How Content and Co-viewers Elicit Emotional Discomfort in Moviegoing Experiences: Where Does the Discomfort Come From and How is it Handled?

RICHARD JACKSON HARRIS[1]* and LINDSAY COOK[2]

[1]*Department of Psychology, Kansas State University, Manhattan, USA*
[2]*Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City, USA*

Summary: Although watching movies is typically enjoyable, they also can elicit discomfort. The present studies investigated what makes some moviegoing experiences emotionally uncomfortable. Using autobiographical memory (Study 1) and scenarios/ vignettes methodology (Study 2), young adults remembered watching a movie that had made them uncomfortable or responded to scenarios about watching a particular type of movie with particular co-viewers (e.g. violent movie with one's spouse). Movies eliciting discomfort were most often dramas (39%) or comedies (26%). Discomfort most often arose from content, particularly fairly explicit sex or violence, and secondarily from the presence of co-viewers. Often the two interacted, for example, being uncomfortable watching explicit sex with one's parents. In terms of dealing with the discomfort, women were overall more direct and men more avoidant. A sizable minority was glad they had seen the film, in spite of the discomfort, and was open to seeing it again. Arguing from converging evidence, these different methodologies produced consistent results. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

People generally watch movies because they enjoy them and are entertained (Vorderer & Hartmann, 2009). Sometimes, however, they end up not enjoying a film as much as they had anticipated and may even be quite uncomfortable watching a particular movie. The present studies explored this type of situation.

Film is a highly affect-laden medium. Like real life, movies can be entertaining, inspirational, emotionally touching, or frightening and disturbing. In fact, people frequently use films for affect regulation and repair, as in choosing to watch a movie to cheer up, forget the troubles of the day, or energize oneself (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2006). For broader reviews of emotion regulation, see Gross (2007) and Koole (2009). In terms of behaviour, movies, especially American films, tend to display very demonstrative emotional expression in the behaviour of their characters, with a common theme in plot lines and characterizations in film involving characters dealing with strong emotion in some way. In fact, film clips are often used effectively as a means of manipulating affect as an independent variable in a wide variety of psychological research (Gross & Levenson, 1995).

There is much evidence of the large role of affect in responding to media. For example, people frequently quote lines from movies in conversation specifically to amuse themselves and others (Harris, Werth, Bures, & Bartel, 2008). Viewers who experience more negative affect attribute more realism and higher information value to the content viewed (Konijn, Walma van der Molen, & van Nes, 2009). When music cued positive autobiographical memories from different lifetime eras, a majority of the memories recalled were related to friends or family (Cady, Harris, & Knappenberger, 2008).

The present research takes a dimensional rather than a categorical approach to studying emotion (Bradley, 2000;

Lang, Potter, & Bolls, 2009) by emphasizing the general dimensions of arousal/activation and valence/pleasure rather than specific emotions. In the context of viewing films, a movie may arouse a viewer for numerous reasons, including suspenseful content, upbeat music, graphic sex or violence, or striking aesthetic beauty. Some of these arousing aspects involve both positive and negative valence, i.e. appetitive or approach motivation as well as aversive or avoidance motivation. For example, one may be both repulsed by very graphic violence or sex as well as perversely drawn to it. People who are by disposition high in the need for affect (Maio & Esses, 2001) tend to report higher levels of negative and ambivalent emotions watching films than do those lower in need for affect. Interestingly enough, they also evaluate those negative emotions more positively (Bartsch, Appel, & Storch, 2010). This differential 'meta-emotion' (product of processes that monitor, evaluate, and regulate affect) may be a useful way to characterize this seemingly paradoxical enjoyment of negative emotion (Bartsch, Vorderer, Mangold, & Viehoff, 2008: Oliver, 1993).

However, the affective experience of watching film is dependent on more than merely the film content's arousal of the viewer. Movies are most often consumed in a social setting, enjoyed with a group of friends or family or sometimes as a couple as a means of developing their relationship ('date movies'). The presence of particular co-viewers can further add to the emotional complexity, particularly in terms of valence. For example, viewers recalling televised sporting events showed differences in uses and gratifications depending on whether the event was viewed alone or with family, friends, or a significant other and whether or not the event was enjoyed (Bonds-Raacke & Harris, 2006). Also, sexual content may have a strong appetitive attraction to a young adult but at the same time have a strong aversive dimension due to one's parents being present. Autobiographical memory studies of recalling frightening or romantic movies previously seen on a date showed that the benefits of moviegoing were closely tied into the gender roles of the dating situation (Harris, Hoekstra,

*Correspondence to: Richard Jackson Harris, Department of Psychology, Kansas State University, 492 Bluemont Hall, 1100 Mid-Campus Drive, Manhattan, Kansas 66506-5302, USA. E-mail: rjharris@ksu.edu

Sanborn, Scott, Karafa, & Brandenburg, 2000; Harris, Hoekstra, Sanborn, Scott, Dodds, & Brandenburg, 2004). Sometimes such gender-specific reactions and behaviours include both positive and negative emotional valence, as when a teen girl is genuinely scared by a horror movie but uses that fear as a reason to cling closer to her date and thus show affection and dependence (Zillmann & Weaver, 1996; Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986). The present studies examined how men and women cope with the discomfort experienced when watching movies.

Sometimes a normal emotional reaction may be over-ridden by other factors (Zillmann, 2006). For example, although watching an athlete get hurt in a ball game would normally elicit an empathic response from a fan, if that player is a member of the hated opposition team, there may be a dispositional override, where the fan may not only fail to empathize but may actually feel positive affect at seeing the injury. Applying this to affect induced by co-viewers, although watching a comedy with a lot of sexual banter and raunchy language might normally elicit amusement and general positive affect in many young adults, these responses may be overridden by concern over the presence of young children as co-viewers.

Media effects may be mediated by different personalities, genre preferences, or situations of viewing which lead one person to greatly enjoy a movie and another to be quite distressed by it. One useful theoretical framework for studying movies evoking discomfort is the uses and gratifications theory; see Rubin (2009) for a current formulation. This framework focuses on how people use media and what they obtain psychologically from this use. Most previous research has examined positive, intended gratifications from media use, e.g. one hopes and expects to be entertained and in fact is. However, sometimes the gratifications are negative. The large literature on effects of media violence has primarily looked at negative media effects such as fear and desensitization elicited by violent films. However, we argue that people sometimes experience a negative gratification, i.e. a vague 'discomfort' or ill-specified negative affect; this phenomenon has not been examined.

