

Near-death narratives and transnational Shia media: A case study of Zindagi Pas Az Zindagi in Kashmir

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Article Info	Abstract
Original article	Background: While existing scholarship highlights how post-revolutionary Iranian media fosters religious affect and moral instruction, little attention has been paid to its impact beyond Iran, particularly in contexts culturally influenced by Iran. Aims: This study examines the reception of the Iranian television programme Zindagi Pas Az Zindagi (ZPAZ) among Persian-knowing audiences in Kashmir. Methodology: Drawing on Diaspora Media Engagement Theory and Reception Theory, this research investigates how Kashmiri viewers interpret ZPAZ's narratives of near-death experiences (NDEs) and their theological implications. We employed a qualitative, audience-centred design, collecting data from 40 Kashmiri participants (29 Shia, 11 Sunni) through semi-structured interviews conducted via encrypted digital platforms. Thematic analysis revealed six recurring themes: curiosity about the afterlife, accessibility of everyday Persian language, identification with narrated experiences, reduced fear of death, cross-border spiritual resonance, and reinforcement of Shia identity. Reception of the programme's explicitly Shia theological content varied by sectarian background: Shia participants frequently described a strengthening of religious identity, while Sunni participants more often reported new curiosity about Shia theology rather than reinforcement of an existing identity. Findings: Findings suggest that ZPAZ functions as a form of mediated spirituality, reported by participants as reducing existential anxiety and, for Shia viewers in particular, strengthening transnational religious belonging. Conclusion: Extending diaspora media frameworks to a “symbolic diaspora,” this study demonstrates how Persian-language religious broadcasting contributes to identity formation and cultural continuity in the Kashmir region.
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1. Introduction

Near-death experiences (NDEs) have increasingly become a site of negotiation between religion, science, and popular culture. These experiences are not confined to theological discourse or clinical case studies; they are also widely mediated through television, streaming platforms, and digital media. Research in clinical contexts has shown that NDEs consistently carry moral, spiritual, and metaphysical interpretations that cannot be fully explained by neurological processes alone (Fenwick & Fenwick, 1995). Media scholars have highlighted that the framing of such experiences often reflects the cultural, theological, and ideological assumptions of the societies in which they are produced (Hoover, 2006).

This paper focuses on the reception of *Zindagi Pas Az Zindagi* (ZPAZ), a Persian-language television programme produced by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), among audiences in Kashmir. ZPAZ presents first-person testimonies of individuals who describe having undergone NDEs, framing these accounts within Shia Islamic eschatology, including concepts such as the *barzakh* (the intermediate realm between death and resurrection), divine justice, repentance, and moral accountability. Adopting a documentary-interview format, ZPAZ positions NDEs as ethically and theologically instructive narratives, situated within Islamic conceptions of the afterlife.

In contrast, Western media productions on NDEs, such as Netflix's *Surviving Death*, adopt a pluralistic and investigative approach, combining NDE testimonies, mediumship, past-life memories, and alleged signs from the dead, without asserting definitive metaphysical conclusions. Similarly, the BBC documentary *The Day I Died: Near-Death Experiences* foregrounds neuroscientific scepticism, staging conversations between experiencers, neuroscientists, and theologians to examine whether NDEs can be explained through cerebral processes alone. American docudramas such as *I Survived... Beyond and Back* present NDE narratives through a formulaic arc of crisis, death, vision, and personal transformation, often drawing implicitly on Christian imagery, whereas fictional programmes like the German drama *Souls* explore reincarnation and past-life memory. Collectively, these programmes illustrate the diverse cultural and ideological frameworks through which afterlife experiences are mediated and interpreted.

Within this global media landscape, ZPAZ occupies a distinctive ideological and theological position. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian broadcasting has been shaped by a conception of media as a moral and spiritual instrument. Imam Ruhollah Khomeini argued that media should serve as a space for ethical cultivation and spiritual awakening rather than merely entertainment, describing it as a “school” for moral and religious growth (Khiabany, 2007). Scholars have documented how Iranian state media integrates religious affect, popular formats, and moral pedagogy in ways that embed religiosity in

everyday life (Sreberny & Mohammadi, 1994; Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008). Religious programming, particularly during Ramadan, has been described in this literature as functioning as a form of spiritual therapy, addressing existential anxiety through emotionally resonant narratives. ZPAZ can be situated within this tradition, combining emotionally resonant testimony with eschatological certainty to present Shia metaphysics within a contemporary media idiom.

