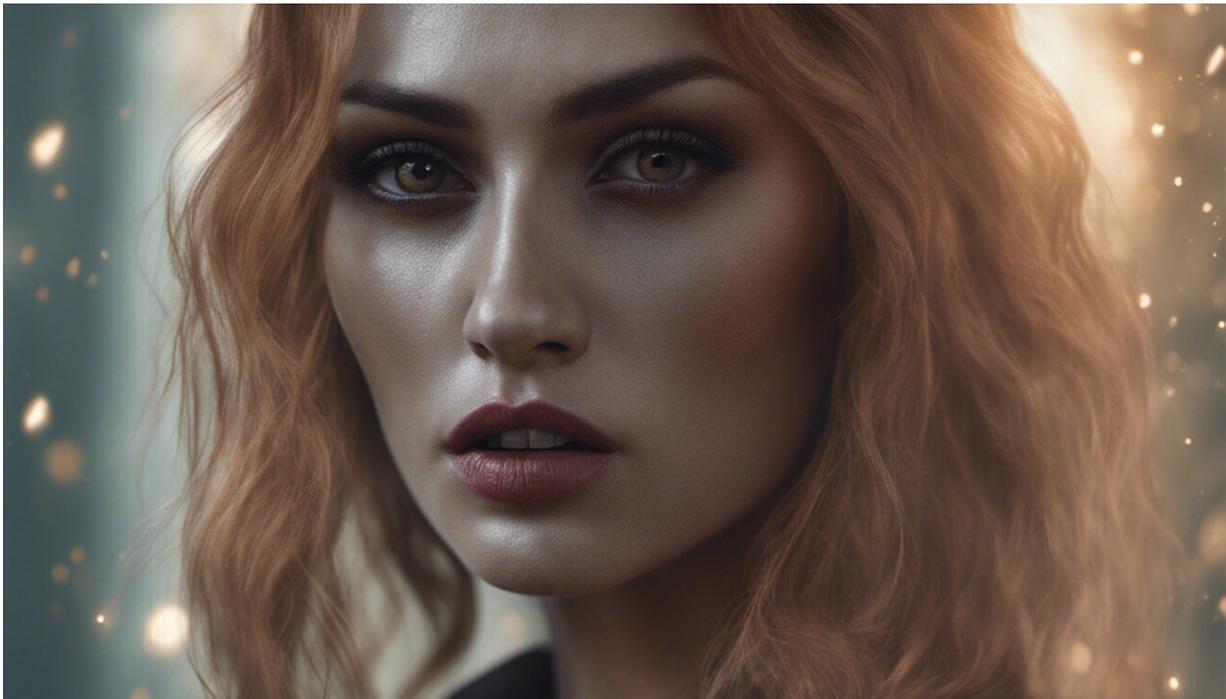


Why scary movies are helping some people cope with the pandemic

October 30 2020, by Max Witynski



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If you're dealing with anxiety in 2020, could watching a horror movie make you feel better? University of Chicago graduate student Coltan Scrivner says the answer—surprisingly—could be yes.

"This seems odd on its face," said Scrivner, a Ph.D. student in the

Department of Comparative Human Development. "How could that possibly help?"

Scrivner takes a scientific approach to understanding cognitive paradoxes like this one, hoping to figure out why some people enjoy being terrified—even during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

"If you talk to horror fans or read horror forums," he said, "you'll see hundreds of anecdotal examples of people talking about how they use horror to cope with a variety of things, including anxiety, depression and traumas that they have experienced."

Evidence suggests that there might be a reason humans find it hard to look away from the grim and ghastly.

"Morbidity curiosity is an internal motivation to learn about threatening situations in your environment, such that you might be able to avoid those situations in the future," Scrivner said. "Currently, one of those situations is COVID-19."

When the pandemic came to national attention, many people felt a sense of impending doom. But at the same time, the movie *Contagion* quickly became one of the most-watched movies in the U.S.

Scrivner decided to try to understand this phenomenon better by taking advantage of the opportunity COVID had presented to study morbidity curiosity in a natural setting, using surveys to reach out to movie fans.

He found that people who were interested in movies like *Contagion* and *Outbreak* reported lower levels of anxiety after the pandemic began.

