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Capitol 'H' Horror: Pereptuations of Risk and Fear in Horror Movies

Lavinia Greer
Linfield University

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Lavinia Greer

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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Introduction

Imagine a dark and stormy night, in an isolated wood, miles out from the nearest town. Imagine that the wind is whistling through the trees, and the leaves hiss and crack like a fire whispering under your feet as you walk. Imagine the telltale prickle on the back of your neck, a shiver not caused by the rain or the chill, but the strong sense of something, someone, hidden just out of sight.

This exercise is the telltale start of many a horror narrative. As soon as the night becomes "dark and stormy," we are primed and on edge to see exactly what the narrative will throw at us, whether it is successfully spooky or not. We know immediately that it's horror because we can recognize the tropes and signals. No matter how many times these same tropes are reused, a huge portion of U.S. viewers tuck in to indulge in these narratives again and again. And while a horror movie might not be everybody's ideal for a movie night, the popularity is undeniable. In 2023, the horror genre was among the top five movie genres watched by U.S. citizens and was even more popular in Spain and Mexico (Fleck, 2023). When that many people are tuning in, what is being watched matters tremendously.

Because digital media is one of the leading industries in the United States, there is a huge incentive to keep making horror. In 2022, digital media made up 10% of the US GDP (or $2.6 trillion dollars), and accounted for 8.9 million US jobs (The Bureau of Economic Analysis [BEA], 2023). The projected revenue for the digital media market in 2024 is $198.10 billion dollars (Statista, 2023). Nearly everyone has some form of technology that allows them to access the seemingly never-ending stream of content that is being produced by the media magnates in the US. With such a rapid rate of production and consumption, it becomes difficult to monitor

every message that is being displayed and perceived across the vast diversity of today's media. especially when that media handles incredibly sensitive topics, like violence, gore, and assault. Few genres handle such sensitive topics at such frequency and depth as the horror genre, and yet there has been little sociological research into how the messages sent by horror are received, namely, how the construction of fear and risk in horror movies perpetuates and reproduces itself in the viewer's real lives.

In this study, I dissect the messages symbolically communicated by horror movies through the eyes of their consumers, and thus how they reproduce systemic inequality through the ideals they perpetuate (Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T., 1966). Through two rounds of interviews, this thesis argues that not only do horror movies have lasting impacts on watcher's behavior and constructions of social realities, but that the very industry of horror films has lasting effects on the social construction of what is scary, who deserves to be afraid, and what we should consider entertainment.

Opening Scene: Theories of Horror

Sociology of Emotion

Any study on the media is really founded on the study of emotions, as the institution of the media is founded on emotional evocation. In 1989, Thoit published a review in the Annual Review of Sociology outlining the growing topic of emotion within sociology. As Thoit describes, "substantive" sociological research into emotion really began around the mid-1980s, with the "Sociology of Emotions" section within the American Sociological Association only being founded in 1986. While emotion used to be considered on a micro, social psychological

level, the growth of the subfield in the 1980s also saw a growth of a macro level analysis of emotion, and the societal effects of emotions being experienced at high levels among communities (Thoit, 1989).

Sociological investigation into collective anxiety and related emotions began with the theorizing of "risk" (Freudenberg 1988; Beck 1992) and was shortly followed by "fear" (Altheide 1997; Glassner 1999; Furedi 2002). *Risk Society*, written by Ulrich Beck in 1992, suggested that society would organize itself to self-protect in response to perceived risk (Beck, 1992). Therefore, the more "risk" that appears present in society, the more drive there is to re-organize. One could anticipate how society might reorganize in response to any given risk, and therefore could be manipulated into reorganizing based on a perceived risk. Barry Glassner's 1999 book *Culture of Fear* argued that fear was something that could be produced by people in power through the media to incite desirable reactionary behavior (Glassner, 1999). Like the concept of risk, fear incited the desire to protect oneself—thus, under the guise of fear, any amount of social reorganization or restructuring could be justified.

Sociology of Media

In Media Studies, the effects of long-term exposure to mass media have long been a rigorous area of study. One of the most prominent theories was developed by George Gerbner during the 1960s, when he aimed to create a theoretical framework for the societal effects of television exposure (Callanan, 2016). Gerbner's resulting work was cultivation theory, which argued that repetitive exposure to patterns on television affected the shape of consumer's social reality. Callanan expands on Gerbner's initial work, describing his conception of a "mean world view," where "heavy television consumers are less likely to trust people" based on the depictions of untrustworthy people in media (Callanan, 2016). In short, Gerbner's research suggested that

not only did heavy media consumption alter viewers' understanding of their social worlds, it also altered their attitudes and behaviors according to that new social understanding.

Since then, there has been a wealth of research into how theories of media sociology have developed along with the industrialization and globalization of society and technology (Sik 2020; Clarke & Short 1993; Beck, 2006, Sternheimer, 2018). Altheide (1997) suggested that the symbols and behaviors portrayed in media affects the ways that we react to these same symbols and behaviors in real life. In 1988, Liska et. al argued that the transmitted messages created a self-replicating echo chamber of thought, which served to produce the same ideals, values, and norms repeatedly (Liska et. al, 1988). In this way, if a message was able to find its way into the media, it would be picked up by other kinds of media and would feed off itself in a reproductive cycle. This was said to be true even of messages that were misinterpreted; that misinterpretation would get passed on and replicate an endless chain of misinformation. With the media holding such a ubiquitous space in modern life, it's more important than ever to understand the messages that are being broadcast and the ways the consumer reacts.

