

## Operant Subjectivity

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### Why Do We Keep Going Back? A Q Method Analysis of our Attraction to Horror Movies

Tom Robinson

Clark Callahan

Keith Evans

*Brigham Young University*

**Abstract:** For some, attending a horror movie is an agonizing experience that brings on nightmares and causes physical and emotional pain, while others rush to theaters with enthusiastic anticipation for the thrill and excitement the horror movie will bring. Why the difference? The purpose of this study was to identify why horror fans are attracted to horror movies and to provide a better understanding as to why this movie genre captivates millions every year. Through the Q sorts of horror movie fans, three factors were identified, “adrenaline junkies,” who represent the stereotypical sensation-seeker, “white knucklers,” who get scared and have nightmares but love watching horror movies, and “detectives” who see horror movies as a intellectual experience where they try to figure out the plot. The results show that horror movies do attract a diverse audience and that fans are much more complex than the stereotypical thrill seeker.

Why do we continue to go to the theater to see horror movies when we know the results will be so disturbing? Why do we stand in line to buy a ticket for a movie we know is going to give us nightmares and keep us up all night? To most, placing oneself in the uncomfortable situations brought on by fear and terror is inconceivable and something to be avoided at all costs. Others, however, flock to theaters in eager anticipation to see what new horrors of blood, torture, pain, and murder the movie producers have created. Over the years, researchers have attempted to explain the attraction to horror movies, giving credit to differences in gender (Berry, Gray, & Donnerstein, 1999; Nolan & Ryan, 2000; Oliver, 1994; Oliver & Sanders 2004; Tamborini & Stiff, 1987), gender-role socialization (Tamborini, 1991; Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986), and personality types (Aluja-Fabregat & Torrubia-Beltri, 1998; Kremar & Greene, 1999; Tamborini & Stiff, 1987; Zuckerman & Litle, 1986). What was once seen as a genre reserved for social delinquents, deviants, and the undereducated, horror movies have evolved to be one of most popular movie genres and still remain a steady moneymaker for the movie industry (Box Office Mojo, 2013).

In 2012, the average horror film earned \$27.6 million, and the horror movie industry has made over \$9 billion since 1995. With the recent success of the *Paranormal Activity* series, box office numbers were well over \$417 million in 2012 and are predicted to be even greater in 2013 (Box Office Mojo, 2013). So, as audiences pour into theaters to experience the terrors of horror, the question still remains why. Why do millions of people expose themselves to these movies when they know the images on the screen will be dreadfully agonizing to watch, and the nightmares that follow will be physically and emotionally painful? The purpose of this research is to identify what types of people are attracted to horror movies. Through the use of Q methodology, this research will

Contact Author: tom\_robinson@byu.edu

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explore the opinions, beliefs, and attitudes of the horror movie fan to provide a better understanding as to why this movie genre thrills and captivates millions every year.

### Literature Review

The phenomenon of fear has been studied at length by a number of researchers from various angles, including the use of fear appeals (Insko, Arkoff, & Insko, 1965; Madux & Rogers, 1983; Soames, 1988), the fear of crime (Fox, Nobles, & Piquero, 2009; Heath & Gilbert, 1996; Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003), and the fear of becoming a victim (Doob & MacDonald, 1979; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980). Other researchers like Twitchell (1985) traced the physiological and psychological roots of fear to horror and terror, including experiencing goose bumps or “the creeps” (pp. 10–11).

From a pop culture perspective, Carroll’s oft-cited *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) distinguishes what he calls “art horror,” the kind of aesthetic that utilizes horror to simulate fear (p. 12). In discussing the theoretical nature of gothic horror, Cavallaro (2002) argued the following:

Narratives of darkness nourish our attraction to the unknown by presenting us with characters and situations that point to something beyond the human, and hence beyond interpretation – a nexus of primeval feeling and apprehension which rationality can never conclusively eradicate. (p. 6)

Some studies have even approached the question of why people seek out and experience fear (Legrand & Apter, 2004). While examining the attraction of going to the theater to watch a horror movie, Fahy (2010) suggested that the popularity of this form of entertainment is because individuals can confront their fear in a controlled setting and because they can appreciate the sensation of regaining control of their lives afterward.