The present studies used converging evidence from multiple methodologies to examine (1) why and how some movies and the situations of watching them make people emotionally uncomfortable and (2) how they cope with such situations. Because different people are made uncomfortable by different films and viewing situations, the studies did not show participants films that the experimenters deemed 'uncomfortable', but rather used two alternative method-ologies to tap into what individual people had actually found distressing in their own experience. Study 1 used a survey to ask participants to recall a personal experience where they felt uncomfortable watching a film, using the methodology of autobiographical memory. Study 2 used the more rigorous experimental method of presenting hypothetical scenarios or vignettes about watching a movie with critical information about content and co-viewers systematically varied across different versions of a story, in an effort to identify exactly what it is that makes a moviegoing experience uncomfor-table.

Because of the exploratory nature of the research, no specific hypotheses were tested. Rather, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: What are the sources of discomfort experienced while watching movies?
RQ2: How do people adapt to this discomfort while watching the film and afterwards?
RQ3: What experienced emotions are associated with this discomfort?
RQ4: Are there positive aspects of the negative affect experienced while watching uncomfortable films?

RQ4a: What types of uncomfortable films might people be glad they saw or wish to see again?
RQ4b: How does discomfort interact with enjoyment of the films?

Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to (a) confirm the viability of using autobiographical memory to study the phenomenon of uncomfortable movies and (b) generate open-ended responses that could be used to develop categories of uncomfortable experiences to use in developing more focused questions for Studies 1 and 2. Autobiographical memory is comprised of knowledge about events or experiences that have occurred in one's own life (Conway, 2001; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). In terms of memory for moviegoing experiences, we asked about autobiographical memories of watching a movie in some situation. Although there is an inherent problem of the inability to verify the accuracy of autobiographical memories, the major interest is the remembered experience, with objective accuracy of the memories being of less concern than the participant's memory of them (Harris, Bonds-Raacke, & Cady, 2005).

Using the autobiographical memory technique in this way allows probing, for example, the experience of watching a frightening movie. A particular movie might be rated for remembered negative consequences, such as induced fears, anxiety, or insomnia and positive consequences like enjoyment or mastery of one's fears, as well as the associated emotions experienced. This method also allows the study of the effects on child viewers of antisocial messages in media, such as sex or violence (Cantor, Mares, & Hyde, 2003; Harrison & Cantor, 1999; Hoekstra, Harris, & Helmick, 1999). By asking adults about their memories of seeing an R-rated movie as a child, one can indirectly study effects of seeing such films without the ethical problem of exposing young participants to such images for research purposes.

For the pilot study, young adult participants were asked to think about movies they had seen in several different experiential categories and write a brief open-ended description of their experience of viewing that movie. The category relevant to the present studies asked participants to tell about an experience watching a 'movie that made you uncomfortable' from either a theater- or home-viewing situation. In the interest of not priming participants to think

in a particular way, no definition or further explanation of 'uncomfortable' was offered, thus allowing respondents to consider discomfort in the broadest possible way. Results were content-analysed by two research assistants and one experimenter to identify reasons that a movie elicited discomfort. Although initial agreement was high, disputes were resolved by discussion. The two clearly emerging primary classes of reasons involved the content of the movie and those who were watching the movie with the viewer (co-viewers). Particular reports of content that elicited discomfort were scored as graphic violence, explicit sex, profane language, and a troubling theme. Types of co-viewers who made the experience uncomfortable included children, one's parents, people one did not know very well, and first dates. These categories were used to develop the specific response options in Study 1 and the stimulus vignettes in Study 2.

It was clear from the pilot study that the content of the movie was not the only source of discomfort, although it was the most important one. Often it was the interaction of the film's content and the co-viewers that elicited the discomfort, perhaps by simultaneously arousing affect of both positive and negative valence. Because of this necessary interaction of the film and the social situation, it is more accurate to speak of uncomfortable moviegoing experiences rather than uncomfortable movies as such.

STUDY 1

Method

The participants were 338 undergraduates enrolled in General Psychology classes at a large Midwestern U.S. university (172 female, 155 male). Their mean age was 19.3 years, with a range of 17–45 years. A large majority (85%) were Caucasian, 2% Asian, 4% African American, 4% Hispanic, 2% 'Other' and 3% did not provide an ethnicity.

Participants received the survey and were asked to 'Think of a movie you have seen that made you feel uncomfortable in some way'. In order to draw from as wide a pool of moviegoing experiences as possible and not to prompt participants in certain directions, no further definition or elaboration of 'uncomfortable' was offered, nor was the setting limited to theater or home viewing. Other questions asked about the movie type, the reason the movie was uncomfortable to view, the participants' emotional reactions, the presence of others, and their physical reaction during and following the viewing of the movie. Response choices for each question were selected based on results from the pilot study. The survey consisted of 11 questions (see Appendix 1 for complete questionnaire) and was administered as part of a battery of questionnaires at the beginning of the semester in January 2007.

Results and discussion

The organization of the presentation and discussion of the results follows the four research questions above.

RQ1: What are the sources of discomfort experienced while watching movies? Participants listed a total of 159 different movies. The movies listed most often were *Brokeback Mountain* (19 times), *The Hills Have Eyes* (12), *American History X* and *Saw* (10 times each), *Saw II and Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (8 each), *Borat* (7), *Hostel* and *The Notebook* (6 each), *Crash* (5), and 149 other movies recalled by between 1 and 4 participants. Participants classified their movie into one of seven genres (comedy, drama, action-adventure, horror, sci-fi, pornography, or other). Drama, horror, and comedy together comprised 89% of the total movies making viewers uncomfortable. Of those movies, 38% were drama, 31% were horror, 20% were comedy, and 11% other genres.

To assess the results discussed below, χ^2-tests (for frequencies) or pairwise *t*-test comparisons (for interval scale values) were used, as appropriate, with a significance level of $p = .05$.

