

Trapped by Culture, Not Education: An Analysis of Domestic Abuse in Pakistani Television Dramas through Audience Reception

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Pakistani YouTube audiences receive and interpret the domestic abuse experiences of educated women in two Pakistani television dramas. In Jafaa (HUM TV, 2024), a medical doctor named Zara endures years of escalating abuse from her husband before finally leaving him. In Kankar (ARY Digital, 2013), a university-educated woman named Kiran resists her marriage and eventually secures a divorce. The study grew out of a puzzle in Pakistan's development story. Women's literacy and enrollment have risen steadily for two decades, yet national survey data show no matching decline in intimate partner violence. This raises a direct question: does an audience's recognition of a female character's education actually soften the cultural scripts that ask women to endure abuse, or does it make little difference? To answer this, the study draws on a qualitative thematic analysis of approximately 350 YouTube comments, gathered through a three-tier purposive sampling strategy. It applies an integrated theoretical framework combining Reception Theory (Hall, 1973), Feminist Media Theory (hooks, 2000; Gill, 2007), and Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1998) to code the data across seven thematic categories and three reading positions. Dominant readings that reproduce patriarchal norms turned out to be the most common reception category in both dramas, accounting for 48.9% of comments on Jafaa and 52.1% on Kankar. Justification of abuse (31.1%) and victim-blaming (21.7%) together made up more than half of all coded discourse. Counterintuitively, the resistance narrative generated more justificatory and victim-blaming commentary than the endurance narrative did, a backlash effect this study attributes to cultivated audience expectations being broken rather than persuaded. Educational identity was frequently invoked but consistently subordinated to cultural prescriptions of marital duty. Based on these patterns, the study proposes a five-mechanism Cultural Mediation Model: cultivation priming, narrative negotiation, discursive mobilization, social reinforcement, and educational subordination. The findings carry implications for drama production, media literacy curricula, and domestic violence policy in Pakistan.

Keywords: domestic violence, Pakistani television drama, audience reception, Cultural Mediation Model, education-empowerment paradox, *sabar*, *izzat*, *naseeb*, YouTube comments, encoding/decoding

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is one of the most persistent forms of gender-based violence in Pakistan. It cuts across socioeconomic status, geography, and women's educational attainment. The World Health Organization's

(2005) multi-country framework defines such violence broadly, as a pattern of physical, sexual, emotional, or economic abuse within an intimate relationship. By that definition, the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) 2017 to 18 found that 28% of ever-married women aged 15 to 49, more than one in four, had experienced such violence at the hands of a husband (National Institute of Population Studies and ICF, 2019). This figure unsettles one of the most entrenched assumptions in gender and development discourse: that education is a reliable route out of vulnerability to abuse. Intimate partner violence in Pakistan is not principally a problem of ignorance. It is sustained by a cultural, ideological, and institutional architecture that education alone does not dismantle.

This is not simply a data point to be qualified. It constitutes a structural problem for models of women's empowerment that treat education as a reliable protective factor. The reasoning behind those models seems intuitive enough: a more educated woman should be more self-aware, more likely to know her legal rights, and more able to name abusive behavior as abuse. Yet this reasoning does not translate consistently into safety within Pakistani homes. The gap between what education is assumed to do and what it demonstrably achieves motivates the specific focus of this study. Rather than treating domestic violence as a social fact on its own, the study looks at the media through which Pakistanis most routinely encounter and discuss educated women's experiences of abuse, and at the audience discourse that determines whether such media challenges or reinforces the cultural override this gap implies.

Cultural values such as *sabar* (patience and forbearance), *izzat* (family honor), and *naseeb* (fate or divine destiny) have long functioned as a normative vocabulary through which Pakistani women are socialized to interpret and manage difficult marriages. These values are not simply private convictions. They are institutionalized in religious speech, parental guidance, societal norms and media representation, and together they form a moral architecture of endurance, one in which a woman's capacity to endure an abusive relationship is framed as virtue and her departure from it as moral failure.

Pakistani television drama occupies a uniquely powerful position within this cultural structure. Serialized over weeks or months and watched across every class and educational level, dramas produced by channels such as HUM TV and ARY Digital are not merely entertainment. They are cultural texts that frame, mirror, and occasionally challenge dominant social values. The migration of drama viewing to YouTube has opened an unprecedented, publicly visible channel for audience response. Comment sections beneath drama episodes now function as sites of participatory reception, where viewers reproduce, negotiate, and sometimes contest the cultural scripts a drama dramatizes.

This study sits at the intersection of three concerns: the education-empowerment paradox in Pakistan, the cultural authority of television drama, and the discursive dynamics of online audience reception. Drawing on approximately 350 YouTube comments collected from two dramas, *Jafaa* (HUM TV, 2024) and *Kankar* (ARY Digital, 2013), it asks how viewers' cultural values shape their perception of educated women's responses to domestic abuse. *Jafaa* dramatizes endurance. Zara, a medical doctor, remains with her husband Hassan through months of escalating violence before finally leaving him after being hospitalized. *Kankar* dramatizes resistance. Kiran, a university student, comes to break her marriage to Sikander and pursues a divorce over her mother's objections of not to do so. Although the two dramas aired eleven years apart, both center on an educated woman's response to abuse. This offers a natural comparison for examining how audiences negotiate the tension between empathy, endurance, and resistance.

Existing Pakistani media scholarship has documented the education-empowerment paradox largely at the level of content, that is, how dramas and news media represent domestic violence (Naz, 2023; Khan, 2020; Ali & Ahmed, 2022). Far less attention has been paid to the reception side of this equation, how ordinary audiences interpret, discuss, and evaluate these representations. No existing study compares audience discourse across an endurance narrative and a resistance narrative featuring educated female protagonists,

or asks whether educational identity, once recognized by an audience, is actually permitted to authorize resistance to abuse. This study addresses that gap directly.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do Pakistani YouTube audiences interpret educated women's experiences of domestic abuse in television dramas?

RQ2: What cultural values dominate audience discourse about domestic violence, particularly sabar (patience), izzat (honor), and naseeb (destiny), and how do these values interact with perceptions of education and women's agency?

