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Infidelity Exposure in Pakistani Dramas and Audience Psychological Well-Being: An In-Depth Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract

Pakistani television dramas have, over the past decade, leaned heavily on stories of marital betrayal, extramarital affairs, and broken trust to hold audience attention. This paper draws on fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews with psychologists, media scholars, drama writers, regulators, and other professionals connected to the drama industry to examine how repeated exposure to infidelity-themed content is understood to shape viewers' psychological well-being. Using thematic analysis, three interconnected themes were identified: the normalization and commercialization of infidelity narratives, the psychological toll such narratives may place on vulnerable viewers, and the moderating role personality plays in how content is processed. Participants largely agreed that infidelity itself is not the problem; rather, it is the absence of moral consequence and the repetition of betrayal as a ratings formula that concerns them. Personality traits, especially conscientiousness and neuroticism, emerged as decisive factors shaping whether a viewer walks away from a drama unaffected or unsettled. The findings extend Cultivation Theory and Social Cognitive Theory into a South Asian media context and offer practical guidance for writers, regulators, and mental health practitioners.

Keywords: *Infidelity, Pakistani Dramas, Psychological Well-Being, Qualitative Research, Personality Traits, Thematic Analysis*

Introduction

Switch on a Pakistani drama channel on any given evening and there is a fair chance the plot revolves around a husband's wandering eye, a wife's silent suspicion, or a "other woman" who threatens to unravel a family. Infidelity has become something of a house style in Pakistani television storytelling. It is not that betrayal has never featured in South Asian drama before; rather, over the last several years it appears to have moved from an occasional plot device to something closer to a default setting.

This shift matters for reasons that go beyond entertainment. Television in Pakistan is not a peripheral pastime consumed by a niche audience; it sits at the center of household evenings, watched collectively by families across class and generation. When the same story of betrayal, suspicion, and heartbreak is told night after night, across channel after channel, it is worth asking what that repetition might be doing to the people watching it, particularly to their sense of trust, security, and emotional stability within their own relationships.

This question sits at the heart of the present paper. Rather than measuring audience reactions through a survey instrument, this study set out to talk directly to the people best positioned to reflect on the issue from multiple angles: the psychologists who sit across from clients who bring up dramas unprompted, the writers who decide how a betrayal plot will end, the regulators who receive complaints, and the scholars who have watched the genre evolve. Fifteen such professionals were interviewed at length about how they see infidelity being portrayed on Pakistani television, and what they believe this portrayal does to the psychological well-being of ordinary viewers.

The value of this kind of inquiry lies in its depth rather than its breadth. A survey can tell us that heavier viewers report somewhat lower psychological well-being scores; it cannot tell us why, or what mechanism might be at work, or how a viewer's personality shapes whether a particular scene lingers in their mind for days or is forgotten by the next commercial break. Qualitative, in-depth conversation was chosen precisely because these are the kinds of questions that resist a tick-box answer.

Three broad questions guided the interviews and, in turn, this article: how do informed observers characterize the way infidelity is currently portrayed in Pakistani dramas; what psychological consequences, if any, do they associate with repeated exposure to this content; and how does personality appear to shape the way different viewers respond to the same material. The remainder of this paper reviews relevant literature, outlines the study's theoretical grounding, describes the methodology in detail, and then presents the findings organized around the three major themes that emerged from the data, before closing with a discussion of what these findings mean and where they point for future work.

Literature Review

Infidelity is, first and foremost, a relational wound. Scholars studying betrayal within intimate partnerships have long noted that discovering a partner's unfaithfulness can trigger a cascade of psychological responses not unlike trauma: intrusive thoughts, hyper vigilance, and a lasting erosion of trust that can outlast the relationship itself. What is less settled is what happens when this experience is not lived firsthand but watched, night after night, as entertainment?

Television has never been a neutral mirror of society. Entertainment industries around the world have long recognized that stories built around forbidden desire, jealousy, and betrayal reliably hold an audience's attention, and infidelity plots have become a dependable narrative engine well beyond Pakistan's borders. What distinguishes the Pakistani case is the cultural weight attached to marriage and family honor, which means that on-screen betrayal is rarely just a private matter between two characters; it is staged against a backdrop of extended family, social reputation, and religious expectation.

