

# Audience's Interest for Health Problems and Human Relations: Friendship and Love in TV Medical Dramas

**Silvia Branea**

Assoc. Prof.,

Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies - University of Bucharest  
Iuliu Maniu Blvd, 1-3, Complex "Leu", Corp A, sector 6, Bucharest

[brsalt@gmail.com](mailto:brsalt@gmail.com)

+40-21- 318-1555

**Adina Guguianu**

Subject Matter Expert,

Carestream Health Bucharest Shared Service Center  
24th Preciziei Blvd , West Gate Park, Building H4, Sector 6, Bucharest,

[adinaguguianu@yahoo.com](mailto:adinaguguianu@yahoo.com)

+40-21-539-7100

## Abstract

*Studying the image of medical employees and real life situations from the medical field has increased significantly over the years. One of the main reasons which lean towards the medical area is the attraction to what we call nowadays "medical soap operas". However, even if these medical productions (popular hospital dramas) are fictions, it has been seen a slight influence towards the public receptivity to situations, ideas and behaviors which can be easily applicable also in real life. The interviewees from our research described the medical field as an environment where friendship and love are permanently present. May be this one of the inexact / incorrect perception which people tend to mould as a response to the high exposure of fiction medical television series?*

*The study dedicated to friendship and love from medical television series is based on a research from 2011/2012, where we tried to expose the following hypothesis: What is the frequency with which young people view medical TV series and in what way do they see a similarity between these soap operas and reality? Looking through the responses we have set up some leading television series. From 75 analyzed interviews, first in line is House MD with 31 answers followed by Grey's Anatomy with 21. Both series are very popular and have been broadcast mostly in the same period, House M.D. started in late 2004 and Grey's Anatomy at the beginning of 2005. Also both are enjoying a lot of success now, years from the first time that were broadcast (IMDB.com).*

**Key Words:** Medical TV series, Audience' perceptions, Work-Life-Balance, Interview.

Show producers, physician writers, and public health experts confirm that although such shows are fiction, they have a real effect on how public thinks and acts as to health care (Truthaboutnursing, 2007).

One of the reasons given regarding the influence of these TV series upon the audience comes from the high interest that allows information to be shared between those who create these soap operas and those who work in a medical system. Besides doctors and others health specialists we can see a high interest from medical equipment suppliers who can easily promote their products through TV shows - on the effectiveness of *product placement* in shows / movies on television have expressed their point of view, also Courbet (1999).

Gordon (2001) has reported that physicians have always had a symbiotic relationship with Hollywood:

Movie studios and TV networks have enlisted the support of individual doctors and their organizations to provide story ideas, expert advice, and, more recently, high-tech medical equipment and snappy jargon.

The author of the article "Where Life and Art Diverge" (Where Life and Art Diverge, 1999) even if she expresses her doubt regarding the authenticity of the medical TV series, she noticed that there is at least one impact/ effect towards the audience – popularity of medical commissions' activity (Where Life and Art Diverge, 1999, 2):

I've been amused by the way both shows (Chicago Hope and Emergency Room) mention The Joint Commission and DRG s from time to time, as if the regular people even know what those are, and their consistently negative portrayals of managed care.

The love stories between men and women who work in the same hospital for a long period of time (as is shown in the medical TV series), does not have a direct influence of the tight relationships between those who work in television and health specialties. Even so, we cannot find a clear explication related to the pressure created by medical screen players on general theme (love and friendship) especially for inherent spiced feelings of these television series.

As the cause of the accentuation of relationships between employees from hospitals cannot be excluded

from the interest of directors and screen players, it should be taken into consideration also the phenomenon described in organizational sociology as "Work-Life-Balance". Human resources try to find equilibrium between private and personal life correlated to the professional one through different strategies. The results delay in showing up for now, especially now when the trend is to spend more hours dedicated to the professional life, hence spending more time at the office.

Even if the "work-life-balance" theory is considered to be an example and has the possibility to offer a balance between multiple social roles, creating this way a field to negative experience, is more and more obvious that the job has a bigger impact of the general role of human existence (Parkes & Langford, 2008). Is not excluded that these statement can determine screen players (especially those with professional themes – cops, investigation, medical etc) to catch more consistent parts of these social roles, coming in the end to describe some situations in which the loss related to the personal life is caused by the lack of time for the private time and tend to be compensated by meaningful emotional relationships as friends and lovers at work.

