

Blog

Fear and female audiences

Guest blog post by Ida Bække Johannesen

Ida Bække Johannesen • 4 February 2024

If you have ever watched a horror movie, gone on a thrilling roller coaster ride, or shared a ghost story with your friends, you've participated in some form of recreational fear. Simply put, recreational fear refers to any fear-inducing activity that you seek out for the sake of enjoying yourself. As such, it is an incredibly broad phenomenon, but you might not have found all of the examples equally appealing. How about the horror movie? It's a classic example of recreational fear, with one study finding that 55% of their participants enjoyed horror media. Also, men generally enjoy horror more than women do (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and Johnson 2020, 217-224), but while the stereotypical horror fan may be male, evidently many women also enjoy the genre. Unfortunately, there exists very little research on whether women prefer some kinds of recreational fear over others, and if so, why. It's worth investigating what those preferences are and what has shaped them, because even when more horror fans are male, women appear to be just as interested in recreational fear as a whole.

If you want an example, just look at the recent popularity of true crime podcasts. This particular genre and format combination, full of macabre stories and murder narratives, has become especially popular with women. In fact, nearly three-quarters of the audience for true crime podcasts is female (Boling and Hull 2018, 99). And even for horror media, the slasher movies of the late 70's and 80's managed to attract an audience of 55% women (Dika 1987, 87). Evidently, some forms of recreational fear successfully appeal to women.

I believe that a part of the explanation lies in evolved sex differences. At the very least, an evolutionary explanation can describe broad patterns for women's preferences, though it's important to note that the definition of women here is very limited and likely only applies to people who are both biologically and socialized as female.

To begin with, fear is a survival mechanism and is meant to protect an organism from potential threats. Our fear system has evolved to be especially alert towards certain things like spiders, heights, or dangerous people because those things have traditionally posed a threat to our survival and reproductive success (Clasen 2017, 35-36). However, over evolutionary time it has been especially crucial that women respond properly to threats because their survival was, in a sense, more important

for reproductive success. They had to stay alive to bear children, but, importantly, they also had to stay alive during the offspring's early childhood to take care of them. And while it sounds a bit harsh, research suggests that over evolutionary time, a father's survival has had much less impact on the likelihood that his children survive (Campbell, Copping, and Cross 2021, 1-5). He could therefore afford to take more risks and be less fearful. Today, we can see the sex differences in fear systems reflected in our preferences for recreational fear.

To make these differences clearer I'll be using two examples of scary entertainment media, both of which have predominantly female audiences. First, the ongoing true crime podcast *My Favorite Murder* (MFM) which is hosted by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. Second, the slasher movie *Halloween* (Carpenter) from 1978.

The first difference to tackle is how easily scared a person is. In general, women have a stronger fear response than men (Campbell, Copping, and Cross 2021, 24-25). So, it's not surprising that women tend to prefer horror with a lower intensity (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and Johnson 2020, 224-225), as enjoyment of any kind of recreational fear activity is heavily dependent on how scary it is (Andersen et al. 2020). Too scary and it stops being fun. On the other hand, if something isn't scary enough to live up to its reputation as a kind of recreational fear, it may just be boring.

In the podcast MFM, the two hosts tell each other true crime stories. While one host narrates, the other host usually reacts in fear or surprise. This often mirrors the listener's own reaction and can make the story scarier. But, if the hosts pause mid-story to make a comment or joke, they lessen the immersion and lighten the mood. The podcast ends up feeling like a comfortable space to deal with the otherwise uncomfortable stories, a space which is neither too scary nor not intense enough. In *Halloween*, fear is mainly kept at bay through the carefully crafted death scenes. Most of the victims die instantly and off-screen, instead of letting the camera linger on displays of fear and pain (Nowell 2011, 96-97). By avoiding making the deaths too intense, the movie is overall less scary and ends up being a better fit for women's lower tolerance for scary stuff.

While fear usually keeps us away from danger, intentionally seeking it out can also have its benefits. As such, recreational fear is appealing because it offers a brief encounter with frightening situations in a controlled and risk-free environment. When we expose ourselves to fear and anxiety, for example by watching a scary movie, we learn how to deal with dangerous situations and how to cope with our own fear (Clasen 2017, 58-59). This is referred to as threat simulation and it's a core component of recreational fear (Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, and Johnson 2020, 228).

