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College Students' Lingering Negative Emotional Responses to Movies Viewed During College

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Abstract

Although much research has been conducted on children's negative emotional responses to movies, and even negative emotional responses to the media in general, limited research has been conducted on college students' lingering negative emotional responses to movies they have viewed during their college years. Through a qualitative analysis using a focus group at a Florida Christian college, this thesis will examine what kinds of disturbing movie content and elements cause these lingering negative emotional responses in college students. The lingering negative emotional responses these students have will also be discussed in detail, as well as what triggers the reemergence of these responses.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The transition from a culture based primarily on print media to a culture based on visual media has had numerous effects, arguably consequences, on individuals in society, as reality is being perceived and processed visually (Senturk, 2011). In his famous book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman supports this idea by demonstrating how America, with the shift from print media to television, turned from a country based on rationality to a country focused on absurdity. Postman recognizes television as a medium and argues that the nature of this medium relies on “visual interest” rather than content, in order to follow the rules and ideals of show business. Americans are no longer interested in exchanging ideas, but are instead entertained by exchanging *images* (Postman, 1985, p. 92-93). Similarly, famous philosopher of Communication theory, Marshall McLuhan, has suggested that “books contain, TV involves” (1964, p. 1).

In lieu of this transition from print media to television, there has been much research conducted on the adverse effects of movies on children. However, less information is known about the repercussions of movies on college students. This thesis will seek to discover what types of disturbing movie content cause lingering negative emotional responses in college students. The reason for choosing to study movies rather than television is due to an accurate assessment from researchers:

...The producers of horror movies and other frightening fictional media content tend to have an explicit goal of frightening viewers, and they have an arsenal of tools to help them achieve that goal: sound effects, music, lighting, costumes, makeup, actors and actresses, and frightening locations, to name a few. Therefore, fictional media such as horror films are likely to include the very types of stimuli (e.g., monsters, creatures, darkness, sudden movements) that are known to evoke fear responses almost universally in humans. (Riddle, 2012, p. 740; Izard, 1977)

In support, a study by Pouliot and Cowen (2007) revealed that fiction films (versus factual documentaries) elicited a more intense emotional response in viewers due to viewers' memory of the visual and verbal information presented.

The majority of research studies in Chapter 2 focus only on fear responses to "scary" movies or "horror" films. The populations researched have been: children, adolescents, and college students. The studies conducted on both fear and anxiety provide a foundation for this thesis regarding the more broad effects of disturbing media content that are encompassed in the phrase "negative emotional responses." Many of the studies evaluated for the literature review in Chapter 2 have been conducted by leading communication researcher and professor, Joanne Cantor, as well as Glenn Sparks.

The reader of this thesis will find that fear is a key component to a lingering negative emotional response. In her book, *Human Emotion*, Izard (1977) shares the power of fear: "It tends to lock into the memory unforgettable experiences that can be re-lived through active recall or through dreams...Fear is activated by a rather rapid increase in the density of neural stimulation, brought about by real or imagined danger. Apprehension, uncertainty, the feeling of a lack of safety and impending disaster accompany strong fear" (p. 90).

Interest for this study was sparked by my personal experience with lingering negative emotional responses to movies. I struggle with my own fear, anxiety, and stress that have resulted from watching movies with content that I find disturbing. I wondered if other college students have similar responses. After having initial conversations with my friends and classmates about their lingering negative emotional responses to movies, I confirmed that I am not alone. Other college students *do* have lingering negative emotional responses to movies that they have viewed during their college years. Thus, the basis for this study was established.

It should be noted that this research study on lingering negative emotional responses on college students is merely a launching pad for other studies to be performed. This is a preliminary study with the purpose of determining whether or not a more vigorous and expanded study is necessary.

The next chapter will explore previous research regarding a variety of different lingering negative emotional responses that children, adolescents, and college students have had, and some theories as to why they have had them.

Research Questions

- What disturbing movie content or elements cause lingering negative emotional responses for college students?
- What lingering negative emotional responses do college students experience?
 - What triggers a negative emotional response to re-emerge?
 - Is there a difference between communication students' lingering negative emotional responses and that of students of other disciplines?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Previous Studies Conducted on Responses to Disturbing Media Content

Children. The most researched population in regard to negative responses to the media are children, and rightly so. This is because children are the most susceptible population to media effects due to their stage of cognitive development. The American Academy of Pediatrics estimates that American children between the ages of two and eighteen use media for six hours and thirty-two minutes every day (2001). This statistic reveals the prominent role that media plays in a young person's life and as a result, the large negative effect that it can have on a child, both now and in the future. Age is a main factor in fear development and reaction. At the same time, fear is also not predictable (Cantor & Sparks, 1984).

Research shows that there is a correlation between Jean Piaget's operational stages and the way that children process media content (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996). When children are in early childhood (between the ages of two and six), they are in what Piaget termed the preoperational stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1929; Piaget, 1962). During this stage of cognitive development, children lack conservation abilities. This means that children are unable to understand that objects or people that change shape possess the same qualities. For example, pre-operational children who viewed clips from *The Incredible Hulk* did not make the connection that David (the main character) had transformed into the Hulk, and thus experienced fear after the transformation. These children, who initially were not frightened by David's character, became frightened when his outward appearance changed into the Hulk because they could not understand that the Hulk was David (Cantor & Sparks, 1986).

Children seven years or older are considered concrete operational children (Piaget, 1929; Piaget, 1962). Older children in the concrete operational stage of cognitive development have more advanced cognitive ability and need the opportunity to process what

they see (Riddle, Cantor, Byrne, & Moyer-Guse, 2012). In fact, Harrison and Cantor (1999) demonstrated that these older children use cognitive processing strategies to cope with media, while younger children use behavioral coping strategies.

