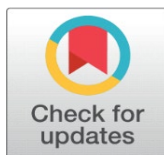
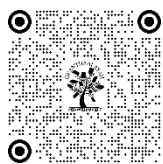


EMPOWERING ARTISTIC EXPRESSION: THE INFLUENCE OF OTT PLATFORMS ON TAMIL CINEMA, WITH A FOCUS ON THE FILM 'VIDUTHALAI'

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms have emerged as a transformative force in the realm of cinematic storytelling, redefining the boundaries of artistic expression and democratizing access to global audiences. This research paper explores the impact of OTT platforms on Tamil cinema, with a specific focus on the critically acclaimed film 'Viduthalai.' The study investigates how OTT platforms have provided Tamil filmmakers with newfound freedom of expression, enabling them to address socially relevant and often sensitive topics. 'Viduthalai,' a powerful and thought-provoking film, serves as a compelling case study, exemplifying the artistic liberties afforded by digital distribution channels. By employing qualitative analysis, this research evaluates the narratives of 'Viduthalai' in theatrical and OTT spheres, shedding light on the unique opportunities, challenges and freedom of expression faced by the filmmaker in the OTT era. Ultimately, the findings underscore the profound influence of OTT platforms in promoting diverse narratives and empowering cinematic voices that might otherwise remain unheard.

Keywords: Artistic Expression, Viduthalai, OTT, Freedom of Expression

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1. INTRODUCTION

The constitutional provision for freedom of speech and expression in India has long been a subject of debate, primarily due to the broad interpretation of "speech" and "expression." This includes the freedom to convey personal viewpoints through visual media such as films, web series, and short films, especially as our viewing habits have shifted from traditional cable TVs to smaller mobile screens. The rise of OTT platforms, which garnered immense popularity during the COVID-

19 pandemic, has further fuelled discussions about the uncensored and unregulated content they offer over the internet. In response to these debates, the government recently introduced new guidelines aimed at establishing a robust three-tier grievance redressal system for these platforms. The effectiveness of these measures remains a topic of discussion, as some argue that they might encroach upon the creative space of content producers, while others view them as necessary efforts to regulate the content available on video streaming platforms. The outcome of this ongoing dialogue will be of significant interest to both content creators and consumers alike. This article discusses the absence of censorship on OTT platforms in India and its implications. It explores the need for censorship and its impact on both creators' freedom of expression and viewers' choice. The paper also addresses concerns about age-inappropriate content and emphasizes the importance of regulating OTT platforms to protect democratic rights [Singla \(2020\)](#).

2. RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND EXPRESSION

In a democratic society, individuals have the fundamental right to freely express their thoughts and ideas through various means. However, this right is accompanied by responsibilities, and constitutional restrictions are necessary in the interest of public welfare. OTT platforms offer a wide range of uncensored content, which differs from content subject to television censorship rules aimed at preventing violence, obscenity, and social discord. While this freedom is essential, it must be exercised without infringing upon religious sensitivities or moral standards and should never incite violence against the public. Therefore, censorship regulations primarily target objectionable, potentially offensive, or sensitive content readily available on OTT platforms. The challenge lies in ensuring that such content is not accessed by individuals who may not be equipped to handle it, necessitating content regulation measures.

This article will delve into the regulation of content concerning morality, public order, and health. It will explore various censorship laws in India, tracing their evolution over time. The necessity for adaptation to the digital age is emphasized, encompassing not only legal frameworks but also those governing media and censorship. The study will draw comparisons between censorship regulations in Singapore and India [Agrawal \(2022\)](#).

The worldwide proliferation of the Internet has created a platform through which free speech can reach wider audiences than in previous eras. The technological prowess and affordability of the Internet make it conducive for citizens to actively participate in the exchange of information. Nevertheless, a significant portion of Internet users choose to exercise their freedom of expression anonymously, potentially giving rise to abuses or even criminal activities that may, in practice, be challenging to prosecute [Popović \(2021\)](#).

3. FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND OTT MEDIA

It is a widely acknowledged reality that the freedom to create can sometimes become overwhelmingly complex. Historically, many Indian filmmakers faced restrictions on depicting explicit content in their cinematic endeavours on the big screen. However, the advent of OTT platforms provided them with a relatively unrestricted canvas to unleash their creative expressions, encompassing themes such as nudity, violence, gore, and explicit language. Furthermore, the exercise of creative freedom is intertwined with the prevailing political landscape. Projects that align with the agenda of the ruling political parties often enjoy a release devoid of

stringent regulations. This selective approach to artistic works is a significant concern, creating economic disparities for those involved in the production of particular projects and acting as an impediment to future creative endeavours.

