Margins and Mainstream: A Comparative Study of Transgender Representation in Pakistani Television and Cinema

Khoula Khan[1,2] *, Noor Aireen Ibrahim [2,3], Ungku Khairunnisa Ungku Mohd Nordin[2]

[1] **Language Academy Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM Johor Bahru Malaysia**

[2] **UCSI University, UCSI Heights Cheras 56000, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

This article undertakes a comparative analysis of transgender representation in Pakistani mainstream television and alternative cinema through the case studies of Guru (2023) and Joyland (2022). Using representation theory and framing analysis, the study explores how costume, makeup, body language, camera techniques, and sound construct visual narratives of transgender identities across the two media. Findings reveal that Guru, produced for a mass television audience under censorship and cultural regulation, leans on stylized gender markers, exaggerated gestures, and externalized camera gazes that risk reinforcing stereotypes and social distance. In contrast, Joyland, operating within the cinematic medium and aimed at both local and international audiences, adopts an intimate visual language: naturalistic styling, empathetic close-ups, and performative dance sequences foreground individuality, vulnerability, and agency. The study argues that television, as a mainstream medium, tends to reinforce dominant cultural scripts, while cinema allows for more nuanced and humanized portrayals. By highlighting the role of the media in shaping transgender visibility, this article underscores the need for more authentic and inclusive representation within Pakistan's mainstream media landscape.

Transgender representation; Pakistani media; mainstream television; alternative cinema; framing analysis; representation theory.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the visibility of transgender individuals in Pakistan's public and cultural spheres has gained marginal traction, yet the nature of this representation remains deeply contested and uneven. The passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2018 was a landmark step, granting transgender people the right to self-identify and formal protection from discrimination. While this legislation was celebrated both locally and internationally as progressive, its translation into everyday social acceptance has been far less straightforward. Transgender persons in Pakistan continue to face systemic exclusion from education, employment, healthcare, and housing, alongside persistent harassment and violence (Zahra & Abbas, 2024). Legal frameworks, while symbolically powerful, remain insufficient when broader cultural narratives continue to position transgender lives as marginal or deviant.

Within this contested social terrain, the media plays a critical role in shaping public discourse and influencing cultural attitudes. Visual media, in particular, operate as a gatekeeper of representation, deciding who is made visible, how they are framed, and to what ends. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that the media do not simply mirror reality but actively produce meaning through signifying practices that involve codes, stereotypes, and

culturally embedded narratives. Representation is therefore never neutral; it is mediated, negotiated, and often complicit in reproducing systems of power. In the Pakistani context, research has consistently shown that transgender characters are frequently portrayed through reductive lenses, with emphasis on sensationalism, tokenism, or caricature rather than nuanced subjectivity (Asghar & Shahzad, 2018). Earlier studies documented how trans characters were relegated to stigmatized roles such as dancers at weddings, beggars in urban spaces, or comic relief in television dramas, framing them as social anomalies rather than full, complex individuals (Yasin, Batool, & Naseer, 2020).

Despite gradual legal recognition, cultural stigma remains deeply entrenched, and media narratives often reinforce rather than challenge dominant prejudices. Print media analyses, for example, reveal the use of demeaning linguistic markers that reinforce symbolic exclusion (Zahra & Abbas, 2024), while broadcast journalism has been criticized for misgendering and sensationalizing coverage of transgender-related stories (Siddique, 2024). Even when transgender individuals appear in mainstream spaces, their inclusion remains precarious. The case of Marvia Malik, Pakistan's first transgender news anchor in 2018, illustrates both the potential for visibility and the fragility of inclusion; her historic entry was met with celebration but also backlash, threats, and institutional challenges that emphasized the risks of trans visibility in conservative settings (Media Diversity Institute, 2023).

