

Crime on Screen, Chaos Within: An Examination of the Psychological Effects of Digital Crime Dramas on Male Tribal Teenagers.

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ABSTRACT

The expanding reach of digital streaming platforms has increased sustained exposure to crime-based entertainment, raising concerns regarding its role in shaping behavioural regulation and psychological functioning. Despite widespread consumption, limited research has examined how such mediated stimuli influence behaviour among marginalized youth populations. This study investigates the behavioural and cognitive effects of digital crime dramas on male tribal adolescents in Bero Block, Ranchi district, Jharkhand, a socio-culturally distinct environment. Employing a qualitative research design and in-depth interviews, the study explores processes of social learning, reinforcement, cognitive schema formation, and self-regulation associated with media consumption. Findings indicate elevated anxiety, heightened distrust, increased behavioural vigilance, and modified risk appraisal, reflecting patterns of behavioural conditioning and adaptive self-monitoring. The results emphasize the moderating role of cultural and environmental contexts in behaviour management and offer implications for youth behavioural interventions, media governance, and organizationally informed approaches to psychological regulation...

Keywords: Crime Shows, Tribal adolescents, Media Influence, Crime Dramas, Behavioural Regulation, Social Learning, Media-Induced Behaviour..

INTRODUCTION

Over the Top (OTT) media services are internet streaming platforms that have been quite popular recently (1) The advent and propagation of OTT platforms have led the online crime shows readily available and accessible to a broad range of audience, counting the tribal youth in rural milieu like Bero. Although these kinds of programs offer entertainment, apprehensions have arisen about their emotional and psychological impact on young audiences, mainly among the marginalized communities. This research targets to explore how online crime shows affect the social perceptions and mental health of the tribal youths in Bero.

The likes of Money Heist, Mirzapur, Sacred Games, are among others, have been a constant source of entertainment for us to consume throughout the day. Due to the stark contrast of projections in the shows (such as offensive language, violence, and mindless but beautiful cinematography), it has begun to affect the lives of the young adults who are the largest consumers of these platforms. Psychologically, the amount of dread created by these shows is increasing abnormal mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety, and depression. It also affects the quality of logical and analytical thought that the human mind is able to conceive, conceptualize, and create with the capability's nature has bestowed upon humanity through evolutionary processes.

Cognitive and Emotional Effects

Exposure to online crime shows among the aboriginal youth in Bero may have profound cognitive and emotional effects. Research shows that excess screen time, primarily with the violent content or the crime related shows shoots up anxiety, social isolation and depression among the youth. (2-3). These effects are exacerbated by the immersive nature of digital media, which can lead to desensitization and a false sense of reality (4). Cognitive elaboration may also get affected, as prolonged exposure to such content may impede emotional regulation and critical thinking. (5)

Developing Interventions

Culturally sensitive interventions are the key to solving these problems. Studies reflect that designing and evaluating digital mental health gears with indigenous teenagers guarantees efficacy and cultural safety (6-7). Relinking the youth to their cultural heritage via community centric programs like land based active living projects, has led to improved mental health outcomes. (8). In addition, digital and online platforms that integrate mindfulness drills are culturally appropriate cognitive behavioural therapies (CBT) have demonstrated efficacy in reducing psychological distress (9).

Cultural Influences

The resilience and mental health of Aboriginal youth are significantly influenced by their cultural distinctiveness. Cultural and community ties nurture a sense of purpose and belonging, which protects against mental health problems (10-11). Culturally based treatments are essential as the damage of cultural knowledge and practices can cause emotional uneasiness and isolation (12)

Comparative Analysis Across Age Groups

Studies shows that younger youths may be more susceptible to the adverse effects of online crime shows due to their developing stage, which is crucial for cognitive and emotional development (5,4). In contrast older, adolescents may display greater resilience, possibly due to greater life experience and coping strategies.

Media Violence and Psychological Effects

Several investigations have linked violent media exposure to a number of psychological effects such as fear, increased insensitivity and heightened aggression (13). As per the cultivation theory of George Gerbner, prolonged television viewing can alter audiences' perception of reality and lead to "mean world syndrome", in which people believe the world is more dangerous than it is. (14)

Impact on Indian Youth

Multiple Indian studies have shown that frequent viewing of crime related content can lead to anxiety and fear in young people. An investigation conducted by the University of Madras found that 34 per cent of children stated stress after watching crime shows, with young viewers having increased fear of personal safety and nightmares (15). Additionally glamorizing criminals in some shows can lead to imitation and normalization of violent behaviour.