RQ3: How does audience reception differ between an endurance narrative (Jafaa) and a resistance narrative (Kankar), and what do these differences reveal about the relationship between cultural conditioning and educational empowerment in Pakistani public discourse?

Research Objectives

O1: To examine the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings that Pakistani YouTube viewers produce in response to educated women's experiences of domestic violence.

O2: To identify the cultural values and belief systems that shape public attitudes toward educated women's decisions in abusive relationships, and how these values are linguistically expressed in audience commentary.

O3: To analyze how education and cultural belief intersect in audience discourse, the specific points at which education is recognized, dismissed, or subordinated to cultural demand.

O4: To develop a conceptual model of how cultural belief mediates audience reception of educated women in Pakistani media.

Hypotheses

H1: When interpreting educated women's experiences of domestic abuse, audiences will predominantly adopt dominant readings that reaffirm patriarchal cultural norms, sabar, izzat, and naseeb, and these norms will prove more influential on reception than recognition of women's educational empowerment.

H2: Audience reception of the resistance narrative (Kankar) will be more polarized, showing a wider spread across dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings, than reception of the endurance narrative (Jafaa), because resistance challenges the naturalized cultural script of feminine endurance more directly than endurance itself does.

Significance of the Study

Theoretical significance. This study extends feminist media reception scholarship. It shows how educational empowerment and cultural conditioning are jointly manifested and reproduced in public audience discourse, and it offers a model of cultural mediation built for non-Western patriarchal media contexts rather than one borrowed from Western feminist media theory.

Methodological significance. This study demonstrates the value of YouTube comment data for qualitative audience reception research. This is a naturalistic, non-reactive source that remains underused in South Asian media studies, and the study offers a replicable sampling and coding procedure for future work in similarly digital reception contexts.

Practical significance. The findings carry direct implications for media literacy education, gender-focused curriculum development, and media policy interventions in domestic violence prevention. They can inform more effective counter-narrative campaigns, production guidelines for dramas depicting abuse, and educational programs that address the cultural barriers education alone does not overcome.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Domestic Violence in Pakistan and the Education-Empowerment Paradox

The presumed link between women's education and empowerment is one of the most widely theorized relationships in development sociology and gender studies. It is embedded in international frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which connect female education directly to reduced vulnerability to violence and greater political voice (Maigah & Latip, 2023). Pakistan's own girls' education campaigns have drawn on this same logic. The Pakistani evidence reviewed below complicates it considerably.

Domestic violence in Pakistan is a structurally entrenched phenomenon, not an isolated one. It is present across class, education, and geography. Early work by Ibrah and Fatima (1993) linked women's vulnerability to low literacy and the absence of institutional protections, but later research complicates any simple literacy-to-safety relationship. Shaikh et al. (2008) studied pregnant women in Islamabad and Rawalpindi and found that more highly educated women reported higher, not lower, rates of verbal and physical violence. This is evidence that educational status does not reliably predict a woman's ability to leave or report abuse when cultural norms privilege family unity over personal safety. Critelli (2010) extends this argument directly to the population this study examines: educated, professionally successful Pakistani women remain subject to patriarchal control, and those who resist abusive treatment are often met with additional stigmatization for violating the cultural script of feminine virtue, not less. Sanauddin et al. (2016) frame this pattern as public patriarchy, an institutionalized system operating through state, legal, and civil structures rather than private authority alone. This helps explain why education, itself a site of public patriarchal regulation, does not automatically produce empowered subjectivity.

This pattern is not unique to Pakistan. Bhattacharyya (2015) documents a structurally similar disjunction in India, where women's rising educational credentials have not been matched by corresponding gains in mobility or domestic safety. This suggests that the education-empowerment paradox reflects a broader South Asian ideological formation, one that treats women's education as publicly legitimate but domestically irrelevant, rather than a peculiarly Pakistani failure. Weiss (2014) situates this dynamic within a Bourdieusian account of social reproduction: educational institutions can transmit the cultural capital that underwrites gender hierarchy rather than automatically dismantling it. Taken together, this literature establishes that the paradox motivating this study, namely that education raises awareness of one's situation without necessarily enabling exit from it, is well documented at the level of social structure. What remains underexamined is how this paradox is reproduced discursively, in the language audiences actually use when they discuss educated women's responses to abuse in media. This study addresses that gap.

Pakistani Television Dramas and the Representation of Domestic Violence

Since the founding of Pakistan Television Corporation in 1964, serialized domestic drama has been one of Pakistan's most culturally influential media genres. It reaches audiences across income and education levels in a way cinema, with its more urban and elite market, does not. The 2000s liberalization of Pakistani broadcasting and the arrival of commercial channels such as HUM TV and ARY Digital intensified competition around emotionally engaging, high-production-value domestic narratives centered on marriage, family conflict, and women's suffering. Momina Duraid Productions, the production house behind Jafaa, has built a reputation for socially conscious dramas addressing sensitive themes. This situates Jafaa's treatment of domestic violence within an institutional history of dramatizing women's social realities, even where, as this study's findings show, its protagonist ultimately endures rather than resists. That a prestige production explicitly designed to engage a social issue nonetheless generates predominantly patriarchal audience commentary is itself telling. It suggests early on that institutional intention and audience reception can diverge sharply, a divergence this study documents systematically in the findings below.

Content analysis substantiates the scale of this representational pattern. Akhter et al. (2023) analyzed thirty prime-time episodes across ARY Digital and HUM TV, the same two channels examined in this study, and found that female helplessness was the dominant representational code on both networks. Thirty-eight scenes depicted women as entirely unable to defend themselves. A further twenty depicted partial but unexercised capacity for self-defense. Ten scenes depicted explicit domestic violence victimization, and only fifteen scenes across the entire sample depicted independent, professionally active women. ARY Digital's framing skewed more negative than HUM TV's, a channel-level pattern that maps directly onto Kankar (ARY) and Jafaa (HUM). This situates the audience data in this study within a broadcast environment that, across both channels, statistically normalizes female helplessness during prime-time programming.