Within Pakistani television specifically, researchers and industry commentators alike have observed a marked increase in storylines built around extramarital affairs, second marriages, and domestic betrayal, often woven into otherwise ordinary family sagas. Some of this has been read as a genuine, if uncomfortable, attempt to reflect a social reality that is rarely discussed openly. A good deal of it, however, has also been read as commercially convenient: betrayal storylines are inexpensive to write, endlessly extendable across episodes, and reliably provocative. Critics of the trend have pointed out that many productions dwell at length on the affair itself while rushing, or entirely skipping, any meaningful reckoning with its consequences, which risks leaving audiences with a lopsided picture in which betrayal is dramatized but rarely punished or resolved.

The psychological literature on media effects offers two complementary ways of thinking about what this might mean for viewers. One strand emphasizes gradual, cumulative influence: the

more a particular version of reality is repeated on screen, the more it comes to feel like an accurate description of the world, regardless of whether individual viewers consciously believe what they are watching. A second strand emphasizes observational learning: viewers do not simply absorb messages passively but form expectations about how relationships work, how betrayal unfolds, and how people recover from it (or do not) by watching characters model these experiences. Neither tradition assumes that all viewers are affected identically. Individual differences, including prior relationship history and personality, have repeatedly been shown to shape whether and how deeply media content is internalized.

A smaller but growing body of work has begun to connect infidelity-themed media specifically to relationship satisfaction and psychological outcomes, generally finding modest but consistent associations between heavier consumption of relationship-conflict content and lower relationship confidence, particularly among viewers already prone to anxiety about betrayal. What remains comparatively thin is qualitative, practitioner-informed insight into how these dynamics play out specifically within the Pakistani cultural and broadcasting context, where the stigma attached to discussing marital breakdown openly, and the sheer centrality of drama-watching as a shared family activity, may combine to produce effects that look somewhat different from those documented elsewhere. This gap is what the present study was designed to address.

Theoretical Framework

Two established media theories, together with a well-known model of personality, provided the conceptual scaffolding for this study. Cultivation Theory, first developed by George Gerbner, argues that heavy, sustained exposure to a particular kind of television content gradually shapes a viewer's perception of everyday reality, often without the viewer being fully aware that this is happening. Applied here, the theory would predict that viewers who consume large amounts of infidelity-centered drama may come, over time, to see betrayal as more common, or more emotionally central to relationships, than they otherwise would.

Social Cognitive Theory, associated with Albert Bandura, complements this by focusing on how people learn by observing others, including fictional others on a screen. Viewers do not merely register that a character had an affair; they absorb, consciously or not, information about how that affair was justified, concealed, discovered, or forgiven, and this observational learning can shape their own expectations and behavioral scripts around trust and betrayal.

Finally, the Big Five personality framework, encompassing openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, was used as a lens for understanding why the same drama scene might leave one viewer unmoved and another deeply shaken. Rather than treating audiences as a uniform mass, this framework allows for the possibility that stable individual differences in personality act as a filter that determines how media content is interpreted, emotionally processed, and either dismissed or internalized. Taken together, these three frameworks informed both the interview protocol and the interpretive lens applied to the findings reported below.

Methodology

Research Design

This paper reports the qualitative strand of a broader mixed-methods doctoral study. A qualitative, interpretive design was chosen because the research questions were concerned less with how many people feel a certain way and more with how and why observers informed understand the relationship between infidelity-themed content and psychological well-being. An in-depth interview approach was selected over focus groups specifically because the subject matter, marital betrayal and its emotional fallout, is sensitive enough in the Pakistani cultural

context that individual, private conversation was judged more likely to yield candid reflection than a group setting.

Participants and Sampling

Fifteen participants were purposively recruited to represent a deliberately wide cross-section of perspectives on the phenomenon rather than a single vantage point. The final sample included a clinical psychologist with direct experience counselling individuals affected by betrayal, a drama scriptwriter with credits on infidelity-themed serials, a producer involved in content decisions, a senior regulatory official, media studies academics, a sociologist with a family and gender focus, a religious scholar, a counselling therapist, a human rights advocate, a legal professional, a media communications specialist, a working drama artist, a cultural researcher, and a television journalist. This spread was deliberate: creative intent, regulatory concerns, clinical observation, and everyday audience commentary each surface different facets of the same phenomenon, and no single professional vantage point could have captured all of them. Participants were based in Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, Pakistan's principal centers of drama production and viewership, and ranged in age from their late twenties to their sixties. Before being interviewed, each participant was screened to confirm familiarity with Pakistani drama content, willingness to discuss a sensitive topic, and consent to being recorded.

