

The Influence of Televised Gender-Based Violence on Youth Perceptions of Gender Roles in Pakistan

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Abstract

The scope of this research is to study the impact of media portrayal of gender-based violence (GBV) on the perceptions of gender roles held by Pakistani youths. There is a growing concern about the sociological, psychological, and media impacts of Urdu-language dramas that depict Violence Against Women (VAW) as either acceptable or romanticised. The main aims for this research were: (1) to evaluate youth exposure to VAW in media, and (2) to assess their perceptions of these portrayals. For this study, quantitative data were collected from 300 students aged 18-30 years residing in Lahore and Sargodha using structured questionnaires. Study findings indicated 81.7% of participants had encountered VAW content on social media, with younger participants, especially those aged 22 to 24, having the highest levels of exposure. There was a significant positive correlation between media exposure and desensitisation as evidenced by Chi-square and regression analysis ($r = .244, p < .001$), supporting Cultivation Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Desensitisation Theory. Although emotionally desensitised, many respondents still cognitively processed VAW as problematic. This illustrates the intricate relationship between emotional numbness and moral intuition that underlies societal expectations. These findings support Feminist Media Theory, alongside Symbolic Interactionism, which argues that media both reinforces and challenges patriarchy simultaneously. In light of such conclusions, the study recommends integrating media literacy education in academic curricula and enforcing stricter content regulation by PEMRA.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, Violence Against Women, Pakistani Television, Youth Perceptions, Media Exposure, Social Media Influence.

Introduction

In Pakistan, television remains one of the most accessible and influential forms of media, deeply ingrained in the country's cultural fabric. Among its most popular genres, Urdu-language television dramas enjoy widespread viewership and are often considered a reflection of domestic and social life. However, these dramas frequently depict violence against women (VAW), including

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emotional abuse, forced marriage, verbal degradation, and physical assault, as routine and unproblematic elements of storytelling. These portrayals are often framed within narratives of love, sacrifice, or moral rectitude, leading to the implicit normalisation of abuse. For the youth, who form a substantial portion of the viewership and are in the process of developing their gender identities and social understanding, such dramatizations have far-reaching implications (Ahmed & Wahab, 2019).

The situation is exacerbated by the rise of social media platforms, which now function as secondary spaces of media consumption and engagement. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok allow for the virality of dramatic clips, often featuring scenes of domestic violence that are shared widely with sensational titles (Holt, 2017; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). These representations of short-form media often strip away the narrative framework and focus on the emotional elements, promoting violence as an entertaining spectacle (Saqib et al., 2023). Young audiences who engage with this form of media may become numb to the seriousness of VAW or learn to consider it a standard aspect of the dynamics between the sexes. Fairbairn (2020) suggests that digital spaces function simultaneously as amplifiers and echo chambers, reinforcing pre-existing sociocultural notions about gender, and as such, shape social views quietly yet profoundly.

Problem Statement

Watching women get hurt and attacked in Pakistani TV shows can change how young people view relationships between boys and girls. The way the show portrays these issues, often pretending violence is something to be enjoyed, romanticised, and desensitised, might slowly make young audiences normalise real-life abuse. Although many people appear to enjoy this type of content, there is limited empirical research available on its impact on the perceptions and social attitudes of youth.

Significance

This study highlights the impact of televised gender-based violence on youth's understanding of gender norms in Pakistan. It provides insights into how media exposure may contribute to either reinforcing or challenging patriarchal beliefs. The sociological relevance of this inquiry lies in its potential to uncover whether the media serves as a conduit for critical engagement and consciousness-raising or facilitates the reproduction of regressive gender norms. The findings can inform gender-sensitive media practices and educational interventions. Ultimately, the research supports efforts to promote media literacy and gender equity among young audiences.

Objectives

1. To investigate the level of youth exposure to violence against women in the media.
2. To examine the youth's perceptions about the television portrayal of violence against women.

