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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Bold Dressing and Intimate Scenes in Pakistani Dramas: A Qualitative Study of PEMRA Guidelines and Channel Practices

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Abstract

Pakistani television is increasingly navigating a complex tension between creative freedom and cultural accountability, particularly in the portrayal of intimacy and dress. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks specifically the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) guidelines in shaping representations of bold dressing and romantic intimacy in television dramas. It also explores how media producers interpret moral boundaries and how audiences respond to such portrayals. A qualitative visual content analysis was employed, focusing on selected romantic dramas aired between 2021 and 2025 on leading Pakistani channels, including Geo TV, ARY Digital, HUM TV, Green Entertainment, and Express TV. Scenes depicting romantic intimacy, suggestive imagery, and provocative attire were purposively sampled and evaluated against PEMRA's Code of Conduct (2015). The findings reveal a consistent trend of ethical transgressions and implicit resistance to regulatory norms. Depictions such as hugs, bed scenes, and Westernized fashion were prevalent, indicating limitations in the enforcement of indecency guidelines. Audience responses were markedly polarized: progressive viewers perceived these portrayals as realistic, whereas conservative audiences regarded them as culturally detrimental. Furthermore, the study highlights the role of commercial imperatives, with visual boldness frequently employed to enhance audience engagement rather than narrative depth. Drawing on Cultivation Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Cultural Imperialism Theory, the study concludes that repeated exposure to such content contributes to the normalization of liberal intimacy, imitation of mediated behaviors, and the gradual dilution of local cultural identity. Overall, Pakistani television reflects an ongoing cultural negotiation, shaped by regulatory gaps, globalization, and market-driven content production. Strengthening ethical oversight and promoting media literacy are essential to balance creative expression with cultural sensitivity.

Keywords Media regulation · PEMRA · Pakistani dramas · Qualitative content analysis · Bold dressing · Cultural imperialism · Visual semiotics

Introduction

Background of the Study

Pakistani television has been a strong medium that not only entertains but also influences cultural values and societal standards. The liberalization of the media in Pakistan has led to an increase in the number of television channels that are privately owned, which has greatly increased the range and variety of content broadcast (Gul et al., 2017). Nonetheless, this growth has come with content that many feel contradicts the religious and cultural values of the country, and this has brought about debate on issues of morality, censorship, and regulatory control. The way women, especially, are depicted has been the focus of considerable criticism, and researchers have observed the increasing objectification and sexualization of women in Pakistani dramas (Safdar & Tahir, 2023; Umbach et al., 2024).

To some extent, this has been caused by transnational cultural flows. The Pakistani producers and viewers have been influenced by Indian and Turkish dramas, which have

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helped to transform the aesthetics in fashion, language, and gender roles (Khanum & Khan, 2016; Rehan, 2017; Abbas et al., 2022; Umbach et al., 2024). Research shows that the dressing style and the body image perception of women in Pakistan have been affected by the exposure to this kind of content, making it acceptable to follow the trends that were previously deemed bold or inappropriate (Khan et al., 2021; Bashir et al., 2022; Batool et al., 2022). The same applies to the TV ads and dramas of Pakistani TV channels, where women are stereotyped or sexualized and some of their ideals are imposed and commercialized (Ali et al., 2012; Habib & Amjad, 2021; Rawan & Bibi, 2019).

The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has responded to increasing concerns of indecency by being increasingly strict in its control over the content aired by broadcast outlets. It has also come up with codes of conduct and rules (PEMRA, 2015a, b; PEMRA, n.d.) to restrict the depiction of bold dressing and intimate scenes. PEMRA officially advised TV stations to avoid airing hugging, caressing, and other intimate acts between couples in 2021, which was widely controversial in the country (Dawn, 2021a, b; NDTV, 2021; France24, 2021; ThePrint, 2021). Although such actions were necessary, according to the regulatory authority, to maintain cultural and religious values (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2021), critics also stated that this type of censorship limits the freedom of artists and instills conservative morality in the creative work (The Guardian, 2023; The New Yorker, 2023).

Despite these policies, researchers have noted that there are repeated breaches of PEMRA policies in the content of dramas, and that there is a complicated and sometimes contradictory relationship between regulatory control and the content practice of broadcasters (Rehman & Anwar, 2020; Asghar & Tabassum, 2025). PEMRA enforcement has similarly been patchy, sometimes banning or censoring dramas because of their treatment of sexuality (South China Morning Post, 2020) and other times tolerant, putting producers and writers in a place of uncertainty as to how to tread the creative line.

Considering these dynamics, it is important to examine the ways in which the regulatory framework of PEMRA is actually affecting the depiction of bold dressing and intimate scenes in Pakistani dramas, and how content creators react or resist such regulatory demands. Such an appreciation can provide insight into the tensions and policy issues surrounding Pakistani television that are due to cultural issues.

Research Objectives

This study aims to accomplish the following goals:

- To investigate how the PEMRA guidelines have affected the depiction of bold dressing and intimate scenes in Pakistani TV dramas
- To test the content practices of the Pakistani TV channels in the context of bold dressing and intimacy in their dramas
- To learn about the connection between the regulatory provisions and the creative decisions of producers and broadcasters of drama

Research Questions

The research is guided by the following research questions:

- How do the guidelines of PEMRA control or influence the depiction of bold dressing and intimate scenes in Pakistani TV dramas?
- In what ways are these guidelines understood and applied in TV shows and drama productions?
- How does regulatory control tie into the creative activity of TV drama makers?

Problem Statement

Bold dressing and intimate scenes are becoming more common in Pakistani television dramas that spark controversies about their ability to fit in the cultural and religious values of the country (Safdar & Tahir, 2023; Dawn, 2021a, b). The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has, in turn, proposed codes of conduct to restrict these kinds of portrayals (PEMRA, 2015a, b; PEMRA, 2009). Nevertheless, it has been reported that it is often violated and not enforced consistently (Rehman & Anwar, 2020; Asghar and Tabassum, 2025). Meanwhile, Indian and Turkish influences on the local content are still present (Rehan, 2017; Abbas et al., 2022). This research examines the actual impact of PEMRA guidelines on the coverage of bold dressing and intimate scenes and the reaction of the drama producers to these regulatory forces.

Significance of the Study

The study is important as it addresses the relationship between regulation and creative content in Pakistani dramas, which is under-researched. It provides some insights that can assist the PEMRA in tightening its policies and also informing the drama makers to strike a balance between cultural values and free creativity. The results can also be used in scholarly discussions of the impacts of media regulation on cultural production in conservative societies.

Literature Review

Pakistani Cultural Change and Liberalization of Media

With the liberalization of media in Pakistan during the early 2000 s, the number of private television channels increased rapidly, and the variety of entertainment content was expanded (Gul et al., 2017). According to scholars, this change established a competitive landscape where producers of dramas were more and more interested in appealing to audiences through the use of glamorous and sensational themes (Faiz et al., 2020). Pakistani dramas started slowly showing new lifestyles, Westernized fashion, and gender role changes, which defied traditional values (Safdar & Tahir, 2023).

Cultural change has been further promoted by the impact of foreign media content. Pakistan is a country where the popular Indian and Turkish dramas have influenced the patterns of language, fashion, and ideas of romance, especially among women (Khanum & Khan, 2016; Rehan, 2017; Abbas et al., 2022). Research has shown that exposure to such dramas has made bold dressing styles and romanticism acceptable, changed the expectations of the local viewers, and influenced the local producers to adopt this style (Rogers, 2000).

Women, Bold Dressing, and Intimacy in Dramas

The representation of women in Pakistani media is also stereotypical in terms of gender roles and is more about looks than content (Ali et al., 2012; Habib & Amjad, 2021). The ads and dramas on TV often objectify women and present them as a visual product to appeal to the audience (Rawan & Bibi, 2019). The media discourses that ostensibly promote modern female empowerment and bodily autonomy through bold aesthetics are often the result of a contradictory form of sexuality and self-objectification (Majeed et al., 2025). It has also been researched that dramas have affected the dressing styles and perceptions of the body image in women, encouraging modern and even revealing clothing (Khan et al., 2021; Bashir et al., 2022; Batool et al., 2022).

The tendency has attracted some controversy among the general population and conservative groups who criticize the growing popularity of revealing costumes and physical closeness in dramas (Samaa TV, 2022; Pakistan Today, 2023). Intimacy, such as hugging, caressing, or romantic physical contact, has been especially disputed as culturally unacceptable (Greene et al., 2011). Such images are widely perceived to be disseminating some values that contradict Islamic beliefs, sparking the need to have more stringent laws to control the content.

Regulatory Role and Practices of Censorship ofPEMRA

PEMRA is the main organization that monitors and regulates the content of broadcasting in Pakistan. It has issued the PEMRA Rules (2009) and the Code of Conduct of Programs and Advertisements (2015) to make it compliant with cultural and religious norms (PEMRA, 2015a, b; PEMRA, n.d.). These policies do not allow indecent, vulgar, or obscene material and make channels observe the morals of the Pakistani society (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2021).

In 2021, PEMRA directly prohibited channels from broadcasting intimate scenes, which triggered a nationwide controversy (Dawn, 2021a, b; France24, 2021; NDTV, 2021; Hindustan Times, 2021; India Today, 2021; ThePrint, 2021). This censorship, according to critics, restricts the freedom of expression and the creativity of art (The Guardian, 2023; The New Yorker, 2023). Even with these precautions, research has reported that the ethical codes of PEMRA are often breached in Pakistani dramas (Rehman & Anwar, 2020; Asghar & Tabassum, 2025). Such contradictions imply that there is a mismatch between policy and practice in regulation, and this leaves drama makers in doubt.

