RESEARCH PAPER

Medical Drama in the Digital Era: Audience Perceptions of Healthcare Representation in the Tamil OTT Series Heart Beat

Dr. M. Lakshmipriya[1], Dr. Ansu Elsa Joy[2], Joshua S[3]
[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, India
Email: lakshmim6@srmist.edu.in
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9916-4501
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, India
Email: ansuj@srmist.edu.in
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6785-7801
[3]Postgraduate Student, Department of Visual Communication, Faculty of Science and Humanities, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur, India
Email: joshuastephan2004@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1725-019X
Corresponding Author: Dr. M. Lakshmipriya

ABSTRACT
Digital streaming platforms have reshaped the production and consumption of audiovisual content, allowing regional narratives to reach wider audiences and creating new spaces for genre-based storytelling. Medical dramas distributed through OTT platforms present dramatized representations of healthcare institutions, medical professionals, and hospital environments, which can influence viewers' perceptions and understanding of healthcare practices. This study investigates the representation of healthcare in the Tamil OTT medical drama series Heart Beat available on Disney+ Hotstar and examines how audiences perceive the realism and credibility of these portrayals. The research adopts a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative content analysis of selected episodes with a quantitative audience survey. The content analysis explores the depiction of medical procedures, professional roles, ethical dilemmas, and hospital settings within the narrative. The audience survey gathers viewers' opinions regarding the authenticity of healthcare representation and the influence of the series on their understanding of medical practices. The findings reveal that the series portrays healthcare professionals as committed and skilled individuals working within a structured hospital environment, emphasizing teamwork, patient care, and professional responsibility. Although certain medical scenarios are dramatized for narrative engagement, most viewers perceive the overall representation of healthcare as relatively realistic and credible. The study also highlights the role of OTT platforms in shaping audience engagement with serialized narratives and contributing to broader awareness of healthcare environments. By examining both textual representation and audience interpretation, the research contributes to discussions on healthcare communication, media representation, and the growing influence of digital streaming platforms in contemporary media culture.

Keywords: Medical Drama, OTT Platforms, Healthcare Representation, Audience Perception and Digital Streaming.
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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital streaming platforms has transformed the landscape of audiovisual storytelling, enabling the emergence of diverse genres and narratives that reach wide audiences across cultural contexts. Among these genres, medical dramas have long held a significant place in global television culture, offering compelling depictions of healthcare professionals, hospital environments, and the ethical dilemmas associated with medical practice. Traditionally popular in Western television, medical dramas are now increasingly produced in regional Indian languages and distributed through Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms. These platforms provide creators with greater narrative freedom and allow audiences to engage with content in more personalized and immersive ways. As a result, medical narratives presented through OTT series have the potential to influence viewers' understanding of healthcare systems, medical procedures, and the professional lives of doctors and nurses.

In recent years, Tamil-language OTT content has gained considerable popularity, reflecting local cultural contexts while also adopting narrative styles commonly associated with global streaming content. Within this evolving media ecosystem, the Tamil medical drama series *Heart Beat* has attracted attention for its portrayal of hospital life and the experiences of healthcare professionals. Medical dramas often blend factual medical information with dramatic storytelling, which raises important questions about the accuracy, realism, and ethical representation of healthcare practices. Existing studies on medical dramas are primarily focused on Western series, suggest that such portrayals can shape audience perceptions of medical professionals, influence public expectations of healthcare services, and contribute to informal health education. However, there remains limited scholarly exploration of how regional Indian OTT medical dramas portray healthcare and how audiences interpret these representations.

Given the increasing consumption of digital streaming content in India, it becomes important to examine how

healthcare narratives are constructed and received within this medium. While OTT platforms offer creative flexibility and high production values, they may also blur the line between realistic medical representation and dramatized storytelling designed to maximize viewer engagement. Consequently, viewers may develop perceptions about medical practices and healthcare institutions based on these mediated narratives. Despite the growing popularity of Tamil OTT series, there is a noticeable research gap in understanding how audiences perceive the authenticity and credibility of healthcare representations in such regional medical dramas.