Beyond Iran, the reception of ZPAZ remains underexplored. Drawing on field research among Persian-speaking communities in Indian-administered Kashmir, this study examines how the programme operates as a transnational cultural resource. Among Kashmiri Persian speakers, ZPAZ is engaged with as a resource for spiritual reflection on death and, for some viewers, as an occasion to reflect on Shia faith. This aligns with broader research on the mediation of Islamic traditions in Kashmir, which highlights the role of communication media in sustaining religious identity, cultural memory, and moral frameworks (Mir, 2019; 2024; Shah, 2025).

By focusing on audience reception, this paper contributes to the study of religious media in transnational contexts, examining how Persian-speaking Kashmiris interpret, negotiate, and internalise mediated accounts of NDEs. This gap matters theoretically for two reasons. First, most existing work on diaspora media engagement assumes a migratory audience physically displaced from a homeland; Kashmiri Persian-speakers, by contrast, are not migrants from Iran but hold a civilisational and linguistic affiliation with it, so their engagement with ZPAZ tests whether diaspora media frameworks extend to non-migratory, or “symbolic,” populations. Second, existing scholarship on transnational Shia media tends to treat audiences as religiously homogeneous; Kashmir's mixed Shia–Sunni Persian-speaking population offers a comparatively rare opportunity to examine how explicitly sectarian religious content is received across, rather than only within, a single sectarian community.

This study is guided by the following research question: How do Persian-knowing Kashmiri viewers, across differing sectarian backgrounds interpret and make meaning of the near-death narratives presented in *Zindagi Pas Az Zindagi*, and in what ways does this engagement shape their reported experience of death anxiety, spiritual curiosity, and religious identity?

2. Discussion

2.1. Religious media in Iran

Research has explored how Iran employs television and other media to cultivate a religiously informed public sphere. Iranian media is deeply embedded in the ideological apparatus of the post-revolutionary state, serving to entertain and, most importantly, to inculcate moral and theological norms (Sreberny & Mohammadi, 1994).

Scholarship on religious media reception more broadly offers a useful set of debates for situating this study. Hjarvard (2008) argues that media increasingly perform functions once reserved for religious institutions, offering audiences moral guidance and a sense of community independent of formal religious authority. ZPAZ complicates this account, however. Rather than illustrating media's autonomy from institutional religious authority, ZPAZ is itself produced by a state religious broadcaster (IRIB) and reproduces Twelver Shia doctrinal content. It is better understood as institutional religion extending into media at the point of production, while, as this study's findings show, audiences at the point of reception still rework that content unevenly by sect, closer to Hoover's (2006) account of active audience reworking than to Hjarvard's thesis of media supplanting institutional religious authority. Existing literature on near-death experience narratives (Greyson, 2003; Parnia, 2014) has likewise tended to treat NDE testimony either as clinical or psychiatric data, or as evidence in debates over consciousness, with comparatively little attention to how such testimony is received as religious media by lay television audiences outside its country of production, the gap this study addresses.

More recent studies (de Abreu, 2009) have examined the affective and symbolic dimensions of religious broadcasting, particularly during periods of heightened public interest in spiritual themes such as Ramadan. Religious media acts as a site of ideological transmission and affective experience; scholars have drawn attention to how religious broadcasts are designed to provoke emotional states such as fear, repentance, longing, or joy that reinforce doctrinal messages (Meyer, 2011; de Abreu, 2009). Viewers of programmes like ZPAZ often report experiencing tears, spiritual catharsis, or renewed religiosity in response to the personal testimonies presented.

ZPAZ is a form of transnational Islamic media that communicates religious and ethical narratives within Iran and among culturally and spiritually aligned communities abroad. These media artefacts increasingly circulate through digital platforms and are often received not as imports but as extensions of a shared religio-cultural identity (Hoover, 2006; Meyer & Moors, 2006; Eickelman & Anderson, 2003).

