

SEMIOTIC RESISTANCE AND QUEER VISIBILITY: LGBTQ+ NARRATIVES IN CHURAILS AND THE ROLE OF YOUTUBE IN PAKISTANI MEDIA DISCOURSE

Sadaf Zubair

Univeristy of Management and Technology

sadaf.zubair@umt.edu.pk

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9402-5504>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17893642>

Keywords

OTT Platform; Semiotic;
LGBTQ+ representation,
Pakistan, YouTube

Article History

Received: 14 October 2025
Accepted: 24 November 2025
Published: 11 December 2025

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *
Sadaf Zubair

Abstract

This paper explores how OTT platforms, specifically YouTube, influence and represent LGBTQ+ identities and how these identities are perceived in Pakistani culture by analyzing the web series Churails (Witches). Utilizing the Triadic Model and Semiotic Technique, as developed by Charles Peirce, the study focuses on LGBTQ+ identity, including symbols, visuals, and elements of stories, determining their effectiveness among Pakistani audience of the internet media. The results highlight the dual role of OTT platforms such as YouTube in fostering progressive discourse on gender and sexuality while encountering societal resistance rooted in conservative norms. The key scenes, as the love confessions of the lesbian couple Bubble and Pinky, the birthday celebration of the transgender character, Baby Doll, depict the transformative potential of media in challenging traditional values and promoting inclusive narratives. This study extends the Triadic Model of Charles Peirce to South Asian digital storytelling and offers a theoretical contribution to understanding the queer representation in non-Western spaces of resistance. It emphasizes how signs, their meaning, and objects construct multiple meanings that create interpretive space for marginalized voices. Audience responses vary from supportive to hostile, showing how broadcasting this kind of content sparks public discussion and reshapes the limits of cultural acceptance. This study contributes to the discourse on the role of media in shaping cultural perceptions and provides insights into the intersection of global content and local identity within a rapidly digitizing society.

INTRODUCTION

Media has a powerful influence on shaping beliefs and behavior, often operating independently of the immediate realities people face in their daily

lives. This concept, known as the "direct effects hypothesis," has been widely debated since the 1940s. Sociologist James Carey highlighted this in his account of mass society theory, stating that "the

media collectively, especially the modern, accessible media of radio and film, wield extraordinary power to shape beliefs and behavior” (Carey, 1996, p. 22). Although versions of mass society theory differ on the extent and type of influence, they commonly emphasize the potential risks media poses in reshaping attitudes and inducing rapid social changes.

Technological advancements and the proliferation of digital platforms have fundamentally shifted entertainment consumption. OTT platforms like Netflix and YouTube have surpassed traditional TV. According to Reuters, 2025 research shows that in May 2025, streaming accounted for 44.8% of all TV consumption in the USA, surpassing broadcast and cable combined, and globally, by 2023, streaming accounted for 38% of television consumption, with nearly 1.8 billion OTT subscriptions (Wikipedia, 2024). In Pakistan, the OTT video market is expected to reach \$466 million by 2025, with YouTube holding 27% of the market share reflecting a big shift in consumer behavior (Statista, 2024). Meanwhile, traditional TV revenue is expected to be around \$922 million in the same year indicating a huge shift in media consumption.

The popularity of platforms such as Tamasha and Myco, especially for live sports streaming, signals a clear movement of audiences from cable to mobile-based OTT consumption (Ali, 2023). These trends illustrate how digital media is not only transforming viewership but also challenging long-held broadcasting norms and enabling more diverse and inclusive content to emerge.

Gender identity, sexual orientation, and preferences profoundly shape individual lives, yet in Pakistan, systemic discrimination against the transgender community persists, manifesting in social exclusion and harassment. While societal attitudes remain deeply entrenched, increasing internet penetration and media globalization have sparked conversations around inclusion (Farooq, 2020). These global LGBTQ+ narratives, however, often clash with Pakistan’s conservative Islamic and cultural norms, fueling debates about

reconciling progressive ideals with traditional values (Dennis, 1996).

