

# **Who reads Urdu women's magazines and why? An investigation of the content, purpose, production and readership of Urdu women's digests**

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## **Introduction**

This article considers Urdu reading digests (magazines) for Pakistani women and their readership. On a monthly basis, around 300,000 adult readers in Pakistan receive these digests in hard copy form and many others read them online around the world. The research described here involved editors and publishers of the digests, regular readers of the digests, people who have never read digests, people who have read digests at some time in their life and a content analysis of six different periodicals. Therefore this study is unusual, in combining text, reader-based approaches and producer perspectives in the investigation about how ideology is prescribed in the text and how far readers might be influenced by that ideology. It is also one of the largest in terms of the number of respondents (308) and, as far as it is possible to tell, unique in being able to compare the views of digest readers with those of non-readers. Using binary regression analysis, the preferences and responses of readers and non-readers are not that much different from each other. Finally, there has been a long-term research tradition on western women's magazines investigating the role of editors and publishers (Ferguson 1983; Gough-Yates 2003; Keller 2010; Winship 1987). However, my research is the first, as far as I know, to combine information on the roles and ideology of editors and publishers alike who produce Urdu women's digests. The results may be surprising because they challenge the established views on the essential influence of media on readers.

## **Background**

Like other Asian countries such as China (Cheng 1997; Huang and Lowry 2012), Singapore (Frith et al. 2004), Hong Kong (Fung 2011) and India (Das and Das 2009; Shrama 2012), Pakistan is experiencing an influx of western media companies marketing their products and targeting consumers through various media formats. The local English-language women's weekly magazines include *She*, *Women's Own* and *Mag*, while the international brands of *Cosmopolitan* and *Vogue*, published in

India, are also easily available. These Indian versions are read in Pakistan because they are heavily loaded with Indian fashion trends in clothing and stories on the Bollywood media industry, which are most popular in Pakistan. The subscription rate and readership of magazines for Pakistani women seems to be divided on the basis of languages, social class and income groups. Women's magazines published in English such as *She* and *Women's Own* are targeted at the educated classes of urban areas who can read in English and can afford to buy a copy of a weekly or a monthly magazine in the price range of Rs. 100 to Rs. 250 (about £3). Generally, these women's magazines are oriented towards the lifestyle of elite Pakistanis and fashion celebrities. Their content focuses on the entertainment and fashion needs of women who have the experience and the financial means to access luxuries of branded products. Despite being liberal in the visual display of fashion and women's clothing, issues related to women's rights for equality, women's health and sexuality are not openly discussed in these versions. Following the trends of western brands and their ideals of female beauty, these English-language magazines also portray slim, tall and fair-skinned models as Pakistani women. The pages of these high-class women's magazines are filled with suggestions as to the latest designer wear jewellery and clothing items and about how to look trendy by wearing odd colour contrasts, for example. There is a great emphasis on looks, clothing styles and the physical beauty of Pakistani models. However, all of this might seem irrelevant to the conditions in which a large majority of Pakistani middle- and low-middle-class women live their lives.

The local Urdu women's digests seem to maintain their niche despite faced with the pressures of transforming technologies and new media challenges. This medium of entertainment targets middle-class Urdu-fluent women, for whom education is not the means to earn independency but to pass time until marriage. Domesticity is portrayed as an essential stage in Pakistani women's life and being educated can be considered an asset; having said that, more often, being highly educated and financially independent can be a disadvantage in getting a life partner. It seems then that the urban middle-class women are struggling between ideals of traditional Islamic morality and honour, and their desire to be educated, independent and in control of their own lives. The apparent purposes of education are also different among men and women. Education is a requirement for a man to gain a better source of income; for women being educated at a certain level is an added value indicating their

ability to raise children better than uneducated women, and support their husbands by managing the home. Another view of education among middle-class women is to have a certificate for times of need only, such as the death of a husband or in case of divorce; when women have to fend for themselves, education helps them gain economic independence.

