

Exploring the Role of Sound in Horror Films: Gen Z Viewing Preferences Across Personal Devices and Theatrical Screens

T.K Navanjali, H.P.Dissanayake, I.P.Adihetti

^{1,2,3} Department of Marketing and Tourism Management, NSBM Green University

t.k.navanjali@gmail.com, hasantha.d@nsbm.ac.lk, imasha.a@nsbm.ac.lk

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of sound on the viewing preferences of Generation Z in the context of horror films, with a focus on comparing the experience of watching on personal devices versus in theatres. Sound plays a crucial role in enhancing fear and suspense in horror films, making the viewing environment an essential factor in the overall experience. A quantitative research approach was adopted, utilizing an online survey of 200 Gen Z participants to collect data on their viewing habits, sound preferences, and perceptions of sound quality across different platforms. The results show that while a majority of respondents prefer the convenience of watching horror films on personal devices, a significant portion acknowledged that theatres offer a superior sound experience that heightens the horror effect. Additionally, 65% of respondents reported using headphones to improve sound quality when viewing on personal devices, though many still noted that this does not fully replicate the immersive soundscapes of a theatre. The findings suggest that sound design is a key factor influencing Gen Z's preference for viewing platforms, highlighting the need for optimized sound experiences across both personal devices and theatre screens. These insights provide valuable recommendations for filmmakers and streaming services aiming to enhance the horror film experience for Gen Z audiences.

Keywords: film sounds, horror films, generation Z, viewing preferences, film screening

1. Introduction

Sound plays a central role in the horror film genre. It functions not merely as a supporting element but as a primary vehicle for emotional and psychological engagement. According to Michel Chion (1994), sound in cinema provides "added value," giving visuals additional meaning and emotional weight. In horror films, this is evident through unsettling soundscapes, sudden auditory shocks, and low-frequency vibrations that heighten fear and suspense. As a result, the auditory dimension often defines the horror experience more than visuals alone (Sonnenschein, 2001). At the same time, audience viewing habits have changed significantly. Generation Z, born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, increasingly consumes films on personal devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops. As digital natives, they prioritize mobility, accessibility, and flexibility in their media consumption. This shift from traditional cinema settings to portable devices raises questions about how effectively sound, especially in horror, delivers its intended emotional and psychological impact in different viewing environments (Statista, 2022; Nash, 2020). Advanced technologies like Dolby Atmos have made theater sound more immersive and multidimensional, offering a rich sensory experience that is difficult to replicate on smaller personal devices (Meyer and Anderson, 2019). In contrast, mobile devices often lack the depth and spatial sound quality needed for a fully immersive horror experience. Although many Gen Z viewers use headphones to improve audio clarity (Gibbs, 2020), the spatial and emotional effects of sound may still be reduced. This study explores how sound influences the horror film experience for Generation Z across different platforms. It investigates whether the immersive quality of horror soundscapes is maintained when viewed on personal devices compared to traditional cinema settings. The aim is to assess how these shifts affect emotional engagement and viewing preferences, offering insights for filmmakers, sound designers, and content providers as they adapt to evolving audience habits.

1.1. Research Questions

1. To what extent does sound influence Generation Z's preference for watching horror films on personal devices compared to standard theatres?
2. Does sound quality impact the emotional and psychological responses of Generation Z across different platforms?
3. Can personal devices effectively replicate the immersive sound experience of theaters for horror film audiences in Generation Z?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Role of Sound in Horror Films

Indeed, sound design is an important feature in the horror film genre, lending an emotional and psychological edge to the viewing experience. In the words of Michel Chion (1994), sound in cinema carries much more than an auxiliary element in the visual for a deep psychological influence on shaping audience perception and increasing emotional arousal, especially in horror. Chion introduced the concept of "added value" to describe how sound charges scenes with meaning beyond that which is available through vision. In horror films, this "added value" becomes a key tool for inducing fear and manipulating suspense and psychological tension and therefore forms an integral part in the immersive qualities of horror films.

Sonnenschein, 2001 then goes on to outline specific sound techniques that are common to elicit fear and anxiety in horror cinema. The deliberate auditory choices involve low-frequency sounds, sudden loud noises, and carefully crafted silences that meet the viewer on both a sensory and an emotive level. For example, low-frequency sounds are notably well-documented to have physiological effects on humans, such as palpitations and hypervigilance, in order to create an omnipresent sense of anxiety. Where sudden loud noises are deployed, often as part of a "jump scare," the aim is to elicit a startle response that directly engages the viewer's sympathetic nervous system. As Sonnenschein (2001) illustrates, this physiological response underlines the crucial role of sound in eliciting a visceral, embodied response that may not be as readily available through more visually driven approaches.