Addressing this gap, the present study focuses on the Tamil OTT medical drama series *Heart Beat* to examine both the representation of healthcare within the narrative and the audience's perception of its realism. Specifically, the study aims to examine the portrayal of healthcare practices, medical professionals, and hospital environments depicted in the series. It further seeks to analyze audience perceptions regarding the realism and credibility of these representations and to explore how digital streaming platforms influence viewers' understanding and interpretation of medical narratives presented in *Heart Beat*. By combining textual examination of the series with audience responses, the research attempts to bridge the gap between media representation and viewer interpretation in the context of regional OTT content.

To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a mixed-method research design. It integrates qualitative content analysis of selected episodes of the series with a quantitative audience survey designed to capture viewers' perceptions of healthcare representation. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of both the narrative construction of medical realities within the series and the ways in which audiences interpret these portrayals.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature on medical dramas, media representation of healthcare, and audience perception studies within the context of digital streaming platforms. This is followed by the methodology section, which outlines the research design, sampling procedures, and data collection methods used in the study. The subsequent sections present the analysis and discussion of the findings derived from the content analysis and audience survey. Finally, the paper concludes with key insights regarding the representation of healthcare in Tamil OTT medical dramas and their implications for media studies, healthcare communication, and digital storytelling.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Medical dramas have been widely examined in media and communication studies because of their ability to combine entertainment with depictions of healthcare practices, medical professionals, and hospital environments. These programs often function as informal sources of information, shaping audience perceptions of healthcare systems and medical procedures. Turow (2010) explored the development of the medical television genre and argued that such programs construct symbolic representations of hospitals and physicians that influence public understanding of medical institutions. In these narratives, doctors are frequently portrayed as authoritative and highly skilled professionals, while complex medical procedures are simplified to enhance storytelling and audience engagement. Scholars have also investigated the influence of medical dramas on viewers' perceptions and expectations of healthcare. Quick (2009) examined how exposure to medical television programs can shape viewers' beliefs about physicians and healthcare services, suggesting that frequent viewers may develop heightened expectations regarding medical expertise, treatment success, and hospital efficiency. Similarly, Morgan and Shanahan (2010), drawing on cultivation theory, argue that long-term exposure to television narratives can gradually influence viewers' perceptions of social realities, including healthcare systems. These studies indicate that repeated portrayals of healthcare settings in media may contribute to the formation of audience attitudes and expectations regarding medical practices.

Another significant body of research focuses on the realism and ethical representation of medical practices in television dramas. Czarny et al. (2010) examined ethical dilemmas depicted in popular medical dramas and found that while such programs highlight moral conflicts faced by healthcare professionals, they often simplify complex ethical decision-making processes. These dramatized portrayals may raise awareness about medical ethics but can also lead to misunderstandings about real-world healthcare practices. Lupton (2012) further emphasizes that media representations of health and medicine contribute to the social construction of meanings related to illness, healthcare institutions, and medical authority.

In recent years, the growth of digital streaming platforms has significantly transformed the production and consumption of audiovisual content. OTT platforms provide greater creative freedom and allow regionally produced narratives to reach broader audiences. Lobato (2019) highlights that digital streaming services have reshaped global media distribution by enabling localized storytelling and on-demand viewing practices. In the Indian context, OTT platforms have contributed to the expansion of regional language web series, including Tamil-language productions across diverse genres. However, despite the increasing popularity of Tamil OTT content, scholarly research examining healthcare representation within these digital series remains limited. Particularly, there is a lack of studies analyzing how medical practices and hospital environments are portrayed in Tamil-language medical dramas and how audiences perceive the realism and credibility of these representations. Addressing this gap, the present study focuses on the Tamil OTT medical drama series *Heart Beat* to examine healthcare representation and audience perceptions within the context of digital streaming platforms.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

The present study adopts a mixed-method research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of healthcare representation and audience perception in the Tamil OTT medical drama series *Heart Beat*. The series consists of two seasons, both of which are considered for the purpose of analysis in this study.





