# Sex Differences in Recreational Fear: An Evolutionary Account of Media Preferences

Ida Bække Johannesen 

## Introduction

Recreational fear, the act of seeking out fear-inducing activities in the hopes of deriving pleasure from them, is an area of study that has emerged in recent years. Despite this, it has already become increasingly clear that most people partake in some form of recreational fear. For example, it is a key component in common activities such as telling scary stories to children or riding a rollercoaster. Another way to experience recreational fear is through the consumption of horror media, such as movies, books, or video games. Studies show that more than half of the American population enjoy horror media, and even more consume horror media regardless of whether they enjoy it or not (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and Johnson 2020, 217). Notably, men are consistently more likely than women to enjoy horror. The gender difference is small but significant. Not only do women enjoy horror less, but they also consume horror media less frequently and prefer their media to be less scary (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and Johnson 2020, 224–225).

We know that recreational fear is a near-universal phenomenon for which there are many ways of seeking it out. We also know that enjoyment of horror skews male. This article is therefore largely motivated by the question of what type of recreational fear the female audience is consuming. Is it the same as men, but in lesser quantities, or are there media that appeal specifically to a female audience? The latter suggestion appears to be more likely. For example, true crime podcasts are recent additions to the catalog of scary media and are enjoyed by a predominantly female audience (Boling and Hull 2018; Vitis and Ryan 2023). Much earlier, the slasher genre grew in popularity after the release of *Halloween* (Carpenter) in 1978. 55% of the audience for slasher movies is female (Dika 1987, 87). Both examples suggest that media related to recreational fear has the ability to appeal specifically to women.

In this article, I look at how and why recreational fear appeals to women. I argue that women's preferences are uniquely shaped by sex differences in fears, morbid curiosity, and disgust sensitivity. As recreational fear is a wide-ranging topic, I limit my focus to entertainment media.

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Specifically, I hypothesize that examples of media with relatively lower levels of frightening materials, a lack of disgusting stimuli, and which focus on dangerous people are of particular interest to a female audience. To show this, I focus on a combination of genres and formats with a substantial female audience: true crime podcasts and slasher movies. I start by presenting the existing theory on sex differences in fear, morbid curiosity, and disgust sensitivity. Then, I use this to analyze two types of frightening media. First, I delve into true crime podcasts, where I will analyze the popular podcast *My Favorite Murder*, hosted by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. Following this, I turn to slasher movies and apply the theory in an analysis of *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978).

Gender differences in scary media preferences are a complex topic that cannot be fully explained through simplified accounts. In their study, Wühr, Lange, and Schwarz (2017, 2–3) suggest different accounts of gender differences in movie preferences such as biological differences, evolutionary mechanisms, and gendered socialization. Media preferences are likely a result of multiple factors intersecting. For example, scoring higher on feminine gender role traits correlates with fear and anxiety regardless of sex. This was shown by research on the link between gender role orientation and fear, which argues that biological sex is worse at accounting for variance when predicting fear levels than gender role orientation (Muris and Field 2011, 82–83). At the same time, the link between gender role traits and fear has not been widely researched. This is particularly true for the field of recreational fear, which is the primary framework of the current article. While acknowledging the multifaceted nature of the question at hand, I focus on evolutionary accounts. Therefore, any time I use the word "woman", it is not fully representational of all women but centered around people who are biologically female and socialized as such, as they are who the findings are mainly representational of. I discuss this further in section 5.

## Sex differences in recreational fear

To answer the question of why horror appeals to women, we must first establish why horror appeals to anyone at all. This issue is at the heart of the study of recreational fear, which proposes that activities falling under this umbrella are a form of threat simulation (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and Johnson 2020, 228). Threat simulation is a form of play behavior not dissimilar to the playfighting of young animals. When animals playfight, they construct a scenario of relatively low risk – it is not a real fight. At the same time, they gain skills and experience with threatening scenarios which are helpful once they encounter real danger. Horror can similarly teach people crucial skills without any real threat to their lives or well-being. It acts as training for an unexpected potential threat by showing how such scenarios may play out and teaches us strategies for survival

and coping. Furthermore, the audience members learn more about their own reactions when experiencing negative emotions, which can help keep threat recognition and avoidance mechanisms sharp. The lessons learned from horror or other recreational fear activities apply to the real world and help the individual cope with fear and negative emotions (Clasen 2017, 58–59). Recreational fear activities then give us the benefits of fear while also providing entertainment and a low-risk environment. For example, watching a slasher movie or listening to a true crime podcast offers a brief and controllable encounter with negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety, but poses no real threat to the consumer.

