



Term Paper: To What Extent Has Social Media Become a Horror Film Plot Device?

Prepared for

Dr. Ghada Abaido

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Department of Communication and Media

Canadian University Dubai, UAE

Prepared By

Sara Shikooh 20200001222

Sofya Abu Baker 20200001459

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The genre of horror has sparked controversy on its own. Explicit content, intentionally harrowing and inhuman themes and plot lines- the amplification of the things we already fear most. In books, film, television serials and more, it seems as though there is always an audience looking for a good rush of adrenaline. Aside from supernatural beings and creatures such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or the Duffer Brothers' *Demogorgon* from hit Netflix show *Stranger Things*, there is a long list of entertainment oriented media based on the fears sparked by technology and how it is rapidly developing- or simply how we use it. From Ray Bradbury's *There Will Come Soft Rains* to the entire basis of the *Black Mirror* franchise, we see the use of technology being used with inherently negative and concerning connotations- and this brings up the observation and question as to how far the use of technology as a horror theme really goes, and more specifically in this modern generation, how social media is the new *Bloody Mary*.

The definition of social media is as tricky and serpentine as the definition of horror or a horror movie- the pair together allow room for a range of different media being labelled as one or the other. The term social media is used loosely now, as is the term 'scary movie'; the true definition and criteria required for a platform to be considered a social media is detailed as a web/internet based site or application which enables users to share concepts, build connections/network, share information, and communicate- while this is not a cohesive list, this definition is apt for the term in the way it is used by moviemakers.

"A horror film is one that seeks to elicit fear in its audience for entertainment purposes. Horror films additionally aim to evoke viewers' nightmares, fears, revulsions and terror of the unknown and macabre" states Wikipedia on the true meaning of a horror movie. Buzz-phrases in this definition include 'elicit fear' and 'unknown and macabre'. The horror genre has been one of the most popular genres over the last century, but how did it all begin, and what makes it so special? It all started back in the 1890s when the first movie to ever be on the record called ' ' also known as *The House of the Devil* came out which was a French short silent film since there were no films with sound up until the 1920s. The film was directed by a French filmmaker and magician named George Millie who led many technical and narrative developments such as trick photography, double exposure, and special effects to bring horror to life in the earliest days of cinema. In the early 20th century horror used to emphasize mainly ghosts, skeletons, and the devil playing on supernatural and religious imagery.

Meanwhile, in Western Europe, there was a massive change in the horror scene due to the rise of expressionism which utilized set designs and cinematography to change internal fears which brought up psychological horror. The first golden age of horror



began in the 1920s and lasted up until the 1950s in the United States, 'universal horror' laid the foundation of modern horror films, and was mainly about monsters- an audience favorite. Frankenstein was released during the period of depression in where his monster was abandoned by his master and hunted by the villagers. This was the mirror of the millions of Americans who had just lost their job. The monsters and horror on-screen helped the mass public address their fears, and horror movies themselves reflected the fears of our society. The 1950's observed the first destructive power of atomic weapons, and growing tension between the USA and the Soviet Union led to themes of 'The Red Scare' as well as plotlines involving a nuclear radiation leak resulting in massive, invasive species such as ants or spiders- a metaphor for both the spread of communism as well as the looming fear of potential nuclear war. Horror movies have always presented the public with the magical screen into the political, social, and popular fears or misconceptions held by the majority.

The film 'Peeping Tom' by Michael Powell showcased a serial killer carrying a video camera to record the fates of his victims. This helped establish the Slasher genre, characterized as "a horror film, especially one depicting a series of violent murders or assaults by an attacker armed with a knife or razor" by the oxford language dictionary; eliminating the horror from its supernatural and religious themes bringing it into reality which focuses on real-life fright such as murderers and stalkers. Up until this day, horror films are highly popular and are all meant to both frighten and entertain audiences with different sub-genres that vary from Slasher horror to Psychological horror, Paranormal horror, and much more.

There is a very specific set of philosophies behind the inclination to enjoy horror films, a few of them being the theory that the gore and freakish content shown on the screen satisfies a dark, cruel part of the human mind and persona- "the beast within" as stated by Malcolm Turvey, director of the Film and Media Studies program and professor. He also goes on to say that while the genre of horror is thought to be one of low dignity and has a 'trashy' reputation for appealing to the most basic and vice-filled human desires, the art of the film is capable of intense complexity and exploration of very diverse themes, often being very raw and unfiltered- very much like the genuine human experience.

This further splits into the idea of demographics attracted to this genre; according to statistics from psychcentral.com, men tend to watch more horror films than women do. This is said to coincide with the concept of masculinity and feeling internal validation when a horror movie with life threatening themes or violence does not scare the man watching, a means of feeling tough and traditionally masculine. In the earlier eras of this art, the visuals were also catered to a male gaze- hardly clothed women, women being brutally murdered, chased, crying, being in pain, or generally falling into discomfort due to a male

antagonist. Naturally, this turns most women away from enjoying slasher or other genres of horror that reflect real life- while media is a mirror to reality, these films depict fears and struggles that seem farfetched to men, but are a harsh truth for women. This same dynamic of a male antagonist and a female victim can be considered a violent male fantasy, appealing to the aforementioned inner beast.

