

Can horror make you happy?

October 12 2007

Eduardo Andrade of the University of California, Berkeley's Haas School of Business wondered why his wife loves scary movies that make him squirm.

So, the assistant professor of marketing interested in consumer behavior teamed up with Joel B. Cohen, a professor of marketing and anthropology at of the University of Florida, to deconstruct what happens when people watch horror films.

Their research results were reported in the August 2007 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Andrade said these scary movie results have tremendous implications for improved understanding of consumer behavior - at the poker table, at the box office for scary movies and while engaging in extreme sports. The popularity of the latter is growing exponentially in the United States and globally, he added. Andrade has already heard from a movie industry representative looking for promotional help during the Halloween season.

In their research, Andrade and Cohen poked holes in the prevailing theories about why people sometimes reject pure hedonism and seek out activities that instead provoke unpleasant feelings. One common theory has been that people benefit from unpleasant or painful situations by experiencing a flood of relief afterward; another routine explanation is that some people just don't experience fear at the same depths that other, more sensitive souls do.

"Those theories are based on the premise that people cannot experience mixed feelings. What if this assumption is relaxed?" said Andrade, adding that there is mounting evidence suggesting that negative and positive emotions can be "co-activated" at the same time.

In a series of four studies, he and Cohen brought dozens of undergraduates - horror movies are very popular with this age group - into UC Berkeley's Experimental Social Sciences Laboratory (XLab) to watch clips of the horror classics "The Exorcist" and "Salem's Lot." To balance things out, the professors also showed the students snippets from documentary films and the TV comedy "Friends."

Students were divided into two groups - fans of frightful flicks and those who tend to avoid them. One finding that surprised Andrade was that both groups reported, on a scale of zero to 100, similar levels of negative feelings while watching the clips. The most remarkable finding was on the positive side. Whereas non-horror movie watchers reported low to flat levels of pleasantness during the scary clips, horror movie fans reported high levels of happiness. Moreover, the peak of their happy feelings occurred during the most frightening segments of the film clips.

The researchers also found, as anticipated, that it was only after the horrifying scene ended that the non-horror movie fans experienced higher levels of positive feelings, or a sense of relief. This effect was not pronounced among horror movie fans who already had been deriving pleasure from the fearful scenes.

Andrade added that proponents of the relief theory used to attribute the relief experienced at the end of a scary movie to the films' positive resolution. However, the villains in many contemporary scary movies tend to live on - if for no other reason than for the next sequel, he said.

What stood out most for Andrade and Cohen were the students' almost

simultaneous experiences of happiness and fear, and the discovery that non-scary movie fans' happiness increased when subjects saw introductory clips about a film's two primary actors - the good guy and the bad ghost - followed by movie clips bracketed on their computer screen by the actors' photos.

Andrade said that this "protective frame," which reminded viewers that the films were make-believe and helped them distance themselves from the fearful content on the screen, appeared to increase viewing enjoyment among the non-horror movie fans, letting them experience fear but also pleasant excitement.

Horror movie fans seem to already have a protective frame of safety, distance or detachment that lets them absorb fear and still enjoy themselves, he said. "In other words, experiencing mixed feelings within a protective frame may well be more fun," Andrade and Cohen wrote in the journal.

From a practical perspective, Andrade said, further research could reveal protective frame cues that marketers could apply to stimulate interest and sales. On a theoretical level, he said it would be very interesting to obtain physiological measurements or brain scans from the viewers to better qualify the results.

Andrade said his research has increased his awareness of the concept of a protective frame that is helping him with his own scary movie viewing experiences: "I'm still not yet a horror movie fan," he said, "but I can be next to my wife for a longer time while she is on the couch watching one."

Source: UC Berkeley

Citation: Can horror make you happy? (2007, October 12) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-10-horror-happy.html>

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