

Digital Content Consumption and Social Sustainability: Impact of Psychological Thriller OTT Content On Gen Z's Behavioural Psychology

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming platforms has significantly altered global entertainment consumption, particularly among Generation Z, a demographic deeply embedded in digital ecosystems. Psychological thriller content—marked by suspense, emotional intensity, and morally ambiguous narratives—has emerged as one of the most engaging genres on these platforms. This study investigates the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural effects of psychological thriller OTT content on Gen Z, with a specific focus on its implications for social sustainability. Using a quantitative research design and survey responses from 227 participants, the study examines viewing patterns, emotional reactions, binge-watch tendencies, sleep disruptions, shifts in ethical perceptions, trust, social behaviour, and changes in real-world risk perception. Results reveal that psychological thrillers significantly influence behavioural psychology, with strong evidence of increased emotional arousal, heightened cognitive engagement, and altered social perceptions. Statistical analysis, including ANOVA on behavioural and frequency-based Likert scales, confirms significant variation across psychological and behavioural dimensions. While participants display high interest in complex narratives and suspense, the findings also indicate potential risks such as emotional fatigue, overthinking, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and reduced offline social interaction. The study highlights the need for balanced and sustainable media consumption and provides recommendations for OTT platforms, educators, mental-health professionals, and policymakers to promote healthy engagement and digital well-being among youth.

Keywords: Digital Content Consumption; OTT Platforms; Psychological Thriller; Generation Z; Behavioural Psychology.

INTRODUCTION:

The surge of Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming services has changed the manner in which people consume entertainment on a worldwide scale, making it possible to watch variety of content anytime they want. Staying at home and quarantining means you have no choice but to binge-watch shows across genres on platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar. Among them, psychological thrillers have been a highly stimulating genre characterized by intricate plots, amoral characters and emotionally charged aspects of the story by which spectator's cognitive and emotional processes would be significantly triggered. Generation Z (those born between the mid-'90s and early 2010s) is the first to grow up in a world full of technology. For this group, OTT (over the top) platforms are a huge part of their daily routine. They are more than just places to see TV shows and movies; they are places to meet people, make friends and learn about other cultures. Their high engagement with digital media makes them an important population for studies on the psychological and behavior effects of media consumption.

Generation Z, people born roughly between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, are the first generation to have grown up entirely surrounded by tech. For this demographic, OTT platforms are a huge part of their daily routine. Not in the sense that they're not just movie and TV show-watching places; they are also places where people meet one another, make friends there and learn about other cultures. Given their heavy exposure to digital media, they are an important population for understanding the psychological and behavioral effects of media consumption.

Objectives of the study: Anticipated Outcomes The current research aims to address influence of psychological thriller contents in OTT platforms and it's implications for behavior psychology of Gen Z in the dimension social sustainability on a bigger extended level. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Understand how Gen Z actually consumes digital content: This involves looking at tight data on not just how regularly they consume OTT, but also what genres and the key drivers of why psychological thrillers are being used. This work aims to explore tendencies of media engagement in

mediating cognitions and emotions, by determining such features.

2. Only a few studies have looked at the cognitive, emotional and behavioural effects that watching a certain kind of film does to our mind. We want to investigate what impact watching psychological thrillers have on: Rational (and therefore critical) thinking Regulating emotions Realism Trust Social bonding and relations.Concat 3C4TV is it is happening nowAre you in? It seeks to identify beneficial effects, such as enhanced problem solving ability and negative outcomes, for example, overarousal or emotional flooding, anxiety or social withdrawal.
3. Examine relationship with social sustainability (social) : The proposed research will explore the association of exposure to physiological OTT thriller in shaping mental well-being, lifestyle balance and interpersonal quality which contributes by underscoring sustainable media consumption among youth. This reflection enables to point out the value of digital content in promoting responsible and balanced uses.
4. Provide stakeholders with evidence-based recommendations: Results of the work will provide content producers, educators, mental health professionals and policy makers with specific recommendations on how to address the use of online appeals and stop suicides. These results can contribute to the nudging of rational consumption behavior, sound mental and social well-being, and environment-friendly engagement in digital media by Gen Z.