Figure 1 & 2. Poster of *Heart Beat* Season 1 & 2.

The qualitative component involves a content analysis of the selected episodes from both seasons of the series to examine how healthcare practices, medical professionals, and hospital environments are portrayed. The quantitative component consists of an audience survey aimed at analyzing viewers' perceptions regarding the realism and credibility of the healthcare representation presented in the series. The combination of these two approaches enables the study to explore both the textual representation within the media content and the audience interpretation of those representations.

Data Collection:

Content Analysis:

For the qualitative component, selected episodes from both Season 1 and Season 2 of the Tamil OTT medical drama series *Heart Beat* were analyzed to examine the portrayal of healthcare practices, hospital settings, and the roles of medical professionals. Episodes were selected based on their relevance to key medical narratives and the depiction of clinical situations within the series. A coding framework was developed to analyze specific elements such as the representation of medical procedures, professional roles of doctors and nurses, ethical dilemmas, communication between healthcare providers and patients, and the overall depiction of hospital environments. The analysis focused on identifying patterns, themes, and narrative strategies used in portraying healthcare practices in the series.

The following scenes from the series were selected for analysis, as they correspond to the coding categories identified for examining the representation of healthcare practices and professional roles.

Emergency Medical Response

One of the key scenes analyzed from Season 1 depicts a critically injured road-accident victim being rushed into the emergency department. Junior doctors initially struggle to stabilize the patient while senior doctors quickly assess the injuries and direct the emergency treatment process. The scene emphasizes the urgency of trauma care and illustrates the coordination between doctors and nurses during critical situations. This sequence was analyzed to understand the representation of emergency medical response, teamwork among healthcare professionals, and the realism of emergency procedures portrayed in the series.





Figure 3 & 4. Emergency treatment Scene.

Medical Training and Hospital Hierarchy

Another scene from Season 1 focuses on the introduction of newly appointed medical interns to the hospital environment. Senior doctors assign cases to the interns and guide them through patient examinations, correcting their mistakes and supervising their work. The scene highlights the structured hierarchy within hospital settings and reflects the learning environment experienced by young medical professionals. This scene was examined to analyze the representation of medical training and professional hierarchies between interns, residents, and senior doctors.





Figure 5 & 6. Senior doctors guide interns.

Doctor–Patient Communication

A significant interaction scene from Season 1 portrays a doctor explaining a serious diagnosis to a patient and their family members. The conversation reflects emotional tension and demonstrates the difficulty doctors face while communicating sensitive medical information. The scene was analyzed to explore the depiction of doctor–patient communication, emotional engagement of healthcare professionals, and the ethical responsibility involved in conveying medical information.



Figure 7. Doctor explaining a serious diagnosis.

Surgical Procedure and Medical Technology

A surgical sequence from Season 2 illustrates the preparation and execution of a complex medical operation. The surgical team discusses the treatment plan in the operation theatre while junior doctors observe and assist the procedure. This scene highlights the use of medical technology and the collaborative roles of healthcare professionals during surgical intervention. The analysis of this sequence focuses on the representation of clinical procedures, professional teamwork, and the functioning of the hospital's surgical environment.



Figure 8. Treatment plan in the operation theatre.

Ethical Dilemmas in Healthcare

Another important narrative moment in Season 2 presents a conflict involving treatment decisions for a critically ill patient whose family cannot afford the necessary medical expenses. The discussion among doctors reveals the ethical tension between hospital policies and patient care responsibilities. This scene was analyzed to examine the portrayal of medical ethics, healthcare accessibility, and the moral responsibilities of doctors within institutional constraints.





Figure 9 & 10. Moral responsibilities.

Emotional Impact of Patient Loss

A later scene in Season 2 depicts the aftermath of a patient's death despite intensive medical efforts. Doctors and interns reflect on the emotional burden associated with their profession. This sequence highlights the psychological challenges faced by healthcare workers and emphasizes the human dimension of medical practice. The scene was analyzed to explore themes of emotional labour, professional resilience, and the humanization of healthcare professionals.