This normalization extends to narrative mechanics as well. Naz (2023) found that Pakistani dramas depicting domestic violence typically follow a cycle in which physical abuse is followed by the husband's apology, the wife's forgiveness, and a return to domestic harmony. This structure reproduces rather than interrupts the real-world cycle of abuse it depicts. Khan's (2020) feminist textual analysis similarly found that female endurance is consistently coded as moral and spiritual elevation, while abusive male characters are framed through trauma narratives that invite audience sympathy rather than accountability. This pattern is directly visible in this study's Jafaa data, where audience commentary repeatedly explains Hassan's violence through his childhood trauma. Ali and Ahmed (2022) extend this analysis to Pakistani news media and find that domestic violence coverage consistently privileges reconciliation, treating legal recourse as an exceptional last resort rather than a standard entitlement. This is evidence of a broader symbolic convergence between news and drama registers around the theme of endurance.

Cultural Values and Gendered Discourse: Sabar, Izzat, and Naseeb

Understanding Pakistani audience discourse about domestic violence requires understanding the specific cultural vocabulary through which it is conducted. Sabar, rooted in the Arabic word for restraint, carries substantial theological weight in Islamic teaching as a spiritual virtue. Within Pakistani domestic culture, however, it is frequently gendered into a prescription that women, counseled by mothers, mothers-in-law, and religious authorities, should tolerate difficult marriages. Its theological grounding makes resisting its application feel like a lapse of faith rather than a simple social disagreement. Izzat, family honor, operates communally rather than individually. A woman's conduct is treated as inseparable from her extended family's reputation, so that leaving an abusive husband is framed as bringing shame not only on herself but on her parents and siblings. Naseeb, fate or divine destiny, offers a theology through which an abusive

marriage can be reframed as providentially ordained rather than humanly alterable. This discourages women from treating their situation as a solvable problem rather than a spiritual trial. Together, these three values form what this study terms the patriarchal cultural triad. Sabar counsels endurance, izzat forecloses public exit, and naseeb recasts both as divinely sanctioned. Together they constrain the agency of women in abusive relationships regardless of their educational standing.

Digital Audience Reception and YouTube as a Research Site

Classical audience reception scholarship, from Hall (1973) through Morley (1980) and Radway (1984), relied principally on interview and ethnographic methods to document how different social groups decode the same media text differently. Naturalistic online comment data offer a complementary source. They are large-scale, text-based, and produced without the social dynamics of an interview or the demand characteristics of a survey. YouTube comments in particular constitute an authentic register of audience discourse, produced in ordinary language by viewers who do not regard themselves as research subjects. This makes them well suited to surfacing the cultural assumptions and values this study investigates. This naturalistic quality comes with trade-offs. Comment sections overrepresent viewers who have the digital literacy, language skill, and motivation to participate in public discussion, and this is a different population than the drama's full viewership. This study treats that overrepresentation not as a fatal weakness but as a redirection of the analytical target, toward the specific subset of the audience that is actively engaged in public discourse about domestic violence, rather than toward the viewership as a whole. Prior work analyzing YouTube commentary around gender, sexuality, and media representation has consistently found that comment spaces both reproduce and contest the ideologies embedded in the content they respond to (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019). This study extends that methodological tradition, still nascent in South Asian digital media research, to Pakistani drama reception.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reception Theory: Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model

This study's central theoretical anchor is Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding and decoding model, developed within British Cultural Studies as a corrective to linear transmission models of mass communication. Hall argued that media texts are polysemic and that decoding is an active process. Audiences construct meaning that may diverge from producers' intentions, depending on the ideological resources they bring to the text. Hall identified three possible reading positions. A dominant reading accepts the text's preferred meaning as natural and self-evident. A negotiated reading accepts that preferred meaning in general while adapting it locally to the reader's own position and interests. An oppositional reading recognizes the preferred meaning but rejects it from within a contrary value system. Morley's (1980) empirical study of audience decoding of the British program *Nationwide* provided the first sustained demonstration that decoding patterns systematically with social position rather than occurring idiosyncratically, a finding this study's design assumes extends to the cultural and social location of Pakistani YouTube commenters. Applied here, endorsements of endurance as virtue, sympathy for an abuser's trauma, and dismissal of a character's education as irrelevant to her marital duty are treated as dominant readings. Comments that accept a woman's suffering while invoking family responsibility or therapeutic obligation are treated as negotiated. Comments naming abuse as criminal, praising resistance, or faulting the cultural values that rationalize abuse are treated as oppositional. This study also makes a specific extension to Hall's original model. Rather than treating education as a neutral demographic detail, the analysis asks whether a commenter's acknowledgment of a character's education is associated with negotiated or oppositional decoding, or whether that acknowledgment is compatible with, and even routinely absorbed into, a dominant reading. This question operationalizes the study's central hypothesis directly at the level of individual comments rather than only at the level of aggregate frequencies.

Feminist Media Theory

The study's second theoretical foundation draws on bell hooks's (2000) insistence that feminist analysis must account for the intersecting forces, class, religion, and culture among them, that structure women's experience of patriarchal power. It also draws on Rosalind Gill's (2007) account of postfeminist media sensibility, in which women's apparently free choices conceal the persistence of patriarchal constraint. Feminist Media Theory supplies the conceptual vocabulary for analyzing how Pakistani dramas construct educated, professional female characters as symbols of social progress while nonetheless subjecting them to a traditional narrative script of suffering and sacrifice. It also helps explain audience comments that acknowledge a character's professional accomplishment only to subordinate it immediately to her relational duties as wife, a discursive move that reflects the broader containment of women's public achievement within a value system centered on the private sphere. This intersectional lens matters especially in the Pakistani context, where class, religion, and family structure interact with gender in ways a gender-only analytical frame would flatten. An educated woman's treatment in audience discourse, this study anticipates, will depend not only on her being a woman but on how her professional identity intersects with her religiosity, her class background, and her family's standing.