Literature Review

Youth Exposure to Violence Against Women in the Media

Television remains a key medium through which gender narratives are disseminated and internalised in Pakistan. Among young people, particularly those aged 16 to 30, exposure to televised content is a routine part of daily life, with drama serials occupying a prominent place in their media diet. According to Awais et al. (2021), over 70% of prime-time Urdu dramas in Pakistan feature at least one form of violence against women, whether emotional, psychological, or physical. These depictions are often framed within familial settings and are rarely subjected to

critical scrutiny within the storyline, making them more likely to be accepted as normative by audiences. The accessibility of such content through both broadcast and streaming platforms increases youth exposure (Holt, 2017) across socioeconomic classes and urban-rural divides (Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

Javed (2023) emphasises how young viewers care about television females, particularly girls, using culture and lived experiences as points of connection. Such identification increases emotional investment, which in turn enhances the internalisation of gender dynamics exhibited on-screen. Indeed, exposing audiences to such portrayals reinforces the normative structures of the conventional gender hierarchy, where women are oppressed under responsibilities framed as duty, sacrifice, and moral altruism (Saleem et al., 2021). Young people who consume such media content tend to accept controlling verbal abuse and even physical aggression as justified within marriage and family contexts (Njuguna, 2017).

This exposure is further intensified by social media's ecosystem, which clips and shares violent scenes from television dramas long after they have aired. Saqib et al. (2023) noted that these emotion-infused labels receive millions of views and thousands of comments. These serve not only as entertainment but also as places where the entrenched ideas of gender are reinforced through entertainment for Pakistani youth on YouTube and TikTok. Within the context of gender relations, forceful depiction combined with emotional arousal and interaction among peers ensures that it is burned into their understanding.

The omnipresence of such content raises significant concerns about the media's role in shaping the cognitive and emotional development of young people. Drawing from Gerbner's cultivation theory, repeated exposure to mediated violence leads to a "mean world syndrome," in which viewers perceive violence as more common or acceptable than it is (Gerbner et al., 1980). In the Pakistani context, where cultural and religious frameworks already discourage open discourse on gender rights, media portrayals can serve to reinforce silence and complicity among youth, particularly when critical counter-narratives are absent.

Perception: Desensitisation to Gender-Based Violence

It was found that all sampled entertainment television channels (ARY Digital, Hum TV, and Har Pal Geo) contained violence against women in almost all episodes of the selected dramas, but at varying degrees (Rawan & Amjad, 2023). One of the most alarming effects of repeated exposure to media-based violence is psychological desensitisation—a diminished emotional responsiveness to real-life violence due to overexposure to fictional or dramatized violence. Numerous studies have linked repeated viewing of violent television content with reduced empathetic responses and lower sensitivity to the suffering of victims (Khan, 2021; Lee et al., 2010). In Pakistan, this phenomenon is particularly relevant as drama serials frequently depict women being slapped, emotionally blackmailed, or silenced without any legal or moral consequence. This normalised violence, portrayed as an everyday aspect of domestic life, risks blurring the line between entertainment and social reality for impressionable audiences (Khan, 2021; Akhter, 2021).

Desensitisation for youth audiences tends to occur in two distinct ways: emotional numbing and cognitive dissociation. Emotional numbing is defined as the loss of empathy concerning violence that occurs in the world. At the same time, cognitive dissociation refers to the separation between acknowledging an act as violent and deeming it morally wrong (Faber & Hesketh, 2021). For example, young people who often view aggressive domination of one male character over another tend to interpret such actions as manifestations of strength or authority instead of abuse (Akhter, 2021). Such viewing habits, as documented by Ahmed and Wahab (2019), influenced the

rationalisation of treatment among their subjects, who were predominantly young women. These women described aggression exerted by men as emotionally distressing behaviour resulting from familial expectations, internalising narrative justifications provided by the television drama. Additionally, the emotional consequences of a profoundly violent scene are often counteracted by resolving the conflict through reconciliation, forgiveness, or some form of romantic resolution, which conditions viewers to treat violence as something temporary and manageable rather than a chronic issue (Akhter, 2021). This approach reduces active perception of reality and increases passive acceptance of internalised oppression (Khan, 2021). The fusion of entertainment with ideology in such representations leaves little space for imagination or critical thinking among young people, as there are insufficient alternative narratives or educational strategies.