Figure 11. Psychological challenges.

Audience Survey:

To examine audience perceptions of healthcare representation in the Tamil OTT medical drama series *Heart Beat*, a structured questionnaire survey was conducted among viewers who had watched both the seasons of the series. A total of 120 respondents participated in the survey. The primary aim of the survey was to collect viewers' opinions regarding the realism, credibility, and influence of the medical narratives depicted in the series. The questionnaire was designed to gather information on how audiences interpret the portrayal of healthcare practices, medical professionals, and hospital environments presented in *Heart Beat*.

The survey instrument consisted of both close-ended and Likert scale–based questions to measure respondents' attitudes and perceptions toward healthcare representation in the series. Respondents were selected using a convenience sampling method, targeting individuals who actively consume OTT content and are familiar with the series *Heart Beat*. The responses collected through this questionnaire formed the basis for the quantitative analysis of audience perceptions in the study.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the content analysis were examined using qualitative thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to healthcare representation in the series. The coded data helped in understanding how medical professionals, hospital settings, and healthcare practices were narratively constructed within the series.

The survey data collected from the audience were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, such as frequency distribution and percentage analysis, to interpret viewers' perceptions and attitudes toward the representation of healthcare in *Heart Beat*. The findings from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses were then integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of how healthcare is portrayed in the series and how audiences interpret and evaluate these portrayals.

RESULTS

The study employed a mixed-method approach**,** integrating quantitative survey data and qualitative content analysis to examine the representation of healthcare in the Tamil OTT medical drama series *Heart Beat* and to understand audience perceptions of its realism and credibility. The findings provide insights into how healthcare practices, medical professionals, and hospital environments are portrayed in the series and how viewers interpret these representations within the context of digital streaming platforms.

The qualitative content analysis of selected episodes indicates that the series portrays healthcare professionals as dedicated and competent individuals who work collaboratively to manage medical challenges and patient care. Doctors are depicted as key decision-makers responsible for diagnosis and treatment, while nurses play a significant supportive role in the functioning of the hospital environment. The narrative emphasizes teamwork, professional responsibility, and emotional commitment within the healthcare setting. The hospital environment is presented with modern infrastructure, medical equipment, and clinical spaces, contributing to a sense of realism in the depiction of healthcare institutions. At the same time, certain medical situations and emergency scenarios appear dramatized in order to enhance narrative intensity and audience engagement.

The quantitative survey findings reveal that a majority of viewers perceive the portrayal of healthcare practices and hospital environments in *Heart Beat* as relatively realistic and credible. Many respondents expressed that the series reflects the dedication and challenges faced by healthcare professionals. However, some viewers also noted that particular medical procedures and emergency situations may be exaggerated for dramatic purposes. Despite this, most respondents considered the overall representation of healthcare in the series to be believable and informative to a certain extent.

The findings further suggest that digital streaming platforms play a significant role in shaping viewers' engagement with medical narratives. Respondents indicated that OTT platforms provide a more immersive and accessible viewing experience compared to traditional television, allowing audiences to engage more deeply with serialized storytelling. As a result, medical dramas such as *Heart Beat* may contribute to increasing viewers' awareness and understanding of healthcare environments, professional roles, and ethical challenges within the medical field.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into the representation of healthcare practices in the Tamil OTT medical drama series *Heart Beat* and the ways in which audiences interpret these portrayals. By combining qualitative content analysis and quantitative audience survey data, the study highlights how medical narratives presented through digital streaming platforms can influence viewers' perceptions of healthcare professionals, hospital environments, and medical practices. The results indicate that the series portrays healthcare professionals as dedicated and responsible individuals who operate in a collaborative and high-pressure environment. This representation reflects common narrative patterns observed in medical dramas, where doctors and nurses are often depicted as highly skilled professionals managing complex medical and ethical situations. Such portrayals contribute to constructing a professional image of healthcare workers while also emphasizing the emotional and moral dimensions of medical practice.