Not all fears are created equal. The most prominent fears are the ones with an evolutionary background and fall within the following categories: predatory animals, contamination, hostile members of the same species, social exclusion, and dangerous environments. These are common fears in today's society, but they are rooted in ancient times. The danger posed by these threats led to an adaptation of the human fear system to become especially sensitive towards anything falling within these categories (Clasen 2017, 35–36). For example, many people fear spiders, sometimes even to a crippling extent, because a bite from one can be deadly. While this was the reality for our ancestors, there are many places today where spiders pose little to no actual threat, and yet the fear persists. These common fears are not restrained by what is realistically posing a threat towards us, but by what we have evolved to fear. The result is that humans are much more likely to fear a spider than a car, even when the car poses a much bigger threat in the modern world (Clasen 2017, 40). In the same vein, women also fear becoming the victim of a crime more than men do, despite men being more likely to end up as victims (Vicary and Fraley 2010, 82). This fear suggests that women are particularly afraid of hostile conspecifics, meaning hostile members of our own species, and scary media can use this fear to impact their female audience.

The adaption of the fear system has also led to sex differences in fear and behaviors because of different obligatory amounts of parental investment for males and females. The investment of females is higher due to gestation and lactation, as they spend longer periods of time excluded from the pool of individuals ready to mate. This limits the number of fertile females and pushes males to compete for access, creating selection pressure to be more aggressive and take more risks for higher chances of successfully passing their genes onto the next generation. Men experience lower levels of fear to not hinder their risk-taking behavior and therefore their reproductive success. Conversely, women's reproductive success is negatively affected by risky behavior that puts them in danger. As the main caretaker of offspring, the mother's survival and presence are closely connected with the likelihood that her children survive and thus her reproductive success (Campbell, Copping, and Cross 2021, 1–4). As a result, women experience a stronger fear response.

In a study where men and women answered how they would respond behaviorally to a threat, their answers were significantly correlated between the sexes, even though the women rated the danger and their own fear higher than the male participants (Campbell, Copping, and Cross 2021, 24–25). Women are also consistently more averse to taking risks (Campbell, Copping, and Cross 2021, 11). Parental investment theory can therefore explain the observable sex differences in fear and risk-taking.

These differences in fear response may then account for some of the differences in horror liking and consumption between men and women. As previously mentioned, men enjoy horror media more than women, whereas women report feeling more easily scared and prefer a lower intensity of scary material (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and Johnson 2020, 224–225). The level of fear appears to be closely related to the enjoyment of horror for recreational fear activities, as shown by a study that compared participants' self-reported enjoyment and fear after visiting a haunted house. This study found that there is an optimal level of fear where enjoyment is at its peak (Andersen et al. 2020). This could link sex differences in fear levels and gender differences in horror preferences. If the subjective experience of fear is different, it stands to reason that the individual's optimal fear levels will also be altered, leading to different preferences.

However, people do not consume horror media in spite of the frightening material but rather because of it. As mentioned before, recreational fear can act as threat simulation and allows the audience to experience scary scenarios without any real danger. This is further supported by one of the main factors behind the popularity of narrative media with dangerous elements: morbid curiosity (Scrivner and Clasen 2022). Morbid curiosity is the curiosity for information about negative topics such as death, violence, or harm. In the same vein as the threat simulation argument, morbid curiosity can also be argued to allow people to learn more about the world, particularly the negative aspects, and how to cope with them (Scrivner 2021, 7). In general, humans have a stronger and faster response to negative events than neutral or positive events. This is an adaptive feature, since an individual who attends to bad outcomes and danger is far more likely to survive (Baumeister et al. 2001, 323–325; Taylor 1991, 78). Being morbidly curious instead of avoidant towards negative topics therefore has its evolutionary benefits, and horror is one way in which we are exposed to useful negativity. For example, one study showed that morbidly curious individuals were more psychologically resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic. They also showed interest in pandemic movies, suggesting that these movies had helped them form coping mechanisms to deal with the real-life pandemic (Scrivner et al. 2021). Altogether, this indicates that morbid curiosity causes people to seek out recreational fear for the learning opportunities that follow.

Morbid curiosity is another area in which there are observable gender differences. One of the ways in which individual levels of morbid curiosity are measured is with the Morbid Curiosity Scale developed by Scrivner (2021). The scale is separated into four different categories that make up the factors of morbid curiosity. The minds of dangerous people factor is about understanding the motivations of dangerous people. The paranormal danger factor centers around phenomena that defy natural laws. The interpersonal violence factor reflects an interest in seeing violent acts, regardless of the motives behind them. Lastly, the body violation factor is the interest in the limits of the body, and what may happen if it is damaged. Overall, men are more morbidly curious than women, but there are also gender differences between the different factors (Scrivner 2021, 3–5). In an interview, Scrivner specifies that "men tend to be more curious about violence and women are sometimes more curious about the minds of dangerous people" (Parsons 2021). So, despite being less morbidly curious in general, women appear to be especially curious about the motives of dangerous people, such as serial killers.