Hutchison (2019) presents an investigation into the mechanism of jump scares in horror movies. According to him, such efficiency of the scare happens because the auditory clue disrupts the feeling of safety and control for a moment. Typically accompanied by loud, unexpected noise, jump scares have become a certain feature of horror movies using the human startle reflex as a potential for memorable terror moments. This is primarily an auditory effect, in that a jump shock requires a sudden contrast in levels to achieve its effect. The efficacy of jump scares and other sound-based approaches to horror does, of course, rely on the quality of the sound system through which the film is experienced. This visceral quality can be considerably demeaned when it is viewed on various devices that possess low sound quality, which potentially can dilute an immersive effect into a weakened one.

Advanced sound systems, like Dolby Atmos, make the experience in theaters unlike what home viewing could offer. Meyer and Anderson (2019) discuss Dolby Atmos and other high-definition sound technologies that create an enveloping three-dimensional soundscape around the viewer, placing them into a real three-dimensional auditory environment, increasing the sensory impact of the movie. This auditory immersion is what captures the essence in horror films since sound in horror films is carefully

crafted to guide an audience's attention, shape mood, and heighten suspense. Meyer and Anderson (2019) note that the Dolby Atmos sound system in a theatre provides the viewer with soft, directional auditory suggestions of increased spatial awareness of sound to different locations and directions, often so important to the attempt of horror to disorient and frighten.

It is this spatial and immersive sound quality that has been argued to enhance further a sense of realism and engagement, given how audiences in a theater are more likely to feel enveloped within the film's world. For example, steps coming from behind or a whispered voice somewhere in the distance that seems to circle around one certainly gives rise to a greater sense of presence and immediacy within the theater setting and pulls an audience deeper into an experience of horror. On the other hand, such effects are usually muffled or lost on personal devices, since sound is usually confined to stereo output through smaller speakers or standard headphones. This technological limitation constrains the full realization of sound design and lowers the immersive potential so crucial for the horror genre.

Research into the psychological effects of soundscapes in horror films by Jørgensen (2018) supports the idea that indeed, theater sound systems greatly enhance the experience of horror. Jørgensen highlights that through sound, there can be created an environment of psychological "claustrophobia," where audiences feel trapped within the auditory space, unable to escape the sounds of horror surrounding them. Working primarily through this sense of containment, and particularly when theaters have good sound facilities, the audience is made especially susceptible and the reaction to fear heightened. According to Jørgensen, "When perceived in the cinema, these auditory elements enhance the feelings of dread and anticipation because audiences cannot actively master or reduce the auditory effect of the sounds they perceive."

While horror soundscapes have had to combat their share of critical disappointments, the move of cinema to streaming platforms increasingly is throwing up new obstacles that require adaptation to personal device environments. Smaller screens and low sound output make for a very different experience in horror movies. Rich and multilayered sound built for theaters often turns out simplistic and flat. The shift is also addressed by Williams; he says that since the mobile phone has become the desired medium of consumption for Generation Z, filmmakers will need to "upmix" those elements frequently in order to have these elements be effective across platforms. Even with these adaptations, Williams argues that the full audio richness of horror movies is rarely translated to personal devices, as mobile sound systems cannot replicate surround sound or dynamic range courtesy of advanced theater systems.

In summary, this aspect of sound within a horror film has multiple layers to the levels of the cinematic experience that emotionally make a huge difference in response to various techniques, whether it is low-frequency sounds, jump scares, or immersive soundscapes. While advanced sound techniques make

theaters even more stunning, thereby creating a more realistic experience for an audience, personal devices can't do the same with audible power. It will be important to learn from these limitations for filmmakers and researchers alike, concerned as they are with the future of the horror genre and innovative uses of sound design within it, as this generation continues to stream on personal devices.

2.2. Generation Z's Media Consumption Preferences

Generation Z, born roughly from the middle of the 1990s to the early 2010s, is the first generation that grew up in times when technology was rapidly developing. This predetermined the difference in how media would be consumed by them versus any other generation. Indeed, digital natives like members of Generation Z decidedly show a preference for personal devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops, for media viewing rather than traditional platforms like TVs or movie screens. Yet, this shift in viewing habits is not an incidental one but a reflection of a generational trend toward convenience, flexibility, and autonomy in media consumption. As Schawbel noted, the media behaviors of Generation Z are driven by a feeling of control over what they watch, where, and when, enabled by streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime Video, which have taken center stage in the generation's entertainment choices.

