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Influential themes and categories of television programs on social vitality from the perspective of students' lived experience

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ABSTRACT

This article aimed to investigate the themes and categories that influence television programs on social vitality from the perspective of students' lived experience. The statistical population included students at various undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels in public and private universities in Bushehr province. Purposive sampling with maximum diversity criteria was used to select 15 participants to achieve an appropriate representation of the wide range of students' experiences with diversity in academic field, level of education, gender, age, and television consumption patterns. The data collection process continued until theoretical saturation was reached to discover all the different dimensions and aspects of the phenomenon under study. In-depth semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection tool. Qualitative data analysis was conducted based on Brown and Clark's six-step thematic analysis method with MAXQDA software. To ensure quality and validity, Lincoln and Guba's criteria including believability, transferability, feasibility, and confirmability were used. The findings showed that in the area of psycho-emotional effects, students indicated that television programs were able to create changes in their moods and energy levels, such that some programs improved feelings of optimism and reduced anxiety levels, while others led to changes in sleep patterns and negatively affected their mood. In the area of social-interactional effects, students experienced that watching certain programs led to changes in their social interaction patterns and transformed their desire to be together, communication skills, and how they made friends.

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Introduction

The impact of television programs on social vitality constitutes one of the significant topics in the fields of communication, sociology, and social psychology (Abrams, 2010; Dempsey et al., 2014). Given their broad audience reach, television programs possess a high capacity to shape societal attitudes, behaviors, and emotions. Accordingly, it is essential to consider the diverse aspects through which television programming affects social vitality. Television is a powerful medium that can either enhance or diminish collective well-being (Smith Speck & Roy, 2008). The responsible role of national broadcasting services or private networks in producing healthy, hopeful, educational, and entertaining content can contribute to the formation of a dynamic, optimistic, and vibrant society.

As one of the most influential mass media tools, television plays a central role in shaping the psychological and social climate of society. By providing educational, entertaining, inspiring, and culturally enriching content, television programs can foster social vitality, strengthen collective morale, enhance optimism about the future, and encourage greater social participation. Conversely, negative, violent, or despair-inducing content may undermine social vitality and weaken social motivation (Aghayari Hir & Dadashi, 2023). Hence, media institutions, particularly television, must recognize their social responsibility in producing and broadcasting programs that not only entertain but also contribute to psychological well-being and collective vitality. Attending to the cultural, emotional, and spiritual needs of the public in program production is a key factor in achieving this goal (Akbari & Rezaeian, 2024).

In contemporary society, where media play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and social behavior, television emerges as one of the most pervasive forms of mass communication with profound implications for the quality of social life (Ausat, 2023). Among its most salient effects is the enhancement of social vitality, which is directly linked to public mental health, collective satisfaction, optimism for the future, and active civic engagement in social and cultural activities (Okechukwu, 2023). Television programs, through the presentation of cheerful, positive, inspiring, and diverse content, can evoke positive emotions in audiences, facilitate emotional release, increase social interaction, and reinforce social solidarity. Likewise, programs addressing current societal issues constructively can serve as a vehicle for raising awareness and fostering cultural development, thereby promoting both social vitality and social capital. Conversely, content

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characterized by violence, sensational negativity, despair, or moral deviance can weaken collective spirit, spread anxiety and hopelessness, and ultimately reduce social vitality (Basry & Hajiani, 2011). This underscores the critical role of program producers, media managers, and content regulators.

The influence of television programs on social vitality can be analyzed from two perspectives: individual psychological effects and broader socio-cultural outcomes. Due to its widespread penetration across all strata of society, television functions as a strategic tool for managing public opinion, shaping norms, and promoting healthy lifestyles. Research in both social sciences and psychology highlights social vitality as a key component of social capital development, the reduction of psychological harm, and the strengthening of national cohesion (Bagheri Khalili, 2007). Therefore, the type and quality of content broadcast by television directly affect individuals' moods, motivations, and social interactions. In today's world, social vitality is not a marginal issue but rather a strategic asset for every society. Accordingly, media—especially television—as powerful instruments of cultural development and public opinion formation, must embrace their responsibility to enhance vitality, raise social optimism, and promote healthy lifestyles (Găvăneci, 2016). Media policymakers and program producers, with a nuanced understanding of the psychological, social, and cultural needs of the population, should design programs that are not only entertaining but also educational, inspiring, and community-building. The future of healthy, dynamic, and vibrant societies is contingent upon the wise and strategic performance of media institutions (Banifatemeh & Salimi, 2011).