The above description is a brief, and simplified, account of the context in which this new study has been conducted. The Urdu women's digests address these urban middle-class women and portray the social problems relevant to their daily lives. The article discusses my findings about the role digests play in socializing these women to producers' ideals.

### **Summary of research methods**

The study involves a content analysis of 30 women's digest issues. The units of content analysis are cover pages, visuals, adverts, editorial pages and stories. Interviews with the digests' editors and publishers of the same set of digests were analysed according to broad themes such as the purpose and educational value of the digests, and the morality portrayed in them. Semi-structured interviews with regular readers were based on their interests and reasons for reading women's digests, coded in broad themes drawing on cultural knowledge of Pakistani society. Focus group discussions with readers and non-readers are also analysed according to broad themes such as religious morality and romance, influence of reading digests and age, idealization and fantasy as escape, domesticity and the changing role of women in Pakistani society, culture and representation in fiction, as well as the usefulness of reading Urdu fiction. The study also involves a survey of 308 Urdu speakers from Pakistan and abroad (face-to-face and online). The survey includes respondents who are non-digest readers or have read digests sometimes (45 per cent) as a comparator group against the regular digest readers (55 per cent). Logistic regression analysis of the differences between these two groups involved explanatory predictors such as age, sex, marital status, work status, education and religiosity, TV and film entertainment choices, ideal heroes and heroines and appreciation of the kinds of stories in the digests. These explanatory variables were added in biographical order to prevent unwanted proxies from dominating the results. The findings are of course only associations, and possible causal interpretation draws from the data achieved (Gorard 2013).

## **Content and purpose of the digests**

The content and tenor of the digests are largely shaped by the ideological perspectives of the editors and publishers. Marriage is a central theme that weaves together segments of romance, morality, traditional values, messages of compromise and tolerance. The stories are mainly about after-marriage experiences and either begin from the point of the main character's marriage or focus on characters struggling to adjust after marriage. Women are shown to have faced the challenges of social norms and expectations after marriage. It is not that these digests present marriage as an option but rather a compulsory stage that comes in every woman's life. In each case, the stories mostly end in the happiness of the married couples, alluding to the fantasy of romance after marriage. Frequently repeated images (eight out of every twelve in a year) on the cover pages of all the digests were of the bride models. No matter how hard the reality of marital relationships was exposed in the stories, the bride remains the symbol of happiness, with the wedding ceremony depicting a new beginning towards better life and a hope for actualization of all their emotional needs. The story lines and other features such as editorials and articles on successful married life also transform the fantasy of visual idealism into another level of perfection. The beauty of the bride is then seen in terms of her patience and strength to face the challenges of married life. Digest editors share similar opinions regarding the need for women to learn ways of facing challenges in the society.

*As I told you, for an ordinary woman a digest provides entertainment and also does their training. It trains them how to live life. You just don't see that we just publish romantic stories – we also make them aware of harsh realities of life as well. This is the best training for women to learn how to live life. Life has all goods and as well as evils. So it tells how to cope with harsh realities of life. It is digests which prepare them mentally. [Editor]*

Divorce is a stigma and staying in a marriage – no matter how abusive – is projected as the best option for women compared to divorce or separation. The digests promote such popular stereotypes about marriage, divorce, women's education and economic independency. According to the content analysis I conducted, it was rare to find stories about highly educated and successful working women. Similarly, there was no story or article that raised concerns over domestic abuse or violence against women. Stories revolved around the art of becoming a 'good' woman, through adjustment,

compromise, patience and tolerance, while the overall advice offered directly by editors and agony aunts in other sections is to deal with problems in silence.