Statistics confirm this trend: in 2022, according to Statista, over 70% of Gen Z viewed most of their media on personal devices, using ease of portability and access over an immersive environment. This underlying change in viewing habits means that, by and large, Gen Z viewers often want to watch content "on the go," fitting lifestyles that are increasingly mobile and flexible. The streaming platforms have taken full advantage of this predisposition by providing extensive libraries one can avail at any time and from almost anywhere, adhering to the values of convenience and immediacy intrinsic to this generation.

This, combined with the development of streaming technology, which boasts high-resolution visuals and audio, complements the convenience of personal devices to cater to viewing pleasures on devices that comfortably fit within the daily routines of Gen Z. This move away from theaters was because, for one, a number of high-end streaming content is made available, and secondly, people find watching films or a series much cheaper and less hassle in the comfort of one's own space. Indeed, for today's Generation Z-most indoctrinated with promises of an on-demand, hyper-personal media environment-the aura of a cinema outing would arguably be quite less salient, given the access and flexibility offered by personal device platforms.

But one compromise of this device-based preference lies in the sacrifice of sound quality. Unlike theaters that boast state-of-the-art sound systems, such as Dolby Atmos, personal devices lack the depth

and surround capabilities that make for an immersive experience. To make up for this, many viewers from Gen Z use headphones to enhance their audio when viewing, and Gibbs says, "It's estimated that about 65% of Generation Z uses headphones when watching movies on a personal device.". With headphones, there is an enhanced audio rather than on most mobile devices' inbuilt speakers; added clarity and isolation work to minimize external distractions and help heighten focus on the content.

However, even very good-quality headphones cannot fully replicate the spatial dynamics of a theater sound system. Multi-channel and surround sound make the audio of theater sound systems enveloping, an important part of the emotional experience of viewing, especially in those genres like horror where the ability of sound to build suspense and induce fear plays such a vital role. Here, Meyer and Anderson add that such audio qualities are so integral to horror films, where even volume and directionality work in concert to heighten a sense of immersion and physicality. Without access to these features, device-based viewers miss out on the full spectrum of auditory depth and intensity that can reduce the emotional impact of movies.

Williams, 2020, comments that poor personal device sound systems have influenced media companies and filmmakers into increasingly adapting content to suit the conditions of device-based viewing. For example, sound design can be simplified or altered to preserve intelligibility and emotional resonance despite the minor speakers. These adjustments aside, personal devices do weaken the auditory experience due to their inability to navigate surround effects and bass levels reproduced at movie theaters. This is especially pertinent in horror films since it is within the aural atmosphere that lies the very core of their ability to terrify and amaze an audience. As such, personal devices may be an excellent answer to the growing demand of Gen Z for flexibility but have failed to deliver anything like the experience of the cinema.

Nevertheless, the dependency on personal devices is part of the cultural shift to digital integration and immediacy that has utterly reshaped the way media is consumed by Generation Z and accounts for dynamic placement over traditionally immersive cinema. This is a trend showing the great importance of sound in their interaction with media, with this generation growing in seeking ways to amplify device-based audio quality, many times using additional tools: headphones or external speakers. As media consumption continues to evolve, understanding the preferences of Generation Z provides valued insight for filmmakers, streaming platforms, and audio engineers as they work to craft experiences resonating with this mobile, digitally savvy audience.

In summary, the hallmark of Generation Z's media consumption is device ownership coupled with a penchant for the ease and flexibility provided by streaming platforms. Even though the auditory limitations of mobile devices somewhat contradict the immersive qualities of genres like horror, Generation Z clings to the convenience of portable viewing, often supplementing sound quality with

headphones for maximum experience. It is a generational shift in media consumption, redefining audience expectations and making content creators reimagine traditional approaches to sound design in hopes of better catering to an audience who genuinely has a digital focus.

2.3. Sound and Immersive Experiences in Theaters vs. Devices

The difference in audience engagement, especially in genres like horror, which rely a lot on sound to immerse or terrify their audience members, is due in part to the fact that theaters can offer an auditory experience fundamentally different from personal devices. Theaters are fitted with specific sound technologies such as Dolby Atmos that create a multidimensional auditory experience. Dolby Atmos by Nash 2020, and other similar systems involve directions that sound could be perceived from, creating an auditory environment whereby the viewer feels surrounded by sounds of the film. The spatial audio effect adds to the increase in realism; it is supposed to plunge the audience into the world of the cinema with immense force and enhance the sensory and emotive effect of a movie.