Following Piaget's studies, Cantor and Sparks (1984) hypothesized and verified that a character's appearance is more frightening to preoperational children, and perception of potential threat (the idea that some event could happen) is more frightening to concrete operational children. Cantor and Sparks (1984) state that to concrete operational children "fear is a function of perceived or potential threat or danger, unrealistic, impossible, or fantastic happenings should diminish in their potential to frighten as children grow and develop cognitively" (p. 94).

An interesting and unexpected discovery by Hoffner and Cantor (1984) is that after experimentation, children in three different age groups (ages four to five, six to seven, and seven to nine) all practiced physical appearance stereotyping.

How does this play into children's negative emotional responses to movies or television? (2008):

Research shows that most preschoolers and elementary school children have experienced short-term fright reactions to the media...A survey of more than 2,000 elementary and middle school children revealed that heavy television viewing was associated with self-reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress...A survey of nearly 500 parents of elementary school children found that the children who watched television just before bedtime had greater difficulty falling asleep, were more anxious at bedtime, and had higher rates of nightmares. (p. 93)

The problem with children, and even people in general, watching an immense amount of media is that according to the cultivation theory, these people who watch a large amount of television "will come to perceive the real world as being consistent with what they see on the

screen” (Wilson, 2008, p. 95). Similarly, in an investigation by Comer, Furr and Beidas, Babyar, and Kendall (2008), it was found that children’s increased perception of personal vulnerability to world threats was elevated with increased television use. Cantor and associates found that children in the concrete stage of development (eight to twelve years old) feel threatened the most by “realistic yet abstract threats such as disease and nuclear war” (Harrison and Cantor, 1999, p. 100). This means that what these older children are watching *is* having a negative effect on them.

Even if parents or adults were to try to dissuade their children from believing what they see on television and in movies, it would have little benefit because the children will already be trying to fit what they have seen into their “limited cognitive schema” (Mathai, 1983, p. 198). This means that children try to integrate this new information with what they already know. Sparks and Cantor (1986) assessed children’s different fright responses to a television program and affirmed the argument that cognitive development is not only interrelated to emotional responses, but also an important factor in predicting and understanding emotional responses (p. 320).

Adolescents. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, it is approximated that the average teenager (by the age of 18) will have seen 200,000 acts of violence solely on the TV (2001). This staggering statistic, along with other research, reveals some of the repercussions of media violence: “aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed” (*Media Violence*, 2001, p. 1222). However, these are not the only emotions and behaviors that result. Other effects of media violence include: sleep disturbances, nightmares, anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (*Media Violence*, 2001, p. 1223).

Not only is violence a cause of post-traumatic stress disorder, but traumatic media content is a cause as well. In a study done by Neria and Sullivan (2011), post-traumatic stress

disorder (PTSD) is shown to be the number one psychopathological consequence as a result of indirect exposure to mass trauma via the mass media. The two main ingredients for PTSD are exposure to trauma and fearful response (Neria & Sullivan, 2011). Studies have found that those who have biological and historical tendencies toward PTSD are more likely to have long lasting symptoms of PTSD after indirect exposure to trauma in the media, whereas those without a history of PTSD do not.

In researching adolescents' responses to disturbing media content, some key connections have been made. In an article by Hoffner (1995), the importance of an adolescent's coping style in processing media content is revealed. This is a strong indicator of why individuals have different responses and experience different effects to the media. There are two kinds of activation and arousal systems that have been identified: (1) "blunting" (activation-oriented coping) and (2) "monitoring" (arousal-oriented coping). Blunting involves cognitive avoidance or distraction from threat cues, while monitoring involves seeking out a solution to a threat (Hoffner, 1995). An individual with high arousability is characterized by his/her poor ability to effectively "screen out stimuli in the environment" (Sparks, 1989, p. 110). This means that such a person has trouble ignoring elements in a movie or TV show that would cause a negative emotional response.

After examining 228 ninth and tenth grade students using questionnaires, Hoffner found that girls reported more empathic concern, "other-oriented response of sympathy or concern for another's welfare" and thus more personal distress, a "self-oriented feeling of anxiety or discomfort in response to another's suffering" than did the boys (Hoffner, 1995, p. 329). The boys who participated in this study liked the scary films more than the girls (Hoffner, 1995). One of the hypotheses of Hoffner's study was supported, concluding that adolescent girls use more coping strategies than boys (Hoffner, 1995). Another finding from

this study is that the adolescents examined viewed violence, surprise, and blood and gore as the top three types of scary content that elicited the use of coping strategies (Hoffner, 1995).

College studies. While the studies above demonstrate the more immediate effect that disturbing media content has on children and adolescents, there are also studies that have been conducted on the long-term effects that disturbing media viewed during childhood might have. Long-term effects of the media on children are prevalent due to the fact that observational learning and desensitization both occur because a brain is easily modifiable. A modifiable brain is a characteristic found in children, but not so much adults (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). In a study done by Harrison and Cantor (1999), college students were assessed on their current fears and origination of those fears from frightening mass media exposure in childhood or adolescence. Harrison and Cantor's hypothesis that younger children would have used behavior coping strategies at the time the exposure and older children would have used more cognitive coping strategies at the time of the exposure was proved true. This study is a seminal work in the field of media effects on children. It can be gathered from this study that younger children lack empathy skills, thus if they are exposed to certain elements, they will not be as affected as older children. This explains why movies viewed during childhood can have lingering negative emotional responses into college.

