

OTT Crime Thrillers and Their Influences on Viewer Perception of Crime

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Abstract

An exciting tale that mainly focuses on a criminal investigation is recognized as a crime fiction story. A story that excites the audience, captivates their thoughts, and builds suspense throughout ultimately leads to the success of a crime thriller movie or web series on the OTT (Over the Top) platform. With the emergence of platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, and others, the popularity of crime thrillers has surged in India. These stories, featuring their powerful and captivating moments, can stir fear and anxiety in audiences. This study seeks to analyze the themes and representation of crime thrillers on OTT platforms and the psychological effects these thrillers have on viewers. This research aims to determine if this type of content impacts viewers more profoundly than conventional Bollywood crime movies. Moreover, it examines the moral consequences of readily available violent material and delves into recorded instances where offenders have referenced OTT crime dramas as motivation.

Keywords: OTT Platforms, Online Media, Crime & Violence in Media.

INTRODUCTION

OTT platforms are digital streaming services that allow viewers to access content directly via the internet, bypassing traditional cable or satellite television. In India, the increasing availability of affordable Internet and the convenience of on-demand content have led to a rapid expansion of these platforms. (Dhiman, 2023) This shift has introduced audiences to a wide range of genres, with crime thrillers becoming one of the most popular categories.

Crime thrillers on OTT platforms often depict complex narratives involving criminal activities, law enforcement investigations, and psychological drama. These shows frequently use storytelling techniques like non-linear plots, flashbacks, and cliffhangers to maintain audience engagement. Such techniques shape how viewers perceive crime, justice, and morality. Unlike traditional Bollywood crime films, which often follow a predictable pattern of Hero versus Villain, OTT crime thrillers present morally ambiguous characters and multifaceted plots, offering a more immersive and realistic portrayal of crime.

Historical Perspective

The origins of the crime thriller genre in visual media can be traced back to the early 20th century. Globally, Alfred Hitchcock's 1927 silent film "The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog" is considered one of the earliest cinematic representations of the crime thriller genre. This film set the foundation for suspenseful storytelling, focusing on criminal psychology and the mystery surrounding a serial killer.

In India, the crime thriller genre in films gained prominence with movies like "Gumnaam" (1965) and "Dhund" (1973), which combined suspense and crime-solving narratives. However, the rise of OTT platforms in the 2010s allowed the genre to evolve beyond the constraints of mainstream Bollywood. The release of "Sacred Games" in 2018 marked a turning point for the Indian crime thriller genre on OTT platforms. It was the first major Indian web series to explore crime and its societal implications through a layered narrative, setting a precedent for future productions.

The portrayal of criminals and law enforcement in OTT crime thrillers plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. These portrayals often blur the lines between right and wrong, challenging conventional views of morality. With easy access to such content, there is growing concern about its psychological impact on audiences. Continuous exposure to violent crime stories may influence attitudes toward crime, normalizing certain behaviours or increasing fear and anxiety.

Moreover, there have been instances where popular media has been linked to real-life criminal behaviour. It is essential to examine whether the accessibility and portrayal of crime on OTT platforms have a more profound influence on audiences compared to traditional Bollywood films. This research aims to explore the unique narrative structures, the representation of crime and law enforcement, and the potential psychological effects of crime thrillers on OTT platforms in India.

Indian Perspective

OTT platforms have seen tremendous popularity and growth during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. India is the second-largest market for internet users worldwide. The increasing availability of high-speed internet connectivity has made it easier for viewers to access streaming services on various devices (Dhiman, 2023)

Some of the popular OTT platforms in India include

1. Netflix: Netflix was launched in India in 2016 and quickly became popular among Indian viewers. It offers a wide range of international and Indian content, including TV shows, movies, and documentaries.
2. Amazon Prime Video: Amazon Prime Video was launched in India in 2016 and offers a mix of Indian and International content, including movies, TV shows, and original content produced in India.
3. Disney+ Hotstar: Disney+ Hotstar is a popular OTT platform in India that offers a mix of international and Indian content, including movies, TV shows, sports, and news.
4. Zee5: Zee5 is an Indian OTT platform launched by the Zee Network. It offers a wide range of Indian content, including movies, TV shows, and original content produced by Zee.
5. Voot: Voot is an Indian OTT platform launched by Viacom18. It offers a mix of Indian and international content, including movies, TV shows, and original content produced by Viacom18.
6. SonyLIV: SonyLIV is an Indian OTT platform launched by Sony Pictures Networks India. It offers a mix of Indian and international content, including movies, TV shows, sports, and news.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