Data Collection

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, which allowed core topics to be covered consistently while leaving room to follow the conversation where a participant's expertise led. Sessions typically ran between sixty and ninety minutes and were audio recorded with permission, then transcribed in full. Before each interview began, the researcher explained the study's purpose, reassured participants about confidentiality, and reminded them that any question could be declined without consequence, given that infidelity and its emotional aftermath can be a genuinely uncomfortable subject even for professionals accustomed to discussing it.

Questions probed how participants perceived the frequency and realism of infidelity portrayals, what emotional or psychological consequences they associated with repeated viewing, whether they saw differences between light and heavy viewers, how they believed personality shaped audience response, where responsibility for ethical portrayal should sit, and what changes they would recommend to make such content psychologically safer to consume. Where useful, participants were also asked to recall a specific scene that had struck them and to reflect on why.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed thematically, following the now-familiar sequence of open coding to capture recurring ideas, axial coding to group related codes together, and selective coding to consolidate the material into overarching themes. NVivo software supported this process by helping to organize codes, track their frequency across participants, and compare how different professional roles emphasized different aspects of the phenomenon. A second coder independently coded a subset of the transcripts, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved to strengthen the consistency of the coding scheme. Where possible, preliminary themes were shared back with participants to confirm that the interpretation reflected what they had intended to convey.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, particular care was taken with informed consent, voluntary participation, and the emotional safety of participants throughout data collection. Written consent was obtained and reconfirmed verbally before each interview, pseudonyms were used throughout transcription and reporting to protect anonymity, and audio recordings

were securely stored and deleted once transcription was complete, consistent with established ethical guidelines for research involving sensitive personal disclosure (BERA, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were reminded that they could pause or end the interview at any point, and interviewers were briefed to remain attentive to signs of discomfort throughout.

Findings

Three major themes emerged from the interviews: the shifting portrayal of infidelity within Pakistani dramas, its perceived consequences for viewers' psychological well-being, and the moderating role of personality traits in shaping individual response. Each is discussed below, drawing on illustrative excerpts from the interviews. Participants are identified only by number to preserve confidentiality.

Theme One: Infidelity Exposure in Pakistani Dramas

Almost every participant agreed on one basic point: infidelity has become a dominant storyline across contemporary Pakistani television, to the point where it is difficult to find a primetime slate that does not feature at least one serial built around a marital affair. Where opinions diverged was on what this trend actually signifies.

Several participants framed the shift as commercially driven rather than socially motivated. One senior media commentator argued that infidelity functions less as an honest attempt to reflect social reality than as a reliable device for keeping ratings high and viewers hooked from one episode to the next. A television journalist among the group traced the pattern back to the earlier popularity of Indian serials, suggesting that Pakistani productions gradually absorbed a similar formula built around marital conflict once it proved commercially successful locally.

A recurring worry was less about the presence of betrayal storylines than about how they conclude, or fail to. One participant, a cultural researcher, put it plainly: dramas ought to show real social problems, but they also owe their audience a moral compass, some sense of consequence for wrongdoing, rather than simply normalizing or glamorizing the affair itself. This participant contrasted the current trend unfavorably with older Pakistani dramas, which he felt combined entertainment with a clearer moral thread. A senior clinical figure raised a related concern: because many viewers do not stay with a serial all the way to its final, consequence-laden episode, what most of the audience actually absorbs is the earlier, more romanticized stretch of the affair, not whatever lesson the writers eventually intended.

Not every participant viewed the trend so critically. A regulatory official pushed back against the idea that infidelity plots are somehow manufactured or artificial, arguing instead that writers are simply drawing on problems that already exist in Pakistani society, and that how a viewer interprets and is affected by that material is ultimately a matter of individual responsibility rather than something that can be laid entirely at the feet of the writer. A working drama artist offered a similar defense of creative freedom, suggesting that art should not be censored merely because it depicts uncomfortable truths, and that the better solution lies in more balanced storytelling, showing both causes and consequences, rather than in avoiding the topic altogether.