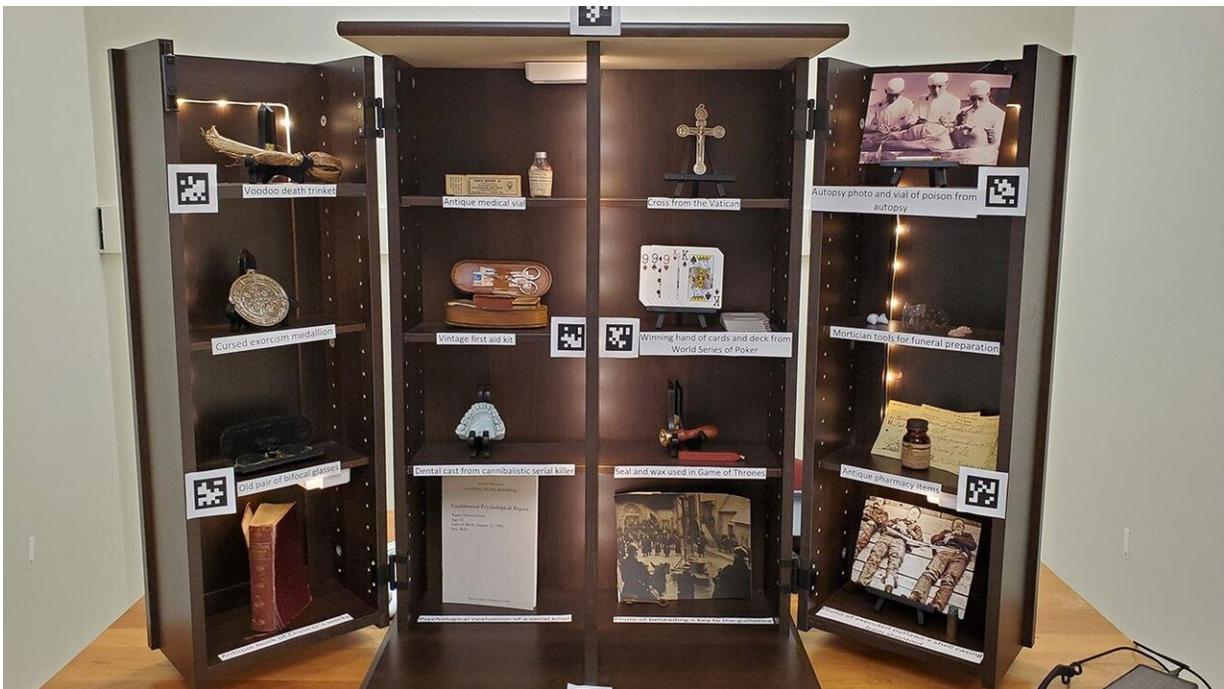
"We tested something called the ordeal simulation hypothesis with horror fans," he explained. "This is the idea that because they've

simulated things like this before, they're a bit more prepared or better able to cope with the real thing."

Future work that Scrivner is piloting will go beyond COVID-19 to explore whether viewing horror helps people practice emotion regulation or process trauma that they've experienced in real life, as anecdotal evidence seems to suggest.

Cabinet of 'morbid curiosities'

More broadly, Scrivner's dissertation work is focused on developing a theory of morbid curiosity as a psychological construct, picking apart the phenomenon's proximate and ultimate causes, and observing how morbid curiosity varies between people and dictates their behaviors.



Research participants wear eye-tracking glasses while engaging with this "cabinet of curiosities" curated by Coltan Scrivner, who is studying how morbid curiosity

manifests on multiple levels. Credit: Coltan Scrivner

One of his favorite projects involves a "cabinet of curiosities" that he curated with items from online vendors on Etsy and from Woolly Mammoth, an eclectic store in the Andersonville neighborhood of Chicago. The study examined participants' morbid curiosity about strange objects at three levels: by looking at them (visual), by touching them (tactile) and by reading about them (epistemic).

Scrivner stocked the cabinet with both "morbid" and non-morbid items for which he had written interesting histories, including a psych report for serial killer Ed Gein, an old copy of Chaucer's works, a "cursed exorcism medallion," a seal and wax used in Game of Thrones and mortician's tools.

Participants viewed the cabinet while wearing eye-tracking glasses. First, they inspected for 90 seconds without instructions, as if they were visiting a museum. Then, while wearing gloves, they were allowed to pick up and examine five items of their choice. Finally, they were asked if they wanted to read the stories behind another five items.

"The idea is to tease apart whether morbidly curious people are really more epistemically curious—they're not interested in doing violent things, right?" said Scrivner, who has paused [data collection](#) on the project due to the pandemic. "So maybe they will be interested in looking at or reading about something scary, but will only want to touch things that aren't."

Haunted houses

Scrivner also has a study coming out in *Psychological Science* this fall

about another seasonally appropriate topic: haunted houses.

In 2017, when data for the forthcoming paper were collected, Scrivner began a collaboration with Mathias Clasen, a researcher at Aarhus University in Denmark with similar interests. With colleagues Marc Andersen and Uffe Schjoedt, they studied visitor responses to scary stimuli at a local haunted tourist attraction.

To do so, they triangulated three different kinds of data: physiological data from heart rate monitors, self-reported levels of fear and fun for visitors after they exited the haunted house and behavioral expressions of fear by coding videos of their reactions to frightening events.

"We showed that there's an optimum level of fear, essentially a sweet spot," Scrivner said. "The basic idea is that people regulate how immersed they are in the haunted house and how much emotional arousal they are willing to experience in order to maximize their level of fun."

With Halloween around the corner, Scrivner is getting ready to celebrate himself.

"I usually like to catch a haunted house or two during October and binge a few horror movies that I've been wanting to watch," he said. "And, of course, curate my spooky Spotify playlist."

His own favorite horror movies include *Hereditary* and other films by Ari Aster. He also likes the work of directors Jason Blum (*Paranormal Activity*, *Insidious* and *The Purge*), Mike Flanagan (*The Haunting of Hill House*) and James Wan (*Saw* and *The Conjuring Universe*).

But if you're not a [horror](#) fan, 2020 may be scary enough, according to Scrivner. Not everyone is equally morbidly curious, and for some

people, the visceral feelings that such films can present outweigh their entertainment value.

"People tend to know themselves well enough to decide whether or not it would be a good idea to try watching something scary," he said.

Provided by University of Chicago

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