

Digital Afterlives of Punjabi Stage Dramas

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Abstract

This study investigates the fan communities around Punjabi stage dramas as they circulate on online spaces, in particular YouTube and Facebook. It explores the construction, negotiation, and performance of transnational Punjabi identities in these online spaces with a particular emphasis on gender, spectatorship, and fan culture around Punjabi dramas. These stage dramas, which are recordings of live performances in Pakistan, have such a massive following that it exceeds in-theatre viewership. On average, these dramas have over 5 million views, 20 thousand likes, and hundreds of comments each. For the purpose of this study, more than 500 comments on 3 popular Punjabi stage dramas have been analyzed. An overview of the comment section reveals that almost all the comments are made by male viewers, and they are mostly positive. Many of the commenters identify themselves as residing outside of Pakistan, such as India and the UK. These patterns and trends are further analyzed by employing exploratory qualitative data analysis techniques of text mining. The findings will be represented in word clouds and frequency plots to observe trends and patterns in the comments. This study provides insight into the digital afterlives of these performances and how they resonate with Punjabis through time and across borders in online spaces.

Keywords: Fan communities; Punjabi; Punjab stage dramas; Diaspora; Social media

Introduction

Punjabi stage dramas are comedy, theatre performances popular in the region of Punjab, Pakistan. The live recordings of these stage dramas circulate widely on social media and video sharing websites such as Facebook and YouTube. Typically staged in a drawing room setting, the dramas regularly feature sexual innuendos and suggestive dance performances. Due to this, these popular stage dramas are considered “anathema to legitimate theatre, roundly dismissed as lowbrow” (Pamment 133). The live theatre performances of these stage dramas are generally popular with the lower socioeconomic classes. However, their recordings can also be seen entering middle- and upper-class homes (147). Moreover, the recordings of these stage dramas on YouTube have become increasingly popular in Indian Punjab, and with the Punjabi diaspora based in the UK and Canada. On YouTube, these performances have a massive viewership, and YouTube has become a popular medium for the consumption of these dramas with millions of subscribers and viewers. McLuhan famously said that “the medium is the message” implying that how the content is perceived will depend on the medium (qtd. in Giddens 3). Hence, it is

important to pay attention to the medium itself. This study investigates how the fan communities of the Punjabi Stage Dramas have interacted with the content and each other as these dramas circulate on online spaces like YouTube, exploring the themes of Punjabi transnational identities, with a particular focus on gender and fan culture and their perception of these dramas as being family friendly entertainment.

With the onset of digital media, the medium is no longer restricted to cinema halls, so only conducting participatory observation and ethnographic accounts is no longer sufficient (Jenkins, “The Cultural Logic” 34). This study will look at how digital audiences receive and respond to Punjabi stage dramas. To determine this, the paper will focus on the comments left by viewers under the Youtube videos of these dramas. These comments can be seen as supplements to the main dramatic text, and it is important to analyze these “accompanying productions” (Klecker 403) to understand how the digital reproduction of these dramas has expanded the dramatic text’s meanings and possibilities across regional boundaries. To undertake this analysis, Google API was used to extract the YouTube comments of a few selected stage dramas. The following elements were extracted: timestamp, comment author name, comment content, comment likes, and comment replies count. A major limitation was that YouTube does not record the gender and location of the author of the comment. Consequently, for analysis, the gender of the commenter was assumed from their profile name, and location was only considered in case the commenter chose to reveal their location in their comment content.

More than 500 comments were extracted from three popular Punjabi stage dramas: *Ek Tera Sanam Khana/Your Place of Idols* (dir. Awan Jee, 2003), in which male actors employ cross dressing techniques to condemn the inordinately masculine political and social structures of Pakistan; *Shartiya Mithay/Guaranteed Sweet* (Anon., 1990s), wherein the father of two blind sons wants his son to become beggars and the sons want to get married; and *Feeqa in Amrika/Feeqa in America* (Anon., 1990s), in which Feeqa, who is neurodivergent, is considered to be a burden until he goes to America. These three dramas were chosen because of their popularity on YouTube as gauged by the number of views, likes, and comments. The comments were sorted in descending order with respect to the number of likes on each comment to observe which comments had the most engagement and identify recurring themes. The patterns and trends in the comments are further analyzed by employing exploratory qualitative data analysis techniques such as text mining in RStudio. A word cloud and a bar chart were generated to reveal the words that were most frequently used by the comment authors. This aided in identifying the major themes from the audience reception of the screen text.

