

Course of Marketing Communication and New Media

Viral terror: how buzz marketing transforms horror films into cultural phenomena

Prof. Stella Romagnoli

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Rumen Ivaylov Pozharliev

CO-SUPERVISOR

Alessia Citro - 774961

CANDIDATE

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ABSTRACT

The investigation analyzes the effectiveness of buzz marketing strategies in the context of the horror movie industry. Particular attention is paid to the emotional impact generated by immersive teaser campaigns through a quantitative methodological approach based on a single-group, post-test design, to evaluate the capacity of such campaigns to stimulate emotional engagement, vision intention, as well as word of mouth (WOM) among Generation Z and Millennials. The results highlight how the sensory and narrative interaction of these teasers amplify emotional engagement, encouraging spontaneous sharing on social media and producing an increased interest for the film industry. What emerges from this study highlights the opportunity to optimize the marketing strategies in the horror movie sector based on past experience, utilizing the emotional component as leverage for WOM and subsequent viral amplification.

INTRODUCTION

The research aims to analyze the effectiveness of buzz marketing in the horror film sector paying particular attention to the emotional impact generated by immersive teaser campaigns. The media landscape is increasingly dominated by digital content as well as viral sharing mechanisms, unconventional marketing strategies are proving to be pivotal tools for stimulating public interest, especially in relation to film genres capable of inducing strong emotions. Horror movies are made with the goal of evoking fear, anxiety, and tension. This is a somewhat privileged field when it comes to experimenting on new techniques that are based on emotional engagement and the active participation of viewers.

The decision to explore this subject was motivated by two main factors. On the one hand, the evident proliferation of successful viral campaigns related to the horror genre demonstrates how experiential marketing is becoming an increasingly decisive component in the construction of a film's identity. On the other hand, there is a gap in the academic literature regarding the quantitative analysis of the psychological and emotional dynamics activated by such strategies, particularly with respect to a young, digitally active, and culturally immersed audience. Studying this phenomenon does not simply mean understanding how a film is promoted, but also investigating the ways in which a community of viewers is built—one that identifies with, participates in, and shares the cinematic experience.

The central research question guiding this work is: *To what extent can word-of-mouth (WOM) generated by an immersive teaser campaign in horror cinema be influenced by emotional engagement, social media sharing, and individual passion for the genre?*

The main objectives of the study are to:

1. Analyze the role of positive and negative emotions in enhancing virality;
2. Explore the influence of digital platforms, particularly TikTok, in the spontaneous diffusion of promotional content;
3. Assess whether and how prior familiarity with the horror genre affects the propensity to recommend.

The proposed method of analysis consists of two phases: first, a qualitative phase conducted through a comparative investigation of three viral campaigns, each examined within its respective temporal and technological context: Paranormal Activity (2007), Smile (2022), and The Blair Witch Project (1999). The aim is to identify common narrative and communication strategies, as well as the psychological levers used to generate anticipation, curiosity, and engagement. The second phase consists of an experiment carried out through an online immersive teaser game designed as a narrative escape room. Participants were asked to experience the game and subsequently complete a structured questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed using SPSS software through descriptive, correlational, and regression analysis techniques.

The thesis is structured into four main chapters.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to the literature review: it defines the key concepts of buzz marketing, experiential marketing, and virality, with a specific focus on their application in the film industry and particularly within the horror genre.

Chapter 2 describes the adopted methodology, the case selection criteria, the experimental design, and the operational variables.

Chapter 3 discusses the results of the quantitative analysis, highlighting the emotions elicited by the teaser game, the propensity for word-of-mouth, and the correlations among the analyzed variables.

Chapter 4 provides a critical reflection on the findings, discussing their theoretical and managerial implications, and suggesting directions for future research.