1. To understand the content and portrayal of crime thrillers on OTT platforms.
2. To explore the psychological impact of crime thrillers on the minds of audiences.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does the storytelling structure (non-linear, flashbacks, cliffhangers) impact audience perception of crime in OTT platforms?
2. How are criminals and law enforcement officers portrayed in OTT crime thrillers?
3. Do OTT crime thrillers influence the audience more strongly than Bollywood crime films?
4. How does easy access to violent crime thrillers on OTT platforms affect audience views on crime and morality?
5. Have there been documented cases of criminals in India citing OTT crime thrillers as inspiration for real crime?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cultivation Theory

Proposed by George Gerbner in the 1960s, Cultivation Theory suggests that watching a lot of media, especially over a long time, shapes how people see the real world. According to this theory, people who regularly watch crime thrillers may start to believe that the world is more violent and dangerous than it is. This is known as the "mean world syndrome."

For example, if someone frequently watches crime-based OTT shows, they may think that criminal activities are more common in society than they really are. This theory helps explain how continuous exposure to crime content can influence people's thoughts and fears (Perera, 2023).

Social Cognitive Theory

Albert Bandura developed Social Cognitive Theory, which explains that people learn by watching others. When people see certain behaviors repeatedly—especially in media like OTT crime thrillers—they may copy those actions, especially if they seem rewarding or go unpunished.

For instance, someone watching crime thrillers might imitate criminal behavior if the show makes it look easy or glamorous. This theory highlights how media can directly influence the attitudes and actions of viewers. (Nickerson, 2024)

LITERATURE REVIEW

The advent of digital streaming platforms has revolutionized the way individuals consume audiovisual content, ushering in a new era of binge-watching culture (Panda & Pandey, 2017). Binge-watching, defined as viewing multiple episodes in rapid succession, has become a prevalent behavior among young adults, often leading to significant lifestyle changes (Ahmed, 2022).

Studies indicate a significant positive association between binge-watching and depression, suggesting that individuals who frequently engage in this behaviour may experience heightened feelings of isolation (Starosta, Izydorczyk, & AntoniWontorczyk, 2021).

Furthermore, excessive binge-watching has been linked to increased interaction anxiety, highlighting potential negative impacts on interpersonal relationships (S & S., 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified binge-watching behaviours, with individuals seeking entertainment and escapism during lockdowns (Stefanucci and Rivera, 2020).

While binge-watching offers certain psychological benefits, such as temporary relief from stress, its risks necessitate targeted interventions to promote balanced media consumption (Flayelle, 2020). Understanding the dual nature of binge-watching is essential for mitigating its impact on individual well-being and developing healthier viewing habits (Merrill & Rubenking, 2019). Moreover, the easy accessibility of web series on OTT platforms has led to increased binge-watching behaviors, which are associated with various health and social issues (Rashmi & Jain, 2023). Additionally, the portrayal of crime in Indian web series can influence viewers' perceptions and behaviors, potentially desensitizing them to violence and altering their understanding of crime and justice (Rashmi & Jain, 2023).

While existing research has explored various aspects of crime thrillers on OTT platforms in India, a significant gap remains concerning the potential influence of such content on real-life criminal behaviour. Notably, there have been instances where individuals have reportedly drawn inspiration from crime-based media to commit actual offenses.

Aftab Poonawala Case (2022)

The American crime series inspired the Mumbai-based chef to chop his girlfriend Shraddha Walker into pieces and dispose at various places in Mumbai. The police probe of Aaftab Amin Poonawalla revealed that he was a hard-core fan of such crime content, especially the 'Dexter' that inspired him to commit the above sensational murder. (TimesOfIndia, 2022)

KGF2 (2022)

KGF2 inspired a youth, Shiva Prasad (19), to become a serial killer and kill 5 people to become famous in his surroundings. He reportedly killed 4 security guards while they were asleep. Later, it is revealed that he is said to be inspired by the Pan-India Kannada film 'KGF2' and wants to become famous like Yash in real life. There was also a guy who shot his co-audience in the KGF theatre in Karnataka. (TimesOfIndia, 2022)