As mentioned earlier the limitation of this study is that the gender of the comment author is assumed from their user handle. Gender is not binary and not necessarily indicated by the name. So, using the names of the comment authors to assume the gender is an imperfect measure. Moreover, the owner of the YouTube channel might have deleted negative or offensive comments from the comment section noticeable through the fact that there were very few negative comments in the comment section, which would limit our understanding of how these dramas are received. However, it is of little concern as this study aims to explore the fan culture around these stage dramas.

Stage Dramas and their Digital Reception

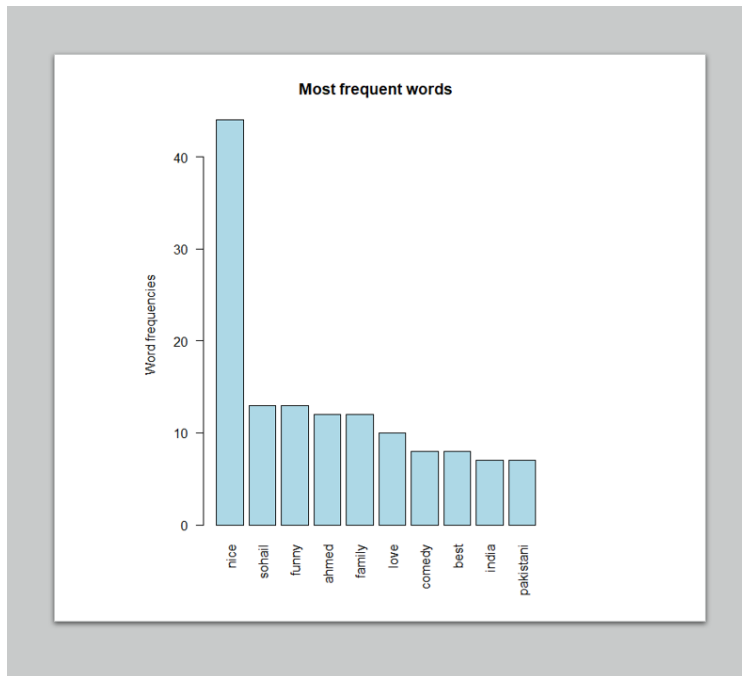
A stage drama typically starts with an upbeat Punjabi song. Usually, a stage drama features three dance performances: in the beginning, middle, and at the end. These dance performances are not included in the recordings of these stage dramas and are uploaded separately on different online spaces for their consumption. The curtains usually open to a drawing room setting and the plays begin with a “loose situational premise that pits prosperous and powerful high-status characters against cheeky and chattering low-status characters” (Pamment 134). The comedy of Punjabi stage dramas lies at the intersectionality of class, gender, race, sexuality, disability, and physical appearance.

An analysis of the comment section underneath the Youtube videos revealed that certain words were used very frequently (Figures 1 and 2). These included appreciation for the humor (“comedy”, “best”, “funny”), acknowledgement for the family-friendly nature of the videos (“family”, “clean”), and geographical references (“India”, “Pakistan”). The following themes were identified in the comment section of the YouTube videos of Punjabi stage dramas: transnational Punjabi identity, gender, fan culture, and the perception of stage dramas as family friendly.



Word Cloud of the Comment Section

Figure 1: Word cloud of the comment section.



Most Frequently Used Words by Comment Authors

Figure 2: Most Frequent Used Words by Comment Authors

Transnational Punjabi Identity

It seems that there is construction, negotiation, and performance of transnational Punjabi identities in these online spaces, particularly YouTube. Traditionally the content of these stage dramas was produced for local consumption but with the advent of social networking and video sharing websites, these stage dramas became increasingly popular with the Punjabi diaspora based in India and the UK. The term ‘diaspora’ is defined as “a desire to feel at ‘home’ in the context of migration” (Brah 17). Brah argues that “home is both ‘lived’ and ‘imagined’” (Brah 20) and constituted through “multiple (lived and imagined) relationships with people and places” (Mallett 76). In the age of high globalization, home has become an excessively a-spatial phenomenon, a concept pertinent to the Punjabi diaspora (King and Christou 462). Furthermore, Taylor et al., argue that “home is often represented as offering complete familiarity and comfort, a place that we either leave and long for, or we move towards, for security and identity” (224). The comment section revealed this “homing desire” (Brah 180) among the Punjabi diaspora as many appreciated these stage dramas because they depicted the family dynamics and how things typically work in a Punjabi home. The comment authors praised the content because of its portrayal of the reality of a Punjabi household. This provided the Punjabi diaspora with a chance to feel at ‘home’ and cherish their Punjabi identity despite being geographically scattered.

