

Portrayal of Drugs in OTT Movies: Assessing Impact on Youth and the Regulatory Framework in India

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ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of Over-the-Top (OTT) streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Disney+ Hotstar, HBO Max, and others has fundamentally transformed the global media consumption landscape. Unlike traditional broadcast television, these platforms operate with fewer content restrictions, enabling creators to explore complex, adult-oriented themes, including substance abuse, drug culture, and addiction, with unprecedented candor. While such portrayals can serve legitimate artistic and educational purposes, mounting evidence suggests a troubling correlation between frequent exposure to drug-glamorizing content and shifting attitudes toward substance use among adolescents and young adults. This paper critically examines the intersection between drug portrayal on OTT platforms, its psychological and sociological impact on youth in India, and the adequacy of current regulatory responses. It argues for a nuanced regulatory approach that incorporates stricter content guidelines, accountability mechanisms, and media literacy initiatives, while preserving artistic expression.

Keywords: N/A.

How to cite this article: Bhutia O, Rastogi S., Portrayal of Drugs in OTT Movies: Assessing Impact on Youth and the Regulatory Framework in India. *Int J Drug Deliv Technol.* 2026;16(11s): 352-357. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.11s.33

Source of support: Nil.

Conflict of interest: Nil

INTRODUCTION

Mass communication platforms, including cinema and OTT platforms, serve as significant channels for the global dissemination of information and entertainment. These media are pervasive, easily accessible, and highly engaging for the general public, frequently influencing and shaping their perspectives and opinions on important issues¹. Films serve as one of the most powerful mediums for engaging with and reflecting upon a wide range of social issues through narrative and cinematic storytelling². India's largest film industry, commonly known as Bollywood, is also the biggest producer of

feature films globally, releasing approximately 800–1000 films each year and reaching an audience that constitutes over 30% of the world's population³.

Since its origin in 1913, Bollywood has consistently created diverse and imaginative representations of societal themes⁴, striving to strike a balance between commercial success and critical as well as audience appreciation. In recent times, the shift from conventional films to OTT has changed the depiction of the use of drugs in visual media, both in terms of the depiction and its effect on the audience. Unlike conventional forms of media, OTT has more freedom to create content that, in

¹ Sohini, C., 2020. Bollywood on the brain: gender and mental health in Hindi cinema. *Lancet Psychiatry* 7 (11), 939–942. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(20\)30428](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30428)

² Bhugra, D., 2005. Mad tales from Bollywood: The impact of social, political, and economic climate on the portrayal of mental illness in Hindi films. *Acta Psychiatrica Scand.* 112 (4), 250–256. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0447.2005.00598.x>

³ Shergill, M., Kumar, S., 2015. An exploration of portrayal of mental illness in bollywood films. *Eur. Psychiatry* 30 (EPV07-e-Poster 07: Cultural Psychiatry), 1300. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0924-9338\(15\)31018-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0924-9338(15)31018-X).

⁴ Dave, S., Tandon, K., 2011. Cinemedication in psychiatry. *Adv. Psychiatr. Treat.* 17 (4), 301–308. <https://doi.org/10.1192/apt.bp.107.004945>.

most cases, depicts the harsh realities of society, such as the abuse of drugs, violence, and sexuality. This creative liberty has given rise to considerable public discourse, especially concerning the depiction of drugs and their possible impact on vulnerable youth viewers. Indian web series such as *Mirzapur*, *Sacred Games*, and films such as *Uda Punjab* have depicted scenes of drug abuse, which have sparked public concern⁵. The depiction of drugs in these films has varied, ranging from the realistic effect of drug addiction on society to the glorification of drug abuse.

The youth population represents the main consumer group for OTT services, with 68% of OTT users falling in the 15-34 years age group⁶. This significant overlap between the OTT consumer base and the population group that is most susceptible to substance use initiation has created a significant point of convergence between media exposure and public health. Recent epidemiological trends have shown cause for alarm. Results of a nationwide survey have shown that 15.1% of school-going youth have used psychoactive substances in their lifetime, with the average age of initiation being 12.9 years⁷. While several factors contribute to substance use among youth, the role of media is a modifiable factor that needs to be explored.

It has been observed that in many OTT content, stories can be seen to have extended and in-depth portrayals of drug usage, violence, and reckless behavior in a way that is appealing and glamorous. In many stories, characters involved in drug usage can be seen to be charismatic and dominant in society. This can be seen to glamorize drug usage in the minds of the audience.

