

# *The relationship between emotional experience and attachment in horror films: the moderating effect of gender*

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**Abstract:** This study aims to explore the relationship between college students' emotional experience when watching horror films and their attachment in the context of Chinese culture, and to examine whether gender plays a moderating role in this relationship. The research method adopted a questionnaire survey approach, Emotional Experience of Horror Films Questionnaire for College Students and the College Students' Attachment Scale. A random sample of 400 college students was used to measure their attachment and emotional experience of horror films. The results show that: (1) college students' emotional experience of horror films, the closeness dimension of attachment, and gender are negative correlated; (2) gender plays a moderating role in the relationship between emotional experience of horror films and attachment, men enjoy horror films more than women. This study reveals the impact of attachment on the emotional experience of horror films, and proposes that gender plays a key role as a key factor, which provides important significance for future horror films to be used for emotional regulation or psychological intervention.

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid development of society, people are facing increasing pressure and negative emotions. To cope with these pressures, some people choose special stress reduction methods, such as watching horror films, and regard it as an effective means of emotional regulation. Horror films provide the audience with a fictional fantasy space-time by defamiliarizing reality, which helps to release the suppressed impulses and thus alleviate the anxiety of reality <sup>[1]</sup>. Watching horror films can elicit positive emotions of excitement and pleasure <sup>[2]</sup>. Studies have also found that the neural activity during the viewing of horror movies enhances the pleasure derived from watching them <sup>[3]</sup>. Furthermore, horror movie enthusiasts exhibit greater psychological resilience and practice effective coping strategies for survival <sup>[4]</sup>. At present, some psychologists have applied it to psychological decompression abroad, but Stefan E (2003) also pointed out that although film is a common form of entertainment and is enhancing its availability, it is not suitable for psychological intervention for everyone <sup>[5]</sup>. After watching horror movies, emotions and cognition can be affected to some extent, with some individuals experiencing hallucinations, feeling frightened, and some

even having their sleep and normal life impacted. Surveys conducted by researchers from different countries have found that empathy, emotional state, preferences, morbid curiosity, gender, and other factors influence individuals' emotional experiences with horror movies <sup>[6]</sup> <sup>[7]</sup>. Although horror movies have garnered attention as a means of emotion regulation, the emotional experience with horror movies can be influenced by various factors.

Attachment refers to the long-term, continuous and relatively stable emotional connection to a specific individual, which guides emotions, moods, cognition, and behaviors. It constructs the connection between interpersonal behaviors, emotional bond and intimate relationships. Due to differences in attachment motivations, individuals with different attachment styles adopt different emotional regulation strategies when faced with stimuli <sup>[8]</sup>, and also provide emotion regulation strategies in the context of security threats, so that the negative emotions of tension can be regulated and alleviated. Some researchers believe that attachment theory is essentially a theory of emotional regulation. Individuals with different attachment styles differ in their preferences for emotional regulation strategies and the effectiveness of regulation, and individual differences related to attachment are also reflected in a series of cognitive processing related to emotions, such as emotional awareness, emotional recognition, emotional attention, and emotional memory <sup>[9]</sup> <sup>[10]</sup>. Individuals with insecure attachment relationships, their internal working models promote depressive and negative beliefs about themselves and others, leading to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and the belief that they will be rejected by others. This internal working model may also affect the physiological functions of emotional regulation and emotional expression <sup>[11]</sup>.

At present, China's research on the emotional experience of horror films has almost just started, and its research on attachment relationship still needs further exploration. Studies abroad have found that women enjoy horror films significantly less than boys, and there are gender differences <sup>[12]</sup><sup>[13]</sup>, which may be influenced by social culture.

In summary, this study incorporates gender as a moderating variable and proposes the following research hypotheses: emotional experience of watching horror films is related to attachment (H1); gender plays a moderating role in the impact of attachment on the emotional experience of horror films(H2).

## **2. Research Methods**

### **2.1 Subject**

The research subjects were college students aged 18-20. Samples were collected from four universities, with 100 students from each. By distributing questionnaires on-site. 400 college students were selected as research subjects, 400 questionnaires were distributed, and a total of 341 valid questionnaires were obtained, with an effective recovery rate of. Among them, there were 153 males and 188 females.

### **2.2 Research Tools**

#### **2.2.1 Emotional Experience of Horror Films Questionnaire**

The Emotional Experience of Horror Films Questionnaire revised by Ge Ying and Chen Xiangyi (2010), Chongqing University of Arts and Sciences. The questionnaire consists of 32 questions, which are divided into six dimensions: space scene, character shaping, sound control, expression technique, ending arrangement and suspense setting. The internal consistency coefficient of each dimension is between 0.458-0.822, the split-half reliability is between 0.478-0.794, the retest reliability is between 0.423-0.724, and the overall internal consistency coefficient is 0.842.