Fear Based Media & The Generalized Other

Media, in symbolic interactionist terms, becomes the viewer's "Generalized Other." "The Generalized Other," hypothesized by scholar George Herbert Mead, is a term for the conglomerated conceptualization of common expectations held by others in society that are considered whenever action takes place (Mead, 1934). Altheide and other symbolic interactionists argue that through the constant exposure to media over time, common expectations are warped to fit the ones projected through the screen (Altheide, 1997). When individuals are assessing themselves against "The Generalized Other," it is no longer strictly a

conception based on their peers and community, but a broad, globalized ideal conceived through recurrent patterns shown in media they consume.

Social reality constructions are also impacted when the media being consumed is fear-based. The term "fear-based media" refers to media in any format that holds inciting the emotion of fear in the consumer as one of its main functions. Fear-based media is particularly harmful because it is not an accurate portrayal of reality, but rather warped to heighten viewers feelings of fear, anxiety, and risk while watching. At high levels of consumption, fear-based media results in a skewed "Generalized Other" that is more violent, reactive, and self-defensive, inciting this same behavior in the viewer. A "Generalized Other" built on fear-based media effectively results in the behavior of an individual with the "mean world view" (Mead, 1934; Callanan, 2016).

Horror movies can be particularly insidious fear-based media because their primary function is ultimately to entertain. Because of this, viewers may be less inclined to consume them critically, resulting in less awareness of the changes in social construction repeated exposure to any fear-based media can result in.

Establishing the Setting: Literature Review

No matter if it is fictionalized "entertainment" or not, media is how individuals receive their information, and this information often shapes the way that they understand and interact with the society around them (Gamson, 1992; Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). Scholars have also shown that consuming media can provoke fear in the consumer, resulting in distrust, anxiety, and the belief that the world is more dangerous than it really is (MacKendrick 2010; Kort-Butler & Hartshorn 2011; Callanan 2012). MacKendrick and Callanan both separately found that news

media framing and consumption had a direct impact on consumer feelings of fear and anxiety (MacKendrick 2010; Callanan 2012). McKendrick discovered this to be true with the way the media framed "body burdens", internal contaminants, like microplastics, and Callanan found this to be true with news media and how the fear it evoked was experienced differently based upon racial and ethnic lines. Racial and ethnic minorities were more likely to have heightened levels of fear and distrust in response to fear-based media (Callanan, 2012).

Similarly, Kort-Butler & Hartshorn (2011) found that media impacted real-world experiences of fear and risk, even when media depicted fictional events. Through watching crime programming, consumers grew more fearful of crime, even though it was fictionalized and clearly presented as such (Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011). This study suggested that even fictional media depictions, that viewers *know* to be fictional, can have real and lasting impacts on consumer beliefs, emotions, and ideals. Though sociologists have examined how news media coverage of crime elevates perceptions of risk (Kovanič 2020; Sternheimer 2018; Burchfield 2014), little research has been done on other kinds of fictionalized fear-based media, like horror movies, which exist in a genre that is built around evoking fear.

In "Risk Society" by Ulrich Beck (1992) and "Culture of Fear" described by Barry Glassner (2000) risk and fear are both defined as tools by which society can be organized. Beck defines risk as "a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself" (Beck 1992). Meanwhile, Glassner defines fear as a tool used by our culture to create a specific favorable response in those that participate within it (Glassner 1999). Beck's concept of risk operationalizes societal organization at a macro level. While fear can be disseminated at a macro level, it ultimately operates on a micro one. Fear occurs on the

individual level, but can create society-wide trends when evoked in a large enough mass of people.

David Altheide built on the ideas of media sociology and framing with a symbolic interactionist lens, attempting to point to the specific signs and symbols that are utilized by the media to incite fear in the viewer (Altheide, 1997). In 1999, Altheide argued for the appeal to fear present in the news media (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999), and the ways that children are leveraged as a pawn in the media game of evoking fear (Altheide, 2002). Altheide's studies proved that there are specific signs and symbols that audiences recognize and develop fear responses to, across media forms and genres.

Moving forward, the scholarship around media sociology continues to focus on the way that media has impacts on consumer views as globalization progresses and technology continues to advance. Our current understandings of the sociological relationship between media and fear are limited to the research that has been done on news media and perceived vulnerability to risk. Assuming that Kort-Butler & Hartshorn's findings on entertainment-based fictional crime media are true for other kinds of fictional media, there are lasting personal and behavioral impacts from what we choose to consume (Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011). These studies suggest that no matter if media is real or obviously presented as fictionalized, and regardless of if its primary function is to entertain or to inform, viewers can recognize symbolic constructions of fear that alter their social realities and create a heightened sense of risk. I continue this research where media, fear, and risk have always met: the horror movie.

Building Tensions: Methods

This study was conducted in two phases. In the first portion of this study, ten semi-structured confidential interviews were completed on a convenience sample. The goal of these interviews was to gain an understanding of the individual experience of fear, in order to better understand how it can ultimately become the social pressure of risk (Beck, 1992; Glassner 1999). A symbolic interactionist approach was utilized by examining if individual's personal definitions and understandings of fear and media have a meaningful influence on their reactions to horror movies (Altheide, 1997). This was done by asking respondents about their own definitions of the primary terms—fear, risk, and horror— as well as their motivations for watching horror films, as well as their individual fears and anxieties.