Participants were asked why the film made them uncomfortable, with the four available choices being the content of the film, who was watching the film with them (co-viewers), both the content and co-viewer, or 'other'. Because only one participant chose 'other', those results were not included. The data for the genre of movie and which of the three variables contributed to one's uncomfortable experience appear in Table 1. For all movie types, the content of the movie was far more likely than co-viewers to make one uncomfortable, by χ^2-tests ($p < .05$). For comedy movies, this trend was less extreme with 42% of respondents mentioning co-viewers as the only or part of the reason for the discomfort. There were significant differences (χ^2-tests, $p < .05$) between all three categories for comedy movies, whereas in the other movie genres the content variable was significantly different from co-viewer and both co-viewer and content.

RQ2: How do people adapt to this discomfort while watching the film and afterwards? When participants checked whether they stopped watching the film altogether, voiced concern about its content while watching or after watching it, pretended to enjoy it, or watched in silence and did not let their true feelings show, men and women were both least likely to pretend to enjoy the movie. Women were significantly more likely than men to voice their concern about the content of the film to others after the viewing of the film, $p < .05$ by χ^2-test. For men, the most common reactions were to remain in silence while watching the film or to speak during the film about their concern. For women, the most common reactions were to speak of their concern to others

Table 1. Study 1: movie genre and why viewer was uncomfortable[a]

Movie genre	Discomfort source (%)		
	Content	Co-viewer	Both
Drama ($N = 118$)	80	5	14
Horror ($N = 95$)	85	7	7
Comedy ($N = 59$)	58	12	30
Action-adventure ($N = 15$)	87	7	7
Sci-Fi ($N = 7$)	86	0	14
Pornography ($N = 5$)	80	0	20

[a]For the first four movie genres, % choosing content differed significantly ($p < .05$) from those choosing co-viewer or both, by χ^2-tests. For comedies, there was a significant difference ($p < .05$) in responses across all three categories.

Table 2. Study 1: strategies for handling discomfort during and after the film (%)

Discomfort source	Reactions[a]							
	While viewing film					After viewing film		
	Stop	During	After	Pretend	Silence	Talk	Forget	Silence
Content ($N = 242$)	22	31[b]	30[b]	5	23	53[d]	37	11[d]
Co-Viewer ($N = 22$)	18	5[b]	9[b]	5	64[c]	27[d]	41	27[d]
Both ($N = 47$)	26	32	32	4	21	49	43	11
Men ($N = 155$)	19	28	21[e]	7	30	44[e]	42	13[g]
Women ($N = 172$)	21	31	36[e]	2	23	57[e,f]	33[f]	12[f,g]

[a]Complete wording for response options
Stop: I stopped watching it without finishing the film.
During: While watching the movie, I voiced my concern about the content to others watching it.
After: Sometime after movie, I voiced my concern about the content to the others watching it.
Pretend: I pretended I enjoyed the movie.
Silence: I watched it in silence and did not let my feelings show.
Talk: Talked about the movie with the other(s) who had seen it.
Forget: Immediately started doing something else more fun to try to forget it.
Silence: Stayed in silence for a little while.
[b]Co-viewer different from content and both at $p < .05$ by χ^2-tests.
[c]Different from all other Co-viewer responses at $p < .05$ by χ^2-tests.
[d]Co-viewer different from content at $p < .05$ by χ^2-tests.
[e]Different from each other at $p < .05$ by χ^2-tests.
[f]Talk response different from other two Women responses (forget and silence) at $p < .05$ by χ^2-tests.
[g]Men and Women 'Silence' response different from their other two responses (talk and forget) at $p < .05$ by χ^2-tests.

during or following the film. These results are found in Table 2.

Table 2 also presents the results for how this variable was affected by discomfort source. Although participants in all conditions were unlikely to pretend to enjoy the film, when the co-viewer was the reason the participant was uncomfortable, the participant was far more likely to remain silent than make any other response, $p < .05$ by χ^2-test. Participants made uncomfortable by a co-viewer were also far less likely to voice their concern during or after the film than were those made uncomfortable by the content, $p < .05$ by χ^2-test. Therefore, it appears that a co-viewer can significantly impact one's behavioural reaction to a film, specifically, suppressing a response of commenting on the discomfort. Interestingly, however, in cases where the discomfort came from both the content and the co-viewers, the pattern of reactions was far more like the cases where the discomfort came only from the content.

How the three causes of discomfort related to participants' actions after the film are found in the right side of Table 2. Those who were made uncomfortable by co-viewers were most likely to try to forget the movie and were significantly less likely than those only made uncomfortable by the content to talk about their discomfort or to remain silent after the film, $p < .05$ by χ^2-test. These results indicate that when the co-viewer was the only reason for feeling uncomfortable, the post-film reactions were different than if it was only the content or both the content and the co-viewer. Discomfort only from the presence of a co-viewer was more likely to lead the viewer to keep their discomfort to themselves. However, in the situation in which the content was responsible for making the film uncomfortable, regardless of the possible presence of awkward co-viewers, one was more likely to discuss the discomfort.

The results of how men and women reacted following the film are also found in Table 2. After the film, both women and men were least likely to remain in silence, $p < .05$ by χ^2-tests. This result was quite different from how men reacted during the film. Previous results showed that when men were viewing the film, they were most likely to remain silent. These data suggest that men's coping mechanisms changed following the film from what they had been during the film. This was also consistent with findings that men were more likely than women to devote their full attention to television viewing (Harris, 2009).

The χ^2-test showed that women were significantly ($p < .05$ by χ^2-test) more likely than men to talk about the movie with others. Also, women were more likely to talk than to try to forget about their discomfort or remain in silence ($p < .05$ by χ^2-test). These two findings are consistent with the previous data for how women handled discomfort during the film. Finally, men were equally likely to talk about the movie or try to forget about it. The general conclusion for these gender results is that men were often more restrained in their reactions, while women were more likely to verbalize their discomfort immediately. Interestingly enough, this runs counter to the gender stereotype of men being more verbally assertive than women, although it is consistent with the general finding of women being more sensitive to emotions and more adept at handling them.

