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From screen to stethoscope: How medical dramas impact the motivation of aspiring medical students

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Abstract

Introduction: Career selection is a critical decision influenced by various factors, including media exposure. As a popular genre among adolescents, medical dramas may shape perceptions of the medical profession. This study explores the impact of medical dramas on medical students' motivation to pursue a career in medicine.

Methods: This study was conducted at the School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia, between February and March 2024, using a mixed-method approach. Quantitative data were gathered through a questionnaire, followed by qualitative insights from in-depth interviews. A two-stage sampling strategy was employed, initially identifying first-year students influenced by medical dramas through screening, followed by purposive sampling to select participants for in-depth interviews.

Results: Analysis identified six key motivational aspects through which medical dramas influence students' decision to pursue medicine. These include the detailed portrayal of doctors' roles, their daily lives, and the reinforcement of a positive perception of the profession. Notably, emotional engagement- such as inspiring doctor characters- and the realistic depiction of challenges, including the dedication and hardships of becoming a doctor, emerged as significant factors.

Conclusion: Medical dramas play a significant role in shaping students' motivation and perception of the medical profession. This study highlights six key motivational aspects influencing career decisions, offering new insights into media-driven career choices and their potential implications for medical education.

Keywords: Medical Dramas, Medical Education, Medical Students, Student Motivation, Career Choice

Practice Highlights

- Medical dramas serve as informal educational tools through entertainment for the public.
- Television influences adolescents' career aspirations by shaping their interests.
- Medical dramas shape public perceptions of the medical profession and may inspire viewers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Medical dramas have remained a widely popular television genre since their emergence in the 1960s, continuously evolving to portray healthcare professionals' professional and personal lives within hospital settings (14th Media Mutations International Conference, 2023; Sonetto & Rocchi, 2024).

Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan had predicted the success of medical dramas as early as 1964 in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, attributing their appeal to the immersive experience viewers have when witnessing medical procedures, which fosters an "obsession with bodily well-being" (Aboud, 2012; Levine & McLuhan, 1964).

Beyond entertainment, medical dramas serve as informal educational tools illustrating medical practices, bioethical dilemmas, and professional conduct (Cambra-Badii et al., 2021; Zago et al., 2024). Research suggests that these dramas reinforce key principles of medical ethics and professionalism, including communication skills, patient confidentiality, and empathetic bedside manner (Aboud, 2012). By portraying both the challenges and rewards of medical practice, these narratives may also shape viewers' perceptions of the profession, inspiring people to pursue careers in healthcare (Alahmari, 2023).

Research indicates a correlation between specific television programs and career aspirations, suggesting that the content adolescents consume can shape vocational interests and goals (Gehrau et al., 2016). As an accessible informal educational resource, television provides insight into professional responsibilities and challenges (Mendick & Williams, 2022). Within this context, medical dramas may play a significant role in shaping students' motivation to enter the medical field. Unlike prior studies that broadly examine media influence over career perceptions, this study focuses on first-year medical students, analysing their motivational drive. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, this study provides deeper insight into how medical dramas influence medical students' motivation to pursue a career in medicine.

II. METHODS

This study was conducted at the School of Medicine and Health Sciences, Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia, from February to March 2024, using a mixed-method approach. A two-stage sampling method was employed, beginning with a questionnaire to identify eligible participants, followed by purposive sampling to select individuals for in-depth interviews. The target population consisted of first-year medical students enrolled in the 2023 academic year who acknowledged that medical dramas had influenced their motivation to pursue a medical degree.

A. Participant Selection

Out of 210 first-year students, 114 reported watching medical dramas. These students completed a demographic questionnaire, which gathered information on gender, parents' profession, and their viewing habits related to medical dramas. Additionally, they completed the *Strength of Motivation for Medical School Revised (SMMS-R) Questionnaire*, a validated self-report instrument consisting of 15 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"), with possible scores ranging from 15

to 75, indicating the strength of motivation for medical school.

B. Qualitative Phase Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to ensure an accurate representation of the study population based on key demographic factors, specifically the profession of participants' parents. The selection process identified respondents from diverse parental backgrounds in the medical field: those with both parents as physicians, those with one parent in medicine, and those with no parental medical background. To ensure gender diversity, one male and one female were selected from each category, all of whom had high motivation scores based on their SMMS-R results. Six participants were selected to achieve thematic saturation, as preliminary analysis showed no new themes emerging beyond this point. Although not statistically representative, this sample captures diverse perspectives on medical career motivation based on different childhood backgrounds.