The first interview consisted of five base questions, four of which had sub-questions that go further in depth with the topics covered. A semi-structured approach to the interview process was employed, so some questions may not have been asked or covered in every interview. The interviews were structured this way to account for the highly personalized experience of fear and to allow room for free discussion of relevant topics if the designated structure was found unfitting. Respondents were asked about their general media consumption habits as well as their consumption of horror movies to place their behaviors in a larger context. Additionally, to assess whether horror movies are the primary media by which respondents encounter horror, this questionnaire asked about other consumption habits. This was due to the reasoning that movies may not be the format in which a respondent interacts with horror the most frequently.

Sub-questions asked respondents to report their own fears, risks they take, reactions to horror movies, and definitions of the words "horror", "risk", and "fear". These questions were intended to add greater context to respondent's answers, as well as to assess the understanding they have of the terms we are using in the conversation. These interviews provided a qualitative

framework for understanding an area of study that has been primarily composed of quantitative work (Callanan, 2012; Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011; McKendrick, 2010; etc.).

After the first round of interviews, a pattern was discovered within responses that warranted further research. Four more confidential interviews were conducted on a different set of questions grounded in and meant to examine the apparent findings of the first interviews. The second round of interviews were developed following grounded theory, a qualitative social science methodology in which secondary theories and further evidence are created and gathered in response to the collection and analysis of an initial batch of collected and analyzed data (Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L., 1967). This questionnaire was slightly shorter and much more targeted on the specific topic of horror intention, messaging, and the handling of sensitive topics, though these resulting interviews took around the same length of time. While several of the questions remained the same (asking respondents what their attitude about horror movies was, how they defined horror, and on their fear reactions to certain tropes) the other questions were aimed at starting a conversation about depictions of sensitive issues, media ethics, and the reactions respondents had to what they reported disliking in the first round of interviews: poorly handled, exploitative horror.

Narrative Climax: Results/Discussion

Following the theoretical framework of risk, fear, and media constructions of reality laid by Beck, Glassner, and Altheide, the first round of questioning explored the individual experience of fear and how that changed depending on respondent's experiences with horror movies. Impacted behavior as a result from a horror movie showed that fear could be evoked from fictionalized fear-based media, and the length of time of time for resulting behavior held implications for social constructions of risk.

Impacts on Constructions of Reality

"Has a Horror movie ever altered my behavior? Oh, Absolutely!" (Isla)

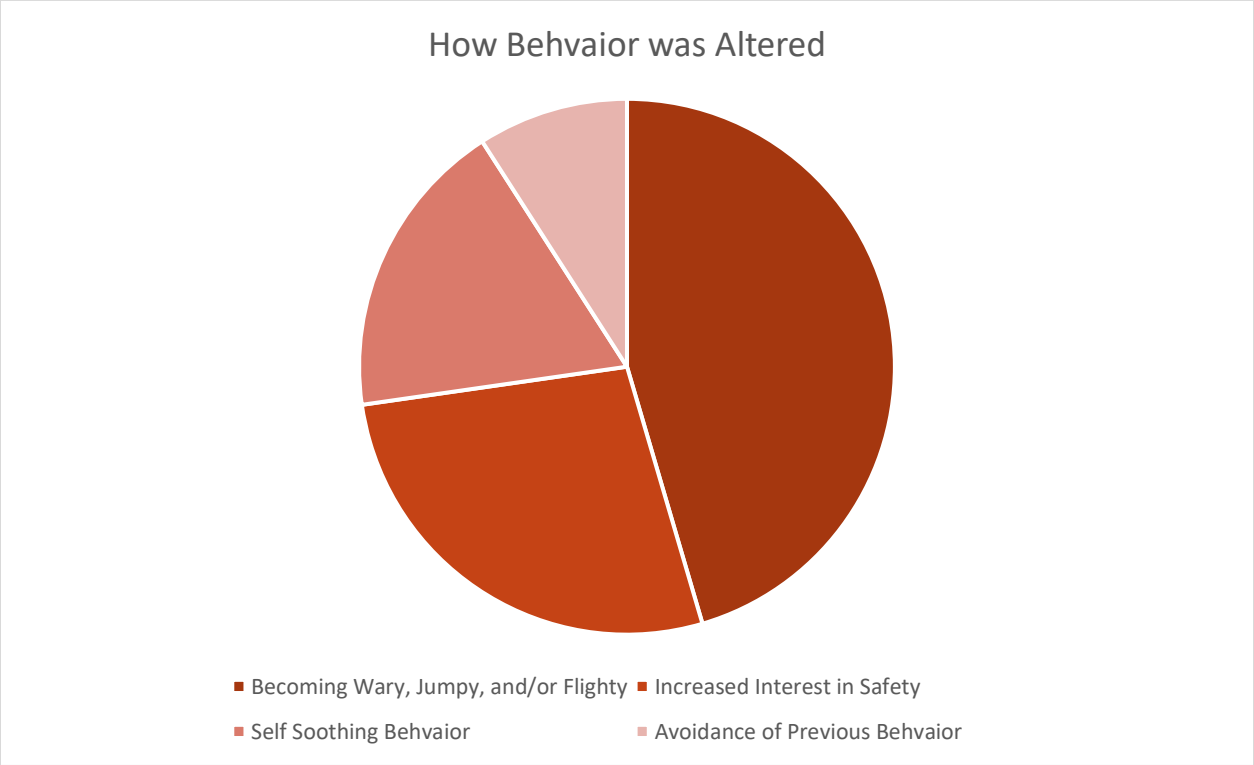
This sentiment, emphatically stated by respondent Isla, was true for *every single* respondent within the first phase of questioning. All ten definitively stated that watching a horror film directly impacted their behavior, as well as their level of fear and perceived risk of the world around them.