Studies support the connection between morbid curiosity and dangerous agents. Wylie and Gantman (2023) found that more than half of the top 10 most-watched Netflix shows and movies featured an immoral main character. Furthermore, the more immoral the main character was, the more hours the media was viewed in total. They also found that people who scored high on morbid curiosity were consistently more curious about bad moral agents. They argue that morbid curiosity is an important factor in determining whether people are interested in content that is morally good, bad, or ambiguous. Additionally, they argue that immoral agents fascinate people due to the information they can provide about how the world works and who to trust (Wylie and Gantman 2023), supporting the argument that morbid curiosity and threat simulation go hand in hand. Additionally, a study of people's interest in serial killers used the Curiosity About Morbid Events scale by Zuckerman and Litle (1986) which is, unlike the Morbid Curiosity Scale, a unidimensional scale without separate categories for different types of curiosity. Nonetheless, they found a link between morbid curiosity and the topic of serial killing. The male and female participants showed equivalent interest in serial killers, which the study interprets as contrastive to the observation that more women consume true crime podcasts (Harrison and Frederick 2022). However, the lack of gender differences is comparable with the study by Scrivner (2021), who found that the minds of dangerous people subscale had the smallest correlation between sex and curiosity. Women's interest in true crime is not because they are more curious about the topic than men, but because they are more curious about the minds of dangerous people compared to the other factors. As the literature shows, morbid curiosity is connected to the interest in media with dangerous agents, such as immoral characters and serial killers.

While frightening media appeal to audiences through morbid curiosity, they can also risk causing avoidance when using disgusting stimuli. There are three different types of disgust: pathogen, sexual, and moral disgust. Disgust acts as a defensive emotion and prompts behavior to avoid contagion, sexual partners that put one's reproductive success at risk, and individuals who break social rules. Spoiled food, wounds, incest, or antisocial acts such as lying or stealing all elicit disgust (Tybur, Liberman, and Griskevicius 2009, 105–107). Ibarra and Maestripieri (2017) conducted a study testing people's interest or avoidance of visual stimuli that were either disgusting, violent, or both. The study's findings were consistent with the hypothesis that violent stimuli would encourage participants to look for longer, while disgusting stimuli would encourage shorter viewing times. Disgusting images had the lowest viewing times, while violent stimuli had the longest viewing times. Participants viewed stimuli that were both violent and disgusting, such as wounds or other outcomes of violence, for a shorter time than the stimuli that were only violent (Ibarra and Maestripieri 2017). Disgusting stimuli can thus result in aversion, for example through shorter viewing times of visual stimuli or complete avoidance.

Women's threshold for disgust may also affect their consumption of scary media, as studies show that women have higher levels of disgust sensitivity (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, and Buss 2018, 150; Haidt, McCauley, and Rozin 1994, 709). The sex differences are especially notable for sexual disgust, while pathogen disgust shows a smaller, but replicable sex difference. Finally, studies show that women are either slightly more or equally sensitive to moral disgust, likely due to similar selection pressure regardless of sex (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, and Buss 2018, 150; Tybur, Liberman, and Griskevicius 2009, 107). Due to its relevance for later analysis, I focus my discussion on pathogen disgust. There are various evolutionary hypotheses for the observable sex differences. Primarily, pathogen disgust helps combat disease and contagion. Women are more sensitive to pathogen disgust as their health is more important for their offspring's survival. They are more likely to spread disease to their children, either by being contaminated themselves, improperly preparing food, or failing to guide their children towards pathogen-avoidant behavior. High pathogen sensitivity also leads to being more selective of mates by avoiding unhealthy or sickly partners. On the contrary, men benefit from a lower sensitivity to disgust due to their role as hunters and warriors, as they would be more likely to come into contact with dead bodies, wounds, and blood (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, and Buss 2018, 150–155). These hypotheses suggest that sex differences in disgust sensitivity are evolutionary adaptions towards reproductive success, whereas pathogen disgust is specifically centered around avoiding contagion. In turn, horror preferences are likely shaped by the sex difference in disgust sensitivity, leading women to be more aversive towards media with disgusting stimuli.