Tensions Between Regulation and Creative Expression

Censorship typically puts the creators of the content in a challenging situation, as they need to walk the fine line between the cultural sensibility and the audience expectations and artistic integrity (Scandura, 2004; Napier, 2013). Researchers believe that being over-regulated may kill innovative risk-taking and decrease storytelling diversity (Collins, 2018). Drama producers are often forced to work in a self-censored environment where they wish to avoid the themes or scenes that may result in regulatory backlash, and yet they strive to compete with international aesthetics in the Pakistani context (Abbasi & Farooq, 2024; Asghar & Tabassum, 2025).

This conflict brings out the complicated relation between regulation and cultural production. Although PEMRA is aiming to maintain moral values, the restrictive policies are likely to deter innovation and limit depictions of contemporary realities in society. To determine the state of Pakistani television dramas, it is crucial to explore how producers go through this tension.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in a multi-dimensional theoretical framework that synthesizes Cultivation Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Cultural Imperialism Theory. This integrated approach is essential to deconstruct how regulatory frameworks, such as PEMRA guidelines, interact with industry practices to influence the portrayal of bold dressing and intimacy in Pakistani television dramas. Instead of viewing these theories in isolation, this study treats them as an interconnected cycle where global media flows (Imperialism) influence production choices (Social Learning), which ultimately shape long-term societal perceptions (Cultivation).

Cultural Imperialism: The Global–Local Tension

At the macro level, Cultural Imperialism Theory (Schiller, 1976) explains the external pressures on Pakistani media aesthetics. The influx of Indian and Western media content has introduced a "liberalized visual expression" that often clashes with local socio-cultural norms. In the context of this study, the shift toward bold dressing and romantic proximity is viewed not merely as a creative choice but as a result of global cultural flows prevailing over local traditionalism. This theory provides the basis for understanding why Pakistani channels adopt transnational media styles such as Westernized wardrobes and stylized intimacy despite strict domestic regulatory codes.

Social Learning Theory: Modeling and Behavioral Scripts

While Cultural Imperialism explains the source of these trends, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) explains their impact through observational learning. Television characters often serve as symbolic models for viewers, particularly the youth. When bold dressing and intimate scenes are framed as glamorous, aspirational, or "modern" by popular protagonists, they provide behavioral scripts that viewers may emulate. This study utilizes this lens to analyze how production choices, specifically costume design and the framing of romantic scenes, function as tools for social modeling, potentially bypassing the moral boundaries set by PEMRA.

Cultivation Theory: Normalization and Regulatory Erosion

Finally, Cultivation Theory (Gerbner et al., 1976) addresses the long-term effects of these portrayals. Gerbner's premise suggests that persistent exposure to specific media tropes "cultivates" a specific perception of reality. In this study, the theory is applied to examine how repeated violations of modesty codes lead to the "normalization" of bold content. When viewers are consistently exposed to intimate framing and provocative attire, their resistance to such content diminishes over time. This creates a cycle in which market demand for "bold" content increases, further pressurizing regulatory bodies like PEMRA and shaping future production decisions.

Synthesis of the Theoretical Framework

The integration of these three theories creates a robust analytical lens for this research. Cultural Imperialism acts as the input, introducing globalized aesthetics into the local industry. Social Learning Theory functions as the process by which these aesthetics are packaged through production techniques (camera angles, lighting, and wardrobe) to create aspirational content. Lastly, Cultivation Theory represents the outcome, where the continued airing of such content gradually erodes the effectiveness of PEMRA's regulatory pressure, leading to a shift in the audience's cultural expectations. This theoretical triangulation allows for a deeper investigation into how "creative workarounds" are used by channels to balance commercial imperatives with regulatory compliance.

With these theoretical assumptions, the following conceptual framework (Fig. 1) is developed as an attempt to elaborate on the relationship between the guidelines of PEMRA, content practices, and portrayal patterns.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This paper adopts a qualitative research design, specifically focusing on interpretive content analysis. The researchers chose this approach because it allows for a nuanced understanding of how PEMRA guidelines are interpreted and navigated by industry professionals. Rather than focusing on a simple frequency count of scenes, the researchers prioritized the underlying meanings, themes, and symbolic representations of bold dressing and intimacy within the televised materials. This method enables a critical interaction with the cultural, ethical, and creative dimensions of media production in the specific context of Pakistan.

The dramas were accessed through the official YouTube channels of the respective broadcasters. It is important to note that this content is first aired on linear television, subject to PEMRA's Code of Conduct, and then uploaded or live-streamed digitally. Thus, the visual evidence analyzed

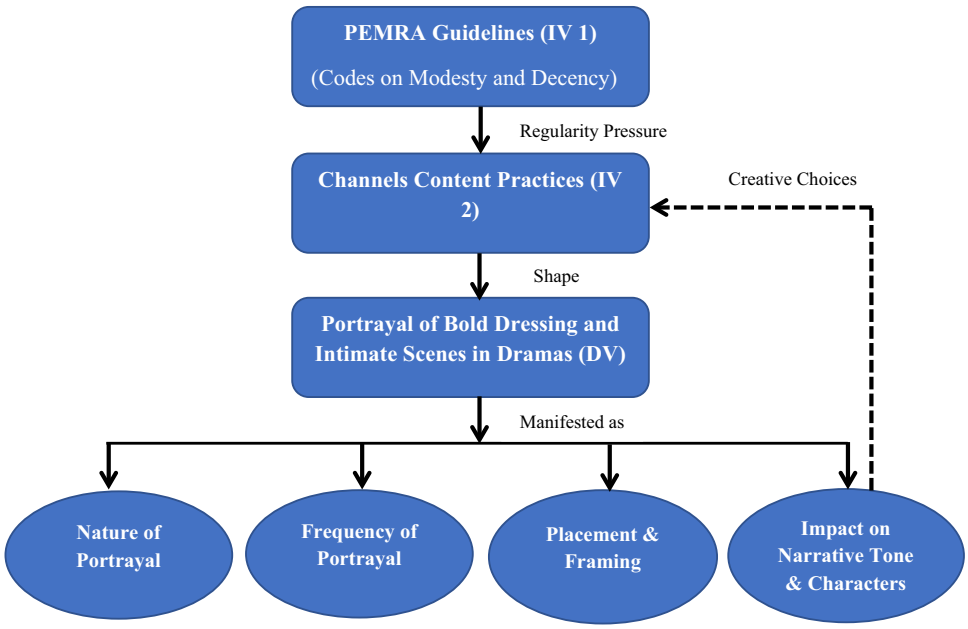


Fig. 1 Conceptual framework of the study

represents a direct extension of regulated broadcast material into the digital space.

Population and Sampling

The sample for this study comprises Pakistani television dramas broadcast between 2021 and 2025. The researchers selected this specific timeframe because it coincides with the most recent PEMRA advisory (2021), which issued stern warnings regarding the implementation of modesty codes. Beyond the initial notice, this 5-year window is analytically optimal as it allows for the observation of a complete "cycle of adaptation," tracking how production houses evolved from initial compliance to developing sophisticated visual "workarounds" in response to digital competition. From this population, the researchers employed purposive sampling to select 17 romantic dramas that specifically featured bold dressing, physical intimacy, or suggestive visual framing. To ensure the sample was diverse and representative of mainstream trends, the researchers selected dramas from five major entertainment channels: ARY Digital, Geo TV, HUM TV, Green Entertainment, and Express Entertainment (see Table 1). For the selection of dramas, researchers watched complete drama episodes and identified bold dressing and intimate scenes in the selected dramas.

Note on Sampling Limitation The researchers acknowledge that by focusing exclusively on the "romantic" genre, the findings may not be generalizable to all television genres in Pakistan. However, the researchers argue that this selection is justified as romantic dramas are the primary site for the "creative workarounds" and regulatory tensions that this study seeks to investigate.

The researchers selected the dramas for analysis that captivate the masses and present new trends in the presentation of bold dressing and intimacy in romantic dramas in the changing regulations of PEMRA.

Table 1 List of selected dramas (2021–2025)

Sr no	Drama title	Channel	Year
1	JAN NISAR	Geo	2024
2	SUN MERY DIL	Geo	2024
3	MAN MAST MALANG	Geo	2025
4	DAYAN	Geo	2025
5	TERY BIN	Geo	2022
6	BAJJO	Geo	2024
7	SIRF TUM	Geo	2023
8	PARWARISH	ARY	2025
9	GHAIR	ARY	2024
10	AYE-ISHQ-E-JUNOON	ARY	2024
11	MEEM SY MUHABBAT	HUM	2024
12	JAFA	HUM	2024
13	ISHQ-E-LAA	HUM	2021
14	RAH-E-JUNOON	HUM	2023
15	IQTIDAR	Green Entertainment	2024
16	KAISI HY YE RUSWAI	Express	2024
17	MEHR MAH	Express	2023

Operational Definitions (Codebook)

To ensure clarity and reproducibility, the researchers established the following operational definitions for the key variables:

- Bold Dressing: Refers to attire that significantly deviates from traditional Pakistani cultural modesty standards (Shalwar Kameez/Dupatta). This includes Westernized silhouettes (sleeveless, deep necklines, tight-fitted jeans/tops) and Indian-style sarees that emphasize physical contours.
- Intimate Scenes: Defined as scripted physical proximity or gestures that imply romantic sensuality. This includes prolonged hugging, bed scenes (lying in proximity), or physical contact (hand-holding/caressing) that violates the 2021 PEMRA circular on "bed scenes and intimacy."
- Cultural Westernization: Theorized as the adoption of Western visual aesthetics, lifestyle portrayals, and moral frameworks in narrative storytelling that challenge indigenous cultural authenticity and traditional family values.
- Creative Workarounds: The researchers define these as specific production strategies (e.g., using soft-focus lenses, silhouette lighting, or evocative background scores) used to imply intimacy without explicitly showing prohibited acts.