The way behavior was altered and how it changed differed by person, but there were common themes among responses. Every single respondent cited becoming wary, jumpy, and/or flighty after watching a horror movie. This was a direct result of the heightened sense of fear and risk that the movie evoked. Many respondents mentioned an increased interest in safety; which manifested in purchasing self-defense equipment, double checking their locks, or even walking their house with a weapon, like Isla:

> "Leaving lights on, checking behind dark crevices in my house, clearing all the rooms with like, a knife to make sure there's nobody hiding anywhere…"

This individual level self-protective behavior was very common, and in line with findings from Kort-Butler & Hartshorn (2011) & Callanan (2012). Both papers mentioned a similar development of increased interest in safety and self-protection in response to heightened levels of exposure to fear-based media. Several respondents mentioned engaging in self-soothing behavior, like changing activities, or sleeping with the lights on. A few respondents specifically cited avoiding previous behaviors after watching a horror movie. John cited being wary of the ocean for years after watching *Jaws,* and Flash—who mentioned hesitancy to drive behind a logging truck after watching the *Final Destination* movies.

Fig.1 below illustrates the breakdown of these different alterations and the resulting behaviors.



(Fig. 1: A pie chart depicting the frequency of different forms of altered behavior in response to fear evoked by a horror movie)

Among responses, there were patterns that followed obvious conclusions. Respondents that identified as female were much more likely to cite that horror movies made increased fear surrounding intruders—(while the intruder was not always gendered, if they were gendered, the interviewee cited male) other attackers/assailants in public, or of sexual harm in any situation. While respondents that identified as male also cited fear of harm, it was less frequent and often at the hands of some sort of creature or supernatural force (surprisingly often, mummies), rather than a human attacker. This dichotomy upholds Gerbner's cultivation theory in two ways. Not only are women in horror movies much more likely to face sexual harm (often at the hands of a male perpetrator), but women are more likely to face sexual harm in real life as well. (*Violence*

against women and girls – what the data tell us - World Bank Gender Data Portal, 2022). The viewership of these narratives reinforces the pre-existing knowledge of this phenomenon and manifests itself in the subconscious of the consumer.

How we Conceive of Horror

An important clarification is that fear is neither bad, nor something to aspire towards being rid of. Fear, like all other emotions, is just information towards living healthily. What Glassner explored is not that fear is an issue if it exists within respondents at all, but that they are experiencing unrealistically heightened levels of it in response to deliberately manipulative media. Large doses of this fear-based media—which is exactly what we have access to in the modern age of digital globalization—constructs a social reality that is so "mean" (Callanan, 2016) that it ultimately results in our current "culture of fear" (Glassner, 1999). Despite how prevalent fear is, most respondents struggled to articulate exactly what scared them, or expressed finding the topic somewhat embarrassing. Most respondents laughed when asked to describe their fears, or what movies scared them the most. One respondent explained—

> Bailey: "When I was growing up, I did have a phobia of butterflies. [It's] minimized now… it was just bugs, specifically butterflies."
>
> Interviewer: "Could you ever…, did you ever know why?"
>
> Bailey: "I have a handful of guesses. There was… there was an episode of Arthur (a cartoon) that I watched. [laughter]."

These fears weren't perceived as 'legitimate' by Bailey because they were debunked as being 'irrational' and seen as childish. It's true that butterflies are not a particularly prevalent trope in horror movies, but why couldn't they be? Jordan Peele, an accomplished modern horror

director, has been known to make a point of using "non-scary" animals in each of his films. After he released his second movie, *US*, in 2019, Peele stated in a YouTube interview his reasoning for using these animals:

> "The deer I used in *Get Out* and the rabbits I used here (in *US*) … you know, woodland animals, where there's something wild and unbridled behind their eyes, but there's also a distinct lack of what makes a human." (Universal Pictures All-Access, 2020)

Peele's reasoning is very interesting, especially considering how many times his movies came up when discussing horror that respondents deemed "good". While no participants mentioned being directly afraid of deer, rabbits, or horses (the animal Peele uses in his most recent film, *Nope* (2022)), they were a meaningful addition to thoughtfully written horror that added to the overall experience of fear. So, why wouldn't butterflies be considered by that same rule? It seemed fears were considered "childish" in the eyes of respondents if they were discovered in childhood, even if they were rational. For example, Dayton discussed his upset at the ending of a movie he had perceived as friendly and fun:

> "Like, you know, I watched a *Scooby-Doo* movie when I was like [five] and the ending had like, it had real monsters in it. And every *Scooby-Doo* movie I've ever seen had people in masks. And so that was the trope I was expecting. And when they were real, I, like, lost my mind. And, like, it was so terrifying to me, 'cause I was like, that's not supposed to happen."