As the above theory makes clear, designing recreational fear experiences specifically for women requires the creator to pay attention to various factors. First of all, women are more likely to have stronger fear responses than men, and the optimal level of fear is likely lower on average amongst women. Some topics are especially frightening to women, most notably the fear of hostile conspecifics. At the same time, the mentality of dangerous people is also of particular interest to morbidly curious women. Recreational fear which utilizes this fear and curiosity towards hostile people may be more likely to appeal to women. Lastly, the media also has to attend to women's lower thresholds for disgusting material, for example by limiting the number of stimuli related to illness or viscera. Of course, all of these factors are subject to individual preferences as well, and what is enjoyable for one person may not be enjoyable for another person. However, as I argue in the following two sections, some media have attracted large female audiences thanks to how their designs suit the preferences of women. To begin with, we turn our focus to the true crime genre, and how it has been used for highly successful podcasts.

## True crime podcasts

As another form of recreational fear, true crime bears striking similarities to horror in terms of their functions and genre conventions. In her book on the rise of true crime, Murley (2008) outlines how the true crime genre has grown over time. Murder and crime have long been the subjects of nonfiction stories, but the modern true crime format emerged in the 1940s and 50s with the True Detective Magazine. Since then, it has grown in popularity and developed as a genre. True crime presents stories of real events while employing a style inspired by horror and the gothic. It commonly features themes of hidden threats in otherwise safe environments, psychopathy, and violence, especially towards women. It allows its audience a peek into the minds of killers, many of whom become well-known symbols of evil. The narrative explores their actions, motives, and backstory, often including a certain degree of speculation. In this way, the stories inspire both aversion and attraction (Murley 2008, 2–5). The genre is also a way to come face to face with the worst of human nature and understand the dangerous and violent aspects of it (Murley 2008, 160). In this sense, the genre is comparable to horror and its usage as threat simulation. The horror genre intends to evoke negative feelings such as fear, disgust, and anxiety. It scares the audience by presenting them with frightening and disgusting stimuli (Clasen 2021, 3). The murder narratives found in true crime thus borrow from the horror genre. Because true crime also evokes negative emotions and allows its audience to learn from the experience, it can be considered a form of recreational fear.

Women have responded strongly to the true crime genre, likely due to its unique narratives of murder and crime. The genre has a predominantly female audience (Murley 2008, 14), as was also found in Vicary and Fraley's (2010) study on the audience of true crime books. They suggest that women find true crime more compelling because they fear becoming victims more than men do. Accordingly, their female participants showed interest in books that allowed women to learn self-defense tactics, focused on the killer's motives, and contained female victims (Vicary and Fraley 2010, 84–85). True crime, regardless of format, is therefore appealing because its stories are full of useful information on how to avoid ending up as a victim. Like other forms of recreational fear, true crime allows for threat simulation without posing any risk for the consumer, and this contributes to drawing women in.

The podcast format was not used for true crime until 2014 with the launch of Serial. However, the podcast format immediately proved to be a popular form of true crime content for women. While an estimated 53% of American podcast consumers are male (Webster 2022), Boling and Hull (2018, 99) found that the true crime podcast audience is 73% female. Serial's immense popularity also led to a huge expansion of the podcast industry across genres (Boling and Hull 2018, 92–93). In the wake of this development, the successful true crime podcast *My Favorite Murder* (*MFM*) was launched in 2016 by true crime enthusiasts Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. Accordingly, the podcast gained a large following and is at the time of writing the 12th most listened to podcast in the United States (Edison Research 2023). *MFM* is a true crime comedy podcast with a lighter mood as the hosts often chat about their own lives, go on tangents, and speculate about the stories as they present them to the audience. The podcast also keeps a comedic tone through the use of their catchphrases, for example, "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered" or "Fuck Politeness". The podcast has especially been popular with women. Additionally, many of the stories presented in *MFM* are about female victims, and the hosts often delve into feminist discussions about violence towards women. (Rodgers 2023, 3049–3051). *MFM* balances the macabre topics with a unique comedy spin on the true crime genre, while demonstrating their appeal to a female audience through their persistent popularity.

For the sake of analysis, I primarily use the theory in connection to the 18th episode. The episode features two stories, each host presenting one, but I limit my focus to the survival story of Mary Vincent, who was attacked by a man named Lawrence Singleton. The story details how Singleton raped Vincent, cut off both her forearms, and then threw her down a cliffside. While the podcast usually focuses on murder victims, Vincent managed to survive this attack. As the story is presented, the hosts also speculate on various aspects of the people involved in the crime and offer their own personal commentary and connections to Vincent's story. After telling the second story

of the episode, they wrap up by reestablishing the benefits of hearing murder narratives and then saying their catchphrase "Stay Sexy and Don't Get Murdered" (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016a). This episode will be the main source used for analysis as it provides examples of how the presented theory ties to *MFM*'s appeal.