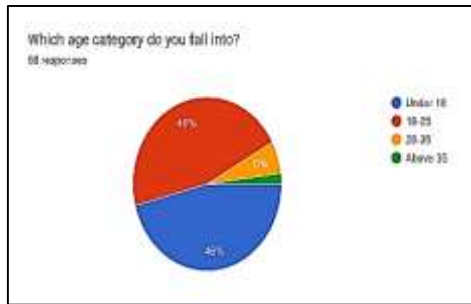
Money Heist (2017)

After getting inspired by watching a crime-based web series, 'Money Heist' on Netflix, a man with his group planned a robbery in Goati Nagar, Lucknow, UP. He reportedly robbed a jewellery store on Sunday. However, later, police cracked the case and arrested them. (TimesOfIndia, 2022)

Drishyam (2013)

The Mohan Lal starrer Malayalam crime thriller ‘Drishyam’ has been remade in multiple languages for its edge-of-seat thriller content, which sadly has become an inspiration for a Bhopal man to commit real-life murder. Indrapal Singh and his nephew took inspiration from the film and disposed of a dead body in the Hathaikheda Dam in 2015. (TimesOfIndia, 2022)

METHODOLOGY



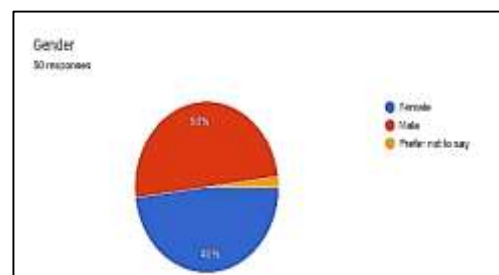
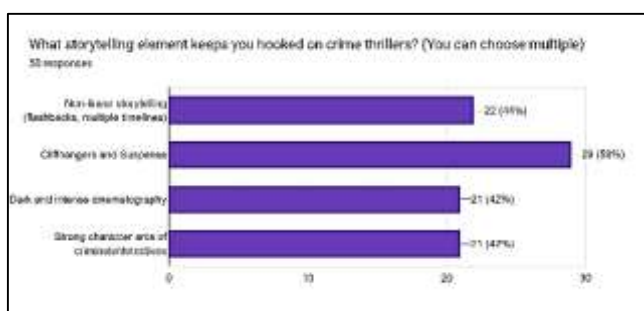
This research adopts a quantitative approach to analyze the impact of crime thrillers on OTT platforms on audience perceptions and behaviors. The study aims to examine how the portrayal of crime influences viewers' attitudes, moral stances, and emotional responses.

A survey-based method was employed to collect quantitative data from participants. The survey was designed to capture audience perspectives on crime thrillers, focusing on the portrayal of criminals, law enforcement, and narrative techniques such as non-linear storytelling and cliffhangers. This method allows for the systematic collection of data to understand patterns and relationships between media consumption and audience perceptions.

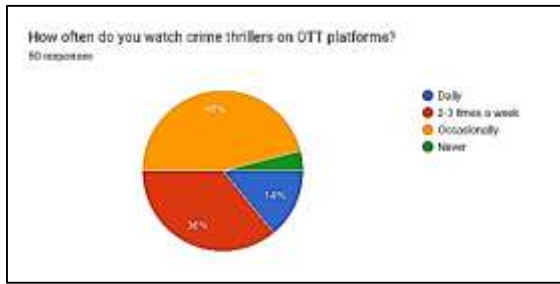
The data was gathered through an online survey created using Google Forms. The survey was distributed through peer groups and academic networks to ensure a diverse pool of respondents. The survey comprised closed-ended questions to gather specific insights. It included multiple-choice questions to assess respondents' media consumption habits, attitudes toward crime and morality, and their psychological responses after watching OTT crime thrillers.

DATA ANALYSIS

A total of 50 responses were collected. The respondents included individuals across different age groups, genders, and educational backgrounds. The survey reflects a diverse demographic, with a nearly balanced participation between male and



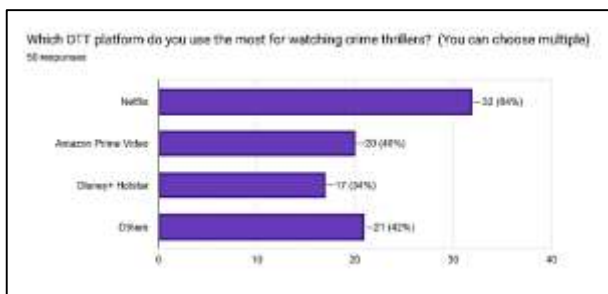
female respondents. Interestingly, the



majority of participants fall into the younger age brackets, particularly those under 25 years old. This highlights how crime thrillers on OTT platforms primarily capture the attention of younger audiences, who are more inclined toward digital content consumption.