Cantor did a later study in 2004 that produced similar results on lingering effects of movies on college students. Ninety-one of the 530 self-report papers returned for the study focused on four particularly fear-arousing movies: *Jaws*, *Poltergeist*, *The Blair Witch Project*, and *Scream*. Thirty-one percent of the students who saw *Poltergeist* said that the behavioral effects that impacted them were still ongoing. Also, eighty-three percent of the students who wrote papers about seeing *Jaws* said that it produced life-changing effects for them. The question remains to be answered: Why did these movies cause lingering negative emotional responses for the viewers when they could be reassured that the content was

fiction? This article recognizes that there are “certain visual images, such as attacking animals and physical deformities” that automatically arouse fear, which correlates with Harrison and Cantor’s study (Cantor, 2004, p. 297). The reason college students and even adults may still become fearful after watching a movie is because the story that is watched, although unlikely, reminds them of existing threats in their own lives and in the world (Harrison & Cantor, 1999). According to appraisal theories, this is termed “personal relevance” as “a stimulus appraised as being more personally relevant will be more likely to lead to fear reactions than those not seen as relevant” (Riddle, 2012, p. 741). Postman argues that television has “made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience” (1985, p. 87).

From a psychological mental health perspective, Nader (2011) states: “Exposure to early-life stress has been associated with increased reactivity to stress and cognitive deficits in adulthood.” If this is true for real-life trauma, why would it not be true for the exposure to disturbing movie content?

Wilson (2008) states that no research has been conducted that directly targets the long-term effects of continuous exposure to media on emotional development. However, for their 1999 study using self-reports from 153 college students, Harrison and Cantor discovered that most fright reactions occurred during childhood or adolescence (the average age being 14.4 years old). Twenty-six point one percent of the participants in this survey still experienced residual fear or anxiety effects into their college years (when the study was performed).

For the study, the stimulus types described by the college students were categorized into five classes of phobia-producing stimuli: (1) animal, (2) environmental, (3) blood/injection/injury, (4) situational, (5) other, with 97.8% of students containing references to one or more of these stimuli. After coding the students’ responses to the survey, the most

frequently cited stimuli was blood/injection/injury. The greatest symptom reported as the result of a scary movie was the participant screaming or crying (Harrison & Cantor, 1999).

Unlike other studies examined in this literature review, sex was *not* a predictor of duration of the fright reaction, however age was. Harrison and Cantor found that the younger the participant was at exposure to the frightful content, the longer the symptoms persisted. Also, a child's accidental or unintentional viewing of a scary movie was directly correlated to longer persisting fright reactions (Harrison & Cantor, 1999).

Possible causes. What are possible causes of negative emotional responses to movies in college students? Cantor (2009) identifies three broad factors that contribute to lingering negative emotional responses to media: 1) realism of depiction, 2) motivation of the viewer, 3) excitation transfer.

Closely tied with realism of depiction is the principle of stimulus generalization, which Cantor believes to be a main correlation between frightening media content and negative emotional responses (1994). According to Harrison and Cantor (1999), stimulus generalization is described in the following manner: "If a real-life stimulus evokes a particular emotional response, media depicting the same stimulus will evoke a similar though less intense response" (p. 99). An article by Bushmann and Huesmann (2006) supports this principle of stimulus generalization with the idea that emotions developed from the media can influence behavior in social settings, even when the media is not present. In fact, if an individual is continuously exposed to arousing media content, habituation of the elicited emotional responses will likely occur. This habituation process is often termed desensitization, as an individual eventually adjusts to the content he/she is viewing and his/her emotional responses. This produces a numbing effect as the viewer is seemingly unaffected by what he/she is viewing (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006).

In an interesting case study by Kaplow et al. (2006), it was indicated that stress symptoms are not only triggered by the exact same stimuli, but also by stimuli that exhibits similar qualities to the original stimuli.

From these theories and discoveries, it can be gathered that the more realistic a movie portrayal is, the more likely it is to affect an individual. Similarly, the principle of classical conditioning reveals that “fear or anger can become linked with specific stimuli after only a few exposures” and these exposures can be either real or an observance from the media (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006, p. 349). Likewise, if a real life situation with a certain stimuli ended badly in the past and a student sees the same stimuli again, but this time in the media, chances are the student will process the stimuli in the same way that he/she processed it previously. This is because the information was stored in long-term memory (Sparks, 1986). Emotional events are more likely to be stored in long-term memory due to two cognitive factors: rehearsal and memory vividness (Brown & Kulik, 1977; Riddle, 2012). According to Riddle (2012), rehearsal is defined as “the degree to which individuals elaborate on a prior event by replaying that event repeatedly in memory” (p. 742). So not only do stimuli exposure and repetition come into play, but also the rehearsal of the stimuli and the vividness with which it is remembered.

In fact, in their study, Sparks, Spirek and Hodgson (1993) found that almost fifty percent of the college students (who had exposure during childhood) that participated in their study showed “various kinds of enduring emotional reactions to frightening mass media,” which included nervousness after viewing, sleep trouble, avoidance of viewing, and fear to go in rooms (p. 470).

The role of a person's past experiences is key to how he/she processes media content (Sparks, 1986). In addition, in an account from Hadley Cantril's qualitative study (1940) post-*The War of the Worlds* radio broadcast, one college student reported: “The mention of

towns along the highways with names that we knew, and the names of hospitals we knew, seemed so real” (p. 52). Once again, the realism of depiction results in a negative emotional response.

The second point that Cantor (2009) identifies is the motivation of the viewer. Movie viewers seek movies in order to obtain a certain experience, and these experiences vary. In *The Invasion from Mars* (1940), Cantril studies the responses of audiences to the 1938 Orson Welles radio broadcast *The War of the Worlds*. One conclusion in studying the variety of person types who tuned into the radio broadcast was that some people do seek the thrill of disaster as a means to escape into another reality, particularly those who suffer deeply and want to compensate for their problems (Cantril, 1940). By engaging with thrilling media content, these thrill-seeking audience members are able to live vicariously through thrilling media to enjoy pleasure without risk (Cantril, 1940).

