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**Research Paper** 



# Influence of movie genre preference on empathy among emerging adults

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# **ABSTRACT**

Movies are a major form of entertainment, watching movies affects people on a large scale. Given the introduction and progression of platforms for movie streaming the exposure is higher. This study aims to find the effects of movie genre preferences on empathy of the individual. Movie genre preferences are based on what the individual is mainly exposed to and would go back again to. For the purpose of this study most popular movie genres of family drama, comedy, horror and social problem genre were considered. Empathy is referred to as the ability to mirror the emotions and the cognitive processes of another person. The aim of this present paper is to study if there is any influence of movie genre preferences on empathy. The tools used for this study include a socio-demographic sheet with questions about movie genre preference and Murthy Empathy Scale. Sample considered for the present study was undergraduate students of ages 18- 21 studying in colleges of Bangalore. The research design used was 4X2 factorial design and the data was analysed using two way ANOVA. The results show that the influence of preferred movie genre on empathy (N=120,: df= 3,120: F= 2.958; p= .035) is significant at 0.05 level. The mean scores were found to be higher for individuals preferring social problem genre and lowest for individuals preferring horror. In conclusion the role of movie genre preferences is significantly influencing empathy levels and this opens up the possibility of understanding how movie genres that are preferred largely are influencing the society at large.

**Keywords:** Empathy, Movie Genre Preference, Effects Of Media, Effects Of Movies, Effects Of Social Message Movies, Effects Of Movies On Empathy

The English word "empathy" came into being only about a century ago as a translation for the German psychological term *Einfühlung*, literally meaning "feeling-in". Two psychologists from Cornell and the University of Cambridge in 1908 suggested "empathy" for *Einfühlung*, drawing on the Greek "em" for "in" and "pathos" for "feeling,". (Lanzoni, 2015) Empathy is often characterized as the ability to "put oneself into another's shoes", or in some way experience the outlook or emotions of another being within oneself

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(Konstantikaki & Ioannidou, 2008). Empathy means to recognize others' feelings, the causes of these feelings, and to be able to participate in the emotional experience of an individual without becoming part of it (Zunshine, 2007). The contemporary model of empathy assumes that it has three components: empathic concern, perspective taking, and personal distress (Blazek, Kaźmierczak, and Wojciechowska, 2013). These factors have also been considered types and studied as affective empathy and cognitive empathy, however what is recognized as the composition of empathy is similar. (Nummenmaa, Lauri, Hirvonen, Parkkola, and Hietanen, 2008)

Genre is a French word and means a category or a type, a collection of instantly recognizable stylistic features. The movies are classified into genres based on many aspects of the content. Categorizing a movie into a particular genre gives the sense of what can be expected in the movie. Preferences for genre are developed by creating an interest in the content associated with the genre itself. Preference is built over time with watching similar content over and over again.

The movies are like a machine that generates empathy. It lets you understand a little bit more about different hopes, aspirations, dreams and fears. It helps us to identify with the people who are sharing this journey with us (Ebert, 2014). Watching a movie and watching a character go through an emotional state can put the individual watching it in a similar state.(Thagard, 2017).

Previous studies have tried to explain that watching certain movie content can bring changes in empathy, that is studies on violent content can desensitize individuals towards violent acts (Vossen, Piotrowski, and Valkenburg, 2017, Krahé et.al, 2011, Krahé and Möller 2010, Linz and Mullin, 1995). There is also a study which explains how exposure to pro-social media can result in pro-social behavior with empathy acting as a predictor of the behaviors (Prot et.al, 2013). The experience of empathy in a movie is also been studied as being affected by many factors such as characteristics of the protagonist (Vorderer, Knobloch, and Schramm, 2001). The content and the behaviors of the protagonist are also concluded to influence the experience of empathy and also impact of modeling such behavior (Zillmann and Cantor, 1975). There are studies which have shown that people who watch particular type of content can have higher empathy. This is true for fictional content watchers who scored high on theory of mind (Black and Barnes, 2015). The people who watch reality T.V have been found to score higher on empathy scales (Melchers et.al, 2015). The studies done on individual genres show that some reasons which the viewers prefer the certain content is due to their empathy. Certain types of comedy preferring individuals have been proven to have higher empathy (Robinson, Callahan, and Evans, 2014, Hampes, 2010).

