

# Movies with gory and disgusting scenes more likely to capture and engage audience

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We know it too well. We are watching a horror film and the antagonist is about to maim a character; we ball up, get ready for the shot and instead of turning away, we lean forward in the chair, then flinch and cover our eyes – Jason strikes again! But what is going on in our body that drives us to this reaction, and why do we engage in it so readily? Recent research published in the *Journal of Communication* found that people exposed to core disgusts (blood, guts, body products) showed higher levels of attention the more disgusting the content grew even though they had negative reactions to the content.

Bridget Rubenking, University of Central Florida, and Annie Lang, Indiana University, published their findings in the *Journal of Communication* from an experiment with 120 [participants](#). Participants watched TV/film clips of three distinct types of disgust: socio-moral, body product and death/gore. Rubenking and Lang measured participants' [heart rate](#), facial expressions and skin moisture. After viewing they tested participants' memory for scenes presented in the messages; examined differences in individuals' memory and physiological levels of activity from before the onset of disgust in each clip to time points immediately after; and then compared the data across disgust types.

The findings suggested that socio-moral disgust-eliciting content elicited a slower response, characterized by one of initial [attention](#) and increasing negativity and arousal, and was remembered better before, at and after the onset of disgust. Both core disgusts saw more of an immediate

negativity and defensive response. Body product disgusts in particular showed an initial defensive response pattern: Instead of eliciting immediate attention, the onset of body product disgusts elicited sharp increases in negativity and arousal, and an acceleration of heart rate, indicating that the content was at first too disgusting to pay attention to. Memory for content before the onset of disgust in the core disgust messages was at near-chance levels – indicating that the disgust onset served as a cognitive interrupt and made participants forget what they had seen before it.

Memory improved at and after disgust onset across all disgust types, and heart rate showed a deeper deceleration over time, showing more attention being paid to the content. Together this data suggests that despite being fully aware of how disgusted they were, participants could not turn away from any of the disgusting content, and actually paid more attention the more disgusting the content got. This pattern was especially pronounced in response to the core disgusts.

"We often choose to view entertainment media to simply make ourselves feel good, and we also likely often choose [entertainment media](#) that will provide meaning, fulfillment and spark introspection. Despite whatever motives encouraged the decision to watch or not watch, this study demonstrates that when we're watching entertainment content that introduces specific types of disgust, our bodies react as being disgusted, and we can articulate that we are disgusted by the content," said Rubenking. "However, we pay more attention once disgust is introduced and we remember the content with [disgust](#) better, making it a smart device for [content](#) creators to use, in moderation."

**More information:** Captivated and Grossed Out: An Examination of Processing Core and Sociomoral Disgusts in Entertainment Media, By Bridget Rubenking and Annie Lang; *Journal of Communication* [DOI: 10.1111/jcom.12094](#) [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ...](#)

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