It has also been observed that after engaging the audience for several hours in immersive and glamorous storytelling, the creators of the OTT content can be seen to add a disclaimer at the end of the story that says “say no to drugs” and “drug-free society” in a way that does not relate to the values embedded in the story. This can be seen to be contradictory to the main message in the story.

For example, in the popular Netflix series “*Sacred Games*”, drug usage is frequently depicted in the broader context of crime and politics. Characters can be seen using drugs in high-stakes settings that subtly link drug usage to power and stress-relieving strategies. Even though the series tries to highlight the darker side of crime and its impact on society, the repetitive nature of drug usage in the series can lead to a form of desensitisation. In this case, the inclusion of a disclaimer at the end of the episode or series can be seen as more of a symbolic act than a serious effort to engage viewers socially.

Similarly, in “*Paatal Lok*”, the use of substances is depicted as part of the gritty portrayal of the lives of marginalized communities, criminal organizations, and mental health struggles. The characters involved in the act of substance use are shown with depth and complexity, which can, in turn, lead to the blurring of the moral implications of the act itself. The depiction of the reality of the environment, while realistic, can be seen as leading to the normalization of the subject matter, as seen in the above example, wherein a short disclaimer at the end of the show fails to sufficiently offset the prolonged exposure to the subject matter, thereby highlighting the

⁵ Vogue India, <https://www.vogue.in/culture-and-living/content/movies-shows-about-drugs-narcotics-netflix-amazon-prime-video-disney-hotstar>, (Last Visited January 23, 2026)

⁶ Ormax Media, <https://www.ormaxmedia.com/data/library/TheOrmaxOTT>

AudienceReport-Sizing-2023-Details.pdf, (Last Visited January 23, 2026)

⁷ Vision IAS. <https://visionias.in/current-affairs/news-today/2025-12-10/society/substance-use-among-school-going-adolescents-in-india>, (Last Visited January 23, 2026)

fact that disclaimers are merely a formality and not a regulation in the true sense of the word.

Theoretical Frameworks: Understanding Media Influence on Youth.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory, sometimes referred to as the cultivation hypothesis or cultivation analysis, was an approach developed by Professor George Gerbner, dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. He initiated the “Cultural Indicators” research project in the mid-1960s to examine whether, and in what ways, television viewing shapes audiences’ perceptions of everyday reality. Situated within the “effects” tradition, cultivation research suggests that television exerts long-term influences that are subtle, gradual, and indirect, yet cumulative and ultimately significant⁸. According to cultivation theory, if you are exposed to something for long enough, you will begin to feel as if you are experiencing it in your own life. In the case of media (television, radio, movies, OTT Platforms etc.), a heavy user will eventually begin to believe that the majority of people who watch that medium would share the same perception. The same applies to drug use; if a person views drug use on television or in a movie repeatedly, they will also begin to believe that drug use is prevalent, normal, and has no consequences. In the context of India, if the youth are constantly exposed to protagonists using drugs without severe repercussions, or if the use of drugs is seen to be associated with the glamorous lifestyle of the protagonists, the theory of cultivation suggests that the youth might be influenced to normalize the use of drugs.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory was introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura. According to this theory, a lot of learning happens through observation. Instead of relying on their own experiences or trial and error, people observe what others do, what happens as a result, and then act accordingly⁹. Social learning theory is another important framework in understanding media effects in relation to substance use. Bandura's theory of social learning emphasizes observational learning as an important mechanism of learning in which an individual learns by observing others. Observational learning occurs when an individual is exposed to attractive, powerful, or similar models. Four processes of observational learning:

Attention: The observer must attend to the modeled behavior.

Retention: The behavior must be remembered.

Reproduction: The observer must possess the capability to replicate the behavior.

Motivation: Perceived rewards or punishments influence the likelihood of imitation

If OTT characters, who renowned actors often play, are seen to be using drugs, young audiences will tend to focus more on them and learn from them. In addition, if the characters are seen to be achieving favorable outcomes without suffering any negative repercussions for their drug use, the motivation to mimic them will be high. On the other hand, if the characters are seen to be suffering from the dire consequences of drug abuse, the deterrent effect will be triggered. As social learning and addiction studies have shown, drug use has functional consequences for the organism that increase the probability of future drug use. Personal factors like episodes of depression can be triggered by environmental factors like media exposure. This

⁸ Montgomery College, <https://pressbooks.montgomerycollege.edu/comtheory/chapter/chapter-16-cultivation-theory/>, (Last Visited 28 January 2026)

⁹ Science Direct, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/theory-of-social-learning>, (Last Visited 28 January 2026)

reciprocal determinism, in which personal factors and environmental influences interact dynamically with behavior, points to the role of media in a causal web.

