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Women's Education. Bait and Switch Marketing Tool in Indian Soap

Operas

An Inquiry into Women's Educational Outcomes and Marriage in Indian Soap Operas

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to trace the goal of female protagonist and antagonist's education and analyze their professional lives in relation to marriage in Indian soap operas. The study sample included 51 daily serials: a) 25 daily serials (in Hindi) with the highest television viewers' ratings from May 25, 2012 to June 2, 2012 were sampled to examine the current soap operas; b) 33 soap operas that were nominated for the award of Best Daily Serial (Popular) by Indian Telly Awards (since 2001) were sampled to record the temporal trends in the past one decade. Content analysis was performed: the specific characteristics of 51 Indian daily soaps were identified, recorded in the predetermined categories, and coded. The major findings were: a) Female protagonist's education and working outside home is uncorrelated. b) Marriage affects the protagonist's professional life negatively, even in serials that explicitly focus on the young unmarried female protagonist's education. c) Marriage doesn't play as significant a role in the female antagonist's professional life; nonetheless it does. d) The female antagonists are often shown as financially independent. e) In the past one decade, focus on protagonist's education has been recurring. Using Cantor (2004)'s empathy hypothesis, the paper contends that the serials use bait-and-switch strategy: daily serials that explicitly focus on the theme of girl's education lure the young females; as the serials progress, the focus switches from education to universally and culturally relevant themes like love, romance and marriage. No non-parametric test has been conducted and the thematic analysis hasn't been included in the report.

Women's Education: A Bait and Switch Strategy in Indian Soap Operas

Scheming mothers-in-law and innocent daughters-in-law seem to be going out of the frame. The popularity of the *saas-bahu* saga is partially on the wane. But even as scriptwriters turn a full circle and focus on the 'empowered' female protagonist, the themes of daily soaps are still constructed around women and family. With the popularity of Indian soap operas amidst women of all classes, castes, and in different settings (Krishnamurthy 2003), it is worthwhile

to question the nature of women empowerment: education and its outcomes in the context of patriarchal, monogamous, patrilocal and patrilineal family-systems as depicted in these soap operas. This is imperative as, in reality as well concern for 'marriageability' still plays a central role in women's educational choices and outcomes in contemporary India (Tamakuwala, 2011; Mukhopadhyay and Seymour, 2005).

The relevant previous studies about women's educational status in India have studied themes like women's educational choices and

outcomes and adolescents' gender identity and media. The literature on Indian soap operas have explored the complexities of women and culture, social interaction, portrayal of women, impact on the viewers, influence on students and also, the effect of the introduction of cable television on gender attitudes in rural India. However, the literature doesn't focus on women's education and its outcomes within soap operas, especially as anchored around marriage.

Impact of soap operas

Currently as many as 40 out of the top 50 programs on television are daily soaps. Krishnamurthy quotes 'Since 1990's women have become an inseparable part of television soaps, both as consumers and as protagonists of television fiction, especially of those daily soaps which get the highest ratings.' Their data reveal a very high percentage of regular women viewers than men. It is reported that prime television is dominated by women-oriented family soaps: major viewers of which are either young girls between 15 to 25 years or middle aged housewives aged 35–45 years. Tamakuwala (2011) notes that soaps make up the brick of most people's media fare and strongly influence cultural change among rural as well as urban masses. The impact of daily soaps on the viewers and of viewers on the daily soaps can't be undermined, given the following factors:

Empathy. Joanne Cantor (2004) suggested that "humans are naturally inclined to empathize with the emotions of protagonist." This suggests that the critical factor to the success of soap operas is that the target audience is able to empathize with the protagonist and that empathy retains the allegiance of the viewer as the viewer sees her own life play out through the protagonist's reel life. It can be speculated that this vast majority who watches soaps regularly, or are exposed to them to any extent, must also be empathizing with their characters. The protagonists in Indian soap operas are women, and so are the primary viewers. Thus, an image of the viewer may be said to be reflected in the characters of the daily soaps and at the same time, characteristics as embodied by the

protagonists and antagonists can be said to reflect the Indian norms in an idealized fashion.

Demand. Daily soaps compete to achieve the highest television viewers' ratings to deliver what the masses demand i.e. what they want to see. In this sense, they are reflective of the complex understandings of women's education by the masses, and its conception in relation to caste, class, values, marriage and livelihood.

Socialization. Gerbner and Gross (1976) argue that television is the central cultural arm of society, serving to socialize most people into standardized roles and behaviors. They suggest that television cultivates people's beliefs about how the world works more through interactions, behaviors, and values present in television content than through finite attempts to persuade.

