

# Survey reveals highly educated audiences enjoy 'trash films'

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Sharks often play a central role in trash films - as is the case in the B-movie "She Gods of Shark Reef" of 1958 and in "Sharknado", a current favourite among trash film fans. Credit: MPI for Empirical Aesthetics / James Vaughan CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

So-called 'trash films' do not stand in opposition to taste and education. Quite the contrary, they are often watched by people with an above-average education and interest in culture. In a survey performed at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics in Frankfurt, film scholar Keyvan Sarkhosh investigated why certain viewers actively seek and enjoy films which they themselves describe as cheap and trash.

Typically, trash films are low budget films, which do not correspond to the mainstream standards and taste. However, with three sequels and a big fan community, a film like "Sharknado" is a perfect example for the success of trash films. "Apart from flying sharks, blood and guts are the main ingredients of this surprise trash hit", says Keyvan Sarkhosh, postdoctoral fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics. "At first glance it seems paradoxical that someone should deliberately watch badly made, embarrassing and sometimes even disturbing films, and take pleasure in them." By means of an online survey among regular consumers of trash films, the authors were able to show how the typical features of trash films support a positive enjoyment.

The study, which has just been published in the journal "Poetics", is the first major empirical investigation into trash films and their audience. Not only did the authors arrive at supporting established hypotheses and assumptions on 'bad films' in film and media theory, but also at providing new and surprising findings on trash fans and their attitude towards these films.

Most of the participants in the study agreed that the term "cheap" best describes trash films. The label trash itself covers films from various genres. Yet almost all participants mentioned low budget horror films as typical examples. The films mentioned most often were "Sharknado", "Plan 9 from Outer Space" and "The Toxic Avenger". Yet the typical trash fan does not really take such films seriously. Instead, an ironic viewing stance came to the fore. Although to a large extent the

participants stated that the films in question were cheaply made and thus "trash", they also confirmed that trash films are overwhelmingly perceived as a form of positive entertainment. Given an ironic viewing stance on the audience's side, trash films are prone to provide "amusement" – they are considered to be entertaining and funny.

Furthermore, the study provided strong evidence that trash film fans are predominantly male – almost 90 percent of the participants indicated that they are men – and highly enthusiastic film buffs. "To such viewers, trash films appear as an interesting and welcome deviation from the mainstream fare", says Sarkhosh. "We are dealing here with an audience with above-average education, which one could describe as 'cultural omnivores'. Such viewers are interested in a broad spectrum of art and media across the traditional boundaries of high and popular culture." Indeed, that an appreciation of trash films is coupled with strong preferences for art cinema is one of the central findings of the study.

Moreover, the "delight in cheapness" is associated with an active exchange over the films watched. A substantial part of participants write about their trash film experiences in forums and blogs. "While many of the typical assumptions related to a cult film experience could not be confirmed with regard to trash films, the authors of the study were able to show that an active engagement in exchanges considerably contributes to the enjoyment of trash films.

**More information:** Keyvan Sarkhosh et al. Enjoying trash films: Underlying features, viewing stances, and experiential response dimensions, *Poetics* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.poetic.2016.04.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2016.04.002)

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