

Blog

Recreational Fear: What It Is and Why That Matters

Recreational Fear Lab member Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen proposes a definition of recreational fear and discusses implications for future research.

Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen • 6 March 2024

The philosopher Noël Carroll (1990) coined the term “the paradox of horror” to describe the strange fact that so many people enjoy horror movies and other media that are expressly designed to frighten them. The enjoyment of horror does seem paradoxical, but there is something a little presumptuous about Carroll’s coinage because it implies that the paradox is specifically about horror. The conviction that it isn’t—that paradoxically fearful enjoyment describes many other human activities—is what motivates the use of a different term, “recreational fear,” by members of the Recreational Fear Lab.

Many activities are fearfully enjoyed in ways that seem to parallel the enjoyment of horror media: People ride in roller coasters, climb up steep mountainsides, visit reputedly haunted locations, cage dive with sharks, and parachute from functioning airplanes. They typically wouldn’t engage in these activities if they weren’t enjoyable, and they wouldn’t be as enjoyable if they did not involve at least some modicum of fear. But there are also harder cases. Should we count as recreationally fearful the watching of thrillers, the hacking of high-security websites, urban exploration, storm watching, or children’s playing hide-and-seek? The decision can only be made on the basis of a good definition of recreational fear. I’m going to attempt to provide one here. Its conditions of adequacy are, first, that it should identify exactly what it is about recreationally fearful activities that makes engagement in them similarly paradoxical, and, second, that it can guide researchers who need to sort out difficult cases such as the ones just mentioned.

Previous definitions have been proposed, but they do not establish a consensus. For example, recreational fear is defined as

- “a mixed emotional experience of fear and enjoyment” (Andersen et al. 2020, 1497)
- “dark tourism encounters which inspire or intend to inspire both positive and negative effects” (Kerr 2022, 145)

- the “human fascination with the morbid” (Moscon and Serpa 2023)
- “behaviors where people voluntarily seek out activities that elicit negative emotions and expect to derive pleasure from such emotions” (Clasen 2023, 36)

I’m not entirely happy with any of these. Kerr (2022) and Moscon and Serpa (2023) arbitrarily delimit the concept to their immediate concerns. Contrary to Andersen et al. (2020), recreational fear is not simply the mixing of fear and enjoyment because that definition includes cases where an activity’s fearfulness goes *against* its enjoyment, as when my wife enjoys the TV show *True Detective* in spite of, and not because of, its many scary parts. Another counterexample would be someone’s joy at winning a lot of money being mixed with their fear that some opportunist will try to take advantage of their good fortune. Such cases are not paradoxical, and they are very far from the phenomenon we are trying to explain. What they show is that such enjoyment as goes into recreational fear must *depend upon* the experience of fear.

Clasen’s (2023) definition captures this dependence well. However, it suggests that researchers are only interested in behaviors that have been sought out for their fearful aspect. Wouldn’t it also be relevant to look at behaviors that *turn out* to be fearfully enjoyable, even if one had not anticipated them to be so? Relatedly, it seems to me the definition can make recreational fear a little too cognitively demanding, involving explicit “expectations” of deriving pleasure from negative emotions.

I propose to define recreational fear as “experiences and activities in which people derive enjoyment from their fearful emotions.” This definition marks the crucial dependence of the enjoyment on the fear, and it does not, I think, trade psychological plausibility for formal precision. It lets in the good cases: thrilling to a horror movie or tensing in excited anticipation of a rollercoaster ride. And it leaves out the bad cases: a teenager’s being peer pressured into watching a horror movie, for example, or someone fully disliking the scariness of the multiplayer horror game *Phasmophobia* yet enjoying its social aspect. In addition, it captures cases in which someone’s enjoyment does not immediately coincide with their fear yet is still derived from it. For instance, someone might experience a sense of accomplishment—and therefore derive enjoyment—from having braved a haunted house tour.