Representation. According to the representation theory, the contemporary media does not represent reality, but constitutes it (Harms & Dickens 1996). Grossberg et al (1998) further said that media representations involve making claims on and about reality. Woodward (1997) remarks that representations (in media) establish identities and provide possible answers to the questions like "who am I?", "what could I be?" or "who do I want to be?". Hall (1997) describes that representation involves stereotyping. Thus, soaps represent and constitute reality and may potentially lead to identity-formation and stereotyping.

Literature Review Themes

The following are themes extracted from the review of literature Tamakuwala, about portrayal of women in soap operas: a) The institution is a male construct; the families of the leading female character are absent (Tamakuwala, 2011). b) A woman's identity is woven around her husband's family (Tamakuwala). c) A conspicuous culture code exists for the married woman: *mangal sutra*, *saaree*, *sindoor etc* (Tamakuwala). d) Often the negative character is an economically independent woman (Tamakuwala). e) Soaps

project largely one community i.e., Hindu, north Indian, upper caste and dominant group generally depicting business as a family profession (Tamakuwala). f) Women are portrayed as docile, easily manageable and submissive (Varghese, 2005), and rarely as intelligent, confident and emancipated. (Kaul and Sahni, 2010). g) Most (Jammu) women respondents agreed that serials had great impact on their thought (Kaul and Sahni, 2010). h) There has been a decisive shift in the representation of women in the TV serials of the 1980s and 1990s with their portrayals of more emancipated women characters glaringly different from the contemporary Saas Bahu sagas (Waheeda Sultana, 2005). i) Female antagonists are being looked upon as role models by students (Centre for Media Studies, 2004). j) Young middle-class school and college going women's perceptions of their identities are grounded in the prevailing media images (Meenakshi Thapn, 2001). k) Characters are constructed primarily through patriarchal and nationalist interests (Sheena Malhotra, 2000).

While Jensen et al (2007) show evidence that watching daily soaps leads to advancement in girl's education, measured in terms of school enrolment rates, the literature doesn't speak about the educational outcomes and the economic independence as projected in the soaps: its content and impact.

Aims of the study

Through this research, the following research questions were addressed about women, i.e. female protagonist and female antagonist as portrayed in Indian soap operas:

1. Does education lead women to work outside home, before and after marriage?
2. Does marriage effect women's education and work?
3. Is there an increasing temporal trend in daily soaps with explicit focus on the protagonist in the past one decade?
4. Does the focus shift from the protagonist's education in the soaps that explicitly begin

around the theme of the female protagonist's education to marriage?

Method

An Indian soap opera is an ongoing work of fiction (written, filmed, enacted and produced mostly by Indians for an Indian audience), with episodes broadcasted on a daily or semi-weekly basis on national Indian television channels/channel chains (like Star Network, Sony Entertainment). It is telecasted four to five days a week. The study defines the female protagonist as the female lead actress according to Channel's official site and female antagonist as the youngest of the prominent female actresses in the negative role. This is so as to control for the age factor as well as effectively compare the education portrayal of the female protagonist with that of the female antagonist. In soaps where the lead female antagonist was an older woman, attempts were made to include the youngest possible female antagonist. In the daily serials, where there were multiple female antagonists, the antagonist competing against the female protagonist was considered for the study.

Sample

To include the most popular daily serials, two criteria were employed, as demonstrated below:

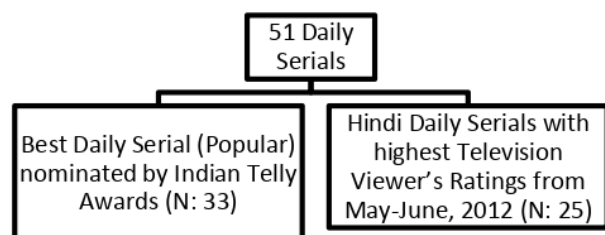


Figure 2: Sample considered for the study.