Education is seen in terms of worldly awareness and knowledge of Islam; the underlying educational rationale is for individuals to become entrenched and embedded in socially expected attitudes and mores. Being able to understand Islam is regarded as the highest form of learning, and the ultimate impact of education means that one becomes a good Muslim in terms of faith and practice. This editorial concept of education is very different from western equivalents where emphasis on learning is associated with the development of individualism and critical judgement:

*So according to me, this is an Ideal Pakistani woman: She should be educated. She should have the knowledge of this world and also she should have knowledge of her religion, Islam. [Editor]*

According to one of the respondents, education is just a way to pass time before one finds a suitable partner to get married to. Marriage is the most eagerly-awaited stage of life for Pakistani girls and their family; in that respect, getting educated is a good task for young women to engage themselves with, until that time comes.

*Batool: Parents have a perception that we have done a B.A., and now we will do cooking at home and that's enough. They think that we don't have to run offices and do jobs. We will just do home cooking and other chores, so it is better to sit at home. The perception is just to sit at home unless you get married. If a girl is not going to get married, only then do they admit her for further studies. This is a general perception – that if you have done a B.A. (undergraduate), then it is enough studying for girls. What else to do!*

The idea of educated women is associated with many stereotypes in Pakistani society, where women's young age is still an important criterion for nuptiality. According to a recent study, 69 per cent of young Pakistani women are married by the time they reach 29 and the average age of women's marriage is 18 years (Bhatti and Jeffery 2012). A highly educated woman past the commonly accepted age for marriage is considered to be at a disadvantage in terms of finding a suitable life partner (Nayyab 2009). Highly educated women usually work outside the home, but the general perception is that they are compromised due to their working experience and to their being aware of

rights and demands. Being young, beautiful and not highly educated translates into better chances to get married sooner and to better partners.

*Batool: Job can be a big hurdle in marriage for a woman. The perception is that if a girl has done a BA, then she is young, but if she has done a Master's, she is considered to be old in age. So this is also a big problem.* [Focus group discussion (I): The participant is a university student.]

*Raheela: We say that a girl is educated, she is headstrong and she wants to be independent, so when it comes to her getting married, most of people would say that she has done a job. She is very educated, and so headstrong that she cannot live with her husband as a submissive housewife. So we compromise. This word 'compromise' is very much in parallel with the word 'submissive' in our society.* [Focus group discussion (II): The participant is a university student.]

The above lines show the dilemma an educated woman is faced with. The appreciated qualities in a Pakistani woman are her nature to adjust and her willingness to submit her personal desires to the demands of others. A 'good' woman is one who does not assert individual choice and who despite being educated and aware of her desires and rights opts for more conventional ways to live her life. Women's education, in that respect, only serves practical purposes – to help them steer through difficult times. Any other way education may impact on their way of thinking, such as giving them the strength and confidence to go against social conventions and be in control of their lives, is not tolerated. The editors of the digests say,

*We appreciate women's education and women's empowerment, but not against what our religion has applied upon us. We take care of this.* [Editor]

*Allah and our Holy Prophet have ordered us to seek knowledge [...] It is not only to receive degrees from School and college [...] we have two kinds of knowledge. One is the degree for achieving jobs and that's not knowledge. And the second is to reform our self and our family and children – this is real knowledge. The knowledge that we receive for our better life, for our religion and for our nation and its betterment is real knowledge. I do not consider having*

*degrees as real knowledge. For me real education is that which shows direction towards traditions, morality and religion.* [Editor]

The idealization of women's image is linked to their physical appearance, honour, ability to manage the home and having stamina to endure. Islam is seen to be the best principle to guide life and the message of the digest assures the rewards for prayer, faith in Allah and patience. Men are idealized as having the authority over women. It is mostly heroes who initiate action in the stories, with heroines obediently performing social demands. The convention of obedience to elders, and specifically to a husband, is presented as the ideal practice to preserve family honour. Women are shown to have responsibility of preserving family reputation, and those who challenge the norms or assert their will for marriage and other aspirations in life are shown to suffer social stigma in the end.