The audience survey findings reveal that viewers largely perceive the healthcare representations in *Heart Beat* as relatively realistic and credible. Many respondents acknowledged that the series reflects aspects of hospital life,

professional responsibilities, and patient care, although some viewers also recognized that certain medical scenarios are dramatized for narrative purposes. This balance between realism and dramatization is consistent with existing research on medical television dramas, which suggests that entertainment narratives often combine factual elements with fictional storytelling to maintain audience engagement. The findings therefore indicate that viewers are generally aware of the dramatic nature of the series while still perceiving it as a meaningful depiction of healthcare settings and professional practices.

Another significant observation emerging from the study is the role of digital streaming platforms in shaping audience engagement with medical narratives. OTT platforms provide greater flexibility in storytelling and allow audiences to consume content at their convenience, which may enhance viewer immersion and emotional connection with the narrative. Respondents indicated that medical dramas presented through OTT platforms can increase awareness about healthcare professions and the challenges faced by medical practitioners. This suggests that digital media content has the potential to contribute to public understanding of healthcare systems, even when presented within fictional storytelling frameworks. In this context, regional OTT series such as *Heart Beat* also play an important role in presenting localized narratives that reflect cultural and social contexts while reaching broader audiences.

The findings of this study have several implications for media production and media research. For content creators, the results highlight the importance of balancing dramatic storytelling with responsible and accurate representations of healthcare practices. Since viewers often interpret these narratives as reflections of real-world medical environments, inaccurate portrayals may contribute to misconceptions about healthcare systems and professional roles. For researchers in media and communication studies, the study demonstrates the significance of examining regional OTT content as an emerging area of scholarly inquiry. The growing popularity of digital streaming platforms has expanded the scope of media representation, making it necessary to explore how localized digital narratives influence audience perceptions across different cultural contexts.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations. The survey was conducted with a limited number of respondents, which may not fully represent the broader population of OTT viewers. Additionally, the content analysis focused on selected episodes of the series, which may not capture the entire range of themes and narratives presented throughout the series.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of healthcare practices in the Tamil OTT medical drama series *Heart Beat* and explored how audiences perceive the realism and credibility of these portrayals within the context of digital streaming platforms. By employing a mixed-method approach that combined qualitative content analysis with quantitative audience survey data, the research provided insights into both the narrative construction of healthcare environments in the series and the ways in which viewers interpret these representations. The findings indicate that *Heart Beat* portrays healthcare professionals as dedicated and competent individuals who operate within a structured hospital environment, emphasizing teamwork, professional responsibility, and patient care. The depiction of hospital infrastructure, medical procedures, and interpersonal communication between doctors and patients contributes to creating a sense of authenticity, although elements of dramatization are present to enhance narrative engagement.

Audience responses suggest that viewers generally perceive the healthcare representation in the series as moderately realistic and credible. While respondents acknowledged that certain medical scenarios and emergency situations may be dramatized for storytelling purposes, they also recognized the series' effort to depict the professional challenges and ethical dilemmas encountered by healthcare practitioners. These findings highlight the dual nature of medical dramas, where entertainment and informational elements coexist to shape audience perceptions of healthcare practices and institutions.

The study also underscores the growing influence of OTT platforms in shaping contemporary media consumption and audience interpretation of narrative content. Digital streaming platforms enable viewers to engage more deeply with serialized storytelling and provide creators with opportunities to develop complex narratives that reflect local cultural contexts. In this regard, *Heart Beat* represents an example of how regional OTT productions can present healthcare narratives that resonate with audiences while contributing to broader discussions about medical professionalism and hospital life.

To conclude, the research demonstrates that medical dramas on digital streaming platforms play a significant role in constructing and communicating narratives about healthcare practices and professional roles. Although these portrayals may incorporate elements of dramatization, they nonetheless contribute to shaping public perceptions and awareness of healthcare environments. As OTT platforms continue to expand the reach of regional storytelling, further scholarly attention to healthcare representation in digital media will be essential for understanding the relationship between entertainment narratives, audience interpretation, and social perceptions of medical practice.

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