Against this backdrop, cinematic and televisual portrayals of transgender identities in Pakistan offer rich sites for comparative inquiry. The 2022 film Joyland, directed by Saim Sadiq, gained international acclaim for its layered depiction of trans life, featuring transgender actress Alina Khan in the role of Biba. The film explores themes of desire, gender performance, and family norms within a patriarchal society, offering a textured narrative that foregrounds the humanity of its transgender protagonist. Its reception, however, revealed the deep ambivalence of Pakistani cultural politics: while celebrated abroad, winning the Jury Prize at Cannes in the Un Certain Regard section, it faced censorship at home, initially banned for "objectionable content" before being permitted for release after review (Sundance Institute, 2022; Amnesty International, 2022). This episode highlights the fraught negotiation between artistic representation, state regulation, and cultural conservatism in Pakistan.

In contrast, Pakistani television dramas such as Guru (2023, ARY Digital) operate within stricter limitations shaped by audience expectations, commercial pressures, and censorship regimes. As the most widely consumed medium in Pakistan, television plays a central role in everyday cultural life, reaching both urban and rural audiences across class divides. Yet its mass accessibility comes at a cost: to maintain ratings and advertiser support, dramas often rely on melodrama, stereotype, and visual exaggeration to convey meaning quickly to heterogeneous audiences (Abbas, 2019). Transgender characters in this format are frequently subject to hyper-stylization, with heavy makeup, flamboyant gestures, and dramatized dialogue functioning as markers of difference. Such strategies reinforce familiar codes of "otherness," making transgender identities legible to audiences but also reinforcing distance rather than fostering empathy.

This study situates itself at the intersection of these two representational sites, television and cinema, to explore how the medium shapes meaning. Media theory reminds us that representation is not only about content but also about form. The concept of "medium effect" suggests that the structures, rhythms, and affordances of television and cinema fundamentally shape the way stories are told and identities are framed (Hall, 1997; Entman, 1993). Television's episodic structure, rapid pacing, and reliance on melodrama create a different visual and narrative logic than cinema's slower pacing, intimate close-ups, and emphasis on psychological depth. Examining transgender representation across these two media, therefore, provides a powerful lens for understanding not only what is represented but also how form and medium condition the possibilities of representation.

This paper is guided by the central research question: In what ways do the mediums of television and cinema distinctively represent transgender characters through visual strategies (costume, makeup, body language, and camera), narrative positioning, and audience expectations? By comparing Guru (television) and Joyland (cinema), this study aims to elucidate how medium-specific approaches may perpetuate stereotypes and othering or promote empathy and inclusion.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, it advances scholarly understanding of how representational constraints differ across platforms, particularly in a conservative media environment like Pakistan, where censorship and cultural norms intersect. Second, it offers insight into how more nuanced cinematic portrayals, exemplified by Joyland, may serve as models or pressure points for transforming mainstream television practices. In doing so, the study foregrounds visual semiotics and media framing as critical axes along which transgender visibility is negotiated in Pakistani popular culture. More broadly, the comparison demonstrates that medium matters: television and cinema are not interchangeable but instead produce radically different representational possibilities that shape the cultural politics of transgender identities in South Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sociopolitical landscape in Pakistan has shifted in recent years with the passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2018), which allows individuals to self-identify and prohibits discrimination. While this legislation marked an important step toward legal recognition, its translation into social acceptance has been uneven. Transgender persons continue to face systemic violence, exclusion, harassment, and stigma in everyday life (Ali, 2022; Zahra & Abbas, 2024). These inequalities are reinforced by cultural institutions, including the media, which play a powerful role in framing transgender identities for public consumption.

In print and online media, transgender people are often depicted as a spectacle or an anomaly rather than as subjects with agency. Asghar and Shahzad (2018) note that Pakistani media perpetuates harmful tropes through sensationalized coverage that marginalizes rather than normalizes trans identities. Zahra and Abbas (2024) similarly identify "linguistic apartheid" in newspaper blogs, where stereotypes dominate and solidarity discourses remain rare. Content analyses further show that coverage of transgender-related issues is either minimal or relegated to superficial treatments, lacking engagement with lived realities (Siddique, 2024).
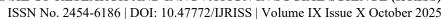
Television remains the most accessible and widely consumed medium in Pakistan, but it is also the most regulated. Agencies such as PEMRA enforce "family-friendly" codes that discourage depictions of non-normative gender roles. Commercial pressures, advertiser influence, and the need to cater to broad family audiences compound these constraints, making television a conservative medium for representation (Abbas, 2019).