This shows how the fanbase of these stage shows has transformed into a transnational community over time. Taylor et al., claims that Punjabi diaspora can be viewed as a part of a wider transnational community and defines transnational community as “groups based in two or more countries that engage in recurrent, enduring and significant cross border activities, which may be economic, political, social or cultural in character” (222). One cannot necessarily identify viewers’ location by name, but the comment section of these stage dramas included a lot of

Hindi names which do point to high viewership outside of Pakistan. Some commenters chose to reveal their location and mentioned that they belonged to Indian Punjab or the Sikh communities based in the UK. Some of the comments left by people from India read, “Love from Punjab, India”, “*Bohat khaas* love from Punjab” (‘Very special love from Punjab’), “*Bohat sohna drama*” (‘Very beautiful drama’), “Love your play from India”, and “East or West Punjab is the Best”. Moreover, these were the top comments as they had the most engagement based on the number of likes and comments. These comments had more than 300 likes on average and multiple replies whereas other comments which just appreciated the content of the drama had an average of 4 or 5 likes.

From the aforementioned observations, it can be concluded that the comments which indicated association with an international Punjabi community gained higher levels of engagement. The Pakistani audience would have been happy and proud to see that their stage dramas were being appreciated by an international community and the platform seemed to have provided them with a space through which they could develop bonds. It seems that the political tensions between both the countries have not prevented people from actively streaming and watching these dramas. Governments of both countries have banned the exchange of content, but a Punjabi identity and its roots have surpassed these restrictions. This has been made possible by social media which fosters new forms of electronic communication that work as an alternative for real-life interactions, which may not be possible due to geopolitical barriers such as border restrictions.

Furthermore, Taylor et al. assert that there are four vital meanings of home: “firstly, a geographical space or material home; secondly, a site where everyday life is lived, the ‘lived home’; thirdly, a nucleus of social relationships and a point of identification, a cultural home; fourthly, a ‘desired home’” (224). Their study concludes that “meanings of home, as part of diasporic identities, can be context-dependent, dynamic and intrinsically linked with how processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances” (223).

Punjabi cinema became a huge trend because of its appeal to the masses of common people which makes the content more relatable for the viewers. It is probable that a popular Punjabi film, *Chal Mera Put/Let’s Go Son* (dir. Janjot Singh, 2019) has helped introduce the international audience to Pakistani stage dramas. The film is based on the undocumented migrant workers based in UK and explores the theme of Indian and Punjabi migrant workers struggling and learning to live together. Similarly, these stage dramas are very old school and deal with traditional tropes and themes. These dramas are staged in a common drawing room setting and explore the everyday struggles of the working class of people. This helps in understanding the appeal these dramas have for the working class and migrant laborers abroad. These dramas have helped in building an imagined community of Punjab that is accessible on both sides of the border. This is the power of Punjabi stage dramas as it has allowed people from two rival countries to bond over these stage dramas.

Gendered Analysis

Punjabi stage dramas are produced, written, and performed by men and only target them as their audience in Pakistan. These dramas are targeted towards the male audiences and have a stigma attached to the consumption of stage dramas due to their reputation for vulgarity.

Analysis of the comment section on YouTube reveals that more than 99% of the people who have engaged with the content have usernames that suggests they are males (Figure 3). This is in line with the in-theatre viewership, and online spaces such as YouTube seem to have little to no effect on changing this viewership pattern. Both gender and class are significant in determining whether a film or a drama is considered appropriate to watch and for whom. Kirk examines a linguistic hierarchy in Pakistan, where English is dominantly perceived as the language of the upper classes, followed by Urdu. Punjabi is the regional language of Punjab and is the most widely spoken language in Pakistan. Regardless of this, it is associated with the lower class because it is considered to be crude. This perception is reflected in the audience consumption, as the Punjabi theatre is popular with the working-class (7). However, even the women belonging to the working class, are supposed to stay away from such content which might be considered normal for the male members of their household. This is evident from their absence in the theatres. But even with the privacy provided by the digital medium, there has not been any significant increase in female viewership. This is due to the societal narrative which perpetuates that “good” and “decent” women need to stay away from this kind of content.