Those who enjoy horror movies have different cognitive evaluation of the content after it has been activated with long-term memory than those who do not enjoy movies with disturbing content (Sparks, 1986). In a study performed by Mares, Oliver, and Cantor (2008), 167 college students along with 206 other participants over the age of 25 took part in the research. From the questionnaires used for the study, it was concluded, “dark or frightening film content may serve emotional needs associated with certain life stages” (p. 503). The issue with this study, along with many other analyses involving self-reports, is that the individuals’ stated motives and preferences may not be accurate due to his/her unconscious desires (Mares, Oliver, and Cantor, 2008).

Cantor’s final factor is the theory of excitation transfer. This idea claims that an individual can have more severe or impacting negative emotional responses if he/she is previously aroused before watching an exciting or disturbing scene from a movie or TV show. The first arousal feelings are termed “arousal residue.” With excitation transfer, the

arousal residue combines with the new arousal experienced from the movie to produce a strong emotional reaction in the individual. The two-arousal incidents may have nothing to do with each other (Zillman, 1978; Cantor, Zillman, & Bryant, 1975; Cantor, Zillman, & Mody, 1974).

In support of Cantor's multifactorial approach to negative emotional responses, Cantril (1940) has also concluded that there are not just one, but several causes that join to affect an individual with a negative emotional response. Some of these include gender, critical ability, and personality.

Paralleling the findings of Hoffner (1995), in a study performed by Sparks (1989) college females showed greater fright responses to media exposure than did college males. There are two reasons why females may have more negative responses to the media. The first is that victims of intense media content are often females, thus if females watch this content, and have a higher empathy with these female characters, they are likely to exhibit increased fright responses. The second reason could be that males are socialized to act tough and conceal their emotion, which, as a result, would lead to low admittance that media is causing them distress (Sparks, 1989). An additional study performed by Sparks et al. (1993) revealed the same data: that females report more enduring emotional responses than do males. These conclusions match those of Hoffner (1995), alluding to the fact that girls and boys don't change in the way they process disturbing film content from adolescence into young adulthood.

Similar to the way in which Hoffner discovered adolescents to process media content, in their study, Sparks et al. (1993) focused on the way in which the activation-arousal theory affects college students processing of media content. Sparks et al. (1993) found that college students who were high blunters/low monitors faced lower physiological arousal to a distressing scene from a horror film than the opposite (high monitors/low blunters). Sparks

and Spirek (1988) argued that this is because the high blunders sought distraction from the film and thus did not engage as fully as the high monitors, who sought out every detail.

Another factor to take note of is critical ability. Cantril (1940) discovered that those people who detected that something was incorrect or “off” with the *War of the Worlds* broadcast could be categorized as having “critical ability.” This means “they had a capacity to evaluate the stimulus in such a way that they were able to understand its inherent characteristics so they could judge and act appropriately” (Cantril, 1949, p. 111-112). However, critical ability alone is not a 100% deterrent to panic (Cantril, 1940). McLuhan states that it is the job of the filmmaker to take the viewers from one world, the real world, into another world, that of the movie. The filmmaker does this so completely and effectively that the audience “accepts it subliminally and without critical awareness” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 249).

One could argue that personal capacity or traits cause a person to be more susceptible to media effects, however, personality is not a uniform factor. Anxiety is multifaceted, caused by multiple variables (Izard, 1977, p. 93). As Cantril (1940) points out, you cannot expect introverts (for example) to all respond with the same negative emotional responses: “their introspections might lead them to be either more independent in their judgments or more sensitive to impending dangers” (p. 129). More accurately, Cantril (2009) concluded:

From analysis of our data it seemed that the general characteristic of personality that made people vulnerable to the broadcast was what we might call susceptibility-to-suggestion-when-facing-a-dangerous-situation. The word “susceptibility” must be so qualified if it is to carry the exact meaning intended. A single word is inadequate. This susceptibility we should expect to be due to complex interaction between the unique

temperaments of single individuals and their equally unique environmental backgrounds. (p. 130)

It can be drawn from Cantril's study in response to the *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast that people of all different backgrounds experience panic as a result of the media (1940).

The purpose of this thesis is to discover the types of media that cause negative emotional responses in college students. As Johnson (1980) acknowledges: "...it is one thing to walk away from a frightening or disturbing event with a mild residue of the images and quite another thing to ruminate about it, feel anxious or depressed for days, and/or to avoid anything that might create the same unpleasant experience" (p. 786). The following chapters will explore the lingering negative emotional responses of college students who have experienced the latter reaction that Johnson described.

Chapter 3: Method

It is too general to assume that an entire population reacts to a movie in the same way, because “any test of a personal capacity or trait assumes that it is found in all members of the population and that its variation is quantitative but not qualitative” (Cantril, 1940, p. 129). By simply measuring with quantitative studies, researchers miss the variety of variables that contribute to affect a person’s emotions negatively. This in-depth study will evaluate the lingering negative emotional responses of students at a private Christian university to movies viewed during college.

For the purpose of the study, a lingering negative emotional response should be understood to mean the following: any emotion or feeling that alters a person’s thinking, perception or life in a negative way after watching a movie. It could be a response symptom that reoccurs daily or is just triggered periodically after seeing or experiencing an association to the disturbing movie content. Any response that persists past the viewing of the movie for any extent of time would be considered a lingering negative emotional response.

Hypotheses

- *Research Question 1:* What disturbing movie content or elements cause lingering negative emotional responses for college students?
- *Hypothesis 1:* It is predicted that personally relevant content will have caused the most lingering responses. Specific elements include: blood, injection, or injury.
- *Research Question 2:* What lingering negative emotional responses do college students experience?
- *Hypothesis 2:* It is hypothesized that college students will have experienced fear, anxiety, nightmares, screaming and crying in response to disturbing movie content.
- *Research Question 3:* What triggers a negative emotional response to re-emerge?