Some of the information related to the actual activity from hospitals and medical centers come directly from the employees and experts from the medical system. Sources which provide information from the medical system expect from a relationship to happen in the most convenient way possible from both sides: Directors, producers, and screenwriters once were expected to portray doctors and their treatments in the best possible light, reinforce their conservative values, and support the kind of public policy and scientific agendas doctors favor (Gordon, 2001).

The main characters from medical TV series were especially doctors. In an article (New TV drama supports nurses, 1999) from the *Australian Nursing Journal* is specified that, besides TV programs which have as a main concern doctors we can see also TV series in which nurses are the attraction:

According to All Saints story editor and former nurse Susan Bowers, the program is aimed at showing what nurses really do in a public hospital. All Saints is centered on life in a general medical ward seen through the eyes of the nursing staff. The program is a weekly, one-hour series of self-contained stories with continuing serial threads for the permanent characters. A writer is then hired and a 'preplot day' is held where a couple of stories are thrashed out and a group of editors, including a nurse adviser, make up the stories.

#### **Methodological approach**

"What kind of connections establishes the audience of TV series, which is centered on a special profession (in this case, doctors), between the stories from the series and the reality?"

The data used to answer this hypothesis was realized based on a semi structured interview guide.

In order to have relevant data from the information gathered is needed to respect the following steps even in the moment of collecting the data and analyzing it: reading and annotate the data; classifying and categorization; finding connections between data and elaborating the final form of the research (Iluț, 1997). Once these steps are followed we can interpret it. In this work sequence we follow the hermeneutic point of view: auto-reflective concept brings out the necessity to build the understanding and personal meaning of what is being studied (Gripsrud, 2002).

Considering these aspects is necessary to mention that the selection of the relevant passages from the answers to the open questions given by the interviewees represent a subjective cut. This cut is based on scientific risk-taking that derives even more as there are not a large number of respondents.

#### **Media Influence**

The debated related to the type of influence and the amplification of the impact of mass-media is very intense. In the past years the balance leaned in favor of specialist who consider that media audience is strong and active, using in a personal way the media content, and sometimes leaned in favor of the media's audience fragility point of view.

Some of these theories spread in the last decade consider that media has an essential contribution in *social construction of reality*. One with different types of information provided to the public, come along some "glasses" which can share reality (Derville, 1997).

Another effect is the one related to "framing": media has a meaningful role in extending the reference of the declarations and events, due to their implementation in a specific context (Derville, 1997).

For Kellner (2003), social developing of reality is partially generated by the symbolic interaction between real life experience and media culture approach. This is a process through which personal experience is focused on medial culture and in which the interpretation and media usage are built by individuals in real life situations.

The approach of these different portraits seen by the audience and usage of the media materials depend of gender, race, class and ideological perspective (Kellner, 2003).

The negotiation for the content acceptability from fiction movies, from a socio/professional category point of view, represents a complex and subtle process, hard to surprise and define. One of the perspectives which can clarify, at least partially, the way an audience member follows and afterward copies favorite fiction character behaviors is the theory of socialization by observing a model. As some authors have noted, if a behavior of a model who can guarantee success is followed, that behavior will become a taker behavior (De Fleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1999).

The difficulty in describing the mechanism which acts during and after the exposure to television has its origins in the complex character of broadcasting diverse messages by mass-media. However, a sample of the

existence of a continuous even though invisible dialogue between the public and media messages producers is raised by Bianculli (1992) by the concept of self-referential: „TV has now matured to the point where it's repeatedly referential". With all this complexity of producing and processing information transmitted by media, is proven that all mass communication ways leave a mark on different public segments (Branea, 2010).

#### Audience of TV Series

Studies related to the social influence identify in general the quasi-universal denial of knowing a flexible part of attitudes and behaviors. Regarding the impact of fiction productions such as TV series, we have a paradox: as many people declare in many situations that are not interested in this phenomenon (in daily conversations or when asked), from the statistics publicized by the rating agencies, results show that a large public of these productions exists.

Based on these references, TV series producers continue to conceive new seasons, resuming and emphasizing on specific fragments of some episodes which had a great success with the public, studying carefully the result of different ways of TV audience measurement and or debates from the forums/ fan sites online organized by the most devoted viewers.

The TV series comes to dethrone not only the classic cinema movie but also the television movie. Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy (2008) consider that viewers are so interested in these shows and they come to establish a sort of *rendez-vous* with the favorite characters (Lipovetsky, Serroy, 2008, 212):

As periodically are seen different characters, these will come familiar to the viewers, they attach on them and it's a pleasure to watch them each time, exactly as when we go to the cinema to see the favorite stars.