As one of the principal tools of mass communication, television plays a decisive role in shaping public culture and influencing social vitality, either positively or negatively. With its extensive penetration into diverse social groups, television can stimulate collective emotions, enhance social optimism, and improve public morale—or conversely, by disseminating negative and discouraging content, it may spread despair, anxiety, and reduce social participation (Jafarinia, 2010). Social vitality, as an indicator of collective mental health, is thus closely linked to media content, particularly television programs. Positive, constructive, cultural, artistic, and educational programming can foster motivation, satisfaction, and a sense of social belonging among audiences (CHalbi & Mosavi, 2008). In contrast, repetitive, negative, or culturally irrelevant content may erode audience trust and lead to a decline in collective vitality. Therefore, television should not

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merely be perceived as a source of entertainment but rather as a critical cultural and social instrument in the path toward sustainable development. Attention to content quality, program diversity, cultural localization, and opportunities for audience participation in media processes can substantially enhance social vitality, national cohesion, and overall quality of life.

A review of prior research, both domestic and international, indicates that no comprehensive study has yet examined the themes and categories of television content influencing social vitality from the perspective of students' lived experiences. Instead, related but more limited studies have been conducted (Beldibekova et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2017; heidari haratemeh et al., 2023; Khajenoori & Naghshbandi, 2023; rahdar et al., 2023; Zare et al., 2022; Zha et al., 2025), all of which have shown that television does include programming intended to foster happiness.

The necessity of the present research can be examined from several perspectives: scientific, social, and practical. From a scientific standpoint, this study contributes to the development of communication and media scholarship in Iran by providing new data on the relationship between national broadcasting and youth social vitality. From a social perspective, the findings offer insights into the needs of younger generations and support the design of appropriate programs to promote their psychological and social well-being. On a practical level, the study provides actionable guidance for program producers, media authorities, and cultural policymakers to enhance content quality and maximize positive audience impacts. Furthermore, it allows for the formulation of effective strategies to optimize the use of national television in strengthening cultural identity, fostering social cohesion, and improving the quality of life of young people in Iran.

The challenges observed in universities in Bushehr Province present a concerning picture of the state of students' social vitality in the region. Field observations and informal reports point to decreased student participation in cultural and social activities, rising absenteeism in classes and campus events, and increasing tendencies toward isolation and withdrawal. Additionally, shifts in leisure patterns—such as the preference for online platforms and foreign social media over national television—reflect a lack of appeal and relevance in national programming for this demographic. The province's unique geographic and cultural context, coupled with its distance from the capital, has resulted in inadequate representation of its local culture within national broadcasting, thereby exacerbating students' sense of alienation from televised content.

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These conditions have had adverse effects on various aspects of student life in Bushehr universities, including weakened campus culture, reduced interpersonal relationships, and declining academic performance. Moreover, the situation has contributed to rising social challenges such as depression, anxiety, and loss of purpose among the youth, with long-term implications for their professional and social futures. The urgency of addressing this issue stems from the fact that students, as future elites of society, play a pivotal role in the economic, social, and cultural development of both the province and the nation. Any decline in their vitality and motivation will inevitably carry long-term societal consequences.

Unlike many quantitative studies that have focused on examining the general effects of television on social vitality, the present research adopts a phenomenological approach to achieve a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences. This methodology allows for the exploration of hidden and complex dimensions of media influence on students' morale and social interactions. Furthermore, while previous studies have primarily analyzed the effects of media on the general population, this study emphasizes university students, a group with distinct social and psychological characteristics, thereby providing a more nuanced perspective on the influence of television programming on their social vitality. By employing thematic and categorical analysis to extract and organize qualitative data, this study identifies primary and secondary components influencing social vitality and provides a coherent framework for understanding these effects.

Accordingly, the overarching aim of this research is to examine the themes and categories of television programming that influence social vitality from the perspective of students' lived experiences. The central research question is: What are the primary and secondary themes through which television programs affect students' social vitality, as revealed by their lived experiences?

Material and Methods

In its qualitative phase, this study adopted an exploratory–descriptive mixed-methods approach and employed thematic analysis to uncover and identify latent patterns within the qualitative data, with the aim of extracting the core components of social vitality and the dimensions through which television programs exert influence. The thematic analysis process comprised open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews with students, faculty members, and media experts at universities in Bushehr Province.

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The first phase of the study followed an interpretative phenomenological strategy to explore and deeply understand students' lived experiences. This qualitative stage was conducted inductively and drew upon Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Through this approach, the qualitative study sought to reveal the conceptual structure of social vitality and the ways in which television programming impacts students' emotions, behaviors, and social interactions.