RQ3: What emotions are associated with this discomfort? Table 3 presents the data for movie type and percentages of primary emotional reactions. For the question 'What emotion did this film predominantly leave you with?' participants chose from one of the following options: fear, sadness, disgust, anxiety, detachment, powerlessness, or other. The category marked 'multiple' in Table 3 is for the participants who did not follow instructions and checked multiple emotions instead of one. By far the most frequent emotional reaction across all movie types was disgust. Particularly for comedy and pornography, participants most strongly reacted with disgust (62 and 80% respectively). All

Table 3. Study 1: movie genre and emotional reactions

Movie genre	Emotions (%)							
	Disgust	Sadness	Fear	Anxiety	Detachment	Powerlessness	Multiple	Other
Comedy (N = 58)	62	4	0	7	0	0	2	25
Drama (N = 117)	39	26	3	4	7	3	7	11
Adventure (N = 15)	33	7	13	7	20	0	0	20
Horror (N = 95)	46	0	23	6	1	0	17	6
Sci-Fi (N = 7)	29	29	14	0	0	0	0	29
Porno (N = 5)	80	0	0	0	0	0	20	0
Mean (N = 297)	46	12	9	5	4	0.2	9	13

other genres also evoked feelings of disgust but were more diverse in their range of emotional reactions. Action-adventure movies evoked every emotion but powerlessness. Horror movies evoked every emotion but sadness and powerlessness. For dramatic movies, every emotion was elicited in someone, with the most frequent emotions being disgust and sadness.

RQ4a: What types of uncomfortable films might people be glad they saw or wish to see again? In spite of the discomfort of watching these films, there is also evidence that, at least in some cases, the experience had not been entirely aversive.

To further probe the bivalent emotional responses to the films, participants rated whether or not they were, in retrospect, glad they had seen the film and if they would like to see the film again, on a scale from absolutely not (1), probably not (2), not sure (3), probably yes (4), to absolutely yes (5). The means for these scales, partitioned by the three sources of discomfort (content, co-viewer, or both), appear at the top of Table 4. Participants made uncomfortable by co-viewers were significantly gladder, $p < .05$, by t-test, in retrospect they had seen the film (mean = 3.45) than those made uncomfortable by the content (mean = 2.55). Although a co-viewer may have strongly influenced how a participant reacted to a film (in silence or attempting to forget), the viewers were still more likely than those in the other

Table 4. Study 1: mean ratings by discomfort source and movie type for retrospect perspective[a] and desire to see the film again[a]

Discomfort source	Retrospect	See again
Content (N = 242)	2.55[b]	1.90[c]
Co-viewer (N = 22)	3.45[b]	3.31[c]
Both (N = 47)	2.74	2.15[c]
Movie type		
Comedy (N = 61)	2.51[d]	2.15
Drama (N = 118)	3.09[d]	2.31[e]
Adventure (N = 15	2.20[d]	1.67[e]
Horror (N = 95)	2.35[d]	1.78[e]

[a]Questions:
9. In retrospect, were you glad you had seen this film?
10. Do you have any desire to see this film again?
Scale:
1 = Absolutely not
2 = Probably not
3 = Not sure
4 = Probably yes
5 = Absolutely yes
[b]Co-viewer different from content at $p < .05$, by t-tests.
[c]Co-viewer different from content and both at $p < .05$, by t-tests.
[d]Drama different from all other movie types at $p < .05$, by t-tests.
[e]Drama different from horror and adventure at $p < .05$, by t-tests.

conditions to have been glad they had seen it. Similarly, participants made uncomfortable by a co-viewer were also significantly more likely to want to see the film again (mean = 3.31) than those in either of the other two conditions, $p < .05$ by t-test. Again, it appears that the presence of a co-viewer strongly dictates how a person reacts to a film. However, these results show that an initial negative reaction to an experience does not necessarily predict an overall negative evaluation of the film. These results suggest that participants might be open to seeing the film again later, perhaps with different co-viewers.

The mean scores for the type of movie and feelings about the film in retrospect and their desire to see the film again are found at the bottom of Table 4. Although ratings overall varied little, those who had watched a dramatic movie were significantly gladder they had seen the film (mean = 3.09) than individuals who had watched any other movie genre, $p < .05$ by t-test. The remaining scores hovered in the 2–3 mean range, which suggests that most individuals were either not glad they had seen the film or were unsure whether or not they were glad. Similar results were found for participants' desire to see the film again. Again, those individuals who were uncomfortable in a dramatic movie were significantly more likely to want to see the film again (mean = 2.31) than those seeing the horror or action-adventure films (means = 1.78 and 1.67), $p < .05$ by t-test. Thus, the overall finding for this measure concludes that, regardless of the movie genre, individuals who were uncomfortable during a movie were not likely to have a great desire to see the film again. However, for dramatic movies, participants were more likely to have been glad to have seen the movie and more open to seeing it again.

The mean scores for how emotion interacted with retrospective reaction and a desire to view the film again appear in Table 5. Those who had experienced sadness (M = 3.67) were significantly gladder they had seen the film than those who had experienced disgust, fear or those who had checked multiple emotions (means = 2.19, 2.50 and 2.57 respectively, $p < .05$ by t-test). The movies that evoked the emotion of sadness most often were drama and sci-fi. (These results are found in Table 3.)

Participants who experienced emotions of disgust (mean = 1.62) were significantly less likely to want to see the film again than those that experienced sadness, anxiety, powerlessness and other, $p < .05$ by t-test. The remaining emotions were all below the midpoint of being sure whether or not one would like to see the film again. Thus, although

Table 5. Study 1: mean ratings for retrospective reaction and desire to view the film again[a]

Emotion	Retrospect	See again
Fear ($N = 28$)	2.50[b]	1.96
Sadness ($N = 35$)	3.67[b]	2.64[c]
Disgust ($N = 141$)	2.19[b]	1.62[c]
Anxiety ($N = 17$)	3.06	2.88[c]
Detachment ($N = 14$)	2.86	2.00
Powerlessness ($N = 3$)	4.00	3.67[c]
Multiple ($N = 30$)	2.57[b]	2.00
Other ($N = 40$)	3.20	2.60[c]

[a]Scale
1 = Absolutely not
2 = Probably not
3 = Not sure
4 = Probably yes
5 = Absolutely yes
[b]Sadness different from disgust, fear and multiple at $p < .05$, by t-tests.
[c]Disgust different from sadness, anxiety, powerlessness and other at $p < .05$, by t-tests.

causal direction is not certain, results showed that the predominant emotion experienced and an individual's desire to see the film again are related. Future studies should assess why sadness has a more positive retrospective impact on viewers and why disgust has such a negative impact. Why are humans seemingly more open to being sad than disgusted? Why are these two emotions so critical to how one assesses the film later?