Studies reveal that transgender characters on TV are often limited to token roles: dancers, beggars, or comedic relief (Yasin, Batool, & Naseer, 2020). Rather than building complex character arcs, dramas rely on sensationalism and stereotypes to engage audiences. Research highlights that such portrayals emphasize deviance or conflict, and occasionally redemption, but rarely show transgender individuals as ordinary members of society (Asghar & Shahzad, 2018).

The exclusion of transgender voices behind the camera is also notable. Marvia Malik's historic entry as Pakistan's first transgender news anchor in 2018 was celebrated, yet backlash and structural barriers prevented broader inclusion in mainstream media. This illustrates how visibility is fragile, subject to institutional resistance and societal hostility (Media Diversity Institute, 2023).

Compared to television, cinema offers relatively greater artistic freedom. In South Asia, films increasingly experiment with transgender storylines, though these often exist within the independent or festival circuit rather than mainstream commercial cinema. In Pakistan, Joyland (2022) marked a landmark cultural moment. Directed by Saim Sadiq, the film became the first Pakistani entry to premiere at Cannes, where it won the Jury Prize in the Un Certain Regard section (Sundance Institute, 2022).

Critics praised Joyland for its nuanced depiction of gender and sexuality, especially through the character Biba, played by transgender actress Alina Khan. By casting a trans actor in a leading role, the film broke longstanding practices of having cisgender actors perform transgender identities. The film's visual grammar, intimate close-ups, naturalistic styling, and the use of dance as identity performance foreground vulnerability, desire, and agency (Them, 2023).

Yet Joyland also faced significant controversy in Pakistan. Initially banned by authorities for "objectionable content," it was reinstated after edits, reflecting how cinema operates in a contested space between artistic expression and cultural conservatism (Amnesty International, 2022; The New Yorker, 2023). While celebrated abroad, the film's reception at home illustrates the persistent tension between visibility and regulation.

To understand these portrayals, several theoretical frameworks are essential. Stuart Hall's representation theory emphasizes that media does not mirror reality but produces meaning through signifying practices (Hall, 1997). Trans identities in media thus function as cultural signs that shape public perception.

Framing theory (Entman, 1993) extends this by showing how media highlight certain aspects of reality to guide interpretation. Frames of "otherness," deviance, or spectacle can reinforce social distance, whereas empathetic frames can normalize and humanize.

The concept of medium effect is particularly important. Television and cinema have distinct affordances: TV prioritizes seriality, broad audiences, and advertiser constraints; cinema allows greater experimentation in visual grammar, editing, and character development. These structural differences shape how transgender characters are staged, narrated, and received.

Despite growing research on transgender representation in Pakistani media, several important gaps remain. First, comparative analyses across mediums are rare, as most studies treat media as a monolithic entity without distinguishing how cinema and television differ in their representational strategies. Second, television-specific visual analysis remains underdeveloped; while print and online discourse have been extensively studied, fewer scholars have engaged with the semiotics of transgender portrayal in Pakistani dramas. Third, cross-medium framing studies are limited, leaving unexplored how film and television differently employ camera work, costume, and narrative positioning to frame transgender identities. Finally, although Joyland marks a significant moment in Pakistani cinema, its role as a potential catalyst for shifting mainstream televisual practices has yet to be fully theorized, creating an important space for further inquiry.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative comparative content analysis with a focus on visual semiotics to examine how transgender identities are represented in Pakistani mainstream television (Guru, 2023) and cinema (Joyland, 2022). The methodology is informed by Hall's (1997) representation theory, Entman's (1993) framing theory, and queer theoretical perspectives on gender performativity (Butler, 1990).

A comparative case study design was selected to analyze two prominent media texts from different mediums. Guru represents mainstream television drama, broadcast for a mass audience under cultural and regulatory constraints. Joyland, in contrast, exemplifies cinematic storytelling with relative artistic freedom and international exposure. This design allows the study to highlight how medium-specific conventions influence the framing of transgender identities.