Meyer and Anderson (2019) notice that this feature of immersion is especially pronounced in the genre of horror films, where audio is one of the main builders of tension, inducers of fear, and creators of suspense. In a movie theatre, through powerful auditory effects such as sudden changes in volume, directional cues, and low-frequency sounds physically resonating with the audience, sound systems can carry out an overwhelming experience which heightens fear. These audio hints are very important in building up the psychological atmosphere that is usually characterized by increased suspense and shock among the audiences. With Dolby Atmos, multidimensional soundscapes make sounds fly across the theatre with ease of movement across the space of the theater, hence reinforcing the sensation that unsettling noises are coming from behind or above, hence elevating the film's capacity to disorient and frighten.

In contrast, theaters can boast spatial depth and quality of sound, while personal devices can provide only minimally developed audio capabilities. Generally, personal devices, such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops, lack sophisticated sound hardware that would allow them to produce comparative auditory depth and spatial effects. According to Gibbs, even in the case of high-class headphones, which many viewers use to enhance the quality of sound insulation, the spatial dynamics of sound are hardly reproducible. Headphones, on the other hand, just can't compete with that because, while they block out external noise and allow the viewer to hear the audio track better, they don't allow the viewer to experience directional sound as one does in a theater, which suggests the sound is coming from various locations in a three-dimensional space. Thus, they don't have the capability of allowing viewers to envelop themselves in a true audio atmosphere, which they would have been able to do in a movie theater environment.

This can be attributed to the reduced sound experience that often occurs on personal devices. Surround sound in theaters puts viewers into spaces where they could feel a greater sense of vulnerability in that they are surrounded by auditory cues of threats in multiple directions. This is an effect more difficult to create on personal devices, which often have a more linear sound that is less dynamic, without the spatial spread that would create a completely immersive experience. Without physicality from low frequencies and the distribution of sound cues in space, the auditory intensity of fear that occurs in horror films is dulled, creating a weaker emotional response.

The emotional impact of a horror movie, which mostly depends on its sound, is thus compromised in personal devices. For instance, scenes intended to make viewers confused or scared-like footsteps approaching from the backside, or some sudden sounds coming from an unpredictable direction-do not have much effect when viewing devices are used. Jørgensen said that sound plays a huge role in developing "psychological claustrophobia" in a horror movie where the audiences feel entrapped or about-to-happen danger because of the audio signals. That effect could barely be given if watched anywhere outside the theatre since surround sound and spatial audio are lacking, restricting him from experiencing sound as an enveloping, immersive element.

Further, the more personal devices become the major platform of media consumption for Generation Z, the more it questions how filmmakers and sound designers might be trying to adapt to these evolving viewing contexts because of the limiting factors provided by mobile sound systems. Williams says that filmmakers have begun to simplify or adapt sound mixes for films that will be viewed largely on these smaller devices; after all, detail of a full theater's worth of sound might not be recognized. For instance, sound effects are normally upmixed or beefed up to speak to clarity rather than to spatial depth-a function more suitable for stereo headphones but cutting down on the multi-dimensional, multi-directional experience in audio desired in theaters. This clearly comes at the expense of the horror movie experience, since the simplified sound cannot convey all of the intensive auditory experience in a theater.

As it is for most viewers, especially Generation Z moves to plug in high-quality headphones to fix the sound; even the best personal audio devices can't pick up spatially resolved audio that the cinema is capable of. This makes the theater's capability to provide an immersive sound from angles, with increased bass and subtle volume changes, one very specific to a movie-going experience that may be hard to replicate on a device. By the same token, horror films rely on such audio characteristics in order to incite fear and tension, usually suffering a little when not viewed in a theatrical environment.

The sound systems of theaters and personal devices are what really create the defining factor in the viewer's level of immersion and emotional engagement with the horror film. Theaters have advanced sound technologies that are spatial and sensory, which fully engage viewers and amplify the emotional impact of the genre. While personal devices may be quite convenient, offering the potential for greater

portability, they lack the capability of creating this multi-dimensional audio experience; it consequently often produces a flat soundscape, influencing viewer response to such films in horror. To that end, consideration of these differences within the auditory experience is necessary for filmmakers, especially those working within sound-based genres like horror, in order to adapt their work to preserve immersive qualities across multiple viewing platforms.