Seven daily serials overlapped in the two selection criteria, and thus the total number of Indian soap operas (in Hindi) that was a part of the study turned out to be 51.¹

Data Collection and Analysis Method

Content analysis Kerlinger defines content analysis as a method of studying and

¹ Nominees for 2010 are not mentioned on the official website of Indian Telly Awards, thus not included.

analyzing communication in an objective, systematic and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. For each of the 51 daily serials, an analysis form recorded the following:

1. Name
2. TVR (Television viewer's rating) rank and/or year of nomination for 'Best Daily Serial'
3. Channel and production house
4. Whether there was a focus on female protagonist's education (Focus on education' has been conceived in a broad sense, which conceptually includes focus on the lead actress' aspirations to achieve education, academic or non-academic).
5. Information about the lead actress (protagonist and antagonist):
 - Class,
 - Marital status, for most part of the serial
 - Level of education
 - less than +2, till +2, graduation, post graduation and doctorate
6. Nature of job: service as an employee, service as a boss, small time business, family business empire, self established business, politician, or a social worker.

The serials were tracked in order to record whether the antagonists and protagonists were working and educated, before marriage, after marriage and after separation.

The aforementioned categories were employed to record women's education and work in relation to marriage. The above categories were used to find out if education was leading the woman to work outside home and if working outside home was related to marriage, especially in the serials that overtly claimed to focus on lead actress' education, at least in the start.

To ensure reliability of the data collected, the data was independently coded by three coders, and integrated after discussion on the serials for which the coded data didn't match. In long running serials, like *Uttaran* and *Woh Rehne Waali Mehloan Ki*, the first generation characters have been considered for analysis. In serials where there are two turning points: when the

serial takes a stark turn in terms of the dynamics of the woman's professional life; the serial's data has been recorded twice. For instance, in *Kasauti Zindagi Ki*, the dynamics changed in relation to love and arranged marriages. The lead actress, *Prerna* was shown as working after the arranged marriage, but is shown as a housewife after love marriage.

After coding, frequency and relative frequency (%) distributions were constructed to compare and contrast the serials with focus on education with those that didn't have any focus on the protagonist's education. In addition to recording the data for the female protagonist and antagonist on various variables; the temporal trends since 2001 in daily soaps were also recorded.

The two aforementioned sub-samples were combined for data analysis. For looking at the temporal trend, only Indian Telly Award's nominees for 'Best Daily Serial' were looked at.

In addition to content analysis of 51 serials, a detailed thematic analysis of four randomly chosen serials was also conducted. These serials were: *Uttaran*, *Ballika Vadhu*, *Kya Hua Tera Vaada* and *Diya Aur Baati Hum*. Although, in the present report no section has been devoted to the same, the themes extracted from the case analysis of these four serials would be used to substantiate the findings from the quantitative content analysis

Results and Discussions

The Protagonist

85.9% of the protagonists were found to be representing middle and upper socioeconomic class as well as caste whereas the majority i.e. 59.26% belonged to the middle class. 25.93% belonged to the upper class and merely 14.81% to the lower class. This substantiates Tamakuwala (2011), who writes, "Television successfully projects a uni-marginal hegemonic picture of society where only dominant class and dominant culture exist."

Table 1
The Educated Protagonists: Education in Relation to Work

	Unmarried	Married	Separated
Working	45.10%	20.41%	63.64%

If we look at Table 1, we see that the percentage of working women decreases after marriage, despite being educated.

Merely 20.41% of the educated women were shown as working after marriage. One implicitly recurring theme was extracted: '*Ache ghar ki auratien bahar kaam karne nahi jaati*'. This might be one of the possible explanations for the apparent decline in working women after marriage given that most daily serials are representative of one segment of the society i.e. upper class Hindus. In many serials, for instance *Kasauti Zindagi Ki*, *Kuch Toh Log Kahenge*, *Sasural Simar Ka* and *Uttaran*, the protagonist herself fitted into the social expectation of centring her life about husband and family after marriage, without rebellion. This theme may be said to be a reflection of reality; NK Singhi in his essay on Gender theme: Issues and Perspectives writes "In upper classes, wealthy women don't work and enjoy the luxuries provided by the male family members". Additionally he draws out that this makes the woman a loser on two accounts: her creative potentials are curbed and she is denied power.

In *Ballika Vadhu*, *Maa Saa* attempted at forbidding Anandi, the child bride from studying because '*Achi Bindniyaan (wives) apni pati ki seva karti hain, na ki padhaai-likhaai*'. Although her attempts are shown in a negative light, after marriage as a grown up there wasn't a faint consideration for the possibility of Anandi's 'education'. This possibility only comes once her husband leaves her for another woman.