At the same time, there is the flipside to the genre, where a female antagonist goes after a male or group of victims with both genders. While at first glance this seems like it shows a woman or female creature in a powerful position, that position/character is almost always sexualized to maintain the male gaze. One film notably aimed at women with a message women will relate to is *Jennifer's Body* by director Karyn Kusama, starring Megan Fox- iconic sex symbol of the 2010's, and Amanda Seyfried- iconic 'good girl', best known for her lead in *'Mamma Mia!'*. With a plot centered around sexual assault leading to a blood sacrifice which turns antagonist Jennifer into a literal boy-eating demon, the film takes stereotypes in the film industry and uses them as metaphors to highlight the 'female problem'- which is "the utterly sad fact that women, no matter how much they love each other, are always, always in competition with one another, and it is horrific to see," according to Megan Fox herself. The film was considered a flop due to its marketing towards men. In this film we also see the use of social media- a reference to the band in the movie selling their souls to become famous online, for which they decide to sacrifice Jennifer's Body.

Aside from a gender demographic, horror films are also more widely consumed by younger people looking for a thrill or rush of adrenaline, similar to a rollercoaster or a haunted house. One might say that the elder generation could be considered more sensitive to extreme content despite them experiencing the effects and real-life horrors of war; this is for two major reasons. Entertainment media can be media that allows an escape from real life while still relating or mirroring it; it is a commonly held idea that horror films take a bad situation and make it worse. The elder generation, having seen and experienced the tragedies of real life through experiences that come with age, might not want to see media that reminds them or brings them back to that memory. Another reason would be the exposure the younger generation as already received when talking about tragedy and horror- while maybe not having seen it with their own two eyes, the internet generation has seen and heard almost double the explicit content experienced by others, and as they are only interacting with it through a screen, they are desensitized to it and do not hold it with much gravity, therefore seeing it as just another slightly different type of content. This also means that when there are films containing plotlines that this younger generation inherently relates to, such as social media and the dangers that follow it, there is a massive chance the warnings of the movie can be taken lightly- and at the same time, as they are young, if the message is frightening enough to make an impact on the way they behave, they can very easily be considered traumatized.

There are quite a few movies such as Unfriended, The Den, and Nerve that raises a few good questions concerning how social media works, how it is utilized, additionally how it shapes involvement. For instance, the movie Unfriended gives us a peak into cyberbullying. The movie revolves around a group of teenagers named Blaire, Mitch, Jess, Adam, and Val, who take part in an online group chat session- they are abruptly joined by a user with the display name "Billie227." As Blaire tries to uncover Billie's character, her friends are constrained to stand up to their darkest privileged insights and lies.



(Unfriended)

This is one of the most popular social media warning movies, where parents urged their children to be cautions of the media they upload and who they speak to online, as it could be absolutely anyone sitting behind the screen. This is the evolution of the ‘stranger danger’ teaching, where one now no longer has to worry about a strange man offering their child sweets and kidnapping them alone, but also about the spread of personal information being leaked, explicit images, ‘grooming’, cyberbullying, and even manipulation to do terrible things- as seen by the internet craze ‘blue whale’.

The use of social media in horror movies often revolve around the key fears of invasion of privacy, sexual abuse and human trafficking, pedophilia, blackmail, addiction, and the specifics that come with being stalked. All very real-life monsters that might have a much harsher effect on the audience than a possessed doll- solely due to the fact that these things can happen to absolutely anyone, and can be amplified by the usage of social media. In contrast to older horror films involving nuclear threats and metaphors for unemployment and immigration, this new set of films reflect the sudden ability to track, locate, see, hear, and learn about a person miles away from you through the tap of a few buttons. These new age horror movies mirror the fears brought on by the existence of social media and the human nature to be social and

want to socialize. This is where we see the gruesome dark side of the internet, which can hardly be called an exaggeration.

One movie that comes to mind is the now trending YouTube published movie *Megan is Missing*, a truly sickening documentary based on real events, as most of these are. The movie follows the plot of two young teenagers, one wild child and one generic ‘good girl’ archetype, and how one thing leads to another and the dangers of speaking to people online. The movie depicts a number of extremely explicit images and videos of the original girls in various acts of torture- these images and videos were up for public consumption of various dark web & fetish websites. These websites and pages act as platforms for similar minded people- predators, to be concise, and fits the definition of what one may call social media.

With the more generic idea of social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat we see this more popular type of social media enter the playing field in *Black Mirror*- a Netflix Series dedicated to futuristic hypothetical concepts- and how they can go south. Extremely south. In episode two of series five, titled *Smithereens*, the plot explores the use of social media and how much can hide behind a password. It also delves into the similar tones of kidnapping and suicide as seen before, but also brings to the table a more surveillance based plotline, where the social media app in the show (titled *Smithereens* as well) provides data and information about their users.