The social learning theory explains how modeling can result in learning and this can explain why the role of protagonist is important considering that he acts as a model. Social learning theory explains how observing and imitating a protagonist or a model can result in learning the behavior portrayed and the model has to be relatable and should fit certain criteria. The theory of reinforcing spiral model explains how such influence from watching certain content can result in movie preferences that can be guided by those influences. That is, if a movie affects the empathy levels of an individual it will end up strengthening the empathy in that individual (Slater, 2007).

Movie genre preferences are developed over a period of time which develops repeated exposure to similar content. This can have an effect on individual's behaviors, thoughts and attitude. Effect of movies can occur on two levels, one being the aspect of modeling the behaviors of protagonist and the second in the form of developing empathy by exercising it. If a person has to completely enjoy a movie which requires a certain level of empathy in them and can continue to prefer such movies it will lead to increasing their level of empathy to meet that demand. In certain movies protagonist plays the role of a moralistic hero and the kind of actors who play such roles could have an established fan base. This can lead for the audience to model such pro social behaviors in real life as well. When the rules that guide the role of a protagonist are dictated by the genre which is true for many movies, then the effects can be classified into small sizes of the genre.

The exposure to media in reference to movies has increased due to easy access to the content through platforms such as Netflix and Amazon prime. Therefore it becomes relevant that the influence of movies be studied in different areas. Keeping this in mind the genres considered in the current study are the most popularly viewed and most commonly produced. It also has to be taken into account how less the studies that research this issue is and therefore the current study can become relevant by adding to such research.

To study there is a large area of influences of movies on an individual out of which empathy is also an aspect. Empathy is an important construct because it acts as predictor for pro-social behavior and also determining factor for effective interpersonal relationships. Empathy is important in both personal and professional life and can be a starting point in this field of understanding. Therefore this study aims to find if movie preferences that have been developed over time have an effect on the empathy of the individual. It will give us insight on how certain media content can influence us in terms of our ability to empathize with others.

This study aims to understand the influence of movies on the broad terms of genres by seeing how a certain inclination to a type will influence the empathy. This will help us understand how movies improve empathy and also classify it on terms of genre. Empathy is an important factor in professions such medical professions, social workers, and counselors. India is a country where a large number of movies are made each year and access to them is becoming easier. Therefore this study can help in determining what kind of movies might be used as educational tools to improve on empathy levels. It can be helpful of the effect of certain movies that are popular in India based on genres can be studied and this will help better understand the media influence.

# METHODOLOGY

### Sample

The sampling method used was non random convenient sampling. The sample considered were undergraduate college students belonging to colleges of Bangalore. A total of 120 subjects were considered for the study. The sample was categorized as 30 subjects for each genre of family drama, comedy, horror and social problem genre. Each category of 30 samples was further divided into 15 males and 15 females. Out of the 200 samples from which the data was collected only 120 were considered based on preference to Indian cinema or south Indian cinema as a measure to get a specific population.

#### **Instruments**

The data collection was done using 2 tools

- 1. The socio-demographic sheet: It consisted information about the name, age, gender, marital status, educational qualification, and questions about the movie content preferred. There were 2 questions addressed towards the movie contents preferred; one about the movie genre preferred and the other about the type that is Hollywood, Bollywood or south Indian cinema preference.
- 2. The Murthy Empathy Scale: this scale was developed by Murthy at Karnataka university. The level of empathy is assessed on a 3 point rating scale, where 1 is lowest and 3 is highest score. The minimum total score that can be obtained in the tool is 35 and the maximum total score is 105. The reliability of the scale was found to have an alpha value of .932. The scale measures empathy with questions referring to third person perspective, sympathy, identification with others, emotionality, and interpersonal perspective.

#### Procedure

For the purpose of data collection survey method was used. The data was collected through pen and paper and also through Google forms. The colleges were contacted and permission was requested to collect data for the purpose of pen and paper data collection. Then the researcher visited each college and collected data in person. Informed consent was taken from the students and participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the procedure for data collection.

The study considers the variables of movie genre preference (Horror, comedy, family drama, and social problem), gender (males and females) and its effects on empathy. Therefore the research design adopted for this study was 4X2 Factorial research design. The data was analyzed using SPSS V25. The analysis conducted was a two way ANOVA test.

Table No. 1 Showing the Two way ANOVA analysis of influence of movie genre preference and gender on empathy.