Research Problem:

The growing popularity of streaming has caused Gen Z to be spending a lot of time with digital video. Of the genres, psychological thrillers are definitely one of the more appealing because they have both edge-of-your-seat stories and emotional depth. This one's just for entertainment and to spark some reflection, but it might have additional influences on viewers' mental state and attitude. Overstimulation could result in increased emotional arousal, altered sleep patterns and a reduced amount of every-day socializing (in the real world), as well as achieving shifts in perspectives on trust and reality. Such content is gaining in popularity, but there has been little research on how psychological thrillers affect Gen Z behavior — most studies have focused on violent media, video games or broader digital use patterns — leaving a gap as to what external thriller content specifically does to the psyches and social engagement of these teens. "It is this gap that has to be bridged – especially in social sustainability, which means for mental well-being, balanced life and healthy relationships.

So, this research was about examining the impact of psychological thriller content on the thinking patterns, emotions and behaviours of Gen Z too. The study also will explore ways in which these effects may inform efforts aimed at cultivating mindful media use.

Importance of study: This research has substantial academic and social implications.

1. Contribution to Media Psychology: It extends current research by exploring Gen Z and the psychological thriller, rather than traditional studies on violent media or general streaming service usage.
2. Advocating Social Sustainability: Linking content usage to mental health, lifestyle and social engagement the need for healthy digital use is emphasized in this paper.
3. Practical Application: The findings of this study can assist content creators, educators, mental health consultants and policymakers in designing strategies conducive to healthy media usage.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

1. **Emotional and Psychological Consequences:** Of all the genres of horror, psychological thrillers are perhaps the most powerful when it comes to getting a reaction out of you making your skin crawl, causing you to cringe or even break out into a cold sweat from pure psychological terror. The stories are instant dopamine hits, but the scroll feeds paranoia, hypervigilance and emotional exhaustion. They either check out or desensitize, or check in and become prone to triggers. In general action movies excite and disorientate if over-watched (Chattopadhyay, 2020; Capron, 2018.; Zwiky et al., 2024; Sultana, Ali & Iftikhar, 2021).
2. **Sleep Troubles and Mental Health Dangers:** Staying up past bedtime to binge-watch thrillers disrupts your sleeping pattern, gives you nightmares and certain areas of the brain get less focused. Sweaty cliffhangers, loud sound design and nervous system overstimulation stretch waking consciousness, thwarting sleep. Long-term, that results in panic attacks, fatigue and declining literacy rates among our youth." Among the most frequent results of these studies were sleep-related problems, so moderation is the norm (Baselgia et al., 2023; Betway, 2021; Sandrila et al., 2025; Hans & Kaur, 2024).
3. **Addiction, Binge-Watching, and Algorithms:** Thrillers are intended to be addictive, with cliffhanger-trafficking and panic-phantomime-dopamine stoking that compulsive viewing fire. And now the OTT platforms themselves are closing the loop, using algorithms to recommend thriller after psychopath-fueled thriller ceaselessly to Gen Z. Impulsivity and sensation seeking personality characteristics are related to increased risk of binge-watching as well. There is a possibility that such practices may in the long run generate dependency of OTT platforms, foster abuse. which could decelerate self-control and enhance digital addiction (Oliveira et al., 2024; Gupta et al., Kumar, Gehlot, 2022; Alimoradi et al., 2022; Nair et al., 2025).
4. **Morality and Ethical Perceptions:** Force-fed on thrillers Gen Z is learning its morality. The constant exposure to those morally grey or anti-heroic figures ensures that bad behavior becomes

acceptable and appealing. I believe the repetition makes it difficult to adhere to appropriate standards, and does make viewers have sympathy for baddies or even encourage crime.” This gradual desensitization, alters young viewers’ perceptions of justice, morality and social responsibility requiring media literacy to include an ethical sight (Shahin, Khan & Pal (2023); Sonkar & Srivastava, 2023; Krahé et al.

5. **Social Sustainability and Media Responsibility:** Beyond entertainment, OTT thrillers’ impact moves on to affect digital well-being and social sustainability. Overuse can handicap such offline sociality even as it promotes loneliness and fears, and it will alter a generation in how these ideas intervene between crime, justice and ethics. Professional stress the requirements of media literacy, parental control and platform operation such as good ratings/alarm for the content. The essential things are the items that give required to keep good mental health and keep social inducted them into digital space (Hans & Kaur, 2024; Harish & Guruprasad, 2024; Jasmine & Keerthana, 2024)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Approach: Quantitative research design is adopted because of its statistical correctness, objectivity and capacity for comparison in investigating the behaviour change. By survey-based data collection, this research design enables it to obtain a large number of respondents with broad representation in terms of age and working status. The advantage of the quantitative approach to calculating is that it can determine specific trends and relationship between watching psychological thriller shows and its psychological effects like on increase in fearfulness, on realize or understand what anxiety means, or cognitive processes are impacted. Graphs, percentages and statistical arithmetic improve clarity of conclusion and make results more understandable. By adopting such a scientific approach, research will transform into an objective and science-based initiative capable of generating generalizable knowledge about content effects psych-thrillers can have on viewing behavior.