For the television sample, Guru (ARY Digital, 2023) was chosen as a recent high-profile drama explicitly centered on a transgender protagonist. The series offers a mainstream representation that reached a wide national audience, making it a relevant case for examining how television mediates transgender visibility. Within the drama, Episodes 1 to 3 were purposively selected for analysis, as these early episodes introduce the central character, establish key visual codes such as costume and makeup, and set the tone for how audiences are invited to interpret the transgender identity. These episodes thus provide a concentrated view of the representational strategies embedded in mainstream Pakistani television.

For the cinema sample, Joyland (Saim Sadiq, 2022) was selected because it is the first Pakistani feature film to gain international acclaim for foregrounding a transgender character, Biba, portrayed by transgender actress Alina Khan. Unlike television, which is constrained by censorship and advertiser pressures, Joyland offers a cinematic space where intimate and layered depictions of transgender identities can emerge. The full film was included in the analysis in order to capture both the public dimensions of Biba's performance as a dancer and

the private aspects of her emotional and relational life. In line with qualitative media research traditions, purposive sampling was employed to focus on texts most directly relevant to the research question, an approach widely endorsed for in-depth interpretive analysis (Krippendorff, 2018).

The analysis was carried out in three interconnected stages. First, descriptive coding was used to systematically catalogue key visual elements such as costume, makeup, body language, camera framing, sound, and dialogue, with attention to their frequency, tone, and context (Neuendorf, 2017). Second, a semiotic analysis approach, drawing on Barthes' (1977) framework, was applied to interpret these visual elements as signifiers of broader cultural meanings. For instance, the exaggerated gestures and stylized presentation in Guru were read as reinforcing stereotypical constructions of transgender identity, whereas the intimate close-ups and naturalistic styling in Joyland conveyed empathy and subjectivity. Finally, a comparative framing analysis was undertaken following Entman's (1993) model, examining how the two mediums framed transgender characters whether as deviant and "othered" through stereotype frames, or as humanized and agentic through empathy frames. Together, these stages enabled a nuanced understanding of how television and cinema deploy different visual strategies to construct transgender representation.

To enhance trustworthiness, the study followed triangulation by combining semiotic analysis with framing theory and queer theoretical insights. Peer-reviewed methodological guidelines for qualitative visual analysis (Rose, 2016; Flick, 2018) informed coding procedures. Reflexivity was maintained by acknowledging researcher positionality and the sociocultural context of Pakistani media.

Although the study analyzed publicly available media texts, sensitivity was exercised in discussing marginalized identities. Care was taken to avoid reinforcing derogatory terms or stereotypes in description. Instead, emphasis was placed on critically interpreting how media constructs transgender identities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the comparative analysis of transgender representation in Guru and Joyland, organized around key visual elements: costume and makeup, body language and performance, camera and gaze, and sound and dialogue. The analysis reveals how the medium itself (television vs. cinema) shapes framing strategies and audience interpretation.

Costume and Makeup

In Guru, costume and makeup function as overt markers of difference. The protagonist, Abid, later known as Guru is styled with heavy foundation, bold lipstick, kohl-rimmed eyes, and brightly colored saris or shalwar kameez, often adorned with glittering jewelry and oversized earrings. In the opening episode, Guru's first appearance at a shrine features a shocking pink outfit paired with elaborate eye makeup and jingling bangles. These visual codes are immediately legible to viewers as signifiers of transgender identity, aligning with long-standing stereotypes of khwaja sira representation in South Asian media (Shahzad & Asghar, 2018). Such hyper-stylization distances the character from everyday norms, presenting her as visually "excessive" and reinforcing the notion of otherness. Moreover, lighting and camera framing often isolate Guru in crowded scenes, an aesthetic cue that further emphasizes her separation from mainstream femininity.