In fact, most respondents were able to trace their specific fears or even scariest experience with media back to things they viewed when they were a child. The media didn't

even have to be intended to be creepy or scary in the slightest to be experienced as such by viewers. As Flash remarks in his interview, he had just been doing research for class as a child and developed new fear:

> "But [I was really scared] of mummies. That was because I read a book in second grade about Ötzi the Iceman and there were just so many photos and so many descriptions of what happened to him. And I, I don't know, he got to me over any other mummy I've ever heard about… It's a pretty gross face... but also, it was like, you know, it was more scary to like just think like, 'Oh my God, [what if] that thing [was] walking'…"

Based on these responses, fear is always seen as irrational until something comes along that rationalizes it. Some fears are inherently rationalized by society, but others can be rationalized through the media. Unlike a lot of other fear-based media, horror movies are more likely to incite fear that is deemed "irrational" because it holds no basis in modern scientific understanding. For example, Aurora cited that ghosts were probably her biggest fear overall, even though she knew most people didn't consider it a "real" or "rational" fear to have. Despite this fact, and despite how much it frightened her, she found herself endlessly fascinated with media depictions of ghosts:

> "…I'm not as scared of ghosts in movies or media. In fact, I often seek it out. I think it's [that I have to] understand what I hate. …I really love different interpretations of ghosts..."

Aurora cited not only the resulting feelings of "catharsis" or "exposure therapy" upon consuming media that contained ghosts, but also some level of justification towards her "irrational" fear.

Besides some level of fear release, respondents also quoted genuine enjoyment for the artform of horror and the darker themes the genre explored. Bailey, who is both a writer and artist herself, commented on it:

> "I do [like] to explore that sort of like uncomfortableness of thinking about how things could be gross, [and] also be beautiful… that kind of visceral nature of physicality of body is a lot of what I like to write, which to maybe some people could be categorized as horror... I think it's a good vessel of exploring things that maybe you don't necessarily think of day-to-day but are aware of and kind of that subconscious understanding of the world. It's like you're a little bit afraid, afraid of a lot of things, [I] feel like a lot of people are. So, it's a good way of recognizing it and making it into a more conscious form..."

These were the ways that horror and fear were functioning positively for respondents. Justifying fears that they found otherwise irrational and as a format for processing dark, sometimes taboo topics like death.

Overall, the speculative incitement of respondent's fears, as well as the reasons for indulging in the horror genre, were highly varied. That said, there was a connection between fear and what horror media individuals decided to consume, though there was a stronger drive from respondents to watch films they knew would scare them than was expected. As Liska proposed, this relationship did seem to result in a self-replicating cycle, in which the fascination about horror that an individual *knew* would frighten them only exaggerated their fear, fueling the desire to engage in more media of that form (Liska et. al, 1988).

The response group supported the hypothesis of horror movies having the same social-reality altering effects of other fear-based media. Every single respondent answered affirmatively to horror having a lasting impact on their perceptions of risk, their fears, and their behaviors. While sometimes there were upsides or silver linings to those alterations (as expressed by Aurora and Bailey)—more often they were lasting thought and behavioral alterations (like those described by Isla, John, Flash, and more). These patterns continued to suggest that the fictionalized fear-based media of horror movies had the same levels of inciting fear and resulting behavioral alterations as non-fiction fear-based media.

Respondent definitions of "horror" revealed an important dichotomy that became especially apparent when they indicated what they liked and disliked in horror. It wasn't as simple as qualifying horror as "good" or "bad": there were two subgenres within the horror genre that transcended the entirety of horror while also segregating it. These two subgenres were what came to be called "Capitol 'H' Horror" and "Lowercase 'H' horror" respectively. All kinds of horror still operated as fear-based in accordance with Altheide's research, evoking fear-based reactions and altering conceptions of social reality. However, the presentation and symbols used to evoke the fear earned different reactions. While horror regarded as "good" resulted in smaller, less severe behavior alterations, horror that was regarded as "bad" resulted in a step towards the "mean world view" (Callanan, 2016). The difference ultimately lies in the symbolic presentation of what we can, and should, define as entertainment.

What We Allow as Entertainment: "Capitol 'H' Horror"

Consuming horror and fear is a very subjective experience. For the purposes of this study, horror was defined as whatever the respondents considered it to be. But even with the assurance that any answer was an accepted one, respondents still struggled within the confines of what they

perceived horror to be. Even then, there were clear commonalities between what respondents reported liking and disliking within horror. So, what is, as Ronnie put it, “Capital H ‘Horror’”?

> “I guess in my head there's a distinction between ‘Capital ‘H’ *Horror media’* and ‘stuff that's scary’. Like I might enjoy watching… stuff that's scary, but I don't find it as interesting and it doesn't stick with me long term as much as what I would consider to be ‘Capital ‘H’ *Horror media’,* which I think it maybe is more psychological or it can have other elements, but a lot of the time I think it has more of a literary aspect to it.”

What Ronnie articulated was a response that many other respondents were feeling. That there was a distinct split within the genre of horror into two subgroups: horror used as a tool to effectively tell a story, and horror used as an excuse to depict exaggerated violence.

Many respondents lamented that they disliked movies that were too on the nose or tried too hard to be scary in specific ways, like “jump scares” and excessive gore. A “jump scare” is a kind of horror technique where a scary image, usually of the villain in the media or a dead body, is flashed on the screen suddenly, often accompanied by a loud noise. Jump scares are startling, but don’t require much filmmaking prowess to pull off, and can become annoying if used too frequently. They are often horror as an excuse, not horror as a tool. The disdain for jump scares was generally regarded as seeing them as “cheap shots,” easy for directors and writers to use to elicit scares from the audience. They made the watchers feel the horror was less refined. It wasn’t simply a genre distinction; the conversation around gore and explicitness delved to a new depth. Alegria was one of the several respondents who expanded on this dislike, stating:

> "But in terms of like, feeling uncomfortable, I don't really like gore. And, I especially don't enjoy watching like, like violence against women… physical, like gore and sexual violence and like that kind of thing directed at women for the sake of horror. I think that it can be really like played up and it's just uncomfortable. It feels very like… voyeuristic? [It] just kind of makes me think… like, who made this? Who is *enjoying* this?"