The gendered dynamics of Punjabi stage dramas are not only limited to its viewership. Even the women working in contemporary Punjabi theatre are deemed as “bad girls” and are accused of promoting “obscenity” and “vulgarity” in the society (Pamment 3). Female stage actresses have to face verbal and physical assault on and off stage. Nargis, a famous stage dancer, was brutally assaulted by an “ex-police officer” who “cut her hair, shaved off her eyebrows, and inflicted 39 wounds on her body” (“Nargis alleges torture by ex-policeman”) when she threatened to expose “the elite government officials who had been enjoying her dance performances in the privacy of their homes” (Pamment 148). In *Kuch na Kaho/Don't Say Anything* (dir. Ilyas Kashmiri, 2016),

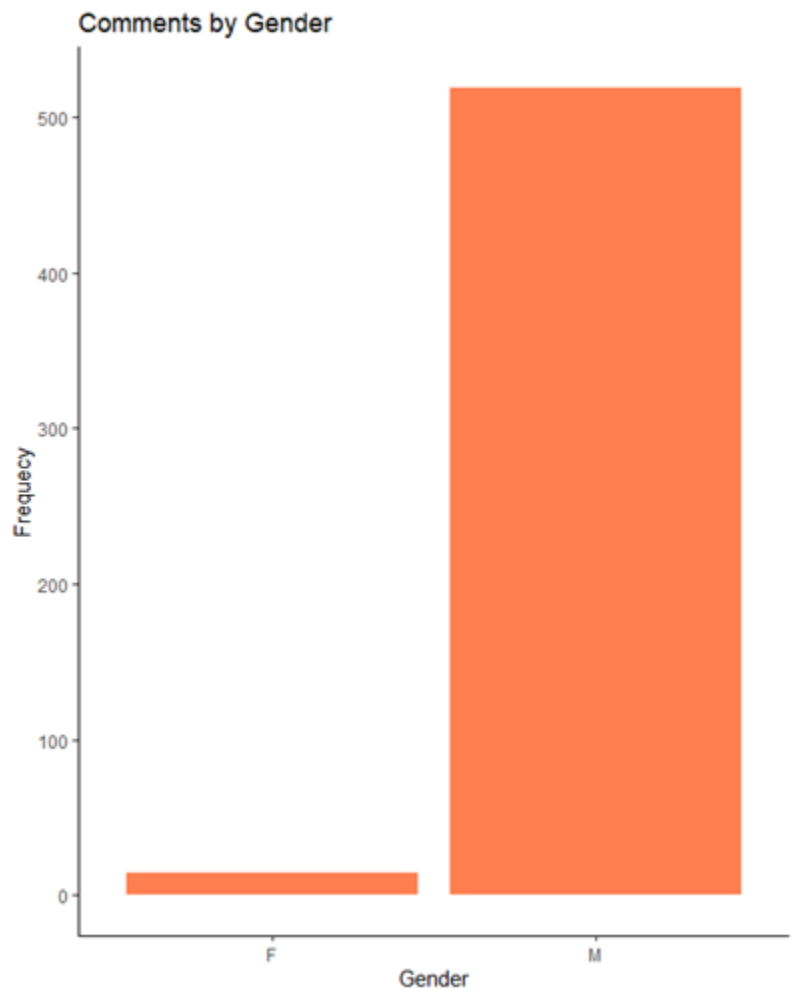


Figure 3: Frequency of comments by gender.

another stage drama, a girl reveals to a male servant that she loves dancing. The servant recommends something “you are a good girl. You should have a wedding” (Pamment 149). The theatre thus highlights the skewed gender balance in our society and depicts the degree of patriarchy and misogyny prevalent in Punjabi society.