One of the ways in which *MFM* appeals to a female audience is through its handling of the horror elements present in the podcast. The hosts can minimize or maximize scary material in order to reach the optimal levels of fear. In *MFM*, the episodes often open with jokes and casual talks between the two hosts, Kilgariff and Hardstark, before they delve into the true crime stories. They also make comments throughout the stories, which can help to intensify the experience when one of them reacts strongly to hearing about gruesome details. For example, Hardstark gasps and exclaims "no" several times during Kilgariff's description of the attack on Vincent (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016a). This accentuates the fear evoked by the story, and Hardstark's response can influence the audience's own reaction. Another example is when Kilgariff starts the story about Vincent by mentioning her personal experience of hearing the story when she was younger (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016a). Her attachment to the victim leads to a very empathetic narration, intensifying the emotional aspects of the story. At the same time, the hosts also lighten the mood with jokes or lessen the immersion by pausing the narrative to make a comment. As mentioned before, the episodes often start out with the hosts using these tools to lighten the mood (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016a). By balancing these methods, the hosts of *MFM* are able to make intense moments impactful while making the episode overall feel like a safe zone to deal with morbid themes. *MFM*'s substantial female following is likely attracted by the podcast's ability to offer scary and negative topics while remaining within the sweet spot of fear for listeners.

As *MFM*'s name implies most of the episodes focus on homicide. This combines the evolutionary predisposition to fear hostile conspecifics (Clasen 2017, 35–36) with women's fear of crime (Vicary and Fraley 2010, 82). Despite the gap in fear and actual victimization suggesting that it is an irrational fear, *MFM* does not frame it as such. Instead, they highlight the shared experiences of women and the structural violence which is prevalent in their lives even if it goes undetected by official crime statistics. This has especially helped to foster a community around the podcast (Rodgers 2023, 3054–3055). For example, the hosts speculate how many cold cases Singleton might have been included in without the authorities' knowledge. They argue that his crime was so extreme that it likely was not his first crime committed (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016a). These discussions legitimize the prevalent fear of gendered crimes and are a way for the hosts to speak up about a fear that many women otherwise keep quiet about (Rodgers 2023, 3055). This helps with presenting the prominent fear of hostile conspecifics as something that goes beyond just evolutionary reasons

and is caused by modern-day sexism. Not only does this create a feminist debate about harassment and crime, but the threatening scenarios are precisely the ones that women strongly fear. Targeting the most prominent fears makes *MFM* both attractive and effective as recreational fear.

Another crucial aspect of effective recreational fear is the threat simulation and learning opportunities. *MFM* is explicit about offering lessons for women to better navigate potentially dangerous situations. Towards the end of the 18th episode, Kilgariff says "Every murder story that you read and all the information you gather informs you so that you know a little bit more next time" (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016a). Here, Hardstark's words show that she is aware of the learning potential of the true crime genre. The episode offers several explicit lessons, for example, that "if you have a bad feeling, do what you need to do, and apologize for it later, like, steal the car and drive the fuck off. Apologize later if it turns out he wasn't gonna kill you" (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016a). The hosts thus offer survival strategies for their listeners to implement against their fear of crime, and they encourage their primarily female audience to listen to their gut feeling. Rodgers (2023, 3057) also demonstrated the popularity of the show's mantra "Fuck Politeness." Rodgers interviewed listeners of the show, all of whom mentioned the mantra as the most important idea they had taken from *MFM*. In short, "Fuck Politeness" is about how women often worry about ensuring men's comfort by being polite even in situations where they themselves could be in danger, and how women should reject their politeness in favor of their own safety. These lessons also appear to be a motivating factor for listeners, as most people prefer podcasts that, like *MFM*, focus on one or two cases per episode. Podcasts of this format cover multiple topics and tend to post episodes more frequently. This makes them a more thorough source of information that can be used to cope with fear (Vitis and Ryan 2023, 306–307). Thus, *MFM* is a form of recreational fear that overtly teaches their audience survival skills and how to cope with a large array of dangerous scenarios.