Explicitness has long been a critique of the horror genre, especially the slasher subgenre within horror. It wasn't that respondents hated the idea of horror being explicit *at all*, it was when a line was crossed and it started to feel, as Alegria put it, "voyeuristic". Liz used the phrase "torture porn" to explain this same phenomenon, especially in the case of violence against women or racial minorities in the movies. Alegria expanded more on her reasoning for disliking excessive gore or brutality:

> "It makes me more uncomfortable in the sense of like the real impacts that it has rather than, like, 'Oh I'm immersed in this world and like there's some sort of like psychological… impact that this movie is having on me…'. It takes me back out of it, into reality, and… unsettles me in that way."

Real world implications of media violence were a common theme, especially among female-identifying respondents, for something they used to categorize horror. Gore, brutality, and other similar aspects of movies were not seen as frightening within the movie, but in the larger social context that the movies existed in. Especially in a social context where those things are more likely to happen to women (*Violence against women and girls – what the data tell us - World Bank Gender Data Portal*, 2022). Like Callanan's findings on the heightened levels of fear in response to fear-based media among racial and ethnic minorities, gender stratification

played a large role in the qualifications of respondent's answers. More "at-risk" groups socially (in this case gender minorities) saw inequality reflected even in the fictionalized world of this "entertainment" media, and that it served to reproduce the inequality into their constructions of reality. It seemed that the scariness of these movies was not in the experience of watching the movie, but in the knowledge that someone—many people, in fact—had sat down and knowingly made a movie with the intentions to show (prejudiced) violence for sport. Liz expanded on her comment about "torture porn" and the real-life implications of highly graphic horror films:

> "I just happened to mention the *I Spit On Your Grave* movies yesterday. … I saw the original one and wrote about it and it's very unpleasant. Well, the reason that the first one was, like, generally considered horrible was that, I mean, it was basically torture porn, like the whole beginning. They just show this woman getting raped and over and over and over and then she goes and kills everybody. But like, it seems totally cool that she kills everybody and you're like, 'yeah, f*** them!'. I don't know that that's a horror movie. That's just like, it was billed as one I know, billed as one for the gore and violence. …I just think there's a big difference between a horror movie, [and violence]."

Horror wasn't necessarily bad if it included any elements of gore or violence that might be perceived as a little over the top, but it was the way that it was presented that made all the difference. "Good" Horror, "Capitol 'H' Horror," was horror that portrayed the *shortcomings of society* through gore and violence, without indulging in it or having it at the expense of a minority. It wasn't that the fears presented were inherently new or had never been conceived of before. Many respondents cited fear of assault or sexual harm when asked about specific fears. It

was that they were new in relation to how much they were thought of or actively worried about after consuming the media that evoked them. As Liz continued:

> "You know, like James Bond can be violent, [Mission] Impossible is violent and people killing each other in… really strange ways. …Everything that happens in [*I Spit On Your Grave*] is extremely horrifying. But like, it's just a tragedy film… It's not a horror film."

Entering the second round of interviews, the conversation was much more focused on the handling of sensitive content in media. Respondents overall agreed that, while there was a place to handle showing things like violence, gore, and assault, there was a definitive "right" and "wrong" way to cover it. Zen stated,

> "You know, I think it's important that you're not projecting, um, *upholding* some messages of racism or sexism or classism with these scenes… that should not have to be a part of your narrative in order for it to be good. So yeah, I just said like, I think you *can* teach in a horror movie because I think that's what Jordan Peele does. But like I mean, because, you know, he puts thought into them. He puts like research and time and like obviously *Get Out* you know had huge implications on race and romantic relationships and how to navigate all of this. So obviously horror movie and it's about it's like it's kind of just a different platform to, 'hey how is race and racism active today?'"

Zen's sentiments were echoed by a lot of other respondents. The issue wasn't the covering of sensitive topics because it was often those topics that added a level of commentary and depth into these movies. It was simply the way they were talked about, shown, or handled.

For example, Jordan Peele, whose movies came up in many interviews, were cited as being particularly good at handling sensitive topics (namely race) without perpetuating or indulging in the inequality: using race not as a trope, but as a category for social critique. Peele was able to write and direct horror narratives of strong, well-written black characters without them facing gratuitous violence, dehumanization, or being treated narratively any different than the countless of white horror protagonists that came before them.

Directors like Peele, who used horror as a tool, were able to wield fear and risk in constructive, illuminating ways. Their conversations about society highlight already present issues, and the resulting fear can be directed towards rectifying that inequality. Peele plays on fears and risks that, albeit exaggerated, serve to turn the pre-existing power structure on its head and highlight the inequality. The issue comes from when horror movies, through their use of fear and risk, reproduce these structures of inequality rather than transforming or upturning them. The resulting fear from these movies only serves to deepen the pre-existing systems of oppression and ultimately urge society towards a construction that may seem to "protect" against risk while only serving to continue protecting those in power and oppressing those below.