The roots of LGBTQ+ movements can be traced back to the 19th century, when discussions around diverse sexualities gained traction in Western medical and social circles. Over decades of social and political struggle, queer identities were decriminalized in many parts of the world. The community, united under the initial LGBTQ umbrella, has since expanded to encompass Intersex, Asexual, and Allied identities, giving rise to the inclusive terms LGBTQIA or LGBTQ+. Compared to bordering India, OTT platforms are relatively new in Pakistan, giving creators an outlet to explore different stories through dramas without the restrictions of traditional media. Due to the advancement of technology and the availability of OTT platforms, entertainment worldwide was transformed, providing economical replacements for cable and giving a platform where everyone can raise their voice on social issues without restriction. This is a qualitative research paper that uses content analysis and a semiotic technique to study drama *Churails*, which was telecast on YouTube by Zee Zindgye. By examining *Churails*, written and directed by Asim Abbasi and starring leading Pakistani actors, this research analyzes the impact of global LGBTQ+ narratives on our local cultural and religious frameworks in Pakistan. This research will shed light on the emerging discourse on the LGBTQ+ narrative representation and acceptance or rejection in the region. This study says *Churails* on air on YouTube uses semiotic storytelling to normalize LGBTQ+ identities in a conservative Pakistani context, thereby enabling a counter-discourse through OTT platforms.

Literature Review

McLuhan (1964) popularized the term “global village” (McLuhan, 1964: p106). He projected on how the broadcasting of information and the telecommunications networks can create the global platform for exchange of information and ideas. He stated that communication of people will start becoming more personal as technologies advance. Even in times before the internet era,

McLuhan has mentioned that this global village structure will make people experience new values and social structure within the culture of communication.

The availability of multiple OTT (over the top) platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and in Pakistan own OTT platforms like Tamasha and ARY Zap, has giving a freedom to users the freedom to access worldwide content with no restriction. It is a paradigm shift in media consumption through these platforms, that local narratives can coexist with international themes. In a study by Uniyal, C., & Mirza, A (2024), highlight that OTT platforms have gone against the traditional broadcasting norm, promoting underrepresented communities and themes, including the LGBTQ+ community. This plays a significant role in reshaping social perceptions and cultural discourses worldwide.

To illustrate this, Batul and Malik (2024) conducted a quantitative study titled "The Netflix Effect" analyzing how exposure to LGBTQ+ content on digital streaming platforms affects Pakistani youth. The study's findings showed that digital media consumption leads to acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, especially among urban youth, and that platforms like Netflix are informal spaces for social learning and identity negotiation. While their study measured attitudinal change, this research builds on those findings by conducting a semiotic analysis of how LGBTQ+ themes are narratively and symbolically represented in Pakistani drama (Churails), adding a qualitative and interpretive layer to the conversation.

Similarly a study by Salam-Salmaoui & Salam 2023, analysis of the web series Churails to demonstrate how Pakistani media can redefine and appropriate global genre conventions while reflecting local cultural realities. The series successfully challenges traditional gender roles and offers a feminist perspective on the Hollywood spy genre. By portraying a strong, independent female protagonist, Churails exemplifies how Pakistani media can creatively adapt and reinterpret global genre conventions, resulting in transformative and inclusive narratives.

In contrast, Salman -Salmaoui and Salam (2024) explore the drama through the framework of queer spatiality focusing on LGBTQ +character navigate, resist and redefine physical and symbolic spaces in culturally sensitive setting. Their study emphasizes that churails construct forbidden queer spaces such as homes, public streets, and hotels as site of both marginalized and resistance illuminating how space itself become a key medium of identify politics.

This research on both studies by introducing a semiotic approach applying Charles Peirce's Triadic Model to decode how sign-visuals, gestures and dialogue construct and communicate queer identity with ink churails, how these sign are interpreted by Pakistani audiences with in contested cultural framework.

Visual cultural studies have further explored how meaning is embedded in media texts. Kabra, Murtaza, and Akhtar (2017) uses Kress and van Leeuwen; the study analyses cultural representation in the title pages of Pakistani plays. The research highlights how the aforementioned visual and textual elements reflect traditional gender roles, social hierarchies, and emotional themes. It highlights the role of visual framing in conveying the importance of power dynamics and relationships, such as character placement and gaze direction. The study emphasizes that drama can embed deep ideological or social meanings in culture. This analysis helps to understand how drama and visual media impact and changes the cultural narratives of any society.