According to the analysis, the excitement created by the teaser experience is a key driver to Word-of-Mouth sharing potential, even superseding not only genre enthusiasm but also people's natural tendency to share content. There is no doubt that the capability of the teaser to push the emotional buttons of the users, particularly if it's mysterious or provocative, is key in making a viral campaign. These guidelines convey that project developers should invest in the creation of immersive experiences capable of activating deep emotional drives and boosting spontaneous audience participation, contributing to making marketing a genuine storytelling experience.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Buzz Marketing and its role in the film industry

Buzz marketing, also referred to as word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM), is one of the most important promotional tools that is capable of affecting consumer buying decisions in a significant way. The Buzz marketing effect is exponentially more powerful than regular paid adverts since it originates from family, friends, and acquaintances, it feels more trustworthy and the decision-making of purchasing a film on the consumer is based on personal associations rather than the standardized message given by regular advertisement.

Digitalization has increased buzz marketing, enabling potential buyers to learn about products and services in real time through online communities, blogs, and review sites. According to Soundararaj, J.J., Baskaran, S.A. and Sivaprakash (2015), 60% of consumers say they trust word-of-mouth from peers more than traditional advertising, which clearly illustrates how much this strategy impacts purchasing behavior¹.

According to its definition in the movie industry, buzz marketing becomes fundamental the movie's visibility and commercial success. The main aim is to go viral by creating some large wave of organic interest and encouraging audiences to then talk about the movie and, ultimately, broadening the audience. The various elements inspire word-of-mouth sharing including witty trailers, endorsements by influencers and celebrities, guerrilla marketing campaigns, and interactive spaces on social media.

In this regard, social media are a major player in providing a platform for real-time communication that propagates a virally infectious discussion. In its best form, buzz marketing sparks a self-sustaining circle of growing interest resulting in the elevation of box office or streaming platform viewership².

¹ Soundararaj, J. J., Baskaran, S. A., & Sivaprakash, S. (2015). *The power of buzz marketing*. Journal of Exclusive Management Science, 4(3), p. 1

² Ulker-Demirel, E., Akyol, A., & Gölbaşı Şimşek, G. (2018). *Marketing and consumption of art products: The movie industry*. Arts and the Market, 8(1), 80-98.

1.1.1 Definition and key principle of buzz marketing

Based on Cambridge Dictionary, “*Buzz marketing is a method of selling a product by getting people to talk about it to other people, especially over the internet*”³.

To fully grasp the concept of buzz marketing, it is important to first understand the role of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) in society. WOM is defined as “*the passing of information from person to person by oral communication*” (Soundararaj, Arockia Baskaran, & Sivaprakash, 2015). Common forms of WOM communication are storytelling and oral tradition, which have historically played a crucial role in folklore and mythology⁴.

This type of communication is particularly significant in marketing, leading to the development of a dedicated strategy known as Word-of-Mouth Marketing (WOMM) or Word-of-Mouth Advertising. According to Soundararaj et al. (2015), “*WOMM is an unpaid form of promotion – oral or written in which delighted customers tell other people how much they like a business, product, service or event*”⁵.

As reported by Entrepreneur, a magazine specialized in business and marketing, Word-of-Mouth is one of the most credible marketing techniques, as those who share recommendations or opinions put their reputation on the line, assuming the role of spokesperson.⁶

The sources of word-of-mouth can be divided into four categories:

- Experience Driven WOM: this type covers about 70% of word-of-mouth knowing that the simple thought that follows is that "the more positive the experience is, the more customers will talk about it."
- Second-hand WOM: it is from customers who have not had first-hand brand experience but have "heard about it" and adopted others' opinions as their own. It accounts for 35% of word-of-mouth.

³ Cambridge Dictionary, *Buzz marketing*, accessed February 27, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/buzz-marketing>.

⁴ Soundararaj, J. J., Arockia Baskaran, S., & Sivaprakash, S. (2015). *The power of buzz marketing*. *Journal of Exclusive Management Science*, 4(3), p. 1.

⁵ Soundararaj, J. J., Arockia Baskaran, S., & Sivaprakash, S. (2015). *The power of buzz marketing*. *Journal of Exclusive Management Science*, 4(3), p.2.

