

The Influence of Horror and Slasher Films on Adolescent Audiences as Compared to the
Influence of Media Violence on Youth Audiences

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Abstract

Youth exposure to media violence has been linked to increased levels of violence in both immediate and long-term situations. Media violence has been shown to increase acceptance of violence as a solution to conflict and decrease arousal and emotional disturbance while witnessing violence. This study focused on gaining information that could be used in understanding how horror and slasher films specifically influence adolescent audiences and how these influences correlate with their age, gender, and other personal traits. This information was gathered through a survey of high school students and a content analysis of instances of criminal acts inspired by horror and slasher films. With existing research on the influence of media violence as well as the common criticism of horror and slasher films for often intensely graphic content, this study served to evaluate whether horror and slasher films have influences on youth audiences similar to those of other forms of media violence. The data collected suggest that liking horror and slasher films, being male, and being an adolescent increase the likelihood of being influenced by horror and slasher films in ways such as increasing tolerance of violent and sexual content in these films and acceptance of violence as a solution to conflict.

Introduction

The horror film is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as a “film genre concerned with arousing feelings of horror.” The slasher film is a subgenre of the horror film in which, according to the Cambridge English Dictionary, “people, especially young women, are killed very violently with knives.” Whether positive or negative, horror and slasher films often elicit strong responses from audiences, critics, and parents. While many people enjoy horror and slasher films, others condemn such films due to the belief that they promote violence and other negative ideals that can have negative influences on youth. Despite being the subject of much criticism, horror and slasher films have a large following. Whether people enjoy these films as a method of catharsis, a thrilling escape to an alternate reality, or a chance to express violent emotions without fear of social condemnation, such films cannot be criticized without the consideration of their long-standing success. Both the positive and negative aspects of horror and slasher films must be considered when examining their effects and the validity of their criticism.

While there is a plethora of sources that detail the influence of violent media on youth, researchers have yet to address the possible influence of horror and slasher films specifically. This presents the question of whether the criticism of horror and slasher films is accurate. That is, whether horror and slasher films do, in fact, portray women in inaccurate and offensive ways, promote violent behavior to audiences, and ultimately have a negative influence on youth.

The main points of the criticism of horror and slasher films are portrayed clearly in a 1980 episode of *Sneak Previews*, a show in which Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, two film critics, discuss current films. This episode, entitled “Women in Danger,” takes on horror and slasher films, criticizing the trend of women in these films being oversexualized, portrayed as weak or

unintelligent, and then punished for these aspects with long and brutal murder scenes. They continue to point out that this invites audiences, especially males, to agree with this portrayal, viewing it as justification for their unrealistic and dangerous perceptions of women.

The question of whether horror and slasher film criticism is accurate provides much room for qualification, seeing that there are many different horror and slasher films made with different motives. Additionally, there is no way that one type of stimulus can influence all adolescents in the same way. Despite this, a general idea of how these films can influence some people could begin a discussion of the ways horror and slasher films affect the general public. This insight on the content of horror and slasher films and their influences could result in more informed audiences.

Literature Review

Multiple content analyses performed on horror and slasher films over the span of about 20 years have widely proven that in these films, females are subjected to a disproportionate amount of terror as well as a disproportionate amount of violence that coincides with some sort of sexual content when compared to male characters. However, not all content analyses have reached the same results. J.B. Weaver's 1991 content analysis of 10 slasher films concluded that gender did not affect the screen time or deaths of protagonists.

A 1992 content analysis of 30 horror and slasher films published in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* by doctoral candidate Fred Molitor and Barry S. Sapolsky, Ph. D. revealed that male characters were more likely to be targeted by killers than female characters. It also revealed, however, that female characters in horror and slasher films were portrayed in longer, more drawn out scenes of terror than male characters. Daniel Linz Ph. D.

and Edward Donnerstein Ph. D. responded to this with a reinterpretation of Molitor's and Spolsky's data. It is their belief that female characters in horror and slasher films are, in fact, singled out for victimization disproportionately, as they are more frequently portrayed as victims than females in other types of films. They support this claim by comparing Molitor's and Sapolsky's data to that of a 1990 content analysis on the victimization of female characters in non-horror, R-rated films, stating that these films, compared to horror and slasher films, have a much larger disparity between the percentage of male and female victims (Yang & Linz). They also claim that almost 22 percent of female characters in horror and slasher films are killed during or in short succession of a sexual act. Molitor and Sapolsky then concede, stating that they do accept that sex and violence are linked in the portrayal of women in horror and slasher films, but female characters are not victims of more violence than male characters, thus displaying that different interpretations of the research results may yield different conclusions.