2.2. Iranian religious influence in Kashmir

Kashmir shares a long-standing intellectual and spiritual relationship with Iran. Persian was the official language of the Himalayan valley for centuries, and the region continues to be home to a small population of Persian-knowing Muslims, particularly within the Shia community. Kashmir has deep-rooted ties to Iranian mysticism, Shia theology, and clerical networks, especially through seminaries in Qom and Mashhad (Malik, 2014; Khan, 1994).

Transnational religious networks, particularly those linking Kashmir

with seminaries in Qom and Mashhad, have strengthened a theological affinity between Kashmiri Shias and Iranian religious seminaries (Wastnidge, 2018). This context makes the reception of Iranian religious television by Persian-knowing Kashmiris a particularly resonant case for examining how media reactivates inherited spiritual sensibilities.

For Kashmiri Shia audiences, Iranian programmes are often described as carrying a sense of religious authenticity and transnational solidarity, particularly around themes such as martyrdom (shahadat), the barzakh, and divine justice, which resonate with local mourning rituals, especially during Muharram. This study's data, however, suggest this sense is not shared uniformly across sectarian lines within the broader Persian-speaking population.

Persian-knowing Kashmiris represent a distinctive audience in this regard. As non-Iranians who are culturally and linguistically aligned with Iranian Islamic traditions, they may access ZPAZ as spiritually and culturally proximate media. However, the interpretive frameworks they bring to the programme are also shaped by local theological discourses, Kashmiri socio-political realities, and affective experiences unique to their context.

3. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Diaspora Media Engagement Theory, which provides a framework for understanding how culturally or religiously affiliated audiences interact with transnational media to sustain identity, memory, and a sense of belonging. Originally developed to examine how migrant communities use media to connect with their homelands, the theory has since evolved to encompass symbolic and affective diasporic communities who may not be geographically displaced but maintain a deep emotional or civilisational orientation toward another culture or nation (Werbner, 2002; Georgiou, 2006).

In this context, Persian-speaking Kashmiris represent a symbolic diaspora; a community bound through historical, linguistic, and cultural affiliation with the Persianate world. The concept of imagined communities helps explain how groups maintain shared identity through language, literature, and cultural memory rather than physical co-location (Anderson, 2006). Diasporic identities can be metaphorical, rooted in orientation, memory, and cultural affinity rather than solely in migration (Clifford, 1994). Media and transnational cultural flows allow communities to inhabit imagined or symbolic spaces, connecting them to distant cultural and linguistic milieus (Appadurai, 1996).

The concept of a “symbolic diaspora” advanced here differs from adjacent terms already established in the literature, and it is worth being explicit about that difference. Brinkerhoff's (2009) “digital diaspora” and Karim's (2003) “diasporic mediascapes” both retain migration as a background condition: they describe how already-displaced

populations use media to sustain homeland ties across distance. Werbner's (2002) and Georgiou's (2006) accounts of diasporic identity similarly presuppose some history of dispersal, even where that dispersal is generations removed from the present. What distinguishes Persian-speaking Kashmiris is the absence of any migratory event at all, their affiliation with the Persianate and Shia world is civilisational and linguistic rather than genealogical. "Symbolic diaspora", as used in this study, therefore names a population that engages transnational media with a diaspora-like intensity of identification, without the demographic history that diaspora theory has typically assumed. This is a modest but specific extension of existing theory, distinguishing the present study's use of the term from prior applications of Diaspora Media Engagement Theory to migrant or refugee populations.

Historical scholarship on the Persianate cultural sphere further supports this symbolic affiliation. The enduring reach of Persian literary humanism reinforces cultural and linguistic continuity across regions, and Kashmir has been situated within a broader Persianate cosmopolis defined by scholarly networks, Sufi practices, and trans-regional cultural exchange (Dabashi, 2015). These perspectives collectively frame Persian-speaking Kashmiris as a symbolic diaspora: although not physically displaced from Iran, they maintain affective, religious, and linguistic ties that shape their engagement with media such as ZPAZ.