Audience Sentiment Capture

The study utilizes social media comments from platforms like YouTube and Instagram to identify thematic patterns in public discourse. The researchers recognize that while these comments provide a rich source of spontaneous reaction, they constitute a self-selected sample. Therefore, this data is used for qualitative sentiment analysis rather than statistical generalization. The aim is to observe the "digital pulse" of the viewers who actively engage with bold content, acknowledging that this does not represent the entire demographic spectrum of the Pakistani television audience.

Unit of Analysis and Multimodal Framework

The researchers utilized three main components as the unit of analysis. Beyond just the dialogue, the researchers employed a multimodal analysis framework to rigorously deconstruct the following:

- Visual Composition: The researchers analyzed camera angles (such as close-up shots used to highlight emotional/physical intimacy) and lighting techniques (such as low-key or moody lighting that creates a sensual atmosphere).
- Physical and Emotional Intimacy: Specific scenes were analyzed for the level of physical contact and the narrative justification provided for such scenes.
- Clothing and Wardrobe: The researchers examined the stylistic choices for lead characters, comparing them against the established modesty standards of PEMRA.

Data Collection

To gather the data, the researchers watched complete episodes of the selected dramas via their official YouTube channels. This ensured that the researchers were analyzing the final broadcast versions of the content. During the viewing process, the researchers captured screenshots of scenes involving bold dressing or intimate gestures. These screenshots serve as primary visual evidence, allowing the researchers to compare on-screen practices directly with the official PEMRA guidelines.

The detailed breakdown of the sampled dramas, including specific episode numbers and the timestamps analyzed for visual violations, is presented in Table 2.

Data Analysis and Reliability

The researchers followed a systematic qualitative content analysis method. After gathering the screenshots, the researchers coded each scene based on themes such as "regulatory compliance," "symbolic defiance," and "globalized aesthetics." Inter-coder reliability: To ensure the findings were objective, the two researchers independently coded a subset of the data (10% of the episodes). An inter-coder agreement (Cohen's Kappa) of 85% was achieved, which confirms the reliability of the thematic coding. The results were then triangulated with the theoretical framework (cultivation, social learning, and cultural imperialism) to explain the broader implications of these portrayals.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers conducted this study in full adherence to the ethical standards of academic research and the legal framework of Pakistan. The objective of the researchers is not to sensationalize objectionable content but to provide a critical academic critique. All images and data were collected from publicly available sources, and the researchers ensured that the analysis remained focused on structural and industry-level practices rather than individual actors.

In qualitative visual analysis, the researcher's role as an instrument of interpretation is pivotal. The authors acknowledge that perceptions of morality and decency are culturally situated. To mitigate personal bias, the researchers adopted a

Table 2 Drama scenes episode and time

Drama title	Episode no	Time stamp (violations)
Jan Nisar	29	15:25/15:45
Sun Mery Dil	10	9:58
	19	11:46/12:30, 24:48
	20	13:05/13:30
	21	11:28/11:34, 16:02
	26	5:44
	31	27:12/27:19
	39	16:10
Man Mast Malang	27	8:57/9:22
	31	9:37/9:51
	37	26:25/27:10
	40	30:56/31:10
	42	8:1/8:30, 22:07/22:14
	49	5:41/6:35
Dayan	10	24:06/24:15
	16	12:00/12:30
	18	15:35/15:51
	19	32:40
Tery Bin	9	21:10/21:25
	16	13:18/13:30
	17	35:31/36:32
	21	37:11/37:26
Bajjo	35	28:49/30:50
	52	4:38/4:54
	53	25:11/25:24
Sirf Tum	4	14:28/14:50
Kabhi May Kabhi Tum	14	20:37/20:47
	32	1:47/1:57
Parwarish	22	39:38/39:52
	24	22:44/23:30
	25	8:24/8:45
Ghair	17	39:21/39:42
Aye ishq e junoon	26	2:40/3:00, 11:57/12:20
	24	16:31/16:52, 19:57/20:10, 27:27/27:50
Meem Sy Muhabbat	33	18:24/19:39
Jafa	5	18:40/18:54
Ishq e laa	Original soundtrack (OST)	2:12
	8	2:32/2:35
	9	2:42/3:17
Rahe Junoon	23	4:30/5:13, 9:49/11:30
Iqtidar	27	2:45/3:35, 10:11/10:30
	37	31:59/32:49
	55	3:38/4:26
	61	12:12/12:30

Table 2 (continued)

Drama title	Episode no	Time stamp (violations)
Kaisi Hy Ruswai	Original soundtrack (OST)	0:29/0:33, 1:29
	3	7:56/8:10, 17:56/18:19
	4	12:16/13:25
	6	5:46, 15:45/16:02
	10	2:30
	11	24:46/25:30
Mehr Mah	Original soundtrack (OST)	0:38/0:52, 1:44/2:03

"reflexive journaling" approach, consistently cross-referencing visual observations with the literal text of the PEMRA Code of Conduct 2015). The analysis does not aim to impose a personal moral framework but seeks to document the deviation from state-mandated regulatory standards. By grounding the study in institutional guidelines rather than individual subjective values, the researchers ensured an objective and balanced interpretation of the visual data.

Results

Overview of Findings

In the following section, a qualitative analysis of selected Pakistani television dramas that were aired between 2021 and 2025 is provided with respect to bold dressing and intimate scenes in the context of the Code of Conduct of the PEMRA (2015a, b). This is informed by the visual analysis of the scenes taken on the official YouTube uploads of the popular romantic dramas by Geo TV, ARY Digital, HUM TV, Green Entertainment, and Express Entertainment. The analyzed scenes were identified and discussed concerning the PEMRA principles, social media reviews of audience critique, and the cultivation theory, social learning theory, and cultural imperialism theoretical perspectives.

The results indicate that even though it was clear that the PEMRA prohibited the depiction of indecent gestures, intimacy, and sexually suggestive material (PEMRA, 2015a, b; NDTV, 2021), the number of Pakistani dramas that either directly breached these rules or existed in a gray area related to morality was quite high during this time. These violations and creative decisions are outlined in this chapter, and how romantic and visual framing were employed, through close-up shots, dark lighting, and attire inspired by the West, to recreate sensuality and romanticism. Besides, it touches upon the popular response, which tended to accuse television producers of spreading Western cultural norms and exalting moral permissiveness (Abbas et al., 2022; Khanum & Khan, 2016; Rehman & Anwar, 2020).



Fig. 2 JAN NISAR Epi 29 (leads standing closely)

Channel-wise Findings

GEO TV Dramas

Geo TV happens to be one of the leading entertainment networks in Pakistan that has been accused on several occasions of pushing the limits in terms of romantic content. Although Geo dramas were directly monitored following the 2021 warning that disallowed hugging and caressing scenes (Dawn, 2021a, b; Hindustan Times, 2021) by PEMRA, some of the shows featured body-to-body contact, sexualized clothing, and erotic framing of scenes that did not reflect the regulatory ethos.

Drama 1: Jan Nisar (Geo TV) In Jan Nisar, a highly controversial romantic scene was presented where the main actors stood in the most intimate position, maintaining eye contact and very minimal separation between the two (see Fig. 2). This scene was criticized by users of social media who noted that "came this close, could've done a kiss scene too," they feared it was sensuous enough to its limits. This kind of proximity was seen as a visual manifestation of intimacy,