According to the total score, it is divided into positive experience and negative experience. The higher the score on the questionnaire, the more positive the emotional experience of the horror film. The questionnaire has good reliability and validity and can be used as a test tool.

### 2.2.2 College Students ' Attachment Scale

The College Students ' Attachment Scale is compiled by Jin Yan of Jiangxi Normal University. The questionnaire is based on the ECR-R attachment questionnaire and revised according to the actual situation of college students ' attachment in China <sup>[14]</sup>. It has 30 items, including two dimensions: proximity and anxiety. According to the scores of the two dimensions, the attachment is divided into four types: security, obsession, fear and indifference. Cronbach a coefficient was used to estimate the consistency reliability of the scale, and the reliability coefficient of the anxiety subscale was 0.940. The reliability coefficient of the close subscale is 0.886, and the correlation between the item and the factor is between 0.362 and 0.710, which can provide satisfactory reliability. The correlation coefficient between intimacy factor and interpersonal sensitivity subscale of SCL-90 was 0.598. The correlation coefficient between anxiety factor and anxiety subscale in SCL-90 was 0.746, which provided satisfactory validity.

### 2.3 Research Procedure and Data Processing

The main test was conducted by a graduate student of psychology who had undergone rigorous training in advance. The test was administered on the campus of the participants. The Emotional Experience of Horror Films Questionnaire used a 5-point scoring system, while the College Students' Attachment Scale adopted a 7-point scoring format. All data were entered into SPSS 27.0 for processing and analysis. The mean values of the three variables-emotional experience of horror movies, attachment closeness dimension, and attachment anxiety dimension were calculated separately, and these calculated mean values were used for data analysis.

## 3. Study Results

The correlation analysis results of the variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation analysis of variables

Variable	Emotional Experience	Gender	Anxiety attachment
Proximity attachment	-0.154**	0.238***	0.460***
Anxiety attachment	0.095	-0.008	
Gender	-0.385***		

\*\* P<.01; \*\*\* P<.001

There is a significant negative correlation between emotional experience scores and the proximity dimension of attachment, as well as gender, while the correlation with the anxiety dimension is not significant. The table reveals that gender has a significant correlation with both the proximity dimension of attachment and emotional experience scores. (See Table 1)

Table 2: Analysis of gender regulation

Dependent variable	Steps into the regression equation	B	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F
Emotional Experience	Step1	0.185	0.148		58.830***
	Proximity attachment				
	Anxiety attachment				
	Gender				
	Step2	-0.086	0.169	0.021	32.249***
	Proximity attachment and Gender				
	Anxiety attachment and Gender				
Dependent variable	Steps into the regression equation	B	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F
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	Proximity attachment and Gender				
	Anxiety attachment and Gender				

Wen Zhonglin definition of a moderator variable is as follows: If the relationship between variable Y and variable X is a function of variable M, then M is referred to as a moderator variable. That is, the relationship between Y and X is influenced by a third variable M. A moderator variable can be qualitative (such as gender, race, type of school, etc.) or quantitative (such as age, years of education, number of stimuli, etc.). It affects the direction (positive or negative) and strength of the relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variable <sup>[15]</sup>. In this paper, gender is discussed as a qualitative moderator variable.

According to the testing procedure for moderation effects, we first calculated the interaction terms between the two dimensions of attachment and gender, and then used hierarchical regression to examine the moderating effect of gender. In the first step of the regression analysis, the two dimensions of attachment and gender were introduced. In the second step, the interaction term between the closeness dimension and gender, and the interaction term between the anxiety dimension and gender were introduced. The interaction terms between the two dimensions of attachment and gender have a significant positive predictive effect on the emotional experience of psychological horror films. The R<sup>2</sup> change is 0.021, the F-value is 32.249, and  $p < 0.00$ , indicating that gender has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between attachment and the emotional experience of psychological horror films. (See Table 2)

To more clearly reveal the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between attachment and emotional experience, we first grouped the participants based on their scores on the proximity and anxiety dimensions of attachment, and then selected the top 27% of participants with the highest total scores on each dimension as the high-score group and the bottom 27% with the lowest total scores as the low-score group. The results of the simple effects analysis show that, regardless of whether it is the closeness dimension or the anxiety dimension, males have a more positive emotional experience of psychological horror films than females. (See Figure 1)