C. Data Collection

The in-depth interviews, conducted by the researcher (NNT), explored participants' perceptions of how medical dramas influenced their motivation to pursue a career in medicine. The interview guide addressed various aspects of this influence on their decision-making process. One key question asked was "*How have medical dramas influenced your decision to pursue medicine?*" All participants provided written informed consent, including permission for audio recording. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

D. Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analysed using thematic analysis with an inductive coding approach, facilitated by *Atlas.Ti* software. Initial coding was conducted by NNT, who identified key patterns and concepts. These were then systematically categorised into themes and subthemes to capture broader meanings and insights emerging from the interviews. To ensure coding reliability, DAS and NP reviewed the preliminary codes and analysis results. Through thorough discussions and iterative revisions, the team resolved discrepancies and achieved near-total agreement on the coding structure. To maintain participant confidentiality, each transcript was assigned a unique identification code.

III. RESULTS

A total of 114 respondents participated in this study, consisting of 26 males and 88 females, reflecting a possible gender disparity in medical drama viewership.

Among them, 93 students (81.6%) reported that medical dramas significantly impacted their decision to pursue a medical career, while 21 students indicated no such impact.

Characteristic	Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Parental Background		
Both parents are doctors	8	7.0
Only one parent is a doctor	18	15.8
Neither parent is a doctor	88	77.2
Reports Motivation to Enter Medical Field Due to Medical Dramas		
Yes	93	81.6
No	21	18.4
Total Respondents	114	100.0

Table 1. Distribution of Respondent Demographic Characteristics

A. Various Dimensions of the Impact of Medical Dramas on Motivation

derived from the in-depth interview analysis, which has been discussed and approved by each inter-rater.

The following table presents the themes and subthemes

No.	Theme	Subtheme
1.	Medical dramas provide an in-depth portrayal of the roles and responsibilities of doctors.	<p>Medical dramas shape public perceptions of the medical profession and doctors' roles.</p> <p>Medical dramas depict the challenges and rewards of doctors' daily work.</p> <p>Medical dramas highlight doctors' lives beyond their profession.</p>
2.	Medical dramas depict both the professional and personal aspects of doctors' lives.	<p>Medical dramas reveal lesser-known aspects of doctors' personal experiences.</p> <p>Medical dramas provide an authentic portrayal of doctors' daily lives.</p> <p>Medical dramas depict ethical dilemmas, emphasising doctors' professional integrity.</p>
3.	Medical dramas contribute to a positive public perception of the medical profession.	<p>Medical dramas portray impressive doctors, evoking admiration, and inspiration in viewers.</p> <p>Doctors' life-saving actions in medical dramas evoke deep emotions and motivation.</p> <p>Medical dramas illustrate doctors' perseverance and resilience in their profession.</p> <p>Medical dramas spark curiosity about medical procedures and treatments.</p>
4.	Medical dramas evoke emotional responses that may inspire viewers to pursue a medical career.	Medical dramas evoke empathy by portraying patients in distress.
5.	Medical dramas showcase inspiring doctor characters, motivating viewers to follow in their footsteps.	
6.	Medical dramas illustrate the challenges and dedication required to become a doctor.	

Table 2. Table of Themes and Subthemes

B. Medical Dramas Provide an In-Depth Portrayal of the Roles and Responsibilities of Doctors

Medical dramas frequently portray various medical scenarios using specialised terminology, offering viewers insight into the daily responsibilities of doctors. As medical settings are generally inaccessible to the public, these dramas provide a unique perspective on the profession. Among the key influences explored in this study, this aspect resonated most with respondents, with four out of six students emphasising its significance.

One participant explained how watching medical dramas sparked their interest in the field, as they previously had limited information about medicine.

“Grey’s Anatomy offered me insight into the medical field and sparked my interest, as reliable information is not easily accessible to those outside the profession” (V1_H3_B19)

Another respondent shared how their perception of doctors shifted from fear to admiration after watching medical dramas, recognising the profession’s vital role in society:

“As a child, I perceived doctors as intimidating due to painful medical visits, such as dental appointments. However, after watching Grey’s Anatomy, I realised that medicine extends beyond that and saw how doctors can positively impact many lives.” (V1_H2_B27)

Beyond hospital settings, medical dramas also depict the role of doctors in broader societal contexts. Through diverse narratives, these dramas offer multiple perspectives on the medical profession. For example, *Doc Martin* illustrates the role of a doctor in a rural community, showcasing their involvement in local issues, such as water problems and education (V2_H4_B21). This highlights how doctors contribute beyond clinical practice, reinforcing their role in public health and community development.