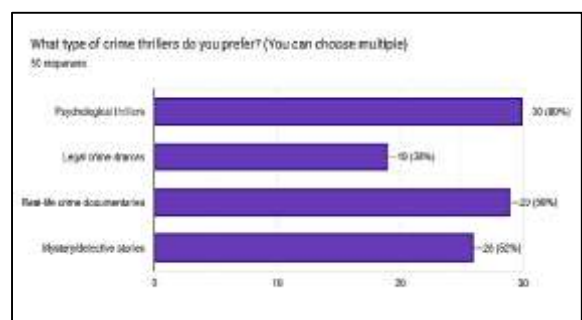
When it comes to viewing habits, a significant portion of respondents watch crime thrillers occasionally, while others engage with the genre multiple times a week. This indicates that crime thrillers hold a regular, if not habitual, place in viewers' entertainment routines. The data suggests that these narratives provide a compelling escape while simultaneously feeding viewers' curiosity about the criminal world.

Regarding platform preferences, Netflix emerges as the dominant choice among respondents. However, many participants reported using a combination of platforms, particularly Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, to access crime-based content. This indicates that audiences are willing to diversify their viewing experiences, seeking crime thrillers across various streaming services to satisfy their interests.



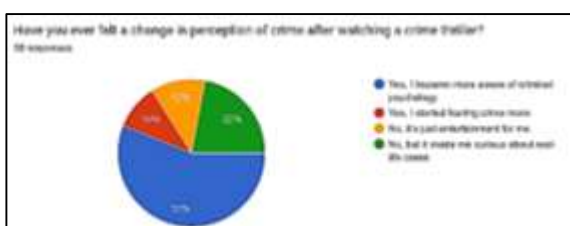
When asked about the most engaging aspects of crime thrillers, respondents showed a strong inclination toward complex narrative structures. Non-linear storytelling—featuring flashbacks and multiple timelines—was the most favored technique, reflecting a desire for stories that

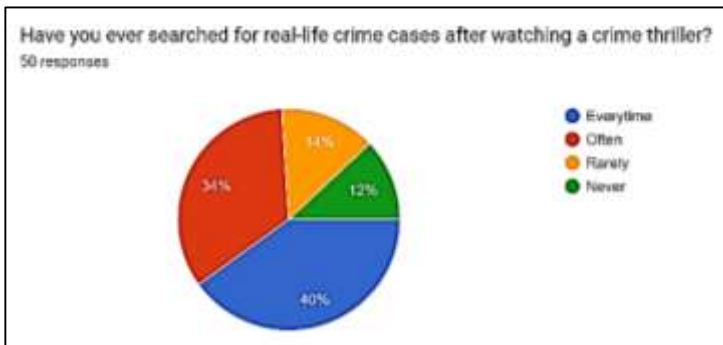
challenge viewers intellectually and keep them guessing. Cliffhangers and suspense-driven narratives also stood out, reinforcing the idea that audiences enjoy the thrill of unresolved tension. Additionally, there was a notable appreciation for character-driven storytelling, particularly when it came to the psychological depth of criminals and



detectives.

The psychological impact of crime thrillers is another significant takeaway from the survey. A



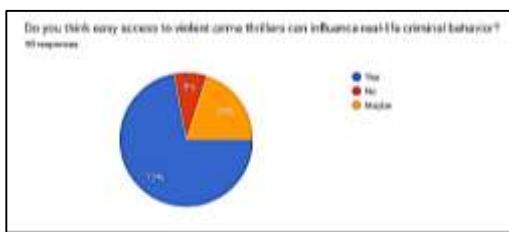
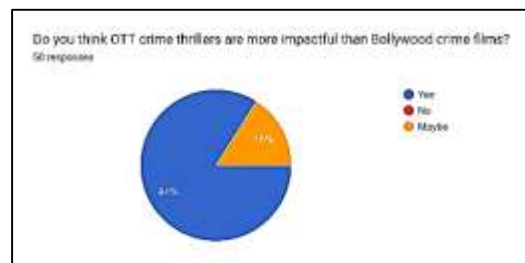


majority of respondents reported becoming more aware of criminal psychology and law enforcement methods after consuming such content. For some, this heightened awareness translates into a sense of caution and a deeper understanding