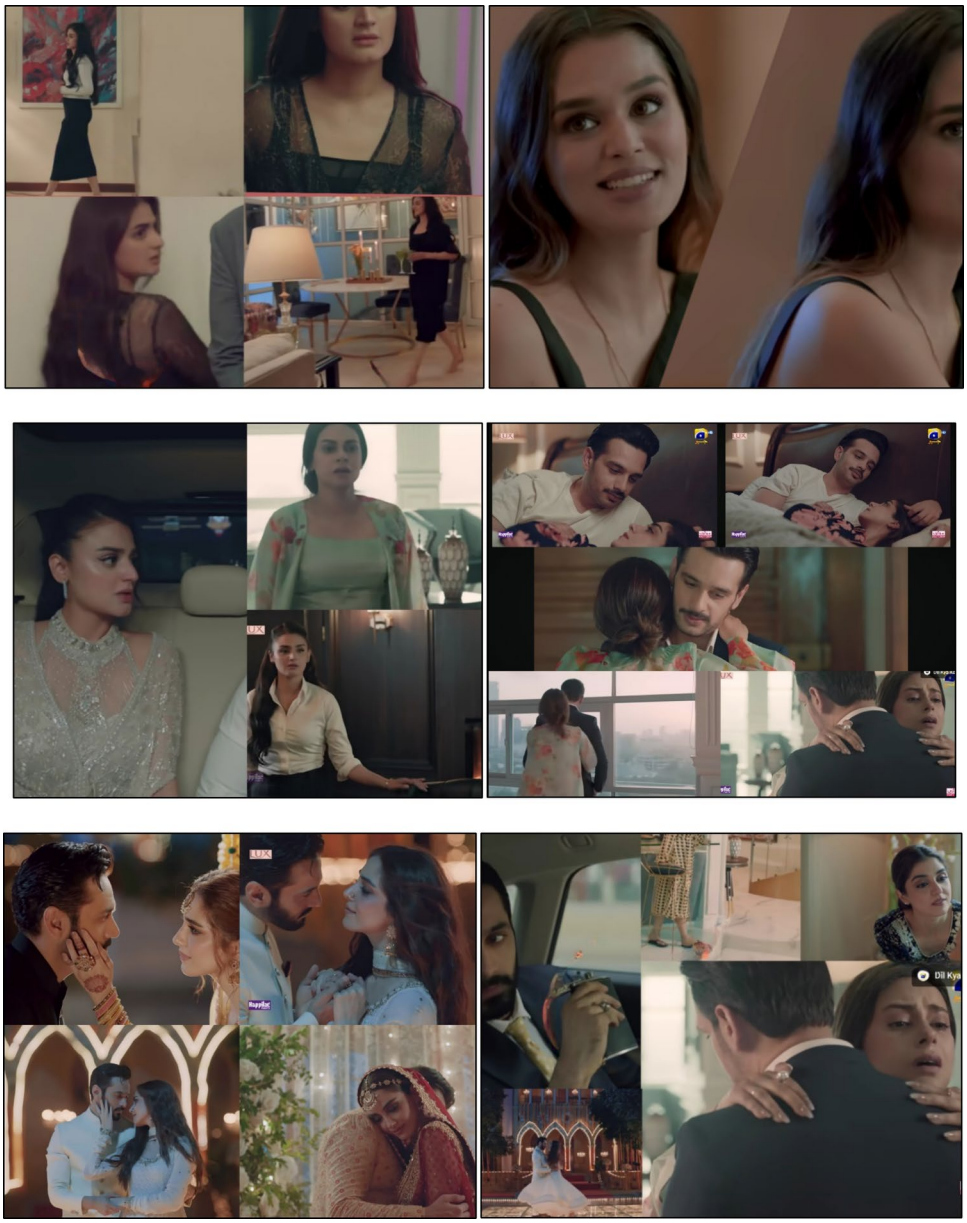


Fig. 3 SUN MERY DIL (alcohol, hug, and saree scenes)

which is against Section 8(b), which discourages indecent or suggestive scenes (PEMRA, 2015a, b).

In terms of cultivation, a recurrence of these images promotes intimacy between non-married couples in televised romance and constructs notions about what viewers consider to be normal intimacy. The cultural imperialism theory is also relevant here since the visual framing is similar to the Bollywood-inspired aesthetics, which have historically had an influence on the Pakistani screen culture (Khanum & Khan, 2016; Rogers, 2000).

Drama 2: Sun Mery Dil (Geo TV) Sun Mery Dil showed several examples of content explicitly violating PEMRA guidelines, such as an unblurred drinking scene, where the main character is depicted drinking (Rehman & Anwar, 2020). Close-up romance, hugging, back-hugging, and Western-style clothing, such as bright sarees, were also present in the drama (see Fig. 3).

The reaction of the population was largely negative, as people claimed that such portrayals would Westernize the local narrative and contravene Islamic cultural standards (Abbas et al., 2022; Faiz et al., 2020). Younger audiences can also adopt such practices, as people can make such behaviors seem glamorous or socially acceptable, according to the social learning theory (Greene et al., 2011).

Drama 3: Man Mast Malang (Geo TV) This play was strongly criticized for its explicit love scenes, such as bed scenes and a woman smoking on two occasions. The use of smoking,



Fig. 4 Man Mast Malang (intimate and smoking scenes)

assimilating Indian aesthetics, instead of local culture. There was a back-hug scene, which was subject to criticism by the audience because of its sensuality (see Fig. 5).

Such styling decisions and bodily gestures, in the view of cultural imperialism, can be interpreted as the cross-border cultural intrusion, in which the influence of Indian fashion and cinematic intimacy can be subtly traced in the content of Pakistani screens (Abbas et al., 2022; Khanum & Khan, 2016). These aspects are emphasized to show how the liberalization of media (Gul et al., 2017) has not



Fig. 5 Dayan (bold saree and back-hug scene)

particularly by the lady actor, resulted in a backlash due to the provocative ways in which the ladies defied the social requirements of modesty (see Fig. 4). The producers were criticized for trying to gain attention through sensationalism, which led to a shift toward commercialized morality (Safdar & Tahir, 2023).

The 2015 Code used by PEMRA clearly cautions against broadcasting shows that would incite negative values in society or those that promote morally dubious conduct. Man Mast Malang not only violated the content regulation but also blurred the boundary between the concept of realism and glamorization, thus contributing to the desensitization of the moral aspect (Rehman & Anwar, 2020).

Drama 4: Dayan (Geo TV) The main protagonist of Dayan had appeared in a provocative saree ensemble, which made audiences comment on the fact that the show was only opened the doors to creative freedom but also resulted in the blurring of moral boundaries in popular narration.

Drama 5: Tery Bin (Geo TV) Tery Bin is one of the most debated plays of the time, which was criticized due to excessive physical intimacy between the main character and the lover. The actor in the movie took the actress by lifting and putting her on a bed in a viral scene, which was highly criticized on social media due to its unnecessary sexuality (see Fig. 6). The audience claimed that "there is no need to show the whole scene," which meant that they could have been implied but not shown.

This scene demonstrates the evident breach of Section 8(a) of the PEMRA that does not allow the representation of indecent gestures or acts, as well as the uncomfortable reaction of the audience to dramatized sexuality.



Fig. 6 Tery Bin (bed scene depiction)



Fig. 7 Bajjo (bold saree look)

Cultivation theory is also relevant to the case since, over time, the audience is conditioned by dramatized romance to expect extreme levels of physical intimacy to be a normal storytelling component (Greene et al., 2011).

Drama 6: Bajjo (Geo TV) In Bajjo, the main female protagonist dresses boldly, especially in a modern saree, which attracted the eyes of the people who commented that producers were employing dressing as a tactic to attract an audience (see Fig. 7). Such reactions by the audience as "when drama doesn't get famous, then they start bold dressing" indicate that people are aware that bold fashion is being commercially applied, but not in an artistic way.

The code of ethics of PEMRA requires dress that is aligned with the local cultural values (PEMRA, 2015a, b). Nevertheless, fashion representations in Pakistani dramas are becoming increasingly responsive to globalized ideals of



Fig. 8 Sirf Tum (tight-fitting clothes, sleeveless appearance)

beauty, which supports the objectification of women (Safdar and Tahir, 2023).

Drama 7: Sirf Tum (Geo TV) This play brought up a conversation with the audience because the female protagonist was wearing tight dresses and short sleeves (see Fig. 8), which were not appropriate wear in front of the family. Though the scenes were not particularly intimate, even the costume design was perceived as an effort to modernize the character representation with Westernized fashion.

The audience complained that the show contravened the PEMRA culture code, directing clothing to correspond to the regional culture and Islamic principles (PEMRA, 2015a, b). This phenomenon can also be interpreted through the cultural imperialism theory (Abbas et al., 2022; Faiz et al., 2020)—the imported stylistic trends gradually push the native ones out.

ARY Digital Dramas

ARY Digital has become one of the most-watched entertainment channels in Pakistan, and it has frequently ventured into the limits of creativity when it comes to narrating stories. The results, however, disclose that ARY dramas often feature provocative dressing, intense physical intimacy, and visuals, which border on PEMRA infractions. Although PEMRA in 2021 sent a circular to TV channels to avoid showing indecent and intimate scenes (NDTV, 2021; Dawn, 2021a, b), ARY romantic dramas repeatedly showed hugging, suggestive glances, and fashionable outfits desirable to wear, which were later criticized on social media.

Drama 1: Kabhi May Kabhi Tum (ARY Digital) This play included numerous hug moments and Western-style clothes, where the main female character wore provocative modern outfits (see Fig. 9). The focus of audience criticism was mainly on the unsuitability of such wardrobe selections in the Pakistani cultural context, describing it as foreign influence under a local veil. The change in costume aesthetics according to cultural imperialism theory implies a partial Westernization of visual discourses, with a greater focus on modern glamor rather than on traditional modesty (Abbas et al., 2022; Khanum & Khan, 2016).

In a social learning perspective, viewers, particularly the younger audience, are likely to start linking bold style and intimacy with empowerment and attractiveness, which is what is glamorized on screen (Greene et al., 2011). Further, the depiction works against the section of the PEMRA which discourages depiction that opposes morality or the culture of the people (PEMRA, 2015a, b).

Drama 2: Parwarish (ARY Digital) Parwarish sparked controversy due to the subject of teenage relationships, which is a very sensitive topic in Pakistani society. The story featured



Fig. 9 Kabhi May Kabhi Tum (hug scene and daring clothes)

scenes of young students in romantic scenarios that led to audience criticism of the presentation of romanticism that propagates Western standards of romanticism among adolescents (Abbas et al., 2022). Also, one of the scenes of a brother hugging a sister was criticized as the actors were not real brothers and sisters, and this raised ethical concern of boundary breach in performance (see Fig. 10).

A background painting featuring rainbow colors that look similar to the LGBTQ+ flag was one such controversial incident that had to be taken down. The audience criticized the creators of promoting Western liberalism, which conforms to the cultural imperialism theory, in which international media icons are insidiously inserted into the local media texts (Faiz et al., 2020).

The play is marked by a two-level breach, visual and thematic, which is contrary to the regulation of PEMRA, according to which no promotion of ideas that do not match the Pakistani moral, cultural, or religious values should be provided (PEMRA, 2015a, b).

Drama 3: Ghair (ARY Digital) In Ghair, there was an evidently erotic scene where the female character was leaning on the shoulder of the male character (see Fig. 11), and this gave an impression of intimacy and physical fondness. These gestures are subtle, but they lie within the PEMRA disadvantageous area of scenes suggestive of physical intimacy.

The reaction of the audience showed that this was uncomfortable, and it implied that such performances undermine traditional gender interaction rules. According to cultivation theory, when exposed to romantic physicality repeatedly, viewers get desensitized, and acceptable behaviors that were once deemed inappropriate are normalized (Greene et al., 2011).

This example highlights the fact that even the gentlest romantic actions can provoke the limits of acceptable behavior when repeated in the frames of the dramas aired in Pakistan, considering its communal morality (Rehman & Anwar, 2020).