3. Materials and Methodology

The materials used in this study were selected to effectively capture Generation Z's horror film viewing preferences and sound experience across different platforms. The primary data collection tool was a structured online questionnaire consisting of 21 items. The questionnaire, designed using Google Forms, included multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale items, and ranking-based prompts. It covered key areas such as demographic details, frequency of horror film consumption, preferred viewing platforms, types of sound systems used, emotional responses to sound, and sensitivity to sudden audio cues. To provide participants with contextual clarity when answering questions related to sound elements in horror films, references to widely recognized horror titles were included. Examples such as *A Quiet Place*, *The Conjuring*, and *Hereditary* were cited to illustrate audio techniques like jump scares, ambient tension-building music, and the use of silence. Although participants were not required to watch any specific clips, these references helped ground their responses in commonly understood cinematic sound conventions. Participants also reported the types of devices and sound systems they used when watching horror films. This included playback platforms such as smartphones, laptops, tablets, and televisions, as well as audio outputs like built-in speakers, external sound bars, and headphones. These details were essential for assessing the variance in immersive sound experiences across personal and theatrical environments.

3.1. Methodology

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to investigate the influence of sound design in horror films on viewer engagement, with particular emphasis on the impact of the viewing platform. The quantitative approach enables systematic measurement and analysis of audience experiences across diverse audiovisual environments, facilitating statistical comparisons of behavioral responses. Data collection was conducted using a structured, self-administered online questionnaire. The instrument was designed to capture key dimensions, including horror film consumption patterns, platform preferences, emotional responses to auditory stimuli, and perceptions of sound quality. The questionnaire comprised 21 items utilizing multiple-choice, five-point Likert scale, and ranking formats. It was segmented into three sections addressing general viewing behavior, auditory experience, and

immersive perception. The use of online surveys is well established for efficiently obtaining reliable user feedback in naturalistic settings. To enhance response validity, the questionnaire incorporated references to critically acclaimed horror films known for innovative sound design. These examples contextualized questions by illustrating specific auditory techniques such as ambient tension, jump scares, and the strategic use of silence. Additionally, the survey gathered information on the types of devices and audio equipment commonly employed by participants, including smartphones, laptops, home theater systems, built-in speakers, headphones, and soundbars. Understanding the listening context is essential for assessing the effectiveness of sound elements in eliciting emotional responses, particularly within the horror genre, where audio plays a pivotal role in viewer engagement.

3.2. Sample Collection

Data for this study were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed over a period of three weeks. The survey link was shared via academic mailing lists, university digital platforms, and selected social media channels to reach a wide and diverse group of respondents. The choice of online distribution was based on its effectiveness in reaching Generation Z, who are highly engaged in digital communication environments (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Respondents were required to confirm their eligibility by indicating that they had watched at least one horror film in the previous six months. Prior to beginning the questionnaire, each participant was presented with an informed consent statement outlining the study's objectives, their rights as participants, and a confidentiality notice. Participants were informed that the survey would take approximately 5–10 minutes to complete and that no personally identifiable information would be collected. In total, 200 valid responses were gathered and screened for completeness and relevance. Incomplete submissions or responses that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the final analysis. The online format allowed for efficient collection of data and ensured anonymity, which is especially important when exploring personal emotional responses and preferences. The collected data were exported to Microsoft Excel and manually cleaned before analysis. Any duplicate entries or contradictory responses were removed to maintain data integrity. Descriptive statistical techniques were then applied to interpret the results in line with the study's objectives.

4. Results and Discussion

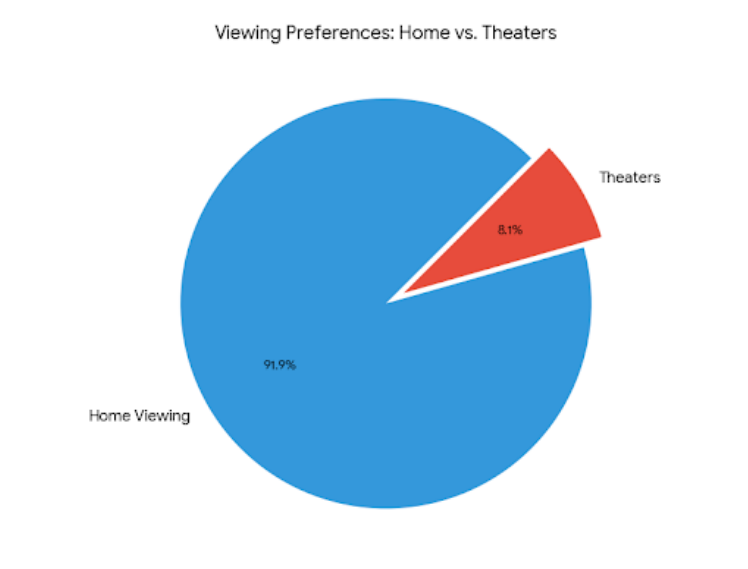
4.1. Analysis of the Results

This section presents the descriptive statistical analysis of the data collected from 200 valid responses. The aim was to identify trends in Generation Z's horror film viewing behavior, platform preferences, and the perceived role of sound in shaping emotional engagement.