⁶ *Word-of-Mouth Advertising*. (n.d.). In *Entrepreneur*. Retrieved February 28, 2025, from <https://www.entrepreneur.com/encyclopedia/word-of-mouth-advertising>

- Company-Created WOM: this is strategically legitimate, but going this route without the proper precautions can wreak havoc on brand credibility or even get the brand into legal trouble.
- Customer reviews and crowd-sourced opinions: These make decision-making easier for customers.

Tax Stephen et al. (1993), Kuwashima Yufu (2006), Aslam Saad et al. (2011) e Pai Seema et al. conducted a study, selecting a sample of 300 people, to understand how much Word-of-Mouth (WOM) can influence consumer decisions. The findings revealed that 40% of individuals consider family members the only reliable source of Word-of-Mouth information. 60% believe that WOM is more trustworthy than traditional advertising. It is also interesting to note that negative WOM has a greater impact than positive WOM in purchase decisions (65% vs. 53%). 64% of respondents consider WOM essential when it comes to foreign brands.

Buzz marketing can be a highly effective strategy, especially in the era of Web 2.0. The key is identifying the element that sparks the buzz—the factor that drives virality⁷.

Starting from Word-of-Mouth Marketing, Buzz Marketing and Viral Marketing develop as strategic approaches⁸.

Buzz marketing is based on the interaction created among the various individuals interested in a product/service, and it contributes to strengthening the brand's message. The objective is to generate hype among consumers, create a sense of curiosity and excitement, and allow the user or consumer to form a positive association. An example of this strategy could be an engaging teaser email, content that particularly captures attention, the use of influencers for sponsorship, etc.

Viral marketing and viral advertising use social networks as a fundamental tool to achieve predetermined marketing objectives, driving brand awareness, increasing sales, etc. Campaigns can present themselves in different ways, such as interactive games, video clips, messages, images, etc. For these campaigns, it is important to identify Social

⁷ Soundararaj, J. J., Arockia Baskaran, S., & Sivaprakash, S. (2015). *The power of buzz marketing*. *Journal of Exclusive Management Science*, 4(3), p.12.

⁸ Soundararaj, J. J., Arockia Baskaran, S., & Sivaprakash, S. (2015). *The power of buzz marketing*. *Journal of Exclusive Management Science*, 4(3), p.3,4.

Networking Potential, as well as key influencers capable of engaging as many people as possible, encouraging mass content sharing⁹.

Buzz marketing is often ignored by businesses, since they prefer utilizing more common promotional venues. However, there are different factors that make buzz one of the most effectively marketing promotion:

- Buzz is cheap: this type of campaign reduces costs because it is based on word-of-mouth. Expensive media such as radio or television are not involved.
- Buzz reduces risks: According to what Emanuel Rosen (2002) said in his book “The Anatomy of Buzz”, stimulating the word-of-mouth is very successful for some companies. and the best thing about these strategies is that they typically involve low levels of financial risk¹⁰.
- Buzz increases visibility: especially in the movie industry, buzz marketing can play an important role, putting a movie at the center of attention. This result can be achieved using exclusive film clips, webcasts from movie premiers, etc. The use of internet-related activities (such as video blog, review website, and so on) can increase visibility while also building stronger relationships with fans.
- Buzz starts conversations: to create a campaign that works, marketers must give people something worth talking about, that catches attention and becomes a great conversation piece. A notable example is the movie “The Omen”, which opened on Tuesday 06/06/06. The unusual nature of the date and the day of the week (it’s rare for a movie to open on a Tuesday) caught the attention of the most curios and the movie was sold out for the entire first month.
- Buzz adds credibility: For a person, one of the most reliable sources of information will always be someone they trust, such as a friend, family member, or colleague. This is why buzz marketing commands credibility and serves as a powerful tool of persuasion¹¹.

⁹ Soundararaj, J. J., Arockia Baskaran, S., & Sivaprakash, S. (2015). *The power of buzz marketing*. *Journal of Exclusive Management Science*, 4(3), p.3.