- *Hypothesis 3*: It is predicted that any stimulus that correlates to the stimulus viewed in the movie that caused the lingering negative emotional response will trigger a negative emotional response. The trigger stimulus could be viewed in the same movie, a different movie, or a real life experience based on the principle of stimulus generalization.
- *Research Question 4*: Is there a difference between communication students' lingering negative emotional responses and those of students of other disciplines?
- *Hypothesis 4*: It is hypothesized that communication students will be more desensitized to disturbing movie content than students of other disciplines. Thus, the lingering negative emotional responses of communication students will be shorter and less intense than those of other disciplines.

Participants

Students enrolled in the classes Introduction to Psychology, Survey of Christian Theology, Leadership Theories and Practices, Mass Communication Law, and New Technology at Southeastern University in Lakeland, FL participated in a preliminary survey. These classes were selected due to their variation in discipline and subject matter. One investigator contacted the professors of each class in advance to request ten minutes of class time. On the day the survey was conducted, the investigator arrived to the class and briefed the students on the research study. Students were not given a definition as to what a negative emotional response is so that their responses to the survey would not be limited and their thinking restricted. The students were then asked to complete the simple, paper survey regarding their lingering negative emotional responses. The surveys were distributed and collected during the allotted class time. Every student present in each class participated in the survey.

In total, there were 145 college students who completed the anonymous eight-question survey (refer to Appendix A). Of these 145 students, 141 students were between the ages of 18 and 25.

The eleven students who provided their contact information on the survey were first e-mailed and requested to participate in a focus group to discuss their lingering negative emotional responses. Due to lack of reply to the e-mail, the scheduled focus group was cancelled and rescheduled for a later date. An additional three students were e-mailed and requested to participate in the focus group. In the e-mails that all 14 requested participants received, the informed consent (refer to Appendix B) was attached in order to give them details and information of what would be expected of them.

The goal for the focus group was six to eight participants. After e-mailing students and coordinating schedules, four students agreed to participate in the focus group. In order to do a comparison between the lingering negative emotional responses of communication students to those of other college disciplines, two communication students and two other discipline students were selected to participate. Participant A was a 22-year-old senior Organization Leadership major; participant B was a 20-year-old freshman Communication major; participant C was a 23-year-old senior Communication major; and participant D was a 21-year-old senior with business concentration. All participants were females.

Procedure

The focus group for this study was held on a Thursday morning at 9:00 am in March 2014. The test room was arranged with tables in a large circle. Upon arrival to the focus group, the four student participants were asked to sign the informed consent (Appendix B). If a student did not feel comfortable with the methodology or purposes of the study outlined in the consent form, he/she could forgo signing the informed consent and excuse his/herself from the focus group. All four students signed the informed consent.

Students were then asked to sit at a chair in the circle with all four students facing one another. One of the investigators for the study joined the circle. The other investigator sat outside the circle off to the side as a non-participant to ensure quality of the session and provide notes for clarification. Three recording devices were turned on in order to record the entire focus group. In an effort to allow students more comfort with one another, students were asked to give a brief introduction about themselves, including: name, year, major, and what brought the students to the college. An outline of the focus group is provided in Appendix C.

After detailing the purpose and expectations of the study and focus group, the investigators asked the participants how they would define a negative emotional response. Students were then prompted to verbally answer to the following open-ended questions:

- When did you watch the movie(s) that gave you a lingering negative emotional response? If there were several, then please clarify that in your answer.
- What movie(s) did you view?
- Where were you and who was with you when you viewed the movie(s)?
- What content made the movie disturbing and caused your lingering negative emotional response? Please describe.
- What was/is the nature of your lingering negative emotional response?
- Does your negative emotional response linger or re-emerge to this day? If so, what causes it to re-emerge? Is there a trigger?

After a question was asked, each student would take a turn answering the question. Though the students answered in order from participant A to D, students were given freedom to interject and engage in a discussion if they so desired.

When all students had given their responses to each question, the students were

dismissed. As the participants were leaving, cards with information for the college-counseling center were distributed, should a participant have any adverse responses to the content discussed in the focus group.

As mentioned above, the focus group session was recorded using three recording devices (one primary and two back-up). Replay of these recordings was the primary method of determining results. It should be noted that a video camera was not used to record due to the highly emotional nature of the content being discussed. It was believed that participants would feel more comfort and display more vulnerability in recounting their experiences if they did not have to worry about a camera in their faces. All recordings were kept private after the focus group.

Chapter 4: Results

Preliminary Survey

Out of the 145 college students (ages 18-25+) who completed the preliminary survey, 85 students responded that they had had a lingering negative emotional response to a movie seen during their childhood and/or teen years. Eight students said that they had a lingering negative emotional response to a movie seen during teen and/or college years. Twenty students marked that they only had a lingering negative emotional response during college. Finally, 19 students indicated that they have had a lingering negative emotional response in all three stages of childhood, teen years, and college. Thirteen students indicated that they had never had a lingering negative emotional response. (Please refer to Appendix D).

Background Information

The first question students were asked was to define a negative emotional response. When asked, participant B stated: "It [the negative emotional response] would change how I do normal things...when you walk away from it [the movie] you are still paranoid with what you saw." Participant C shared: "I walk away from it [the movie] finding that I'm fearful and...feel like I constantly have to be looking over my shoulder." Participant D described a negative emotional response saying "I'd have a lot of anxiety...and think that something's going to happen to me like it happened in the movie...I'll also have dreams."

When asked what movies caused them negative emotional responses, the four participants referenced the following: *Contagion*, *Final Destination*, *Taken 1*, *Taken 2*, *House at the End of the Street*, *I am Legend*, *When a Stranger Calls*, and *Insidious*. It should be noted that all participants mentioned the *Taken* movies.