The definition refers to “fearful emotions” rather than simply “fear” in order to accommodate emotions that are commonly grouped with fear but sometimes seen as distinctive from it: anxiety, dread, terror, etc. Another consideration was that the definition should look beyond the relationship between enjoyable and fearful emotions in also mentioning the “experiences and activities” that give rise to those emotions. The main reason is that existing research conducted under the heading of “recreational fear” (sometimes: “recreational horror”) is not narrowly concerned with understanding fearful enjoyment as such. It is also centrally

concerned with understanding how different activities and engagements give rise to that type of emotional experience. The centrality of this concern is indicated by the fact that researchers who define recreational fear in narrowly emotional terms often proceed to use the term in ways that strictly speaking violate that definition. Thus, Andersen et al.'s (2020) seminal study mentions “haunted attractions” (1497) and “horror entertainment” (1498) as examples of recreational fear, but they couldn't be because they are not the names of “a mixed emotional experience of fear and enjoyment,” as was the same study's definition. However, “haunted attractions” and “horror entertainment” are examples of “experiences and activities in which people derive enjoyment from their fearful emotions”—that's the whole point.

I hope to have convinced the reader that my definition of recreational fear is clear and precise. Does it also meet its second condition of adequacy in allowing one to decide whether seemingly difficult cases should or should not count as recreationally fearful? In other words, does it have practical and investigative “cash value”?

In early 2022, a handful of members of the Recreational Fear Lab met to design a survey that was meant to assess how frequently and how widely Danish youth engaged in recreational fear. We therefore had to decide which of a wide range of activities should count as recreationally fearful; however, it quickly became clear that our intuitions about quite a few possible cases—only some of which were relevant to that particular study—were misaligned.

Each difficult case seemed to call for consideration of its particulars: Is public speaking a kind of recreational fear? Not intuitively. But what if one experiences both fear and enjoyment in delivering the speech, as several of those present claimed to have done on prior occasions? Perhaps—but the correlation could be coincidental. But then what if the enjoyment is prompted by a sense or realization that one is managing to control one's fear of public speaking? Quite possibly, though the case seems contrived. Many other activities gave us trouble because they at least *can* involve a combination of fear and enjoyment: scuba diving, urban exploration, romantic dating. In these and other cases, we needed some way of abstracting the relevant psychological factors from the specific activity in order to be able to decide under which conditions the activity should count as an instance of recreational fear.

I believe that my definition can help with such cases. According to that definition, public speaking is a form of recreational fear only if and insofar as the speaker's enjoyment derives from a sense of risk or danger (such that removing that sense would diminish the enjoyment). I think it's clear that very few cases of public speaking are enjoyed because they provoke fear or anxiety, and so, as a generalization, we should say that public speaking is not a recreationally fearful activity.

At the same time, we can recognize that some types of activities may be recreationally fearful only in special or delimited circumstances, and we can consider whether those circumstances are relevant for the purposes of a given empirical study. In designing the survey study, my colleagues and I realized that children's enjoyment of animated movies is frequently recreationally fearful. For example, Disney's animated "Classics" usually have scary parts that thrill their young audiences (such as Simba and Nala's danger-filled trip to the elephant graveyard in *The Lion King*). So do many well-known fairy tales: My two-year-old daughter is frightfully enraptured when I perform the menacing voice of the fearsome troll in "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" to her. These examples of recreational fear illustrate the concept's wide application beyond the prototypical cases of horror media and extreme sports. They also illustrate that it's not rare for an activity to be recreationally fearful for some audiences or participants but not for others (few adults are frightened by Disney animation, and my wife is unmoved by my troll voice).

A rough division can be made between activities that are typically and variably recreationally fearful. Activities that are typically recreationally fearful, such as bungee jumping or the watching of horror movies, are activities whose enjoyment typically derives from their fearfulness. They are of general and central relevance to the study of recreational fear. Activities that are variably recreationally fearful, such as scuba diving or the watching of Disney movies, are activities whose enjoyment derives from their fearfulness only in specific or delimited cases. They are of contingent and conditional relevance to the study of recreational fear. Finally, activities that fall into neither of these two categories, such as public speaking or shopping, are activities whose enjoyment rarely or never derives from their fearfulness. They are of marginal or no relevance to the study of recreational fear.