Male and female mean scores for the questions about retrospective emotions and a desire to see the film again did not differ significantly (2.7 and 2.0 respectively for each question).

STUDY 2

Study 1 assessed participants' real moviegoing experiences and has given a good idea of the sorts of films that people find uncomfortable, why they find them so, and how they manage that discomfort. However, because it used survey methodology, a high degree of experimental control and causative conclusions were not possible. Thus, Study 2 was performed, where the two major sources of discomfort, i.e. content and co-viewers, were systematically varied in hypothetical scenarios/vignettes presented to participants to assess their reactions. We administered the study to 81 undergraduates from the same sample as used in Study 1, during the 2007 spring and summer semesters.

Method

A total of 81 participants (32 men, 49 women) had a mean age of 21 (range: 17–34). Over two-thirds (69%) were Caucasian, 14% African American, 7% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 2% Native American, 2% did not give an ethnicity.

Based on the frequency of results from the pilot study and Study 1, five types of potentially uncomfortable movies were selected. Two were generic (a graphically violent movie and an overtly sexual R-rated movie) and three were specific films, all of which had been frequently mentioned in Study 1 as having been uncomfortable to watch. *Brokeback Mountain*, a critically acclaimed and popular film about a long-term gay relationship of two cowboys starting in the 1960s, and *American History X*, a very violent film dealing explicitly with brutal racism, white supremacists and racial hate crimes, were selected. Finally, *The Notebook*, a love story widely thought to appeal more to women than to men, was included to provide some gender balance to the masculine tilt of the violent movie and *American History X*.

Similarly, five different co-viewers were identified, again based on results from the pilot study and Study 1. One's spouse, parents, first date and two same-sexed friends were used. A fifth category was 'a gay friend', except when paired with *American History X*, in which case the co-viewer was identified as a 'different race friend'. Sample scenarios appear in Appendix 2.

Twenty-five scenarios were written, five for each film, with one scenario for each film for each co-viewer. All participants read five of the 25 scenarios, one for each film and one for each co-viewer. No film or co-viewer was repeated in the five scenarios read by any participant. The movies appeared in the same order for all (violent movie, *The Notebook, American History X*, sexual movie, and *Brokeback Mountain*), with the order of accompanying co-viewers counterbalanced. Participants were told to imagine themselves in the situation described in the scenario. The scenarios involving specific films provided a brief description for the benefit of those who had not seen the movie. For each scenario participants were asked, 'Under these conditions, how much do you think you would enjoy this movie?' and 'How uncomfortable, if at all, would you be watching this movie?' Both were rated on seven-point scales from low (1) to high (7).

Results and discussion

Results were analysed primarily in terms of film type and co-viewer. As with Study 1, the results will be presented and interpreted around the research questions presented earlier.

RQ4b: How does discomfort interact with enjoyment of the films? Results for the different films and co-viewers appear in Table 6, in both cases partitioned by gender, with all differences mentioned significant at $p < .05$ by t-test. In spite of the discomfort they thought they would experience, participants still anticipated a moderate level of enjoyment overall in most conditions. Men thought they would enjoy the violent film and *American History* X more than the women would, while the women thought they would enjoy *The Notebook* and *Brokeback Mountain* more than the men did. Men thought they would be more uncomfortable than women watching *The Notebook* and *Brokeback Mountain*, while women thought they would find *American History X* more uncomfortable to watch than the men did. Compared to the movie genre variable, the co-viewer variable did not show as much difference between the sexes, although men thought they would be more uncomfortable and enjoy the movie less than women thought they would, when watching with their parents. Men also thought they would be more uncomfortable on a first date than the women did (all ps $< .05$ by t-test).

Table 6. Study 2: mean enjoyment (E) and discomfort (D) ratings (1 = low, 7 = high) by movies and co-viewers

Movie	Men-E	Women-E	Men-D	Women-D
Violent film	5.06[a]	4.22	3.22	3.18
The Notebook	3.93	6.06[b]	3.00[c]	1.65
American History X	4.87[a]	4.27	3.28	3.94[d]
Sexual film	4.00	3.88	4.38	4.31
Brokeback Mountain	3.34	4.33[b]	4.41[c]	3.22
Co-viewer				
First date	4.44	4.69	3.59[f]	2.92
Spouse	4.09	4.55	3.34	3.63
Two same-sex friends	4.06	4.31	3.66	3.12
Parents	4.03[e]	4.69	4.41[e]	3.06
Gay friend	4.43	4.68	3.43	3.24

[a]Men enjoy more than Women at $p < .05$, by t-tests.
[b]Women enjoy more than Men at $p < .05$, by t-tests.
[c]Men more uncomfortable watching than Women at $p < .05$, by t-tests.
[d]Women more uncomfortable watching than Men at $p < .05$, by t-tests.
[e]Men enjoy less and more uncomfortable watching than Women when watching with one's parents at $p < .05$, by t-tests.
[f]Men more uncomfortable watching than Women on a first date at $p < .05$, by t-tests.

Table 7. Study 2: discomfort ratings by film and co-viewer (1 = low, 7 = high)

	Notebook	Violence	AmHistX	Sex	Brokeback	Mean
Parents	1.9	2.9	3.6	5.5	4.1	3.6
Spouse	2.1	3.4	3.8	4.4	3.9	3.5
First date	2.5	2.7	3.2	3.8	3.9	3.2
Friends	2.1	3.8	3.8	3.9	3.1	3.3
Gay friend	2.4	3.2	4.0[a]	4.1	3.5	3.4
Mean	2.2	3.2	3.7	4.3	3.7	3.4

[a]This condition for *American History X* involved a different-race friend instead of a gay friend.