An understanding of why people like to be scared by frightening experiences has taken researchers in a variety of directions. Sparks and Sparks (2000) examined three fundamental explanations for people’s enjoyment of violence, mayhem, and horror content in their media. First, the aesthetic quality of such content can be inherently appealing and done with the intention of drawing the viewer into the story (Allen & Greenberger, 1978, 1979). Second, the novelty and macabre nature of most horror films entices viewers to watch, and then they are exposed to things they would never see in their ordinary lives (Carroll, 1990). Third, the content satisfies the desires of the sensation seekers who look for the most intense media to generate a similarly intense stimulation. As Zuckerman (1996) describes it, “Sensation seekers prefer being frightened or shocked to being bored” (p. 155).

Once-popular explanations for the attraction to horror films have fallen out of favor, while others have risen to prominence. Feshbach’s (1955) long-held catharsis model – the notion that viewers are purged of their aggressive tendencies after watching violent film content – has largely been disproved (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Excitation transfer, meanwhile, has long held a sturdy reputation as an explanation for people’s attraction to horror films (Zillmann, 1978). Viewers experience arousal while watching horror films, which continues after the film is over. The sense of relief or even of satisfaction that can come from the resolution at the film’s end is intensified, and viewers often mistakenly associate this intense relief with the film itself. The effect of excitation transfer has been well documented in a variety of fields, including watching horror films (Zillmann et al., 1986; Reisenzein & Gattinger, 1982). Scholarship on understanding the attraction to horror films has examined a number of factors, with most centering on differences in gender and personality traits.

### **Differences in Gender and Gender Socialization**

From the research examining the appeal of horror movies, numerous studies have indicated that men watch more horror films than women (Cantor & Reilly, 1982; Hoffner & Levine, 2005; Mundorf, Weaver, & Zillmann, 1989; Nolan & Ryan, 2000; Oliver, 1994). Some specific differences of appeal between the genders have been found, for example, when self-reporting feelings of fear: males typically report lower levels of fear and physiological arousal than females (Cantor & Reilly, 1982). In a 2000 study by Nolan and Ryan, participants were asked to describe the scariest slasher film that they could recall seeing. The results showed that females were more likely to use words describing fear or terror, while males used words describing frustration and anxiety. Harris et al. (2000) asked college students to recall a date they went on where they watched a movie that frightened them. The results show clear differences between the genders; females reported twice as many “negative reactions” and “sleep disturbances” than males did (p. 262). When looking at the appeal of horror movies, Tamborini and Stiff (1987) found that male horror-movie fans were sensation seekers who liked the destructive nature of horror films, while female horror-movie fans liked horror movies because of their satisfying endings.

Another way in which the genders differ in their reactions to horror movies is in gender socialization. Gender socialization is the process one goes through to learn the social expectations and attitudes related to one’s gender. Current cultural socialization norms have moved beyond the use of tribal rituals (Gebser, 1985) to test a young person’s worthiness to enter adulthood; however, the expectations are still the same, and in modern times alternative methods are used for adolescents to prove they are ready to be adults. Zillmann and Weaver (1996) suggest that the horror movie is one of these modern rites of passage. Horror movies are a way for young men to show they have mastered their fears and a way for females to show their need to be protected. Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, and Aust, (1986) found that males enjoyed a horror movie more when their female partner was scared; in concert with this finding, the opposite was discovered for women, who preferred their male partners to show strength and courage. Zillmann and Weaver (1996) expanded this theme with a study demonstrating that when males and females are given an opportunity to act out traditional gender roles (i.e., the males show that they are not frightened by a horror film, and the females are given the opportunity to grab men’s arms), both genders report higher levels of enjoyment.

### **Differences in Personality**

In addition to gender, researchers have found that differences in personality are a good predictor of the attraction to horror films. The greatest amount of research has concentrated on the sensation seekers, who are individuals with “the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experiences” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 10). The sensation-seeker personality is particularly attracted to the horror genre because “the jolt of horror is exhilarating and . . . leaves people feeling invigorated” (Tamborini & Stiff, 1987, p. 425). These individuals actually seek out horror movies because the thrill they receive from the fear created by the movies can be pleasurable and satisfying.

Using his Sensation-Seeking Scale, Zuckerman (1996) identified four dimensions of sensation seeking: (a) thrill and adventure seeking (TAS), which is a desire to engage in risky sports involving speed or the defiance of gravity; (b) experience seeking (ES), which is a desire to seek experiences through the mind and senses; (c) disinhibition

(Dis), which represents both desire and actual activities of seeking pleasure through partying, sex, and gambling, and (d) boredom susceptibility (BS), which is an aversion to boredom. Researchers have found that each of these dimensions is correlated with attraction to horror movies, yet Zuckerman and Litle (1986) found that males correlated with TAS and Dis, and females correlated with TAS, Dis, and BS. The highest correlation between horror movies and both genders was with Dis.