The freedom of speech empowers regular individuals to engage in the dissemination of ideas. It undeniably constitutes a crucial component of democratic culture, ensuring that everyone, not solely the political or cultural elite, possesses the opportunity to contribute to public discourse. This interactive nature of freedom of speech implies that exposure to others' ideas can have a profound impact, potentially reshaping our perspectives. Moreover, freedom of speech is appropriate, as each participant depends on, extracts ideas from, and adapts or critiques the prevailing cultural context [Popović \(2021\)](#).

A noteworthy development occurred in January 2019 when several prominent OTT platforms voluntarily adopted a self-regulatory code. This code prohibited certain types of content on their platforms, particularly content that disrespected the National Emblem or Flag, incited religious discord, promoted terrorism, or involved child pornography.

4. INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In an international context, various countries have implemented regulatory measures to oversee OTT platforms. Singapore, for instance, mandates that service providers prominently display content warnings for elements such as nudity, drugs, sex, and violence within their content. The United Kingdom subjects OTT platforms to a level of scrutiny similar to that of public service broadcasters. In Australia, the OTT sector is governed by the principal legislation known as the BSA, 1992. On the other hand, Turkey has established a licensing regime where OTT platforms are granted licenses for a period of 10 years to operate within the country. In contrast, countries like Indonesia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia have taken a more stringent approach by implementing strict regulations that place significant control in the hands of the government. This has resulted in actions such as blocking several OTT platforms, including Netflix, in their efforts to maintain authority over content distribution. [Achintya \(2021\)](#)

On October 1, 2017, Germany implemented the *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*, or "Network Enforcement Act." This law aims to improve law enforcement in social networks by holding providers responsible for addressing online speech that violates criminal laws. Despite concerns from Facebook and others during legislative proceedings, the Act gained international attention. As the first anniversary approaches, this paper examines the past, present, and future of the controversial law and its impact on human rights online [Schmitz & Berndt \(2018\)](#).

5. IMPACT OF OTT PLATFORM ON TAMIL CINEMA

The emergence of OTT platforms has ushered in a transformative era for Tamil cinema, where the film 'Viduthalai Part-1' stands as a prime example of this evolution. This sub-theme delves into the profound influence of OTT platforms on the Tamil film industry, highlighting how they have provided a unique space for daring narratives like 'Viduthalai Part-1' to thrive. In this dynamic landscape, filmmakers are no longer bound by the conventional constraints of mainstream cinema, allowing them to delve into intricate socio-political narratives with a newfound creative freedom. 'Viduthalai Part-1' serves as a testament to this newfound liberation, shedding light on issues that might have been considered too sensitive or unconventional for traditional cinema. The impact of such films on

Tamil cinema within the OTT landscape signifies a shift towards more diverse and thought-provoking storytelling, providing both filmmakers and audiences with a platform for meaningful artistic expression and exploration of pressing societal concerns. [Chattopadhyay \(2020\)](#)

The transition of 'Viduthalai' from its theatrical cut to the director's cut on an OTT platform underscores the profound impact that OTT platforms have on the freedom of expression for filmmakers. This theme explores the significant differences and artistic liberties that the director takes in the OTT version compared to the constraints imposed by the theatrical release. It delves into how the OTT platform serves as a canvas for the director to fully realize their creative vision, unshackled by commercial pressures or censorship, allowing for a more nuanced and authentic representation of their storytelling. This shift exemplifies the unique opportunity OTT platforms provide in enabling directors to exercise their freedom of expression to its fullest extent, resulting in a richer and more unrestrained cinematic experience for the audience. [Cherukuri \(2023\)](#)

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study aims to explore the influence of OTT platforms on Tamil cinema, with a specific focus on the critically acclaimed film 'Viduthalai.' The methodology employed for this study involves a comprehensive approach that encompasses qualitative analysis, critical examination, and expert insights. This exploratory research aims to explore the intricate journey and the obstacles the films, the context of OTT platforms. The objective is to uncover the chronological events that have significantly influenced the trajectory of the film's presence and performance in the digital streaming environment.

- 1) **QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS:** The research will involve an in-depth qualitative analysis of various aspects related to the impact of OTT platforms on Tamil cinema. This analysis will include:
- 2) **CONTENT ANALYSIS:** Examination of existing literature, articles, and critiques related to Tamil cinema's transition to OTT platforms and the specific film 'Viduthalai.' This analysis will provide insights into critical reception and audience reactions.
- 3) **COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS:** A comparative study of the narratives of 'Viduthalai' in both theatrical and OTT settings. This analysis will shed light on the unique opportunities, challenges, and artistic freedom afforded by OTT platforms.