Table 7 breaks down the discomfort ratings by both film and co-viewer. Although these data must be interpreted with caution, given that there are only 15–20 participants per cell and thus could not be tested statistically, there are some interesting trends. Overall, *The Notebook* evoked low discomfort ratings with all co-viewers, while the sexual film evoked the highest anticipated discomfort. Interestingly, by far the most uncomfortable combination was watching the sexual movie with one's parents.

As in Study 1, experiencing discomfort did not necessarily translate into being sorry one saw the film or not wanting to see it again. About 30% reported they would have been glad they had seen the film, and 15% said they would actually like to see it again, with another 20% uncertain but open to it.

RQ2: How do people adapt to the discomfort while watching the film and afterward? Similar to Study 1, two questions asked people how they thought they would handle any discomfort while watching the movie and after it was over (top of Table 8). During the movie, women were non-significantly more likely than men to say they would voice their concern to their co-viewers (40 *vs.* 28%), while men were non-significantly more likely to say they would pretend they were enjoying the movie (26 *vs.* 12%). Overall, 27% of the men and 30% of the women said they would 'not be

Table 8. Study 2: strategies for handling discomfort (%)

	Men	Women
'How do you think you would handle any discomfort you felt during the movie?'		
a. 'I would leave'	11	11
b. 'I would voice my concern about the movie to the individual(s) watching it with me'	28	40
c. 'I would pretend to enjoy the movie'	26	12
d. 'I would feel bad because I knew person(s) watching movie with me were displeased'	8	6
e. 'I would not be uncomfortable'	27	30
'After movie was over, how do you think you would handle any discomfort you felt?'		
a. Talk with individual(s) watching with me	39[a]	61[a]
b. Ask to never see that type of movie again	16	11
c. Begin new activity to forget the movie	28	20
d. Remain in silence	9	4
e. Other	7	5

[a]Women different from men at $p < .05$, by χ^2-tests.

Table 9. Study 2: response of 'I would not be uncomfortable' by gender (%)

	Men	Women
Film		
Violent film	47[a]	22
Sexual film	16	12
American History X	22	12
The Notebook	28	74[b]
Brokeback Mountain	22	31
Co-viewers		
Parents	16	31
Spouse	28	27
Same-sex friends	22	26
First date	41	35
Gay friend	29	41
Different race friend	25	8
(American History X condition only)		

[a]Men different from women at $p < .05$, by χ^2-tests.
[b]Women different from men at $p < .05$, by χ^2-tests.

uncomfortable'. These data are broken down by film and co-viewer conditions in Table 9. Two films showed strong gender differences, with 74% of the women (*vs.* 28% of men) saying they would not be uncomfortable watching *The Notebook*, while almost half of the men (47%), but only 22% of the women, said they would not be uncomfortable watching the violent movie, all $ps < .05$ by χ^2-tests.

For anticipated coping strategies after the movie was over (bottom Table 8), well over half (61%) of women said they would talk to their co-viewers about it, while only 39% of men reported they would do so, $p < .05$ by χ^2-test. When asked about anticipated conversation with the co-viewers while watching the film, there were no gender differences, and 42% overall thought there would be little or no conversation. The sexual film was by far the most likely to elicit responses of 'making fun of the movie' (37%) or 'commenting on how gross the movie is' (31%). For *American History X*, 65% thought it would elicit comments on 'discrimination characters faced', though only 15% suggested this would happen for *Brokeback Mountain* ($p < .05$ by χ^2-tests), the other film explicitly dealing with prejudice and discrimination. Why racial discrimination appears more salient or at least more worthy of discussion than prejudice based on sexual orientation is not entirely clear.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

These two exploratory studies have produced some solid, albeit preliminary, answers to the research questions about the experience of watching a movie that elicits a general negative affect or emotional discomfort. First of all, discomfort watching a movie comes primarily from two sources. The major one has to do with the content of the film. Particularly, extremely explicit violent or sexual images or themes can be troubling. Content is not the whole story, however. A secondary class of reasons a moviegoing experience can be distressing has to do with the co-viewers. Sometimes the mere presence of some other person or persons can be very uncomfortable, particularly if it interacts with problematic content. Clearly both content and co-

viewers can affect the uses and gratifications obtained from viewing a film.

Just as there are sometimes positive aspects to watching a scary movie (Bartsch et al., 2010; Harris et al., 2000; Zillmann & Weaver, 1996), so is there sometimes an upside to these uncomfortable movie viewings. The level of enjoyment is most often moderate, rather than very low. Being uncomfortable watching a film typically, but not necessarily, leads to an assessment of having wished one had not seen the film and not wanting to see it again. The sizable minority of cases where someone is open to seeing the film again, particularly in the case of dramas and where the discomfort comes from the presence of a co-viewer rather than the content, are quite interesting and worthy of further study. This issue seems an interesting one to study further as a way of exploring simultaneous appetitive and aversive motivation in a common behaviour such as watching a movie.

The two studies yielded interesting and complementary data in several areas, although because of the different nature of the two methodologies, the questions about coping strategies could not be identical. Nonetheless, a lot of consistency was found, such as the tendency for women to be more likely than men to voice concern during, and particularly after, the movie. However, discomfort was handled somewhat differently between the studies when asking participants how they would handle discomfort while viewing the film: In Study 1, both genders were least likely to pretend to enjoy the movie while in Study 2 men were least likely to leave while women were least likely to leave or pretend to enjoy the movie. Note that the answer 'I would leave' in Study 2 is roughly comparable to 'I stopped watching it without finishing the film' in Study 1.

Studying movies that make people uncomfortable presents considerable methodological challenges. The typical methodology of showing someone a film clip and assessing their responses is not likely to work well for this problem, as not everyone would find any given clip uncomfortable, or, in the case where most might, the clip might have such extreme content as to pose ethical issues for its use. Also, the co-viewer variable cannot be systematically and realistically varied in a lab setting, although some limited manipulation might be possible (e.g. watching with a same-sexed group, one opposite-sex person or alone).

Thus we have used two very different methodologies. One used a survey to assess participants' individual memories for their own uncomfortable moviegoing experiences. In this case we were able to be sure that we tapped into real experiences of being uncomfortable watching a movie. However, this was at the cost of having to deal with a wide variety of materials, retrospective bias, and the inability to exert tight experimental control. Experiment 2 using systematically varied scenarios exercised a high degree of experimental control and uniformity of stimuli, although at the cost of being somewhat artificial, with participants responding to hypothetical moviegoing situations rather than a real one from their own experience. Clearly both surveys and vignette studies have their strengths and limitations. However, using the logic of converging evidence, these two very different methodologies yielded consistent and

interpretable complementary results, thus increasing the confidence in the findings.