Internationally, the representation of LGBTQ+ narratives in the media has been an important issue for some time. But these narratives have been talked about primarily in Western countries and often ignore the non-Western countries. Due to the emergence of the OTT platform Times has changed and queer narrative is now part of the Pakistan Drama through the OTT platform and challenges this generic reality in Pakistan, considering them only in the context of conservative cultural and religious conservatism. Rahman (2014) explores how traditional Islamic interpretations sideline queer identities while also acknowledging the emergence of new frameworks

in the South Asian context that seek to reconcile faith and sexuality. Highlighting this point, Harithawarn (2015) applied an intersectional and global perspective to his investigation, arguing that gay Muslims often find themselves caught between Western liberal narratives and local socio-religious expectations. This tension affects both the production and consumption of gay media. These perspectives are important for understanding how a play like Coralize operates across multiple cultural registers. On a national level Abbas (2019) studied the 24 transgender characters in Pakistani television dramas from 2010 to 2018. With the passage of time, Intersex characters in TV dramas have improved. Dramas such as Khuda Meera Bhi Hai (2016) and Alif Allah Aur Insan (2017) focus on both the discrimination against transgender people and show their struggle to get their civil rights. The trans* narrative of “Wrong body” is still the main reason for the discussion. The nature of transgender issues in Pakistan is different from the LGBTQ community in the West. Unlike Western queer narratives, transgender people in Pakistan face a variety of socio-religious challenges. In Pakistan, however, LGBTQ+ narratives are still seen as taboo, often at odds with traditional cultural and religious values, leading to resistance or backlash, and verbal violence against this content. Pervez, & Saleem 2021)

This growing body of research highlights the dual potential of OTT platforms and media representation in Pakistan. On the one hand, they can challenge prevailing social norms and encourage more progressive ways of understanding. On the other hand, they risk clashing with existing conservative cultural and religious beliefs. Using semiotic and multimodal frameworks, researchers can further explore how these narratives shape and reflect cultural discourses, offering insights into the ever-changing media landscape.

Important Terms

LGBTQ/LGBTQ+/LGBTQI – According to a report published by the United Nations, LGBTQ is an abbreviation for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, Intersex and Queer”; “LGBTI” for

“lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex” while + is there to be more inclusive. While these terms have increasing resonance, different cultures use different terms to describe people who have same-sex relationships or who exhibit non-binary gender identities.

Objective of the study

To explore how OTT platforms, specifically YouTube, contribute to the spread of the global LGBTQ+ narrative within Pakistani society.

Research Questions

RQ1. How are LGBTQ+ issues represented through symbols, visuals, and storytelling in Churails, and what meanings do these elements convey to Pakistani audiences

RQ2. To find out what storytelling methods are used to present LGBTQ+ issues to make them acceptable or thought-provoking for Pakistani audiences.

Methodology

This qualitative and descriptive study analyzes the 10-episode web series Churails, written and directed by Asim Abbasi and aired on YouTube by Zee Zindagi. The series was selected for its bold portrayal of gender, sexuality, and power structures and for including LGBTQ+ characters in a South Asian sociocultural context. The research uses Charles Peirce's Triadic Model of Semiotics to examine the dialogues, visuals, symbols, and character arcs across all episodes, providing a holistic view of LGBTQ+ representation and its cultural implications.

This study employs Charles Peirce's Triadic Model of Semiotics to analyze the visuals, dialogue, and symbols associated with LGBTQ+ identity and themes, exploring how these elements are interpreted by audiences.

The Triadic Model

1. Representamen (the sign itself dialogue, gesture, symbol)
2. The interpretant (the meaning generated in the mind of the audience)
3. The object (what the sign refers to)

By using this framework, the research decodes how LGBTQ+ identities and relationships are visually and narratively constructed and how these signs can be interpreted in a Pakistani context. The analysis will be based on content sampling from the full series with specific focus on scenes that show queer relationships, gender nonconformity or symbolic resistance to heteronormative norms.

Semiotic Analysis Units for LGBTQ content

1. Dialogue
2. Sign/ symbol
3. Colors
4. Characters (Dressing)
5. Storyline

6. Message conveyed by the Drama

Notably, Churails was not broadcast on local Pakistani television channels but was streamed on the Indian OTT platform Zee Zindagi. This cross-border broadcasting bypassed national censorship norms and allowed greater narrative freedom, making it a relevant case study in understanding how digital media platforms mediate and globalize queer narratives in culturally restrictive environments.