In her analysis, Sabine Chalvon-Demersay (1999) raised an investigation related to the ways that the author of the screenplay of the "Emergency Room" television series used to control the public. The idea of this investigation came from the reflection upon the reports between the audience and mass-media. The author sustains that for some ideologies born at Frankfurt School, media is powerful and the audience is weak (faced to manipulation, alienation and false consciousness); for the followers of the utilizations and gratifications theory and for some analysts concerned of sociology reception, media is weak and the public is powerful – active, endowed with initiative, with a capacity of decoding and also with resistance and selection.

The research related to media reception highlights, especially in the last period, the complexity of how audience reads the message transmitted by the show. Regarding the receptivity of Medical TV series, Quick (2009) made some interesting

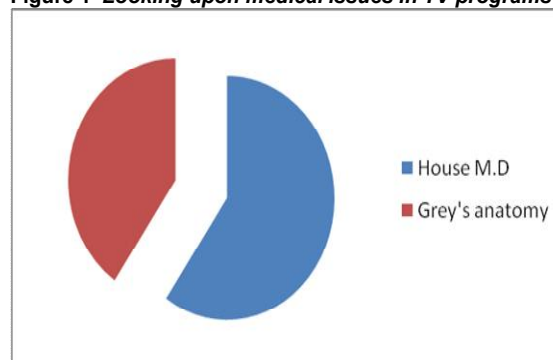
discoveries related to the audience of "Grey's Anatomy". According to Quick's research, public known such as "heavy viewing of the show" have suffered an enormous influence regarding their own perception about real medical life.

Another study (Davin, 2003) made a comparison between watching and American medical drama and a documentary. Those who attended the research consider that the soap opera drama is more useful than the documentary. This fact is demonstrated by the large audience and intense promotion and also is more likely to learn from it, while the documentary is incomplete and superficial.

#### The description of the professional life of physicians in terms of TV 'Audience

The study dedicated to friendship and love relations from the medical TV series is based on a research from 2011/2012, where we have followed the influence of TV series upon young people, from which it resulted that at least half of the 75 of the students (faculty and master) from universities all over Bucharest watch with interest medical TV series. Making a list of the most watched medical series we can see that from 75 analyzed interviews, on the first place we find *House M.D.* with 31 answers from 155 variants, having an average of 93 followed by *Grey's Anatomy* with 21 answers with an average of 88. Both series are popular and started being broadcast mostly in the same period of time; *House M.D.* has been seen for the first time on late 2004 and *Grey's Anatomy* at the beginning of 2005 and still has a great success nowadays.

Figure 1 Looking upon medical issues in TV programs



The main character from *House MD* is a male doctor and in *Grey's Anatomy* the heroes are both men and women – residents. From a medical perspective related to gender we can assist to an evolution regarding the precedent periods when doctors were always men in fiction medical movies/TV series (Philips, 2000, 50):

Early television hospital dramas established the doctor as a male hero and ideal citizen, and relegated women to the roles of the supportive nurse or grateful patient.

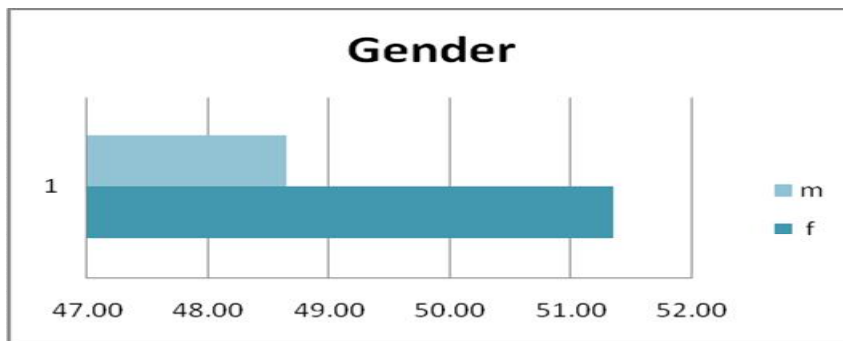
As for which type of TV series are most watched, following the answers given by the 75 respondents, we

registered 25 first options for *House MD* and *Grey's Anatomy*, followed by police investigation series as a second option and ending with fantasy as a third option.