Being exploratory research, these studies of course leave many questions unanswered. A primary one is to further probe the nature of the emotion of 'uncomfortable' moviegoing experiences, especially how the positive and negatively valenced aspects of the experience interact with each other. What specific sort of negative affect is strongest? Disgust seems to be the most common emotion, but others are also elicited sometimes, depending heavily on the film genre. Films eliciting sadness were more likely seen as having some redeeming value or being worth seeing again than were films eliciting disgust. Relating these negative emotional responses to other variables, including participants' prior preferences in movie genres, site of viewing (home or theater), and initial expectations (e.g. were they expecting to be uncomfortable?) would be fruitful extensions of the research.

Another question is the degree of discomfort elicited by different types of content and co-viewers. It was interesting that by far the most uncomfortable combination in Study 2 was watching a sexual movie with one's parents (Table 7). Parents as co-viewers were not necessarily negative with other movies, and the sexual film, though overall producing the most discomfort, was not seen nearly as uncomfortable with other co-viewers. The combination of parents and sex, however, was toxic. To fully grasp the complexity and subtlety of exactly what makes a moviegoing experience uncomfortable, one must consider such interactions.

Coping strategies for dealing with discomfort showed some interesting trends, particularly in regard to gender. Contrary to the stereotype of women being less assertive than men, women were actually more likely to verbally express their concerns to their co-viewers, while men's responses were more variable but somewhat more likely to use avoidance responses like leaving the scene or changing the topic of conversation. Whether this reflects women's generally greater empathy in identifying with the film characters or the co-viewers or their greater comfort and social skills in dealing with emotion, compared to men, is not clear at this point but would merit further research. Perhaps men and women receive different gratifications from handling the uncomfortable media situation in different ways. Although the authors know of no taxonomy about adult coping strategies for watching difficult material, it might be useful to consider Cantor's (2009) division of cognitive and non-cognitive strategies for different ages of children watching frightening images with their parents. For example, younger children more often use non-cognitive strategies such as hiding their eyes or burying their head in a parent's lap, while older children and parents would talk about how unrealistic the violence is and how actors are not really being hurt.

Emotion in response to media, film in particular, is intense but in no way simple. Hedonically, the valence is usually primarily positive, but there are significant pieces of negative affect widely present as well. This negative affect may or may not be enough to make the moviegoing experience overall an unpleasant one. Such nuances are part of what media psychologists need to better understand.

REFERENCES

Bartsch, A., Appel, M., & Storch, D. (2010). Predicting emotions and meta-emotions at the movies: The role of the Need for Affect in audiences' experience of horror and drama. *Communication Research*, 37, 167–190.

Bartsch, A., Vorderer, P., Mangold, R., & Viehoff, R. (2008). Appraisal of emotions in media use: Toward a process model of meta-emotion and emotion regulation. *Media Psychology*, 11, 7–27.

Bonds-Raacke, J. M., & Harris, R. J. (2006). Autobiographical memories of televised sporting events watched in different social settings. *Psychological Reports*, 99, 197–208.

Bradley, M. M. (2000). Emotion and motivation. In J. T. Cacioppo, L. G. Tassinary, & G. G. Berntson (Eds.), *Handbook of psychophysiology* (pp. 602–642). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cady, E. T., Harris, R. J., & Knappenberger, J. B. (2008). Using music to cue autobiographical memories of different lifetime periods. *Psychology of Music*, 36, 157–177.

Cantor, J. (2009). Fright reactions to mass media. . In J. Bryant, & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (3rd ed., pp. 287–303). New York: Routledge.

Cantor, J., Mares, M. L., & Hyde, J. S. (2003). Autobiographical memories of exposure to sexual media content. *Media Psychology*, 5, 1–31.

Conway, M. A. (2001). Sensory-perceptual episodic memory and its context: Autobiographical memory. In A. Baddeley, J. P. Aggleton, & M. A. Conway (Eds.), *Episodic memory: New directions in research* (pp. 53–70). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Conway, M. A., & Pleydell-Pearce, C. W. (2000). The construction of autobiographical memories in the self-memory system. *Psychological Review*, 107, 261–288.

Gross, J. J. (2007). *Handbook of emotional regulation*. New York: Guilford Press.

Gross, J. J., & Levenson, R. (1995). Emotion elicitation using films. *Cognition and Emotion*, 9, 87–108.

Harris, R. J. (2009). *A cognitive psychology of mass communication* (5th ed.). New York: Routledge.

Harris, R. J., Bonds-Raacke, J. M., & Cady, E. T. (2005). What we remember from television and movies: Using autobiographical memory to study mass media. In W. R. Walker, & D. J. Herrmann (Eds.), *Cognitive technology: Essays on the transformation of thought and society* (pp. 130–148). Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co. Publishers.

Harris, R. J., Hoekstra, S. J., Sanborn, F. W., Scott, C. L., Dodds, L., & Brandenburg, J. D. (2004). Autobiographical memories for seeing romantic movies on a date: Romance is not just for women. *Media Psychology*, 6, 257–284.

Harris, R. J., Hoekstra, S. J., Sanborn, F. W., Scott, C. L., Karafa, J. A., & Brandenburg, J. D. (2000). Young men's and women's different autobiographical memories of the experience of seeing frightening movies on a date. *Media Psychology*, 2, 245–268.

Harris, R. J., Werth, A. J., Bures, K. E., & Bartel, C. M. (2008). Social movie quoting: What, why, and how? *Ciencias Psicologicas*, 2, 35–45.

Harrison, K., & Cantor, J. (1999). Tales from the screen: Enduring fright reactions to scary media. *Media Psychology*, 1, 97–116.

Hoekstra, S. J., Harris, R. J., & Helmick, A. L. (1999). Autobiographical memories about the experience of seeing frightening movies in childhood. *Media Psychology*, 1, 117–140.