¹⁰ Rosen, E. (2002). *The anatomy of buzz: How to create word-of-mouth marketing*. New York: Doubleday.

¹¹ Mohr, I. (2007). *Buzz marketing for movies*. *Business Horizons*, 50(4), 395–403. doi:10.1016/j.bushor.2007.04.001, pp. 4-5.

Today, the campaigns that have the biggest effect, especially among Gen Z, are largely ones that arise organically on TikTok or Instagram, where a simple meme can monopolize everyone's attention¹².

1.1.2 Application of buzz marketing in the film industry

Movies are a part of everyone's lives: from theaters and cinemas to homes with new streaming platforms such as Netflix and Prime Video, watching movies is one of the most common forms of entertainment.

To promote new films, companies, along with other strategies, also use buzz marketing, with the objective of creating intriguing topics to capture attention and build brand awareness and consequent Word-of-Mouth (more specifically, electronic-WOM).

To achieve box office success for a movie, the impact of online and social media word-of-mouth is crucial, as people's comments can spark widespread interest among audiences. This is evidenced by the fact that, nowadays, the first thing that a person does while choosing a film to watch is searching for reviews¹³.

Thus, not all the reviews have the same impact, in fact, according to the negativity bias theory proposed by Baumeister et al. (2001), individuals are majorly inclined to weigh negative reviews more heavily and respond to them more swiftly than they do with positive reviews, even when a film creates an equal number of both. Additionally, neutral reviews tend to have a lesser impact on people's intentions to watch a movie compared to the influences of either positive or negative reviews¹⁴.

Compared to what has been said so far, when exposed to new movies, people usually share their own opinions and engage with those of others. However, not everyone reacts in the same way. The phenomenon known as "emotional contagion" refers to the tendency of individuals to mimic and align their behaviors and emotional states with those of others (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). On certain topics, in fact, if they do not have a

¹² Inside Marketing. (n.d.). *Buzz marketing: cos'è, definizione ed esempi*. Inside Marketing. Retrieved from <https://www.insidemarketing.it/glossario/definizione/buzz-marketing/>

¹³ Kim, A., Trimi, S., & Lee, S.-G. (2021). *Exploring the key success factors of films: A survival analysis approach*. *Service Business*, 15(4), p.614–615.

¹⁴ Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). *Bad is stronger than good*. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 323–370.

strong opinion, people would adapt their ideas, and consequently, their reviews, to the prevailing ones¹⁵.

To delve a bit deeper, buzz marketing leverages this psychological trend to shape public perception and enhance word-of-mouth communication, thereby generating interest and influencing audience sentiment.

The following sections will explore its role and application strategies within the film industry.

Buzz building serves a strategic function in the context of movie differentiation. This strategy is a variation of product differentiation, with the objective to alter either a physical or non-physical aspect of a film to gain a competitive edge. Once the differentiation is obtained, buzz marketing becomes crucial for breaking through the noise and grabbing the attention of both consumers and the media. According to Mohr (2007), strategies for movie differentiation can include: *“differentiation with cosmetic movie features, differentiation to reach market segments, growing a movie segment, positioning to support the movie image, positioning to extend the movie image, and differentiation via non-traditional channels”*¹⁶.

1. Differentiation with cosmetic movie features: a film cannot be evaluated without being seen, for this reason, consumers base their choice of which movie to watch on cosmetic movie features such as the storyline, the cast, directors, trailers, and genre. When this type of information is not relevant enough for making a decision, the public tends to seek recommendations from acquaintances or mega-stars. To address the situation and create a positive buzz marketing, marketers can enlist the help of influential figures known as "connectors," including celebrities, film critics, talk show hosts, and other prominent personalities from Hollywood. Additionally, many audiences consult critics when deciding which films to watch. According to a 2001 article in the Wall Street Journal ("Town and Country"), over one-third of Americans actively seek out the opinions of film critics, and one in three moviegoers makes their decisions based on positive reviews. Recognizing the link between favorable reviews and box office performance, film studios meticulously oversee the review

¹⁵ Kim, A., Trimi, S., & Lee, S.-G. (2021). *Exploring the key success factors of films: A survival analysis approach. Service Business, 15*(4), p.620.