Data Sample No 1

By contrast, Joyland adopts a more naturalistic and layered aesthetic. The transgender character Biba, portryed by Alina Khan, is styled in a way that blurs traditional gender binaries: she appears glamorous and overtly feminine in performance settings yet understated in domestic or intimate contexts. For instance, in the dance rehearsal sequences, Biba wears sequined blouses, bold eyeliner, and vivid lip shades under warm stage lighting, visuals that celebrate confidence and public performance. However, in scenes at home or in conversation with Haider, her co-dancer, she appears without heavy makeup, dressed in neutral tones and casual attire, reflecting vulnerability and authenticity. This juxtaposition not only humanizes her but aligns with global queer cinema's visual language of realism and emotional depth (Ghosh, 2021).

Data Sample No 2

The divergent styling choices in Guru and Joyland also reveal how medium influences representation. Television dramas often rely on visually exaggerated codes because they must convey character identity quickly and recognizably to a mass audience with limited narrative subtlety (Mittell, 2015). Cinema, however, affords space for gradual character development and more nuanced costuming, where shifts in makeup and clothing mirror psychological and social complexity (Malik, 2020). In Joyland, for instance, Biba's understated styling in private spaces signals emotional depth and realism, while her elaborate stage costumes emphasize performance as empowerment rather than caricature. This contrast illustrates how costume and makeup, far from being neutral, serve as central semiotic tools that either perpetuate stereotypes or open space for authentic representation.

Body Language and Performance

Television dramatization in Guru emphasizes flamboyant gestures, dramatic expressions, and overtly "performed" femininity. These cues resonate with audience expectations of what a transgender body should look and act like, but they risk reducing identity to performance alone.

Joyland, however, allows for a broader emotional range. Biba's body language conveys vulnerability, strength, and desire beyond stereotypical markers. Dance is particularly significant: rather than a spectacle for others, it becomes a form of identity assertion and empowerment. This aligns with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, where embodied acts challenge fixed categories of male/female.

The contrast also highlights the different representational logics of television and cinema. In Guru, body language is amplified to fit the melodramatic conventions of mainstream TV, where exaggerated gestures communicate meaning quickly to a wide audience. In Joyland, by contrast, subtle gestures such as Biba's

controlled movements during moments of intimacy or her quiet physical presence in domestic spaces carry as much narrative weight as her dance performances. These understated performances invite viewers to perceive her as a multidimensional character rather than a stereotype. Thus, while television tends to externalize identity through hyper-performance, cinema foregrounds the embodied nuances of lived experience.

Moreover, the contrast in physical expression also reflects the social environments in which each medium operates. Guru, produced within the constraints of Pakistani television, mirrors societal discomfort with gender nonconformity by exaggerating bodily difference—using movement as a marker of "otherness." The performative excess becomes a means of containment, signaling visibility without acceptance (Asghar & Shahzad, 2018; Yasin, Batool, & Naseer, 2020). Joyland, on the other hand, situates the body as a site of resistance and authenticity. Biba's gestures, whether a defiant glance, a poised dance step, or a moment of stillness, embody her agency and emotional truth. Through this controlled yet expressive physicality, Joyland reclaims the transgender body from spectacle, transforming it into a narrative vessel of humanity and self-determination (Butler, 1990; Ghosh, 2021; Zakria, 2023).

Camera and Gaze

In Guru (2023), the transgender protagonist is framed through a lens of spectacle and social distance. The dance sequence captures this dynamic vividly: Guru, adorned in a heavy, glittering outfit and vibrant makeup, performs before a raucous crowd that laughs, cheers, and throws money. The camera alternates between close-ups of her expressive gestures and wide shots of the audience's reactions, emphasizing her objectification. These visual rhythms, combined with loud background music and exaggerated crowd noise, transform the scene into one of performative vulnerability. Guru's body becomes a site of fascination rather than agency, mirroring Ahmed's (2019) notion of conditional visibility, where marginalized figures are seen but never fully accepted. Television's reliance on heightened emotionality and fast-paced editing further amplifies this sense of spectacle, reducing identity to entertainment (Asghar & Shahzad, 2018; Yasin, Batool, & Naseer, 2020).