Additionally, medical dramas influence students' motivation to pursue medicine by portraying the realities of medical work, including complex procedures and life-saving interventions. More than half of the respondents identified this as a significant factor in their decision to study medicine. As one participant stated:

“The scenes depicting doctors helping others, particularly during surgeries, inspired me to study medicine. I wanted to experience performing surgeries and learn how to help others.” (V4_H7_B19)

These findings suggest that medical dramas not only enhance public understanding of the profession but also play a role in inspiring future medical students.

C. Medical Dramas Depict Both the Professional and Personal Aspects of Doctors’ Lives

Medical dramas depict not only medical procedures but also the personal lives of doctors, including their relationships, friendships, and personal struggles. By presenting doctors as multidimensional individuals beyond their professional roles, these narratives contribute to a more relatable and humanised portrayal of the profession. Notably, four out of six highlighted the importance of this aspect in shaping their motivation. One respondent noted that their interest in medical dramas stemmed primarily from the blend of romantic elements, rather than the medical content alone (V3_H6_B1).

The public often has limited insight into the personal experiences of doctors, making it difficult to relate to them. However, medical dramas help bridge this gap by shedding light on aspects of doctors' lives that are not commonly shared. This increased visibility fosters a sense of closeness and enhances a deeper understanding of the profession, which may, in turn, inspire career interest. As one participant expressed:

“Medical dramas reveal stories that doctors seldom share, providing an effective way to convey these experiences to the general public.” (V5_H11_B4)

By offering a representation of doctors' daily lives, medical dramas provide viewers with a deeper understanding of what a career in medicine entails. This additional perspective can be a key factor in the decision-making process for those considering entering the field (V2_H4_B28).

D. Medical Dramas Contribute to a Positive Public Perception of the Medical Profession

Three out of six respondents emphasised that medical dramas portray the ethical dilemmas faced by doctors, reinforcing professional values that shape viewers' perceptions of the medical field. One respondent noted that the depiction of doctors' strong work ethic in these dramas increased their interest in pursuing a career in medicine (V3_H6_B4).

Additionally, medical dramas present compelling and admirable doctor characters, which can serve as a source of inspiration for viewers. As one respondent shared:

"The dramatised portrayal made it inspiring for my younger self, leading me to think, 'Doctors are cool.'" (V5_H11_B2)

The depiction of medical procedures, particularly surgeries, also left a strong impression on some respondents, reinforcing their motivation to enter the medical field. One participant stated:

"Medical dramas provide insight into a doctor's work, including various surgeries, highlighting the fascinating ability to help many people." (V4_H7_B33)

Furthermore, the portrayal of doctors saving lives in medical dramas can evoke strong emotional responses, fostering admiration and a desire to pursue medicine. One respondent expressed how these scenes encouraged them to consider a career in medicine (V5_H11_B2). Medical dramas also emphasise the perseverance and resilience of doctors in the face of various pressures and stress, further reinforcing the appeal of the profession for aspiring medical students (V5_H9_B11).

E. Medical Dramas Evoke Emotional Responses that may Inspire Viewers to Pursue a Medical Career

Medical dramas can spark viewers' curiosity about medical procedures, motivating them to explore the medical field further and increase their interest in the profession. One respondent noted that medical dramas played a role in their initial motivation for pursuing medicine, as the cases depicted often align with real-world medical scenarios, piquing their interest to learn more:

"I believe the medical procedures shown in Grey's Anatomy exist in real life and are up to date. For example, an episode featured an abdominal wall transplant, which piqued my curiosity. After researching it, I discovered that the procedure had only recently been developed, showing how the show connects to world medicine." (V1_H2_B14)

Beyond fostering curiosity, medical dramas also evoke strong emotional responses, such as sadness and empathy, particularly when portraying patients in need of medical care. One respondent shared that such portrayals heightened their awareness of the number of people requiring medical assistance. The emotions they experienced, combined with this awareness, ultimately served as an inspiration to pursue medicine (V1_H2_B31).