Normalisation of Violence Against Women (VAW)

The habituation and normalisation of violence against women in Pakistani television dramas is a long-standing issue that results from how the storylines are structured and resolved. The portrayal of male dominance with aggressive tendencies in many serials stems from a requisite reaction to a woman's perceived noncompliance or refusal to adhere to the rigid expectations of her gender role. Such an approach reinforces patriarchal systems that treat violence as not only permissible but necessary for the restoration of order within families and morals (Awais et al., 2021; Khan, 2021). For young viewers, especially among those who have virtually no access to alternative gender discourses, such portrayals can further entrench the perception that conflict, especially violent conflict, is an inevitability in inter-gender relations (Awais et al., 2021).

According to Clark (2021), the symbolic framing of VAW as a televised moral corrective or emotional response strips violence of its legitimacy. The assailants are never punished for their actions; rather, resolution is always the responsibility of the woman who, more often than not, is required to forgive and reform her abuser. This 'good' and 'bad' female dichotomy propels harmful stereotyping and justifies violence as discipline or correction (Ashfaq & Shafiq, 2018). This portrays deeply problematic sentiments towards young, impressionable audiences, suggesting that reconciliation, coupled with loyalty, is an absolute good that must be preserved even at significant personal cost (Clark, 2021). Gradually, these kinds of representations dull the moral boundaries sharp enough to define abuse and make it appear normal within marriage or paternal relationships. In Pakistan, where socialisation occurs within a family setting that idolises submission to authority, shame, and honour cultures, media narratives depicting normalised violence are of even greater concern. Lokot (2018) argues that in a traditional context, mediated images have the potential either to defy or support cultural boundaries. The absence of trauma or injustice framing VAW on television leads not only to misrepresentation of actual victims' suffering but also aids in desensitisation towards the long-term psychological and physical abuse consequences inflicted. This perception poses a significant challenge to gender justice activism, particularly among young activists who internalise these norms and may do so much earlier than they develop critical frameworks for understanding them.

The present study employs five sociological and media-related theories —Desensitisation Theory, Social Learning Theory, Cultivation Theory, Feminist Media Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism—to analyse the impact of televised violence against women on shaping gender perceptions among Pakistani youth. Violent media content has an emotionally numbing effect due to previous encounters with aggressive material; this is the essence of desensitisation theory (Funk et al., 2004). Social Learning Theory helps explain some observable behaviours based on media portrayals. Bandura & Walters (1977) suggest that social learning occurs upon viewing dramatized

aggressive behaviour by males towards females. They argue that younger audiences will imitate these behaviours, as they will be deemed acceptable or rewarded.

Also, the application of cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 2017) helps to understand how viewing violence on television shapes viewers' social reality and leads them to think of violence as a commonplace feature of gender relationships. The study also uses feminist media theory, which critiques mass media for the promotion and perpetuation of patriarchal frameworks of women's oppression through symbolic violence (van Zoonen, 1994). From a Sociological standpoint, symbolic interactionism can be used to study how adolescents derive meaning from media texts and construct their gender identities based on media stories and online discussions (Blumer, 1986). The adoption of all these theories together enables consideration of not only the consequences of the content created by mass media but also – and perhaps more importantly – the sociocultural contexts in which youth interpret, reproduce, or resist acts of violence against women and feminine identity.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research design to investigate how televised gender-based violence affects youth perceptions of gender roles in Pakistan. Data were collected from 300 university and college students in Lahore and Sargodha, Punjab, using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure equal representation by gender (150 males and 150 females). A structured questionnaire comprising 41 items, including 32 perception-related statements, was developed and administered. Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” To ensure reliability, a pilot test was conducted, and the instrument yielded a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.89, indicating high internal consistency. The data were collected cross-sectionally and analysed using SPSS. Both descriptive and inferential statistics, such as the chi-square test, correlation, and regression analysis, were applied to examine patterns and relationships. Ethical protocols, including informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation, were strictly adhered to maintain the integrity of the research.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Respondents and Media Engagement (N = 300)

