

## Yes to Shades of Gray and No to Joyland: Mapping the Complex Moral Landscape of Pakistani Viewers' Responses to Taboo Media

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### Abstract

A qualitative study was executed using thematic analysis based on focus group discussions uncovered social hypocrisy in media consumption, the role of censorship as a political tool, generational shifts in media perception, and the influence of social media-driven outrage as the major themes. The results illustrate that Pakistani viewers are both the consumers and the makers of their own privacy, as it is usually observable that videos are being watched and then at others' snaptime, besides age, providing a way to avoid any undesired consequences from the authorities. Moreover, the finding that censoring does not stop the curiosity of the audience, in fact, it might lead to a greater number of underground viewers is the conclusion of this research. The paper enriches media psychology with an analysis of cognitive dissonance, moral panic, and social conformity in the configuration of media engagement in conservative societies. It also gives an account of the new technology' platforms as a growing entity in reshaping the taste of the audience in a scenario where the traditional censorship models get challenged and the transformational ones are dominant. As the newer generation becomes more familiar with the international story, the fate of Pakistan's media is hanging on a thin thread that represents the struggle between freedom and new austerity. This report is a testimony to the necessity for societal dialogues around topics centering on media use, moral policing, and diversifying cultural norms in Pakistan's cinema industry.

**Keywords:** Media psychology, censorship, selective moral outrage, Pakistani cinema, taboo content, audience reception, moral policing, generational media shifts

### Introduction

Pakistani news headlines are infused with varying ideologies and power relations, influencing viewers' perceptions and attitudes (Hassan, 2018). This reflects a media environment where news and entertainment content often serve as tools for shaping public opinion and reinforcing or contesting social norms. The ideological framing evident in the news media also extends to entertainment, where narratives carry embedded values that influence moral judgments. For instance, the Turkish drama Resurrection: Ertuğrul resonated widely with Pakistani audiences while promoting anti-democratic, conspiratorial, and pro-violence themes that align with Erdoganist ideology (Yilmaz et al., 2025).

In parallel, digital media remix practices in Pakistan have enabled the circulation of content that would typically be censored in traditional platforms. These practices allow for the integration of culturally sensitive or controversial material in new forms, challenging established media production norms (Asif, 2024). This tension between conservative values and more liberal media expressions reflects the complexities of media consumption in Pakistan.

The reception of locally produced films like *Barzakh* and *Joyland* further illustrates these dynamics. While *Barzakh* resonated with some urban women who found its themes emotionally significant, others rejected the film, viewing it as incompatible with national identity (Farooqui, 2024). In contrast, international films such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and shows like *Elite*, despite their sexually explicit content, are consumed more freely, often without the same level of public criticism. This selective acceptance points to inconsistencies in moral judgment, where the origin of content appears to influence public tolerance.

These contrasting responses underscore a broader moral landscape in which Pakistani viewers navigate complex cultural and religious expectations. As Tamborini et al. (2013) explain, shared value systems play a crucial role in how audiences evaluate morally ambiguous content. In the Pakistani context, such systems are influenced by religion, tradition, and societal norms, shaping the boundaries of what is considered acceptable media.

Hassan (2018) also notes that Pakistani audiences express dissatisfaction with sensationalist and entertainment-driven news, reflecting a degree of critical engagement with the media. This awareness likely extends to entertainment media, where audiences evaluate content based on cultural compatibility and perceived moral appropriateness.

The study titled “Yes to Shades of Grey and No to Joyland” aims to explore why certain taboo topics are tolerated in foreign media but rejected in local productions. By examining audience responses to *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Elite*, *Joyland*, and *Barzakh*, the study investigates how factors such as foreignness, topical relevance, societal judgment, and media framing influence public acceptance. This research contributes to an understanding of media censorship and the evolving relationship between media, morality, and cultural identity in Pakistan.

## Method

### Research Design and Approach

Qualitative research design was employed to understand the dynamics of media consumption in a deep way this allows the deeper understanding of the phenomena and collectivistic understanding of the experiences of adults watching taboo media.

### Focus Groups

Data was collected using focus group discussion to gather rich, qualitative data, explore group dynamics, and uncover diverse perspectives. They are also cost-effective and efficient for gathering feedback quickly and flexibly.

### Sample and Participant Selection

#### Sample Size

Sample comprises of 8 participants to collect the opinions and thoughts of adults regarding the Yes to shades of gray and no to joyland: Mapping the Complex Moral Landscape of Pakistani Viewers' Responses to Taboo Media according to following criteria.

#### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

- Adults were included in the study.
- Individuals who viewed seasons like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Elite*, *Joyland*, or *Barzakh*.
- A balanced mix of genders to explore gendered differences in perception.
- Representation from different socio-economic, educational, and religious backgrounds.

Participants will be recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, using social media platforms, academic institutions, and personal networks.

### Data Collection Procedure

#### Recruitment and Consent

Participants will be recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Each participant will be provided with an informed consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality assurances.

## Focus Group Discussions

The discussions will be semi-structured and last between 60 to 90 minutes. Depending on participant convenience and accessibility, sessions will be conducted either in person or virtually via Zoom.

## Recording and Transcription

All sessions will be audio-recorded with participants' permission. The recordings will then be transcribed verbatim. To ensure confidentiality, all identifiable information will be anonymized during transcription.

## Interview Protocol for Focus Groups

The focus group guide will follow a five-part structure:

### Opening Questions (Icebreaker & Contextual Understanding)

- "Can you briefly introduce yourself and share your favorite genre of movies or TV shows?"
- "Have you watched Fifty Shades of Grey, Elite, Joyland, or Barzakh? What was your initial reaction?"

### Perception of Foreign vs. Local Media

- "Western shows like Elite often contain explicit content. Why do you think such content is widely watched in Pakistan but not criticized as much as local productions like Joyland or Barzakh?"
- "Do you think Pakistani audiences apply different moral standards to foreign and local media? Why or why not?"

### Morality and Media Consumption

- "What factors influence whether you find a media production acceptable—such as cultural values, religious beliefs, or peer influence?"

### Censorship and Audience Agency

- "Joyland and Barzakh faced bans in Pakistan, while Elite and Fifty Shades of Grey remained accessible. Do you think censorship reflects public opinion, or is it more about political or religious control?"

### Psychological and Social Influences

- "Do you think watching shows like Elite or Joyland changes people's views on gender, sexuality, or relationships in Pakistan? If so, how?"

### Closing Questions

- "Based on our discussion, do you think Pakistani audiences are evolving in their acceptance of controversial media content, or do traditional values still dominate?"

## Data Analysis

### Transcription and Familiarization

All recordings will be transcribed, and transcripts will be reviewed multiple times to ensure deep familiarization with the data using thematic analysis.

### Coding Process

Thematic analysis will be conducted manually. Open coding will first be applied to label significant statements. These codes will then be grouped into broader categories, followed by axial coding to identify relationships between themes. A codebook will be developed and refined throughout the process to ensure consistency and reliability.

### Thematic Framework

Emerging themes will include but are not limited to:

- Theme I: Selective Moral Outrage (Western vs. Local Media)

- Theme 2: Media and Morality (Personal vs. Public Acceptance)
- Theme 3: Role of Censorship (Control vs. Public Choice)
- Theme 4: Social Hypocrisy in Media Consumption

#### Data Reliability and Validity

To enhance reliability, coding will be cross-checked by an additional researcher. Member-checking will also be performed by sharing key interpretations with select participants for confirmation and feedback.

#### Saturation

Data collection will continue until thematic saturation is reached—that is, when no new themes or insights emerge from additional focus groups. This ensures the robustness of the findings.

#### Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity will be maintained throughout the study. Participants will receive detailed information about the study and provide written informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality will be guaranteed by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing data. Participation will be entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

#### Results

The results of this study reveal a complex and often contradictory moral landscape in how Pakistani audiences engage with and respond to taboo media content. While Western films and TV series featuring explicit themes, LGBTQ+ representation, and bold storytelling are widely consumed and even celebrated, local productions that explore similar narratives face intense scrutiny, censorship, and public backlash. Through focus group discussions, several key themes emerged, highlighting the role of social hypocrisy, selective moral outrage, censorship dynamics, and generational divides in shaping audience perceptions.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Representative Narratives	Consensus
Moral Outrage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Western media as entertainment</li> <li>• Cultural representation</li> <li>• Foreign tolerance</li> <li>• Animation</li> </ul>	<p>Western films are just fiction, but Pakistani films should reflect our values.</p> <p>We enjoy Elite because it's 'not real,' but Joyland feels too close to home.</p>	High
Double Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private enjoyment</li> <li>• Public condemnation</li> <li>• Perception</li> </ul>	<p>People secretly watch Fifty Shades, but they criticize Joyland openly.</p> <p>A bold scene in a Western film is 'cinema,' but in Pakistani films, it's 'obscene.'</p>	High