Situated within an interpretive–constructivist paradigm, the qualitative phase aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of students' lived experiences concerning the consumption of television content and its impact on their social and emotional lives. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary tool, complemented by participant observation and document analysis. These techniques enabled the identification of basic, organizing, and overarching themes.

Sampling in the qualitative phase was conducted purposively, applying maximum variation criteria to recruit 15 student participants from diverse backgrounds. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, ensuring that all relevant dimensions of the phenomenon under study were fully explored.

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-step process. First, the researchers immersed themselves in the data through repeated readings of the transcripts. Second, initial codes were generated inductively, without imposing any pre-existing theoretical framework. Third, related codes were aggregated into potential themes. Fourth, themes were reviewed and refined at both the code and dataset levels. Fifth, themes were clearly defined and named, with comprehensive descriptions of their content and scope. Finally, the sixth step entailed writing the report, supported by illustrative data excerpts.

The trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative findings were ensured through Lincoln and Guba's criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To enhance credibility, multiple techniques were applied, including methodological triangulation (interviews, observations, and document review), investigator triangulation (involving multiple independent coders), and member checking (returning findings to participants for verification).

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All personal information and participant responses were treated with strict confidentiality. No names or identifying details were reported in the final research outputs.

Results

The thematic analysis revealed the complexity and multidimensional nature of the effects of national television programs on students' social vitality. Based on the findings, two major domains—psychological-emotional effects and social-interactional effects—were identified as key outcomes of television viewing, influencing students' behavior, attitudes, and performance at multiple levels.

The psychological-emotional effects encompassed changes in energy levels, emotions, motivation, and outlook toward the future, which directly shaped students' engagement and social participation. In parallel, the social-interactional effects manifested through altered patterns of communication, participation in group activities, and the quality of interpersonal relationships, thereby exerting a direct influence on the structure of students' social networks.

The mechanisms of influence were identified within three mediating categories—content-related factors, spatiotemporal factors, and individual audience characteristics—all of which played a critical role in determining the intensity and direction of the effects. The variation of outcomes across different program types highlighted the pivotal role of program content in shaping diverse consequences: entertainment programs primarily generated short-term mood enhancement, whereas drama series and educational programs produced deeper and more enduring effects on students' attitudes and behaviors.

In addition, several challenges and barriers were identified, including poor content quality, competition with digital media, and generational gaps in preferences, which collectively underscore the need for re-examining production and broadcasting strategies. Conversely, the opportunities and proposed solutions suggested clear pathways for optimizing the positive effects of television programs on the social vitality of younger audiences.

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Table 1. Global, organizing, and basic themes

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Theme
Psychological-emotional effects	Impact on mood and motivation	Changes in personal energy and vitality; improved or reduced optimism; effects on anxiety and stress; changes in sleep/rest patterns
	Impact on temperament	Positive or negative emotions; effects on self-confidence; changes in outlook toward the future; influence on academic and career motivation
Social-interactional effects	Changes in social interaction patterns	Increased or decreased preference for group activities; effects on communication skills; changes in friendship formation; influence on group participation
	Participation in social activities	Changes in attendance at events; effects on volunteer activities; participation in student associations; influence on family and peer relationships
Mechanisms of influence	Content-related factors	Program type and genre (drama, comedy, documentary, sports); production quality; entertainment appeal; transmitted values
	Spatiotemporal factors	Broadcast timing; viewing duration; viewing context (alone or group); frequency and regularity of viewing
	Individual audience factors	Students' age and gender; field of study and education level; personality and psychological traits; socio-cultural background
Variation by program type	Entertainment and comedy programs	Temporary mood enhancement; stress reduction; promotion of sociability and conversation; influence on humor and social skills
	Drama series and fictional programs	Influence on attitudes and values; creation of shared discussion topics; impact on behavioral patterns; reinforcement or weakening of social identity
	Educational and documentary programs	Increased knowledge and social awareness; promotion of critical thinking; encouragement of informed social participation; motivation for academic engagement
	Sports programs	Strengthening of team spirit; generation of collective excitement; influence on physical activity; reinforcement of national identity
	News and social programs	Influence on socio-political awareness; changes in perspectives on social issues; effects on civic participation; creation of concern or optimism
Challenges and barriers	Content quality challenges	Poor program quality; mismatch with youth needs; repetitiveness and lack of innovation; weak constructive messaging
	Temporal and media challenges	Competition with digital media; incompatibility with student lifestyles; inappropriate scheduling; declining television audiences
	Socio-cultural challenges	Generational gaps in preferences; influence of social media on consumption patterns; changing youth leisure activities; limited youth involvement in content creation
Opportunities and strategies	Content quality improvement	Production of diverse and engaging programs; youth participation in content creation; use of new technologies; responsiveness to youth interests
	Interactive and participatory strategies	Development of interactive platforms; organization of program-related events; creation of multimedia content; establishment of fan clubs and associations
	Policy and structural strategies	Youth-centered policy-making; appropriate budget allocation for youth programs; training producers on youth psychology; establishment of continuous feedback and evaluation systems

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the themes and categories that shape the influence of television programs on social vitality, as understood through students' lived experiences. According to the students' accounts, the effects of television programs on their social vitality can be categorized into three main domains.