Taken together, these responses suggest that the professional community interviewed here is not opposed, in principle, to Pakistani dramas addressing infidelity. Their concern lies elsewhere: in the tilt toward sensational, unresolved, or glamorized betrayal narratives used primarily as a ratings tool, at the expense of the more socially responsible storytelling that many participants remembered from an earlier generation of Pakistani television.

Theme Two: Psychological Well-Being

The second theme concerned what participants believed happened, psychologically, to viewers who consumed this content repeatedly. Here, too, there was more nuance than a simple "harmful versus harmless" divide.

Most participants agreed that repeated exposure to storylines built around deception, suspicion, and marital breakdown could plausibly affect a viewer's emotional state and their sense of security within their own relationships, though few were willing to claim this happened uniformly or instantly. A cultural researcher who has written on gender and family themes suggested that especially among women who follow dramas closely, the steady diet of betrayal narratives, absent a clear educational payoff, can gradually seed emotional stress and a creeping insecurity about their own marriages. A television journalist on the panel extended this point, arguing that repeated portrayals of extramarital affairs can chip away at viewers' underlying belief systems, raise general stress levels, and, in some cases, plant seeds of distrust between spouses who begin, almost without realizing it, to measure their own relationship against what they have just watched.

Participants with direct clinical experience were the most specific about mechanism. One counselling professional observed that media effects of this kind tend to be strongest among people who already carry some relationship insecurity or unresolved emotional difficulty; for these viewers, a fictional betrayal on screen does not stay fictional for long; it becomes a lens through which they start to reread their own partner's behavior. This same participant flagged particular concern for younger viewers still forming their basic assumptions about what intimate relationships look like. A media studies academic added that even where effects are not obvious in the moment, the cumulative weight of repeated exposure can shape thinking gradually, a process made easier, in her view, by an industry under commercial pressure to prioritize dramatic tension over any responsibility toward the audience's emotional welfare.

A minority of participants were more skeptical that dramas alone could be shown to cause measurable psychological harm. A regulatory official argued that there simply is not enough evidence to say television is directly responsible for such effects, maintaining that dramas tell stories and it is up to each viewer to interpret them through their own values and experience, though she conceded that any content, watched repeatedly, will likely leave some mark depending on how personally engaged a viewer is with it. A working artist echoed this, suggesting that dramas largely reflect a reality that already exists rather than manufacturing new attitudes, and that the deciding factor is less the content itself than whether a viewer engages with it critically or identifies with it personally.

What emerges from this theme, on balance, is a picture of psychological well-being as something shaped jointly by media content and the viewer's own starting point, rather than a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship. Stress, anxiety, and eroded trust were widely associated with heavy or repeated exposure, but participants were careful to note that these outcomes depend heavily on a viewer's prior emotional resilience, cultural beliefs, and existing relationship circumstances, making the influence of these dramas cumulative and conditional rather than immediate and universal.

Theme Three: Personality Traits

The third and most elaborated theme concerned the role of personality in shaping audience response. Here, participants were nearly unanimous on one point: viewers are not a uniform, passive mass. The very same scene of betrayal, watched by two different people, can land in entirely different ways depending on who is watching, and participants repeatedly returned to personality as the clearest explanation for why. What follows organizes this theme around the five personality dimensions participants themselves gravitated toward.

Openness

Participants generally described more open-minded viewers as approaching infidelity storylines analytically rather than emotionally, treating them as an opportunity to think through a difficult

social issue rather than as a template for their own behavior. One drama artist argued that restricting writers from exploring controversial territory would foreclose exactly the kind of social conversation drama is capable of starting, and that viewers with broader perspectives are generally capable of appreciating multiple sides of a relationship conflict without simply absorbing whichever side is dramatized first. At the same time, several participants cautioned against equating openness with uncritical tolerance: a cultural researcher insisted that even open-minded audiences expect a drama to draw some kind of moral line, and that repeated exposure without any such context risks dulling even a reflective viewer's discomfort with behavior that conflicts with prevailing cultural and religious values over time.