Specifically, MFM and *Halloween* focus on the threat of hostile people, like serial killers, to teach the consumer useful survival strategies. For example, we learn that Laurie Strode's clever thinking and vigilance is her main strength against Michael

Myers, while the friends who dismissed her fears end up dead. Similarly, MFM's hosts will often bring up survival strategies for women, such as their mantra: "Fuck Politeness" (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016a). In short, it means that women, whom society expects to be polite and non-assertive at all times, are often brought into danger precisely because voicing their uncomfortableness is considered rude. Instead, MFM teaches women that doing whatever gets you to safety is okay, even if that means being rude. Women are much more afraid of ending up as victims of a crime than men are (Vicary and Fraley 2010, 82), which means that the threats found in MFM and *Halloween*'s stories are precisely the ones that are relevant for women to simulate in the safe environment of a podcast or movie.

In fact, we are naturally drawn to the learning possibilities of threat simulation. This is because of our morbid curiosity (Scrivner and Clasen 2022). Once again, this is an evolved trait. Being curious towards morbid topics like death, violence, or threatening people is beneficial because it pushes us to learn more about these topics, which leads to us being better equipped to deal with them. What's more, a recent study found that women are especially curious about the psychology and motives of dangerous people compared to other factors of morbid curiosity (Scrivner 2021, 5-7).

This helps us make sense of the female appeal of true crime podcasts and slashers such as MFM and *Halloween*, both of which feature serial killers or otherwise dangerous people. In general, recreational fear offers an opportunity to reap all the benefits of being curious, while imposing no real cost for the information gathered, as opposed to learning from putting oneself in real danger. For example, female true crime podcast listeners mention that understanding what drives someone to harm others is a specific motivation for them to listen to this genre of podcast (Boling 2023, 998-999). MFM can be seen appealing to women's morbid curiosity when they discuss the backstory of certain criminals and speculate on what led them to commit their crime (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016b). While *Halloween*'s Myers reveals no obvious motivations behind his actions (Carpenter 1987, 39:05-39:48), that hasn't stopped viewers from discussing how his mind works. Googling Myers's motivations will give you plenty of results, ranging from scholarly literature to fan-curated wiki sites. *Halloween* appeals to female audience members in particular, since they are especially curious about the minds of dangerous people such as Myers.

While morbid curiosity makes us seek out recreational fear, we can also be put off if something is too disgusting. Disgust is a defensive behavior that makes us want to avoid whatever promoted the feeling in the first place. And, you've guessed it, it's another one of evolution's little gifts. Most disgusting things are linked to illness and pathogens, such as rotten foods, open wounds, or cockroaches (Tybur, Liberman, and Griskevicius 2009, 105). Women are more sensitive to disgusting things than men are, likely as a result of having over evolutionary time been in charge of food

preparation and keeping children healthy, whereas men needed to be able to tolerate a certain amount of blood and gore if they were to hunt or fight (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, and Buss 2018, 150-155). And disgust sensitivity also applies to media, which means that women are more likely to avoid certain types of recreational fear if they find them too gross to enjoy.

Despite their focus on dark topics, MFM and *Halloween* aren't very gross. MFM limits how descriptive their language gets, even when discussing gory attacks. For example, in their 18th episode, they describe a survivor as looking "beyond something you would see in a horror movie" (Kilgariff and Hardstark 2016a), which certainly sounds horrifying but doesn't go into excessive or specific details. The makers of *Halloween*, on the other hand, had a very tangible reason to avoid making their movie too disgusting: the dreaded X-rating. Receiving such a rating would mean that only adults could enter the cinema, which would severely limit their sales. That's why the movie is purposefully devoid of disgust-inducing scenes (Nowell 2011, 39-40). Apart from the very first death, the victims die off-screen and without displays of gore (Nowell 2011, 96-97). For a movie with a solid handful of victims, it's shockingly palatable – perhaps especially for female viewers.

From these two examples of scary media, we can see how evolution has shaped our preferences for recreational fear. It's not that women are less interested in recreational fear, but things that were tailored for a male audience will often have very little appeal to women. Horror and fear can absolutely be of interest to women, but we need to consider the fear system, disgust sensitivity, and morbid curiosity of the audience we are trying to attract.

This blog post is based on Ida Bække Johannesen's BA project "Sex Differences in Recreational Fear: An Evolutionary Account of Media Preferences" (from the 2023 course "Recreational Fear: Scientific, Historical, and Aesthetic Perspectives"). The exam paper is available in its entirety in the journal *Leviathan* (Johannesen 2024).

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