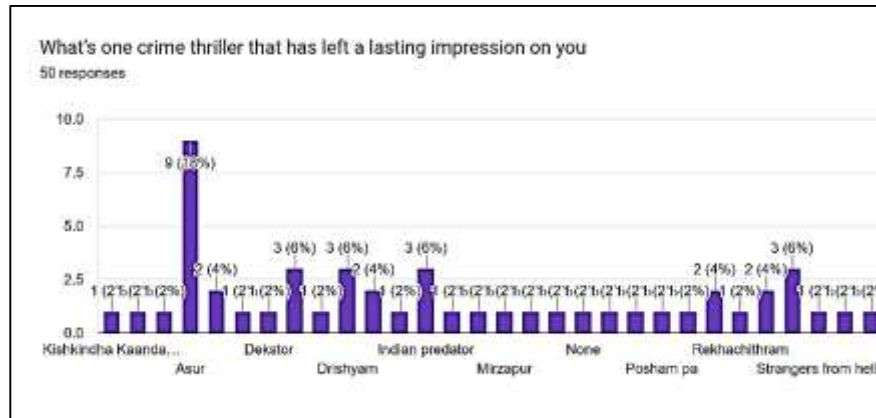
of real-world crime. Notably, a large portion of viewers admitted to actively researching real-life crime cases inspired by the fictional stories they watch, suggesting that these narratives often blur the lines between fiction and reality.

The potential influence of OTT crime thrillers on real-life behavior is a point of concern for many respondents. A substantial portion believes that exposure to violent or morally ambiguous content could inspire vulnerable individuals to imitate criminal acts. While some view crime thrillers purely as a form of entertainment, the prevailing sentiment suggests a recognition of the broader societal impact these narratives can have, especially when consumed without critical engagement.

When comparing OTT crime thrillers to Bollywood crime films, the majority of respondents found OTT content to be far more immersive and realistic. This preference may stem from the long-form storytelling format available on streaming platforms, allowing for greater narrative complexity and detailed character arcs. In contrast, Bollywood crime films, while still popular, are often perceived as dramatized and less grounded in realism.



Specific crime thrillers mentioned by respondents further underscore the genre’s powerful hold on audiences. *Asur* emerged as the most impactful title, praised for its psychological depth and gripping storyline. Other notable mentions included *Indian Predator*, *Delhi Crime*, and *Drishyam*, each leaving a lasting impression on viewers due to their intense portrayals of crime and investigation. This highlights a growing appetite for content that not only entertains but also provokes thought and emotional engagement.



CONCLUSION

This research explored how crime thrillers on OTT platforms influence audience perceptions, behavior, and views on crime and morality. Through a quantitative survey, it became clear that these shows are highly popular, especially among young adults. Platforms like Netflix dominate viewership, and series such as *Asur* hold a strong appeal due to their gripping storytelling and complex characters.

The study found that crime thrillers not only entertain but also shape how people understand crime and law enforcement. Many respondents reported becoming more aware of criminal activities and feeling cautious in real life after watching these shows. Some even took their curiosity further by researching actual crime cases. This suggests that the content consumed on OTT platforms has a lasting psychological impact beyond entertainment.

A key concern that emerged is the potential for crime thrillers to influence vulnerable individuals. While most viewers see these shows as fictional, a significant portion believes that easy access to violent content could encourage real-life imitation. This raises questions about the ethical responsibility of streaming platforms and the need for media literacy to help audiences separate fiction from reality.

The research also highlighted how narrative techniques—such as cliffhangers and non-linear storytelling—enhance audience engagement. This storytelling style makes OTT crime thrillers feel more immersive and realistic compared to Bollywood crime films, which are often more dramatized. This deeper engagement can strengthen audience perceptions of crime and law enforcement, influencing how they interpret real-world events.

Overall, the study emphasizes that OTT crime thrillers are more than just a source of entertainment. They play a role in shaping public awareness and attitudes toward crime. While

they can inform and engage, there is also a need to be mindful of their potential influence on behavior. This research contributes to understanding the complex relationship between media consumption and real-life attitudes, highlighting the importance of responsible storytelling and informed viewership in the digital age.

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