Furthermore, it is evident that the content of these stage dramas is structured to appeal more to the male audience. Most of the humor is centered around polygamy, women’s morality, and explicit references to sexual intercourse. Laura Mulvey claims in her essay that “film language is both controlled by men and designed for the benefit of male pleasure, which is inextricably linked with looking, voyeurism, and the objectification of the female image” (10). Mulvey further argues that “film only serves to perpetuate a type of male-driven patriarchal language that facilitates male visual pleasure and female spectators have no access to it other than through the male gaze that consistently objectifies the female spectator’s onscreen counterpart. Therefore, the only pleasure that female spectators derive from it is masochistic (the pleasure in one’s own pain)” (10). These stage dramas are created for the male audience by the male producers, directors, and actors, and female performers have little to no part in the main plot and their performances serve as peripheral items (Pamment 201). A major critique leveled against the Punjabi stage dramas is the abundance of misogynist *juggat* (‘disparaging remark’) and lack of narrative (Pamment 135). The popular practice in Punjabi stage dramas of “making women the target of jokes in a very vulgar manner” has been condemned by the theatre activists (Pamment 145). Serving as passive sidekicks to the male comedians, women ultimately became targets for misogynist humor. The women characters present in the stage shows are normally of ill repute and this is made very clear through the insults they get from male actors. The “comedians explicitly play to their audience’s male gaze, crudely reducing [female counterparts] to sexual utility” (Pamment 146). The comment section of these stage dramas on YouTube is filled with people asking the names of the female actors and praising them for their physical appearance. On the contrary, male comedians are praised for their comedy and performance. Hence, the misogynistic content of these dramas and society’s disapproval might help in explaining the absence of female viewership.

Fan Culture

The fan culture around the Punjabi stage dramas in the online spaces can be analyzed as an important part of modern consumer culture. It can tell a great deal about how stage dramas function both as a source of entertainment and an art form. So, it becomes pertinent to talk about the fan culture that exists around these stage dramas as they circulate on YouTube and Facebook. In online spaces, fans are defined as “individuals with a relatively deep positive emotional conviction about someone or something famous [who] make use of digital tools and communication technologies to discuss, share, create, or otherwise respond to a public performance” (Duffet 18). Fans may not be the “cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers that they have been labeled” (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 231). Rather, “fans are able to digest the media texts that they consume so as to produce their own artworks and be creative on their own terms” (233). Fans are considered a dedicated and active audience, so it is important to study them in media sociology. Recent digitalization of live performances has allowed fan culture to become more widespread and more accessible. Digitalization for online spaces such as YouTube has allowed a virtual community to be formed. A virtual community is defined as

“social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 67). In this case, the community seems to be based on mutual admiration for stage dramas.

Virtual spaces like YouTube and Facebook provide a particular freedom to the audience in viewing stage dramas, indulging in discussions around them, and acknowledging they like and dislike. Media platforms have enabled viewers to express their opinions in new ways and Punjabi stage dramas consumers have used these online spaces to create a discourse that is political and religious. Fan groups for Punjabi stage drama are very popular on Facebook and YouTube, however, there is a stark difference in the discourse surrounding these dramas in both these spaces. Facebook and YouTube differ in terms of their audience, content that is shared, and the way the community interacts with that content. On Facebook groups, *mujra* (‘sexual dance’) videos circulate which are not present in the drama recordings that are made available on YouTube. Furthermore, the content that is generally shared on these Facebook groups by its members hardly has anything to do with the stage dramas themselves with people sharing random pictures which they think will get a lot of. Facebook groups for these stage drama groups have an abundance of unrelated religious and political posts; pictures like *Allah* (‘God’) written in a fruit and posts praising the Pakistan army are common among these Facebook groups.

New digital technologies have been central to understanding how the notion of piety and religious identity is constructed among Muslims today. Charles Hirshckind analyzes that in Egypt, religious identity and notion of piety is established through listening to popular audio cassette sermons of religious texts that connect the listener with his larger sense of piety. Hirshckind explores ways in which these sermons have penetrated the public sphere to the extent of a constant sound emanating from everywhere (Syeda 14). Hirshckind’s arguments regarding piety can help explain how digital media technologies are being employed in Pakistan to create religious identity in the Facebook groups of these stage dramas. On the one hand, YouTube has created a transnational space with people across borders watching and mutually appreciating the family-friendly content of Punjabi stage dramas. On the other hand, the audience on Facebook seems to be interested either in the clips of sexualized performances and double entendre, or ironically, using the space to further religious and political discourse. Hence, each platform facilitates a different kind of fan following due to things like the nature and privacy of the interactions, and the platform’s own censorship and regulations.