Though majority of the actresses aren't shown working after marriage, it will be unfair to not give importance to the exception to this general norm. One of the exceptions is *Parichay*, in which the female protagonist, *Ridhi*, keeps working after marriage as well as during pregnancy. During pregnancy when she receives a call for a job interview, her mother-in-law

firmly opposes. At his mother's disagreement, *Kunal*, her husband takes a stand for his wife. *Ridhi* doesn't speak for herself and later in her defence tells *Kunal* that 'she didn't apply for the job, but the job was offered to her.' Here the *motive* to work was denied by the woman and the man had to intervene to defend his wife's job offer whereas the woman, his wife, was shown not to have or express an opinion of her own. Later in the serial *Ridhi*'s profession is constructed around her husband.

Another exception to the case is *Hitler Didi* aired on Zee TV, which focuses on the struggles of a 25-year-old working girl, Indira Sharma who makes relentless effort to manage her family and her profession together. In the serial, she is well known as *Hitler didi* in her locality. She works to provide for her whole family. Currently in the story, she has brain tumour and is about to die within a month. Three important observations can be made about this case: the protagonist is a working woman and is called *Hitler*; the serial tends towards changing the focus from its central theme, that of a struggling working woman; she works because she is the only one who provides for her family.

Table 2
The Protagonists: Relation of Work and Marriage to Education

	Before Marriage (Work)	After Marriage (Work)	After Separation (Work)
Educated	47.50%	25.64%	70%
Not Educated	44.44%	0%	0% (n=1)

As we see in Table 2, all the 44.44% of the non-educated working women left their jobs after marriage.² In most serials, marriage was a product of financial crisis in the family, especially in the lower classes (55.55%).

The Antagonist

87.88% of the young female antagonists were shown as educated in popular daily serials.

² 55.56% of the uneducated women belonged to the lower class, and 33.33% belonged to the middle class, whereas only 11.11% belonged to the upper class (In absolute terms, 1 serial).

Antagonists belonged to middle and high class as well as caste in most serials. In only two of the serials the negative actress belonged to low socioeconomic class.

Table 3
The Female Antagonist: Relation of Marriage to Work

	Before Marriage	After Marriage	After Separation
Working	35.48%	32.14%	40%

Interestingly, unlike the case of the female protagonists, there isn't a sharp decrease in the number of working women antagonists after marriage or a sudden increase after separation. The percentages in all three cases: before marriage, after marriage and after separation vary relatively lesser.

By far we've discovered that 'not working', especially after marriage, is a norm for women in Indian soap operas. In this light, it is imperative to interpret this 32.14% of the antagonists who are shown as working after marriage carefully. This may be seen as potentially creating associations between 'negative characters and work' for the audiences. An example could be Sony TV's *Kya Hua Tera Vaada*. Here the antagonist is a financially independent stalwart of a corporate. She works out of her own will rather than a consequence of dire circumstance. She is the boss of the male protagonist and hasn't attained her top-level position by support of a man, but by fraud and competitive and shrewd attitude.

Table 4
The Female Antagonist: Relation of Work and Marriage to Education

	Before Marriage (Work)	After Marriage (Work)	After Separation (Work)
Educated	37.03%	36.36%	50%
Uneducated	25%	25%	0% (n=1)

In most cases, as compared to the uneducated working protagonists who left their job post marriage, uneducated working female antagonists didn't. Very few of these women, who didn't work before marriage, started working after marriage. The negative character,

often shown to engage in power manipulation, is bestowed independence and scope to manipulate power through the male-dominated professional sphere.

Temporal Trends

The Protagonist since 2001

Table 5
Education, Work and the Protagonist (2001-2011)

Year	Serials with focus on education		Serials with single working protagonists		Serials with married working protagonists	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
2001-04	3/8	37.5	3/11	27.27	3/9	33.33
2005-08	8/13	61.5	6/15	40	1/11	9.09
2009-2012	12/29	41.3	10/30	33.33	6/29	20.68

No observable increasing trend in the daily serials which focused on women's education is apparent in the table above. But if we look at the data carefully, we observe that in 2007, six out of six serials that were nominated for the Indian Telly Awards' Best Daily Serial category were focused on protagonist's education. Thus, looking at the data, excluding 2007, we see an increase in focus on women's education. Nevertheless, to generalize and say that the focus on education in Indian daily soap operas has increased would be misleading and inappropriate. The most appropriate way to look at the table may be to understand women's education as a recurring theme in the past one decade in the popular daily serials.

In the time period 2005-08, there was a drastic rise in focus on education and working lead actresses albeit only when they were single, in fact there was a drastic fall in the married working protagonists.