After having collected the social and demographic data, we can conclude that these types

of television series are being watched by men and women, the difference between the two being minor. Thus we may notice a percentage of 48.64% answers given by men and a percentage of 51.35% given by women.

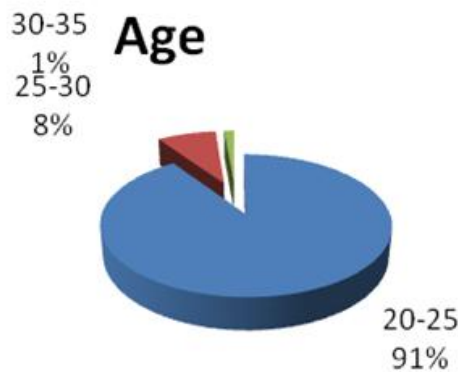
Figure 2 Gender of the interviewed students



The real difference can be seen when analyzing the information regarding the age range of

the people watching the TV series in scope: 90.54% within the range 20-25 years old.

Figure 3 The age of the interviewed students



These are mostly students from urban settlements (89.19%) with relatively low income, 79.73% of them

with a maximum of 1000 RON per month.

Figure 4 Income of the interviewed students

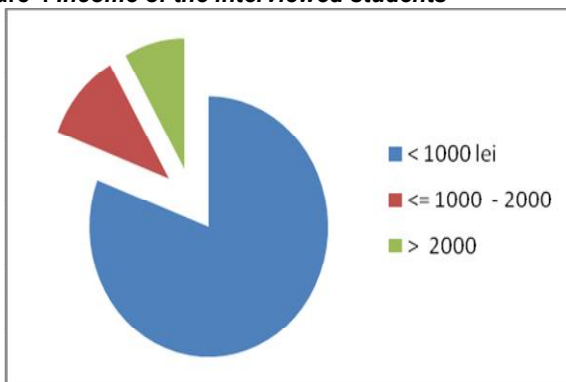
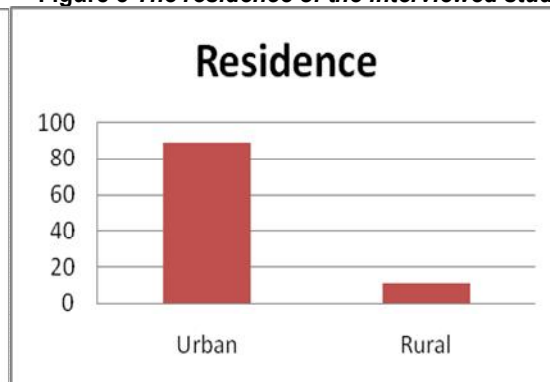


Figure 5 The residence of the interviewed students



Once we have established the profile of the audience for these TV series, we can proceed to examining the reason for which these series are most watched, according to the information received in our interviews. If we consider a top for the answers received, we will notice that most people are attracted to the main theme, the subject and the character development (30 out of 75 answers).

Analyzing the answers a bit further we find a lot of interesting reasons:

*The themes are very interesting, one of the series was part of a presentation for one of the classes I teach [...]; Medical theme and the characters' attitude" [...] life stories entwined with teamwork and fun; The main character's brightness (House MD).*

Besides the theme and the subject, 19 out of 75 answers reveal the wish to relax and to spend leisure time as pleasant as possible.

We may notice that one of the most important reasons is the theme and action some answers being based only on certain types of TV series (criminal investigation, medical, etc.).

Considering that most interviewees watch these TV series for the theme and subject, we were interested in knowing exactly their opinion regarding friendship and love relationships between the characters, even in the working environment.

This being said, we can see that most of the respondents consider friendship as being absolutely necessary in these TV series and even is considered to be the main link for the characters:

*Friendship is seen as an indestructible connection; Friendship is a group quality which helps getting over problems, personal or professional.*

Sometimes friendship is benefic at the working place, matters very much the teams support:

*Friendship has a strictly professional interest (House M.D.) and is based especially on the jobs relationships; Friendship is a strong connection from which success is born; Friendship is seen as a group quality and helps solving problems.*

Those who answered consider that besides the main purpose of friendship, moral and physical support, team work, in some cases friendship plays a double role and is seen as an act of personal achievement:

*Friendship is supported by mutual advantages; In some TV series friendship is being describes as dangerous and in others a strong and powerful link from which success rises; Friendship is a competition (quote: win to*

*win type).*

We can see from this responses related to friendship, that most of the interviewees make reference to medical TV series, where a friendship relationship is absolutely necessary which keeps a team on track with great results. This determines a better coordination in the medical field and empowers team strength:

*Friendship in Grey's Anatomy is valued; Friendship is very important especially in a team regardless the work field (doctors, investigator, detectives; Friendship is determined by a powerful connections in Grey's Anatomy, when in other TV series friendship is not even mentioned, mostly is seen as a strictly professional relationship; Friendship is only a work related connections, strictly professional, unconditioned and based on mutual respect.*

Besides friendship relationships, which are based on respect and team work, sometimes love relationships may evolve. This provides and reinforces the idea of union between TV series characters. We have found a really interesting answer, where is specified that love relationships can be the start point of some series and this kind of connections is imminent in an well organized group which share the same values (doctors, police officers etc.):

*In Grey's Anatomy, love is the main subject, in other series love is not even mentioned; Love gave the main reason of the TV series theme.*

Regarding the view of the interviewees over the watched TV series, many consider that have not been influenced in any way by the themes or the series themselves. However there are some respondents which consider that some TV series have an educational predisposition to those who watch them:

*Professional fields and domains are approached in the TV series, these are well received by the group age 20-25, sometimes may open new paths and roads for different specialties (ex: medicine, law, crime and investigations, biology or physics), this may have the role to inspire the viewer to follow on a potential carrier.*

Or, maybe, in some cases can strengthen up personal and professional relationships by adopting some examples seen in the TV series:

*Sometimes, watching series, we become aware of the importance of real friends, love relationships or can create the desire of union in personal connections; There are lots of common point of views regarding discussions and can develop new relations or may help communicating in a love relationship.*

## Discussion

This research had the purpose to find out in which way TV series especially those from the medical field have



an increased interest among Bucharest young students and masters graduates. This has been demonstrated that it enjoys a high interest which in fact exists.

In this way, a survey realized by the a network company (UPC Romania, 2008) sums up the fact that TV series European audience based on medical real life situations gets at 71% for the TV category which apply medical themes, from which, foreign productions such as *Emergency Hospital*, *Grey's Anatomy* are favorite by viewers (50%) comparing with series related to the same theme (22%).

The great success which the American TV show *Grey's Anatomy* is enjoying among Romanian public is found also throughout the interviewed students. Besides *Grey's Anatomy*, another successful TV show which is found in the first selections of the interviewees is *House MD*. As anticipated, we discovered the fact that those who participated to the research watching these medical TV series represents one of the methods in which they can understand critical situations from the medical world. They consider that there is a high resemblance between a real life medical environment and the fiction cases presented in medical TV shows.

Although, those who answered and exposed their point of view regarding the TV series are very few, as in all qualitative researches, some result can be used as hypothesis for later studies which may suggest to find out which are the reasons why the public is watching medical TV series – are these related to the public's interest towards medical issues or by the scenario's quality and how this is brought out by the screenwriters, including the scene dynamic or the "spicing of the plot". Another possible research may be extended through the communication specialists from medical institutions and has the scope to find out if and how the information from medical TV series is perceived by the beneficiary.

If the result will demonstrate a constant

interest of patients for finding out novelty from the medical field through media entertainment shows, it will probably be useful to produce more TV series with medical thematic adapting them to the audience's needs.

### Conclusions

This research may be used by screenwriters and TV producers and also to employees from a medical environment. Regarding the screenwriters and producers the utility of this research is brought up by the Romania public expectations concerning medical TV series. In the case of medical employees if to be taken into consideration the public's interest regarding the association between medical practice and a friendly/ human/ familiar environment in which feelings and emotions do not miss.

We can conclude also that a continuous collaboration is needed between health specialist and tv series producers. Improvement of the dialog between medical screenwriters and health specialist may contribute to carry around some inexact opinions related to medical procedures, inexact opinions which have already brought up some undesirable results when some patients believed in cures borrowed from movies with medical themes and subjects.

It should not be neglected the audience' opinion regarding the link between private and professional life of medical staff based on impressions left by TV series spiced more and more with sex scenes (especially in *Grey's Anatomy*). The audience growth due to these invincible ingredients is accepted, especially by direct producers and also by those who receive important fees as a medical consultant for the screenplays of movies and medical TV series. However they should consider the dangers exposed to the public's perception regarding the slip from medical ethics presented in the TV shows, this may cause at one point an increase in the disbelief related to the doctors capacity to prioritize medical act in disadvantage of love and friendship relationships in the working environment – the hospital.

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