Findings and Analysis

Churail is a web series that focuses on the lives of four women: Sarah (Sarwat Gilani), who gave up her career as a lawyer so that she could be a good wife and mother. Jagnu (Yasra Rizvi), a wedding planner, Zubaida (Mehr Bano), A boxer, and seeking love and freedom. Batool (Nimra Bucha), an ex-convict sentenced to twenty years in prison for murder. Their lives become intertwined when Sara discovers that her husband is cheating on her, after which the four decide to set up an agency to catch cheating husbands. They secretly run the agency under the guise of a retail burqa store called "Halal Designs" and call themselves Churail. When one of them goes missing, their investigation leads them to something much bigger than themselves, dominated by the most powerful in Karachi. This study analyzes the LGBTQ+ content of the web series and uses semiotic techniques to identify the LGBTQ+ content. Using Peirce's model, the research

uncovers deeper meanings behind gestures, visuals, and dialogues, providing insights into perceptions of social tension and change in Pakistani media narratives.

Selected Scene Analyses Using Triadic Model

Episode 2: Scene in Hotel Kitchen

Representamen (Sign): Jugnu, a strong-minded character, challenges a lady about arranging a job for a girl. When the lady refuses, Jugnu shows a picture on her phone, causing an immediate change in the woman's expression. This is the sign of visuals and dialogue emphasizing the power dynamic and social stigma surrounding sexuality. How did you get this? (Yeh tumhain kaise mili?) Jugnu responds: ("Kion kay yeh main hoon aur mera paanch logon ko zakhmi kar dena). Because this is who I am. And me injuring five people is nothing compared to your is nothing compared to your lesbian activities or interests. **The Object (Reference):** The statement shows the society's double standards regarding moral behavior towards LGBTQ+ individuals in Pakistan. The Jugnu confidently asks her for the favor, and on refusal, she blackmails her that she will expose her Lesbian relationship.

The Interpretant (Meaning): This is the peak of the highest hypocrisy and societal pressure, and behavior that they will accept the relationship, which is against the societal norms, but under some conditions. The professor's revelation and resulting breakdown reflect the tension between personal truth and societal expectations. His character embodies what Haritaworn (2015) describes as "queer double marginalization"—caught between Western sexual identity discourse and local socio-religious repression. The scene visualizes this dichotomy through Peirce's interpretant: the meaning is not just personal confession, but a symbolic challenge to cultural norms.

Episode 3: Babli and Pinky (Lesbian Couple)

Representamen (Sign): Babli and Pinky, sit in front of the car and tell other friends about their life incidents and how their companionship is old.

Zubaida humorously suggests they marry two brothers, to which Babli states:

“Hum dono ek dosray ke liye kafi hain and Pinky replies with a meaningful smile | Sab kaam key liye”.

Translation: We are enough for each other. Pinky looks at him with a quiet, meaningful smile – the kind that holds depth beyond words. Pinky (softly, with layered intent): "For all kinds of work."

The Interpretant (Meaning): the interpretation of all the conversation is that sometimes people express their feelings through humor and playful style, trying to normalize same-sex relationships and personal identities as they understand the societal pressure and norms.

The Object (Reference): This indicates the challenges of openly accepting and speaking LGBTQ+ identities in a heteronormative cultural and conservatives society

Episode 4: Transgender Representation

Baby Doll Birthday Celebration

Representamen (Sign): it is a positive but defiant celebration of a transgender woman, Baby Doll, enjoying her birthday with their friends, accompanied by the remark:

"Chal Nimo, teri bari hai. Poo bani Parvati Jersey mooh mein kabhi kuch liya he na ho."

Translation: Come on, Nimo, it's your turn now. You've turned into Parvati Jersey as if you've never had anything in your mouth before!

Interpretant (Meaning): This scene has a deep meaning in a very casual manner, and it depicts resilience and camaraderie among transgender individuals while subtly addressing societal ostracism.

Object (Reference): This represents the collective struggle and joy of transgender individuals creating spaces in society for acceptance.

Hotel Scene

Representamen (Sign): Baby doll, a transgender person, was not allowed entry into a hotel as he told the guard why you are not allowed to enter, even though Nadra had issued me a national identity card, leading to a heated exchange of insults and loose language.

Interpretant (Meaning): This conflict highlights the systemic discrimination against transgender individuals and shows their persistent battle for basic rights.

Object (Reference): This shows that exclusionary practices and prejudices are faced by marginalized genders.

Episode 6: Professor's Room Scene

Representamen (Sign): The professor's relationship with the male is exposed through dedicated agency. The wife saw her husband half-naked with a half-naked male guy. She wanted to show this to their kids and her husband was shocked to see her in the hotel room. Later, His confession to his wife "You are the only woman I have ever loved, but I can't deny what is real inside me," shows his internal conflict. The wife's violent reaction represents the societal rejection of non-heteronormative identities.