Drug Portrayal on Indian OTT Platforms: Content Analysis.

Some movies available on OTT platforms that show drug usage in a way that may be construed to be glorified, normalized, or even aestheticized are listed below¹⁰.

Kaalakandi – Disney+ Hotstar

Kaalakaandi stands apart from the usual content seen on platforms like Netflix, Disney+ Hotstar, and YouTube. The film stars Saif Ali Khan in the lead role, portraying a man who discovers that he has stomach cancer and only a limited time left to live. After the initial shock, he chooses not to dwell on his condition but instead to embrace life fully. Determined to experience what he has previously avoided, he begins experimenting with things he has never tried before—including drugs like LSD, along with smoking and alcohol. This reckless mix propels him into an intense and surreal journey unlike anything he has ever experienced.

Dev. D – Netflix

In recent times, there have been numerous remakes of the movie “Devdas” that generally depict scenes set in the British era with similar dialogues, locations, and costumes. However, in the movie “Dev.D,” Anurag Kashyap took a unique turn by portraying the movie with a realistic point of view. Therefore, with this unique twist, the movie “Dev.D” is definitely a must-watch on Netflix. The movie portrays the story of the protagonist named Dev, who takes up smoking and other drugs after seeing his beloved, Paro, get married to somebody else.

Such scenes in the movie may have a significant effect on the youth, especially because of the emotional and visual intensity of such substance use. When such a form of substance use is depicted as a solution for heartbreak or personal failure, it may have an unintentional effect of normalising and even justifying such an act among the youth. The young and vulnerable may view substance use as a solution for emotional distress, especially if such consequences are not heavily emphasized. Eventually, such a depiction may influence attitudes and make such an act seem less harmful and even acceptable, thereby affecting the behavioral tendencies of the youth.

Drug Lords- Netflix

The documentary series "Drug Lords" is available on the online streaming service Netflix, which offers detailed narratives about some of the most powerful drug lords and the global drug trade. This has the potential to impact the lives of the youth. Although the series is informative, there is also the potential for the lifestyles of the drug lords, such as Pablo Escobar, to be portrayed in a positive manner. This is because the series is also focused on the wealth, power, and influence that they enjoyed. This could cause the youth to believe that the drug trade is directly related to their social status and success. Furthermore, the detailed narratives could also cause the youth to be more interested in the lifestyles of the drug lords, which may lead to experimentation and risk-taking behavior. The information presented in this series also offers information on the downfall of drug lords. However, it may also make youth think that drug lords achieve success and wealth through their activities.

Dabba Cartel- Netflix

¹⁰ GQ India, 7 Bollywood drug movies on Netflix, Disney+ Hotstar and YouTube that show the dark side of substance abuse | GQ India, (Last Visited 27 January 2026)

has faced criticism for the way it portrays the drug trade, as it may trivialize the gravity of the drug business. Although the series tries to showcase a female-dominated crime narrative, it may not effectively separate glorification from criticism, as it shows how the characters are achieving financial independence, power, and empowerment through illegal means. This may create a narrative that may not be appropriate, as it may show crime as a way of empowerment, especially for young viewers. Another issue that may be raised against Dabba Cartel is that, as it shows a drug distribution service as a part of the drug business, it may not effectively show the gravity of a drug-related crime. The series may not effectively address the social, legal, and health implications of drug abuse, as it may not effectively show the damage that drug abuse may cause to individuals and society. In terms of regulation and ethics, this may not be appropriate, as it may affect the youth, especially in terms of how it may indirectly influence them to take part in the drug economy.