Additionally, the research has identified another personality trait, empathy, which is directly related to the attraction to horror movies. Davis (1983) stated that empathy “in the broadest sense refers to the reaction of one individual to the observed experiences of another” (p. 113). Because horror movies typically contain scenes with graphic violence and detailed images of victims suffering and in pain, highly empathetic people who are sensitive to the distress and pain of others are not particularly attracted to horror movies (Tamborini, 1991). Highly empathetic people develop strong associations with the characters in horror movies and they can actually become involved in the characters’ lives to a point that they have “strong reactions to emotionally charged events” (Tamborini, Stiff, & Heidel, 1990, p. 620). They can even feel as if what is happening to the characters in the movie is actually happening to them.

This is not to say that people who are attracted to horror movies lack empathy or delight in the pain of others; they are, however, more likely to be “normal people who derive pleasure from the more positive aspects of the viewing situation” (Tamborini, 1991, p. 325). Tamborini continued by describing these viewers as beyond the negative effects of horror movies. He argued that “it is conceivable that individuals who do not daydream or who do not let their imagination wander never forget that what they are watching is only a movie and thus do not get upset by these events” (p. 313).

### **Theoretical Background**

As the above discussion highlights, there are a number of reasons why individuals elect to view horror movies. While the major participation identifiers are associated with mediated personality and gender differences, one element that is common throughout the experience is self-selection. Whether audience members at a horror movie like or dislike the genre, they all have one thing in common: each of them has chosen to be there. Again, we ask the question, “Why do we go back?” Perhaps the best explanation can be found within the uses and gratifications theory.

Uses and gratifications theory has been used in numerous types of viewer analyses, including television crime dramas (Brown, Lauricella, Douai, & Zaidi, 2012), newspaper readership (Towers, 1985), cultural responses to media (Hur & Robinson, 1981; Li, Yea-Wen, & Nakazawa, 2013), and Internet use (Jiménez, Cruz López de Ayala Lopez, & Pisionero, 2012). Johnston (1995) has looked specifically at the link between uses and gratifications theory and the personality characteristics and motivations of horror movie viewers. The results confirm the conclusions of uses and gratifications theory in that the gratifications sought are directly related to the gratifications obtained when watching horror movies. Johnston takes the research one step further to say, “Rather than suggesting that gratifications sought mirror gratifications obtained, this study suggests that individual differences in viewing motivations explain variance in responses to graphic media” (p. 543). Her analysis found six viewing factors: (1) gore watching (“I watch because I like to see people die,” and “I like watching blood and guts.”); (2) thrill watching (“I like to be scared,” and “I like to have fun.”); (3) independent watching (“I watch because it makes me feel brave,” and “Watching makes me feel mature.”); (4) problem watching (“I watch because I am lonely,” and “I watch to

avoid problems at home.”); (5) peer motivations (“I watch because everyone else watches,” and “I watch to fit in with my friends.”) and (6) entertainment motivations (“I watch because there’s nothing else to do,” and “I watch because the films are stupid and I can laugh.”) (pp. 536–537).

Later, Johnston (1995) combined excitation transfer theory and uses and gratifications theory to describe the four principal motivations adolescents cite for viewing horror media. The research indicated that the adolescents’ motivations are connected to the cognitive responses they undergo while watching horror films, including whether they identify more closely with the victims or the aggressors. Additionally, Zillmann (1980) used excitation transfer theory to explain the effects films have on viewers. The broad scope of uses and gratifications theory makes it an especially effective tool for understanding the motivations behind why people are attracted to the horror film genre (Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rubin, 1994).

From this literature review, two research questions guided the research: What types of individuals are attracted to watching horror movies; and what personality characteristics exist in individuals who are attracted to watching horror movies?

## **Method**

For this study, the concourse was a group of statements centered on the idea of “Why I like horror movies.” These statements were gathered from a diverse group of sources comprised of academic journals (including Johnston’s (1995) viewing motivations and Zuckerman’s (1996) sensation-seeking research), popular magazine and newspaper articles, blogs, horror-movie fan pages, chat rooms, and comment pages that all discussed why people like watching horror movies. Many of the statements were direct quotations from fans themselves concerning why they were attracted to horror movies. A total of 75 statements emerged from this effort. Next, a group of five horror movie enthusiasts (two faculty members and three graduate students) reviewed the statements to determine their relevance to the research topic, the independence of each idea, and to eliminate any repeated ideas or perceptual saturation. Based on this group’s input, a sample of 48 statements (see Appendix A) was selected from the population of opinions that best represented why individuals are attracted to watching horror movies. It is this sample of 48 statements that the respondents used to create a Q-sort of their own attitudes about why they like horror movies.