Interpretant (Meaning): The interpretation of this tragic narrative highlights the internal and external conflicts faced by repressed individuals, as well as the devastating consequences of societal and familial intolerance.

Object (Reference): In a Conservative society, there is a stigma and risk of living a hidden identity. The scene shows a reflection reveals the pain and desire for a genuine human connection and acceptance. A transgender character mourns the professor's death, remembering the professor, "Hum jaise logon ko kitni baar milta hai jo bistar se bandhne ke baad yeh na pooche ki 'kunjar,' maza aa raha hai? Jo haath thame aur rone key liye kandha dey."

"People like us. How often do we find someone who, after tying us to the bed, doesn't ask, 'So, enjoying it, slut?' But instead holds our hand... and offers a shoulder to cry on

This indicates that the world needs kindness, regardless of identity.

The grief expressed by the transgender character mourning the professor's death goes beyond surface-level representation. It highlights vulnerability, longing, and the need for emotional safety qualities rarely afforded to transgender individuals in Pakistani media. This reinforces

Abbas's (2019) observation that transgender portrayals are evolving in drama, while also supporting Gopinath's (2005) notion of "queer affect as resistance," where emotional resonance becomes a tool of cultural and political assertion.

Episode 5: Babli and Pinky's Love Confession

Representamen (Sign): The Lesbian couple Babli and Pinky openly express their love to forming a heart for each other.

Interpretant (Meaning): This heartfelt moment reflects self-acceptance and the power of love in a society that often judges.

Object (Reference): The possibility of reclaiming space for LGBTQ+ narratives in Pakistani media.

Family Dinner Scene

Representamen (Sign) A boy tells a family at dinner that he is bullied at school because he brought a Barbie doll.

Interpretant (Meaning) The scene reveals to our minds the expectation of roles of men and women in society, and the movie challenges the early-teen rigidity of gender roles

Object (Reference) The inflexibility in the gender norms and the influence of the same in shaping childhood identity.

The Analysis of Churails Drama Serial identified LGBTQ + content. This drama broke new ground in South Asian media because it represented the critical presentation of gender, sexuality, and identity issues.

Babli & Pinky Scene (episodes 3& 5)

The depiction of Babli and Pinky on the one hand provides the reader with a very intimate but also culturally presented version of a same-sex affair. Their unruly beard, humor aimed at casualness and affection with bravado challenge the invisibility of the lesbian identities in the Pakistani Narrative. This is consistent with the conclusion of Batul and Malik (2024), who discovered that digital queer narratives facilitate a more inclusive attitude acquisition with the urbanized Pakistani youth through a similar process of anthropomorphism (rendering the queer identities in a manner evocative and accessible on an emotional level).

RQ1: What are the symbolic representations of LGBTQ + in Churails, what visuals and storytelling are present to tell the Pakistani viewer which meanings they convey?

In Churails, the LGBTQ + naartaive are addressed by the use of symbolic visuals, storytelling moments, and embedded narratives, which combined, raise concerns toward the marginalized people surviving in a patriarchal society. Seen semiotically, these elements become the representamina (sign forms) that refer to objects (the realities of LGBTQ + life) and create interpretants (meaning to the viewer).

The photograph in the 2nd episode also acts as a symbolic representamen of exposure and confrontation in relation to the secret double lives to be lived due to the repression of the society. In the Pakistani case, especially among younger audiences, the interpretation as seen by them is an acknowledgement of the irony in the difference between the morality represented in the community and the reality of everyday life and as such, a slight challenge of the narrow-minded morality is brought out. Heart gesture of Babli and Pinky in Episode 5 is a kind of an iconic connotation of the love and acceptance. What is meant here is same-sex intimacy which has been excluded rather extensively in mainstream stories and the interpretant to the young viewers serves to normalize the emotional aspects of such relationships through the universally understood symbol.

The birthday party of Baby Doll in Episode 4 can be seen as the piece of transgender identity re-framing. The object of resilience and belonging is the representamen of communal joy and its interpretant beckons audiences to understand that transgender people are complex social beings who should not be viewed purely as victims. Such meanings can also be reiterated through dialogues: the episode 2 associates violence with the homophobic shame, and the episode 6 shows internal mental conflict of the professor whom the viewer may empathize with, showing the dangers of social ostracism.

These semiotics do not merely symbolize reality through LGBTQ + characters, which can be

normalized by audiences (young people in particular), and reinterpreted by enveloping them in common emotional and social contexts.