Based on what had been communicated by respondents, it would be easy to discount "Lowercase 'H' horror" as vapid and unscary beyond the blood and guts. The posture, tone, and language that respondents used to discuss the phenomenon of "lowercase 'H' horror," however, ranged from apathetic to full on discomfort and disdain. There are of course fans of the campy, gory, cheesy horror, but there seemed to be none in the sample for this study. This could be explained by the dominant population of female respondents. But it cannot be denied, there is something evocative about "lowercase 'H' horror" in its gratuitous and mindless violence.

"Lowercase 'H' horror" and "Capital 'H' Horror" exist within a dichotomy. While both forms of horror draw on social issues and use fear and risk as tools, what makes "capital 'H' Horror" so "good" to respondents is the way that it is subversive, outlining the problems with an issue by taking it to an extreme. Ronnie discussed how a lot of the most popular horror movies of the last couple of years, in addition to movies that she enjoyed the most, were very clearly about social issues:

> "[Ari Aster's] movies are pretty explicitly about family… and Midsommer [is] about trauma and releasing trauma, [and] almost everything Jordan Peele's done is about race. And a lot of… horror stuff is political in a way."

Horror is political, as Ronnie states, because fear and risk are political. Both capital and lowercase forms of H/horror are political. The difference lies in the ways that politics, the social issues are handled within these fictions. Ronnie argues that while "capital 'H' Horror" is subversive, "lowercase 'H' horror" is completely surface level, displaying social issues not to comment on them or outline their shortcomings, but only to indulge in the brutality they cause. Respondents like Alegria and Liz cited "lowercase 'H' horror" as feeling voyeuristic because it literally forces the watcher into the place of the voyeur, watching helplessly as worst-case scenarios play out.

There is an argument to be made about whether this form of voyeurism is consensual or non-consensual. Does the viewer consent simply by viewing, or are they allowed the grace of plausible deniability that they didn't know what they were getting into? In the second round of interviews, Aria explored this idea:

> "Well, sometimes I'll sit down to see a movie and I just, I don't know a thing about it, you know? And then something happens, that maybe I wouldn't have watched [the movie] if I knew I was going to see that, and, I just feel… bad. For the characters but also, like, the actors. A lot of times with actresses in horror movies when there's an assault scene out of nowhere, you know? And you just think, like, she had to act that. She had to pretend that was happening to her. I feel bad."

The result is that horror is one of, if not the only, genre of fear-based media in which violence can be shown so lawlessly, while not being *against the law*, and it is done so in a way that is explicitly for entertainment. It wouldn't be an issue if what one watched didn't matter, but what one watches *does* matter. As Selene argues,

> "And I think [about] the whole argument about, "video games don't make kids violent!", can be almost applied here. Where, you know, there's research that shows… in development, children exposed to violence and you know, having to shoot your friends in a game [does] make you more violent. So, I think that it's just it's kind of scary to think of, "who has access to sort of media?". Especially with the more sensitive topics."

Watching these images and patterns of violence on the screen repeatedly supports a specific version of a social reality (Callanan, 2016). With every movie, scene, and image, that version of social reality becomes more and more entrenched to the viewers.

We don't want to believe that we can be so easily swayed. Many respondents who reported enjoying "cheesy" horror movies claimed they liked them as casual viewing, and

despite the shortcomings, believed they were important in their own right as something to "turn your brain off to". But, as Zen counters,

> "… I don't think it's possible to just turn your brain off during any movie, you know, because you're always learning."

Combining both Zen and Selene's points, it's also important to remember who has access to these movies. With streaming services, globalization, and the introduction of technology into almost every home in the US, media has never been so unregulated and easy to access. Children can and do watch horror movies. Zen continued,

> "Especially if you consider like, I remember being like a kid and being like, like "Horror movies! Oh my God!" you know, like, "We're so grown up!" You know, something that's desired and you do it, you try to do it as young as possible because you want to be a big kid."

When a character is being brutally assaulted, horribly tortured, or painfully dying, it is displaying these signs and symbols in a way that is inherently entertainment. And while it is entertainment in intent, it doesn't end up being entertainment in impact, as these symbols reinforce a preexisting social reality where these inequalities take place (Altheide, 1997). Without the officialness of the news media or the censorship of most crime procedurals, this results in an unpleasant message of what is allowed to be enjoyed that is difficult to digest. Additionally, by displaying these acts as those of entertainment, it fundamentally trivializes them. It's hard to separate the genuine reality of war in another country from the casual viewing of a fictional family being slaughtered.

This research is not arguing that horror movies are a deliberate tool of stratification, but the results strongly suggest that regardless of fictionalization and presentation, they are currently acting as an agent that perpetuated social inequalities through the symbols they present and the fear they incite. Especially considering their popularity, pervasiveness, and easy accessibility, it's time to consider fear-based entertainment media as being as much a mechanism of social control as the other forms of non-fiction fear-based media that have been considered as such for decades.

Conclusion, Implications, and Further Research

These findings definitively show that horror movies impacted the fears and perceived risk of participants. Additionally, horror plays a large role in the social construction of fear and risk, and fear and risk play a large role in the ways that we behave and what we believe. The conversation around capital 'H'/lowercase 'H' horror media examines the implications of the media institution and how it perpetuates inequality and fear through the narratives it produces and sells. This blatant display of the worst humanity could possibly inflict upon itself is objectionable in and of itself, but the message it unwittingly sends is the real problem. No other fear-based media creates the same level of moral ambiguity and outright on-screen violence as horror. Whether through framing or character driven storytelling, other fear-based media like news and cop shows have much more clean-cut lines between right and wrong, as well as broadcast/FCC guidelines about what they are allowed to show.