Hypothesis:

Alternative Hypothesis (H1): The psychological thriller OTT content affects the behavioral psyche of audience in a noticeable way.

Null Hypothesis (H0): There is no significant effect of psychological thriller OTT based content on viewers’ behavioral psychology.

DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION:

The survey registers more female responders (139) compared to men (88). It indicates growing appeal of psychological thriller programming by women, bucking the belief that crime and suspense are the genre's traditional fare for the opposite sex. Women are apparently no less responsive than men, with the stats implying a focus due to possible attraction to complexity psychologically, plots, and involvement on an emotional plane in thrills.

The majority of the surveyors (130) are in the 13-28 age group, thus pointing out that young audiences form the primary consumers of psychological thriller content. The 29-44 and 45-60 age groups also have a high usage rate, recording 38 and 49 users, respectively. Few of those under 12 and over 60 are involved, which suggests that material in the genre of psychological thriller is largely funded by youth and middle-aged adults, assuming that since they are most exposed to new media and are interested in complex narratives. Students (107 respondents) comprise almost half of the total sample, making a strong statement regarding the fact that young adults are the most common consumers of psychological thrillers. Service professionals (62) make up another sizable majority, followed by business professionals (20) and housewives (23). Smaller numbers for the retired (9) and unemployed (6) suggest that working adults and students use a higher frequency of thriller content, perhaps due to the fact that they commonly use digital media and enjoy suspenseful shows. Dichotomous Data: The graph highlights the influence of psychological thriller OTT content on viewer behavior. Among 227 respondents, 163 frequently use OTT platforms, indicating high digital engagement, while 189 are willing to pay for services, showing strong perceived value. Emotional responses were reported by 171 viewers, reflecting the genre's impact on anxiety, excitement, and mental stimulation. These trends suggest that psychological thrillers drive both engagement and spending, but their intense content may affect mental health, causing tension, overthinking, or heightened real-world nervousness. Overall, frequent consumption correlates with emotional involvement, demonstrating the profound effect of thriller content on Generation Z behavior.

Behavioural based Likert Scale

Behavioural Based Likert Scale	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Interest in narrative complexity and engagement with suspenseful storytelling.	93	78	30	14	12
Perception shift regarding ethics and morality due to media exposure.	27	60	74	41	25
Impact of media on social perception and trust.	34	62	65	42	24
Psychological effects of suspenseful and intense media.	31	61	66	49	20
Emotional toll and mental exhaustion caused by intense content.	37	48	50	40	52
Potential habituation or reduced emotional response to violent media.	38	51	54	47	37
Effects of media on sleep and cognitive processing.	26	54	54	43	50
Influence of media on personal safety concerns and parental anxiety.	27	55	68	37	40
Perceived societal impact of thriller media on criminal behaviour.	38	77	66	32	14

The Likert-scale analysis provides insights into Generation Z's responses to psychological thriller OTT content. Out of 227 participants, 93 strongly agree and 78 agree that they enjoy complex, suspenseful narratives, while only 26 disagree or strongly disagree, highlighting the genre's widespread appeal. Regarding moral and ethical influence, 27 strongly agree and 60 agree, but 74 remain neutral, showing that many viewers may not consciously recognize the impact on their values. Social trust and perception of crime show similar

division: 34 strongly agree and 62 agree that media shapes impressions, while 65 are neutral and 66 disagree or strongly disagree. Emotional fatigue is reported by 37 strongly agree and 48 agree, with 102 neutral or disagreeing, indicating varied experiences. Impacts on sleep and thought processes are also mixed, with 26 strongly agree, 54 agree, and 93 neutral or disagreeing. These findings suggest psychological thrillers evoke cognitive, emotional, and social responses, but effects vary significantly among viewers.