4.1.1. Viewing Preferences and Platforms

The findings indicate a dominant preference for home viewing, with 91.9% of respondents choosing to watch horror films on personal devices, compared to only 8.1% who prefer theaters. This trend reflects a shift toward convenience and flexibility, driven by technological advancements and lifestyle changes. While theaters offer immersive audiovisual experiences, their appeal remains limited to a niche audience. Consequently, filmmakers and streaming platforms must prioritize optimizing sound and visual quality for home viewing environments.

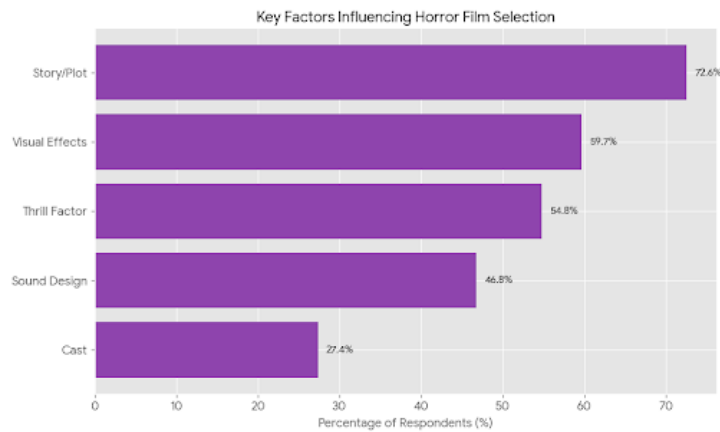
Figure 1



4.1.2. Key Factors Influencing Film Selection

When selecting horror films, respondents prioritize narrative strength, with 72.6% considering story or plot as the most important factor. Sensory elements such as visual effects (59.7%), thrill factor (54.8%), and sound design (46.8%) also play significant roles in shaping audience choices. Interestingly, the cast is the least influential factor (27.4%), suggesting that star power is less relevant in this genre compared to storytelling and atmospheric elements. These insights emphasize the need for cohesive narratives paired with strong audiovisual components to meet audience expectations.

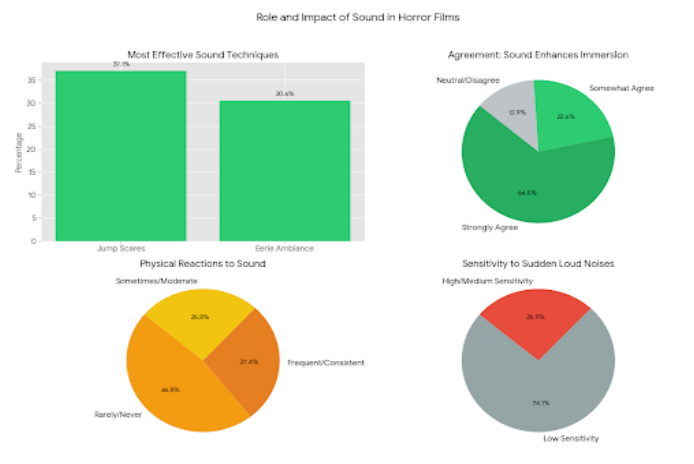
Figure 2



4.1.3. Role and Impact of Sound

Sound emerges as a critical component of the horror experience. Over 77% of respondents believe sound effects are very or extremely important, and 83.9% agree that sound is more impactful in theaters, highlighting the superior acoustic environment of cinemas. However, advancements in personal audio setups—such as headphones (used by 54.8%) and external speakers—are bridging this gap for home viewers. Jump scares (37.1%) and eerie background ambiance (30.6%) are considered the most effective sound techniques, while character voices and silence contribute to tension but are less dominant.

Figure 3

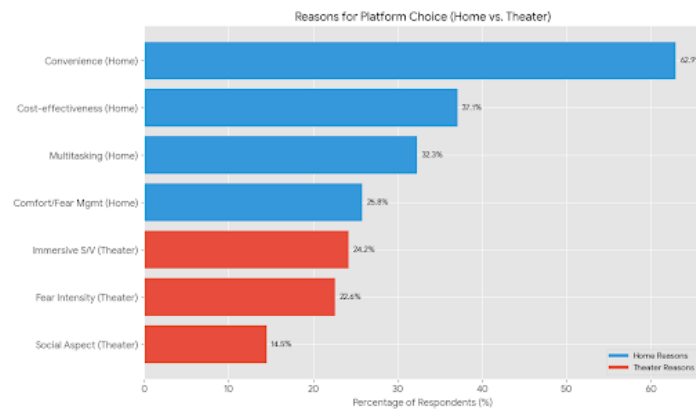


4.1.4. Reasons for Platform Choice

Convenience (62.9%) and cost-effectiveness (37.1%) are the primary reasons for watching horror films at home, while multitasking (32.3%) and comfort in managing fear (25.8%) also influence this preference. Conversely, immersive sound and visuals (24.2%) and heightened fear intensity (22.6%) attract theater-goers. Despite these attractions, the social aspect of theaters is less significant, with only

14.5% citing it as a reason. This suggests that practical considerations outweigh experiential factors for most viewers, reinforcing the dominance of home viewing.