Drama 4: Aye Ishq-e-Junoon (ARY Digital) Aye Ishq-e-Junoon also included numerous hugging scenes, intimate close-up shots, and bedside shots that illustrated an increased level of physical intimacy (see Fig. 12). These visual effects transcend traditional romantic hinting and border on the portrayal of physical intimacy, which has never been seen in previous Pakistani television storytelling.

The response to it was mixed: the younger audiences praised it as a love-realism of our times, the conservative audience criticized ARY for pushing the ethical boundaries. The argument that can be put across by the cultivation perspective is that this kind of repeated exposure is pushing the boundaries of intimacy norms and creates a transition towards intimacy of sensual representation in mainstream media (Greene et al., 2011).

Considering the recommendations of PEMRA, these representations are contrary to Section 8(c), which prohibits

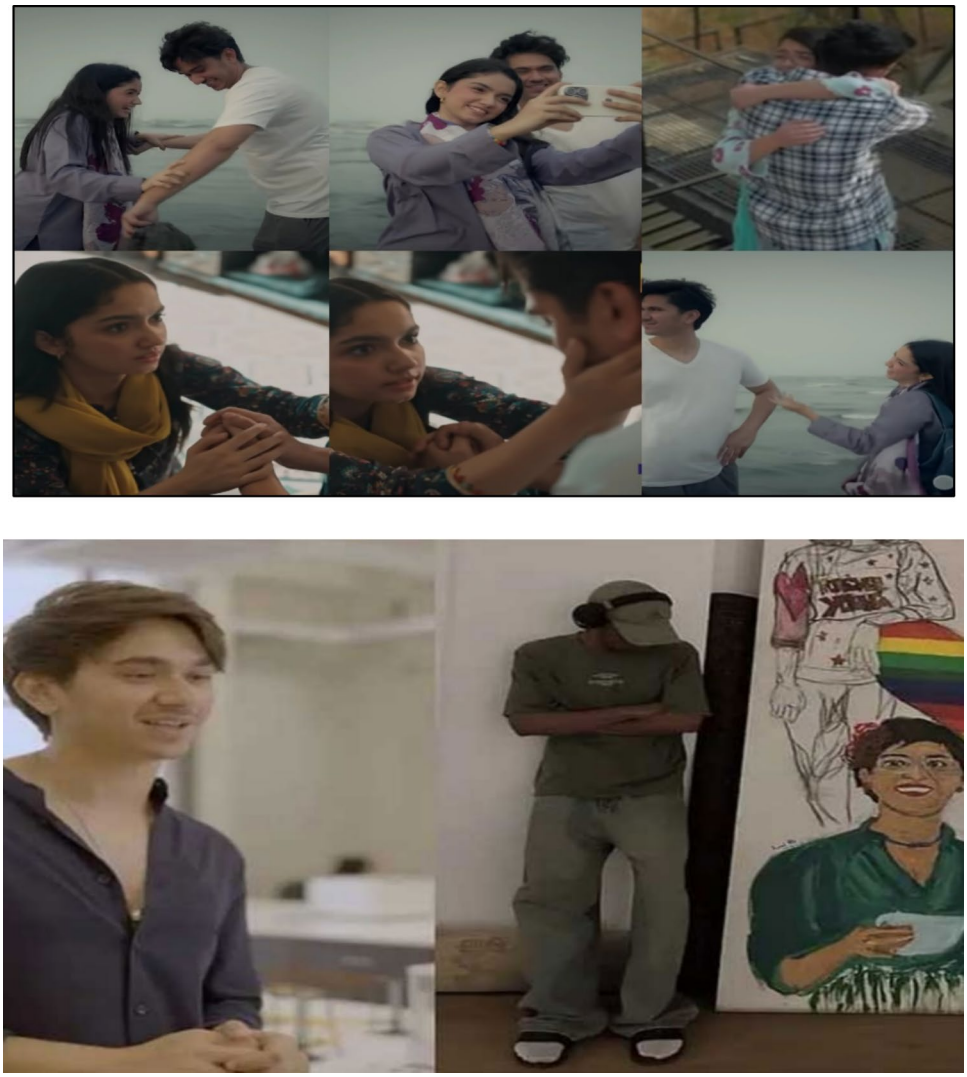


Fig. 10 Parwarish (teenage relationship scene, rainbow-colored art, and hug scene)



Fig. 11 Ghair (shoulder-rest scene)

actions that are offensive to the decency of society or any acts that promote romantic behavior. Social learning at work is further demonstrated by the commercial success of such serials wherein the drama-makers are persisting in pushing the boundaries in response to the interest of the audience (Safdar & Tahir, 2023).

HUM TV Dramas

HUM TV, which is considered to have a progressive approach to storytelling, has also been under growing criticism due to introducing romantic visual framing and provocative clothing that push against the limits of traditional culture. Even though HUM has traditionally been using a gentler narrative approach, observations have indicated that during the period between 2021 and 2025, the channel featured several examples of physical attraction, exposing clothes, and romantic use of light. These aspects, though contributing to the quality of the movie, tend to push the boundaries of the ethics of emotional and sensual depiction—something that is directly intertwined with PEMRA broadcast decency policy (2015) and the censorship controversies of Dawn (2021a, b).

Drama 1: Meem Sy Muhabbat (HUM TV) In Meem Sy Muhabbat, some scenes involved intimate physical contact

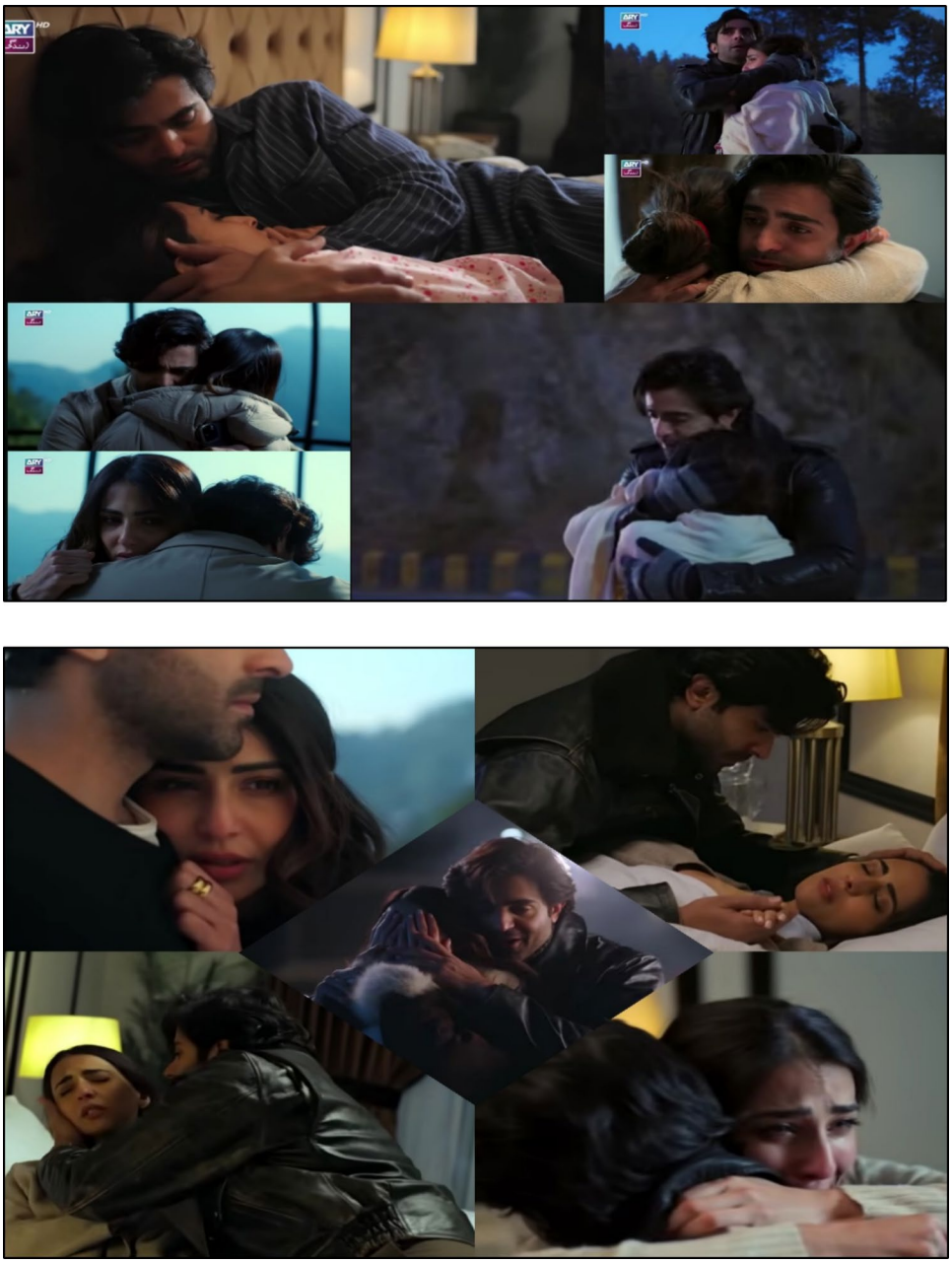


Fig. 12 Aye Ishq-e-Junoon (bed and hugs scenes)

between the main characters, which were criticized because they encouraged romantic intimacy rather than socially acceptable behavior. The visual framing was used through tight camera shots and emotional eye contact, creating the effect of sensual intimacy without direct gestures (see Fig. 13).

The commentary by the audience on social media was mixed, as some felt enthusiastic about the natural chemistry, and others criticized it as pushing the boundaries of cultural decency. This partial romanticization is comparable to cultivation theory, when constant exposure to this kind of framing eventually reinitiates the understanding of normal affection to viewers (Greene et al., 2011).