7. FILM PERSONALITY ON OTT PLATFORMS

Anurag Kashyap highlighted that OTT platforms offer him creative freedom to explore socio political content, which is often challenging to find funding for in traditional theatre-based Hindi films. He mentioned that his film "Choked" on Netflix is an example of how he can express his ideas without constraints and receive adequate financial support. OTT platforms provide the freedom and resources that are sometimes lacking in mainstream cinema.

Manoj Bajpayee emphasized that OTT platforms provide a variety of content, leaving the choice of what to watch to viewers. He compared it to a bookstore where people can choose their preferred books. Bajpayee believes in viewers' freedom to select content and thinks parents should be the primary censors for their children. He also mentioned that he appreciates the creative freedom OTT platforms offer,

allowing him to explore diverse genres and collaborate with directors to create unique content.

Sudha Kongara emphasized that the most distinctive aspect of OTT platforms is the freedom to independently choose the cast and tell the story exactly as they envisioned it.

Vignesh Sivan stated that working on an OTT platform provided him with the liberty to make creative decisions without any external pressure or interference, whether it be in casting or scripting, which he found to be a significant advantage.

Vetrimaran noted that there is a noticeable contrast between making films in the mainstream industry, where he often felt the weight of significant pressure, and working on OTT platforms, where he experiences a sense of relaxation and is not concerned about adhering to market requirements or mainstream acceptance.

Gautham Vasudev Menon mentioned that he does not feel the pressure of writing for the audience in OTT platforms.

8. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF OVER-THE-TOP (OTT) PLATFORMS AND TRADITIONAL THEATERS

The dichotomy between Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms and traditional theatres represents a profound transformation in the realm of audio-visual consumption. The advent of OTT services, capitalizing on internet connectivity, empowers viewers with unparalleled flexibility, enabling access to an extensive array of content at their convenience, breaking free from the constraints of time and location. In stark contrast, theatres offer a unique communal experience, anchoring the cinematic journey to a specific physical space and temporal framework. The expansive screens and immersive sound systems within theatres accentuate the grandeur of cinematic storytelling, creating an atmosphere unattainable in the personalized settings of OTT viewing. [Dutta et al. \(2011\)](#)

The choice between these platforms not only mirrors the ever-evolving landscape of consumer preferences and economic considerations but also contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding the democratization of content access in the digital age. Against the backdrop of relentless technological advancements shaping the entertainment industry, a comprehensive understanding of these differences becomes imperative for scholars and practitioners alike, as they navigate the intricate dynamics of the evolving audio-visual landscape. [GN \(2023\)](#)

9. UNVEILING CREATIVE FREEDOM: THE DIRECTOR'S CUT PHENOMENON ON OTT PLATFORMS

In a recent interview, Mr. Inba, the assistant director to acclaimed filmmaker Vetrimaaran, shed light on the director's cut release of the film "Viduthalai" on Zee 5 OTT. Contrary to popular belief, this isn't a novel concept but a tradition that predates the digital era, finding its roots in DVD players. During our conversation, Mr. Inba, Associate of Film Maker Vetrimaaran emphasized the significant disparity between the director's cut and its theatrical counterpart. The director's cut, he noted, embodies artistic integrity, presenting an unadulterated version that encapsulates the director's creative essence. What makes the Zee 5 OTT release of "Viduthalai" remarkable is the platform itself. OTT platforms have emerged as revolutionary spaces, fostering the creation of socio-political narratives that challenge societal norms. They provide an unbridled space where directors can craft narratives infused with their unique vision, unrestricted by censorship. This

newfound freedom enables directors to weave compelling, unfiltered stories that resonate deeply with the audience, marking a paradigm shift in the cinematic landscape. The director's cut release of "Viduthalai" stands as a testament to the power of OTT platforms, ushering in an era where creativity knows no bounds. (Inba, Personal Communication, 2023)

The investigation into the comparative nuances between the Theatrical and Over-The-Top (OTT) versions of a film unravels a notable 20-minute difference in their respective runtimes. This analysis extends beyond mere temporal distinctions, delving into the intricacies of censorship adherence, language utilization, and the multifaceted portrayal of law enforcement agencies. Jadhav & Tilak (2023)

1) Censorship and Certification Discrepancies:

The theatrical release version, constrained by the rigors of censor restrictions, presents a cinematic narrative that adheres to predefined content guidelines. Its certification as an A – Adults only film underscores the mature nature of its content. Conversely, the OTT iteration, accessible through the Zee 5 platform, diverges markedly by liberally incorporating un-muted profanities, rendering its dialogues unsuitable for public exhibition.

2) Language Content Divergence:

A discerning examination of the OTT version reveals a stark departure from the language norms associated with the theatrical release. While the latter maintains a level of decorum in line with its mature certification, the former ventures into unparliamentary territories, exceeding the boundaries set for public consumption.