Morbid curiosity also appears to be crucial for true crime's popularity, as studies of the motivations in true crime podcast audiences show that morbid topics are often seen as appealing. A study by Boling (2023, 998–999) focuses on survivors of domestic violence who consume true crime to better understand the motivations and psychology of a criminal mind. Several participants mention wanting to understand what drives someone to harm other people, including as a form of therapy. Vitis and Ryan (2023, 303) examined Australian listeners and found that 91% of listeners have an interest in serial killers, which indicates a higher level of morbid curiosity (Harrison and Frederick 2022). Finally, Boling and Hull (2018, 101) found that one of the motivations with the strongest gender differences was the wish to peek into the mind of a criminal, as women were much more likely to agree to this and similar statements. Although the article considers this

listening motivation to be related to voyeurism, it bears similarity to the minds of dangerous people category of the Morbid Curiosity Scale, as do the findings of the other mentioned studies. This indicates that there is a strong link between true crime audiences and being morbidly curious about the minds of dangerous people.

The connection between content, morbid curiosity, and audiences is also present in the *MFM* podcast since the dangerous situations that the hosts bring up are highly effective at attracting a morbidly curious audience. The episodes include stories on serial killers and child murders among other cases (Rodgers 2023, 3055). These topics align with the minds of dangerous people category from the Morbid Curiosity Scale, which women are often more curious about than the other items on the scale (Parsons 2021). The listener motivations discussed in the previous paragraph also apply to *MFM*'s content. To better illustrate this, I analyze an additional episode that contains a clear example of how morbid curiosity is present in *MFM*'s content. The 20th episode discusses Richard Ramirez, a serial killer from the '80s, who is also known as the Night Stalker. Kilgariff and Hardstark delve into his backstory and what drove him to violence. For example, they speculate that he was desensitized to violence after hearing his cousin's story of committing war crimes and raping women while serving in the Vietnam War and then witnessing the same cousin kill his own wife by shooting her. The hosts then wonder if Ramirez could have lived a normal, non-violent life if he had not experienced this (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016b). Delving into Ramirez's life prior to his crimes allows Kilgariff and Hardstark to offer their audiences the exploration of a criminal's mind and motivations that they seek out in true crime content.

At the same time, Kilgariff and Hardstark take precautions to not make their episodes too macabre, even when appealing to morbid curiosity. When covering cases of murder, rape, and other attacks, it is unavoidable that such stories would include many grisly details that evoke feelings of disgust in the audience. This is especially true of *MFM*'s female audience, due to women's lower threshold for disgusting stimuli (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, and Buss 2018, 150; Haidt, McCauley, and Rozin 1994, 709). One of the ways in which the podcast pays attention to disgust sensitivity is when talking about the attack on Vincent in their 18th episode. They avoid overly descriptive language and excessive details, even though the attack left Vincent covered in blood, mud, and wounds. For example, the hosts describe her as looking "beyond something you would see in a horror movie" (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016a). This description does not take away from recounting the horrifying event but avoids triggering disgust as it is not very detailed or specific. In this way, the listeners are aware of Vincent's current state in vague terms but avoid making up vivid images in their minds. The podcast format also helps. As everything is told through an audio format, there are no visual stimuli to evoke disgust. Overall, *MFM* makes careful use of descriptions

when the hosts explain the events of the cases they cover. The audio format and the lack of gory details allow them to attract a morbidly curious audience and not put off their female listeners who may be more averse to disgusting stimuli.

## Slasher movies

Horror movies are perhaps one of the most popular forms of recreational fear. At the same time, they are seen as being a generally male genre (Wühr, Lange, and Schwarz 2017, 5; Clasen 2021, 4). Scholars often argue the same for the slasher movie cycle, due to the influence of Clover's 1987 article "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film," which presented slasher movies as violent and misogynist power fantasies catered to a male audience (Nowell 2011, 3–4). I will use the slasher movie, sometimes called the teen slasher (Nowell 2011) or the stalker movie (Dika 1987), to refer to a cycle of movies all following the same general story where a blade-wielding killer stalks a group of teenagers (Nowell 2011, 16–17). In contrast to Clover's depiction of the cycle, Nowell (2011) looks at the commercial objectives and strategies used by filmmakers to argue that these movies were specifically made to attract young female moviegoers. With a 55% female audience, the slasher movies' strategies appear to have been successful (Dika 1987, 87). In particular, the slasher movie cycle gained in popularity with the release of *Halloween* (Carpenter) in 1978 (Clasen 2017, 125–126). *Halloween*'s killer is the dangerous Michael Myers who breaks out from the mental hospital he had been kept in after killing his own sister at the age of 6. He returns to his childhood town where he stalks and attacks teenager Laurie Strode and her friends on Halloween night (Carpenter 1978). The makers of slasher movies in the '70s and '80s, including *Halloween*, had low budgets and marketed their movies towards teenagers to ensure profits. Specifically, the creators aimed to attract young women, since they were often the ones to pick which movie to go see with their partner or friends (Nowell 2011, 81–86). Therefore, the following section will analyze how *Halloween* appeals to a female audience by applying the established theory on sex differences for recreational fear.