Drama 3: Jafa (HUM TV) Jafa attracted attention due to its depiction of young people in love affairs, a depiction that people considered unfit to be aired on youth television (see Fig. 14). The critics asked: Which college do students get to wear bangles and make love gestures? These comments demonstrate a perceived lack of touch with reality and educational morals.

In terms of social learning theory, representation of young characters in romance can promote the imitation of those students who watch the programs, and make it acceptable to do anything that may not be compatible with the school rules (Greene et al., 2011). Besides, Section 8(a) of PEMRA forbids any content promoting conduct which does



Fig. 13 Meem Sy Muhabbat (close-up view with emotional glance)



Fig. 14 Jafa (college romance scene)

not reflect the societal value. The youthful romance in this drama is an example of creative excess as well as cultural contextualization.

Drama 4: Ishq-e-Laa (HUM TV) A bed scene in Ishq-e-Laa attracted media attention because of its depiction of the lead characters in close physical contact with each other, although no actual intimacy was shown in the scene (see Fig. 15). According to viewers, this suggestive placement was unnecessary to the story, and many of them cited the notice issued by PEMRA in 2021 prohibiting bed and hug scenes (France24, 2021; Dawn, 2021a, b).

The representation is contrary to Section 8(b) of the PEMRA, which limits visuals that are offensive to moral values. The scene was subtly lit, emotional, and the camera angle added to the romantic suggestion, and how indirect suggestions can give a sensual undertone without happening directly. Such implicit portrayals in the context of the cultivation theory can accept the normalization of sensual undertones in the Pakistani dramas as a regular element of romance tropes.

Drama 5: Rah-e-Junoon (HUM TV) In Rah-e-Junoon, simple lighting was used, slow-paced camera movement, and close body shots, which made it extremely romanticized. The aesthetic focus on mood and lighting did not imply anything excessively indecent, but the focus on the mood and the light indicated the sensual undertone (see Fig. 16). Criticisms among viewers pointed out that HUM TV was exploiting the drama's closeness to the heart, and that to many viewers, this went beyond right and wrong.



Fig. 15 Ishq-e-Laa (bed scene with romantic framing)



Fig. 16 Rah-e-Junoon (hug scene under dim lighting)



Fig. 17 Iqtidar (close hug scene)

The case depicts that visual framing may suggest intimacy in the absence of any actual physical contact, which, in accordance with the opinions of Scandura (2004), suggests that camera work as such may be sub-textually sexual. This stylistic appropriation of the cinematography of world romance in Pakistani television under cultural imperialism indicates a continuous Westernization of the Pakistani television visuals.

Green Entertainment Drama

Play: Iqtidar (Green Entertainment) In Iqtidar, there were many hugging scenes and intimate close-up moments between the main couple. These gestures, though subtle in presentation, had the air of romantic bodily nearness that is not typical of the traditional Pakistani storytelling. Sensual touch was increased by soft lighting and lengthening of the eye contact in these sequences (see Fig. 17).

The reaction of the audience was mixed as younger viewers said that cinematic realism was absolutely perfect, and conservative ones accused it of violating cultural modesty. Some of the online remarks indicated why new entertainment mediums were pursuing the same bold trend as older ones by citing previous warnings by PEMRA of indecent scenes (NDTV, 2021; Dawn, 2021a, b).

When viewed through a cultivation theory viewpoint, these recurrent representations of romantic intimacy make hugging and touching each other as signs of emotional bonding seem normal. Within the context of social learning theory, viewers can be taught the associations between romantic success and physical expression, which reinforces the behavior modeling provided in the media (Greene et al., 2011). In addition, Iqtidar depicts cultural imperialism through visual imitation by incorporating the aesthetic devices applied in global romantic series (Abbas et al., 2022; Faiz et al., 2020).



Fig. 18 Kaisi Hai Ye Ruswai (bold sleeveless dress and close frame)

Express Entertainment Dramas

Express Entertainment, which is a relatively smaller network, has been showing a growing trend of incorporating bold attire and emotional intimacy in its narrative. These results underscore the role of competitive pressure in the market, even in the secondary channels, which results in the liberalization of the visual strategies of audience engagement.

Drama 1: Kaisi Hai Ye Ruswai (Express TV) In Kaisi Hai Ye Ruswai, the female lead was displayed many times in sleeveless and body-fitted dresses, and the scenes of intimate communication with the male lead were presented. Although the plot focused on emotional conflict, the costume and shot composition were faulted as putting visuality ahead of plot (see Fig. 18).

Viewers were not happy with it as they claimed that traditional identity is eroded by such Western-style dressing. According to the PEMRA Code of Conduct (2015), there is a requirement to follow cultural and religious values, and the visual design in this drama did not comply with the spirit of modest presentation (Rehman & Anwar, 2020).

Theoretically, the cultural imperialism system describes how local creators, whether knowingly or not, recreate the trends of the world aesthetic to appeal to the urban audience. The cultivation effect is also evident in this case when extended exposure to the modernized images determines the tolerance of viewers to the exposure to revealing clothing.

Drama 2: Mehr Mah (Express TV) The play Mehr Mah had several close-up shots, in which the main couple was visibly in sexual contact, eye-gazing, and touching. The camera angles and body language, but without any actual touching, did form



Fig. 19 Mehr Mah (close interaction scene)

a suggestive subtext, which made the video unnecessarily sensual to some viewers who criticized it (see Fig. 19).

These kinds of framing are contrary to Section 8(b) of PEMRA, which does not favor the display of gestures or visuals that are offensive to decency or modesty (PEMRA, 2015a, b). In a Scandura (2004) manner, this example highlights the fact that camera placement can be used to express intimacy while the dialogue or action is held back.

The cultivation theory is also evidenced gradually in the drama because viewers are constantly exposed to this aesthetics and start appreciating sensual undertones as narrative conventions. Moreover, it is the representation of social learning, as producers imitate the earlier successful formats, which basked in ratings on the basis of romantic visual emphasis.

Emerging Themes and Patterns

Through the process of fine-tuning reviews of selected dramas distributed in Geo TV, ARY Digital, HUM TV, Green Entertainment, and Express TV (2021–2025), it is clear that there is a systematic trend of visual boldness, romantic closeness, and cultural Westernization. Despite repeated warnings of PEMRA against indecent content (PEMRA, 2015a, b; Dawn, 2021a, b), creators turn to more modern aesthetics, stylized sexuality, and sexy clothes to gain a larger audience. These results demonstrate three key new themes:

Normalizes Intimacy and Romantic Physicality

One of the most noticeable themes discovered is the slow normalization of television romance. The scenes like hugging, physical proximity, emotional eye contact, and suggestive bodily language, as witnessed in Aye Ishq-e-Junoon (ARY), Ishq-e-Laa (HUM), and Jan Nisar (Geo), show how the directors employ framing and lighting to create sensual connotations without making physical contact. This stylistic device is a mild transgression of the decency provisions of PEMRA (Section 8a–b) that limit indecent gestures and acts that are offensive to morality (PEMRA, 2015a, b). No explicit sexual scenes are shown; however, the beauty of intimacy building resembles the international media trends in which romance is equated to physical proximity on a visual level (Scandura, 2004).

Using the cultivation theory, repeated exposure to this sort of visual intimacy is slowly eroding the audience's tolerance level, leading to the acceptance of emotional and physical intimacy in dramatic shows in prime time. These images make viewers, and in particular younger viewers, socially acceptable as manifestations of love, and become more desensitized to the limits established by PEMRA (Greene et al., 2011).

According to social learning, the behavioral cues are characteristics that show gestures of intimacy, through hugs, shoulder touches, or emotional gazes. Viewers, especially those who are easily swayed, might emulate that sort of behavior in real life and take it as a reflection of romantic sincerity. This can be seen in the online viewer arguments where the terms chemistry and realism were used as a defense of such scenes.

Bold Dressing and the Commercialization of Glamor

The second large trend is the trend of bold dressing, where the female characters are often depicted wearing Western clothes or revealing clothes like sleeveless tops, tight-fitting gowns, or deep neck sarees. They include Sirf Tum (Geo), Kabhi May Kabhi Tum (ARY), Bajjo (Geo), and Kaisi Hai Ye Ruswai (Express). These representations were always met with criticism in the media because of their supposed

false portrayal of Pakistani women and their tendency to idolize Western fashion, previously criticized by Khanum and Khan (2016) and Abbas et al. (2022) as evidence of cultural infiltration by the media. Such wardrobe selections frequently seemed to have no bearing on plot progression and hence some sort of commercial interest, namely, to draw an audience by visual appeal, not narrative power.

Safdar and Tahir (2023) suggest that this type of fashion leads to the objectification of females whose characters are not complex but defined by their physical appearance. Another important point brought up by Batool et al. (2022) is the role of supporting beauty standards in imposing social pressure on women to emulate fashion on-screen. From the perspective of the cultural imperialism theory, ambitious fashion trends represent symbolic domination, as Western fashion is turned into aspirational symbols in the Pakistani media (Faiz et al., 2020; Abbas et al., 2022). This is a kind of displacement of the culture, as native modesty is translated into the world fashion paradigms.

The guidelines of PEMRA place special focus on wearing clothes that would reflect Pakistani culture and religious beliefs (PEMRA, 2015a, b). However, repeated visual signal systems indicate systematic non-observation and can be interpreted as lax enforcement or deliberate border-testing by production crews.

Cultural Westernization and Audience Polarization

The third theme that is emerging is the encroachment of Westernized romantic values and the hybridization of cultures in local storytelling. Symbols and styles of global liberal culture (i.e., LGBTQ color palettes, alcohol consumption, or Indian-inspired sarees) were used in several dramas, including Parwarish (ARY) and Dayan (Geo). The trend is an example of cultural imperialism, whereby the localized content internalizes the foreign signs and sensibilities, with most of them conflicting with the conservative societal norms (Khanum & Khan, 2016; Abbas et al., 2022). It also brings out the twofold nature of media globalization, which increases creative variety and at the same time reduces cultural authenticity (Gul et al., 2017).