Cultivation Theory

The study's third theoretical resource is George Gerbner's (1998) Cultivation Theory. It holds that heavy, cumulative exposure to television narratives shapes audiences' perceptions of social reality in directions congruent with the values embedded across those narratives, an effect Gerbner locates not in any single program but in television's long-run consistency as a storytelling system. Applied to Pakistani domestic drama, decades of narratives in which women's endurance of abuse is framed sympathetically would be expected to cultivate an audience predisposition toward reading new dramas through that same lens, regardless of a given drama's own narrative argument. Cultivation Theory is particularly well suited to explaining two of this study's central findings. The first is the consistency of dominant readings across dramas broadcast eleven years apart. The second is the counterintuitive possibility that a resistance narrative like *Kankar* could generate more, not less, defensive patriarchal commentary, since its departure from cultivated expectation provokes active reassertion of the norm it violates rather than passive acceptance of its argument. Gerbner's related concepts of mainstreaming and resonance are useful here too. Mainstreaming describes how heavy viewers' attitudes converge toward a shared cultural baseline regardless of their prior individual differences. Resonance describes how cultivation effects are amplified when television content echoes viewers' own lived experience. Together these concepts offer a plausible account of why the sabar-glorifying testimony examined later in this study's findings carries such persuasive force for its author. A viewer whose own marital history resonates with Kiran's is arguably the viewer most susceptible to the cultivated reading, not least of all.

Taken together, these three theories are treated here as complementary rather than additive. Reception Theory supplies the structural categories, dominant, negotiated, and oppositional, into which individual comments are classified. Feminist Media Theory supplies the analytical lens for how gender ideology and educational identity are constructed and contested within those readings. Cultivation Theory supplies the historical and systemic explanation for why the culturally dominant reading position recurs so consistently across audiences and across a decade of Pakistani broadcast history.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995). It is grounded in an interpretivist and constructivist research philosophy that treats YouTube comments not as transparent windows into audience psychology but as culturally and linguistically mediated expressions that require interpretive engagement. Consistent with feminist epistemology (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991), the study does not claim neutrality toward domestic violence. It proceeds from the premise that domestic violence constitutes injustice, and it treats understanding how cultural values sustain that injustice as itself an analytical priority, a commitment that shapes the questions asked without predetermining the findings.

The comparative logic of the design rests on the deliberate selection of two dramas occupying opposite narrative positions on the same underlying theme. *Jafaa* (HUM TV, 2024), written by Samira Fazal and directed by Danish Nawaz, aired thirty-two episodes between May and December 2024. It stars Mawra Hussain as Zara, a medical doctor whose marriage to Hassan (Usman Mukhtar) deteriorates from controlling behavior into escalating physical violence, including an assault severe enough to hospitalize her, before she ultimately leaves him. *Kankar* (ARY Digital, 2013), starring Sanam Baloch as Kiran and Fahad Mustafa as Sikander, aired twenty-five episodes between May and December 2013. It dramatizes a university-educated woman's growing resistance to her husband's violence resulting in her miscarriage and her eventual pursuit of divorce over her mother's objections and with her father's support. The eleven-year interval separating the two broadcasts is treated here as an analytical asset rather than a confound. It spans Pakistan's rapid smartphone and YouTube expansion, to more than 71 million active Pakistani users by 2024, the emergence of the Aurat March movement since 2018, and successive reforms to domestic violence legislation. Persistence in the cultural patterns identified across this period therefore constitutes a meaningful finding about the robustness of patriarchal cultural mediation, while any shift would equally indicate real, if gradual, cultural movement.

Data Collection and Sampling

Eight episodes were purposively selected from each drama to represent the establishment, escalation, and resolution stages of the abuse arc. These were Episodes 11, 12, 14, 15, 18, 20, 21, and 22 for *Jafaa*, and Episodes 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, and 25 for *Kankar*. Comments were drawn from each channel's official YouTube upload using a three-tier purposive sampling strategy per episode. The ten most-liked comments captured culturally dominant positions. The comments generating the most replies captured contested or controversial positions. Five randomly selected comments from the middle range of engagement captured more tentative or ambivalent audience voices. This procedure yielded a combined corpus of approximately 350 comments, roughly 176 per drama, which is broadly consistent with comparable YouTube reception studies (Talukder, 2023). Most comments were written in Urdu, in Nastaliq or Roman script, and were translated by the researcher, a native Urdu speaker, with particular care taken to preserve the cultural resonance of terms such as *sabar*, *izzat*, and *naseeb*. Urdu-English code-switched comments were analyzed as unified texts rather than divided by language, since the code-switching itself, the movement between culturally embedded Urdu values and globally circulating English discourses of rights and empowerment, was treated as analytically significant in its own right.

Thematic Analysis and Rigor

Coding followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase thematic analysis procedure: familiarization, initial code generation, theme clustering, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. It was applied primarily deductively through the study's integrated theoretical framework, while remaining open to

inductively emergent patterns. Each comment was coded for its Hall (1973) reading position, dominant, negotiated, or oppositional, and for its primary theme among seven categories developed jointly from theory and data: justification and normalization of abuse; victim-blaming and responsibility attribution; education versus cultural beliefs; empowerment and resistance narratives; honor and family pressure (izzat); glorification of patience and sacrifice (sabar); and religious and moral framing (naseeb, religious duty). Comments engaging multiple themes were coded for their most rhetorically dominant theme, with secondary themes noted separately.

Rigor was addressed through the qualitative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility rested on sustained engagement with the 350-comment corpus across multiple analytical passes and on peer debriefing with the supervising faculty member. Because the researcher never interviewed or otherwise identified individual commenters, conventional member-checking was not applicable, so credibility instead relied on grounding every interpretive claim in specific, citable comment evidence and on an independent inter-rater review of approximately 10% of coded comments, which returned high agreement on theme and reading-position assignment. Transferability was supported through thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the drama and sampling context, sufficient for readers to judge the relevance of these findings to other South Asian or patriarchal media settings. Dependability rested on an explicit, documented coding schema and audit trail, and confirmability on the researcher's own explicit acknowledgment of a feminist, critical standpoint rather than a claim to value-free neutrality.