Gender	Frequencies (%)
Male	150 (50.0%)
Female	150 (50.0%)
Age	
18–21	93 (31.0%)
22–24	132 (44.0%)
25–27	61 (20.3%)
28–30	14 (4.7%)
Area	
Rural	77 (25.7%)
Urban	223 (74.3%)
Educational Level	
Undergraduate	126 (42.0%)
Graduate	103 (34.3%)
Post-Graduate/M.Phil.	67 (22.3%)
PhD	4 (1.3%)

Marital Status	
Single	263 (87.7%)
Married	36 (12.0%)
Divorced	1 (0.3%)
How many hours do you use social media daily?	
Less than 1 hour	12 (4.0%)
1–3 hours	115 (38.3%)
4–6 hours	89 (29.7%)
6–7 hours	45 (15.0%)
More than 10 hours	39 (13.0%)
How many social media Apps/Platforms do you use?	
0	20 (6.7%)
1–5	139 (46.3%)
6–9	98 (32.7%)
10+	43 (14.3%)
Following any VAW dramas or related content on social media.	
Yes	245 (81.7%)
No	55 (18.3%)
Whether you have seen social media content depicting VAW from TV dramas	
Frequently	47 (15.7%)
Often	115 (38.3%)
Occasionally	70 (23.3%)
Rarely	56 (18.7%)
Never	12 (4.0%)

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents and their patterns of media engagement, particularly with violence against women (VAW) content. The gender distribution is evenly split, with 150 males (50%) and 150 females (50%), providing balanced representation. In terms of age, the majority of respondents fall within the 22–24 age group (44%), followed by the 18–21 age group (31%), indicating that the study predominantly includes young adults. Only a small proportion (4.7%) belongs to the older age bracket (28–30 years). Regarding residential background, a significant majority of participants (74.3%) come from urban areas, while only 25.7% reside in rural settings, reflecting an urban-dominated sample. In terms of educational qualifications, most respondents are either undergraduates (42%) or graduates (34.3%), with a smaller percentage pursuing postgraduate/MPhil studies (22.3%) and PhD studies (1.3%). Marital status reveals that an overwhelming 87.7% of participants are single, with only 12% married and a negligible 0.3% divorced, which aligns with the youth-dominated demographic.

When asked about daily screen time watching VAW-related content, 38.3% reported watching for 1–3 hours, followed by 29.7% for 4–6 hours, suggesting moderate engagement. Notably, 13% watch more than 10 hours daily, indicating potentially high exposure levels. The weekly consumption of TV dramas with VAW content reveals that nearly half of the respondents (46.3%) watch 1–5 dramas, while another 32.7% watch 6–9 dramas per week, indicating frequent exposure. A substantial 81.7% of respondents confirmed encountering VAW content on social media, while only 18.3% denied such exposure, demonstrating the widespread presence of such content online. Lastly, in terms of frequency of watching VAW in media, 38.3% of participants reported doing so “often,” followed by 23.3% who watched “occasionally.” However, only 4% reported “never” watching such content, indicating that exposure to televised gender-based violence is everyday

among the sample. Overall, the data suggest high levels of youth exposure to VAW through television and social media, with regular engagement across platforms. This supports the relevance of investigating how such exposure may influence perceptions of gender roles.

Bi-Variate Analysis

Hypothesis 1

H₀ (Null Hypothesis): The level of youth exposure to violence against women in media is low.

H₁ (Alternative Hypothesis): The level of youth exposure to violence against women in media is high.

