

**Diversity in Horror: An Analysis of Representation of Women and People of
Color in Horror Movies**

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Abstract

The horror genre is a popular genre in the film industry. Even though it is known for scaring its audience and keeping them in suspense, it is also known for the lack of representation among women and people of color. This research analyzed the amount of diversity in the top 210 horror films from 2001-2021. To determine and examine the number of women and people of color, a content analysis was conducted on a sample of films using their IMDB listings. Four themes were discovered during the textual analysis: representation, beauty standards, controversy, and freedom of expression. The research concluded that diversity in horror films have changed overtime in the past 21 years. While female representation in horror films have remained consistent, representation among people of color have slowly increased overtime.

Keywords: Framing; content analysis; horror films; diversity

As one of the top film genres, the horror has become popular because of its grotesque elements, interesting characters, and unforgettable stories. The pleasures of horror films stem from the urge of gratifying pre-established desires. (Tudor, 1997). Until recently the horror genre had a reputation for not having representation of a lot of women and people of color in its films. If there were people of color in horror films, they were normally the first to be killed (Oliver, 2018).

In the earlier decades, especially in classic films such as *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Psycho*, there were no people of color. There were also not a lot of women in those films. If there was a person of color, they would be cast in a very minor role or someone who would not make it to the end of the film (Burgin, 2019). In the 1980s and 1990s, people of color made a slow emergence in horror. However, there were only one or two people of color in the film and they

would have minimal lines, were portrayed stereotypically, and their primary role was to be the supporting character to the white main protagonist (Burgin, 2019). Also, women were usually portrayed as helpless and easy prey (O'Brien, 2019). In recent years, surge of films has starred people of color (Bastián, 2018). Mainstream and successful films such as *Tales from the Hood*, *Candyman*, *The People Under the Stairs*, *Blade*, *Get Out*, *Us*, *Train to Busan* and *The Girl with All the Gifts* had people of color in starring roles and as heroes who outlived the murderer or main antagonist. Those films also included stories that entered around African American and Asian cultures. Films such as *Scream* and its sequels, *Bird Box*, *Suspiria*, and *Halloween* step away from the damsel in distress trope and portray the lead female character as strong, perseverant, and capable of destroying her antagonist.

Using framing theory, this research will explore the top ten horror movies from the last 21 years. It will include a look at the overall cast, how many people in the cast were women and/or people of color. The results determine whether the film is diverse.

Literature Review

Framing Theory

Framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information (Davie, 2010). Framing is related to agenda-setting, meaning that it sets and agenda or tone about a particular subject or tone. Framing can have a considerable influence on audiences and stakeholders. Framing theory is defined as how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information (Davie, 2010). Framing is commonly used in the news and the media. The theory was introduced by

Erving Goffman in 1974. Representation in general and the types of representation of people of color in horror films is an example of framing. For example, complex male characters are associated with positive reviews. Female characters are seen as incidental to success in this context (McCullough, 2021).

Stereotypes in Horror Films

After not being included in horror films for a lengthy period, people of color surfaced in the genre, but there was a catch. In the Shudder documentary *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*, people of color in horror films were usually the first to be killed off in any film (Burgin, 2019). Anderson-Lopez also assessed the gap in representation of people of color (Anderson-Lopez, 2019). Also, women were seen as docile in the beginning of the film before becoming the “final girl,” They were also seen as damsel in distresses who needed the protection from her male counterpart to keep her safe (Thompson, 2018).

Recent films have been attempting to break away from these tropes. For example, Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* plays with, inverts, and makes light of horror tropes. Instead of a killer with a knife terrorizing its victim, the villain is white supremacy and racism. Also, the hero is a Black man (Wilz, 2021).

Horror Movies Centered Women and Around People of Color

In recent years, films that are starring and centered around people of color have surfaced in Hollywood and have become quite popular. Films like *Get Out*, *Us*, *Train to Busan*, and many others have centered around the lives of people of color and the horrors that they face (Bastién, 2018). Filmmaker Jordan Peele has developed a reputation for creating films that are horrifying, suspenseful, thrilling, and starred people of color (Briefel, 2021). Japanese films such as *Ringu*,

Honogurai mizu no soko kara, *Ju-On*, *Kairo*, and *Chakushin ari* have become immensely popular. So much so, that American remakes have been created (Overton, 2016).

Research Questions

RQ1: With the horror genre changing over time, is it still true that there are no representation of women and people of color in horror movies?

RQ2: Based the top ten horror films from the past 21 years, how much has diversity increased or decreased in horror movies?