Tribal Youth and Media Exposure

The tribal youth's introduction to new media provides a complex relationship between cultural preservation and modernization. Whereas new media technologies offer chances empowerment and social engagement, they also carry the risk of cultural disconnection. The divide is evident in many tribes across the country, where the new media serves as both means of cultural presence and catalyst for change.

Cultural Disconnect

Tribal youth, such as the Lodha tribal community in Odisha, are increasingly adopting digital technology and cosmopolitan life, causing them to become more alienated from customs and ancestral cultural systems. This change raises concerns about harm of heritage and identity, reflecting how contemporary media contributes to cultural disconnection (16).

Digital Empowerment

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs is trying to integrate tribal populations into the digital mainstream as part of its effort to promote digital inclusion. In count to facilitating this amalgamation, access to modern media also provides tribal adolescents with greater agency by improving their educational options and allowing them to participate in the disclosure of the larger society (17). Digital

inclusion has the potential to uplift the tribal' status and bring them into the mainstream society. Supreme Court Advocate Sanjay Upadhyay pushed for digitally empowering India's tribal population and said advocated for serious brainstorming for inclusion of tribals in the decision-making process. As most of the tribal habitats are located in geographically inaccessible areas with maximum remoteness, reaching them has been a grave challenge. Digital technology is one of the devices through the tribals not only can be reached out but also can get information about the world outside and stay updated. Such technology can actually make a difference (18).

Theoretical Framework:

To understand the psychological effects of online crime shows on tribal adolescents in Bero block of Ranchi district, this study draws on two important communication theories: The Social Cognitive theory and the Cultivation theory

Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) provides an additional important perspective for analysing how media affects behaviour and psychology. According to this hypothesis, people learn new emotional responses, behaviours and attitudes and by observing others, especially when there are symbolic models such as fictional characters in the media. This study uses the theory to understand how aboriginal adolescents may relate to or emulate characters such as criminal, victims or detectives depicted in online crime dramas. Such identifications may influence their emotional regulation, perceptions of social norms and behaviour. Regular exposure to glamorized depictions of violent methods of problem solving or crime may lead to the normalization of these behaviours and shape the moral judgement of young viewers. This theory is particularly relevant to adolescents, as this stage of development is marked by active identity formation and increased social learning.

George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory (1976), this theory explain how prolonged exposure to television content can shape people's perception of social reality. According to Gerbner, people who watch a lot of television contents (shows and programs about violence) are more prone to believe that the world is scary and dangerous place. This phenomenon is known as the "Mean world syndrome". This theory is extremely relevant to this study to understand how tribal adolescents may internalize skewed perceptions of justice violence and law as a result of frequent exposure to crime shows, these views can lead to mistrust, fear, increased anxiety and even desensitization to criminal activity. Given the immersive nature of OTT platforms and digital media, this acculturation effect may be even more pronounced among young and vulnerable audiences, especially in communities with low media literacy initiatives.

Objectives of the study

To study the psychological impact of digital crime dramas on tribal adolescents.

To explore the cognitive and emotional responses caused by exposure to digital crime content.

Research Design

The research performs a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews to unveil the psychological effects of digital crime dramas on tribal adolescents. The qualitative method was selected to extract advance understanding of the behavioural, emotional and cognitive, responses of adolescents to such audio-visual content. By concentrating on comprehensive personal narratives, the study pursues to capture the subjective meanings and experiences that adolescents attach to their consumption of media. This design is appropriate for addressing composite psychological phenomena that cannot be fully understood through numerical data alone.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Bero Block, located in the Ranchi District of Jharkhand, India. Bero is primarily inhabited by tribals and currently undergoing a digital shift due to increased access to internet connectivity and smartphones. This setting provides and appropriate backdrop for studying how tribal adolescents interpret, decode and experience digital crime dramas in changing technical and cultural milieu.

Population and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in the study to choose participants who might offer detailed information about the psychological effects of online crime shows. Participants were tribal teenagers between the ages of 13 and 19, residing in Bero Block, and actively exposed with online crime-based content through platforms such as social media, OTT, or YouTube services. Local **Anganwadi workers and ASHA personnel** assisted in identifying eligible participants. A total of **20 in-depth interviews** were conducted with adolescents who met the selection criteria and consented to participate. The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview schedule, targeted to elicit participants' safety perceptions, mental process, behavioural changes and emotional states with digital crime shows. In depth interviews were conducted in a conversational approach with follow up questions based on their responses.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1. Shows the emotional responses while watching the shows

Emotional Response while watching the shows	
Codes	Responses
Calm but alert	n = 12
Anxious but hooked	n = 5
Tense but can't stop watching	n = 3

Emotional Response while watching the shows: The most commonly reported feeling while watching digital crime dramas/shows was "calm but alert" (n = 12), indicating passive vigilance. This was followed by "anxious but hooked" (n = 5) and "tense but can't stop watching" (n = 3), demonstrating that the content elicited both emotional tension and high levels of involvement.