This concept of a data leak causing turmoil is one that reflects very real cases in our lives today, in light of the Facebook Data Leak, where countless users’ information and personal data was acquired without consent so they could be shown political advertisements. This is an example of a corporate breach of privacy, although one of the more hard-hitting examples would be the act of ‘doxxing’- a federal offense where a person’s exact location and information is published to the public, inherently making them vulnerable to anyone with malicious intent. As a real life issue, these things translate into horror films in very specific and more relatable ways; usually in the form of a stalker.

The plotline of stalkers using social media to learn everything about you from a distance and even physically locate you is explored in another streamed media, Netflix’s *You*, based on a stalker with a self-claimed righteous cause. The beauty of this series in particular is how the story is told from the perspective of the antagonist who does not believe he is the antagonist, and therefore creates a narrative where the audience may actually sympathize with him. In the various monologues the main character delivers, he consistently expresses his dislike for social media and how “everyone makes everything so available,” essentially stating that it is not his fault- the user has put up all this information about themselves on their own. It is simply his way of using social media, not stalking.

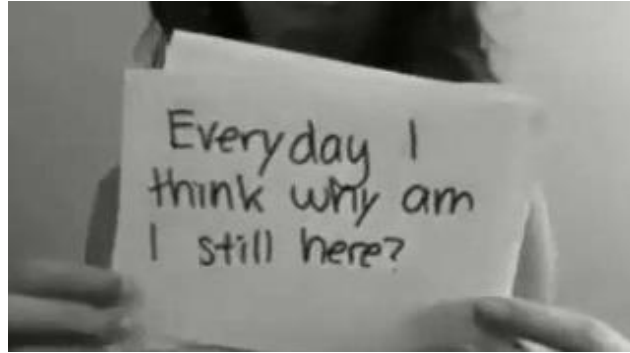
While this is an example of a series and not a film, the initial genre of horror/thriller remains the same.

The internet has changed the way human beings communicate with one another, as the term “socializing” could incorporate an online component. Even though various social media platforms impact society in a positive way for instance, by connecting users from all around the world, allowing them to share content, and expressing themselves.

It does have its downside which could cause individuals to face some fears towards social media. One common issue nowadays is that not a lot of people read the terms and conditions and agree on them without ensuring what it states. No matter how addicting social media could be, it’s safe to say that being an active user doesn’t only leave individuals depressed but also lowers their self-esteem, while keeping them stressed- due to a constant comparison of themselves to celebrities online. Cyberbullying: posting, sending, or sharing extremely sensitive content to humiliate or expose somebody, is another large issue. Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying makes it easy and accessible to harm others. As it doesn’t involve face-to-face interaction, in reality, it also decreases the level of empathy that a bully feels towards the victim as it's done through a screen and observing the person’s reaction is not possible.

Perhaps, a case highlighted in the media back in 2012, outlines how a teenager named Amanda Todd committed suicide due to a horrible situation with cyberbullying. Being only 12, she was being used by an older male that threatened her to show her breasts in an online webcam chat in order to prevent her parents from getting killed. When those images were leaked, Amanda kept receiving endless hate comments and threats from almost all social media platforms. This history would haunt her and keep rising to the surface, no matter how many times she moved. Furthermore, she didn’t just get bullied online, but in real life as well- after this incident, she decided to publish a video on YouTube explaining her story to the whole world, in particular emphasizing cyber-bullying which was quite new to people back in the days.





A glimpse of Amanda's video on Youtube.

Today this video spreads awareness and helps us understand the dangers of social media and how precautionous we should be when publishing certain content by making our profiles public.

Though many of the functions of social media services to preserve and control established socio-cultural and political norms, they also possess the inherent capability to distort our sense of society just enough to allow instances of horror to slip through. The quick changes to our understanding of self and others created by the quick changes to communication technologies have disarranged a few of the characterizing social perimeters and in this way permitted these moments of frightfulness to continue through social media itself. On the other hand, the most important media functions would be to serve as the eyes and ears (surveillance) in order to transmit up to date information, spread awareness about cases like that. The Correlation function plays an important role too as it addresses how media presents facts and how credible the media is, so given the example of Amanda Todd it should be ensured that the information is as precise as possible.

In recent times, these movies and films have been taking advantage of the developing technology and social trends brought to us in the form of social media, maximizing the fear that follows being on the internet. A main take away from the evolution of plot and horror, the content created in terms of entertainment have always and will always evolve with the changing patterns of society; using social media and the internet as a key factor in a movie made to invoke fear, is sure to have an impact on the audience subjected to the film. However, the frank realism of these films may turn viewers away, on the basis that entertainment is to detach from the harshness of the real world. This is one of the main reasons these films are less popular, and are treated as subpar. To conclude, the use of social media as a plot device in new age horror films is a gateway to exploring the inherent human fears of losing privacy, having your freewill taken from you, as well as the more major ones such as the depiction of unhinged behavior enacted by other human beings, often hiding in plain sight. This fear of the unknown is what pushes the genre forwards, and forwards it continues to move.

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