This study's theoretical framing is also informed by scholarship specifically on religious media in Kashmir. Mir's (2019) work on the intersection of religion and media in Kashmir establishes that communication media play a constitutive, rather than incidental, role in sustaining religious identity and practice in the region, a claim this study extends by examining a specifically transnational and Iranian source of that media, rather than domestically produced content. Mir's (2024) subsequent analysis of new media practices and religious change in Kashmir suggests that digital and broadcast media actively reshape, rather than simply transmit, religious life in the region; this study's finding that reception of ZPAZ diverges by sectarian background can be read as one concrete instance of that broader process, in which the 'change' in question is not uniform across the audience but stratified by prior religious identity. Shah's (2025) media-theoretical reassessment of Kashmir's historical Islamisation similarly treats communication as central to religious transformation in the region across historical periods, situating this study's focus on a contemporary broadcast medium within a longer scholarly tradition of examining how communication technologies have shaped religious change in Kashmir.

Diaspora Media Engagement Theory highlights the multifaceted ways in which diasporic or culturally affiliated audiences use media to maintain transnational linkages, reinforce cultural identity, and engage in symbolic politics (Karim, 2003; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Georgiou, 2006). In this framework, media do not remain merely channels of

entertainment but become ritualistic and affective spaces where viewers reconnect with a larger cultural world from which they may feel estranged in their local context. This study extends the application of this theory by exploring a non-migratory diaspora in Kashmir, where Iranian religious and philosophical programming in Persian serves as a source of spiritual education and identity reconstruction, particularly among younger viewers.

This study also draws on Reception Theory, particularly Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, to examine how Kashmiri audiences interpret and emotionally respond to Persian-language media content (Hall, 1973). Reception Theory moves beyond the assumption of media as a one-way transmission of meaning and instead focuses on how meaning is actively constructed by viewers based on their cultural, religious, and emotional positioning. In the context of ZPAZ, the encoded Iranian worldview centred on Islamic eschatology and spiritual ethics is decoded by Kashmiri viewers in diverse ways, depending on personal experience, religious background, and cultural literacy in Persian. The concept of cultural proximity suggests that audiences are drawn to media content that resonates with their cultural experiences even across national boundaries (Iwabuchi, 2004), and Hall's (1990) account of cultural identity as a continual "production" helps frame how Persian-media engagement enables viewers to negotiate hybrid identities that fuse Kashmiri, Shia Islamic, and Persian civilisational elements. The concept of mediascapes is similarly relevant, suggesting that global media flows allow viewers in Kashmir to situate themselves within a larger Iranian or Shia worldview that transcends borders (Appadurai, 1996).

Diaspora Media Engagement Theory and Reception Theory operate at different, complementary levels of analysis in this study. The former helps explain why Persian-speaking Kashmiris turn to Iranian religious broadcasting at all, accounting for the civilisational, linguistic, and affective ties that make such content meaningful to a population that is not, in the conventional sense, a diaspora of Iran. The latter helps explain what Kashmiri viewers then do with that content once they encounter it, attending to how encoded theological meanings are decoded differently depending on viewers' sectarian background, biographical experience, and prior religious knowledge. Read together, the two frameworks allow this study to ask not only why ZPAZ resonates with Kashmiri Persian-speakers as a category of transnational religious media, but also how that resonance varies within the audience itself, rather than treating "the Kashmiri viewer" as a single interpretive position.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

The study adopts a qualitative, audience-centred research design,

grounded in the framework of Reception Theory (Hall, 1973; Livingstone, 1998). It seeks to explore how Persian-knowing viewers in Kashmir interpret ZPAZ, particularly in terms of its philosophical, spiritual, and narrative dimensions. Qualitative research was selected to allow for nuanced insight into participants' emotional, ideological, and cultural engagement with the programme, with particular emphasis on how language and religious affinity shape viewer interpretation (Morley, 1992; Alasuutari, 2004).

The study is situated within a constructivist epistemology, which recognises that meaning is co-constructed by viewers through their cultural, religious, and linguistic positioning. Rather than assuming a uniform reception of the programme's messages, this research emphasises the multiplicity of interpretation (Ang, 1991). Given that participants belong to a region with historical and spiritual ties to Iranian and Shia traditions, this positionality is central to the analytical lens.