Source	Df	F	Sig.	
Preferred movie genre	3	2.958	.035	
Gender	1	.792	.375	
Preferred movie genre * Gender	3	1.021	.386	

For the current research two way ANOVA was used to analyze the data to study if empathy levels differed as a result of movie genre preference and to see if there was any interaction effect of movie genre preference and gender on empathy. The results for the main effect of preferred movie genre on empathy (N=120,: df= 3,120: F= 2.958; p= .035) is significant at 0.05 level. Thus, it may be said that the role of preferred movie genre has a significant influence on empathy. The results for the influence of gender (N=120,: df= 1,120: F= .792; p=.375) is not significant at 0.05 level on the dependent variable of empathy. Therefore it can be said that gender has no significant influence on the levels of empathy among the emerging adults. The interaction effect of movie genre preference and gender on empathy among emerging adults (N=120,: df= 3,120: F= 1.021; p= .386) is not significant at the level of 0.05. Hence, there is no significant interaction effect between gender and movie genre preference on the level of empathy among emerging adults.

Table No. 1 Showing the Post hoc test (Tukey HSD)- preferred movie genre and empathy

(I) Preferred movie genre	(J) Preferred movie genre	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Family drama	Comedy	77	2.383	.988
	Horror	3.90	2.383	.363
	Social problem genre	-3.07	2.383	.573
Comedy	Family drama	.77	2.383	.988
	Horror	4.67	2.383	.210
	Social problem genre	-2.30	2.383	.770
Horror	Family drama	-3.90	2.383	.363
	Comedy	-4.67	2.383	.210
	Social problem genre	-6.97*	2.383	.022
Social problem genre	Family drama	3.07	2.383	.573
	Comedy	2.30	2.383	.770
	Horror	6.97*	2.383	.022

The Tukey HSD analysis results shows that there is a significant difference in empathy between horror genre and social problem genre (p= 0.022) at the level of 0.05 with the mean difference 6.97. The mean difference between family drama genre and comedy genre (-.77) is not significant (.988) at the level of 0.05. The mean difference between family drama genre and horror genre (3.90) is not significant (.363) at the level of 0.05. The mean difference between family drama and social problem genre (-3.07) is not significant (.573) at the level of 0.05. The mean difference between comedy genre and horror genre (4.67) is not significant (.210) at the level of 0.05. The mean difference between comedy genre and social problem (-2.30) is not significant (.770) at the level of 0.05.

# DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that movie genre preferences significantly influence empathy. Movie genre preference broadly explains the kind of content preferred and this preference is built based on repeated exposure and over time. This indicates that this preference can influence an individual. The findings of the study show that it can influence the empathy levels of an individual. Previous studies such as the one conducted on German adolescents (Krahé and Möller, 2010) showed that violent media usage led to decrease in empathy and also developing easy access to aggressive behaviors. Therefore genres that could have more violent content could influence empathy and similarly different content can influence empathy differently as discussed further.

The study on why individuals frequent horror genre (Robinson, Callahan, and Evans, 2014) they discussed how different viewers have different reasons to go back and in another research (Shreve, 2018) it was found that there is no significant difference in empathy for people who prefer horror genre at different intensities. In the current research there were four genres that were studied and therefore give a better picture of difference of individuals who would prefer horror over the other genres, and the findings revealed that horror genre preferring individuals had the least mean score of the four genres. As mentioned by Robinson, Callahan, and Evans (2014) this could be due to the fact that individuals who are adrenaline junkies and the detectives who watch horror for adrenaline release and cognitive satisfaction respectively, but do not experience empathy can be higher in number or can be the major reason for preferring horror over the other genres among emerging adults. The age

and the related developmental stage is also associated with adventure seeking behavior and thus could explain lesser empathy and the reason for preferring horror. Horror movies also expose their audiences to a lot of violence when compared to the other genres studied. The respondents who preferred horror can be long time watchers of the same genre and therefore can be more desensitized and hence scored lesser on empathy as supported by previous studies (Krahé et.al 2011) which address decrease in empathy after violent media usage.