To begin with, slasher movies would be nothing without their killers. *Halloween*'s Myers gives the movie its fear factor by tapping into the primal fear of conspecifics out to harm us (Clasen 2017, 127). His reason for killing is unknown. Instead, he becomes an unspecific threat that the audience can project their fears onto. He does not express any motives for going after Laurie or his own sister, and he has no grudges or specific targets. As Dr. Loomis describes him, he is the embodiment of evil (Carpenter 1978, 39:05–39:48) and ancient predation in its purest form. This is even evoked through his use of a knife as his preferred weapon. Before there were guns and other technologically advanced weapons, there were sharp objects that lent themselves to stabbing and slicing. Like most slasher villains, Myers prefers the pretechnological knife as a weapon (Clover

2015, 31). Additionally, he survives getting shot and stabbed throughout the movie, and at the end when he falls from the 2nd floor, he appears to have gotten up and walked away on his own (Carpenter 1978). Myers seems superhumanly invincible, making him a much more potent version of the hostile conspecific (Clasen 2017, 44). With such an ending, *Halloween*'s take-home message is that people can never truly eliminate threat and predation. This message is only possible because Myers acts as a representation of conspecific predation itself. This is made even clearer through his lack of a specific motive and his choice of weapon creating the impression of an ancient threat.

The lack of a motive makes Myers more frightening, but it also affects his appeal to morbid curiosity. While women tend to be mainly interested in the motives and personalities of killers (Scrivner 2021, 4–5), *Halloween* does not explain how Myers' mind works, unlike many other depictions of murderers in true crime or horror fiction. He is off-screen for large parts of the movie, and when he does appear, it is behind a mask. Slasher movies also tend to hold off on delving into the mind of their killer. Both Myers' body and mind are thus largely hidden from the audience, which prevents much speculation on the driving motive behind his murders (Dika 1987, 88). This is not to say that people have not attempted to analyze Myers's mind, as a quick search on the internet reveals pages of discussion boards and scholarly articles on the subject. But in *Halloween*, Dr. Loomis points out that he has been unable to understand Myers' motivations despite being his assigned psychiatrist for the past 15 years. Myers is described as someone who possesses no reason, conscience, or understanding of right or wrong, and Dr. Loomis concludes that "what was living behind that boy's eyes was purely and simply… evil" (Carpenter 1978, 39:05–39:48). Not only is Myers presented in the unambiguous terms of good and evil, but his psyche is also unknowable to Dr. Loomis and the audience. While the movie denies much insight into the psychology behind its killer, that has not prevented viewers and critics from theorizing. As was previously argued, Myers' strength as a slasher villain lies in the inability to pin him down. While one may argue that this makes *Halloween* appeal less to women's morbid curiosity, the active discussion surrounding Myers suggests the opposite. Viewers have instead become more curious. Myers may not reveal how his mind works, but this is exactly what allows the audience to speculate and come up with their own explanations.

*Halloween* also acts as threat simulation for its viewers. Because Laurie survives, and her friends do not, her survival strategies offer a learning opportunity for the viewers. Once again, Clover (2015) has influenced the literature on slasher movie survivors: she argues that Laurie is an example of the slasher genre's Final Girl. A Final Girl is the female main character and sole survivor, who stands out from her friends by being virginal and keeping her wits about her (Clover 2015, 36–40). Being a virgin is hardly what saves Laurie, rather it is her clever thinking and

watchfulness that gives her an advantage against Myers (Clasen 2017, 127). Early on, she has already noticed that Myers is stalking about the neighborhood, while her friends have yet to see him, and they therefore fail to take her seriously (Carpenter 1978, 23:57–25:08). Unlike Annie, whom Myers kills when she enters the car where he is hiding (Carpenter 1978, 53:57), Laurie pays attention to her surroundings and anything that may pose a threat. Even when Myers corners her, she cleverly fashions a hanger into a weapon that she can use against him (Carpenter 1978, 1:24:11–1:24:24). Throughout the movie, Laurie displays that she is both clever and alert. The lesson is clear: someone who pays attention to dangerous cues and cleverly deals with them has a much higher chance of survival (Baumeister et al. 2001, 323–325). *Halloween* thus validates Laurie's observant nature as a survival strategy and not baseless paranoia. Similarly, the audience learns that wits and alertness are the traits of a survivor.