4.2. Sampling strategy

A purposive sampling approach (Patton, 2002) was used, supplemented by snowball sampling through university networks in Kashmir, where initial participants identified through Persian-language academic programmes referred subsequent contacts meeting the study criteria. Participants were required to: reside in Kashmir; hold formal academic training in Persian language and literature, which served as the basis for assessing Persian proficiency rather than self-reported or informal exposure; have watched ZPAZ regularly or occasionally; and be able to reflect on their viewing experience in relation to its cultural and spiritual themes.

A total of 40 participants were selected from the age group of 25-45, comprising both male and female genders. All participants had completed at least secondary school education, in addition to their Persian-language training. The sample included both Shia (n= 29) and Sunni (n= 11) Muslims, drawn from different districts of Kashmir. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached; no substantively new themes emerged after the 30th interview, and the remaining interviews served to confirm and deepen existing categories rather than generate new ones (Guest et al., 2006).

4.3. Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method well-suited to exploring individual meaning-making processes (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). As the researcher was not in Kashmir, interviews were conducted via encrypted online platforms such as Google Meet and WhatsApp video calls. The digital format also enabled greater accessibility, particularly for participants residing in different districts of Kashmir. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 min.

Interviews were conducted in a combination of Urdu and English, and occasionally Persian, depending on participant comfort. This multilingual approach enabled participants to express complex emotions and cultural concepts more authentically. All interviews were recorded with prior consent and transcribed. A mobile phone was used to record the interviews.

An interview guide comprising open-ended questions explored the circumstances under which participants first encountered ZPAZ; their emotional, spiritual, or contemplative responses to specific episodes or themes; their reflections on the programme's portrayal of life after death, including resonance or dissonance with personal beliefs; and, where relevant, the programme's relationship to participants' religious belief and identity. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect participant privacy.

4.4. Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: familiarisation with data, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. An inductive approach was applied, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data while being guided by the research question.

Coding was undertaken by a single researcher (the author). No second coder was involved in this study, and inter-coder reliability statistics are therefore not reported. To support interpretive consistency in the absence of a second coder, the analysis was conducted iteratively and reflexively across Braun and Clarke's six phases: initial codes were revisited across repeated readings of the full transcript set rather than derived from illustrative excerpts alone, and emerging themes were checked against the entire dataset to ensure they remained grounded in participants' own language rather than in categories imposed in advance.

4.5. Ethical considerations

Formal institutional ethical review was not accessible to the researcher, given the remote and cross-border nature of the fieldwork; this is acknowledged as a limitation. In its place, the study followed established ethical norms for qualitative interview research: participants were informed of the study's purpose and voluntary nature, and of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence; verbal informed consent was obtained and recorded prior to each interview; and pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect participant identities.

4.6. Major themes

- **Curiosity about life after death.** Participants were drawn to the show because of interest in afterlife experiences.

- **Accessibility of language.** Everyday Persian made the content relatable.
- **Identification with narrated experiences.** Participants reported vicarious identification with testimonies, even absent a personal near-death experience.
- **Reduced fear of death.** Participants described the show as reframing death as less frightening.
- **Cross-border spiritual resonance.** Near-death experiences emphasised shared human journeys across borders.
- **Reinforcement of Shia identity.** Seeing Imams and Shia figures in experiences reinforced Shia faith for participants who already held that identity; reception varied by sect (Table 1).

Table 1. Coding table

Theme	Approx. % of participants	Illustrative quote
Curiosity about the afterlife	~90	"The idea seemed interesting. It talked about life after death, which is usually missed by the media."
Language accessibility	~85	"The language was not academic; it was everyday spoken Persian."
Identification with narrated experiences	~55	"The woman's experience reverberated with me."
Reduced fear of death	~80	"My fear of death has considerably lessened. It is not frightening now."
Cross-border spiritual resonance	~70	"The idea of borders took a backseat... we all go through the same life cycle."
Reinforcement of Shia identity	~65	"The narrators mentioned seeing Imams and Shia figures, which increased faith."