When questioned about when they viewed the movies that caused their lingering negative emotional responses, the participants said the following: one to two years ago

(participant A); two to three years ago and three months ago (participant B); two years ago and five years ago (participant C); one to two years ago (participant D).

When asked about where and with whom the movie was viewed, these were the respondents' replies. Participant A said that she watched *Final Destination* by herself in the middle of the day; *Contagion* was watched with her sister at a movie theater; and she saw *Taken* on an airplane. Participant B saw *Taken 1* at home with her family; *Taken 2* in a movie theater with her boyfriend, and *The House at the End of the Street* at night with sister at home before bed. Participant C watched *I am Legend* with a friend at her house; and saw *Taken 1* at a movie theater. Participant D viewed *Insidious* at home with a friend who had convinced her to watch it.

Types of Disturbing Content

Following background information, participants explained the types of disturbing movie content that have given them lingering negative emotional responses. The most stated content participants mentioned was content associated to real life, as well as personally relevant content. Participant A stated that the "real aspect" of the movies is what caused her negative emotional response, the fact that the "content was applicable to real life." Similarly, participant B responded to the question saying: "When you see in a movie something...actually happen that you kind of deal with on a daily basis, like traveling or babysitting, when you see the bad things that could happen, it makes me really anxious." After viewing *I am Legend*, participant C was reminded that the world will come to an end someday, a reality demonstrated in the movie, which put fear in her. Likewise when watching *Taken*, participant C was reminded "human trafficking is so huge, even in the U.S." With this being a real life issue, she herself feels like a potential victim. Finally, the disturbing movie content that has caused lingering negative emotional responses for participant D is content related to demonic possession and "crazy spirit stuff," which she recognizes as "very real."

According to participant D, these are issues not to be played around with. In addition, the scenarios presented in *When a Stranger Calls* proved to be disturbing because she was a babysitter at the time of the viewing the movie. Because *When a Stranger Calls* focuses on a scary babysitting account, participant D found the movie to “parallel” her life.

Hypothesis #1 predicted that personally relevant content will have caused the most lingering responses. Specific elements include: blood, injection, or injury. This was partly proved true. Yes, personally relevant, real life content caused the most lingering negative emotional responses. However, not one participant referenced blood or injection. The word “injury” was not specifically used, but it was alluded to.

Lingering Negative Emotional Responses

When asked about their lingering negative emotional responses, the participants each told their experiences. Immediately after viewing *Contagion*, participant A said that she didn't want to touch anything due to the spread of disease that happened in the movie. Although she hasn't seen *When a Stranger Calls*, seeing previews for the movie has given her fear. Now, when she babysits, she will avoid sleeping alone. If the children's parents offer her a guest bedroom, she will forego it and sleep on the floor in the children's room, so that she does not have to sleep alone. *Taken* has made her “very much aware at the airport or just in general” and she said that it “makes me think a lot of people are shady even if they're not...” The *Final Destination* movies have made her cautious when driving. For example: “When I'm on the highway and I'm passing a semi...” She said she thinks of different possibilities of what could happen based on what she saw in the movie. She is “not terrified,” but nervous.

Next, participant B recounted her lingering negative emotional responses. The *Final Destination* movies have made her practice avoidance. Following her viewing of *Taken*, she said she doesn't feel safe around people – especially men. In the movie, the man who

performed the kidnapping seemed “normal,” so “you weren’t expecting it,” she said. As a result, she doesn’t like to be alone anytime, especially at night and does not like traveling alone. Viewing *The House at the End of the Street*, has only contributed to this fear of being alone, home alone. She said she can do it, but the fear is always in the back of her mind. She described herself as feeling “on-edge” and said the effects are “exhausting.” The distrust of men was also experienced after participant B watched *The House at the End of the Street*.

Like *Taken*, the man seemed nice, but turned out to be deceitful. She said:

You know it’s [the negative emotional response] from the movie, because when you are in that situation, you’ll think back to the scene...that’s how I know it’s not an irrational fear or a fear that I’ve come up with. When I’m traveling by myself, I think about how she [the main character in *Taken*] got off the plane and went right into the car and he followed her...or like when I’m babysitting I think to how he was right in the house. It’s not like I’m coming up with these thoughts on my own. It’s like you’re actually remembering the scene in the movie and how simple it was and so that causes even more fear. Having to actually see it freaks me out...

Moving on to participant C, she said that she had an irrational fear of someone sneaking in her house and taking her since childhood, so watching *Taken* made the fear return. Her negative emotional response to *Taken* has lingered to this day. In reference to the movie, she said that it “causes me to put up a wall...if I’m traveling by plane I don’t talk to anyone. I keep to myself because I don’t want to be naïve.” Furthermore, she said that she has dreams that people are chasing her and will do anything to take her. The feelings from those dreams will linger for up to a week’s time. She said that she knows it is contributed to the movie. “It [the dream] messes with me,” she said.

Participant D said her greatest lingering negative emotional response is anxiety. After watching *When a Stranger Calls*, she stopped babysitting for a while because of the anxiety

and fear that resulted from the movie. Now, two years later, she still suffers from lingering negative emotions to the movie. Anytime she is in her house alone at night, she “takes every precaution” because she is so anxious. Twice she has woken up in the middle of the night from deep sleep with intense anxiety. Lying in bed “paralyzed,” she then goes to the garage, retrieves a baseball bat, and walks around her house praying. This fear and anxiety of being home alone still persists. While describing her experience, she said that she is already thinking to the future and how she does not want to stay home alone when her parents are out of town this summer. She said she will probably get a hotel room instead to avoid the fear and anxiety of being alone.