These results indicate a combination of cognitive stimulation and emotional arousal.

Table 2. Shows the mood after watching the Shows

Mood post watching the shows	
Codes	Responses
No major change	n = 9
Feeling "disturbed"	n = 7
Uneasy	n = 4

Mood post watching the shows: When asked how they felt after watching, the most common response was "no major change" (n = 9). However, a large number of people reported feeling "disturbed" (n = 7) and "uneasy" (n = 4). This suggests a variable psychological consequence, with some subjects emotionally untouched and others experiencing persistent discomfort.

Table 3. Shows the cognitive engagement of the audiences

Cognitive Engagement	
Codes	Responses
Plot twists	n = 8
Legal system involvement	n = 7
Fear of falling a prey	n = 5

Cognitive Engagement: respondents reported thoughtful about "plot twists" (n = 8), suggesting active cognitive engagement with the narrative and "legal system involvement" (n = 7) and Thoughts such as "fear of falling a prey" (n = 5) also highlight an underlying anxiety regarding personal safety, influenced by the show's content.

Table 4. Shows the effects perceived

Effect on Perceived Safety	
Codes	Responses
Watch your surroundings	n = 9
Fear rises	n = 6
More alert now	n = 5

Effect on Perceived Safety: The most mutual safety-related response was "watch your surroundings" (n = 9), followed by "fear rises" (n = 6) and "more alert now" (n = 5). These answers specify that watching crime dramas advances situational consciousness but may also increase anxiety and dread.

Table 5. Shows the memorable content themes

Memorable Content Themes	
Codes	Responses
False allegation case	n = 12
Hidden Camera footage	n = 5
Murder examination	n = 3

Memorable Content Themes: The “false allegation case” was identified as the most memorable scene type (n = 12), followed by “hidden camera footage” (n = 5) and “murder examination” (n = 3). These responses highlight the psychological impact of professed unfairness and violent crime, which appear to leave a lasting impression.

Table 6. Shows the behavioural modifications

Behavioural Modifications	
Codes	Responses
Keep lights on	n = 9
Talk less to strangers	n = 7
Avoid strangers	n = 4

Behavioural Modifications: Generally reported variations comprised “keep lights on” (n = 9), “talk less to unknowns” (n = 7), “avoid strangers” (n = 4), and reflecting increased cautiousness and self-protective behaviours in response to the content viewed.

Table 7. Shows the audiences imitating the characters

Identifying and imitating characters	
Codes	Responses
no” imitation	n = 7
trying detective work	n = 6
speaking like characters	n = 4
copying dialogues	n=3

Identifying and imitating characters: While many participants reported “no” imitation (n = 7), others engaged with the characters by “trying detective work” (n = 6), “speaking like characters” (n = 4), or “copying dialogues” (n = 3). These behaviours point to a moderate level of identification or playful mimicry.

Table 8. Shows the discussion among the family and Peer

Family and Peer Discussions

Codes	Responses
Share scary moments	n = 11
Parents Disapprove	n = 9

Family and Peer Discussions: Crime shows were typically discussed among peers, with “share scary moments” being the most common activity (n = 11). However, “parents disapprove” (n = 9) appeared as a frequent motif, indicating a generational gap in media choices and perceived appropriateness.

Table 9. Shows the family response and reactions

Family Response and Reactions	
Codes	Responses
No comments	n = 9
Mother Dislikes	n = 6
Elders Disapprove	n = 3
Asked to stop Watching	n = 2

Family Response and Reactions: Family members’ responses varied from “no comments” (n = 9) to “mother dislikes it” (n = 6), with “elders disapprove” (n = 3) and “told to stop watching” (n = 2) indicating moderate to extreme dissatisfaction among elder family members.

Table 10. Shows Society’s Perception towards the shows

Society’s Perception	
Codes	Responses
Feel unsafe	n = 13
Doubt intentions	n = 4
Cant trust easily	n = 3

Society’s Perception: Participants’ views towards others appeared to transform negatively, with responses such as “feel unsafe” (n = 13), “doubt intentions” (n = 4), and “can’t trust easily” (n = 3). This reflects a breakdown in interpersonal trust, possibly caused by continuous exposure to themes of betrayal and crime.