¹⁶ Mohr, I. (2007). *Buzz marketing for movies. Business Horizons, 50*(5), p.399.

process. They often highlight positive critiques in their advertising and may choose to delay or forgo press screenings if they expect negative feedback.

2. Differentiation to reach market segments: typically, the public chooses the film that best satisfies their preferences. Focusing on a specific segment and studying it thoroughly can provide a significant competitive advantage.
3. Growing a movie segment: once a film successfully captured a specific segment, it can expand its audience. Buzz marketing that relies on strong themes or niche segments can be an effective way to reach new audiences and prolong its success.
4. Positioning to support the movie image: Positioning refers to the perception of a product or brand, in this case, a film, in the consumer's mind. It differs from differentiation, as the latter is based on the actual characteristics of the product, while positioning is subjective.

A film that is a strategic example of positioning was “House of wax” (2005). The buzz surrounding the film was generated by emphasizing a key plot moment in which socialite Paris Hilton, playing the role of Paige Edwards, was killed. To capitalize on this element, the producers launched promotional posters and T-shirts featuring the slogan "See Paris Die May 6". Additionally, on the official movie website, Paris Hilton promoted the "Paris Hilton Podcast", inviting users to count down the days until the film's premiere, while following her as she shopped, attended parties, and promoted the movie.

5. Positioning to extend the movie image: Films can act as brand. This means that they can offer a mix of symbolic, functional and experiential benefits, which allows them to expand their image through collaborations and merchandising.
6. Differentiation via non-traditional channels: While in the past word of mouth existed only through face-to-face conversations, today buzz marketing spreads much more easily and rapidly through SMS, emails, blogs, social media, and streaming platforms. An iconic example of viral marketing in the movie industry was *The Blair Witch Project*: the film was launched with an innovative web campaign, that had the audience believe the story was real. In a clever marketing move, the actors were even listed as "missing, presumed dead" on IMDb before the movie's release. The limited

theatrical distribution increased demand, transforming the film into a global success, earning over \$248 million on a \$35,000 budget¹⁷.

Buzz marketing starts from creative thinking and, as mentioned before, its objective is to generate WOM among the public. It is not simple, but to succeed, there are some steps to follow:

- Determining key success factors: many sequel films, such as Spider-Man, Harry Potter, Shrek and others, have become well-recognized brands. To develop a strong buzz marketing strategy, it is important to highlight the distinctive elements of a brand, the value it offers to the public and its key characteristics. A success brand communicates benefits, is recognized for specific traits and offers competitive advantages that makes it attractive to the public.
- Analyzing whether macroenvironment forces can support a buzz strategy: what makes you laugh, cry, create interest or appeal is directly influenced by the socio-cultural and economic context. For this reason, it is important to assess how the brand is going to fit into the current macroeconomic scenario.
- Find a buzz hook: giving people something to discuss is what gives the brand visibility and makes it memorable.
- Defining how to start the buzz: to spread their messages many companies decide to engage influential consumers, others use celebrities, who have an extensive network that takes root in various social contexts and can quickly amplify the spread of the message. Others, on the other hand, aim to capture the attention of the public and the media directly, exploiting viral events and high impact content.
- Leveraging Viral Marketing to amplify the buzz: creating content that incentivizes spontaneous sharing can be a way to attract visitors on a web site and to spread a message. Some key elements to achieve this include giveaways, ease of sharing via email, direct links or quick downloads and scalability of content, which must be able to move from a small audience to mass sharing.
- Establishing strategies for spreading the buzz between the audience and future streaming/DVD viewers: the buzz can be released through internet, testimonials and influencers, TV programs, events and film premiers.