The study analyzes only publicly posted, non-identifying YouTube comments, consistent with internet research ethics guidelines (Franzke et al., 2019). No usernames, profiles, or other identifying information were collected or reported, and comments are referenced only by drama and episode. Sustained engagement with domestic violence content carries a genuine emotional toll for the researcher, so appropriate reflective and support practices were maintained throughout data collection and analysis, consistent with the ethical protocols of the Department of Mass Communication, Forman Christian College.

FINDINGS

The following analysis presents the thematic and reading-position distribution of approximately 350 YouTube comments coded across the Jafaa and Kankar datasets. RQ1 is answered principally through the education-versus-cultural-beliefs and empowerment themes. RQ2 is answered through the justification, victim-blaming, honor, sabar, and naseeb themes collectively. RQ3 is answered through the comparative frequency and reading-position distributions reported throughout this section.

Overview of Thematic Frequency Distribution

Table 1 presents the combined and drama-level frequency distribution across all seven thematic categories.

Theme	Jafaa (n)	Kankar (n)	Combined (n)	% of Combined
Justification and normalization of abuse	29	101	132	31.1%
Victim-blaming and responsibility attribution	16	75	92	21.7%
Education versus cultural beliefs	20	45	67	15.8%
Empowerment and resistance narratives	16	42	59	13.9%
Honor and family pressure (izzat)	6	29	36	8.5%
Glorification of patience and sacrifice (sabar)	10	22	32	7.5%
Religious and moral framing (naseeb)	5	16	22	5.2%
Total	102	330	440	100.0%

Justification and normalization of abuse was the single most heavily coded theme, accounting for 31.1% of all coding references, followed by victim-blaming at 21.7%. Together these two themes, both of which orient audience discourse toward protecting rather than challenging abusive behavior, account for more than half of all coded discourse. Counterintuitively, Kankar, the resistance drama, generated substantially higher frequencies than Jafaa across nearly every theme, most strikingly in justification (101 references versus 29) and victim-blaming (75 versus 16), a pattern discussed at length below.

A supplementary NVivo matrix-coding query, cross-tabulating each comment's thematic code against a broader abuse stance (condemning abuse, justifying abuse, a mixed response, or a neutral, purely observational comment), sharpens this picture considerably. The justification and victim-blaming themes carry the heaviest concentrations of the justifying-abuse stance, and they are the most attitudinally consistent categories in the dataset. Comments coded to either theme are almost uniformly oriented toward defending the perpetrator or assigning responsibility to the victim. The education-versus-cultural-beliefs theme, by contrast, shows the most diversified stance distribution of any category. It contains meaningful volumes of both condemning and justifying stances alongside a visible mixed-response component, a distributional signature of the same three sub-patterns discussed below: dismissive displacement, weaponized inversion, and structural critique. The empowerment and resistance theme carries the highest concentration of the condemning-abuse stance relative to its own coding volume, but even so, the absolute

size of that condemning-abuse response remains smaller than the justifying-abuse volumes recorded for the two largest themes. This reinforces that oppositional discourse is present but structurally outnumbered in both comment spaces.

Justification and Normalization of Abuse

Two distinct sub-patterns characterize this theme. In Jafaa, audience commentary repeatedly invokes Hassan's childhood trauma as an explanatory, and often exculpatory, frame. One commenter wrote that "Hassan's childhood trauma has made him like this... it shows how he's afraid his loved ones will abandon him, and he has anger issues" (Jafaa, Episode 11). This deploys real psychological literacy, attachment theory and intergenerational trauma, in service of empathy for the abuser rather than accountability toward the victim. In Kankar, the equivalent pattern takes the form of a behavioral provocation defense. One extended comment argues that "Kiran has more than one problem... she argues, provokes him, then blames him... you should support him, not humiliate him in front of everyone" (Kankar, Episode 16), recasting even Kiran's miscarriage, medically the direct result of Sikander's assault, as a consequence of her own choices. A shorter comment from the same dataset states the underlying norm even more starkly: "Women suffer beatings, work for a living, bear the children of the family and yet remain with their husbands" (Kankar, Episode 16). Here endurance is presented not as injustice but as the expected content of feminine marital duty.

Victim-Blaming and Responsibility Attribution

Victim-blaming appeared far more frequently in the Kankar dataset (75 references) than in Jafaa's (16), and it often fused with commentary on education and class. One widely coded comment dismissed Kiran outright: "education doesn't mean that you can misbehave or argue with your husband on tiny things... she is from a low class family and doesn't know what she is doing" (Kankar, Episode 16). This single utterance simultaneously invokes educational dismissal, victim-blaming, and class-inflected honor discourse. A related comment reframed the entire conflict as a failure of adjustment on Kiran's part, arguing she "should have been better educated on how to deal with her husband in his different moods" (Kankar, Episode 16). This converts a demand that the abuser stop hitting his wife into a demand that the wife better anticipate his moods.

Education versus Cultural Beliefs

Although only third in raw frequency, this theme is most directly diagnostic of the study's central argument. Three discursive sub-patterns recur. Dismissive displacement names a character's education, then denies its relevance to marital conduct, as in the "education doesn't mean you can misbehave" comment above. Weaponized inversion turns education against its bearer, as in the comment that "Zara is a doctor but doesn't know how to handle a psycho patient" (Jafaa, Episode 15). This converts Zara's medical training into a professional obligation that heightens her tolerance for abuse. A related comment argues she "studied to be a doctor to help others, but she can't even help her own husband" (Jafaa, Episode 14), extending her professional vocation of care backward into her marriage. Structural critique, the minority pattern, uses education's apparent failure as evidence of ideology's independence from credentials: "It doesn't matter if someone is well qualified. I have seen well-educated people hit their wives... thinking is patriarchal and controlling" (Kankar, Episode 25). Dismissive displacement and weaponized inversion together account for roughly two-thirds of this theme's coding references, with structural critique making up the remainder. This indicates that even within the theme most directly concerned with education, the patriarchal reading position retains its majority. The comparative distribution reinforces this pattern: Jafaa generated 20 references to Kankar's 45, since a character's education is invoked more contentiously when deployed in the service of resistance, as with Kiran's divorce, than when an educated character simply endures.