Note: Percentages reflect the researcher's qualitative estimate of relative theme prevalence across the 40 interviews, based on close reading of the transcripts, rather than a systematic quantitative count. They are reported as an indicative guide to relative frequency, consistent with the qualitative design of the study.

5. Interpretation and finding

The qualitative analysis of responses from 40 Kashmiri participants regarding ZPAZ reveals six recurring themes: curiosity about life after death, accessibility of language, identification with narrated experiences, reduced fear of death, cross-border spiritual resonance,

and reinforcement of Shia identity. As discussed below, however, these themes were not uniformly distributed across the sample: reception varied meaningfully by sectarian background, complicating any claim to a singular or universal pattern of engagement.

5.1. Curiosity about life after death

This theme reflects a broader psychological and cultural phenomenon: the human drive to explore existential questions. In the Kashmiri context, where spiritual and religious discourse forms a significant part of social life, such curiosity aligns with established cultural and religious narratives about life after death.

Nearly all respondents reported that they were drawn to ZPAZ by a profound curiosity about post-mortem experiences. A 30-year-old female participant from Budgam described herself as someone who is curious about the afterlife: “The Iranian programme came as a whiff of fresh air, something new. I was glued to the television to listen to the experiences, especially the last section where the anchor would ask the guests to compare this life with the otherworldly life.” She had introduced the programme to her university classmates: “We would discuss the episodes and then also relate them to the description of the afterlife given in the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet. Sometimes I quietly desired to die for some time to experience that beautiful unseen world.”

A 26-year-old Sunni participant from Shopian, South Kashmir, discovered ZPAZ through Persian-language Telegram channels and described it as changing his outlook on death and religion: “I used to think religion exaggerates afterlife stories. But these interviews sounded like real psychology — near-death, out-of-body, awareness beyond the brain. ZPAZ was making faith scientific; it was bridging belief and rational inquiry. I now follow other Iranian programmes exploring spirituality, and I think Iran is a hub for rational faith. The sermons delivered by mullahs in mosques do not carry the depth and appeal that these programmes convey. I am in a way hooked to them.”

These accounts suggest that media content focusing on NDEs can, for some viewers, catalyse spiritual exploration and reflection, and encourage engagement with questions of mortality. This finding resonates with prior studies showing that narrative media can stimulate spiritual curiosity and personal reflection (Hood et al., 2009).

5.2. Accessibility of language

The impact of linguistic accessibility aligns with media studies research highlighting how language choice shapes audience reach, comprehension, and emotional resonance (Couldry, 2012). By using everyday language, ZPAZ appears to have helped participants engage with the spiritual narratives without feeling alienated or intellectually overwhelmed.

Respondents consistently described the Persian used in ZPAZ as

clear, everyday, and relatable rather than formal or academic, though two participants suggested English subtitles would have widened the programme's reach. A 30-year-old male teacher from Srinagar noted that the language was "not academic, it was everyday spoken Persian, so could be easily understood", while suggesting subtitles would help non-Persian speakers. A 28-year-old female participant from Budgam described the pacing of speech as helpful: "They would talk slowly, with pauses, which is a characteristic of Iranians; this way of expression helped me a lot to understand the conversations, as I am not a native speaker of the Persian language."

5.3. Identification with narrated experiences

Even though participants had not personally undergone near-death experiences, several reported a strong sense of vicarious identification with the narratives. A 28-year-old participant from Budgam, who works at a local religious school, described an experience during childbirth that she felt echoed one of the programme's testimonies: "The Iranian woman had lost consciousness at the time of giving birth; she had gone to a different realm and seen her grandmother who had passed away quite long ago. When I gave birth to my baby, I also underwent something similar. I am not comfortable sharing the whole experience, but I can say the woman's experience reverberated with me."

A 32-year-old Sunni participant from Kupwara, pursuing a PhD, described a vision after a fall from a tree: "I felt someone pushed me from behind, I fell on the ground, lost consciousness for about half an hour; however, when I regained my senses, I felt I was in a different world for ages. I can't express in words what I was there, but whatever I saw was extremely beautiful."