Figure 4



4.1.5. Immersion and Emotional Impact

The majority of respondents (87.1%) agree that sound effects enhance immersion in horror films, with 64.5% strongly agreeing. While sound rarely evokes physical reactions for most viewers (46.8%), a notable minority (27.4%) experiences frequent or consistent responses, such as jumping or goosebumps. Sensitivity to sudden loud noises varies, with 74.1% reporting low sensitivity, indicating that while jump scares are effective, their impact is not universal. Overall, sound remains a pivotal tool for creating fear and psychological engagement, making it essential for filmmakers to leverage sound design strategically across platforms.

4.2. Discussion

The dominance of home viewing in this sample (91.9% vs. 8.1% for theaters) reflects a broader shift in consumption driven by convenience, flexible scheduling, and lower per-view costs associated with streaming. Recent comparative analyses show that although audiences often rate films higher in theaters; likely due to the immersive environment, the practical advantages of home viewing continue to pull behavior toward domestic platforms (Ho, Eliashberg, Weinberg, & Wierenga, 2023; Ho et al., 2024). Still, generational nuances persist; U.S. survey data in 2025 found Gen Z maintained notable theater loyalty for communal genres like horror, even as home streaming became a daily habit for most viewers (InsightTrendsWorld, 2025). Taken together, the findings of this study align with a global migration to home viewing while acknowledging that the theater's affective and social appeal remains salient for a subset of viewers (Ho et al., 2024; InsightTrendsWorld, 2025).

Participants' prioritization of story/plot (72.6%), followed by visual effects, thrill, and sound design, with cast least important, mirrors contemporary scholarship that locates the power of horror in atmosphere, subtext, and formal execution rather than star presence. Work on recent "horror renaissance" cycles highlights audiences' gravitation toward thematically rich, psychologically resonant narratives (Baker, Rutherford, & Pamatau, 2023). Psychological syntheses further suggest individual differences (e.g., sensation-seeking, empathy dimensions) modulate preferences for tension and narrative complexity—traits that make strong plotting and aesthetic control more compelling than celebrity (Martin, 2019). This distribution thus supports the view that horror's value proposition is an integrated package of narrative cohesion and carefully engineered sensory cues (Baker et al., 2023; Martin, 2019).

The centrality of sound in this dataset, over 77% rate it very or extremely important, 83.9% experience greater impact in theaters, and 54.8% use headphones at home—accords with evidence that sound design orchestrates fear via dissonance, atonality, dynamic range, and silence (Shehan, n.d.; Gong & Zhang, 2021). Computational work shows that horror soundscapes reliably modulate tension, arousal, and valence, underscoring why techniques like jump scares and eerie ambiance dominate perceived effectiveness (Lopes, Liapis, & Yannakakis, 2017; Gong & Zhang, 2021). The theater's acoustic infrastructure (room geometry, calibrated speaker arrays) likely explains respondents' higher perceived impact in cinemas, while the rise of high-quality headphones at home helps narrow—but not erase—this gap (Ho et al., 2024; Shehan, n.d.).

The split between functional drivers for home (convenience, cost, multitasking) and experiential drivers for theaters (immersive AV, heightened fear) matches industry and survey evidence: audiences cite price barriers and the premium sensory experience as decisive factors for cinema attendance, yet still default to the convenience of the couch for routine viewing (InsightTrendsWorld, 2025; TVREV, 2025). The finding that social experience is relatively weak as a motivator (14.5%) suggests a cultural tilt toward individualized, controlled media environments—even for fear-based genres—while preserving the theater as an occasional venue for peak sensory episodes (InsightTrendsWorld, 2025; Ho et al., 2024).