To ensure the results of this study were from horror-movie fans, care was taken during the sampling procedure to select respondents who were in the target-market age range for horror movies (18–29 years of age). Because the purpose of the study was to determine what types of people are attracted to horror movies, individuals were only selected for participation if they answered yes to the following two questions: (1) Do you like watching horror movies? and (2) If a new horror movie comes to the theater, are you likely to go see it?

The next step was to have the participants conduct their Q-sorts by reading through each of the 48 statements and ranking them on an 11-point scale that ranged from “most like I believe” (+5) to “least like I believe” (–5). After the Q-sorts were completed, interviews were conducted with each of the participants to probe further into the individuals’ decision-making processes, to allow them to explain why they ranked some statements high and other statements low, and to let them express their thoughts and feelings about horror movies. The interviews used a structured questionnaire with the following questions: (1) Why did you select these two statements as being most like you believe?; (2) Why did you select these two statements as being least like you believe?;

(3) What do you like the most about horror movies? and (4) What do you dislike about horror movies? The average time for each person to complete each Q-sort and interview was approximately 45 minutes.

In the analysis, researchers used Principal Components Analysis to generate an unrotated factor matrix, which was then subjected to a varimax rotation. To qualify as a reportable factor, the criterion was at least two significant participant factor loadings at the 0.01 significance level. Once the factors were determined, significant positive and negative z scores for the statements that accompanied each factor were then compared. Statements for each factor with a z score greater than  $\pm 1.0$  were considered to be significantly “most like I believe” and “least like I believe.”

Finally, the composite factor arrays for each factor were derived from the rank scores assigned to each statement by the participants significantly associated with each factor. Factor scores that differed by  $\pm 3$  for each statement on each factor were considered to be significantly different.

Labels and interpretations determined by the investigators for the following factors were derived from the factor scores, supplemented by the responses recorded from the interviews conducted with the participants.

## Results

The factor analysis of the Q-sorts yielded three significant factors, or “operational definitions of the attitudes or value preferences” of the individuals conducting the sorts (Brown, 1980, p. 55). These three factors characterize general perceptual typologies and not necessarily demographic identifiers of individual responses. Unlike traditional means-based statistical representations, these three factors identify both majority and minority perceptions and thereby offer a rich view of the popularity of horror movies.

### **Factor 1: The Adrenaline Junkies**

The ratings of 18 individuals (9 males and 9 females) who had 15 statements (both positive and negative) in common made up this group (see Table 1). The individuals in Factor 1 were labeled the “adrenaline junkies” because they view horror movies as a way to get an adrenaline high or to feel pumped up and alive. This group represents the stereotypical sensation-seeker horror-movie fan who is driven by excitement, fun, and energy. Horror movies for adrenaline junkies are similar to an extreme sport that is played for excitement and to increase the heart rate. One adrenaline junkie said, “I want to feel my cinema and horror movies wake my body up and get my blood pumping.” Adrenaline junkies love the suspense in a horror movie and the feeling of not knowing what will happen next because they appreciate the scare. They are not shocked by blood and gore, and they enjoy the climax in these movies.

The statement that adrenaline junkies disagreed with the most was, “Horror movies are nothing more than sick entertainment for depraved individuals.” They take exception to this statement because they are the people who really like horror movies, and they do not consider themselves sick and depraved. They see horror movies as a way to have a thrilling experience, and they feel justified in looking for a cheap thrill. Because they are thrill seekers they do not allow themselves to develop a connection with the characters or victims in the films. Their empathy for the characters is almost nonexistent, and in many cases, they like watching characters get what they deserve. One adrenaline junkie said, “In one movie I watched, the characters were so stupid I wanted them to all get killed.”