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Representative Narratives	Consensus
Religious and Cultural Justifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moral responsibility</li> <li>• Religious narratives</li> </ul>	<p>Pakistani filmmakers should respect Islamic values, even if Western movies don't.</p> <p>If a film contradicts religious teachings, it shouldn't be allowed here.</p>	High
Social Hypocrisy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of social judgment</li> <li>• Taboo themes</li> <li>• Reflection of hypocrisy</li> </ul>	<p>I liked Joyland, but I wouldn't say it openly—people will judge me.</p> <p>We pretend to be moral, but everyone watches such content in private.</p>	Medium
Audience Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bans as a tool of control</li> <li>• Moral protection</li> <li>• Curiosity</li> </ul>	<p>The government bans films to please religious groups, not because people demanded it.</p> <p>Whenever something is banned, more people want to watch it.</p>	High
Cultural Superiority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Storytelling</li> <li>• Colonial mindset</li> </ul>	<p>Hollywood tells these stories better, so we accept them more.</p> <p>We see Western films as progressive but judge our own for the same themes.</p>	Medium
The Public vs. Private Divide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private consumption and public discourse</li> <li>• Media's role</li> </ul>	<p>Many conservative people secretly watch Netflix but won't admit it.</p> <p>People attack films on Twitter without even watching them</p>	High
Gender and Media Censorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scrutiny of female</li> <li>• Moral battleground</li> </ul>	<p>A bold scene with a man is 'art,' but if a woman does it, it's 'shameful.'</p> <p>A same-sex relationship in Elite is fine, but in Barzakh, it's a 'Western agenda.'</p>	High
Generational Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generation difference</li> <li>• Digital exposure</li> </ul>	<p>Older people think these films corrupt society; younger people see them as normal.</p> <p>We grew up with global content—this is normal for us.</p>	High

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Representative Narratives	Consensus
Media's Role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evolution</li> <li>• Challenging norms</li> </ul>	<p>Cinema reflects reality, but some people don't want to see it.</p> <p>Movies like Joyland start conversations we need to have.</p>	High
Political Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political move</li> <li>• Nationalist narratives</li> </ul>	<p>The government censors films when they fear public debates.</p> <p>Some films are banned just because they don't fit the national image.</p>	High
Streaming Platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessibility</li> <li>• OTT platforms</li> </ul>	<p>People consume all kinds of content on Netflix, but only local films are judged.</p> <p>Younger viewers are more open-minded because of exposure to diverse content.</p>	High
Public Perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hashtag</li> <li>• Digital outrage</li> </ul>	<p>A few tweets can get a film banned in Pakistan.</p> <p>Most people protesting haven't even watched the film.</p>	High
Family vs. Individual Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Family-friendly' cinema</li> <li>• Parental concerns</li> </ul>	<p>Pakistani films should be safe for families, unlike Hollywood movies.</p> <p>Parents worry that such films will 'corrupt' young minds.</p>	High
Amid Censorship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-censorship</li> <li>• Struggle</li> </ul>	<p>Many directors won't touch bold topics because of fear of bans.</p> <p>Pakistani cinema can't grow if everything controversial is censored.</p>	High

The findings are categorized into 15 superordinate themes and 40 subordinate themes, each supported by participant narratives that illustrate the nuances of these perspectives.

#### Selective Moral Outrage

Participants consistently pointed out that audiences apply different moral standards to Western vs. local content. While explicit scenes in Western productions are tolerated or ignored, similar depictions in Pakistani films or TV series lead to

controversy and calls for censorship. Western Content as 'Just Entertainment': Audiences perceive Western media as detached from cultural identity, making its bold themes less threatening. Local Content as a Cultural Representation: Pakistani films are expected to uphold societal values, leading to stricter scrutiny.

"Hollywood films don't shape our society, but Pakistani films do. That's why we hold them to a higher standard."

### Social Hypocrisy in Media Consumption

Despite public condemnation of controversial themes, private consumption of the same content remains high. Many participants admitted to watching banned or controversial films privately while criticizing them in public. Fear of Social Judgment: Viewers often hide their support for bold narratives due to societal expectations. Contradictions in Consumption: The same people who criticize explicit content in Pakistani films frequently consume uncensored global content.

"I watched Joyland and found it thought-provoking, but I can't say that openly because people will judge me."