Table 2: Relationship Between Age and Watching VAW Content on Social Media

Age Group	Low Exposure	Medium Exposure	High Exposure	Total (N)
18–21	33 (37.1%)	50 (27.9%)	10 (31.3%)	93 (31.0%)
22–24	35 (39.3%)	80 (44.7%)	17 (53.1%)	132 (44.0%)
25–27	18 (20.2%)	39 (21.8%)	4 (12.5%)	61 (20.3%)
28–30	3 (3.4%)	10 (5.6%)	1 (3.1%)	14 (4.7%)
Total	89 (100.0%)	179 (100.0%)	32 (100.0%)	300 (100.0%)

The crosstabulation illustrates the relationship between age groups and their exposure to VAW content on social media. The results show that younger respondents are more likely to report higher levels of exposure. Specifically, the 22–24 age group is the most exposed, with 53.1% reporting high exposure and 44.7% reporting medium exposure. Similarly, the 18–21 age group also exhibits substantial engagement, with 31.3% showing high exposure and 27.9% showing medium exposure. In contrast, the 25–27 and 28–30 age groups report considerably lower high exposure rates (12.5% and 3.1%, respectively). These findings suggest that younger youth are more frequently engaging with VAW content on social media, supporting the study's broader aim of examining how age influences patterns of media consumption related to violence against women, and linking directly to the hypothesis regarding the impact of exposure on perceptions and attitudes.

Table 3: Chi-Square Test of Independence

Test Statistic	Value	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-Square	20.796	6	.002**
Likelihood Ratio	20.382	6	.002**
Linear-by-Linear Association	12.971	1	.000**
N of Valid Cases	300		

The Pearson Chi-Square test shows a significant association between age group and level of exposure to VAW content on social media: $\chi^2(6, N = 300) = 20.796, p = .002$. The significant result means that the age group is not independent of exposure level — younger respondents show systematically different viewing patterns than older ones. This finding is critical for Hypothesis 1, as it statistically rejects the null hypothesis (H₀), confirming that exposure to VAW content among youth is not uniformly low but varies significantly across age groups, with younger users being more exposed overall.

Table 4: Symmetric Measures (Strength of Association)

Measure	Value	Approx. Significance
Gamma	.293	.000**
Spearman Correlation	.205	.000**
Pearson's R	.208	.000**

The Gamma coefficient (.293) and correlations (Spearman = .205; Pearson's $r = .208$) indicate a positive, low-to-moderate relationship between age and exposure level. The positive values suggest that as youth age increases (from younger to older age bands), there is a trend toward greater exposure to VAW content. All associations are statistically significant ($p < .001$).

The results support the alternative view of Hypothesis 1, suggesting that exposure is not uniformly low and is meaningfully patterned across age groups, thereby confirming the presence of considerable exposure to VAW content within youth demographics, which is linked to age.

Hypothesis 2

- H_0 : Representation of violence against women in dramas has no significant impact on youth attitudes and behaviours.
- H_{2a} : Representation of violence against women in dramas has a significant impact on youth attitudes and behaviours.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Exposure Level	2.87	1.21	300
Perception (Desensitisation, Normalcy)	4.16	0.92	300

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics for exposure to violence against women (VAW) content on social media and viewer perception regarding such content (covering desensitization, perception of normalcy, empathy, and consciousness). The mean exposure level, $M = 2.87$ ($SD = 1.21$), indicates a moderate degree of social media engagement with VAW-related content among the sampled Pakistani youth. Meanwhile, the perception score of $M = 4.16$ ($SD = 0.92$) is relatively high, suggesting that respondents generally acknowledge VAW as a serious social issue. These findings align with the core theme of the study, confirming that young Pakistani audiences are both exposed to and sensitive to portrayals of VAW in the media, which helps to understand how such content influences perception and awareness.

Table 6: Correlations Between Exposure Level and Perception

Variable	Exposure Level	Perception
Exposure Level	1	.244**
Perception	.244**	1

Note: $p < .01$, 2-tailed.

Table 6 reveals a significant positive correlation between exposure level and perception ($r = .244$, $p < .001$). This indicates that higher levels of exposure to VAW content on social media are associated with stronger perceptions and attitudes toward the issue, particularly regarding its normalization, emotional impact, and importance. In other words, youth who encounter more of this content online tend to view VAW more critically, which supports the hypothesis that media

representation of VAW impacts youth attitudes and behaviors. These findings suggest that increased media consumption leads to greater awareness and cognitive engagement with the issue.