Empowerment and Resistance Narratives

Oppositional readings celebrating agency were considerably more frequent in Kankar (42 references) than Jafaa (16). One of the most politically explicit examples argued that "the more women that do this, the better society will change... society has made divorce a taboo for women, which is the only reason so many men have the courage to be animals" (Kankar, Episode 18). This reframes an individual decision as collective political action. A second comment fused class awareness with feminist analysis directly addressed to other women: "Kiran is educated and still putting through this BS... Your life and your dignity should be your top priority" (Kankar, Episode 15). Empowerment commentary on Jafaa tended instead toward sympathy for Zara combined with criticism of the family members pressuring her to endure, rather than structural critique of patriarchy itself. One commenter directed frustration at Hassan's grandmother: "Zara's dadi has lost her mind with her old-fashioned thinking... Hassan should control his anger, after all, Zara is his wife, not his slave, to torture like this" (Jafaa, Episode 15). This is an oppositional reading, but it remains narrower in scope than Kankar's structural commentary, since it targets an individual antagonist within the family rather than patriarchy as a system.

Honor and Family Pressure (Izzat)

Izzat-based commentary was substantially more frequent in Kankar (29 references) than Jafaa (6), reflecting the greater narrative salience of family pressure toward reconciliation in the resistance storyline. Readings split between two positions. Some rejected maternal pressure outright: "Kiran's mama be like 'ENDURE (SABAR KRO)'... what the hell" (Kankar, Episode 16). Others deployed izzat instrumentally against the victim herself: "If Kiran requires 'izzat' she needs to be tactful and know when to stop talking and pressurizing her husband" (Kankar, Episode 16). This second reading inverts izzat's conventional meaning, the protection of women's dignity, into a demand for submission.

Glorification of Patience and Sacrifice (Sabar)

Sabar-glorifying commentary appeared more often in Kankar (22) than Jafaa (10), notably even though Kankar's own narrative explicitly argues against endurance. The most striking example is autobiographical. A commenter described enduring her own troubled marriage for seven years on her mother's advice that "your husband is mentally sick, don't leave him before giving your best," concluding "It's possible, ladies. Good luck and God bless" (Kankar, Episode 25). This personal testimony reframes years of endurance as a success narrative and models sabar for other women, evidence of cultivated cultural frameworks operating even against a drama's own preferred meaning. A negotiated counterpoint accepted the value of sabar while refusing to let it excuse violence: "Yes, Kiran should have shown patience (sabr). But that's not the reason for Sikandar's hitting" (Kankar, Episode 18).

Religious and Moral Framing (Naseeb)

Although the least frequently coded theme (5.2%), religious framing carries disproportionate cultural authority, and the data reveal religion functioning as a genuine site of contestation rather than a uniformly patriarchal register. Some comments invoke religious authority to enforce endurance: "Read Quran. Divorce (talaq) is a very sensitive topic. Even Allah doesn't like it... Shame on Kiran" (Kankar, Episode 16). Others invoke the same tradition to condemn abuse: "Our Prophet (PBUH) is the perfect example, he never raised his voice when speaking to his wife, so where do these men get the idea that they can do all this?" (Kankar, Episode 25). This demonstrates that Islamic tradition is discursively contested rather than monolithically deployed in either direction.

Reading Positions: Dominant, Negotiated, and Oppositional

Table 2 reports the distribution of Hall's (1973) three reading positions by drama.

Reading Position	Jafaa (n)	Jafaa (%)	Kankar (n)	Kankar (%)
Dominant	46	48.9%	125	52.1%
Negotiated	33	35.1%	73	30.4%
Oppositional	16	17.0%	43	17.9%
Total	95	100.0%	241	100.0%

Dominant readings constituted the largest category in both dramas: 48.9% in Jafaa and, notably, an even higher 52.1% in Kankar. This directly supports Hypothesis 1, since cultural mediation proved more influential on audience reception than recognition of educational empowerment in either drama. Negotiated readings, comments that accept a woman's suffering while still invoking family responsibility or a therapeutic obligation to her abuser, made up the second-largest category in both dramas, 35.1% in Jafaa and 30.4% in Kankar. This indicates that even audience members who do not fully reproduce the dominant reading rarely move all the way to outright opposition. Oppositional readings remained below 18% in both cases. The finding that Kankar, whose own narrative argument favors resistance, produced the higher proportion of dominant readings is among this study's most theoretically significant results, discussed in full below. It is accompanied by a correspondingly higher share of oppositional readings in Kankar (17.9% versus 17.0%), confirming Hypothesis 2's prediction of greater polarization in resistance-narrative reception, though not in the progressive direction a simple media-effects account would predict.

Answering the Research Questions

Across both dramas, educated women's experiences of abuse are interpreted principally through cultural rather than professional frameworks (RQ1). Educational or professional identity is acknowledged, but it is treated as either irrelevant to, or actively in tension with, marital obligation far more often than it is treated as a basis for agency. Justification and victim-blaming, which jointly account for more than half of all coded discourse, constitute the dominant cultural values shaping that discourse (RQ2). Sabar operates prescriptively, izzat operates through family shame, and naseeb operates as the most authoritative, if least frequent, register of religious sanction. Comparatively, the endurance narrative produced a more internally coherent dominant reading, while the resistance narrative produced a more polarized reception: more forceful dominant readings alongside more oppositional ones. This is corroborated by NVivo word-frequency analysis showing Jafaa's corpus clustering around psychological vocabulary (trauma, mental, healing) and Kankar's clustering around social and structural vocabulary (society, mothers, class, rights) (RQ3).