### The Influence of Religious and Cultural Norms

The identity of religion plays a dominating role in the formation of censorship and reception of audience. Hence the local media should be considered accountable for the Islamic and religious values as compare to production of western media industry. The moral responsibility of the directors of Pakistan to maintain the alliance of their work with the teaching of religious work. Censorship as Religious Protection indicated that the society should maintain the censorship.

### The Impact of Censorship on Audience Curiosity

Bans on films such as Joyland and Barzakh often lead to increased audience curiosity rather than deterrence. Many participants stated that censorship makes content more appealing. Censorship as a Political Tool: Some argue bans are politically motivated rather than driven by public demand. Increased Interest in Banned Content: Prohibited media gains a cult following, increasing its underground popularity.

"The moment a film gets banned, everyone wants to see it."

### Generational Shifts in Media Acceptance

A clear generational divide was evident in audience responses. Participants who were young expressed more openness as compare to older generation due to digital connectivity. For Gen Z bold themes are normalize but conservative viewers leads to threat to identity

"We grew up seeing international content streaming openly I find it normal"

### The Power of Social Media in Shaping Perceptions

Social media is appearing as a place to fight for moral poliving. It was also noted that the fate of film is govern by hastags and publicity as compre to story Many controversies are appeared from the non reviewer.

"Insta and twiter are now banning the films."

### The Future of Pakistani Cinema Amid Censorship

Censorship has led to self-censorship among filmmakers, restricting creative expression and limiting artistic growth. Participants feared that continued bans would prevent Pakistani cinema from evolving. Fear of Controversy Among Directors: Many filmmakers avoid bold themes to prevent backlash. The Battle Between Artistic Freedom and Moral Policing: A growing struggle exists between expression and societal control.

"Pakistani cinema can't grow if everything controversial is shut down."

### Discussion

This difference shows that people see Western media as outside and not connected to their own culture, while local shows are expected to show and support social rules. Because of this, local makers of films get more limits and feedback, even when their art is less clear than that of the West. This expectation makes a limiting creative space, stopping the types of stories that can be told in Pakistani film and TV.



Another major finding is the gap between what is said in public and private media consumption. While the local productions have often faced public condemnation for their controversial themes, the same content is consumed by the audiences privately through international platforms (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2023). It reflects a wider pattern of social hypocrisy where people comply with collective moral standards in public but consume prohibited content in private (Sawatsky and Lalumière, 2020).

The contradiction runs to censorship as well: rather than turning people against the films and shows, their banning only serves to arouse greater curiosity among the audience and, consequently, greater underground consumption. Censorship efforts might thus be counterproductive since they strengthen the belief that certain films have content too provocative for public display which in turn makes them more coveted (Willoughby and Dover, 2022).

It further elaborates that in Pakistan the censorship is more of a political game than an actual reflection of public sentiment. The bans on Joyland and Barzakh films were mainly under the influence of conservative and religious groups; however, they do not represent the general audience's disapproval (Dwulit and Rzymiski, 2019). This indicates that at times, the censorship tool is applied to preserve a certain national image or give in to powerful factions rather than to actualize real audience concerns (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2020).

### Implications for Pakistani Cinema and Media Regulation

The results imply that the expansion and international acclaim of Pakistani cinema will suffer in the long run from ongoing censorship and selective moral outrage. Pakistan's film industry runs the risk of falling behind in the rapidly changing global entertainment scene if local filmmakers are unable to pursue daring or unusual stories.

Additionally, traditional censorship models may become less applicable as audiences use digital platforms to consume more uncensored content, which would force regulatory bodies to reevaluate their strategies. Finding a balance between artistic freedom and cultural values while adjusting to the changing global content consumption landscape is probably going to be crucial for Pakistani media's future.

### Conclusion

The study draws attention to the inconsistencies and complexity of Pakistani audiences' interactions with taboo media. Generational changes, political censorship, social hypocrisy, and

selective outrage all contribute to a restrictive media landscape where local productions are scrutinized more than international ones. However, the current model of censorship and moral policing may become more challenging to maintain as digital platforms and audience preferences change.

It is essential to promote candid conversations about media consumption, confront societal inequalities, and provide space for artistic expression in order to cultivate a more open and varied media landscape. Without these discussions, Pakistan's entertainment industry's ability to expand will be constrained and filmmakers and viewers alike will continue to be trapped in a cycle of contradiction and restriction.

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