The reactions of the audiences in platforms show polarization: Such depictions were often justified by urban audiences as being artistic realism. They were attacked by conservative and middle-class viewers as decadence or Western imitation. This digital polarization reflects a deep ideological conflict in Pakistani society where the import of liberal norms regarding sexuality and body exposure directly clashes with traditional socio-sexual morality and religious frameworks (Majeed & Malik, 2022).

This two-sidedness highlights the division of the audience perception in the light of cultural liberalization, which supports the argument that mass media plays a role in cultural invasion as put forward by Faiz et al. (2020). In addition, the repetition of the warnings by PEMRA (2021 circulars) related to the display of hugging, caressing, or bed scenes (France24, 2021; Dawn, 2021a, b) is an indication of preservation of morality in a creative globalization by the regulator. The very fact that these scenes persist, though, implies that compliance is typically superseded by market needs and the pressure to comply with TRP (Rehman & Anwar, 2020).

Visual Framing as a Sensual Suggestive Tool

The second common trend is the application of camera angles, lighting, and background decorations to give out a romanticized atmosphere, without the explicit intimacy. Dim lighting, slow camera movement, and close framing were employed by the producers in Rah-e-Junoon (HUM), in Iqtidar (Green), and in Mehr Mah (Express) to create emotional tension and sensuality visually.

This aligns with Scandura's (2004) argument that the cinematic technique itself has a moral dimension in its ability, through visual emphasis, to suggest sensuality even in scenes rich in dialogue. The cultivation effect in this case is not literal imagery, but rather being emotionally conditioned; the audience eventually takes the romantic aesthetics to be equated with physical proximity. These kinds of scenes also lead to the question of the interpretive application of the implementation of PEMRA, as the code bans a visual implication of indecency, but offers no standard of visual implication. Because of this, producers have taken advantage of this gray area to give the impression of sensuality without being interpreted as violated, as a form of creative negotiation within the boundaries of censorship.

Discussion

Discussion of Findings with Respect to the Research Objectives

Objective 1: To Investigate the Effects of PEMRA Guidelines on the Depiction of Bold Dressing and Intimate Scenes in Pakistani TV Dramas Even though the Code of Conduct (2015) and Rules (2009) of PEMRA expressly forbid indecent, suggestive, and culturally offensive visual materials, the results of this study suggest that these clauses are not strictly enforced and are rather vaguely adhered to. Intimacy and loving gestures on screen were framed in hug scenes, bed scenes, and sensual episodes in dramas on all the leading channels, especially *Tery Bin* (Geo TV), *Aye Ishq-e-Junoon* (ARY), and *Ishq-e-Laa* (HUM), although this practice was prohibited in 2021 by the PEMRA in the form of a circular (Dawn, 2021a, b; France24, 2021).

The researchers observed that the power of PEMRA is only symbolic as opposed to operational, since producers tend to work around visual implications to avoid direct prohibition. This is achieved through specific production

techniques such as dim lighting, emotional gaze, or soft touch. For instance, the researchers noted that instead of explicit acts, directors use extreme close-ups and slow-motion editing to amplify sensuality while technically staying within the vague definitions of "decency." Rehman and Anwar (2020) and Asghar and Tabassum (2025) both made similar observations, as they discovered that frequent ethical violations occurred because of subjectivity in the interpretation of regulatory language. From a regulatory perspective, this paper stands on the side of the 2021 policy analysis by PIDE that found that the guidelines of PEMRA had no enforcement authority in the context of competitive media commercialization. Therefore, innovating producers adopt aesthetic realism and TRP contest as opposed to regulatory prudence.

The researchers argue that PEMRA does not function as a monolithic regulator; rather, its enforcement is marred by internal contradictions and external lobbying. The vagueness of terms such as "culturally offensive" allows for subjective interpretation by different monitoring committees. Moreover, the influence of powerful media conglomerates driven by the "TRP contest" often creates pressure that forces the regulator into a reactive rather than proactive stance. This explains why PEMRA's enforcement appears inconsistent: it is a negotiation between state-defined morality and industry-driven commercial realism.

Objective 2: To Analyze TV Channels in Pakistan in Terms of Bold Dressing and Intimate Scenes in Terms of Their Content Practices The results showed that content approaches of prominent channels have gotten much more business-oriented, focusing not on narrative power but on visual appeal. In *Sirf Tum* (Geo), *Kabhi May Kabhi Tum* (ARY), and *Bajjo* (Geo), female characters were wearing modern or revealing clothes, which is reminiscent of previous trends revealed by Ali et al. (2012) and Habib and Amjad (2021) on the objectification of gender roles in televised media.

The researchers found that these wardrobes often mimic Indian soap opera aesthetics (e.g., stylized sarees and heavy jewelry) combined with Western silhouettes, creating a hybrid "glamorous" look. This development can be put into context by using social learning theory, where media creators mimic successful visual designs from international programs, where they learn that popular aesthetics is associated with boldness. Owing to this fact, these depictions carry on the cycles of imitation in production and expectations by the audience. Furthermore, the results demonstrate an apparent shift in genre: moral or family-oriented ones were replaced by romanticized and youth-based stories where sensuality is normalized through visuals. Qaiser et al. (2024) and Abbas et al. (2022) also found similar patterns and stated that the commercialized romantic tropes transform the attitudes of the audience towards gender and morality.

Furthermore, the researchers observed that this shift in visual aesthetics is not limited to female characters. There is an emerging trend of "modern masculinity" where male protagonists are portrayed through a stylized lens. Characters in dramas such as *Tery Bin* and *Aye Ishq-e-Junoon* often feature gym-toned physiques, tight-fitted modern attire, and meticulously groomed appearances that mirror international "heartthrob" archetypes. This indicates that the "commercialization of the body" is becoming a gender-inclusive practice in Pakistani media, where both male and female appearances are optimized for visual attraction and digital engagement.

While the study does not use proprietary financial data, the content practices observed in objective 2 such as the adoption of Indian-style sarees in *Bajjo* and Western silhouettes in *Kabhi May Kabhi Tum* serve as proxy evidence for commercial interests. These choices are driven by "market realism," where producers prioritize visual hooks and digital virality over traditional narrative depth to compete with international streaming trends. This is consistent with the findings of Faiz et al. (2020), who argue that liberalization has created a competitive landscape where sensationalism is used as a strategic tool for audience retention.

Objective 3: To Be Aware of How Regulatory Guidelines Influence the Creative Decisions of Drama Producers and Broadcasters The paper has shown that there is a contradictory nature between the PEMRA moral framework and the artistic freedom of producers. Although a major goal of PEMRA is cultural integrity, bold content is justified by producers through the concept of creative freedom and modern realism. Such a conflict could be seen in plays like *Parwarish* (ARY), where the relationships between teenagers and the image of the LGBTQ flag were shown, and people widely criticized these shows as a breach of cultural traditions.

This fact is consistent with Gul et al. (2017), who believe that the liberalization of media in Pakistan has led to the emergence of a regulatory gap whereby the broadcasters push the boundaries of ethics in the name of being innovative. The researchers observed that broadcasters are moving towards Western narrative patterns more and more, adopting cinematographic styles such as low-key "mood" lighting and evocative background scores to imply intimacy. This proves the cultural imperialism model, as producers strive to engage and compete with a global audience (Abbas et al., 2022; Faiz et al., 2020).

While primary interviews with directors and writers were not within the scope of this visual analysis, the "creative intent" can be inferred through the public discourse of industry leaders. For instance, several leading writers have publicly argued that the shift toward bolder themes is a response to "Global Competition" and the need for

"Narrative Realism." This suggests that the visual choices observed in the sampled dramas are not accidental but are part of a deliberate industry-wide strategy to align Pakistani television with international aesthetic standards, a phenomenon often described by creators as "creative evolution" in the face of rigid regulatory frameworks.

Also, the results of *Dayan* (Geo) and *Kaisi Hai Ye Ruswai* (Express) note that aesthetics are being imitated from both Indian and Western trends, as Khanum and Khan (2016) and Rogers (2000) found that there was cross-cultural borrowing in Pakistani programming. Such creative habits are indicative of a market-conditioned identity change, in which a business is more successful when it violates ethical standards. According to the cultivation theory, this desensitization to bold images develops over time due to constant exposure to such romanticized material on both the viewer and the producer side. Media repetition leads to the acceptance of previously taboo images, as seen by Greene et al. (2011). Thus, the demand of the audience is fulfilled, and the new regulations of culture are built by drama-makers not only in response to the demand but also through the continuity of visual exposure.

Furthermore, the researchers argue that the dual presence of these dramas on both linear television and digital platforms like YouTube creates a "regulatory paradox." Although critics suggest that YouTube operates outside PEMRA's jurisdiction, the content analyzed in this study is first broadcast on regulated TV channels. This means that any "bold" content observed on official YouTube channels (such as *Tery Bin* or *Rah-e-Junoon*) has already bypassed the initial regulatory filters of PEMRA. The fact that these scenes are live-streamed and later uploaded digitally confirms that the visual boundaries are being pushed at the source of broadcast, not just on unregulated digital spaces. This highlights a state of "institutional inertia" where the regulator's presence is symbolic on TV, while the same content gains massive digital traction through visual hooks and provocative thumbnails.