Knobloch-Westerwick, S. (2006). Mood management: Theory, evidence, and advancements. In J. Bryant, & P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Psychology of entertainment* (pp. 239–254). Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Konijn, E. A., Walma van de Molen, J. H., & van Nes, S. (2009). Emotions bias perceptions of realism in audiovisual media: Why we may take fiction for real. *Discourse Processes*, 46, 309–340.

Koole, S. L. (2009). The psychology of emotion regulation: An integrative review. *Cognition and Emotion*, 23, 4–41.

Lang, A., Potter, R. F., & Bolls, P. (2009). Where psychophysiology meets the media: Taking the effects out of mass media research. In J. Bryant, & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (3rd ed., pp. 185–206). New York: Routledge.

Maio, G. R., & Esses, G. M. (2001). The need for affect: Individual differences in the motivation to approach or avoid emotions. *Journal of Personality*, 69, 583–615.

Oliver, M. B. (1993). Exploring the paradox of the enjoyment of sad films. *Human Communication Research, 19*, 315–342.

Rubin, A. M. (2009). Uses-and-gratifications perspective on media effects. In J. Bryant, & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (3rd ed., pp. 165–184). New York: Routledge.

Vorderer, P., & Hartmann, T. (2009). Entertainment and enjoyment as media effects. In J. Bryant, & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (3rd ed., pp. 532–550). New York: Routledge.

Zillmann, D. (2006). Empathy: Affective reactivity to others' emotional experiences. In J. Bryant, & P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Psychology of entertainment* (pp. 151–181). Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Zillmann, D., & Weaver, J. B. (1996). Gender-socialization theory of reactions to horror. In J. B. Weaver, & R. Tamborini (Eds.), *Horror films: Current research on audience preferences and reactions* (pp. 81–101). Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Zillmann, D., Weaver, J. B., Mundorf, N., & Aust, C. F. (1986). Effects of opposite-gender companions affect to horror on distress, delight, and attraction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51*, 586–594.

APPENDIX 1: STUDY 1 QUESTIONNAIRE
Sometimes, for various reasons, we end up watching a movie that we do not care for. Think of a movie you have seen that **made you feel uncomfortable** in some way.

Appendix 1: Study 1 Questionnaire

Sometimes, for various reasons, we end up watching a movie that we don't care for. Think of a movie you have seen that **made you feel uncomfortable** in some way.

Title (or description) of movie:
1. Type of movie (circle 1): Comedy Drama Action-Adventure Horror Sci-Fi Porno Other_____

2. **Why** did watching this movie make you feel uncomfortable (check one)?
   because of.....
   _____ a. The content of the movie   _____ c. Both the content and who was watching it with me
   _____ b. Who was watching it with me   _____ d. Some other reason _____

3. If the **content** made you uncomfortable, which of the following aspects of content was uncomfortable?
      (Check all that apply)
   _____ a. Graphic violence   _____ d. Very disturbing theme
   _____ b. Explicit sexual content   _____ e. Emotionally troubling
   _____ c. Offensive language   _____ f. Offensive portrayal of some social group
                                          _____ g. Some other aspect_____

4. If the **others watching** the movie with you made the experience uncomfortable, who were they? (check one)
   _____ a. Parents or adult/teen family members   _____ c. A date I didn't know very well yet
   _____ b. Children too young for this content   _____ d. Someone else I didn't know very well
                                                       _____ e. Someone else _____

5. **Why** did the presence of these other people make you uncomfortable (check one)?
   _____ a. I feared the other viewer(s) would not approve of the content.
   _____ b. I did not know what the other viewer(s) would think of the content.
   _____ c. I thought the content was not appropriate for the age of other viewer(s).
   _____ d. I was worried about what the other person(s) would think of me for watching/choosing this movie.
   _____ e. The other person's reactions to the film were very different from mine (how?_____)

6. What **emotion** did this film predominantly leave you with? (Check one)
   _____ Fear   _____ Sadness   _____ Disgust   _____ Anxiety   _____ Detachment   _____ Powerlessness   _____ Other

7. How did you **handle your discomfort** while watching this film?
   _____ a. I stopped watching it without finishing the film.
   _____ b. **While** watching the movie, I voiced my concern about the content to the others watching it.
   _____ c. Sometime **after** the movie, I voiced my concern about the content to the others watching it.
   _____ d. I pretended I enjoyed the movie.
   _____ e. I watched it in silence and did not let my feelings show.

8. After the movie was over, what did you do?
   ___ a. Talk with individual(s) watching with me.
   ___ b. Ask to never see that type of movie again.
   ___ c. Begin new activity to forget the movie.
   ___ d. Remain in silence.
   ___ e. Other.

9. In retrospect, were you glad you had seen this film (circle one)?
   Absolutely Not   Probably Not   Not sure   Probably Yes   Absolutely yes

10. Do you have any desire to see this film again (circle one)?
   Absolutely Not   Probably Not   Not sure   Probably Yes   Absolutely yes

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE SCENARIOS FROM STUDY 2
Sexual movie with parents

Pretend that one weekend you return home for a surprise visit. When you arrive you find your mother, a retired kindergarten teacher, and your father, an accountant, just sitting down to watch a movie they had rented. They tell you that all they knew of the movie was that it was rated R for explicit sexual content and raunchy language but had received exceptional reviews. Not wanting to ruin their evening plans you agree to join them. The movie proved to be even more sexual and raunchy than you had predicted.

The Notebook with gay friend

Imagine that you and a friend, who happens to be gay, visit the home of another friend to watch a movie. When you arrive they tell you that they had rented _The Notebook,_ which is a movie about two young people of opposite walks of life who fall in love. After a summer of falling in love, they are separated by the young woman's family. Years later they meet up again and find they are still deeply in love. Although not your choice, you decide to stay and watch the film.

American History X with spouse

Imagine that you and your spouse visit the home of another couple to watch a movie. Unknown to you, they have rented the movie _American History X,_ which is a movie detailing how a violently racist white 'skinhead' is transformed after being sent to prison for murdering a black individual. This character, played by Edward Norton, returns home to find his younger brother following in his same racist, violent and dangerous footsteps. The movie portrays extreme examples of racism, Nazi propaganda, brutal language and graphic violence. Although the movie was not your choice, you and your spouse decide to stay to watch it.