Regulation Framework in India for Portrayal of Drugs in OTT Movies:

No specific legislation in India governs the depiction of drugs in movies shown on Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms. Movies shown in theaters are governed by the Cinematograph Act of 1952, which mandates that films receive certification from the Central Board of Film Certification. However, there is no such mechanism in place for OTTs. In the absence of specific legislation, the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules of 2021 (IT Rules 2021) and the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic

Substances Act of 1985 (NDPS) can be applied indirectly through advisories on abetment.¹¹

Part III of the IT Rules, 2021, regulates online curated content publishers, such as OTTs, through a three-tier self-regulatory mechanism. Part III of the Code of Ethics of the Rules mandates that “a publisher shall not transmit, publish, or exhibit any information which is prohibited under any law or has been prohibited by a court of law.” The guidelines for classification of content have also emphasized the need for such content to be classified in accordance with the norms of the society in which it is published, to ensure sensitive depiction of complex issues such as drug abuse, particularly in the context of content meant for younger audiences, and to evaluate the impact of the content in general, depending upon the target audience¹².

The NDPS Act indirectly deals with drug depiction on OTT platforms through a potential abetment under Section 29, according to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) advisories. There are no provisions directly dealing with fictional drug depiction, but glamorization can be viewed as promoting drug offenses under Sections 15-20 relating to production/sale or Section 27 relating to consumption. Section 29 of the NDPS Act deals with a penalty for abetment, conspiracy, or attempting to commit any offense under this act with equal severity as the original act. Sections 15-20 deal with handling narcotics such as cannabis or psychotropics, while Section 27 deals with consumption. Further, in 2024, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) has released an advisory¹³ to OTT platforms, warning them against promoting, glamorising, or glorifying drug use in their content. It

¹¹ Medianama, <https://www.medianama.com/2024/12/223-broadcasting-ministry-advisory-ott-platforms-drug-abuse-concerns-creative-freedom/>, (Last Visited 6 February 2026)

¹² Mondaq, <https://www.mondaq.com/india/healthcare/1570310/advisory-for-ott-platforms-on-streaming-of-narcotic-drugs-related-content>, (Last Visited 6 February 2026)

¹³ https://www.argus-p.com/uploads/km_updates/download/1736855059_Advisory_26_11_24.pdf, (Last Visited, 7 February 2026)

emphasized that the depiction of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances may have a harmful influence on “young and impressionable viewers”.

The advisory issued the following directions for OTT platforms:

Due Diligence in Review of Content: The OTT platforms must ensure that the content hosted by them does not portray the use of drugs as being “fashionable” and acceptable in society.

Compliance of OTT platforms with the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985:

Sections 15, 16, 17, 18, and 20 of the Act prohibit activities such as cultivation of cannabis, poppy, and coca plants and the use of these drugs. The use of these drugs is also prohibited under Section 27 of the Act. Any such content portraying these drugs and being streamed by OTT platforms may invite legal consequences for the platform for abetment of such activities.

Classification of Content and Viewers’ Advisory for Content Featuring Drugs and Their Use:

The OTT platforms have to classify and provide an advisory for content featuring the use of drugs and highlight their adverse effects on the viewer in accordance with the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021.

Encouragement of public health messages: The Ministry has encouraged the platforms to carry public health messages as well as disclaimers on the ill effects of drug abuse. Further, the platforms must be encouraged, as part of corporate social responsibility, to promote content such as documentaries on the ill effects of the consumption of drugs on health.

MIB issued these recommendations in accordance with Part III of the IT Rules, 2021, which is relevant to online curated content platforms (OTT platforms) and includes the Code of Ethics. It also warned that non-compliance

of these recommendations will invite even greater regulatory scrutiny.

Conclusion.

In conclusion, the depiction of the use of drugs in OTT movies reflects the complex interplay between freedom of expression, societal influences, and regulatory controls. OTT platforms have certainly broadened the scope of expression by dealing with innovative and unconventional ideas, but the depiction of the use of drugs, which is often glorified, is a matter of serious concern with regard to the impact on youth. Youth are impressionable, and such depictions may affect their minds.

The Indian legislation, such as the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, and the advisories issued by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, indicate a deliberate attempt to achieve a balance between freedom of expression and social accountability. The provisions regarding content classification, use of disclaimers, and adherence to existing laws such as the NDPS Act of 1985 indicate a developing approach to the dissemination of content.

However, for this to be achieved, not only must there be compliance, but there must also be a commitment to ethical storytelling. OTT platforms must, in fact, be diligent in their portrayal of drug usage, ensuring that there is no inadvertent glorification or trivialization of drug abuse. The inclusion of educational content and the emphasis on the ill effects of drug usage can go a long way in promoting informed viewing. Thus, it can be said that a combined effort to reduce the ill effects of drug portrayal, while not compromising the freedom of expression of digital media, must be made

REFERENCE

N/A.