3) Portrayal of Law Enforcement Dynamics:

One of the striking disparities lies in the depiction of the police department. The OTT rendition unfolds a series of scenes that not only demoralize but also lay bare the darker facets of the police force. These scenes intricately unravel the intricate handling of socio-political issues, particularly those intertwined with a social movement spearheaded by Vaathiyar. Sharma (2021)

4) Vaathiyar and the Makkal Padai Movement:

Vaathiyar, an enigmatic figure known as the Ghost, assumes a pivotal role in the narrative as the leader of a formidable troupe named 'Makkal Padai.' His character becomes a focal point as he finds himself at the pinnacle of the Police Department's most-wanted list. This positioning elevates the tension, adding layers to the overarching socio-political context. Samriti & Sharma (2020)

5) Accusations Against the Downtrodden:

The police troupes engaged in the unfolding socio-political drama are portrayed as casting unwarranted accusations upon the innocent, voiceless, and downtrodden commoners of the locality. This narrative element introduces a dimension of societal imbalance and injustice.

6) Raw Crises in Police Camps:

Within the OTT version, the lens of scrutiny widens to unveil the rawest crises faced by these accused individuals in police camps. The depiction of their ordeals sheds light on the harsh realities they endure, effectively peeling away the veneer of authority and revealing a potentially malevolent side of the police department. This comprehensive analysis not only delineates the temporal distinctions but also unearths substantial divergences in content and thematic portrayals between the Theatrical and OTT versions. Such explorations contribute to a nuanced understanding of the filmic landscape, addressing the complex interplay of

ensorship, language, and societal reflections within cinematic narratives. [Patil \(2022\)](#)

10. UNVEILING REAL-LIFE STORIES AN DISCUSSION

Indian web series have increasingly embraced real-life events and biographical narratives, shedding light on untold stories and captivating audiences with their compelling storytelling. These series not only entertain but also serve as a powerful medium for societal reflection and awareness. In this discussion, we will explore the influence and significance of autobiographical web series in Indian entertainment, with a particular focus on noteworthy productions like "Delhi Crime," "Scoop," "Scam 1992," "Scam 2003," "Auto Shankar," and "Queen." These series delve into the lives of individuals who made headlines, either through their criminal actions or their political careers. [Santhanam \(2020\)](#)

We will analyse how these narratives contribute to public discourse, evoke empathy, and raise important questions about justice, ethics, and the human experience. Additionally, we will examine the creative and ethical challenges of adapting real-life stories for the screen and their potential impact on society's perception of these events and individuals. The rise of OTT platforms has revolutionized Tamil cinema, exemplified by 'Viduthalai Part-1.' This sub-theme explores OTT's profound impact, enabling daring narratives and freeing filmmakers from mainstream constraints. 'Viduthalai Part-1' symbolizes this newfound creative freedom, addressing sensitive topics often overlooked in traditional cinema. These films signify a shift toward diverse storytelling, empowering both creators and audiences. The transition of 'Viduthalai' from theatre to an OTT director's cut underscores OTT's influence on filmmakers' freedom. This theme highlights the creative liberties in the director's cut compared to theatrical releases. OTT platforms serve as a canvas for unbridled creative expression, devoid of commercial pressures or censorship, resulting in more authentic storytelling. This shift showcases OTT's unique potential to enhance filmmakers' freedom of expression, enriching the cinematic experience. [Khader \(2016\)](#)

11. CONCLUSION

The impact of OTT platforms on Tamil cinema is undeniable and transformative. The case study of 'Viduthalai Part-1' exemplifies how these platforms have provided filmmakers with unprecedented creative freedom and the ability to explore daring and socio-political narratives that were previously constrained by the conventional norms of mainstream cinema. This shift signifies a broader movement in Tamil cinema towards more diverse and thought-provoking storytelling, offering both creators and audiences a platform for meaningful artistic expression and the exploration of pressing societal concerns. [Oozeer \(2014\)](#)

Furthermore, the transition of 'Viduthalai' from its theatrical cut to the director's cut on an OTT platform underscores the immense influence OTT platforms have on the freedom of expression for filmmakers. This transition allows directors to fully realize their creative vision, liberated from commercial pressures and censorship, leading to a more authentic and nuanced representation of their storytelling. OTT platforms, as exemplified by the experiences and perspectives of prominent figures like Anurag Kashyap, Manoj Bajpayee, Sudha Kongara, Vignesh Sivan, Vetrimaran, and Gautham Vasudev Menon, have become a haven for artistic expression and innovation in the world of cinema. In essence, the impact of OTT platforms on Tamil cinema has not only democratized the filmmaking

process but has also empowered filmmakers to push the boundaries of storytelling. As this revolution continues to unfold, it promises to bring forth a new era of cinema that is characterized by diversity, creativity, and an unyielding commitment to exploring the complexities of the human experience.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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