Furthermore, Andrew Welsh Ph. D. performed a content analysis of 50 horror and slasher films and published the findings of this research in 2009 with the Department of Criminology and Contemporary Studies. He found that females are not more likely than males to be victimized in horror and slasher films and that the violence they face is often less severe or graphic. However, female characters are more likely to be victims of violence with some sexual component.

There have been multiple studies providing evidence that media violence has an observable influence on youth audiences. Craig Anderson et al. combined information from various studies to explain that this violence has both immediate and long term effects on youth (2003). They detailed a study in which some subjects watched an action film while others

watched a less violent film. All subjects who had seen the action film were more likely to choose to subject strangers to an electric shock in a controlled experiment. The research of Joanne Cantor, Ph. D., published by the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, concluded exposure of children to media violence may also be linked to antisocial behavior and reduced sympathy for victims. This research lays a foundation for research on the specific influence of violence in horror and slasher films.

American professor Carol Clover's book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, published in 1992, discusses the draws and peculiarities of the horror genre. This is not, however, an account of proven influences of horror and slasher films as her ideas are not investigated by original research. Along with influencing Welsh's aforementioned content analysis, it has sparked a great deal of scholarly conversation. Most of the background research for this study cites Clover's work in some way. Clover described the tropes of popular horror and slasher films: the notorious party girl whose death is swift and unemotional, the "final girl" whose intelligence and modesty ensures her survival, and the lonely, unnerving killer who fascinates audiences with his grotesque behavior. She emphasizes the fact that these tropes are portrayed with extreme accuracy in horror and slasher films and that the genders of these characters rarely switch.

Clover theorizes that the male killer is formulated to be shocking yet relatable, suggesting that filmmakers use first-person, shaky camera angles from the killer's perspective to prompt audiences to identify with the killer. The victims' deaths are both expected and accepted as they are shown as punishments for behaviors such as sexual promiscuity, underage drinking, and

other acts common to rebellious teens. While some papers cite these tropes, others focus on her description of the audience's reaction to the films.

Purpose

While there have been multiple studies investigating the influence of media violence on youth audiences, there have been no studies on the influence of specific violent genres of film on youth audiences. Additionally, the criticism of horror and slasher films for their negative portrayal of women and their sexuality have been supported by various content analyses. However, some common criticism of horror and slasher films, such as the belief that they cause males to accept violence due to these films' tendency to prompt males to identify with the killer, have not been examined. By using the conclusions of these two fields of research, this study focuses on answering the questions that remain unanswered by previous studies. Through a survey and a content analysis, this study is designed to gauge the influence of horror and slasher films on adolescent audiences.

Hypothesis

Because violent media has already been shown to cause desensitization to violence in youth audiences and increase violent behavior, similar findings should be expected from this study. This study's findings should show that adolescents that like horror and slasher films are more tolerant of violent and sexual content in horror and slasher films as well as more accepting of violence as a solution to problems. Additionally, the content analysis should display a tendency of males to be influenced by horror and slasher films.

Methods

This study aims to compare the influences of horror and slasher films on adolescent audiences to the most common criticisms of these films and the influence of media violence on youth audiences. Siskel and Ebert's criticisms and the research of Anderson et al. and Cantor are used as a point of comparison. To gain an understanding of the influences of horror and slasher films on adolescents, students at a mid-sized, suburban high school were surveyed on their beliefs regarding horror and slasher films as well as their opinions on violence. A total of 75 students responded to the survey. These students were those that either gave their own consent or expressed the consent of their parents if they were under the age of 18. Because every student must take four years of English Language Arts, teachers of all grades and levels of these classes were contacted to get a wide variety of survey participants. A total of eight classes participated in the survey.

Demographic questions used to distinguish patterns in data included age and gender as well as whether participants liked or disliked horror and slasher films. This was important as the criticism of horror and slasher films expressed concern that male audience members would be more likely to identify with the killers in horror and slasher films and thus would be more impressionable. Additionally, dividing participants into those that liked and those that disliked horror and slasher films made it possible to observe whether horror and slasher films have any discernable effects on adolescents.