Interestingly, the percentage of educated women has remained above 85% throughout the decade. Most of these characters represent upper-middle class/caste, are educated, but paradoxically don't earn a livelihood. Applying Cantor's empathy hypothesis and representation

theory, it may be said that the audience may not associate women's education with work and especially women may self-represent themselves as educated or aspiring to be educated, but not an economically independent individual.

The Antagonist since 2001

Table 6 <i>Education, Work and the Antagonist (2001-11)</i>				
Year	Serials with single antagonist working		Serials with married antagonist working	
	n	%	n	%
2001-04	1/6	16.66	2/6	33.33
2005-08	4/8	50	3/7	42.85
2009-12	6/17	35.29	5/16	31.25

For the working antagonists, the temporal trend is similar to the one found for the female protagonists. A greater percentage of women were shown working between 2005-08, and particularly in 2007. If we exclude 2007, we find an increase in the number of working women antagonists. Although, it must not be generalized that women are increasingly being shown as working outside their homes.

Serials with Explicit Focus on Female Protagonist's Education

Female protagonists in serials with explicit focus on the protagonist's education were mostly shown as housewives after marriage.

34.69% of the daily serials were focused on the lead actress' education in the beginning of the serial, out of which in only 8% of the serials the protagonists were shown as 'working' after marriage.

Although more women are shown working before marriage in serials with focus on education, but, as we can see in Chart 1, the percentage drastically fell after marriage, but increased again after separation.

Let us look at serials that didn't have focus on women's education. As is evident in Chart 1, percentage of working women fell after marriage, and rose to a 100% after separation. Although there is not as much a sharp decrease in

number of working women after marriage as was in the case of the serials with focus on education, the parabolic trend is replicated. Thus, initial focus on the protagonist's education can be said to be short lived. In both cases, lead actress is shown as a housewife after marriage.

In the serials where the focus didn't shift from the protagonist's education to her marriage, the protagonist's education or professional aspirations were found to be side-tracked. In fact, in all such cases in the sample, the serials ended with the female protagonist's marriage with the love of her life, not showing the life after marriage. An example could be *Dil Mil Gaye*, in which the show ends at *Ridhima* and Dr. *Karan*'s marriage.

Let us also look at the professional lives of the antagonists in the serials where the focus was on protagonist's education. Whether the focus was on education or not, in contrast with

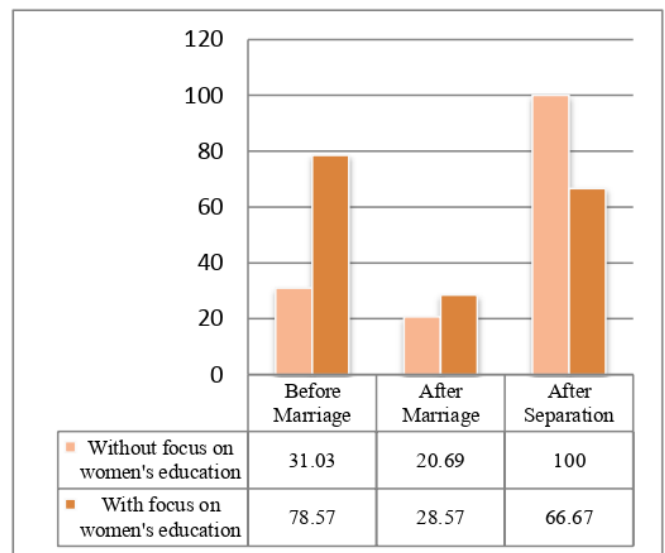


Figure 2. Percentage of female protagonists shown as working women, in soaps with and without focus on protagonists' education

the protagonists (Refer: Figure 2), the fall in the percentage of female antagonists working after marriage isn't as sharp. In the former case, since these serials focused explicitly on lead actress' education, a substantial percentage of protagonists were shown working before marriage.

Relative to the protagonists, lesser antagonists left work after marriage in the serials that focused on lead actresses' education or even in fact in the serials that didn't (Refer Chart 2). Thus, it can be said that marriage doesn't have that substantial an effect on the professional lives of negative actresses in the lead roles.