After she viewed *Insidious*, participant D said that any previews that seem demonic cause her anxiety and make her want to pray. Many times she does start praying. Her lingering negative emotional responses to *Insidious* include: anxiety, racing heart, and nightmares. The night before the focus group, participant D had a nightmare that “everyone was dying.” While describing the dream in the focus group, she started crying remembering the trauma of the dream. She speculated that the dream was the result of a conversation about her experience with *Insidious* she had had with a friend the day prior. She said that even conversations regarding scary movies elicit anxiety and sometimes make her cry as she is brought back to the negative emotions she experienced while watching and after watching *Insidious*.

Hypothesis #2 predicted that college students will have experienced fear, anxiety, nightmares, screaming and crying in response to disturbing movie content. All of these conjectures were verified by the focus group, making the hypothesis true. In addition, all participants mentioned fear or discomfort of being alone. Another common denominator between several participants was distrust of men.

Triggers for Reemerging Negative Emotional Responses

When asked what triggers her lingering negative emotional responses, Participant A said that hers are triggered when someone else is talking about the movies that have given her lingering negative emotions. Also, she said that when someone has a freak accident, she thinks of scenes in the movies. When there is a world epidemic, participant A said that it brings her back to the possibility of what happened in *Contagion*.

Participant B said that her lingering negative emotional responses are triggered when she experiences what happened in the movie. For example, a month prior to the focus group, participant B flew home from college and felt fear as she waited in the security line at the airport. She recognizes that she is not a strong person and would not be able to defend herself, and thus has a fear that someone will take her. "It's almost become a habit," she said. *Taken* is a real issue and thus elicits very real real-life responses.

Participant C said she still thinks about the events in *Taken*. They re-emerge to the "forefront of my mind" when she has to travel somewhere. While these thoughts do not completely "cripple" her, they do bother her when she is "miles away from home," traveling.

Participant D attributes the re-emergence of her negative emotional responses to scary movie previews. Seeing a scary movie preview causes her anxiety. In addition, even conversations about scary movies give her negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, nightmares, and crying.

Hypothesis #3 predicted that any stimulus that correlates to the stimulus viewed in the movie that caused the lingering negative emotional response will trigger a negative emotional response. The trigger stimulus could be viewed in the same movie, a different movie, or a real life experience based on the principle of stimulus generalization. This hypothesis was also verified and proved true. All participants' negative emotional responses were triggered by seeing or experiencing what they previously viewed in the movies.

Comparison: Communication Students v. Other Discipline Students

Hypothesis #4 presumed that communication students would be more desensitized to disturbing movie content than students of other disciplines. Thus, the lingering negative emotional responses of communication students will be shorter and less intense than those of other disciplines. This hypothesis was proved false. There appeared to be no difference between communication students' responses and the responses of the students of the other two disciplines represented. Lingering negative emotional responses were even and consistent across the board, all continuing to persist years after viewing the movies.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Limitations of the Present Study

Due to the fact that only two males identified themselves as such on the initial survey stating that they had a negative emotional response to a movie in college, it is difficult to make an accurate judgment or comparison between males' and females' responses to movies. More males may have had a lingering negative emotional response to a movie viewed during college, but because they did not provide their contact information on the survey, there is no way of recording that. Thus, there is a limitation in the analysis as only females participated in the focus group. The lack of response on the part of the male college students could further confirm the findings of previous research regarding male and female responses to movies.

The findings indicate, as expounded upon in Chapter 2, that males are socialized to conceal their negative emotions as to maintain a "manly" facade. Females, on the other hand, express their negative emotional responses to movies and have more of these responses because females empathize with the female victims (Hoffner, 1995; Sparks, 1989; Sparks et al., 1993). This thesis affirms this idea as each of the movies referenced had a female victim with which the focus group participants could relate to. In the future it would make for a more complete study to have a more balanced pool of participants.

In addition, it was anticipated that distributing the preliminary survey would yield more students with willingness to participate in the focus group. However, this was not the case, making it difficult to plan and conduct the focus group with the desired number and variety of participants. In the future, more classes should be surveyed in order to gain a better ratio of students to contact for the focus group, and then as a result participate in the focus group. However, for the purpose of this study, the results yielded were consistent with previous research. The four focus group participants were between the ages of 20 to 23,

which gives a good representation of the college ages. More of a variety could be examined in the future.

Conclusions and Future Prospects

It should be noted that all movies referenced by the focus group participants for this study were rated "PG-13" or "R." More specifically, *Contagion*, *Taken 1*, *Taken 2*, *House at the End of the Street*, *I am Legend*, *When a Stranger Calls*, and *Insidious* are all rated PG-13. *Final Destination* is the only movie rated "R." Thus, movies do not need to be labeled as a "horror" movie to cause lingering negative emotional responses in college students.

While there were not specific movie elements per say that caused the students' lingering negative emotional responses, it can be affirmed that movie content that parallels real life situations causes a lingering negative emotional response in college females. This is because college females find the content to be personally relevant to their own lives, such as a human trafficking kidnapping as evidenced in the movie *Taken*. As a result of these real life scenarios portrayed in movies, college females may experience nightmares, crying, fear, nervousness, anxiety, distrust, and/or practice avoidance of certain situations. These symptoms are triggered and re-emerge by conversations relating to the movie with the disturbing content, other movie previews with seemingly disturbing content, or real-life day-to-day experiences that remind the viewer of the movie seen in the past. This thesis affirms the principle of stimulus generalization. Negative emotional responses were triggered by seeing or experiencing stimuli that corresponded to the movie that they had previously viewed. While there were no differences between the two communication students' experiences and the experiences of the organizational leadership and business major who participated in this study, further research should be done on the lingering negative emotional responses of communication students who have a concentration in film. The two communication students were studying general communication, which could yield different

conclusions than that of students studying film. It would be interesting to evaluate if college communication students with a concentration in film have been desensitized by all of the disturbing content that they have viewed.