Method

To examine the amount of diversity in horror films from the last 21 years, content analysis was conducted. The content that was analyzed included IMDB listings of the films. A coding book was used for the content analysis. The coding book included the year, name of the film, link to the IMBD listing, release date, runtime, director's name, director's gender, director's race and ethnicity, total number of characters, number of female characters, number # of characters who are people of color, and "does this movie reflect diversity (No = 0, Yes = 1)." The study focuses on the number of women and people of color from the top 210 horror films from the past 21 years. The films explored were the top ten films from 2001 to 2021.

Conceptualization & Operationalization

The present study defines diversity as "the presence of differences within a given setting. This may include gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, etc." (Tan, 2019). Diversity can also be defined as anyone that is not a white male. For this research,

diversity in horror films was broken down into gender, race, and ethnicity. The characters in the horror films will consist of both main characters and supporting characters.

Measurements

To measure the amount of diversity in horror films, the present study used the Semantic Differential scale with interval data. Interval data is defined as “data measured based on specific numerical scores or values” (Keyton, 2015). Diversity is defined as “the presence of differences within a given setting including gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, etc.” (Tan, 2019). The ranking elements include “diverse” or “not diverse.” In the codebook, diverse films were labeled with the number one while films that were not diverse were labeled with the number zero. Diverse means that half or more of the characters are either women, people of color, or both. Not diverse means that less than half of characters were women, people of color, or both.

Sampling

The present study uses purposive sampling. To arrive at this sample, researched on horror films from the past 21 years, 2001-2021, was conducted. The top ten movies from each year based on popularity by IMDB. As a result, a total of 210 films were analyzed for diversity in race and gender. To determine the amount of diversity, the cast lists on IMDB were analyzed. An example of this sampling with content analysis is Kim et al’s article *News Media Presentations of Electronic Cigarettes: A Content Analysis of News Coverage in South Korea* (Kim et al, 2017).

Results

To answer RQ1, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted on the sample. The test confirmed that the number of female characters was fairly constant ($M = 15.6$; $SD = 19.2$). The test also confirmed that the number of characters of color changed overtime ($M = 7.79$; $SD = 19.85$). To answer RQ2, a Chi-Square test was conducted on the sample and variables were compared. There was not a trend of statistical changes. Even though films in recent years showed more diversity overtime, time will tell to see if the trend sticks.

Figure 1

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Female	210	1	200	15.46	19.213
POC	210	.00	227.00	7.7857	19.85779
Diversity	208	0	27	.52	1.908
Valid N (listwise)	208				

Figure 2

Crosstab

Count

		Diversity			
		no	yes	27	Total
Year	2001	9	1	0	10
	2002	5	5	0	10
	2003	8	2	0	10
	2004	5	4	1	10
	2005	4	6	0	10
	2006	4	6	0	10
	2007	7	3	0	10
	2008	7	3	0	10
	2009	6	3	0	9
	2010	6	4	0	10
	2011	5	5	0	10
	2012	5	5	0	10
	2013	5	5	0	10
	2014	6	4	0	10
	2015	9	1	0	10
	2016	7	3	0	10
	2017	7	3	0	10
	2018	9	1	0	10
	2019	6	3	0	9
	2020	4	6	0	10
	2021	1	9	0	10
Total		125	82	1	208

Figure 3

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	52.209 ^a	40	.094
Likelihood Ratio	41.217	40	.417
Linear-by-Linear Association	.734	1	.392
N of Valid Cases	208		

a. 42 cells (86.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .04.

Discussion

A few concepts were discovered during the coding process of the research. First, most of the movies were directed by white males. Second, movies that were more diverse either had a

female or POC director or were filmed in countries foreign countries such as Korea, Japan, China, or Africa. Next, movies in 2002, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2010, and 2016 were more diverse with films such as *The Eye*, *Ju-on: The Grudge*, *Noroi*, *Lady Vengeance*, *The Baby's Room*, *Them*, *The Host*, *Pan's Labyrinth*, *REC 2*, *Kim Bok-nam salinsageonui jeonmal*, *Cold Fish*, *I Saw the Devil*, *Under the Shadow*, and *Train to Busan*. Overall, *Train to Busan* was the most diverse with 227 characters with all of them being Korean. 2021 was a breakthrough year with more diverse films.

Conclusion

In conclusion, diversity in horror films have changed overtime in the past 21 years. While female representation in horror films have remained consistent, representation among people of color have slowly increased overtime. The research indicates that the gender and the race and ethnicity of the director and filming location determines the amount of diversity that a film has. A recommendation for a future research project would be to explore the amount of horror movies with African American leads.

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