Data Sample No 1

By contrast, Joyland (2022) opens with a radically different visual strategy. Biba, the transgender dancer portrayed by Alina Khan, is introduced smoking backstage, the camera positioned frontally at eye level. The framing is static and unembellished, granting her visual autonomy. The act of smoking, a taboo for women in Pakistan, signals defiance and agency rather than deviance. The subdued lighting, minimal sound, and absence of movement invite viewers into her subjectivity rather than positioning them as spectators. This empathetic gaze aligns with Bordwell and Thompson's (2017) concept of subjective framing, where intimacy and stillness replace the distancing effects of spectacle.

Data Sample No 4

Although both productions depict transgender women within gendered boundaries, their camera movements and narrative grammars diverge sharply. Guru's televisual gaze relies on mobility rapid pans, zooms, and cuts to heighten emotion and maintain audience engagement, reinforcing stereotype through excess. Joyland, meanwhile, employs measured tracking shots and long takes that follow Biba with dignity and restraint. Throughout the film, Biba remains vocal, bold, and self-possessed; the camera supports her narrative rather than controlling it. Thus, while both characters are framed within socially constrained worlds, Guru renders visibility as vulnerability, whereas Joyland transforms it into empowerment and voice (Keegan, 2018; Mittell, 2015).

Thus, while Guru employs a televisual gaze that objectifies through excess and distance, Joyland humanizes through subtlety and proximity. Television dramatizes difference; cinema transforms it into empathy, showing how the politics of the gaze are deeply intertwined with the affordances of each medium (Mittell, 2015; Bordwell & Thompson, 2017).

Sound and Dialogue

In Guru, sound and dialogue often reinforce stereotypes. The transgender character's voice is dramatized through exaggerated tone and accent, serving as a constant reminder of "difference." The background score in tense moments heightens spectacle rather than empathy.

Joyland, however, incorporates sound more subtly. The use of silence in intimate scenes, soft vocal tones, and music accompanying dance performances creates a layered emotional atmosphere. Instead of emphasizing difference, sound design contributes to normalizing Biba's presence as part of the narrative world.

The contrast between the two media reflects broader conventions of televisual melodrama versus cinematic realism. Television relies on heightened dialogue and background scores to signal emotion quickly to its audience, often resorting to auditory exaggeration that underscores stereotypes. Cinema, on the other hand, uses sound as an expressive layer, allowing pauses, ambient noise, and restrained dialogue to shape meaning (Raza, 2019). In Joyland, the soundscape works as an extension of Biba's interiority, giving audiences access to her emotions beyond words, while Guru's reliance on dramatized sound reinforces distance and spectacle.

Moreover, sound in Joyland functions as a bridge between performance and emotion. The recurring blend of rhythmic music and ambient silence mirrors Biba's shifting states, confidence in public, fragility in private, allowing sound to embody identity itself. This layered auditory realism deepens the film's empathy, contrasting sharply with Guru's overstated musical cues that frame the transgender body as spectacle rather than subject.

Summary

The findings suggest that the medium is not a neutral container but an active force in shaping representation. Television (Guru), bound by censorship, advertiser pressures, and family audiences, tends to fall back on established visual tropes, reinforcing transgender otherness. Cinema (Joyland), by contrast, offers space for complexity, using visual and sonic strategies to humanize and individualize.

This aligns with Entman's (1993) notion of framing: while Guru selects and emphasizes transgender identity as spectacle, Joyland frames it as lived reality. Such differences underscore how medium matters: television may amplify dominant cultural scripts, while cinema can disrupt them through empathetic aesthetics.