¹⁷ Mohr, I. (2007). *Buzz marketing for movies*. *Business Horizons*, 50(5), p.399-402.

- Exploring effective calls to action that can encourage potential customers to engage with the brand: companies can use interactive surveys, contests, puzzles and online games.
- Creating excitement and offer unforgettable experiences to the public: A notable example of buzz marketing is Cingular's advertising campaign for the launch of Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith. The commercial featured Chewbacca trying to perfect his iconic roar, while music producers worked to capture the ideal tone for the Star Wars ringtone. This original approach has generated enormous excitement, leading to the recognition of the spot as one of the most unforgettable moments linked to the film¹⁸.

In recent years, the film industry has faced several challenges, including piracy, strong competition, audience saturation, and overlapping marketing campaigns. The only solution to these issues is creativity and innovation, which explains why buzz marketing is and will continue to be the promotional tool of the new millennium.

1.1.3 Buzz hooks

As we have established so far, in the film industry, the word “buzz” refers to the anticipation or the enthusiasm generated around a film, often before its release. This interest can be stimulated through marketing strategies, good reviews or word of mouth. The buzz is important to attract the interest of the public and can even guarantee ticket sales success.

Conversely, a “hook” is a narrative component that intrigues the public's attention at the start of a narrative. In the context of film, a hook can be a cool opening scene, a great mystery, or an interesting character that makes the audience want to keep watching. The objective is to spark curiosity and maintain the public's interest as the plot unfolds¹⁹.

The expression “buzz hooks” refers to the combined use of these strategies. Even if the term is not formalized in academic literature, it is often used in the marketing slang to highlights those elements or strategies that spark viral WOM and grab the public's attention in an immediate and emotional way.

¹⁸ Mohr, I. (2007). *Buzz marketing for movies*. *Business Horizons*, 50(4), p402–403.

¹⁹ McKee, R. (1997). *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*. ReganBooks.

In cinema, buzz hooks are narrative stimuli intentionally inserted into a promotional campaign (or sometimes in the movie itself) to capture the immediate attention of the public, stimulate curiosity and sharing on social media, trigger spontaneous conversations (online and offline) and to make the film "unforgettable" even before its release.

Buzz hooks are important because they anticipate the release of the film with hype and mystery, make the campaign memorable and easily recognizable and turn the audiences into promoters, exploiting the logic of word of mouth.

The film industry offers a wide range of emblematic examples of "buzz hooks", testifying to their effectiveness and communicative impact.

The promotional campaign of *Toy Story 3 - The Great Escape* was a particularly effective example of the use of viral marketing within the film industry. In particular, the strategy exploited a series of videos centered on the character of Ken, with the aim of engaging an adult audience by appealing to the nostalgia of the 1980s and introducing the character with an ironic and appealing tone.

One of the central elements of the campaign was the video *Groovin' with Ken*, a retro-style mock interview in which the character talks about his lifestyle, passions and wardrobe. The video, posted on YouTube, highlighted Ken's vanity and superficial charm, helping to turn him into a central figure and increasing audience interest in the film.