Conscientiousness

This trait was consistently framed as protective. Participants described conscientious viewers as measuring what they see on screen against a fairly settled internal moral compass, one built on religious belief, family loyalty, and personal discipline, rather than being swept along by dramatic momentum. A cultural researcher argued that dramas serve their audience best when they draw a clear line between right and wrong, and that conscientious viewers are the ones most likely to notice, and appreciate, when a story actually does this. A television journalist offered a memorable image, comparing repeated exposure to infidelity content to "drops of water falling on a stone": capable of wearing down attitudes over time across society broadly, but something conscientious individuals are comparatively well equipped to resist through deliberate ethical reasoning. Several participants also noted that conscientious viewers are the most likely to simply switch off content that conflicts with their values, treating this as a straightforward exercise of personal choice rather than a difficult act of self-denial.

Extraversion

Participants consistently linked extraversion to healthier emotional processing, not because extroverted viewers are unaffected by what they watch, but because they are more likely to talk it through. One counselling professional explained that people who openly discuss a disturbing scene with friends or family tend to process and release the associated emotion, whereas those who keep such reactions to themselves are more prone to letting anxiety quietly accumulate. A drama artist added that discussing dramatic content within a social circle tends to sharpen critical thinking about the issues raised rather than leaving the viewer to respond on pure emotional reflex. That said, participants were careful to note that extraversion is not a full shield; even sociable, expressive viewers can be shaken by a storyline that hits uncomfortably close to their own life, particularly when the fictional scenario echoes a real and unresolved relationship concern.

Agreeableness

Agreeable viewers were described as unusually attuned to the emotional stakes of betrayal storylines, largely because such narratives cut directly against their preference for cooperative, trusting relationships. A television journalist observed that repeated infidelity portrayals can be especially unsettling for viewers who place high value on marital trust and loyalty, since these stories directly threaten values this group holds central to family life. Several participants suggested that agreeable viewers respond particularly well to storylines built around reconciliation and accountability, and particularly poorly to plots that leave betrayal unresolved, which several described as producing a kind of quiet disappointment rather than outright distress. A drama artist tied this to empathy specifically, arguing that writers who portray both sides of a relationship conflict fairly, rather than caricaturing one partner, allow agreeable viewers to process the material with understanding rather than blame.

Neuroticism

Of all five traits, neuroticism produced the most consistent and most concerning accounts. Participants repeatedly described emotionally sensitive or anxious viewers as the group most likely to import a fictional betrayal directly into their own relationship, questioning a real partner's trustworthiness on the strength of nothing more than a drama they had just watched. A counselling professional drew on clinical experience to describe individuals who, after sustained exposure to betrayal-heavy dramas, began to genuinely doubt partners with no history of infidelity whatsoever, a pattern she attributed to the combination of personality and unresolved prior emotional experience. Another clinical participant noted that viewers already struggling with depression or emotional instability appeared to be especially vulnerable, tending to read fictional conflict as a realistic possibility for their own lives rather than as invented drama, which in turn deepened feelings of fear and hopelessness. Participants also described a pattern of persistent rumination among highly neurotic viewers, replaying a disturbing scene mentally long after the episode had ended, with some seeking reassurance from family and others processing the distress privately and, in the process, prolonging it. Encouragingly, several participants noted that supportive strategies, talking to trusted family members, deliberately limiting exposure, and consciously distinguishing fiction from reality, appeared to ease this vulnerability considerably, suggesting that neuroticism increases risk without making distress inevitable.

Across all five traits, the overarching pattern participants described was one of personality functioning as a filter standing between the drama on screen and the viewer's psychological response. Conscientiousness and neuroticism produced the clearest and most consistent accounts, the former largely protective and the latter largely amplifying, while openness, extraversion, and agreeableness shaped the character and expression of a viewer's response more than its underlying intensity.

Discussion

Reading these three themes together, a fairly coherent picture emerges. Participants did not, on the whole, object to Pakistani dramas depicting infidelity as such; several were quite firm that fiction has every right to explore difficult social terrain. Their concern was narrower and, arguably, more actionable: it centered on how infidelity is told, specifically whether a storyline lingers on the affair while skimping on consequence, and whether repetition across the industry has turned betrayal into formula rather than genuine social commentary.