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First, in the domain of psychological-emotional effects, students reported that television programs produced noticeable changes in their mood and energy levels. While certain programs enhanced optimism and reduced anxiety, others negatively affected their temperament by disrupting sleep patterns and contributing to emotional instability.

Second, in the domain of social-interactional effects, students indicated that watching specific programs altered their patterns of social interaction. Their inclination to engage in group activities, communication skills, and approaches to friendship formation were shaped by television content. Furthermore, participation in social events, involvement in student associations, and interactions within family and peer networks were also reported as being influenced by the programs they consumed.

Third, students identified mechanisms of influence in the form of content-related, spatiotemporal, and individual factors. They emphasized that program genre, production quality, entertainment value, and the embedded values within the content were critical determinants of how television affected their social vitality. Different types of programs produced distinct outcomes: entertainment and comedy provided temporary cheerfulness and reduced academic stress; dramas and series shaped attitudes and fostered shared topics of conversation; sports programs enhanced collective spirit and excitement; and educational content improved knowledge and strengthened motivation for social participation.

Despite these positive effects, students also pointed to several challenges, including poor quality of certain content, lack of alignment with youth needs, competition with digital media, and generational differences in program preferences, all of which served as barriers to maximizing the positive influence of television.

A review of the existing literature confirms both the uniqueness and the broader relevance of these findings. Prior research on social vitality has largely emphasized general or contextual dimensions of the concept. For instance, (Sharifi Rahnemo et al., 2022) examined social vitality in relation to students' social adjustment, highlighting its role in cultivating good citizenship. In contrast, the present study focused specifically on university students and the role of national television. Similarly, Sunarti et al. (2023) analyzed the historical functions of social vitality within traditional rituals, demonstrating their role in fostering social cohesion—findings that align with the current study's interpretation of television as a modern ritual shaping social vitality. Zare et al. (2022)

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identified determinants of social vitality from the perspective of cultural policymakers, including job satisfaction, social and cultural capital, and quality of life.

When situated within the broader field of media effects research, the findings reveal both convergences and divergences. Bahonar et al. showed how television comedies, news, and dramas send recurring messages that shape cultural identity, which resonates with the present study's theme of "variation by program type" and underscores television's differentiated influence on students' social behavior and identity. Similarly, Ghasemi et al. identified a gap between the actual and desired roles of televised sports in promoting physical activity, findings consistent with the present study's theme of "content quality challenges."

International scholarship further supports these insights. Chen et al. (2017) found that political satire produces a dual effect—increasing political participation while simultaneously intensifying negative attitudes—a finding consistent with the present study's emphasis on the "mechanisms of influence," highlighting the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of television's impact. Ford et al. (2016) differentiated between positive and negative styles of humor, each exerting distinct effects on well-being, which parallels the role of "psychological-emotional effects" identified here.

Overall, these comparisons confirm the validity of the present findings and underscore the need for a systemic and multidimensional perspective in understanding the complex influence of television on students' social vitality. Specifically, six overarching themes emerged: psychological-emotional effects, social-interactional effects, mechanisms of influence, variation by program type, challenges and barriers, and opportunities and strategies. The DEMATEL analysis further revealed that mechanisms of influence (with a coefficient of 0.975) played a central role in guiding the overall process of impact, while opportunities and strategies (with a prominence value of 9.460) formed the central axis of the relational network. Among the program types, comedy and entertainment generated the most immediate positive effects by enhancing mood and reducing stress, whereas dramas and series fostered deeper social engagement through shared discussions and strengthened relationships.

This study is limited by its focus on university students, and caution must therefore be exercised in generalizing the findings to other populations. Given that national television programs were found to exert a greater influence on students' social vitality compared to social media, it is

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recommended that media literacy workshops be organized for students to raise awareness of the psychological and social effects of television programs. In addition, training programs in media content production should be designed for students in communication and media studies at universities in Bushehr, with the goal of equipping them to both critically engage with and contribute to the media landscape.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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