A near-consensus that sound enhances immersion (87.1%, with 64.5% strongly agreeing) is consistent with theory and empirical modeling of how audio shapes moment-to-moment affect in horror (Lopes et al., 2017; Gong & Zhang, 2021). Yet the relatively modest rates of frequent physical reactions (27.4%) and high proportion of low sensitivity to sudden loud noises (74.1%) may indicate habituation to conventional shock tactics among today's viewers, supporting arguments that effective fear increasingly relies on layered soundscapes and narrative tension rather than sheer loudness (Martin, 2019; Shehan, n.d.). For practitioners, this implies prioritizing sophisticated acoustic dramaturgy (e.g., dynamic contrast, spatialization, motif development) and integrating sound with story beats to sustain engagement across both home and theatrical contexts (Baker et al., 2023; Gong & Zhang, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This study provides meaningful insights into Generation Z's preferences and behaviors when engaging in horror films, with a particular emphasis on the role of sound in shaping their viewing experiences. The findings indicate a strong preference for home-based viewing over traditional theater attendance. This trend is primarily influenced by factors such as convenience, affordability, and the flexibility to multitask during media consumption. However, theaters continue to hold relevance for a significant portion of respondents who value the immersive qualities of a large screen and high-fidelity sound environment. Sound design emerged as a central element in the horror viewing experience, significantly contributing to immersion, emotional intensity, and fear generation. While respondents consistently acknowledged the importance of sound, opinions differed regarding its impact across platforms. Theatrical environments were widely recognized as offering a superior sound experience. Nonetheless, the increasing availability of advanced personal audio technologies, such as noise-cancelling headphones and external speakers, has enhanced the home viewing experience, reducing the sensory gap between the two settings. In terms of specific sound elements, jump scares and ambient background music were identified as the most effective in provoking fear responses. Additionally, subtler elements such as character voices and silence were noted for their ability to build suspense and psychological tension. These findings underscore the importance of optimizing sound design not only for cinema but also for digital platforms, ensuring that the horror genre retains its emotional impact regardless of the medium. The study highlights the evolving dynamics of horror film consumption among Generation Z, shaped by technological developments and changing media habits. For filmmakers, sound designers, and content platforms, these results suggest a need to create adaptable, high-quality auditory experiences that cater to diverse viewing contexts. By combining strong narrative structures with immersive soundscapes, creators can effectively meet the expectations of a generation that prioritizes both convenience and sensory engagement in their cinematic experiences.

References

- Baker, S., Rutherford, A., & Pamatatau, R. (2023). Contemporary horror on screen: An evolving visual narrative. Springer. <https://link.springer.com>
- Gong, Z., & Zhang, J. (2021). Review of sound in horror movie. In Proceedings of the 2021 3rd International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2021). Atlantis Press. <https://www.atlantis-press.com>
- Hamedani, A. (2022). Sound and fear: A neuroscientific perspective on horror films. *Journal of Neurocinema*, 15(1), 12–25.

- Ho, J. Y.-C., Eliashberg, J., Weinberg, C. B., & Wierenga, B. (2023/2024). On enjoying watching movies in a theatre versus at home: A comparative analysis. *Marketing Letters*, 35, 29–44. <https://link.springer.com>
- Hutchison, P. (2019). The role of sound in modern horror cinema. *Film Studies Quarterly*, 22(4), 118–130.
- Lopes, P., Liapis, A., & Yannakakis, G. N. (2017). Modelling affect for horror soundscapes. University of Malta Technical Report. <https://www.um.edu.mt>
- Martin, G. N. (2019). (Why) do you like scary movies? A review of the empirical research on psychological responses to horror films. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2298. <https://www.frontiersin.org>
- Nash, R. (2020). Cinema vs. streaming: A study of sound and immersion in Gen Z's viewing preferences. *Sound and Screen Studies*, 10(1), 29–45.
- Pew Research Center. (2021). How Generation Z consumes media <https://www.pewresearch.org>
- Shehan, E. (n.d.). Sound, screams, and the score: An exploration of sound in classic horror slashers. *Render: The Carleton Graduate Journal of Art and Culture*, 5. <https://carleton.ca>
- Statista. (2022). Media consumption trends of Generation Z. <https://www.statista.com>
- Sonnenschein, D. (2001). Sound design: The expressive power of music, voice and sound effects in cinema. Michael Wiese Productions.
- TVREV. (2025, August 21). Why horror dominates theaters but dies on streaming. <https://www.tvrev.com>
- Väliaho, P. (2014). Mapping the moving image: Gesture, thought and cinema circa 1900. Amsterdam University Press.
- Meyer, J., & Anderson, T. (2019). Dolby Atmos and horror films: Enhancing fear through immersive sound. *Cinema Technology Journal*, 17(3), 15–28.
- InsightTrendsWorld. (2025, April 2). Theater vs. streaming: Has the couch finally won? New study breaks it down. <https://www.insighttrendsworld.com>