes, they are sneering and taunting the women around them.

Masculine Physical Appearance

The male protagonists of all three dramas taken in the sample showed unrealistic, unattainable, and high beauty standards. They all had muscularity, chiseled jawlines, and other traits that aligned with societal ideals of traditional masculinity. These characters exhibited an obsession with their body image. Their clothing, their homes, their cars, their guards, and their luxurious lifestyles were focused largely on these dramas. They are presented as a perfect package that meets all the beauty standards along with their wealth and strong family backgrounds.

Discussion

The most common and important motif observed in all the male protagonists of the sample taken is the unrealistic and often unattainable beauty standards. Just like women have been objectified in the name of beauty standards, now male protagonists are also being glamourized and gold-plated in idealized, illusory, and unfeasible beauty standards. Which in turn can result in body shaming, or mental and behavioral issues related to body image. The theoretical framework also suggests that individuals learn about gendered body ideals and norms by observing the media representations, which may influence body image perceptions and behaviors. (Puente, Carbonell, 2024), The male protagonists are portrayed as emotionally stoic and unexpressive, especially in front of the women around them. All the male protagonists of the dramas taken in the sample portrayed aggression to a very great extent. The exclusion of aggression in male protagonists reflects the theory's emphasis on observational learning, suggesting that men may internalize and emulate aggressive behaviors observed in media representations,

perpetuating societal norms around male aggression and dominance. Ultimately it might result in acceptance of aggression and violence as an expected behavior or reaction in various situations (Zeb, Khan, & Ajmal, 2021). All three protagonists tried to dominate and control the lives of women around them, especially the female protagonists. Being suppressive and dismissive of emotional sensitivity and vulnerability is also used as a tool to portray masculinity. All three male protagonists tried to hide their feelings of sadness, sorrow, and fear from others, especially from female characters. The theoretical framework highlights the role of observational learning in the acquisition of gender roles, suggesting that individuals may model behaviors they observe in media representations, including those that perpetuate gender inequality (Bandura, 1986; Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 2014). It is observed after the analysis of dramas that the protagonist is now a splendid concoction and a subtle mix of hero and villain. There are the traits of both hero and anti-hero used in the portrayal of male protagonists. Such characters are mostly portrayed with moral ambiguity, making decisions that are morally questionable leading to make them flawed personalities. These characters serve as role models to the audience and such portrayals may send the message that certain toxic behaviors are morally acceptable or even admirable, ultimately impacting real-life behaviors and attitudes (Butt, Abbas, Ashiq, & Sarfaraz, 2021). This can create problems in a society like Pakistan where the legal system is already flawed and facing challenges. emphasizes the role of observational learning in the acquisition of gendered behaviors, suggesting that individuals may model aggressive behaviors observed in media representations. The makers of dramas must generate some balance in the complexity of characters with a serious obligation, keeping in view the impact of their characters on the audience. As a responsible storyteller, the

makers should acknowledge the consequences of the characters' actions and promote critical thinking among the viewers.

Limitations and Recommendations

The qualitative content analysis of Pakistani dramas to examine the portrayal of male protagonists and masculinity can provide a vital understanding and insight, meanwhile, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of this study. Firstly, the number of dramas included in the study might not be enough to represent the entire spectrum of Pakistani dramas which might result in potential selection bias in sample selection. Secondly, qualitative content analysis might result in the subjectivity of the interpretation and results. The results might be interpreted and perceived differently while doing qualitative content analysis. Thirdly the influence of media ownership on the portrayal of male protagonists and masculinity was neglected in this study. Some of the needed recommendations for different stakeholders involved in the production and consumption of Pakistani dramas are given as follows. Firstly, the diverse storytelling that discourages traditional stereotypes should be promoted by the media owners. There should be open dialogues between media owners, creators, and directors on the sensitivity of this topic. Secondly, to promote a sensible portrayal of masculinity the authorities should collaborate with stakeholders to design and implement the media guidelines. Thirdly, the authorities should create a certain process to monitor, regulate, and censor content that doesn't align with positive social values. Lastly, it is recommended to future researchers that instead of cross-sectional studies, they should conduct longitudinal studies on this topic for more comprehensive insight into the development and evolution of male protagonists over a longer period. The sample size should also be increased in future research.

Conclusion

It is concluded that famous Pakistani dramas with high viewership and ratings are setting some harmful trends in the entertainment industry. They are promoting unrealistic physical standards, emotional suppression, and an aggressive nature in the portrayal of male protagonists by glamorizing them with the unethical use of power and wealth. Overall, these exclusions in the research findings demonstrate the pervasive influence of societal norms, media representations, and role modeling on the development and reinforcement of gender roles, as outlined by the Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Role Development and Laura Mulvey's concept. The portrayal of male protagonists with such harmful stereotypical norms will result in the acceptance of toxic masculinity as an in-built nature of men in society. Ultimately it may result in the acceptability of harassment, violence, and romanticized aggression. Therefore, such portrayals should be banned by the media regulatory authorities and responsible storytelling should be promoted by the creators.

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