It should be recognized that due to time and resource constraints, there were restrictions on the breadth and depth of this research effort. Because of this, the observations from this study may not be sufficient evidence to reach valid conclusions. Research must be continued in order to provide a complete understanding of the lingering effects of disturbing movie content viewed during college. In addition, this research can be a reference point for future, more inclusive studies regarding a larger population of college students who experience lingering negative emotional responses.

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Appendix A**SURVEY: Negative Emotional Responses to Movies**

Please circle your answer.

1. Have you watched any movies that have caused you to experience a negative emotional response of any kind?

Yes No

2. How old were you?

Child (1-12 years) Teen (13-17 years) In college (18-24 years)

3. Do you still experience negative emotional feelings as a result of viewing a movie?

Yes No

4. If no, how long did the negative emotional responses last after viewing the movie?

5. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group (an open discussion with a small group of students) regarding your negative emotional responses to movies?

Yes No

5. If yes, please provide the following information:

Name: _____

E-mail: _____

(If you are selected for the focus group, you will be e-mailed.)

6. What year are you at Southeastern?

Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

7. How old are you?

18-19 20-21 22-23 24-25

Appendix B

Negative Emotional Responses to Movies: Focus Group Informed Consent

Title of Project: College Students' Negative Emotional Responses to Movies

Responsible Principal Investigator: Dr. Robert Scott

Other Investigator(s): Brianna Kuck

Purpose of the Study: The objective of this study is to determine what types of disturbing movie content cause lingering negative emotional responses in college students.

Procedures to be followed: As a participant, you will be asked to share your negative emotional responses to a movie that you have previously viewed. You will be asked various questions regarding your media experiences as well as listen to others' similar fear responses to disturbing film content. The focus group is intended to last no longer than 1 hour.

Discomforts and Risks: Potential risks include psychological disturbance and discomfort in reflecting on traumatic personal experiences that resulted from disturbing movie exposure, as well as possible traumatization or distress from hearing other focus group members' experiences.

Benefits: This study may allow you the realization that you are not alone in experiencing fear as a response to viewing a film. Further than that, this study will provide greater clarity to the psychology community as well as the communication field as to the kinds of disturbing film content cause lingering negative emotional responses in college students. While there has been quantitative research done regarding this issue, very little qualitative research has been done.

Statement of Confidentiality: All personal information and experiences discussed in this focus group will remain locked in a cabinet in Dr. Scott's office after they are discussed in this focus group setting. When analyzing your experiences during the writing process, names will be coded in an effort to maintain privacy. No name will be used in any published information, and names will only be viewed by Dr. Robert Scott and Brianna Kuck (the two investigators present for this focus group). The contents and discoveries from this focus group will be included in a Thesis paper for the Southeastern University Honors Program, which may later be published as an academic article. However, as mentioned above, confidentiality will be maintained with no identity exposed in the paper.

Whom to contact: Please call or e-mail Dr. Robert Scott at 863-667-5208 or roscott@seu.edu with any questions, or concerns about the research. You may also call Dr. Robert Scott if you feel you have been injured or harmed by this research. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the SEU Institutional Review Board at 863-667-5097 or via email at pbleblanc@seu.edu.

Voluntariness: Participation in this study is voluntary and you, as the participant, may discontinue at anytime. The decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your grades at, status at, or future relations with Southeastern University.

Dissemination: The research results will be disseminated by way of Honors Thesis paper for the Honors Program at Southeastern University in Spring 2014. It will be read by various faculty, staff, and students. The thesis may also be published as an academic article in the future, as well.

Signature of Consent:

I am 18 years of age or older.

I have read and understand the above consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I have been given a copy of this consent form for my records.

Participant Signature

Date

Print Name

Appendix C

College Students' Lingering Negative Emotional Responses To Recently Viewed Movies

Focus Group

March 13, 2014

9:00 am, A204

(Have students sign informed consent upon walking through the door)

- Introductions & Ice breakers
 - Name, Year, Age, Major, What brought you to SEU? (1-2 mins each)

- Orientation
 - Everything will be recorded
 - All information will be kept private
 - Each person in room was selected based on responses to the survey he/she completed; his/her lingering negative emotional responses to a movie seen during college.
 - Purpose of the study:
 - Identify what types of disturbing movie content cause lingering negative emotional responses in college students.
 - There has been research done on the lingering response to a movie seen during childhood or adolescence but not to a movie viewed during college.
 - What I am hoping to gain from the focus group:
 - What disturbing movie content or elements cause lingering negative emotional responses for a college student
 - What lingering negative emotional responses college students experience
 - What causes a negative emotional response to re-emerge
 - Is there a difference between communication students' lingering negative emotional responses and that of students of other disciplines?
 - Value of a focus group:
 - Small environment
 - There have been quantitative studies done, but not qualitative studies
 - Depth of experiences can be documented
 - Opportunity to discuss experiences and realize you are not alone
 - In talking about the movies you have seen, the memories and negative emotional responses previously experienced may return; don't be afraid. If it is too much to bear, you may excuse yourself. We also have information for the SEU counseling center.
 - Lingering: any negative emotional response that lasts past the time of viewing a movie.
 - Define negative emotional response (list from other studies)
 - (Go around and have each person define what they think a negative emotional response is)

- Analysis Questions

1. When did you watch the movie(s) that gave you a lingering negative emotional response? If there were several, then please clarify that in your answer.

2. What movie(s) did you view?

3. Where were you and who was with you when you viewed the movie(s)?

4. What content made the movie disturbing and caused your lingering negative emotional response? Please describe.

5. What was/is the nature of your lingering negative emotional response?

6. Does your negative emotional response linger or re-emerge to this day?

->What causes it to reemerge? Is there a trigger?

- Conclusion

---Wrap up

---Business cards for counseling center

Appendix D

**Survey Data of 145 College Students'
Negative Emotional Responses to Movies**