Responses like these points to the role of empathetic engagement through storytelling: by presenting vivid accounts of post-death experience, the show appears to have allowed viewers to project themselves into these situations, consistent with theories of narrative empathy suggesting storytelling can create a shared experiential space even among audiences who have not directly experienced the events described (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

5.4. Reduced fear of death

One of the most prominent patterns reported by participants was a significant reduction in fear of death, described by around 80% of respondents. Many participants framed this shift in their own words as a reframing of death, from a source of anxiety to a natural and meaningful transition, which they associated with greater emotional regulation and existential comfort. This aligns with research in psychology and thanatology suggesting that exposure to narratives about post-mortem experiences can be associated with reduced death anxiety (Tomer, 2012; Wong, 2008).

A 32-year-old female participant from Srinagar, who survived a serious car accident in 2019 and had lived for years with travel-related anxiety, described watching ZPAZ in 2023 as transformative: “I had never heard anyone talk about dying so peacefully. When a middle-aged Iranian woman from Tehran spoke of a bright light and beautiful colours in the programme, I felt overwhelmed and cried. For the first time, death didn't seem like darkness.” She added that the show encouraged her to view prayer as an act of connecting to a benevolent God rather than fearing punishment.

A 25-year-old woman from Srinagar, who described anxiety attacks triggered by funerals, said this had reduced after watching many episodes: “I see it as a part of living, then crossing a milestone to a different realm. I even think the word ‘death’ is wrong, as nothing dies; it may just change its form and inhabit a different world.” A 41-year-old bureaucrat from Anantnag, a Sunni participant who described the fear of death as something that had once felt paralysing, said ZPAZ's descriptions had “mostly been fear-reducing than fear-inducing,” although he noted the programme also included accounts of punishment.

5.5. Cross-border spiritual resonance

Many participants described the experiences depicted in ZPAZ as transcending national, cultural, or geographic boundaries. One respondent reflected: “The idea of borders took a backseat. It showed we all go through the same life cycle. I could connect with a factory worker from Karaj like someone living in my neighbourhood ... Their spiritual quest was similar to ours.”

The youngest participant in the study, a 25-year-old car dealer from Srinagar, described the programme as changing his sense of cultural distance from Iran, despite having grown up with Persian lullabies, Saadi's Golestan and Bostan, and the poetry of Rumi in his home: “The thought that Iran is a different place, a perfect place where people breathe mysticism; when I watched ZPAZ, it changed, not in a bad way, but in a way where I could connect with them ... They have the fears that we have, struggles like us.”

Participants' framing of these experiences as universally human is consistent with studies in comparative spirituality, which suggest that afterlife narratives often foreground shared patterns of human consciousness and moral reflection (Greyson, 2003; Parnia, 2014). It is worth noting that this theme was described in similarly universalist terms by both Shia and Sunni participants in this study, distinguishing it from the more sect-specific pattern discussed below.

5.6. Reinforcement of Shia identity

ZPAZ embeds distinctly Shia theological motifs, and participants who already identified as Shia frequently described their encounters with

narrated Imams as strengthening and affirming that identity. A 23-year-old participant from Ganderbal, whose family had been distressed by his drug addiction, described a video of a man who survived a coma after a car crash: "I vividly remember how he described his misdeeds being presented to him, the embarrassment he felt, the thirst he underwent. He said the only thing that brought him relief was his participation in Muharram gatherings."

A 34-year-old woman from Kulgam described ZPAZ as helping her return to religious practice after a period of distance from faith: "Every testimony felt like a call to purify my life before meeting God. A woman with an NDE saw her deeds as colours, colours so beautiful they couldn't be compared to anything in the world, and I started thinking about my own actions the same way. The programme's portrayal of divine justice was visually powerful, more persuasive than abstract sermons."

This pattern aligns with scholarship on media and Shia Islam, which emphasises the role of televised and digital platforms in sustaining collective memory, devotional identity, and transnational Shia belonging (Deeb, 2006; Khosronejad, 2012). As the following section shows, however, this identity-affirming effect was reported primarily by Shia participants; it was not a uniform feature of the sample's engagement with the programme.