The content of the digests has the qualities of pulp fiction, the cheap and disposable fiction that moulds desires and nourishes fantasies of better life (McCracken 1998). Romance reading by women has also been explained as imaginary fulfilment of the repressed desires given by a male-dominated world (Radway 1984, 1986). Romance fiction is interpreted not only as a constructed world for imaginary escape but as also having the power to naturalize repression through romantic idealization (Margolies 1982; Modleski 1982; Phillips 1985). In a western context, these studies present popular findings on readers and popular texts produced for women. However, the research tradition in popular media studies has selective approaches of investigating the text or readers separate from each other. Another limitation has to do with the research design, where the onset assumption is that pleasure and escapism are desired by romance readers only. If we draw from readers only, then the explanatory reasons for reading romance are mainly joy and the pleasure of reading. Hermes (1995) discusses this in terms of repertoires of practical knowledge, emotional learning and connected knowing. Although pleasure and escapism are widely discussed, there is paucity of empirical evidence provided on the influence of ideology followed in the text. Romance fiction and women's magazines are generally discussed under the category of popular text, but they are quite different genres in terms of style, format and approach towards readership. The genre of Urdu women's digest is seen as combination of both the romance fiction and regular magazines because the digest contains the flavour of both the elements. In form and content, Ali (2004) identifies Urdu women's digests as closest to Harlequin

romances or television soaps. However, this description ignores the relationship of readers with the digest that editors claim to develop directly through regular editorials, letters, problem pages and advice columns.

### **Who are the regular readers, and do they adhere to what they read?**

The discussion above gives an understanding of the culture and market where digests are produced and sold to their consumers. There is also an assertion of the argument by digest editors and academic research that this mass-produced literature has a purposeful impact on the readers. This section attempts to provide evidence if reading digests has any influence on readers by comparing them with the beliefs, choices and practices of the people who do not read. The readership variable includes binary categories of regular digest readers and non-readers. The percentage of regular digest readers is nearly half (55 per cent) of the non-readers.

The sample for the survey in this study has three main categories of women's digest readers – frequent and less frequent respondents, and respondents who have 'never' read women's digests. The regression model includes predictors such as background information of the respondents, entertainment choices, reading choices, favourite elements in the stories, similarities of digest stories with real life and ideal qualities of the characters. These possible predictors were entered into the model in blocks representing individual background, their choice of other forms of entertainment, whether they read the digest in print or online (if they did), and finally what their favourite sections and story attributes were. Of the respondents, 55 per cent were regular readers of the digest (see row 1 in Table 1). Using information about the respondents' background, it is possible to predict whether they were readers to 59 per cent accuracy. This means that personal background cannot be a major determinant of digest reading (albeit for the subgroup of Urdu speakers). Unexpectedly, neither age nor marital status is relevant to the 'prediction' made here and does not tell whether the individual reads the digests or not. The digests cover the topic of marriage and domestic life as a central theme, but married and unmarried women were equally likely to read them.

Table 1: Cumulative percentage of variation in response to 'readership' explained by each stage analysis.

Stage	Percentage explained
Base	55
Background	59
Entertainment	81
Mode of delivery	81
Choice of reading	100

A much larger percentage of variation is explained by the variables representing entertainment choices (see row 3 in Table 1). This is discussed further below.

A common view in the interviews was that unmarried girls must never the digests because the romance stories in the digest give them an ideal version of a romantic relationship and married life. This view of getting an ideal husband and home are linked with established social attitudes and mores. A general perception found in the interviews is that young unmarried girls are passive readers and they may look forward to have an ideal life like the one they find in the romance fiction of the digests. Real life, however, is assumed to be different from the ideal world of romance.