Adrenaline junkies do not internalize the horror movies. For them, this type of media

is psychologically transitory, meaning the effects of horror movies are very short lived and do not linger with them. During the interviews, one person said, "As soon as the movie is over, it's over," and another person said, "I don't let my imagination affect me." These individuals are not afraid to go home in the dark, and they don't have nightmares after watching a horror movie. As mentioned before, horror movies make these individuals feel alive, and once they have experienced that feeling, they move on to something else. It is as if these individuals can flip a switch, so to speak, in regards to the effects of horror movies. In describing his feelings about a horror movie, an adrenaline junkie stated, "I don't get stressed. I don't know why you would. It's not like it's real life." Horror movies are a game to these people, as evidenced by their self-reported physiological responses.

**Table 1: Factor 1 – Significant Positive and Negative Statements**

<b>Statement Number</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Factor Score</b>
26	I love the adrenaline rush I get from watching a horror movie	+5
27	I like horror movies because they are suspenseful.	+5
35	I like that feeling of not knowing what's going to happen next in a horror movie.	+4
7	For me, a good story is just as important as the scares in a horror movie.	+4
43	Being scared makes me feel alive.	+4
41	I watch horror movies because I want to find out what new ways the moviemakers have come up with to scare me.	+3
30	I like horror movies about things that could really happen.	+3
6	A horror movie based on a true story is more effective than other types of horror movies.	+3
29	I like watching horror movies because a female is always the hero.	-2
14	Women in horror movies are used for nothing more than sexual objects.	-3
18	Horror movies give me bad dreams for days or even weeks after watching them.	-3
23	The effects of horror movies linger with me for months or even years.	-4
19	I get physically nauseous while watching a gory horror movie.	-4
47	I'm not willing to risk being scared for the thrill I get from watching a horror movie.	-4
4	Horror movies are nothing more than sick entertainment for deprived individuals.	-5

### **Factor 2: The White Knucklers**

Labeled the "white knucklers," the Factor 2 group comprised 12 individuals (6 males and 6 females) defined by 17 common statements (see Table 2). These are people who like being scared at horror movies, based on their agreement with statements such as, "I liked to be scared" and "I want to get scared," but they overwhelmingly experience the

negative psychological effects that come from watching horror movies. While others experience excitement and intellectual stimulation, white knucklers experience dramatic psychological consequences from viewing horror movies. These consequences can be quite significant and include nightmares, physical stress, lingering fear, an increased heart rate, and heightened phobias. While white knucklers are watching the movies, they hate that feeling of knowing something bad is going to happen, and they report experiencing physical stress waiting for it to actually happen. Some reported being so scared that they were afraid to go home after the movie or walk to their cars in the parking lot. One white knuckler confessed, "Even if I'm in my own house when I watch it, I'm scared to go into my bedroom." Another summarized this idea succinctly: "I have distinct memories of horror movies making me so scared that I had to sleep with someone else." Even though white knucklers like the suspense and the adrenalin rush, they get truly scared and are affected physically and psychologically.

More important than just being scared, white knucklers want their horror movies to have a good story. They like movies about serial killers and demonic possession and movies based on a true story or something that could really happen. This may be why they get so scared. For them, the higher levels of perceived reality cause higher levels of genuine fear. Because white knucklers perceive the movies as being real, in their minds they know that the killer from the movie could actually be hiding in their houses, waiting under their beds, or watching them from inside their closets. They tend to interject themselves into the movie and see themselves as one of the characters. One person stated, "Subconsciously you start to think, 'What if that was me, what would I do?'" and another said, "You apply it [the movie] to your life and think, 'What if that happened to me?'" They have a strong level of empathy for the characters, and they develop a strong connection with the characters and what they are doing in the movie. In describing the empathy they feel, a white knuckler said, "I can feel myself stressing out for the character on the screen."

**Table 2: Factor 2 – Significant Positive and Negative Statements**

<b>Statement Number</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Factor Score</b>
26	I love the adrenaline rush I get from watching a horror movie.	+5
21	I've gotten so scared during a horror movie that I was afraid to go home or walk in my house afterward.	+5
7	For me, a good story is just as important as the scares in a horror movie.	+4
8	Movies about demonic possession are the scariest movies	+4
6	A horror movie based on a true story is more effective than other types of horror movies.	+3
30	I like horror movies about things that could really happen	+3
20	I can feel myself becoming physically stressed while watching a horror movie.	+3
27	I like horror movies because they are so suspenseful	+3
22	I often have a nightmare shortly after watching a horror movie.	+2
17	I hate the feeling when I'm watching a horror movie and I know something bad is about to happen.	-3