Family Friendly Entertainment

Another prominent theme that emerged from the comments left on these stage dramas was that these dramas were considered as a family friendly form of entertainment by many comment authors on YouTube. Many comments said that the stage dramas are family friendly or “*Parivaar ke beech main beth ke dekhney wala*” (‘Can be watched when sitting with family’). Family friendly entertainment means that it is appropriate to view with children. These comments are paradoxical given that stage dramas have a notorious reputation for vulgarity and obscenity due to not only crude language but sexually provocative dance performances.

The sexually provocative dance performances are termed as *mujra*. *Mujra* is a kind of sexual dance performance by a woman. Such performances play a huge part in the popularity of live

performances. The live theatre performances rely on these sexually suggestive dance numbers appealing to the ‘male gaze’ to entice the audience. Mujra dance performances in stage dramas feature a “female performer in a sexually charged and powerful situation who needs to be satiated and desires a male for her satisfaction” (Syeda 6). Hoek has defined obscenity as “the representation of sexuality in ways that are considered socially and morally unacceptable” (3). Following this, these dramas are notorious for obscenity and vulgarity because of these erotic dance performances. In Pakistan, these dramas are certainly not considered family friendly, which is evident from the predominantly male crowd present in live theatre performances.

Thus, there is a huge inconsistency between the reputation these stage dramas and their performers have in Pakistan versus the reputation they have in the transnational community on YouTube. In Pakistan, the stage dramas and their performers have a very negative reputation, and these dramas are perceived as an immoral form of entertainment. Khalid Abbas Dar, a senior stage actor, reported in an interview that his dying father said, “I have no regrets in life except your performances” (Pamnent 138). Then a question arises: why is someone sitting in India claiming that this is a family friendly form of entertainment with dozens of people agreeing with it? The live mujra performances, which are an integral part of live Punjabi stage dramas, are cut out from the recordings of the stage dramas that is made available on YouTube rendering these stage dramas “clean” for their viewers. Therefore, the international community does not get to view the sensationalized and sexualized aspects of these dramas since they do not make it to YouTube. Hence, it is probable that due to the lack of sexual dance performances in the recordings of the stage dramas, people deem these plays as family friendly. Although the stage dramas are full of sexual innuendos, these dramas are still regarded as family friendly form of entertainment by its male viewership.

Another reason that these Punjabi dramas are considered family friendly by their fans might be because these dramas are very traditional in their plot. The stage is usually set in a domestic setting and the plots revolve around finding humour in mundane situations. Even though these dramas may include the topics of marriage and flirtation, they do not include themes like ‘modern’ dating which means they resonate as family friendly to Punjabis.

Conclusion

New media has allowed these stage dramas to reach a wider audience greatly replacing the older forms of consumption that are live theatre performances. These dramas have a massive fan base on YouTube. However, there is a huge contradiction between the reputation these stage dramas and actors have in Pakistan versus the reputation these dramas have with the international community on YouTube. The mujra performances which are a huge part of live performances do not make it to YouTube due to which the international community watching these dramas do not perceive them as immoral, which is how they are commonly perceived in Pakistan. Additionally, due to the absence of the mujra performances, these stage dramas are claimed to be a family-friendly form of entertainment by the viewers on YouTube. Still, even with the privacy provided by the digital medium coupled with the “clean” perception of these dramas, they have been unable to increase the female viewership or engagement with the content. In this way YouTube has helped in the formation of a transnational Punjabi community around these stage dramas. On the contrary, Facebook groups include even more sexualized and sensationalized content than in

theatre performances. On one hand, YouTube has brought the Punjabi diaspora together and provided them with family-friendly entertainment in their mother tongue while on the other hand, the Facebook audience is appreciating the raunchy side of humor. Hence, not all online spaces have worked in a similar manner and the different reception of Punjabi stage dramas in their live context, on Youtube, and on Facebook goes to show that the medium really is the message.

Appendix



Figure 4 Comments on Punjabi Identity



Figure 5 Comments on Stage Dramas being Family Friendly

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Filmography

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