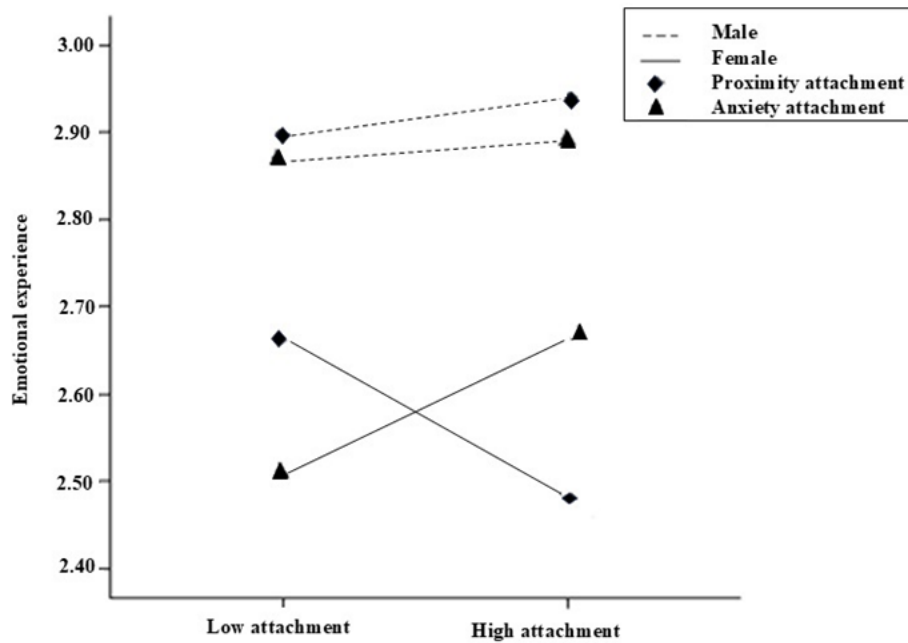


Figure 1: Analysis of the moderating effect of gender

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that gender plays a moderating role in the relationship between attachment and emotional experience of horror films. In terms of the proximity dimension of attachment, there are significant gender differences in emotional responses to horror films, with males enjoying them more than females, which is consistent with previous research findings <sup>[6][16]</sup>. Gender differences in the preference for horror media are a complex topic that cannot be fully explained through simplified narratives. Different explanations have been proposed for gender differences in film preferences, such as biological differences, evolutionary mechanisms, and gender socialization <sup>[17]</sup>. In China, long-term gender socialization has led women to value emotional intimacy and empathy, and they tend to express their emotions in socially accepted ways. At the same time, women are often perceived as timid and weak, in need of protection. Therefore, when watching psychological horror films, women are more likely to show sympathy and compassion, as well as fear and concern. On the other hand, men emphasize independence, bravery, maturity, and stability, and tend to analyze situations rationally. Their emotional expression is more focused on behavior compared to women. As a result, when watching psychological horror films, men are more likely to feel a sense of catharsis and experience great psychological satisfaction and relief after the film ends.

In terms of the anxiety dimension of attachment, as anxiety scores increase, both males and females become more positive in their emotional experience of psychological horror films, with males showing a more positive response than females. Male college students experience less distress and anxiety when watching horror films compared to females <sup>[18]</sup>. These findings reflect more general gender differences, with females and girls typically reporting more fear and anxiety than males and showing greater anxiety and fear when watching horror films compared to boys and men. This gender difference may be attributed to females' typically higher anxiety proneness <sup>[6]</sup>. In addition, female viewers desire a satisfactory and appropriate resolution, while male viewers desire to see violence and destruction in films. It can be observed that the destruction and cruelty in psychological horror films better satisfy the needs of males, while the desire of females for a

satisfactory resolution is often hard to fulfill.

When individuals face stress but cannot access their attachment figures, they may feel anxious and distressed about their emotional expression being rejected, and worry about being hurt or abandoned in intimate relationships. They may try to avoid intimacy with others to protect themselves and tend to express their emotions in a more reserved and concealed manner, rather than through direct interaction. Watching horror films can meet this need by providing a way to release emotions without requiring interaction with others. Given these research findings, when individuals choose horror films for emotion regulation, they should consider factors such as personal attachment and gender to avoid the negative effects of horror films and leverage their unique positive role in emotion regulation and stress relief.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, our research findings indicate that there is a significant negative correlation between college students' emotional experience of horror films and the proximity dimension of attachment, while the correlation with the anxiety dimension is not significant. Gender plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between emotional experience of horror films and attachment, with males exhibiting a more positive experience of psychological horror films compared to females. It is worth noting that when using horror films for psychological intervention and emotion regulation in the future, the audience's attachment type and gender should be taken into consideration.

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