Behavioural Likert Scale Anova

Anova: Single Factor				
SUMMARY: Likert Behavioural Questions				
Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance
Interest in narrative complexity and engagement with suspenseful storytelling.	227	455	2.00	1.27
Perception shift regarding ethics and morality due to media exposure.	227	658	2.90	1.36
Impact of media on social perception and trust.	227	641	2.82	1.46
Psychological effects of suspenseful and intense media.	227	647	2.85	1.37
Emotional toll and mental exhaustion caused by intense content.	227	703	3.10	1.96
Potential habituation or reduced emotional response to violent media.	227	675	2.97	1.76
Effects of media on sleep and cognitive processing.	227	718	3.16	1.75
Influence of media on personal safety concerns and parental anxiety.	227	689	3.04	1.59
Perceived societal impact of thriller media on criminal behaviour.	227	588	2.59	1.23

ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	224.49	8	28.06	18.38	0	1.94
Within Groups	3104.82	2034	1.53			
Total	3329.31	2042				

ANOVA test was used to identify response variations across various behaviour Likert scale questions from psychological thriller material. The findings support that the groups vary significantly because the F-statistic (18.38) is much larger than the F-critical value (1.94). The p-value also equals 0, which is evidence against the null hypothesis. This implies that psychological thriller material influences different areas of the viewer's behaviour and perception statistically significantly.

Frequency based likert scale:

Frequency Based Likert Scale	Always	Occasion ally	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Binging on Thriller Crime Content	42	74	58	36	17
Prefer to watch Real-Life Crime Documentaries	42	68	67	31	19
Using Unofficial sites to watch	12	39	45	43	88
Rewatching to analyze details	26	40	51	48	62
Thoughts about the Plot after completion	43	52	58	31	43

Reading reviews and discussions about thriller content	28	45	55	48	51
Comparing real-life events to those in the thriller content	20	54	65	51	37
Possession of Self-Protection devices	25	23	35	32	112

The frequency analysis of psychological thriller and crime content reveals significant patterns in viewer engagement. Among 227 participants, 42 “always” and 74 “occasionally” binge-watch thriller crime shows, while 58 watch “sometimes” and 36 “rarely” or “never,” indicating high immersive engagement. Crime documentaries show similar trends, with slightly lower binge frequency. Access to illegal streaming sites is limited, with only 12 “always” and 39 “occasionally,” while 88 “never” access them, reflecting a preference for legal OTT platforms. Repeated viewing to analyze hidden details is moderate: 26 “always,” 40 “sometimes,” and 62 “never,” showing that a substantial audience passively consumes content. Post-viewing reflection occurs in 43 “always” and 52 “occasionally,” while review engagement is lower. Participants occasionally draw parallels between thriller narratives and real life, with only a minority (25 “always,” 23 “occasionally”) taking personal safety measures. These patterns suggest strong cognitive and emotional involvement but limited behavioral changes regarding personal security.

Frequency Likert Scale Anova

Anova: Single Factor				
SUMMARY				
Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance
Viewing habits and addiction to crime thriller content.	227	593	2.61	1.38
Preference for true crime versus fictional crime storytelling.	227	598	2.63	1.38
Willingness to bypass legal access to watch psychological thriller movies	227	837	3.69	1.66
Interest in intricate storytelling and attention to detail.	227	761	3.35	1.82
Cognitive impact and lingering effects of media.	227	660	2.91	1.88
Engagement with critical discussions and analytical thinking.	227	730	3.22	1.76
Influence of thriller content on real-world perception.	227	712	3.14	1.45
Perceived need for personal safety and influence of media on security concerns.	227	864	3.81	2.02

ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	312.25	7	44.61	26.72	0	2.015
Within Groups	3018.85	1808	1.67			
Total	3331.10	1815				

ANOVA test was used to investigate differences in frequency-based responses concerning psychological thriller content. The findings indicate a statistically significant difference between the groups, as shown by the F-statistic (26.72), which is significantly greater than the F-critical value (2.01). Once more, the p-value is 0, offering strong evidence against the null hypothesis and indicating that the frequency of engagement with thriller content varies significantly across different

behavioural aspects. The ordinal preference rating scale highlights audience priorities among OTT platforms. Netflix leads the ranking, with 129 respondents selecting it as their first choice, followed by 39 (2nd), 22 (3rd), 20 (4th), and 17 (5th), reflecting its strong global content library, originals, and user-friendly interface. Amazon Prime Video ranks second: 57 respondents selected it first, 89 second, 44 third, 26 fourth, and 11 fifth, indicating wide acceptance despite