It makes sense to discuss horror movies and haunted houses as "forms" of recreational fear, as is done in some studies, because they are typically enjoyed for their fearfulness. Typically, but not always. Many horror movies feature beautiful cinematography, biting satire, compelling characters, alluring mystery, and humor. When people watch horror movies to experience such non-horrific sources of pleasure, there is no "paradox of horror" involved. Neither should we be talking about recreational fear when audiences do not enjoy such movies at all. I have already given the example of adolescent peer pressure, but there could be many other reasons why someone indicating on a research survey that they watch horror "occasionally" is not a reliable indication that there is a paradox to be solved. I hope my definition helps to bring these qualifications out by making it clear that what is centrally at stake in recreational fear is a narrowly psychological paradox that manifests itself variably across very many behavioral and experiential domains.

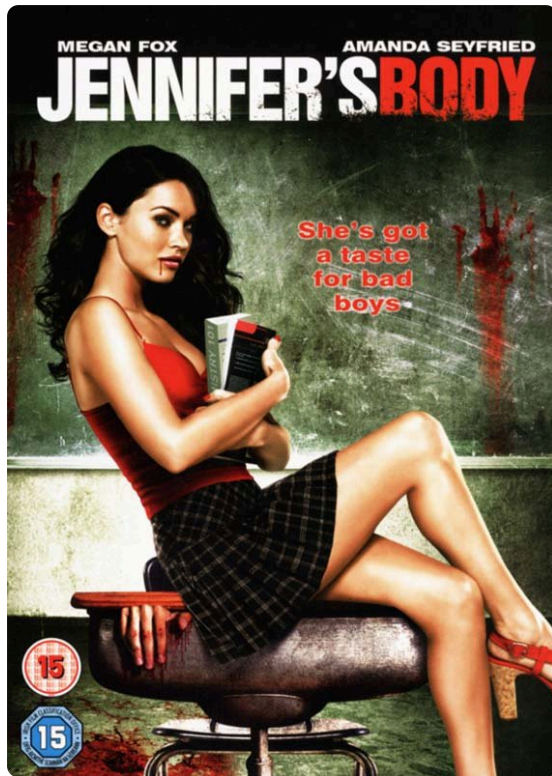


Figure 1

I can think of a non-paradoxical reason for the popularity of the horror movie *Jennifer's Body*, starring Megan Fox, among certain audiences.

Finally, let me try to be a little more concrete about how these abstract considerations can help make for good research. There may admittedly be no need for very careful wording in some cases, as when researchers aim to quantify people's engagement in typical kinds of recreational fear. If I ask some member of a demographic of interest whether they enjoy horror movies and the answer is "yes," it's a fair assumption that they do so, at least in significant part, because they enjoy the frights as such. However, if the question is whether to count as recreationally fearful someone's engagement in *variably* recreationally fearful activities, such as urban exploration, survivalist challenges, wildlife safaris, or the watching of thriller movies, it is important to ask the right questions. What needs to be ascertained is not whether they enjoy these activities, or whether they find these activities both enjoyable and fearful. What is relevant is whether they enjoy the fearful aspects of the activity in question (such that subtracting the fear would lessen the enjoyment). So one should not ask, for example, "Do you find urban exploration both enjoyable and fearful," as some writings on recreational fear might lead one to ask. A better question might be something like, "Do you find urban exploration enjoyable when it involves a sense of danger, as when exploring a desolate neighborhood at night?"

It is precisely the paradoxical nature of recreational fear that makes it such a fascinating area of study, and any adequate definition of the concept needs to reflect that. My proposal is not meant to denigrate research that has employed or implied a different conception of the recreationally fearful, but to point out that

what the term was adopted to describe is a definite psychological mystery—one that I hope to have literally spelled out here, and about which we need to know so much more.

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