*Laila: All that romance and everything in the digests. So you know your child. You know what is her nature and what is her age. You can't change nature. So not unless a girl is mature enough and in proper environment, you must give them these things or otherwise you are giving them to an immature girl and it is like spoiling them. She would go in the dream world as given to us in digests. So these things matter a lot. [University student]*

*Salma: I was 20 or 19 years old, and I liked it (reading women's digests) but my mother literally, she snatched the digests away and she told me that they will take you in an idealistic world and you will create fantasy in your mind. [University student]*

The above excerpts show that reading digests carries some guilty pleasure that seems to control access to teenage girls and young women. If that control really works, then the digest readership would only

consist of middle-aged and old women. However, the model explains no association between age groups and digest readers, which means that readers of all age groups are equally likely to be the readers.

Another commonly held view is that the women's digests are only read by women. Men have not been mentioned by the editors or by interview respondents at any instance. Male respondents (7 per cent) are not substantial enough in the sample to make any claims; however, men's participation in the survey indicates that the women's digest readership does not exclusively comprise female readers.

The reported religious beliefs and fervour (religiosity) of the respondents do not contribute to the accuracy of the model, again suggesting that religion cannot be a determinant of digest readership. Although religious values are the central message of all digest contents, respondents' religiosity does not seem to make them select or reject reading women's digests. Contrary to the editors' aims of promoting religious values, it appears that there is no association between the religious interests of readers and the digests' messages of Islamic practices and morality. This suggests that readers have their own views on religion and digest reading does not impact upon what they believe and practice as Muslim women.

My research findings show that digests are being read largely by middle-class young women who live in urban settings in Pakistan and overseas. They are generally Muslims who practice Islam as a faith but do not adhere to principles that exclude women from public space – such as wearing a veil or being restricted within the confines of the home. The main reasons of reading the digests are to pass time and enjoy themselves while consuming something which is considered to have meaningful content. In addition, their husbands and family would not disapprove of this popular practice – reading from printed paper is perceived to have a high educational value compared to TV and films.

*Alina: The book is such a thing that you will never get negative things from it. Whoever reads it will definitely read it positively. Yes, TV and other variety media always have positive and negative things for you. A book never gives you a wrong thing. Even if it is written about the wrong thing, there is still a moral in the end. [Alina is a housewife, mother of two. She has been a regular digest reader for the past thirteen years.]*

In a previous readers survey-based study by Zubair (2010), the analysis is solely based on a sample of digest readers; there was no comparison group and any claims about digest readers are derived through simple descriptive statistical analysis. The study very easily attributes women's beliefs and daily life practices to their digest reading interests. However, when non-readers of women's digests are taken into consideration, it transpires that women resort to various practices (other than women's digests that is) – such as fasting, for example – to attain a desired body shape, or that their desire to wear designer clothes and jewellery and use bleach creams is not related to the consumption of women's digests; after all, such messages are available in other formats and media as well. The problem other researchers have had is that without a direct comparison with non-readers, they cannot warrant their claims about the special status of the readers.

As shown above, the largest single proportion of variation explained in Table 1 concerns other forms of entertainment. Respondents, who show more interest in entertainment activities, such as Bollywood films, watching local television dramas and reading Urdu novels, are likely to be regular digest readers. Respondents who stay at home are also likely to be regular readers when compared to students and those who have office jobs. To some extent, availability of time, financial means, skill to read in Urdu and private home space seem to be possible explanations of these associations. It seems that digests are treated as just another form of entertainment; in addition, the consumption of women's digests and other entertainment forms such as TV and films are not in inverse relationship. An assumption that people who seek entertainment from electronic media are least interested in reading women's digests has been refuted according to the current analysis. Television soaps and Bollywood films offer entertainment somewhat similar to the digest stories, but watching TV soap or film sitting in a common area with friends or family members is a social and shared experience. Readers who regularly read women's digest show a stronger association with reading material published in Urdu as compared to electronic media, perhaps because readers valued the private experience of pleasure.