Finally, *Halloween* also pays attention to not make any of the murders too graphic or violent. This was mainly to ensure that the movie could receive an R-rating (Nowell 2011, 94), but it has the additional effect of being a better fit for the disgust sensitivity of its female audience. R-rated movies, unlike X-rated movies, allowed minors to view the movie in cinemas. 12-17-year-olds made up approximately a quarter of all admissions and were therefore crucial to the financial success of slasher movies (Nowell 2011, 3940). To obtain an R-rating, *Halloween* limited how horrifying and gory the death scenes were. Nowell (2011, 96–97) outlines the five murders' disgusting or frightening features. The majority of the victims die instantly, off-screen, and therefore without excessive displays of pain or fear. It is only the first victim, Myers' sister, whose death includes multiple attacks and is relatively gory (Carpenter 1978, 06:10). Apart from this, fear is mainly present in the pre-death struggles and Myers' stalking (Nowell 2011, 96–97). As previously established, visuals of the gory outcomes of violence are powerful as disgusting stimuli and cause aversion (Ibarra and Maestripieri 2017, 139). The minimal use of disgusting scenes ensures the movie's R-rating, but it has the added effect of being a better fit for female audiences with a lower threshold for disgust.

## Limitations and future research

As the current article is entirely theoretical, its conclusions have not been tested through studies using empirical data. Additionally, gender differences have not been researched in depth, and the findings from research are not entirely consistent across studies (Andersen et al. 2020, 1507–1508). Gender differences in horror enjoyment is therefore an area of study with many possibilities for future research, including trying to verify this article's hypothesis.

Research with a focus on gender should also be intentional about how to collect gender demographics and the role that gender and sex play in the research (Gofman et al. 2021, 10). I attempt to make this explicit by stating in the introduction that the findings are likely only applicable to cisgendered women. This is because the current article is largely based on the findings of studies and literature that either treat gender as binary, thus not accounting for nonbinary and transgender people, or that are not explicit about how their conclusions apply to gender and sex. While evolutionary theory can be in the form of purely biological models, empirical data comes from participants who are also affected by gender socialization. This inevitably impacts the data. As stated by Muris and Field (2011, 82–83), how gender role orientation affects fear is a topic that still requires more research, as findings suggest that fear is dictated by more than just biological sex. My own conclusions are unable to shed more light on this link, as it is based on data that also does not include gender role orientation as a factor. This may be relevant to include in future research. Nonetheless, one significant limitation is therefore that my conclusions are not representational for any person whose gender orientation has not been represented in the data.

## Conclusion

Both *MFM* and *Halloween* show awareness of their female audience, whether that is through discussions of women's experiences with crime or by marketing to a female audience. In terms of evolved sex differences in fear, curiosity, and disgust, they also succeed. While there is nothing to suggest that this was a conscious effort, it works in their favor. For example, *MFM* and *Halloween* are relatively less scary than many other forms of recreational fear. *MFM*'s hosts use commentary to either intensify or lessen the suspense and fear, while *Halloween* had to limit frightening scenes to ensure an R-rating upon release. Additionally, both media rely on the audience's fear that another person may kill or hurt them. It appears to be no coincidence that hostile conspecifics are so popular in scary media since they are both a source of primal fear and a component of morbid curiosity. They appear to be especially effective for a female audience due to women's fear of ending up the victim of a crime (Vicary and Fraley 2010, 82) and their morbid curiosity about the minds of dangerous people (Parsons 2021). As recreational fear, *MFM* and *Halloween* benefit women by acting as threat simulation. They teach women how to cope with fear and other negative reactions (Clasen 2017, 58–59), but there are also more specific lessons in either example. *MFM*'s hosts often give explicit lessons, for example by telling their listeners to forego politeness in favor of their own safety. *Halloween*'s audience learns from Laurie's behavior. Here, being clever and vigilant is what makes someone able to survive a threat like Myers. Lastly, scary media is only able to be adaptively beneficial if excessive disgusting stimuli have not already stopped the audience

from engaging. *Halloween*'s R-rating demonstrates its careful production of scenes including murder and stalking, while *MFM*'s hosts instead avoid disgusting descriptions when talking about upsetting real-life events.

In conclusion, recreational fear activities can appeal specifically to a female audience. I began by hypothesizing that women were particularly interested in media that were relatively less frightening, had fewer disgusting stimuli, and centered around dangerous people. These three topics relate to the existing theory of fear as an adaptive behavior: the fear system in general, morbid curiosity about the minds of dangerous people, and disgust sensitivity. The two analyses demonstrate that the aforementioned features were present for both slasher movies and true crime podcasts, which suggests that these common traits are part of how *MFM* and *Halloween* successfully appeal to women. While the current evolutionary account is far from a complete explanation of the popularity of the analyzed media, it shows that women often engage with recreational fear media that is specifically beneficial to them.

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