Linear Regression Analysis

Table 7: Model Summary (Regression)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.244	.060	.056	.89233

The table above reinforces the correlation result by showing that exposure level accounts for 6% of the variance in perception scores ($R^2 = .060$). While 6% may seem modest, this represents a significant effect in the context of the social sciences, where attitudes and behaviors are influenced by multiple factors. The Adjusted R^2 (.056) ensures this result is not due to overfitting, and the standard error (.89233) indicates the model fits the data reasonably well. These findings suggest that exposure to VAW content is a significant contributor to shaping perceptions, although other variables (such as personal values, culture, and education) likely also play a role.

Table 8: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	15.036	1	15.036	18.884	.000**
Residual	237.284	298	.796		
Total	252.320	299			

The ANOVA table confirms that the overall regression model is statistically significant: $F(1, 298) = 18.884$, $p < .001$. This suggests that exposure level is a significant predictor of perception, indicating that the observed relationship between these variables is unlikely to be due to chance. In terms of the 2nd hypothesis, this ANOVA result provides further validation. As young people consume more VAW-related content online, their perceptions are noticeably affected, confirming that the impact of media representation is real and measurable.

Table 9: Coefficients

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t	Sig.
Constant	3.630	.132		27.441	.000**
Exposure Level	.185	.043	.244	4.346	.000**

Table 9 shows that exposure level has a significant positive effect on perception: for every 1-unit increase in exposure level, the perception score increases by .185 units on average ($B = .185$, $p < .001$). The standardized Beta coefficient (.244) further shows that exposure is a moderately strong predictor of perception. This result directly confirms the hypothesis that the representation of VAW in media impacts youth perceptions and behaviors. The more Pakistani youth are exposed to this content, the more it shapes their views, increasing desensitization and influencing attitudes toward VAW.

The combination of descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression results clearly shows that exposure to VAW content on social media significantly predicts viewer perception, providing

strong support for 2nd hypothesis. These findings reinforce the main research objectives by showing that media portrayals of violence against women, when consumed through social media, do shape youth perceptions and awareness in Pakistan.

H₀ (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant association between exposure to promotional content on social media and viewers' perception of desensitisation to violence against women.

H_{2b} (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a significant association between exposure to promotional content on social media and viewers' perception of desensitisation to violence against women.

Table 10: Crosstabulation

Watch VAW Content on social media	High Desensitisation	Medium Desensitisation	Low Desensitisation	Total (N)
Frequently	28 (9.3%)	15 (5.0%)	4 (1.3%)	47 (15.7%)
Often	40 (13.3%)	60 (20.0%)	15 (5.0%)	115 (38.3%)
Occasionally	21 (7.0%)	38 (12.7%)	11 (3.7%)	70 (23.3%)
Rarely	22 (7.3%)	23 (7.7%)	11 (3.7%)	56 (18.7%)
Never	3 (1.0%)	3 (1.0%)	6 (2.0%)	12 (4.0%)
Total	114 (38.0%)	139 (46.3%)	47 (15.7%)	300 (100%)

The table shows a clear relationship between the frequency of watching VAW content on social media and levels of desensitization among viewers. Those with higher exposure (frequent and often viewers) report greater levels of high and medium desensitization. For example, 9.3% of frequent viewers reported high desensitization, and 13.3% of those who watched often also reported high desensitization. Conversely, respondents with low or no exposure (rarely or never) were more evenly distributed across desensitization levels, with fewer reporting high levels of desensitization. Overall, 38.0% of the sample exhibited high desensitization, with 46.3% medium and 15.7% low, confirming that greater exposure to VAW content correlates with increased desensitization. These results align strongly with the study's 2b hypothesis, demonstrating that frequent exposure to media representations of violence against women contributes to reduced emotional sensitivity among viewers, a key theme of the research.