fewer top rankings. Disney+ Hotstar falls in the mid-range, with 38 first-choice votes, 48 second, 86 third, 30 fourth, and 25 fifth, showing moderate popularity, particularly regionally in India. HBO receives fewer top rankings, with only 22 first-choice votes, but 78 and 59 respondents ranked it 4th and 5th, respectively, suggesting appreciation for quality content without broad adoption. The “Others” category, including Apple TV, Hulu, and local services, had 29 first-choice votes and 80 fifth-choice votes, indicating niche appeal. Overall, Netflix dominates consumer preference, followed by Prime Video, while other platforms occupy secondary or specialized positions.

The rank-order scale reveals the primary motivations behind audiences viewing psychological thriller content on OTT platforms. Entertainment emerged as the strongest driver, with 128 respondents ranking it first, while only 13 rated it least important, highlighting the genre's broad appeal despite its intense themes. Interest in psychology was the second key motivator, ranked second by 98 respondents, reflecting curiosity about human behaviour, mental processes, and character psychology, though only 27 ranked it first. Thrill and suspense also motivate viewers, with 95 ranking it third and 59 ranking it second, indicating that adrenaline-fueled plot twists and suspenseful storytelling attract a wide audience. Word-of-mouth and reviews rank lower, with 112 respondents placing it fourth and just 21 ranking it first, showing external opinion is secondary to intrinsic interest. Surprisingly, escapism is the least significant motivator, with 151 respondents ranking it fifth, suggesting psychological thrillers engage the mind intensively rather than serving as a relaxing distraction.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. OTT platforms can feed content with psychological insight, alternating thrillers with genres that help you recuperate emotionally. That could involve cues advising that content be relaxed after a binge of watching, or reminders to take breaks during which they can review story lines rather than binging.
2. Schools can offer media literacy classes that looks at how thrillers manipulate audiences, build suspense and push emotional buttons. These and workshops on emotional resilience can help Gen Z to engage with heavy content critically and learn how to handle the resulting cognitive and emotional load.
3. Psychologists and media professionals can consult with content makers to evaluate how plot lines, suspense, etc., may impact on audiences. This, we hope, reduces the chance that thrillers will be engaging and at the same time minimises anxiety and biased perceptions.
4. Governments, policymakers and OTT platforms can collaborate to create a sustainable viewing regime. They could include algorithms that monitor high-intensity exposure and recommend break times, or user analytics to enforce consumption. Meticulous

information on content intensity and studies can also promote responsible media skills.

5. ReflectTo interest Gen Z viewers you may encourage them to reflect on a program by journaling their reactions, or participating in forums that discuss storylines and moral dilemmas. Community or online groups can increase engagement, decrease isolation and improve media literacy.
6. OTT platforms, educators, and policy makers can invest in research to understand the effect of thrillers on cognition and social behavior. Study outcomes could inform content policies and educational efforts that promote well-being.

CONCLUSION:

From a sample of 227 subjects, this study highlights the strong psychological impact that comes from watching psychological thriller in OTT mode. The power of the genre to elicit basic human emotion is at least apparent, though only 74.89% of users report increased emotion and/or arousal. Such response extends beyond the feelings of momentary exaltation, and tends to last longer in one's psychological spectrum; such as: a disturbed sleep. The long-term consequences of such responses could be observed in the altered moral demeanor of individuals, suspicion in social scenes, and heightened social antennae. The study's research approach has also scientifically provided high-level confidence in connection between thriller genre and body language psychology are two relations.

The psychology thrillers pique our interest with the bait of tension that hooks audience and drags them into cognitive and affective investment. Our psychology, emotions are extenuated lap by the interlace of great stories with intense psychological conflict and shocking plot twists. The audience enjoys a moderate adrenaline rush as they confront their fears vicariously. This kind of black humour attraction is something against stress but inviting adrenaline and scare at the same time.

Except that thrillers shape our sense of crime and security, warning us about the threats. Crime and manipulation are ingeniously off-screened – knowledge and vigilance is already a priori when you find yourself in the real life situation. The hypervigilance is conditioning viewers - but also the possibility of whipping people into an unrealistic and unjustifiable fear of crime in actuality. That kind of infamy, in large part is spawned by the corrupt justice system, and/or inability to enforce seems to take away their credibility or idealizes its own investigative mimicry.

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