The current study showed that comedy is not significantly different from other genres in respect to empathy levels, but the mean score was different from the other genres, maybe further research with higher sample size could yield better results. In a previous study (Hampes, 2010) the findings showed that liking for different kind of humor is related differently to empathy levels. In the current study the whole of comedy genre was considered and sub genres however were not individually studied and hence the two studies can't be compared. It has to be considered that comedy as a genre has many sub genres which can be categorized as having very disparate content, that is, it can be aggressive or even self enhancing (Hampes, 2010). This meaning it is not guided by one principle as compared to horror or family drama which have stringent demarcations of the sort of content, and therefore the differences among the genres when compared with comedy genre revealed to be not significant. There is also a study (Melchers et.al, 2015) which concluded that high vicarious embarrassment containing video content can activate the parts of the brain related to empathy. The vicarious embarrassment element is a common trope of comedy and also reality TV, however this is not very common in Indian cinema context.

The findings of this current study show that social drama has the highest mean score and is significantly different from the mean score of horror genre on empathy scores. Social problem genre can be categorized as having to deal with immediate social issues and also with biographical storylines. This format of content makes the characters more realistic and also relatable and as stated in a study by (Zillmann and Cantor 1975) a more relatable character can elicit more empathy. They also discussed that protagonist when acting benevolently or neutrally is more likely to elicit feelings of empathy then when violently presented. In social problem genre it is common to show the protagonist to be morally righteous and this can explain how participants who preferred this genre can be exposed to such experiences of empathy multiple times and thus have developed better empathy.

The findings of the genre of family drama show no significant difference among other genres. There are not many researches on this genre done yet and therefore it's unclear about the influence of this genre. This could be because it is a sub genre and mostly popular in India where research with the variables of the current study is limited.

In respect to gender difference there was found to be no significant difference in the levels of empathy between male and female emerging adults. The studies on gender differences in empathy have distinguishing results. There are studies that support that there is significant gender difference and there are studies which say it is influenced by different factors. A study on gender differences in empathy (Nanda,2016) found that there is significant difference in male and female in their empathy scores. A study conducted on gender difference, motivation and empathetic accuracy (klein and Hodges, 2000) found that motivational differences can affect the gender difference in empathy. In their meta analysis, Wager et al (2003) did not find a significant difference in brain activation between men and women in response to emotional stimuli. The use of physiological measures as indicators of empathy has been found to show no difference in men and women in respect to their empathy scores (Eisenberg

& Lennon, 1983). Another study on gender differences in empathy (Rueckert, 2011) also claimed that there was limited evidence to support gender difference and can occur only in specific situations. A study that reviewed previously existing (Moore et.al, 2014) researches on gender differences in empathy proposed that better statistical designing can help us gain better understanding of the gender differences in empathy, this includes taking into consideration factors such as sexual preference, prenatal hormone exposure.

# Implications of the study

The findings of the study findings show that there is a significant effect of movie genre preference on the levels of empathy in emerging adults. Considering the day and age of influence of media on the emerging adults the study becomes relevant to especially the population of emerging adults who are most likely exposed to media. We understand by this research how different content of media can be influencing us differently that is guide us to understand how media is influencing us by decreasing or improving empathy and in turn we return to similar content and thereby be affected longitudinally as expressed by reinforcing spiral model (Slater, 2007). These findings can be helpful as proposed by previous study (Blasco and Moreto, 2012) in creating an educative curriculum where movies can be used to develop empathy in medical students. A study conducted on (Prot et.al 2013) participants from 7 countries concluded that pro social media use can influence pro social behavior and is directly linked through empathy. These findings in addition to the current findings can imply that movie genre preference that is influencing empathy in participants is also influencing and directing their pro social behavior.

# Limitations of the study

- 1. The study was limited to sample population of undergraduate students, unmarried, and current residents of Bangalore and therefore can't be generalized to the complete population of emerging adults.
- 2. The study did not consider respondents who preferred watching Hollywood over south Indian or bollywood content.
- 3. There was self report question used to study movie genre preference, which is not a standardized tool and therefore can't be a complete understanding of the variable itself.

# **CONCLUSION**

The aim of this research was to find if movie genre preferences have any influence on our empathy. In addition to that the study also attended to the interaction effect of gender and movie genre preference on empathy levels. The major finding can be concluded as that there was a significant effect of movie genre preference on empathy levels. These results leads us to understand that the kind of movie genre preference we have and most possibly which can become a factor leading us to having higher exposure in the same genre can be influencing our empathy levels. This opens up the possibility of us looking forward to understanding how different content that are sometimes preferred largely among masses can be influencing our daily behaviors. The gender difference in empathy was found to be not significant and the interaction effect of movie genre preference and gender on empathy was also found to be not significant. These findings give us an understanding of how gender difference in empathy is still unclear and different studies claim different results.

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# Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

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