Theoretical Integration

Cultivation Theory

The results support the main assumption of the cultivation theory: habitual exposure to media representations would eventually influence reality perceptions of viewers. Viewers who constantly see hugging, romantic intimacy, and sexual apparel might accept such depictions as a normal representation of romance. In plays such as *Tery Bin* and *Rah-e-Junoon*, the emotional intimacy was portrayed by cinematic methods (visual framing and sound design) instead of direct text, indicating soft cultivation and some delicate reworking of romantic conventions over the years. This is in line with Greene et al. (2011), who reinforced their claim with the fact that fictional images of intimacy moderate the attitudes of the audience on what is appropriate in relationships.

Social Learning Theory

The research confirms the social learning theory and the importance of audience and producers learning by observation and reinforcement. The audience is fascinated by the updated fashion and romanticism, and the industry replicates the international trends and local achievements to stay up to date. Examples of dramas that involve observational learning include *Man Mast Malang* and *Aye Ishq-e-Junoon*, in which sensual signals are copied from foreign entertainment industries. Such imitation, as proposed in the model of Bandura (through Greene et al., 2011), takes place when behavior is rewarded with popularity, whereby bold or visually stimulating content receives social media attention and rating success.

Cultural Imperialism

The findings go a long way to endorse the cultural imperialism theory by demonstrating how Western and Indian media aesthetics have infiltrated Pakistani television. Some of them are Western dress, Indian-style saree, and LGBTQ color symbolism in *Parwarish*. These results can be compared to Abbas et al. (2022) and Faiz et al. (2020), who cautioned that the styles of the content imported transform the indigenous identity and erode the local cultural authenticity. Thus, culture is being borrowed through language and style as Khanum & and Khan (2016) argued previously; currently, it is to be borrowed through visual sensuality and romantic morality. The researchers argue that this cultural hybridization allows drama-makers to generate globally well-liked hybrid content that loses touch with native principles.

This intertextual influence, particularly the aesthetic realism of Turkish dramas and the glamorous silhouettes of Indian soaps, acts as a benchmark for Pakistani producers to bypass traditional visual boundaries.

However, it is crucial to recognize that the reception of these bold portrayals is not uniform across Pakistan's diverse social landscape. The "culture" referred to in this study represents a contested space where urban-liberal segments may find Westernized aesthetics acceptable, while rural and traditionalist audiences perceive them as a direct threat to indigenous values. By prioritizing bold visual hooks, broadcasters are primarily catering to a "transnational urban class" and a younger, digitally active generation. This selective portrayal risks alienating more conservative segments, thereby intensifying the sociocultural polarization within the country.

Broader Analytical Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study suggest a complex contradiction in the Pakistani media landscape: while PEMRA attempts to enforce a traditionalist "cultivation" of modesty through circulars and codes, functioning as an institutional mechanism of "body policing" aimed at preserving traditional cultural boundaries against Western expressions of bodily autonomy (Majeed et al., 2025), the industry's "production logic" is increasingly driven by a globalized aesthetic that rewards bold content for commercial survival. The researchers argue that this creates a state of "regulatory erosion," where the constant exposure to visual "workarounds" (systematically categorized in this analysis as technical maneuvers such as low-key "mood" lighting to imply intimacy, extreme close-ups for physical proximity, and slow-motion editing paired with evocative background scores to heighten sensuality) such as low-key lighting, extreme close-ups, and evocative background scores effectively desensitizes the audience over time. This implies that cultural imperialism does not just replace local values but creates a "hybrid morality" where the visual language of the drama (cinematography) becomes more influential than its narrative morality. From a theoretical standpoint, this suggests that in the digital age, symbolic defiance through aesthetics is often more powerful than literal compliance with regulatory frameworks.

The 5-year trajectory of this study (2021–2025) reveals a progressive normalization of bold content; while initial years were marked by subtle stylistic negotiations following the 2021 circulars, the latter half of the timeframe shows a more blatant institutionalization of bold aesthetics, indicating that PEMRA's symbolic presence has weakened as market realism has solidified over time.

The analysis revealed that regulatory erosion is uniform across all private channels, as the competitive TRP model leads to a homogenization of content where broadcasters replicate each other's bold visual strategies to ensure market survival.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides a detailed qualitative analysis of regulatory erosion and visual aesthetics in Pakistani dramas, certain limitations must be acknowledged:

1. **Absence of Producer Perspectives:** A primary constraint of this research is the lack of primary data from industry professionals, such as directors, producers, and scriptwriters. Their subjective rationale for "creative workarounds" could provide deeper insights into the commercial-regulatory conflict.
2. **Subjectivity in Interpretation:** As a qualitative study focused on visual semiotics, the interpretation of "boldness" or "sensuality" is inherently subjective and influenced by the researchers' socio-cultural perspective.
3. **Lack of Quantitative Data:** The study does not employ quantitative methods, such as frequency counts or large-scale audience surveys, which limits the ability to statistically generalize the findings across the entire media industry.
4. **Genre Specificity:** By focusing exclusively on romantic dramas, the study excludes other genres like social-issue dramas or comedy, where regulatory compliance patterns might differ.
5. **Non-representative Audience Data:** The reliance on social media comments captures only the vocal segment of the digital audience. Due to the lack of demographic data (age, gender, socioeconomic status) of these commenters, the findings regarding audience sentiment should be viewed as exploratory rather than a definitive measure of broad audience polarization.

Future Research Future studies should incorporate semi-structured interviews with media executives and PEMRA officials to bridge the gap between production intent and regulatory enforcement. Additionally, a mixed-methods approach combining content analysis with audience surveys would help quantify the "cultivation" effect on different demographic groups in Pakistan.

Conclusion

The current paper examined the theme of bold dressing and intimate scenes on Pakistani television dramas, which aired between 2021 and 2025, in the context of the regulatory measures given by PEMRA. As a result of qualitative visual examination of romantic programs on the most popular channels like GEO TV, ARY Digital, HUM TV, Green Entertainment, and Express Entertainment, the results showed that there is an increasing disconnect between the ethical codes that PEMRA recommends and the reality of the behavior of media content creators. Although several warnings were given in 2021 to curtail the indecent or suggestive content (Dawn, 2021a, b; NDTV, 2021), many dramas involved hugging, bed scenes, close camera shots, and provocative costumes that defy the moral principles that were detailed in the 2015 PEMRA instructions. These are some of the examples of how the implementation of media ethics is still loose, and creative departments can

demonstrate their creativity or avoid regulatory restrictions in the name of artistic freedom and market demand.

An additional observation of the analysis showed that provocative dressing and sexualized depictions are now a business tactic to attract popular focus and better ratings and are indicative of a tendency toward the commodification of female images (Safdar & Tahir, 2023; Bashir et al., 2022). Sleeveless costumes, tight-fitting clothes, and Westernized sarees represent modernity and traditionalism at the same time, turning off traditional audiences. The visual analysis also showed definite signs of cultural borrowing of Indian and Western aesthetics, which uphold the claims made by Abbas et al. (2022) and Faiz et al. (2020) that Pakistani television is experiencing cultural hybridization under the influence of the global media. Also, in social media, reactions of the audience were strongly polarized: urban viewers justified such depictions as artistic realism, conservative audiences regarded those depictions as a danger to the local traditions and family values (Gul et al., 2017).

In theoretical terms, the results are very close to cultivation theory, which proposes that the consistent exposure to these scenes can eventually make liberal visual behavior normalized, and it can also rebrand moral demands within the society. In a more comparable way, social learning theory says that the audience and creators recreate what is accepted and popularized, therefore, strengthening some representations by seeing and copying. Cultural imperialism theory also explains why local producers are subconsciously embracing Western or Indian sensibility in fashion and romantic expression, which symbolically means being dependent on foreign creative standards. All these structures are indicative of the fact that television not only mirrors societal attitudes towards morality, intimacy, and modernity but also transforms them.

The research also highlights the fact that PEMRA should redefine its codes, which give more pictorial references to lighting, framing, and symbolic gestures, as opposed to using spoken or explicit standards. Though media producers have a right to creative freedom, they should also remember that they have a social duty to portray romance in a culturally sensitive manner. Simultaneously, the media literacy of the audience should increase so that viewers can be more critical when interacting with televised intimacy rather than perceiving it without critical interpretation.

In general, the study finds that Pakistani television dramas are bargaining a complicated crossroads between tradition, modernity, and control. Most of the productions have set aside the moral lines that are established by PEMRA in their efforts to stay competitive and attractive. It has led to a twofold change: television stories grow more creative, and at the same time, they question the traditional ethics and reform gendered images on television. In conclusion, this paper confirms that television is not just a reflection of cultural change but is a primary source of a new mediated reality. While direct societal impact requires further audience research, the findings suggest that the constant exposure to these visuals is redefining the mediated cultural norms, where ethical alertness and critical viewing are essential to navigate the changing media landscape in Pakistan.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Digital-First Enforcement Mechanism:** PEMRA should implement a mandatory "Digital Preview" policy for drama teasers and trailers. Since digital virality often bypasses linear TV standards, trailers must be certified separately to prevent the use of sensational visual hooks that violate decency codes.
2. **Inclusive Stakeholder Consultation:** Instead of unilateral notices, PEMRA should establish a "Broadcasting Ethics Council" comprising media house representatives, academic researchers, and sociologists. This would ensure that "decency" is defined through a consensus-based approach rather than subjective interpretation.
3. **Measurable Compliance Metrics:** PEMRA should move toward a "Weighted Violation Index" (WVI). Instead of generic warnings, channels should be assigned points for different types of violations (e.g., wardrobe, physical intimacy, or suggestive dialogue). Accumulating a certain number of points within a quarter should trigger automatic fines or license suspension, making enforcement predictable and transparent.

Author contributions GS designed the plan of the study, collected data, wrote methodology, made results, discussion and conclusion and overall proofread the article. E.A. wrote the Introduction, Literature Review, and arranged the References.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors. So, no ethical approval is required for such kind of research.

Informed Consent Not applicable.

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