These contrasts highlight important cultural dynamics in Pakistan. Television, as the more accessible medium, risks perpetuating stereotypes at scale, influencing everyday social attitudes toward transgender communities. Cinema, though less widely consumed domestically, can act as a cultural catalyst, pushing boundaries and offering new representational models. Together, they illustrate the contested terrain of transgender visibility in Pakistani media, caught between the forces of conservatism, censorship, artistic freedom, and global reception.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This comparative analysis of Guru (television) and Joyland (cinema) demonstrates that transgender representation in Pakistani media is profoundly shaped by the affordances and constraints of the medium. Television, constrained by regulatory oversight, advertiser influence, and the expectations of a mass, family-oriented audience, continues to rely on visual tropes such as hyper-femininity, exaggerated body language, and externalized framing (Asghar & Shahzad, 2018; Yasin, Batool, & Naseer, 2020). These strategies often reproduce stereotypes and sustain a sense of social distance between transgender characters and mainstream viewers. By contrast, cinema exemplified by Joyland, uses naturalistic styling, intimate camera work, and subtle sound design to construct a space for empathy, individuality, and agency (Them, 2023; Sundance Institute, 2022).

The findings highlight that medium matters. Television frames transgender identities largely through the logic of spectacle, emphasizing difference, while cinema offers opportunities for more layered, humanized portrayals (Hall, 1997; Entman, 1993). This divergence underscores a paradox in Pakistani media culture: the most widely consumed medium, television, risks reinforcing marginalization, while the less accessible medium, cinema, holds the potential to challenge dominant norms, foster empathy, and gain international recognition (Amnesty International, 2022; The New Yorker, 2023).

For media practitioners, the study emphasizes the need to move beyond tokenism and visual exaggeration in televisual storytelling. Responsible and authentic portrayals can contribute to reshaping public perceptions and aligning representations with the lived realities of transgender communities (Zakria, 2023). For policy and regulation, the findings suggest that cultural sensitivities must be balanced with inclusivity, ensuring that transgender characters are not censored into caricature but allowed to emerge as full subjects with emotional and social depth (Ali, 2022; Zahra & Abbas, 2024).

Academically, this research contributes to South Asian media studies by highlighting the importance of medium-specific analysis in understanding representation. It illustrates that television and cinema cannot be treated as interchangeable platforms, as their structures, audiences, and visual grammars create divergent framings of identity (Rose, 2016). Finally, at the level of social change, cinema can act as a cultural catalyst, offering models of empathetic representation that television may later adapt. The compassionate gaze of Joyland signals a pathway for reshaping public attitudes toward greater acceptance of transgender communities (Ghosh, 2021; Stryker, 2006).

Looking ahead, this study suggests several directions for both media practice and scholarship. First, as digital streaming platforms such as YouTube and OTT services (e.g., Netflix, Zee5) become increasingly popular in Pakistan, they may provide a hybrid space between television and cinema. Future research could examine

whether these platforms enable more nuanced representations or whether they replicate television's tendency toward stereotype-driven narratives (Neuendorf, 2017). Second, training programs for television writers, producers, and directors should emphasize sensitivity in portraying marginalized identities. Incorporating transgender voices in the production process as consultants, scriptwriters, and actors can ensure that representation moves beyond surface-level tropes. This collaborative approach has the potential to reduce misrepresentation and foster authenticity in storytelling (Siddique, 2024).

Third, there is scope for longitudinal studies tracking how exposure to films like Joyland affects public perceptions over time. Does empathetic cinematic portrayal translate into shifting attitudes at the societal level, or do structural inequalities dilute this effect? Exploring audience reception through surveys and focus groups would strengthen understanding of media's transformative potential (Chion, 1994; Butler, 1990). Finally, international recognition of Pakistani films dealing with transgender themes opens opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue. Comparative work across South Asia could reveal shared patterns of representation and provide strategies for more inclusive media practices regionally (Media Diversity Institute, 2023).

Ultimately, this study suggests that inclusive, authentic, and empathetic visual strategies are crucial for advancing the visibility and dignity of transgender individuals in Pakistan. Bridging the gap between the "mainstream" and the "margins" in media remains an urgent task that requires collaboration among cultural producers, policymakers, and scholars (Zahra & Abbas, 2024). While television currently reinforces stereotypes through spectacle, cinema demonstrates that alternative visual strategies are possible, offering space for empathy, humanization, and social change. Moving forward, the challenge is not only to celebrate cinematic milestones like Joyland, but also to bring these representational shifts into the heart of mainstream media, where their impact on public perception will be most profound.

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