<i>Statement Number</i>	<i>Statement</i>	<i>Factor Score</i>
4	Horror movies are nothing more than sick entertainment for depraved individuals.	-3
47	I'm not willing to risk being scared for the thrill I get from watching a horror movie.	-3
29	I like watching horror movies because a female is always the hero.	-4
13	Jump scares don't appeal to me in horror movies.	-4
36	I like to watch "torture" films because I'm curious what torture would really be like.	-4
5	I don't think movies about serial killers are scary at all.	-5
28	The more blood and gore there is in a horror movie, the better.	-5

### Factor 3: The Detectives

Factor 3 consisted of eight individuals (5 males and 3 females) with 12 statements (both positive and negative) in common (see Table 3). Researchers labeled this factor the "detectives" because these individuals view horror movies as a puzzle to figure out or a game to win. In their minds, they can beat the game by figuring out the plot before the characters in the movies. One detective respondent noted, "I like M. Night Shyamalan movies. I like the breadcrumbs he leaves." Another detective respondent noted, "I like to try to figure things out. I don't just go to be scared." This type of horror movie viewer watches in order to see where the pieces fit together. For detectives, viewing a horror movie is as much an intellectual experience as it is entertainment, and their enjoyment comes from figuring out who the bad guy is and which character will be the last one alive to beat the monster. Describing why he likes horror movies, one person said, "While I'm watching the movie, I always wonder what's going to happen next. Will they die? Will they get revenge?" and another person said, "I didn't like the movie *The Sixth Sense*. I had it figured out in the first 15 minutes."

Detectives do not perceive horror movies as real and therefore approach them from an angle of skepticism and emotional detachment. In this way, they are similar to adrenaline junkies in that they experience little or no psychological effects from viewing horror movies. They are able to turn off viewing effects as soon as they leave the theater, and they do not report any lasting anxiety or nightmares. One possible reason for this is the approach detectives take while viewing these films; they do not see horror movies as real, and therefore they do not have any real attachment to the characters or situations in the movies. Their detached approach to watching these movies does not pull them emotionally into the films. One detective noted this perception of indifference by stating, "I'm the kind of person that once I leave the theater, it's out of my head." Others explained their lack of involvement with the characters with statements such as, "I don't really think about the person that's being tortured."

Finally, detectives like the suspense of the movies but are much more interested in the story itself. A successful horror movie to a detective is one that has a coherent plot and logical narrative. For these individuals, an obvious plot is a detriment. They like not knowing what will happen next and trying to figure it all out. One detective respondent claimed, "Without a good story, I become disinterested." These individuals do not appreciate the blood and gore, but if the story is effective enough, they will tolerate it.

More than anything, it is this aloofness that defines the detectives; they are a difficult group to impress.

**Table 3: Factor 3 – Significant Positive and Negative Statements**

<b>Statement Number</b>	<b>Statement</b>	<b>Factor Score</b>
27	I like horror movies because they are suspenseful.	+5
7	For me, a good story is just as important as scares in a horror movie.	+4
32	I like it when horror movies give me something to laugh at to relieve the tension.	+4
35	I like that feeling of not knowing what's going to happen next in a horror movie.	+3
26	I love the adrenaline rush I get from watching a horror movie.	+3
34	The more realistic the special effects are in a horror film, the scarier it is.	+3
41	I watch horror movies because I want to find out what new ways the moviemakers have come up with to scare me.	-3
22	I often have a nightmare shortly after watching a horror movie.	-3
23	The effects of horror movies linger with me for months or even years.	-4
18	Horror movies give me bad dreams for days or even weeks after watching them.	-4
28	The more blood and gore there is in a horror movie, the better.	-5
36	I like to watch torture films because I'm curious what torture would really be like.	-5

## Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to determine why individuals are attracted to horror movies and, more specifically, what types of people like horror movies and what personality characteristics are associated with each type of fan. By using Q methodology, the factor analysis of the statements identified three sets of opinions (adrenaline junkies, white knucklers, and detectives). Much of the past research looking at the attraction of horror movies was supported by the identification of the adrenaline junkie, who was a strong example of the sensation seeker. Just as Tamborini and Stiff (1987) found with the sensation seekers, the adrenaline junkies receive pleasure from the feeling of fear, and they seek out horror movies for a thrill and the sensation of excitement. On Zuckerman's (1996) Sensation-Seeking Scale, adrenaline junkies align most closely with the thrill and adventure seekers (TAS) and disinhibition (Dis), but they also exhibited tendencies of experience seeking (ES), which is a desire to seek experiences through the mind and senses. Being scared makes adrenaline junkies feel alive.