DISCUSSION

Why Dominant Readings Persist: Cultural Override

The clearest theoretical implication of this study is that dominant, patriarchy-reproducing readings constitute the majority audience position in both dramas. This directly addresses whether cultural values override educational recognition in domestic violence reception. Hall's (1973) concept of preferred meaning explains the Jafaa case straightforwardly. The drama's own narrative logic contextualizes Hassan's violence through his trauma history and keeps Zara emotionally invested until late in the story, so it encodes a preferred meaning broadly sympathetic to endurance. Audiences producing dominant readings are therefore reinforced doubly, by their own cultural values and by the text itself. Kankar is theoretically more revealing precisely because its preferred meaning is clearly pro-resistance. Kiran's choice is narratively legitimized and her father's support validates her agency, yet this preferred meaning does not translate into a corresponding majority of oppositional audience readings. This gap between encoded and decoded meaning is, in Hall's framework, the most politically significant feature of the entire communicative process. It is explained here by Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1998): decades of Pakistani domestic drama have cultivated an expectation of feminine endurance robust enough that Kiran's resistance registers, for much of the audience, not as a persuasive argument but as a violation of a deeply cultivated norm, one to be reasserted against rather than adopted. Morley's (1980) insight that decoding is patterned by audience members' social position, rather than freely chosen, further clarifies why oppositional readings remained under 18% in both dramas. The comment space functions simultaneously as a forum for discussion and as a site of socialization, where departing from dominant norms carries real reputational cost. A commenter who names Hassan's or Sikander's behavior as simple criminal violence, rather than as trauma or provocation, is not merely offering an interpretation. They are implicitly rejecting the sabar, izzat, and naseeb framework that the surrounding comment thread treats as common sense, and in a public, named or pseudonymous forum, that rejection invites social friction in a way a private, unspoken disagreement would not.

Twin Mechanisms of Justification: Trauma and Provocation Defenses

The childhood trauma defense in Jafaa and the behavioral provocation defense in Kankar function as structurally parallel but distinct mediation mechanisms. Each relocates moral responsibility away from the abuser, toward psychological determinism in the former case, toward the victim's own conduct in the latter. The trauma defense is analytically striking because it deploys genuine psychological sophistication entirely in service of empathy for Hassan rather than concern for Zara's safety, a distinctly gendered use of therapeutic discourse that, per Gill (2007), serves the male subject's rehabilitation rather than the female subject's protection. The provocation defense operationalizes what hooks (2000) identifies as a core patriarchal mechanism: interpreting women's self-assertion as provocation that warrants corrective retribution. This is visible in the systematic cataloguing of Kiran's faults, arguing, visiting her family, humiliating her husband publicly, as justification for Sikander's violence. That an endurance narrative elicits a caretaking-oriented justification while a resistance narrative elicits a punitive one suggests something important. The patriarchal cultural triad identified in this study adapts its specific expression, sabar-inflected in Jafaa, naseeb- and izzat-inflected in Kankar, to whichever narrative logic it confronts, rather than operating as a fixed, uniform response. In both cases, the underlying discursive labor is the same. It relieves the drama's audience of the harder task of sitting with an abuser's full moral responsibility, substituting a more emotionally manageable story, of a wounded man or a provoking wife, for the less comfortable one of a person who simply chose violence.

The Education-Empowerment Paradox in Audience Discourse

The three educational sub-patterns identified in the findings, dismissive displacement, weaponized inversion, and structural critique, together provide direct discursive evidence for the education-empowerment paradox that Critelli (2010), Sanauddin et al. (2016), and Weiss (2014) have documented at the level of social structure. What the audience data add is a demonstration that this override is not a failure of awareness. Commenters routinely name a character's educational credentials accurately and explicitly before subordinating them to cultural prescription, which indicates a lack of cultural permission to draw empowerment conclusions rather than a lack of relevant knowledge. This distinction, between knowing something and being culturally authorized to act on that knowledge, is this study's most direct discursive contribution to the education-empowerment paradox literature. It relocates the paradox from a deficit in what women and their communities understand to a deficit in what the surrounding cultural system permits them to do with that understanding, a reframing with direct consequences for how interventions premised on raising awareness alone should be designed.

The Polarization Paradox: Resistance Narrative Backlash

Kankar's simultaneously higher justificatory, victim-blaming, and oppositional-reading frequencies constitute what this study terms the polarization paradox of resistance narratives. A drama's progressive argument can generate more oppositional readings and a more forceful, reactive reassertion of patriarchal norms at the same time, rather than net progressive movement. This complicates any straightforward media-effects assumption that resistance narratives reliably produce progressive audience reception. It also aligns with Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik's (2019) observation that gendered media content online tends to generate predictable, simultaneous cycles of endorsement and backlash rather than uncontested progressive uptake. The eleven-year gap between the dramas is not a sufficient alternative explanation. The higher proportion, not merely raw count, of dominant readings in Kankar indicates that the backlash pattern is tied to narrative type rather than to elapsed time.

Religion as a Site of Contestation

The naseeb theme's small size belies its analytical weight. The same theological vocabulary, invocation of Quranic teaching, the Prophet's example, and divine will, is mobilized toward opposite conclusions. Some comments use it to sanctify endurance and condemn resistance, while others use it to condemn abuse as a violation of Islamic teaching. This demonstrates that Islamic discourse in Pakistani public reception is not monolithically patriarchal, and that a theologically grounded, feminist-compatible counter-discourse already circulates in this space, a resource of considerable practical relevance for religiously framed anti-violence messaging. Neither position in this contestation requires the commenter to step outside an Islamic frame of reference. Both argue from within it toward opposite practical conclusions, which suggests that interventions seeking to mobilize religious authority against domestic violence are not asking audiences to adopt an imported or secular framework. They are asking audiences to resolve an argument that is already underway inside their own tradition.

The Cultural Mediation Model and Hypothesis Evaluation

Synthesizing across these discussions, this study proposes a Cultural Mediation Model comprising five sequential mechanisms, summarized in Table 3. The audience member arrives at a drama already shaped by cultivation priming, the predisposition toward feminine endurance built up over decades of prior viewing. They encounter the drama's specific narrative through narrative negotiation, accepting the elements that align with that predisposition while reinterpreting conflicting elements through justificatory schema. They express the resulting position through discursive mobilization, drawing on whichever cultural

resource, sabar, izzat, religious authority, class hierarchy, best fits the moment. That position is then amplified or muted through social reinforcement, as likes and replies make certain readings more visible to subsequent viewers than others. Throughout, the character's educational or professional identity is subject to educational subordination, in which that identity is marginalized, weaponized, or treated merely as evidence of ideology's reach, but is rarely allowed to authorize resistance outright.