Survey participants were then asked to rate their agreement to the statement "Horror films often portray women as being weak or incapable" on a scale from one to five, with a response of one indicating strong disagreement and a response of five indicating strong agreement. This information was gathered for the examination of whether adolescents notice the

stereotypes portrayed in horror and slasher films and the likelihood that they will look for these stereotypes. Participants were also asked to rate their agreement to the statement “Violence cannot fully resolve conflicts,” using the same scale as previously described in order to find which demographics were most inclined to accept violence as a solution to conflict.

Additionally, participants were asked to choose from provided responses to express their tolerance of violent and sexual content in horror and slasher films. The provided responses allowed participants to claim to have complete, high, medium, low, or no tolerance for this content. Analysis of the accumulated data was performed to find whether certain responses were typically linked and if any factors were dependent on others.

A content analysis on instances of criminal behavior inspired by horror and slasher films was also performed to broaden the scope of the study from the school of the students who were surveyed to an international level. The circumstances surrounding crimes inspired by horror and slasher films were examined to find whether traits such as gender or age played any factor in these crimes. The original time range for articles to be included was 1960 to present, as 1960 was the year Alfred Hitchcock’s horror film “Psycho” was released, which many consider to be the birth of the modern horror film genre (Clover, 1992). However, none of the articles selected were written before 1990.

Limitations

To achieve the approval of the school district’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), a group of district officials that make decisions and oversee operations of the district to ensure the safety of students and staff, certain alterations to the research design had to be made. In surveying high school students, one of the most prominent limitations was the need for parent consent forms

which were required of all participants under the age of 18 by the IRB. This added difficulty for survey participants and served as a deterrent as it increased the amount of participation necessary of students beyond the completion of the survey. Students over the age of 18 were not required to present signed parent consent forms as they were viewed as being legally old enough to make the decision to participate in the survey. Because of this, the average age of the survey participants was higher than anticipated. The survey also reached only a small population as many of the teachers contacted for surveys did not respond. Most of the survey participants were Honors or Advanced Placement students due simply to the fact that most of the teachers that responded were Honors or Advanced Placement teachers.

Due to the fact that the survey was anonymous and not administered under supervision, participant honesty could have been a limitation. Because of this, it is possible that some responses were not honest. The survey also requested that participants assess their own beliefs in multiple instances, so the accuracy of the data relied partially on participants' ability to answer with honesty and accuracy. Additionally, to function in accordance to IRB standards, participants were not required to answer any questions, allowing them to skip questions as they wished. This could have had a slight influence on the survey results as two participants omitted one question each.

Due to time constraints as well as the repetitive nature of the news articles describing the criminal acts analyzed in this study, only 10 were included in the content analysis. Many of the stories seemed to include many of the same aspects and therefore including more than 10 would not have been efficient. However, analyzing more sources could have shown different trends or accounted for more outliers.

Results

Survey

Survey participants that liked horror and slasher films were more accepting of violence and sexual content in these films than participants that disliked these films. Sixty percent of participants that liked horror and slasher films claimed to be tolerant of any level of sexual content in these films, while only 39 percent of participants that disliked these films claimed complete tolerance of sexual content. Similarly, 58 percent of participants that liked horror and slasher films and 22 percent of participants that disliked these films claimed to be tolerant of any level of violence in these films. Forty-one percent of participants that disliked horror and slasher films and 52 percent of participants that liked horror and slasher films were either unsure or believed to some degree that violence is sometimes necessary in resolving conflicts. Survey participants that disliked horror and slasher films were not significantly more likely than participants who liked horror and slasher films to believe horror and slasher films portray women as weak or incapable.

Out of 36 female participants, 11 disliked horror and slasher films while 25 liked these films. Out of 37 male participants, 16 disliked horror and slasher films while 21 liked these films. The majority of males were uncertain of whether violence was an acceptable solution to conflict, while the majority of females did not accept violence as a solution to violence. To questions requesting participants to choose responses ranging from full tolerance to no tolerance of violent and sexual content in horror and slasher films, males were more likely to claim to have complete tolerance of any type of violent or sexual content in horror and slasher films than females. Fifty-four percent of males and 33 percent of females claimed complete tolerance of

violent content, while 67 percent of males and 39 percent of females claimed complete tolerance of sexual content in horror and slasher films. Additionally, female participants were more likely than male participants to believe that female characters in horror and slasher films are often portrayed as weak or incapable individuals.

Content Analysis

Of the ten instances of criminal acts inspired by horror and slasher films that were analyzed, all of the criminals were boys or men. Sixty-nine percent of these criminals were minors while 85 percent were under the age of 30. Multiple news sources described the criminals as “troubled,” often using quotes from acquaintances of the criminals to reinforce this impression.

