

# When a blockbuster becomes lackluster: Not all movie-watching experiences are created equal

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When you sit down to watch a new flick, whether you enjoy the movie may depend on the person sitting next to you, according to research from a Kansas State University professor. It's especially true if you are awkwardly watching a movie's steamy love scene with your parents.

"We know that most of the time people enjoy watching [movies](#) -- that's why they do it," said Richard Harris, K-State professor of psychology. "But sometimes we watch a movie that isn't what we describe as 'enjoyable.' For whatever reason, the experience is uncomfortable emotionally or in other ways."

Such research is important, Harris said, because movies are a very common form of entertainment, particularly for teens and young adults, the largest movie-viewing demographic.

"We should know psychologically what the attraction of movies is, what the experience is like, and what the effects are," he said.

Harris has conducted two studies that show we may not enjoy watching a movie for two reasons: what we're watching and who we're watching it with. Particularly, the combination of watching a steamy love scene with your parents proved to be most unpleasant.

"The topic of sex seems to be the most difficult for parents and teens or

young adults to talk about with each other," Harris said. "Seeing a movie with a graphic sex scene forces both parties to confront this awkwardness and implicitly acknowledge each other as sexual beings, one of the hardest realizations for teens to admit about their parents or parents to admit about their children. It's not easy, and apparently, not fun."

Harris' research is based on feedback from 400 participants and appears in an upcoming issue of the journal [Applied Cognitive Psychology](#).

In his first study Harris' team asked participants questions about when they didn't enjoy watching a film. Viewers indicated content with violence, sex, vulgar language or other troubling themes made them uncomfortable. The type of co-viewer and their interactions with the content also created unpleasant experiences.

The study focused on those uncomfortable movie-viewing moments and how viewers acted during the movie and after it. Harris said the gender of the viewer influenced reactions, a somewhat surprising result.

"Contrary to gender stereotypes, women were actually more likely to talk about it, both during the movie and after," Harris said. "Men were more likely to do the avoidance types of responses: start talking about something else, not say anything at all or pretend it didn't bother them."

Harris' second study offered a more controlled look at movie-viewing experiences. Researchers created a set of 25 different movie-watching scenarios made from five types of movies and five co-viewer groups. The types of movies included a very violent movie, a sexually explicit movie, and the films "Brokeback Mountain," "The Notebook" and "American History X." The co-viewer groups included watching the movie with your [parents](#), a spouse/significant other, a group of same-sex friends, a gay friend and a first date.

In each scenario, researchers asked participants about their discomfort level and how they would handle it. According to results, "The Notebook" caused the least distress among viewers. While the type of movie -- including a very violent or sexual movie -- influenced the discomfort, the co-viewers ultimately determined if the movie-viewing experience was enjoyable.

Research also indicated that some movie types, such as comedies, are enjoyed more with groups of people. At the same time, certain types of co-viewer groups, such as a group of men going to a romantic movie, almost never occur. But the same men may go to that same romantic movie with a different person, such as a girlfriend.

Despite the discomfort from watching a certain movie, a quarter of the participants in both studies said they would be interested in seeing a movie that made them uncomfortable again, and a third of participants said they were glad they saw it.

Provided by Kansas State University

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