Table 11. Shows the resilience tactics

Resilience Tactics	
Codes	Responses
Talk to Friends	n = 4
Close Eyes	n = 4
Ignore Bad Scenes	n = 3

Distract Myself	n = 3
Watch Cartoons	n = 3
Skip Violent Parts	n = 3

Resilience Tactics: Participants used a variety of coping mechanisms to manage their distress, including "talk to friends" (n = 4), "close eyes" (n = 4), "ignore bad scenes" (n = 3), "distract myself" (n = 3), "watch cartoons" (n = 3), and "skip violent parts" (n = 3). These tactics imply an attempt to control emotional responses during or after exposure.

Table 12. Shows the learning outcomes

Perceived Learning Outcomes	
Codes	Responses
Basic Ideas on Self-Defence	n = 12
Legal Information	n = 5
Learnt to be alert	n = 3

Perceived Learning Outcomes: In terms of knowledge acquired, the most frequently mentioned learning was "basic ideas on self-defence" (n = 12), followed by "legal information" (n = 5), "learned to be alert" (n = 3). While several participants identified practical insights from their watching experience, while others perceived little educational benefit from their viewing experience.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of this study suggest that digital crime dramas significantly influence the behavior and psychology of tribal youth. Recurrent themes such as increased alertness, changes in behavior, heightened anxiety or tension, and diminished trust in others indicate a complex and multifaceted reaction to crime-related content.

From the perspective of Cultivation Theory, the responses show a mainstreaming outcome, where long and continued exposure to television and media content shapes viewers' perceptions of reality. Participants who stated augmented hyper-vigilance, fear and a general feeling of being unsafe appear to affect a "mean world syndrome," trusting that the world is more dangerous than it actually is. The constant representation of betrayal, violence, and injustice in crime dramas mostly cultivates a worldview categorized by fear and suspicion. This is predominantly apparent in participants who specified they began avoiding strangers, talked less to unknown people or kept lights of their rooms switched on. behaviours driven by a heightened perception of personal risk.

Complementing this, Social Cognitive Theory helps enlighten the procedure of learning and imitation seen in this investigation. Numerous respondents reported imitating characters by "copying dialogues," "talking like

them," or trying "detective work." These activities validate observational learning, where adolescents model behaviours they see as fascinating or rewarding. Additionally, the acceptance of coping mechanisms like watching cartoons, skipping violent scenes, or talking to friends indicates active self-regulation, another key construct of the theory. Notably, some participants also reported gaining legal awareness, learning basic self-defence or showing that cognitive processing of media content can lead to perceived skill acquisition.

Both theories contribute to understanding the findings' dual nature the dual nature of media impact, while crime dramas can instil dread and mistrust (as seen in Cultivation Theory), they also offer opportunities for identification, imitation, and learning (as proposed by Social Cognitive Theory).

Conclusion

This qualitative investigation reveals the profound behavioural and psychological impact of crime shows and dramas on Indigenous adolescents, a group often underrepresented in media studies. Participants reported heightened vigilance, anxiety, and feelings of interpersonal distrust stemming from repeated exposure to crime themed narratives in audiovisual content. For example, adolescents described being more cautious of their surroundings at night or questioning the intentions of their neighbors, reflecting a mindset where danger is perceived as omnipresent.

These emotional and cognitive responses align closely with George Gerbner's cultivation theory, which posits that prolonged media consumption shapes perceptions of reality, particularly increasing fear among heavy viewers. In Indigenous contexts, where community bonds and oral traditions traditionally foster trust, such distortions erode social cohesion, portraying isolated villages as hotbeds of crime.

Furthermore, instances of character imitation such as mimicking investigative methods or aggressive confrontations support Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory. Through observational learning, adolescents adopt modeled behaviours, especially when reinforced by compelling dramatic tension, leading to actions like vigilance in real-world games or conflicts.

This dual effect makes crime dramas a double-edged sword: they erode feelings of safety and community trust while simultaneously serving as informal learning tools for problem-solving and empathy. To mitigate the risks, targeted media literacy programs are crucial for adolescents in vulnerable tribal communities. These initiatives should equip young people with critical viewing skills, enabling them to distinguish between fictional narratives and real-life realities, understand cultural stereotypes, and utilize media effectively for personal growth and advocacy. By fostering media literacy, such programs can transform passive consumption into empowered engagement, thereby safeguarding mental well-being

Abbreviations

CBT- Cognitive Behavioural Therapies

OTT- Over the Top

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Ethics Approval

This study does not need any ethical approval.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the study or this article.

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