The 2001 murder of 15-year-old Alisson Cambier by 24-year-old Thierry Jaradin was strongly influenced by the American satirical “Scream” horror film series (Osborn, 2001). Jaradin wore a mask emulating that of the onscreen killer, using large knives similar to those shown in the films. The circumstances surrounding the crime were noticeably similar to those of many horror film murders: a young, lonely man, whose romantic feelings for a young woman are not reciprocated suddenly and violently kills the woman in retaliation. The victim was stabbed 30 times with two large kitchen knives, and the murderer immediately called his father and coworker to confess following the attack.

In 2004, at the age of 14, “gifted” middle school student Michael Hernandez, killed his friend and classmate, stabbing him over 40 times (Schwartz, 2004). This murder was planned in a journal found once Hernandez was in custody. The journal also included detailed plans for other murders, including the murder of his own sister. Also found in the journal was an

“exhaustive” list of violent video games and films which could have influenced his violent behavior.

Two boys, in 2009, at the ages of 14 and 15, plotted to kidnap, torture, and murder two students and one police officer, their plan modeled after the popular horror film “Saw” (Netter, 2009). This plan, however, was stopped when one of the teens’ mother overheard the boys’ plot and called the police. They were unable to make these ideas a reality and were each charged with three counts of conspiracy to commit aggravated kidnapping.

In 1993, 2-year-old James Bulger was brutally beaten and slain by 10-year-old boys, possibly inspired by the horror film *Child’s Play 3* (Tuohy, 1993). One of many brutal crimes committed by minors inspired by horror and slasher films, it serves as a poignant reminder of the most extreme influences of these films.

Discussion

Based on the survey results, it is clear that adolescents who enjoy horror and slasher films are more accepting of the violence and sexual content in these films. While this data does not account for violent and sexual content in other contexts, it indicates that adolescents who watch horror and slasher films develop further tolerance to this content unlike those that dislike horror and slasher films. Adolescents that liked horror and slasher films were also more likely to accept violence as a solution to conflict than those that disliked horror and slasher films. This suggests that horror and slasher films may increase adolescents’ acceptance of violence as a solution to conflict which could in turn increase violent behavior.

These results support the conclusions of the aforementioned studies by Cantor and Anderson et al. on the influence of violent media on youth audiences. Similar to previous

research, this study has found evidence that horror and slasher films may desensitize viewers to their violent and sexual content. This study also suggests that adolescents who watch horror and slasher films, like youth who are exposed to media violence, may be more inclined toward violent behavior.

Despite the fact that female participants were more likely than males to like horror and slasher films, they were still more likely than males to agree with the statement that violence cannot fully resolve conflict. Gender clearly has the potential to play a role in the influence of horror and slasher films on adolescents. These results show that male adolescents may be more accepting of violence, possibly letting this influence their own behavior in the face of conflict. Males were also less likely than females to believe that women in horror and slasher films are often portrayed as weak or incapable. While this differs between films, it is a common criticism of the horror genre of which females appear to be more aware.

Although previous research on the influence of media violence on youth did not examine the difference between the influences of media violence on different genders, this study has shown that gender is a factor in the influence of horror and slasher films, which supports the criticism that horror and slasher films negatively influence male audience members and their perception of women.

The content analysis shows that young males are the most impressionable audience members of horror and slasher films. This does not mean that females or older audience members of horror and slasher films do not commit crimes inspired by these films or that these films do not have an influence on them. It does, however, emphasize the importance of educating young males specifically on the lack of reality in the horror and slasher films to which they are

exposed. This could give adolescents a more realistic view of these films and a better understanding of the weight of the graphic content in these films.

The results of the content analysis support Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert's criticism of horror and slasher films. They expressed concern that males watching horror and slasher films are invited to identify with the killer. This killer is often shown slaughtering young women with the justification that they were acting in sexually promiscuous ways or in an otherwise liberated fashion. Because criminals that were inspired by horror and slasher films were most commonly young males, it is possible that they identify with the young male killers often portrayed in these films and are inspired by their actions.