5.7. Sectarian variation in reception

While the majority of participants were Shia, the sample also included 11 Sunni Muslims, allowing for a preliminary examination of how sectarian background shaped engagement with ZPAZ's explicitly Shia theological content, the Imams, the barzakh, and divine justice as narrated within Twelver Shia eschatology.

Reinforcement of Shia identity was reported predominantly by participants who already identified as Shia. Sunni participants in this study did not report a comparable strengthening of sectarian identity; several instead described curiosity about Shia theology, particularly the Imams and their significance, as something newly encountered rather than reinforced. The 26-year-old Sunni participant from Shopian, for instance, engaged with ZPAZ primarily through a psychological and rationalist register, describing it as making "faith scientific", without reference to Shia figures. The 32-year-old Sunni participant from Kupwara related his own visionary experience to the theme of identification with narrated experiences rather than to Shia theological content. The 41-year-old Sunni participant from Anantnag likewise engaged primarily with the theme of reduced fear of death.

This divergence complicates any reading of reception as uniform. It suggests that ZPAZ's psychological and universalist dimensions, curiosity, reduced death anxiety, cross-border resonance, travel across sectarian lines more readily than its explicitly Shia theological content,

which appears to resonate as identity-affirming primarily for viewers already holding a Shia religious identity, and as newly informative for Sunni viewers encountering these motifs for the first time. Given the relatively small number of Sunni participants in this sample (n= 11), these observations are suggestive rather than conclusive, and sect-balanced sampling is flagged as a priority for future research.

5.8. Synthesis and implications

The analysis suggests that ZPAZ engages participants across multiple, and not always uniform, dimensions:

- **Psychological.** Participants reported reduced fear of death and described increased existential reflection.
- **Spiritual.** Participants described curiosity, vicarious identification, and emotional engagement with metaphysical concepts.
- **Cultural/ Religious.** For Shia participants in particular, engagement with the programme was associated with a strengthened sense of religious identity; across the sample as a whole, viewers described a shared spiritual understanding across national and cultural boundaries.

Taken together, these responses suggest that narrative-driven religious media can function as a resource for spiritual reflection, emotional coping, and, for some viewers, religious identity reinforcement. Given the qualitative, self-selected nature of this sample, these findings speak to how participants experienced and made sense of the programme, rather than establishing the programme's effects in a generalisable sense.

6. Limitations

The responses were largely similar across the sample, which may reflect social desirability bias, the persuasive framing of the programme itself, or the researcher's own positionality as someone situated within the cultural and religious context under study. The near-absence of negative, resistant, or negotiated readings is a notable limitation given the study's reliance on Reception Theory, which anticipates variation in audience decoding; future work should actively probe for dissenting or ambivalent responses. The sample's sectarian composition, while including both Shia and Sunni participants, was not balanced or stratified by sect, limiting the strength of the sectarian comparison offered above. Coding was conducted by a single researcher without formal inter-coder reliability checks, and the study did not undergo formal institutional ethical review. Finally, the analysis remains qualitative and exploratory; mixed-methods research with a larger, sect-stratified sample could further test the patterns identified here.

7. Conclusion

The findings of this study point to the significance of religious media such as ZPAZ in shaping participants' spiritual reflection, emotional responses to death, and, for many Shia viewers, religious identity. Participants described being drawn to the show by curiosity about life after death, valuing its accessible language, and engaging empathetically with the narrated experiences. Most significantly, participants reported reduced fear of death and a sense of cross-border spiritual connection; among Shia viewers in particular, many described a deepened sense of religious identity, while Sunni participants more often described new curiosity about Shia theology rather than a reinforced one.

Taken together, these results suggest that ZPAZ is experienced by its Kashmiri viewers as more than entertainment, as a cultural and spiritual resource that participants drew on to navigate existential questions, manage death anxiety, and, for some, affirm their faith. Its reception illustrates one way in which media can figure in contemporary spiritual life, where narratives of mortality became, for these participants, occasions for shared human reflection and sect-specific religious meaning-making. As a qualitative study of a self-selected, non-representative sample, these findings describe patterns within this group rather than generalisable effects of the programme, and they invite further research, particularly with a larger and sect-balanced sample to test how far these patterns extend.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the author on reasonable request.

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