



Empathy and Enjoyment of Horror Literature

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ABSTRACT/INTRODUCTION

Empathy is a multidimensional construct that is divided into four distinct areas: empathic concern (sympathy), personal distress, perspective taking and fantasy (how one identifies imaginatively to fictional characters). Previous research has indicated that higher levels of empathic concern are associated with less liking of horror in films (Hoffner, 2009); however, no research has investigated the relationship between trait empathy and preference for horror literature. In formulating our hypotheses, we note that certain elements of horror, including auditory and visual elements, contribute to emotional reactions and perception of horror; it is expected that the emotional impact of books will be less than the emotional impact of films (Martin, 2019), and therefore the relationship between empathy and preference for horror will be reversed. Fantasy empathy has been associated with the ability to identify with characters from an imaginative perspective. As an individual immerses themselves in horror literature, they may find themselves lost in the story and enjoying the literature more, which leads to a predicted positive correlation between enjoyment of all genres of literature (including horror) and fantasy empathy. We do not predict any correlation between other types of empathy and enjoyment of horror literature. In addition, we have a research question: In what way will empathy relate to enjoyment of different types of scary content in horror books? Forty-five undergraduate participants completed a survey on Qualtrics, including a measure of enjoyment of different genres of literature, a measure of enjoyment of different types of frightening content in scary books, and Davis' (1980) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). Fantasy empathy was not significantly correlated with liking for literature in general, but when examining the correlations between empathy and the seven individual genres of literature, significant correlations with fantasy empathy emerged only for fantasy novels ($r = .484, p = .001$) and science fiction ($r = .412, p = .005$). Liking for horror literature was not significantly correlated with any of the subscales of the IRI nor with the overall empathy score. Empathy did not predict any of the measures of enjoyment of different types of frightening content.

HYPOTHESES

Hypotheses

H1: Fantasy empathy will be positively correlated with enjoyment of fiction in all genres

H2: Empathic concern, personal distress, and perspective taking empathy will not predict enjoyment of fiction

Research Question

RQ: In what way will empathy relate to enjoyment of different types of scary content in horror books?

METHOD

Participants

Participants: 45 undergraduate students, recruited via email, participating in exchange for extra credit

- Age: $M = 22.6$ ($SD = 3.41$). Range 19 to 37
- Major: 38 (84.4%) were psychology majors
- Gender: 41 (91.1%) female, 3 (6.7%) male, 1 (2.2%) genderqueer
- Sex assigned at birth: 41 (91.1%) female, 3 (6.7%) male, 1 (2.2%) declined to indicate
- Reading fiction books for pleasure: $M = 32.2$ minutes per day ($SD = 31.53$)

Measures

Literary Genre Preference: Rated enjoyment of fantasy novels, science fiction novels, horror novels, western novels, romance novels, thriller novels, and mystery/detective novels on 1-7 scale. Overall liking of fiction scores range from 7 to 49, liking scores for each genre range from 1 to 7. Higher scores indicate greater liking.

Scary Content that Affects Enjoyment: Participants rated a list of things that can happen in scary stories; indicating whether each would increase or decrease enjoyment of the story, using a 1-5 scale. Scale yields measures of four types of scary content: Happy Ending, Danger, Excitement, and Suffering. Subscale scores range from 1-5, with higher scores indicating that the content would increase liking for the story.

Empathy: Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI; Davis, 1980) Four subscales: Fantasy (FS), Empathic Concern (EC), Personal Distress (PD), and Perspective Taking (PT). Participants respond on a five-point scale, yielding subscale scores ranging from 7 to 49, with higher scores indicating greater empathy. Cronbach's alphas for the four subscales in the present sample were .65 (FS), .71 (EC), .73 (PD), and .64 (PT).

Procedure

The questionnaire was presented on Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com>). Participants first read an informed consent statement and responded "I agree" to affirm informed consent. They then completed the measure of literary genre preference, the measure of scary content that affects enjoyment, and Davis' (1980) IRI. Finally, participants completed demographics, including age, academic major, gender identity, and sex assigned at birth, then listed their three favorite fiction books and reported on the average number of minutes per day they spent reading fiction books for pleasure. After completing the questionnaire, participants were instructed about how to obtain a voucher for extra credit.

RESULTS

H1: Fantasy Empathy will be positively correlated with enjoyment of fiction in all genres

	r	N	p
Fantasy	.484	45	.001
Sci. Fiction	.412	45	.005
Horror	-.058	44	ns
Westerns	.022	45	ns
Romance	.237	45	ns
Thrillers	-.048	45	ns
Mysteries	.002	45	ns
All Genres	.287	44	ns

Fantasy empathy was moderately strongly related to liking of fantasy and science fiction novels, but not significantly related to liking of any other type of literature. An unexpected finding is the variation in the relationship between empathy and liking for the different genres.

H2: Empathic concern, personal distress, and perspective taking empathy will not predict enjoyment of fiction.

Of all the correlations of the empathy measures with the liking of literature ratings, only one (correlation of empathic concern with liking of fantasy novels) reached statistical significance ($r = .299, N = 45, p = .046$). One interesting finding that should be investigated further is that the correlation between empathic concern and liking for horror, while not significant, was negative ($r = -.174, N = 44, p = .259$). This was in contradiction to the prediction of Hypothesis 2, but is consistent with the relationship between empathy and liking for horror films (Hoffner, 2009).

Research Question

In what way will empathy relate to enjoyment of different types of scary content in horror books?

None of the correlations between empathy and enjoyment of scary content in horror books attained statistical significance. This is in contrast to the findings reported by Hoffner (2009), who noted that individuals who were high in empathic concern liked suffering less, but liked danger, excitement, and happy endings more.

CONCLUSIONS

As the present research would suggest, empathy does not seem to relate to enjoyment of different genres of literature or enjoyment of scary content in horror books. Given the small number of participants, the statistical analysis that could be done was very limited. Further research on this subject matter would be necessary in order to examine the relationship between empathy and enjoyment of horror literature further. The initial analysis did reveal that both Fantasy and Science Fiction genres of literature displayed a moderately strong correlation between empathy and enjoyment, but not quite at the level we had hoped for. In further research, it would be interesting to see if larger sized subject pool demonstrate similar findings or support the initial hypothesis for this research.

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