RQ2: How are the LGBTQ + content presented in the drama to be either acceptable or thought-provoking to Pakistani listeners using techniques of storytelling?

Storytelling has been based on subtle and yet powerful strategies that spark the mind and do not go against cultural conventions in Churails. Through semiotics, it can be determined that these methods employ a mixture of personal and social stories, symbolic signals, and humanizing depictions of characters in order to avoid confrontation directly but in a manner that does not support the status quo.

The characters of Babel, Pinky, or the Professor, who find themselves in the context of much deeper social structures, forming representamina, that are mixtures of personal conflicts and social life. In another instance, the object of resilience under oppression contained in Episode 3 by Babel and pinky who sometimes exchange humorous but defiant statements used to create an interpretant, which is open to empathy as well as doubting contradictions in the society. This paves the way towards the younger audience connecting with LGBTQ+ topics without experiencing guilt that they are trending against cultural allegiances. Sensationalism has been avoided in the drama and we are shown indexical evidences of discrimination, like the actions of the guard in Episode 5, that directly lead to prejudice on a systemic level in familiar and homely avenues. In the case of young people, these occurrences can trigger a realization of how they are taught to accept prejudice within their contexts. On the same note, the inward struggle of the professor in episode 6 is also symbolically used as a reflective depiction of conflict between what an individual was and what they should be, causing interpretants of sympathy and moral inquiry.

Visual cues as depicted by the Barbie doll in Episode 5, convey how we are early socialized into gender binaries. Its object is the performed gender roles, whereas the interpretant to young audiences

can be a disturbing fact that such expectations are made not natural. Through placing these indicators in culturally understandable stories, Churails constructs a mediated environment within which those subjects which are taboo can be discussed, and hoped that slight changes in perceptions can happen over time and the culture of the following generation as a result.

Interpretive Impact on Audiences (Inferred)

Even though the research of the audience was carried out with certain restrictions determined by censorship and cultural sensitivity and drama ban in Pakistan, however, the comments that are freely visible on YouTube are of great help when the reception of Churails by the Pakistani audience is of concern.

Other viewers applauded the show as being courageous and meaningful

And now it is time we bring LGBTQIA into the mainstream media! It is time to come out of the shadows! This is going to be known to generations as the first small step into a better future!!”

The rest responded by some form of resistance or unease: Pakistan is an Islamic country, and so do help us out of your negative mind. You cannot defend such obscenity!– @yahyamonnan4485

The Encoding/ Decoding theory proposed by Hall (1997) is also confirmed because it states that the meanings of media texts are shaped by the cultural and ideological filters and do not have definite meanings.

Jugnu defying and Baby Doll grieving simply represent the symbolic framework of Churails that compel the viewers to negotiate new meanings generally against dominant stories.

The viewer, especially in scenes heavy in semiotic conflict, has become an active cocreator of meaning through the mechanism of the interpretant of Peirces as well. Even without actual audience surveys, the comments in the public spaces of digital forums such as YouTube indicate the ability of the show to be provocative and challenging. These responses confirm the use of the show as a generator of a cultural conversation

wherein the queer narratives initiate discussions within a highly resistant media landscape.

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes a theoretical contribution to the fields of media studies, queer representation, and cultural semiotics by extending Charles Peirce's triadic model into the context of South Asian digital storytelling. While semiotic theory has traditionally been applied to Western media, its application to analyzing queer narratives in traditional, non-Western societies has yet to be fully developed.

By examining scenes from the Pakistani web series *Churails*, this research and semiotics provide insights into how, when read in the Pierce model, not only character identity but also reveal underlying cultural tensions, social hypocrisy, and perceptions of gender and personal development. The research highlights how signs (representations), their interpreters, and objects construct layered meanings and open interpretive information to marginalized voices that challenge binary gender norms.

Furthermore, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that recognizes that OTT platforms are catalysts for counter-discourses. It demonstrates how global queer narratives, localized through semiotic coding, can mediate new cultural understandings even in resilient societies. It opens avenues for further theoretical exploration of how meaning is negotiated between global content and local identities, particularly in media ecologies shaped by both sociopolitical resistance and digital access.

By analyzing the entire series, this study ensures a comprehensive semiotic reading that captures narrative continuity, character development, and emerging symbolic structures, which is not possible through a selection of episodes. In doing so, the study affirms the value of semiotics as not only a tool of interpretation emerges, disrupts, and redefines norms in South Asia's digital narrative.