To summarize, there was a difference in

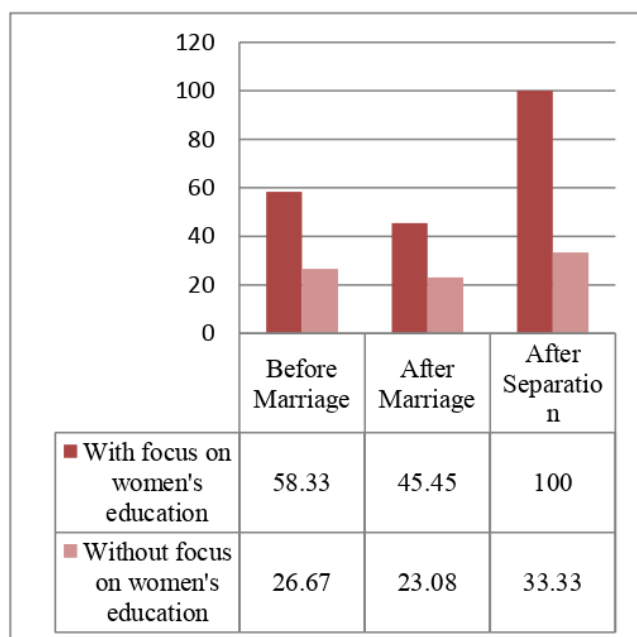


Figure 3. Percentage of female antagonists shown as working women, in soaps with and without focus on protagonists' education

the serials with focus on female protagonist's education and the ones without the focus: a lesser number of women, both protagonists and antagonists were shown as working after marriage than before. In neither case the majority of the women were working after marriage. Thus, ironically, even in serials with the focus on women's education, show women leaving their jobs after marriage.

Summary and Conclusion

While 85% of the protagonists were found educated in the daily serials, most of them weren't found to be economically independent. The first objective of the paper was to empirically find out if marriage affects women's

work outside homes (professional lives) in Indian soap operas. I found that the number of working women decreased after marriage in the daily serials. The personal life, which is predominately focused around marriage, doesn't go hand in hand with professional lives for women in daily serials. Within the broader theoretical framework of representation theory that states that representation establishes individual and collective identities and provide possible answers to the question: who am I?; what could I be?; who do I want to be? , it is highly imperative a finding for the broader conception of woman's identity in contemporary India, where "marriageability" still remains the focus of women's education (Mukhopadhyay and Seymour). Besides social construction and women's identity formation, women's representation may lead to stereotyping among the viewers, who may deploy the strategy of splitting and thereby creating a black and white between the female protagonist and female antagonist, as well as housewives and working women.

Lesser antagonists were found to leave work in the professional sphere after marriage. Nonetheless, marriage did seem to have an effect even on antagonist's life. In many a cases, her focus in life diverts to "seduce" the man in the lead actress' life. She symbolizes deception, professionally or personally.

The second objective of the paper was to empirically find out if there exists an increasing temporal trend in daily serials with explicit focus on protagonist in the past one decade. The theme of focus on female protagonist's education recurred time and again in the past decade, especially in the year 2007 where all six of the serials that were nominated for Indian Telly Awards focused on the protagonist's education. This trend may be reflective of the growing need of the masses for entertainment- education. However, as we have seen this focus gradually shifts thus also pointing to an existence of complex social norms and realities that the serials try to mirror.

The third objective of the paper was to find whether the focus shifts from the female protagonist's education. This was found to be the case in most serials. There was a decrease in the number of working women after marriage, in both cases: serials with explicit focus on the female protagonist's education and without, although the decrease in number was sharper for serials with an explicit focus on protagonist's education. The representation that education doesn't lead to an outcome grounded in work, may thus create an associationistic disjoint amidst these women, failing to connect education and work.

The paper's contention, thus, is that the focus on the protagonist's education is a bait-and-switch marketing strategy to lure a wider audience base. As this strategy is employed, young protagonist's struggle for education acts as a bait for young women able to *empathize* with the protagonist. As the serial progresses and the audiences' commitment to watching serials escalates, the serials switch to more universal themes like love and marriage. In other words, in the beginning, the young women may get lured to watch serials with focus on the young protagonist's education since they're able to see themselves in the protagonist (Cantor's empathy hypothesis) but later as the serial progresses, the focus from protagonist's education seem to get lost and more universal themes like love and marriage sustains the young female audience's interest. Many a time, the serials digress and ultimately ends up being a daily serial weaved around the marriage and family. When the focus doesn't shift completely, the reality is operated around marriage and family. Thus, the serials can also be said to be using foot-in-the-door compliance tactic, especially for younger women to *comply* to watch daily serials. Intentional or unintentional, the shift acts as a compliance tactic, escalating audience's commitment.

The young educated (or aspiring to be educated) girls are better able to empathize with protagonists struggling for education or employment. Thus, focus on female protagonist's education may be said to creating a wider audience base for the serial makers.

protagonist's education in the serials that explicitly begin around the theme of the female

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