Table 11: Chi-Square Test of Independence

Test Statistics	Value	df	p-value
Pearson Chi-Square	24.867 ^a	8	.002**
Likelihood Ratio	21.569	8	.006
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.945	1	.003**
Gamma	.211		

Chi-Square analysis revealed a significant correlation between the frequency of exposure to promotional VAW content and viewers' perception of desensitization. Both the Pearson Chi-Square ($p = .002$) and Likelihood Ratio ($p = .006$) results were below the 0.05 threshold, confirming the relationship is unlikely due to chance. The Linear-by-Linear Association ($p = .003$) further supports this finding. Additionally, the Gamma coefficient (.211) indicates a positive association, as exposure increases, so does desensitization.

In summary, viewers exposed more frequently to VAW content show higher levels of desensitization, highlighting the media's potential role in shaping attitudes toward violence against women, and statistical tests validate the importance of this correlation. This information helps to comprehend the potential impacts of such content on individuals and facilitates conversations on the role of media in affecting perceptions and attitudes.

Results and Discussion

The current research sheds light on a critical societal issue—how persistent exposure to televised gender-based violence (GBV) shapes youth perceptions in Pakistan. Drawing from Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, the study reinforces the idea that media representations are not neutral but potent tools for shaping social norms over time. Pakistani dramas, often rooted in patriarchal narratives, act as ideological instruments that normalize violence under cultural pretences such as love, sacrifice, or familial duty (Clark, 2021; Awais et al., 2021). Such portrayals, as the findings confirm, have a significant influence on youth, particularly urban populations aged 22–24, who showed the highest exposure and correlated perception scores. Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) also finds strong application here. The regression analysis reveals a significant relationship ($\beta = .244, p < .001$) between exposure to violent televised content and altered perceptions among youth. This suggests that young viewers model behaviour seen in media, often without critical reflection, especially when that behaviour (e.g., male aggression) is rewarded or romanticized. This mechanism facilitates not just learning but the internalization of regressive gender scripts. Societal implications are substantial. Symbolic violence—covert, cultural reinforcement of male dominance—pervades drama narratives, presenting abuse as part of normative domestic life. Feminist Media Theory (van Zoonen, 1994) underlines how such media texts sustain patriarchal hegemony by reproducing symbolic frames where women are victims and men are saviours or disciplinarians. Simultaneously, the emotional detachment noted in participants mirrors the Concept of Desensitization Theory (Funk et al., 2004), as youth become cognitively aware yet emotionally numb—a duality captured by the high perception scores despite exposure. Furthermore, the societal failure to provide counter-narratives or positive role models in mass media aggravates the issue. Youth in Pakistan often lack critical spaces to question or discuss these portrayals, especially in conservative or male-dominated households. The media, thus, not only mirrors but manufactures a reality where violence against women is either invisible or justified.

Conclusion

This study concludes that televised portrayals of violence against women significantly shape how Pakistani youth perceive gender roles and relationships. With over 80% of respondents exposed to VAW content via media, and statistical analyses confirming positive correlations between exposure and desensitization, the research emphasizes that such portrayals are not mere entertainment but active forces in reinforcing gender inequality. Through Cultivation Theory, the study shows how media shapes social reality; through Social Learning Theory, it demonstrates behaviour modelling; and through Feminist Media Theory and Symbolic Interactionism, it connects media with societal meaning-making. The youth, particularly those aged 18–24 in urban areas, are most at risk of internalizing these harmful narratives, especially when exposed to violent content lacking in critical context or consequences. The findings underscore the need for urgent media reforms, targeted educational interventions, and increased parental awareness. Television content, if left unregulated, risks perpetuating a culture of silent acceptance, emotional detachment, and moral

confusion regarding gender-based violence. Moving forward, Pakistani society must acknowledge the dual role of the media as both educator and influencer, one that can either perpetuate inequality or serve as a tool for empowerment.

Policy Recommendations

- Media Literacy in Education: The Ministry of Education should introduce media literacy education in schools and universities to help students critically assess gender portrayals and distinguish between fiction and reality.
- Stricter Content Regulation: The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) should enforce stricter rules on televised VAW, penalizing content that normalizes abuse without offering critical perspectives.

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