Conclusion

The research paper explores how OTT drama **Churails** represents LGBTQ+ narrative through

interesting storytelling, visual images, and symbolic aspects and how the themes LGBTQ+ are relevant in a Pakistani context. Employing Charles Pearce's Triadic Model, the analysis indicates that **Churails** employs interesting narrative structures, beautiful visuals, and strong symbolisms to convey the idea of a "natural character disapproving of the society's self-imposed constraints".

The main finding of the scene, such as Baby Doll's birthday party, Babli and Pinky's confession of love for each other, significantly affects the pride and self-esteem of the audience. On the other hand, the tragic story of the professor shows the inner struggle of people and the struggle to find their identity, and ends in a way that no one can understand, not even their life partner. In a society where such thoughts are considered bad, such expressions directly or indirectly challenge the double standards of morality and ethics prevalent in Pakistani society, appealing to the audience to understand the plight of the LGBTQ+ community and help it to push down to the public representation.

The complexity of LGBTQ+ representation in media and policy is further highlighted by recent international events. For example, ex US President Donald Trump, on January 20, 2025, issued an executive order discontinuing DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) programs in federal agencies. It also mandated federal recognition of only two sexes, male and female. These reforms have provoked a great deal of debate. The proponents argue that they are defending traditional values, while the critics argue that they are limiting the visibility and rights of LGBTQ+ individuals.

This serves to underscore the reality that the struggle for LGBTQ+ identity in Pakistan is deeply embedded in a broader struggle for visibility and inclusion in the world. It also identifies how much of an impact government policy can have on what is discussed in public regarding gender and identity. This study identifies the new ways in which YouTube and other OTT channels are narrating stories that mainstream media have not touched upon. With *Churails*, Pakistani

audiences are brought face-to-face with international LGBTQ+ concerns, which spark debate around taboo topics and socially conservative Pakistani society. However, the popular reaction and outrage portrayed in the series indicate the difficulties of obtaining generalized social acceptance.

The study thus points out the use of YouTube as an OTT platform and how it facilitates bringing to the forefront global viewpoints that have otherwise been neglected by the mainstream media. Content like *Churails* that brings worldwide LGBTQ+ issues to Pakistani viewers and allows individuals to openly discuss issues that are taboo in nature can result in expanding cultural discussion. Yet, the public backlash and resistance reflected in the show reveal the difficulty in obtaining widespread social approval.

As a Muslim researcher, I recognize the importance of maintaining ethical and cultural values, particularly when addressing sensitive topics like gender and sexuality. While I believe media content should be handled with responsibility and moral awareness, I also acknowledge the need to study these portrayals critically. Ignoring such content does not prevent its impact; rather, it limits our understanding of the ongoing cultural shifts and social tensions in society. This research does not seek to endorse any value system but aims to explore how the media reflects real struggles and how these narratives can inform public awareness in ethically grounded ways. It is through such balanced inquiry that we can engage with difficult issues while respecting our faith and cultural identity.

Significance of the Study

This research is important and timely. As it analyzes stories about LGBTQ issues on a global level, which is a current hot-button issue, OTT platforms such as Zee Zindagi on YouTube can incorporate these topics into their locally produced plays without the local constraints Pakistani TV channels have to follow. The research focused on how *Churails* uses storytelling, imagery, and symbolism to showcase LGBTQ+ issues. The drama features prominent

Pakistani actors and brings global LGBTQ+ stories to Pakistani audiences in a way that Local channels cannot do this. The study also looked at how Pakistani viewers reacted to these dramas. Whether they accept or deny these problems, and how do these shows encourage discussion about LGBTQ+ issues in a society where such issues are often considered taboo? In countries that are influenced by conservative religious values, like Pakistan, this research helps us understand how the media challenge or use cultural and religious norms. It also adds to the academic debate about how the media portrays LGBTQ+ issues and how audiences respond to those issues. And how does global content affect local identity?

Limitations of the Study

The limitation of this study is that dramas with LGBTQ+ content are banned in Pakistan due to state censorship and societal taboos. As a result, the analysis was limited only single drama series. The audience interview or survey could not be conducted due to ethical and cultural sensitivities surrounding the LGBTQ+ Topic in Pakistan. However, YouTube comments were publicly available from two sources. The First teaser of *Churails* on Zee5 official channel, and Pakistan YouTube channel Celeb City Official by DRM, which featured discussions on the show's ban in Pakistan. These comments provided valuable, albeit limited, insight into the public reception and controversy surrounding the series.