Adrenaline junkies are not empathetic with the characters in a horror movie, and they do not get caught up in the characters' lives or feel their pain. Even though they show no empathy toward the movie's victims, they disagreed strongly with the idea that the people who are attracted to watching horror movies are sick and deprived

individuals. These horror movie fans appear to be more like the type of individuals Tamborini (1991) described as “normal people who derive pleasure from the more positive aspects of the viewing situation” (p. 325). Exemplifying this idea directly, one adrenaline junkie said, “I know it isn’t real . . . I think it’s important to appreciate the art and entertainment value.” What makes this group the most unique, and the reason they can so easily separate themselves from the fear and what is happening on the screen, is that they never lose sight of the fact that what they are watching is only a movie and that it is not real.

The existence of the other two factors was the most surprising result from this research, because a description of these individuals did not exist in past research. The group called the white knucklers was the most surprising and the most curious. The best way to describe this group is by looking at the top two statements they selected as best describing how they feel about horror movies: “I love the adrenaline rush I get from watching a horror movie” and “I’ve gotten so scared during a horror movie that I was afraid to go home or walk in my house afterward.” Past research may have described this group as sensation seekers because they enjoy watching horror movies for the excitement and the rush of adrenaline these movies provide, but what makes them different from the typical sensation seeker is that they also possess some of the same characteristics as people who hate watching horror movies. Even though they go to horror movies by choice, they get scared, suffer from nightmares, and carry the haunting effects of the movie with them for weeks or even months.

Another aspect that separates the white knucklers from the adrenaline junkies is that they are highly empathetic people who develop strong associations with the characters and feel as if what is happening to the characters is actually happening to them. Tamborini, Stiff, and Heidel’s (1990) research found that highly empathic people, who are sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, are not attracted to horror movies. Based on this idea, one would expect empathetic individuals to avoid horror movies, but white knucklers do the exact opposite. Despite feeling the pain and suffering of the characters, white knucklers are consistently in the theater to watching horror movies.

The question, then, is why do white knucklers enjoy horror movies so much? When posed with that question in the interviews, one white knuckler said, “I don’t know why I put myself through that. A part of me likes watching, but afterwards I think, ‘Why did I watch that?’” Another person summed up the feelings of many white knucklers by saying, “I don’t want to see those kinds of movies, but I can’t help it.” The answer? White knucklers just like the feeling of being scared. Like adrenaline junkies, white knucklers get an extreme amount of pleasure from the thrill of watching a horror film; therefore, they are willing risk the stress and pain, the horrible feelings, and the nightmares for the rush that being scared gives them.

The third factor, the detectives, was also an unexpected group found in the results of this research. Uniquely different than the other two factors, the detectives like horror movies for the suspense and the cognitive challenge they provide. Unlike adrenaline junkies, they do not watch for thrills and excitement; their attraction comes from spotting clues, figuring out the who and why, and determining how the movie will end. They are similar to the adrenaline junkies in that they do not get emotionally involved in the movie; they feel no empathy for the characters, and horror movies don’t scare them or give them nightmares. In Zuckerman’s (1996) Sensation-Seeking Scale, the detectives would correlate with the experience-seeking (ES) dimension, which is a desire to seek experiences through the mind and senses. The only difference would be that the horror-movie experience for detectives is strictly through the mind. They resist

letting their senses get involved while watching a horror movie. This is illustrated in the fact that they are so hard to impress, and they are not really into all of the gags, special effects, and blood and guts that movie producers include in horror movies.

### **Future Research and Limitations**

While this research applies uses and gratifications theory as an underpinning, the findings suggest an extension of this theory. Past examination of the reasons behind horror movie viewership has focused mainly on uses and gratifications theory and excitation transfer theory. Although the results of this study have supported the application of excitation transfer theory for adrenaline junkies and white knucklers, this theory does not fit well for the detectives. Detectives have an altogether different motivation for their patronage, and while uses and gratifications theory would still apply generally, Johnston's (1995) combination of uses and gratifications theory and excitation transfer theory would not. Further research needs to be done to address these theoretical differences. As this research demonstrates, when smaller viewer groups are pulled from the larger horror-movie population, general theoretical descriptions may lose some of their explanatory power. Certainly, more research would help identify the different uses and gratifications of the detectives and solidify this finding.