There are several shortcomings to this study. The small convenience sample resulted in a lack of diversity across gender, race, class, and other forms of stratification. Almost no demographic data was intentionally collected, but through the conversations present in the interviews the following was freely given. Of the fourteen participants, three were male, nine

were female, and two considered their gender as “other”, but related to women’s issues. Twelve of the participants were roughly college age (20-26), while two were in their late fifties. Twelve of the respondents identified as White/Caucasian, while two identified themselves as racial/ethnic minorities. For further research, it would be beneficial to get not only more respondents, but respondents with greater diversity across these levels of stratification. It would also be beneficial to interview a greater population of the “target demographic” of horror movies, which is white/Caucasian men aged roughly 20-35. Additionally, combining the two phases of data gathering into one comprehensive questionnaire covering both topics would allow for faster and more holistic data gathering.

Horror’s place in modern life is growing. With it, and with the simultaneous growth of technology and the media, it’s important to understand how we and our society interact. Horror affects what we fear, what risks we take, and how we act. But moreso, horror affects what we consider “horror”, what we consider to be “gore”, and what we are willing to allow as entertainment. Not all horror is good, but not all horror is bad, either. As Aurora said:

> “I love that people do it anyways, even if they get scared or [hate it] afterwards [or it] alters their behavior. [I love that they] watch horror movies...”

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APPENDICIES

APENDIX A: RECRUITMENT TEXT: (to be disseminated via social media (Instagram story), via email, and via direct text message.

You are invited to participate in sociological thesis research on the topic of horror movies, fears, and risks. The study will involve an interview of about 45 minutes to an hour on your own experiences and beliefs. There are no "right" answers, and you will not be tested on any of the subject matter. If you are interested in taking part in this study, please respond to this message and you will receive further information.

APPENDIX B: VERBAL INFORMED CONSENT SCRIPT

Consent Form:

I invite you to participate in a research project on horror movies and fear; it will help me complete requirements for my sociology major at Linfield University. This interview is about your own personal behaviors, beliefs, and experiences with horror movies, fear, and anxiety.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will be asked questions about your own understandings, knowledge, and beliefs, there is no right or wrong answer. Participating in this study may not benefit you directly, but it will help me gather knowledge and understanding about these topics. We will be discussing topics that frighten you individually, which may be sensitive. The interview is designed to be the least stressful experience possible. You may skip any questions you don't want to answer, and you may opt out of the interview at any time. If you become anxious at any time during the interview, relevant local and national help line numbers are available.

The information you will share if you participate will be kept completely confidential. Only your name and email address will be collected initially and kept only for the duration of the study. No real names, email addresses, or other identifying information will be included in the final paper, so the responses cannot be traced back to you. All collected information will be deleted within five years of the completion of the paper in accordance with best practices, roughly around May 31st, 2029.

Please note: You must be 18 or older to participate in this study.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Megan Kozak Williams, Chair of the Linfield University Committee on Human Research Participation at irb@linfield.edu .

By continuing, you are consenting to participate in this study. Please say yes to indicate that you give verbal consent and agree to continue.

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE 1

Participant Name:

Participant Email:

How often and what kinds of media do you consume the most?

How often do you watch horror films?

a) Would you consider yourself a fan of horror films? Why or why not?
   (if yes) Do you have a favorite horror movie? And if so, why?

b) Are there other forms of horror media you also like to consume, either in combination with horror films or separately? (Ex. Television, Books, Video Games, etc.)

c) What does "Horror" media mean to you?

Are there certain kinds of horror films that scare you more than others? (Ex. Slasher, Zombie Movie, Home Invasion, etc.)

(if yes) Do you know why you have this different reaction?

a) Has watching a horror movie ever altered your behavior after the movie? How was your behavior altered? (Ex. Sleeping with the lights on, new fears, etc.)
   a. (if yes) For how long was your behavior altered?

b) Are there any horror movies (or other horror media) that frightened you so bad you would never watch it again?

What scares you/do you have any specific fears?

(if yes) Do you know why you have these fears? Can you relate them to what movies frighten you the most?

a) Do you have any altered behavior in response to fears? (Ex. Walking with keys in knuckles, avoiding dogs, only running in the morning, etc.)
    a. (if yes) How much would you say this behavior interferes with your everyday life?

b) What does "Fear" mean to you?

What risks do you take in your everyday life? (Ex. Driving too fast, walking alone at night, etc.)

a) Do you know why you take these risks?

b) What does "Risk" mean to you?

APPENDIX D: QUESTIONNAIRE 2

Participant Name:

Participant Email:

How do you define what makes a movie a horror movie?

How recently have you watched a horror movie?

What is your attitude about horror movies?

Are there certain kinds of horror films that scare you more than others? (Ex. Slasher, Zombie Movie, Home Invasion, etc.)

(if yes) Do you know why you have this different reaction?

a) Are there any horror movies that frightened you so bad you would never watch it again?

What makes horror “good” or “bad”, in your opinion? Can you give an example of a movie that exemplifies each?

Are there any horror movies that you found more upsetting than frightening?

a) What do you account for the difference between a “frightening” and “upsetting” horror movie?

Do you believe there should be any limitations to what is shown in horror movies?

a) Do you believe there is a “good” way to handle sensitive topics in horror movies, or any media?