Finally, openly discussing LGBTQ+ issues continues to be challenge within Pakistan's conservative socio-political environment, which posed constraints on both data collection and interpretive outreach during the research process

REFERENCE

- Abbas, S. (2019). Through the lens of television: Progression in portrayal of Pakistani Trans* community (A study of TV shows from 2010 to 2018). *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 9(4), e201919.

- Ali, K. (2023, October 20). OTT numbers swell as fans move to online cricket streaming. Dawn. <https://www.dawn.com>
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text* (S. Heath, Trans.). Hill and Wang.
- Carey, J. W. (1996). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Routledge.
- Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The basics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Dennis, E. E. (1996). *Media debates: Issues in mass communication* (2nd ed.). Publisher. (Note: Add publisher's name if available)
- Farooq, Q. (2020). Margin to mainstream: Analysis of anti-discriminative Pakistani legislation and of supportive role of TV drama and film to reinforce country's transgender. *Global Scientific Journal (GSJ)*, 8(9). (Consider verifying journal title accuracy.)
- Gopinath, G. (2005). *Impossible desires: Queer diasporas and South Asian public cultures*. Duke University Press.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.
- Haritaworn, J. (2015). *Queer lovers and hateful others: Regenerating violent times and places*. Pluto Press.
- Jethava, N. (2023). Representation of LGBTQIA+ people in selected Indian web series: A study. *Vidhyayana: An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal*.
- Johri, M. (2024). Examining the impact of cinema on the normalization of queer and sexual minorities through Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue*. *New Literaria*, 5(2), 26–36.
- Khan, S. (n.d.). The portrayal of LGBTQ+ community in web series on Over the Top (OTT) video platforms—An analysis. In *Changing Landscape of News Media & Entertainment* (p. 233). (Add full publication details if available.)
- Kubra, K., Murtza, A., & Akhter, R. (2017). Semiotics analysis of cultural representation in Pakistani dramas title pages. *Journal of Literature, Languages and Linguistics*, 38(si1), 8–16.
- Lobato, R. (2019). *Netflix nations: The geography of digital distribution*. NYU Press.
- Peirce, C. S. (1931–1958). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (C. Hartshorne & P. Weiss, Eds., Vols. 1–8). Harvard University Press.
- Pervez, A., & Saleem, S. (2021). Abuse and violence experienced by gay men living in Pakistani cultural context: An interpretative phenomenology analysis. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 34(2), 227–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2021.1948941>
- Rahman, M. (2014). *Homosexualities, Muslim cultures and modernity*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reuters. (2025, June 17). Streaming surpasses broadcast and cable TV viewing in U.S. for first time. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/streaming-surpasses-broadcast-cable-tv-viewing-us-first-time-2025-06-17/>
- Sagheer, I., Yasir, A., & Safdar, U. (2024). Decoding the visual language: A semiotic analysis of YouTube thumbnails. *Pakistan Islamicus: An International Journal of Islamic & Social Sciences*, 4(3), 67–85. <https://linguisticforum.com/index.php/ling/article/view/174/103>
- Salam-Salmaoui, R., & Salam, S. (2023). Hollywood comes to Pakistan: Churails' appropriation of Hollywood detective genre. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 13(4).
- Salam-Salmaoui, R., & Salam, S. (2024). Navigating the forbidden: Churails and queer spatiality. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 25(1), 42–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2024.2374983>
- Shaw, A., & Sender, K. (2016). Queer technologies: Affordances, affect, ambivalence. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 33(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1129429>

- Statista Market Insights. (2024). OTT video market in Pakistan – Forecast 2021–2030. Statista. <https://www.statista.com>
- Statista Market Insights. (2024). Traditional TV & home video market in Pakistan – Forecast 2021–2030. Statista. <https://www.statista.com>
- Uniyal, C., & Mirza, A. (n.d.). Digitalization, new media & OTT: Case study of ushering new perspectives for gender issues. (Add publication name and date if available.)
- van Leeuwen, T. (2005). Introducing social semiotics. Routledge.
- Wikipedia contributors. (2024, May 28). Over-the-top media service. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Over-the-top_media_service
- Zeb, S., Saeed, A., & Masum, R. (2021). Challenging gender stereotypes: A semiotic and critical approach to Pakistani TV advertisements. *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review*, 5(2), 1–15. [https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2021\(5-II\)1.1](https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2021(5-II)1.1)