F. Medical Dramas Showcase Inspiring Doctor Characters, Motivating Viewers to Follow in their Footsteps

Medical dramas can inspire viewers through uplifting scenes and compelling portrayals of doctor characters. These representations serve as role models, fostering admiration and desire to follow in their footsteps. Notably, three out of six respondents indicated that such portrayals influenced their decision to pursue a medical career. As one participant shared:

"In 'New Amsterdam', there is a doctor who stands out from others - someone who wants to create change and has a unique vision. I found him quite inspiring." (V3_H6_B5)

G. Medical Dramas Illustrate the Challenges and Dedication Required to Become a Doctor

Medical dramas not only portray the professional responsibilities of doctors but also illustrate the journey of becoming one, highlighting the challenges and obstacles along the way. Two out of six students emphasised the significance of this theme, noting that the depiction of medical interns' experience in these dramas played a crucial role in their motivation to pursue medicine. As one participant shared:

"Medical dramas often depict doctors under immense stress, highlighting the challenges of the profession. However, rather than discouraging me, witnessing their struggles made the career even more appealing." (V5_H10_B28)

IV. DISCUSSION

The in-depth interviews revealed that medical students felt more mentally prepared and motivated to pursue medicine after watching medical dramas. These shows provided insight into both the professional and personal lives of doctors, reinforcing previous studies on their educational influence in shaping viewers' perceptions of the medical field. This aligns with the Media Effect Theory, introduced by Gerbner in 1960, which suggests that television shapes individuals' perceptions of reality, particularly among frequent viewers (Stacks et al., 2015). Hoffman and colleagues further applied this theory to medical dramas, highlighting their role in influencing viewers' perception of the medical profession (Arias, 2018).

Beyond depicting technical medical procedures, medical dramas also emphasise ethical principles and professional values, contributing to a favourable image of the profession. Research indicates that medical and nursing students often use these shows as supplementary learning tools for bioethics and professionalism (Cambra-Badii et al., 2021). Similarly, these portrayals may inspire high school students to consider careers in

medicine by offering an engaging introduction to the field.

Emotional engagement is another key factor in the influence of medical dramas. Strong emotional responses- such as curiosity, empathy, and excitement- can enhance motivation, as emotions play a crucial role in learning, achievement, and psychological well-being, particularly in adolescents (Pekrun, 2017). Positive emotions make tasks more appealing, fostering inner motivation that arises after the initial external excitement provided by medical dramas (Legault, 2016).

Furthermore, medical dramas often depict the challenges of medical training, including long working hours and emotional strain, providing a more nuanced perspective on the profession. While these portrayals may initially present an idealised view of medicine, they also serve as a reality check, reinforcing the dedication required to pursue a medical career. This dual representation may deter less committed individuals while strengthening the resolve of those deeply passionate about the field (Tedeschi, 2024).

However, the potential for misinformation in medical dramas must also be considered. The oversimplifications or dramatisation of medical practice may create discrepancies between fictional portrayals and real-world medicine, leading to misconceptions among viewers (Alismail et al., 2018). One notable bias is the tendency to depict doctors as infallible heroes performing miraculous saves amidst dramatic emergencies, often intertwined with personal achievements and romantic subplots. This portrayal fosters unrealistic expectations, potentially leading to disillusionment when aspiring medical students encounter the demanding and less glamorous realities of medical education and practice (Tedeschi, 2024).

These findings highlight the complex role of medical dramas in shaping career motivation, offering both inspiration and potential misconceptions. Their influence appears particularly significant for students without a familial background in medicine, as most respondents came from non-medical families. This trend may suggest that medical dramas serve as an accessible source of insight into the profession for those without direct exposure. However, the possibility of sampling bias should be considered, as students already interested in medicine may be more likely to engage in medical dramas. While these dramas may serve as informal educational tools, their impact should be critically assessed to ensure they provide a balanced and realistic portrayal of the medical profession.

V. CONCLUSION

Medical dramas play a significant role in shaping students' motivation to pursue a medical career by providing an engaging portrayal of the profession. These shows offer insight into the roles and responsibilities of doctors, their daily challenges, and the emotional rewards of the profession. Additionally, they influence public perceptions of medicine and evoke strong emotional responses through inspiring characters and narratives. By depicting both the struggles and triumphs of medical training, medical dramas contribute to students' understanding of the dedication required to become a doctor. This study highlights six key aspects through which medical dramas impact students' decision to pursue medical education, highlighting their role as both an informational and motivational tool.

Notes on Contributors

Nathania Nishida Tan participated in data collection, data analysis, review, the writing of the paper, and the formatting for publication.

dr. Daniel Ardian Soeselo, Sp.B, MSi.Med. participated in the data analysis, review, and direction of the paper.

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Ethical Approval

This study received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia under the ethical approval code 13/02/KEP-FKIKUAJ/2024. To ensure confidentiality and data security, all interview transcripts were anonymised and securely stored in password-protected files, accessible only to the research team.

Data Availability

The data of this qualitative study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with the participants.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest in connection with this article.

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