This distinction matters for how the psychological well-being findings should be read. Participants did not describe media influence as automatic or uniform. Instead, they consistently pointed to an interaction between what is on screen and who is watching it, an interaction that aligns closely with Cultivation Theory's central claim that repeated, patterned exposure shapes perception gradually rather than through any single dramatic scene. Several participants noted, notably, that this gradual shaping seemed to occur even among viewers who consciously recognized that dramas exaggerate reality for effect, a finding consistent with Gerbner's original observation that cultivation often operates below the threshold of a viewer's conscious awareness. The observational-learning language several participants reached for instinctively, describing viewers absorbing how betrayal is justified, concealed, or forgiven from watching characters model it, likewise echoes Social Cognitive Theory's account of how fictional narratives shape real expectations.

The personality findings extend both frameworks in a useful direction by suggesting that cultivation and observational learning are not evenly distributed processes. Conscientious viewers appeared comparatively well insulated, evaluating content against a stable internal value system before it could take root; neurotic viewers appeared considerably more exposed,

prone to importing fictional betrayal directly into their perception of their own relationships. This reinforces a broader argument, increasingly common in media psychology, that personality deserves treatment as a central explanatory variable in its own right rather than a minor demographic control.

It is also worth pausing on where participants disagreed, since these disagreements were themselves informative. A meaningful minority resisted the idea that dramas cause measurable psychological harm at all, insisting instead that content merely reflects existing social reality and that responsibility for interpretation rests with the viewer. This is not a position to dismiss lightly; it echoes a long-running and legitimate debate in media studies about where the line falls between media as mirror and media as mold. What the interviews suggest, taken as a whole, is that both positions are partially right: dramas may not manufacture betrayal as a social phenomenon out of nothing, but the manner in which they choose to dramatize it, glamorized and unresolved versus contextualized and consequential, appears to matter a great deal for how audiences are affected, and that distinction was consistently more important to participants than the sheer amount of infidelity content on air.

Limitations and Recommendations

As with any qualitative study built on a purposive sample, these findings reflect the informed perspectives of fifteen professionals rather than a representative cross-section of the general viewing public, and they should be read as depth rather than breadth. Participants were also concentrated in Pakistan's major urban centers, which may not fully capture how audiences in smaller towns or more conservative rural settings experience the same content. Because the interviews were retrospective and reflective rather than observational, they describe participants' interpretations of audience psychology rather than direct measurement of it.

With those boundaries in mind, several practical recommendations follow reasonably directly from what participants described. Production houses and regulators would likely serve audiences better by encouraging storylines that carry infidelity through to some meaningful consequence rather than by attempting to suppress the topic altogether, since participants were far more troubled by unresolved glamorization than by the mere presence of betrayal in a script. Media literacy efforts and public awareness campaigns aimed at protecting psychological well-being would probably do better if targeted specifically at viewers already known to be emotionally vulnerable, particularly those high in neuroticism or already navigating relationship insecurity, rather than pitched at the general audience. Mental health practitioners working with clients who report distress connected to television viewing may find it useful to routinely ask about drama consumption habits alongside more traditional intake questions. Finally, future research would benefit from longitudinal designs capable of tracking the same viewers over time, and from comparative studies examining whether the patterns described here are distinctive to Pakistani television or characteristic of South Asian and Middle Eastern drama industries more broadly, given how frequently participants themselves drew comparisons to Turkish and Indian productions.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand, through the eyes of professionals closest to the phenomenon, how infidelity-themed Pakistani dramas are perceived to affect audience psychological well-being. What emerged was neither a simple indictment of the genre nor a dismissal of any concern. Participants converged on a more precise worry: that betrayal has become a commercially convenient narrative shortcut, too often told without the consequence or context that would give it genuine social value, and that this particular pattern of storytelling, more than infidelity content in general, is what leaves an emotional mark on vulnerable viewers.

Personality, especially conscientiousness and neuroticism, consistently determined who walked away from these dramas relatively unaffected and who carried the story home with them. For an industry that reaches into nearly every Pakistani household, that distinction deserves serious attention from writers, regulators, and mental health professionals alike.

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