*Farzana: Romance is very clean in digests as compared with what they show on TV dramas nowadays. Last night's drama had a scene which did not have romance as such, but the dialogues were like that [...] you can't sit and watch that with your parents. They make dramas*

*from digest stories but the romance is more enjoyable when you read it. Reading the romance is something else than watching it on TV.* [Farzana, single, working woman]

The aspect of seeking entertainment from reading digest stories is frequently mentioned in readers' interviews. The desire for entertainment and escape is generally attributed to the pressure of daily routines. For regular readers, the women's digests are a means to gain experience of escape and pleasure. This does not imply that non-readers have no need to achieve similar experiences of emotional pleasure and relaxation. Lifestyle and other engaging activities that are not mentioned in the survey are possibly having an important role in the life of non-readers.

Adding location of the respondents and mode of survey completion does not cause any variation in the model represented in the Table 1. This shows that living in countries other than Pakistan makes no difference to the readership. More intriguingly, at the final step of the regression model, choice of reading digest contents such as editorials, readers' letters, problem pages and beauty tips is added in order to see if there is any association between readership patterns and preferences for specific contents of the digests. Adding these variables increases the percentage of prediction about the digest readership (see row 5 in Table 1).

Preferences for stories involving concepts like 'patriotic hero' and 'intelligent heroine' are not related to patterns of readership when all other variables are controlled in the model. Digest contents such as editorials and stories have frequently mentioned national patriotism. Patriotic heroes and martyrs of wars are regarded as real heroes of Islam and the nation, but regular readers and non-readers are not different in their views about heroes and heroines. Therefore, reading digests perhaps do not really shape the regular readers' views, nor do the regular readers' views determine the readership. This interpretation is confirmed by the lack of relevance of other possible predictor variables such as 'how many characters and stories look like their real-life counterparts'. Readers do not perceive the digest stories as real or true, and certainly not any more so than non-readers do. The stories are taken for what they are – pure entertainment.

## **Conclusion**

On one hand, the digests portray a producer-led ideal view of women and their behaviour in Pakistan, apparently aiming towards the 'education' of women through entertainment; however, this is more

akin to reformation of women into appropriate Muslim wifery, with the task to support their husbands and sons, rather than helping them attain individual citizenship with personal right on the self. The digests romanticize Islam as the best way of living one's life in general and specifically for women. Digests, unlike western magazines, are not just about giving lifestyle choices to women, but claim responsibility for training their minds. This educational approach reduces the opportunity readers have to choose different sets of values and lifestyle because the digests do not give space to notions that challenge traditional ways. The variety of options for women to live in Pakistani society is limited, but there is an emerging consciousness for them to gain economic independency through education. The digests rarely direct towards more options but, on the contrary, many times abhor and 'deface' the images of liberal and independent women.

On the other hand, regular reading of fiction seems to relax readers and take off the pressures of mundane existence. Watching a favourite soap on TV or reading every month new digest novels, a celebrity interview and new beauty tips builds excitement in everyday life. The importance of reading digests for learning and moral education seems to be a denial of pleasure achieved through romance fantasy. Stating blatantly that one reads love and romance stories because they give them pleasure comes forward as guilt. Enjoyment for emotional satisfaction is a gendered concept. Adult females are perceived not to express their feelings openly because enjoyment is assumed to have moral implications for them. Within a Pakistani cultural context, when a woman or young girl admits that she enjoys a cultural practice for pure emotional gratification is associated with a low moral character. There is a possibility, then, that readers rationalize reading digests for the didactic nature of the latter, because this is what is socially expected of these women readers and because they experience their pleasure as an emotional guilt. Stating that digest reading serves learning purposes perhaps saves readers from confessing their yearning for emotional pleasure while setting their reading practices within a socially safe and acceptable format.

### **Acknowledgement**

Special thanks to Professor Stephen Gorard for his support and encouragement in writing this article.

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### **Suggested citation**

Siddiqui, N. (2012) Who reads Urdu women's magazines and why? An investigation of the content, purpose, production and readership of Urdu women's digests. *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 8:2- pp. 323-334.