Mechanism	Description
1. Cultivation priming	Decades of prior viewing establish an audience predisposition toward feminine endurance before a given drama is even watched.
2. Narrative negotiation	Viewers accept the drama's elements that are consistent with their cultural script and reinterpret conflicting elements through justificatory schema.
3. Discursive mobilization	Viewers draw on available cultural resources, sabar, izzat, religious authority, class hierarchy, to construct publicly defensible positions.
4. Social reinforcement	Likes and replies amplify culturally dominant readings, increasing their visibility to subsequent viewers.
5. Educational subordination	A character's professional or educational identity is marginalized, weaponized, or treated as evidence of ideology's power, but rarely permitted to authorize resistance outright.

This model extends Hall's (1973) encoding and decoding framework by specifying the cultural mechanisms through which mediation is enacted in a particular social context. It substantiates Hypothesis 1 in full: dominant readings were the plurality position in both dramas, and education was consistently deployed in service of dominant or victim-blaming readings rather than empowerment. Hypothesis 2 is supported with an important qualification. Kankar did produce greater polarization, more readings at both the dominant and oppositional poles, but this polarization was not symmetrical. The backlash effect on the dominant pole outweighed the corresponding growth in oppositional readings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined how Pakistani YouTube audiences receive educated women's experiences of domestic abuse across an endurance narrative (Jafaa) and a resistance narrative (Kankar), testing whether cultural conditioning overrides educational recognition in shaping that reception. The evidence supports an unambiguous conclusion. Dominant, patriarchy-reproducing readings were the majority position in both dramas. Justification and victim-blaming together accounted for more than half of all coded discourse. Educational identity, though frequently named, was consistently subordinated to cultural prescriptions of marital duty through dismissal, weaponization, or containment, rather than treated as a basis for agency.

This research offers three theoretical contributions. First, it develops the Cultural Mediation Model, extending Hall's (1973) encoding and decoding framework and Gerbner's (1998) Cultivation Theory into a

five-mechanism account of how patriarchal values consistently outweigh educational recognition in domestic violence media reception. Second, it identifies a polarization paradox in which resistance narratives generate simultaneously more oppositional and more intensely defensive patriarchal readings, complicating straightforward assumptions about the progressive effects of resistance-oriented media. Third, it provides direct discursive evidence, through the typology of dismissive displacement, weaponized inversion, and structural critique, for the education-empowerment paradox previously documented mainly at the level of social structure (Critelli, 2010; Sanauddin et al., 2016; Weiss, 2014). Taken together, these contributions reposition audience reception, rather than drama content alone, as a necessary object of study for anyone seeking to understand why the education-empowerment paradox persists in Pakistani public life. Representation is only half of the meaning-making process, and this study's evidence suggests the reception half is doing at least as much of the work of sustaining the paradox as the representation half.

These findings carry practical implications for three audiences. For drama producers, the data identify the childhood trauma backstory as the single most productive generator of justificatory audience commentary in this dataset. Psychological complexity in an abuser's characterization need not be abandoned, but it should be paired with clearer narrative accountability, for instance, giving educated female protagonists explicit narrative authority to name abuse in professional or rights-based terms rather than treating their education as mere biography. Collaboration between production houses, PEMRA, and domestic violence organizations such as Rozan, the Aurat Foundation, and War Against Rape on minimum content standards, covering perpetrator accountability, support-seeking depiction, and constructive family response, would formalize this recommendation along lines already established in UK and Australian broadcasting practice. For media literacy education, the study's typology of justificatory strategies, the trauma defense, the provocation defense, dismissive displacement, offers a ready-made curriculum for helping students recognize and resist these discursive moves in their own media consumption. Because these strategies recur in ordinary online conversation and not only in classroom material, a curriculum built directly from real audience commentary, of the kind this study has collected, is likely to resonate with students more immediately than abstract theoretical description alone. For policy and research bodies, PEMRA's content standards currently lack provisions specific to domestic violence normalization. The National Commission on the Status of Women could incorporate systematic digital discourse monitoring into its existing reporting alongside survey and legal-case data, and the Higher Education Commission could fund a dedicated research center on gender, media, and cultural mediation to institutionalize the kind of longitudinal audience reception research this study has initiated.

This study is subject to four limitations. The YouTube commenting audience is self-selected and digitally engaged, and it does not represent viewers who do not comment or who lack digital access. Commenter anonymity precluded any demographic analysis by age, gender, or education, which limits the study's ability to relate reading position to social attributes. The eleven-year gap between dramas, while treated here as an analytical asset, remains a genuine confound that cannot be fully disentangled from narrative-type effects. Finally, translation of Urdu-language comments, though conducted with native-speaker fluency and cultural care, inevitably introduces interpretive choices that cannot be entirely eliminated.

Future research might extend this design in several directions. It could track audience discourse longitudinally to see whether it shifts over time. It could expand comparatively to other dramas and narrative types beyond the endurance-resistance binary. It could test cross-culturally whether the Cultural Mediation Model generalizes to other South Asian or Muslim-majority media contexts. It could also turn specifically to male audience reception, given men's disproportionate role as perpetrators of the violence this discourse surrounds. A further direction concerns audience demographics. This study's reliance on anonymous comment data could not establish whether reading position varies by the commenter's own gender, and future designs that recruit demographically identified participants, whether through platform-based surveys or moderated focus groups, could test directly whether the justificatory and victim-blaming

commentary documented here is disproportionately authored by men, by women, or distributed relatively evenly across both. Research evaluating counter-narrative media literacy interventions against the mechanisms identified here would provide the most direct test of whether these patterns of cultural mediation can be deliberately disrupted.

The paradox this study set out to examine, that education is assumed to protect women from abuse yet does not reliably do so, is not, on this evidence, a story of simple oppression. It is a negotiation between education's genuine but bounded emancipatory potential and a cultural system that determines whether, and how, that potential is permitted to be acted upon. The minority of Pakistani YouTube commenters, roughly one in six to one in five across both dramas, who offered oppositional readings grounded in feminist analysis, structural critique, or progressive religious reasoning demonstrate that this cultural system is neither monolithic nor uncontested, even where it remains, for now, the majority position.

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