As an exploratory study into the types of horror movie watchers, this research is limited in its ability to make predictive conclusions about viewers themselves. However, now that these categories of viewers are identified, further research can move in that direction. Thus, while participants self-reported physiological effects of horror movie viewing, future research may actually measure the effects on the body to see if the adrenaline junkies, detectives, and white knucklers actually experience physical effects differently. Additionally, this research can offer scholars and movie producers an alternative way of evaluating successful films. For example, further research should evaluate the top-grossing horror films in relation to these three factor groups. Do successful films have themes or a storyline that appeal to all three? By expanding the subject pool to include a more international audience (a limitation of this research approach), additional research can test these factor groupings in a more global way.

Through the use of Q methodology, this research has shown that while differences in the horror movie fan's gender and personality type can be explained, differences in the reasons why horror movies are attractive can be explained based on the opinions and feelings of the fan. Unlike survey or scale research, Q methodology gathers together groups of people with common attitudes, opinions, and motivations. Clearly, the three factors found amongst horror movie fans all have separate and distinct attitudes and motivations for their love of horror films. While much of this research supports past findings, there are clear differences and new findings that need further exploration and explanation. Future research should take a closer look at the makeup and opinions of adrenaline junkies, white knucklers, and detectives, and what types of horror movies are the most successful with each group.

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## Appendix A

### 48 Statements of Why Individuals are Attracted to Watching Horror Movies

1. Even though I know horror movies aren't real I still get really scared while watching them.
2. I get scared in horror movies because I can feel the fear and pain the characters are going through.
3. Even though I know I am safe in the theater, the sense of danger makes me experience a great deal of fear.
4. Horror movies are nothing more than sick entertainment for depraved individuals.
5. Movies about serial killers are the scariest movies.
6. A horror movie based on a true story scares me more than other types of horror movies.
7. I like to watch "torture films" because I am curious what torture would really be like.
8. Movies about demonic possession are the scariest movies.
9. Even though I am scared, I just can't stop looking at the screen during a horror movie.
10. I believe that for some people, watching horror movies is kind of a release for cruel or aggressive impulses they might have.
11. Sometimes I try to laugh during a horror movie to relieve the tension.
12. Even though I know the images on the screen aren't real, my brain reacts as if they are real.
13. I don't like the way horror movies objectify women.
14. Women in horror movies are used for nothing more than sexual objects.
15. Horror movies remind me of how violent the world is today.
16. Horror movies scare me because they make me think that somewhere out in the world there are sick and disturbed people like they show in these movies.
17. I hate the feeling when I'm watching a horror movie and I know something bad is about to happen.
18. Horror movies give me bad dreams for days or even weeks after watching them.
19. I get physically nauseous while watching a horror movie.
20. I can feel myself becoming physically stressed while watching a horror movie.
21. I've gotten so scared during a horror movie that I was afraid to go home or walk in my house afterwards.
22. I have nightmares after watching horror movies.
23. The effects of horror movies linger with me for months or even years.
24. I can endure the horror because I know there will be a sense of relief at the end.
25. I like being scared in a horror movie because that feeling is so out of the ordinary for me.
26. I like the sensations that watching horror movies give me.
27. I like horror movies because they are suspenseful.
28. The more blood and gore there is in a horror movie the better.
29. I like watching horror movies because a female is always the hero.
30. I like horror movies about things that could really happen.
31. I go to horror movies because I love the feeling of being scared.
32. It doesn't bother me when the "bad" characters or the characters I dislike get killed in horror movies.



33. The best horror movies are the ones that have the characters in situations that resemble my own life.
34. The more realistic the special effects are in a horror film is the scarier it is.
35. I like that feeling of not knowing what's going to happen next in a horror movie.
36. Even though I avoid pain and suffering in everyday life, I can't wait to watch a scary movie.
37. Making it through a horror movie gives me a sense of accomplishment – I can conquer my fears.
38. I like when the victim gets revenge in horror movies.
39. I like to go to see horror movies on dates because it gives me an excuse to hold on to him/her.
40. I don't mind watching a horror movie because I know what I'm watching could never happen in real life.
41. I watch horror movies because I want to find out what new ways the movie makers have come up with to scare me.
42. I love the adrenaline rush I get from watching horror movies.
43. Being scared makes me feel alive.
44. I like to prove to my friends that I'm not afraid to go to horror movies.
45. What I feel during a horror movie is feeling of excitement more than a feeling of being scared.
46. Watching horror movies makes me realize that everything in my own life is OK.
47. I'm willing to risk being scared during a horror movie because of the pure thrill I get out of the experience.
48. By watching a horror movie I'm able to confront my fears in a safe environment.