Through the culmination of the results of this study, it can be concluded that young males that like horror and slasher films are the demographic most likely to be influenced by horror and slasher films. Despite the fact that there are innumerable horror and slasher films with varying plots and content, they have a reputation of portraying women poorly, and this portrayal is recognized to various degrees by adolescent audiences. Similarly, these films are widely known to include violent and sexual content which, despite being commonly accepted by adolescents, is not tolerated equally by all demographics of adolescents. The content analysis shows extreme but not impossible consequences of the influences of media violence on adolescents as well as adults. Those that are heavily influenced by horror and slasher films may lose a sense of reality and commit serious crimes as a result.

While adolescents can be exposed to horror and slasher films without displaying signs of being negatively influenced by them, some do experience negative and possibly harmful influences due to these films. Because of this, efforts must be taken to mitigate the influence of

these films. Such efforts may begin with discussing the content of horror and slasher films to their adolescent audiences. Because those that commit crimes inspired by horror and slasher films take such drastic measures because of fictional stimuli, they may be experiencing a lack of connection to reality. Therefore, one way to mitigate the influence of horror and slasher films could be for parents and educators to initiate conversations with their children regarding horror and slasher films, their unrealistic components, and the significance of violence and its consequences in realistic settings. Additionally, parents that have already seen signs of violence or lack of sympathy in their children should strongly consider whether their children should be exposed to horror and slasher films and monitor the content to which they are exposed, again ensuring that their children understand that these films are not realistic.

Further Work

Although this study shows that gender is an important factor in the influence of horror and slasher films on adolescents, it presents the question of why this is true. Similarly, it is unclear why male participants in this survey displayed a greater acceptance of violence as a solution to conflict when compared to female survey participants. Furthermore, it is unclear which specific components of horror and slasher films cause adolescent audiences to become more accepting of violence as a solution to conflict. Because the causes of these findings are currently unknown, definite and significant systems to combat the negative influences of horror and slasher films cannot be developed. Should this research be continued, the specific reasons for the influence of horror and slasher films would be an important focus.

Additionally, comparing horror and slasher films written and directed by men versus those written and directed by women could uncover prominent differences. In 2013, under two

percent of the highest grossing films at the US Box Office were directed by females (Follows, 2014). This indicates a distinct possibility that female-directed films could have different influences on audiences simply because they make up such a small minority of the films to which youth are currently exposed.

Conclusion

The influence of horror and slasher films on adolescent audiences are, in multiple respects, similar to the influence of violent media on youth audiences. Like violent media, horror and slasher films increase young audience's acceptance of violence in conflict resolution and desensitization to violence. The common criticism that horror films prompt males to identify with the killer of these films has also shown to be a valid possibility. Further research should be dedicated to determining the reason for these influences. Through this research, methods to lessen the influence of horror and slasher films can be developed, thus decreasing the frequency of violence due to these films.

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Appendix

Survey on Influence of Horror and Slasher Films on Adolescents

1. What is your gender? Choices given: Male, Female, Other (with write-in option)
2. What is your age? Choices given: Below 14, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, Above 18
3. Without considering details or exceptions, do you like horror and slasher films? Choices given: Yes, No
4. Which of the following best describes your experience as an English Language Arts student? Choices given: I am very passionate about this class and I very much enjoy reading and writing the required assignments, I enjoy the class to a reasonable degree and I do fairly well in the class, I do not specifically like or dislike this class and my performance is average, I dislike this class more than I like it and my assignments reflect my disinterest to some degree, I strongly dislike this class and I do poorly because of this, I dislike this class but I am still able to do well, I like this class but I do not do well
5. Rate your agreement with the following statement: Violence cannot fully resolve conflicts. Choices given: 1-5 from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”
6. Rate your agreement with the following statement: Horror films often portray women as being weak or incapable. Choices given: 1-5 from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”
7. Rate your agreement with the following statement: Horror films include longer scenes of violence against men than women. Choices given: 1-5 from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”
8. Which of the following most accurately describe your feelings toward violence in horror and slasher films? Choices given: I have no problem with any level of violence in these

films, I have a high tolerance for violence in these films, but some especially violent scenes may make me uncomfortable, I can tolerate violence in these films if it has a specific reason and context in the story line, I have a low tolerance for violence in these films, but I can tolerate some, I have no tolerance for any violence in these films

9. Which of the following most accurately describes your feelings toward sexual content in horror and slasher films? Choices given: I have no problem with any level of sexual content in these films, I have a high tolerance for sexual content in these films, but especially sexual scenes make me uncomfortable, I can tolerate sexual content in these films if it has a specific reason and context in the story line, I have a low tolerance for sexual content in these films, but I can tolerate some, I have no tolerance for any sexual content in these films