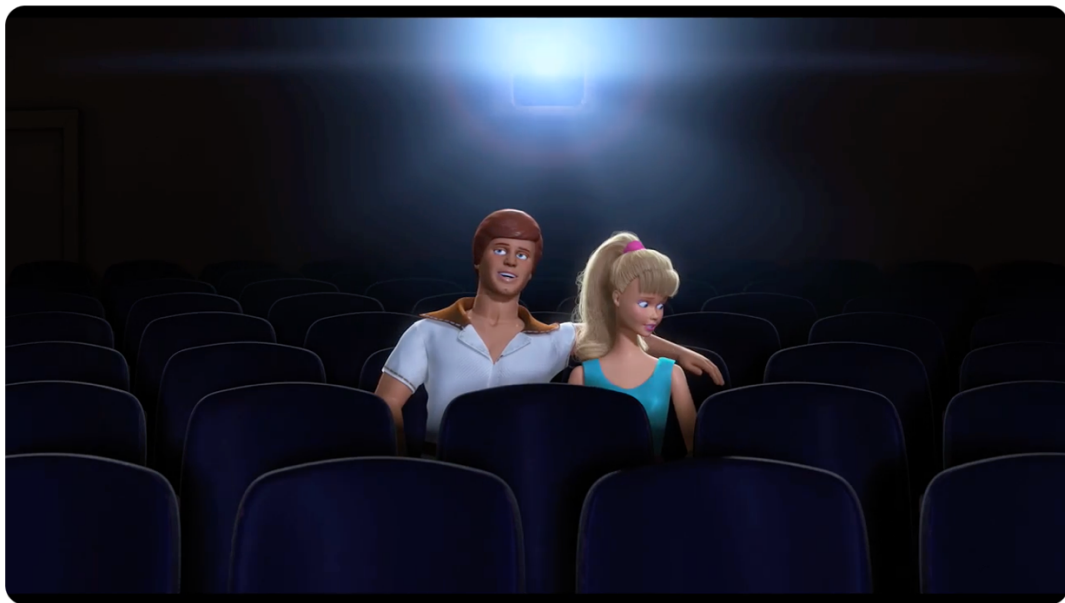
This content was accompanied by a series of three videos entitled *Ken's Dating Tips for Today's Bachelor*, in which Ken dispenses ironic advice on how to win a partner, openly parodying the male stereotypes typical of 1980s pop culture. The titles of the three episodes - *Know Yourself, Be Yourself*; *Play Hard to Get* and *Communication is Key* - trace the style of the sentimental manuals of the time, offering a humorous and easily shareable take on the subject. Thanks to the propagation on YouTube and the ease with which this content could be shared on social media, the campaign achieved high visibility and audience engagement, helping to fuel the anticipation for the film's release.

The use of viral videos allowed the promotional strategy to:

- Reach a heterogeneous audience, extending the target beyond children and also involving adults who grew up with the original toys;
- Create an emotional connection with viewers, exploiting nostalgic appeal;

- Introducing new characters in an original way consistent with the spirit of the film.

This method of communication played a significant role in the commercial success of *Toy Story 3*, becoming a true example for buzz marketing strategies applied to animated films.



TOY STORY 3| Ken's Dating Tips: #31 'Play Hard To Get' | Official Disney Pixar UK



Disney UK ✓
8,15 Mln di iscritti

Iscriviti

👍 439



➦ Condividi



Figure 1: Screenshot from the viral video “Ken’s Dating Tips: #31 – Play Hard to Get,” part of the promotional campaign for *Toy Story 3* (2010). Source: Disney UK YouTube

A further significant example of celebrity-based buzz marketing is the *Deadpool* (2016) film promotional campaign. In this case, the main buzz hook was the protagonist actor Ryan Reynolds, who chose to merge his public image with that of the character he played, becoming a viral vector of the promotion of the film itself. The strength of the campaign lays in its consistency with the irreverent and subversive spirit of the film: the communication was ironic, provocative, self-referential and deeply meta.

Among the most memorable actions, we must remember the fake romantic campaign of Valentine’s Day, which presented *Deadpool* as a comedy of love (“True love never dies”), deliberately deceiving part of the general public. In addition, Reynolds has participated in numerous talk shows, television sketches and commercials dressed as *Deadpool*, often

breaking the fourth wall and addressing directly to the audience. Social media management played a crucial role: short, sarcastic and in-character content was regularly published on official profiles, making the promotion an extension of the film itself.



DEADPOOL Promo Clip - Valentine's Day (2016) Ryan Reynolds Superhero Movie HD

Figure 2: Promotional image from the viral video "Deadpool Valentine's Day Promo Clip," part of the buzz marketing campaign for Deadpool (2016). Source: 20th Century Fox / YouTube.

This strategy has transformed Reynolds not only into a testimonial, but into an active agent of the buzz, feeding virality through the continuous ambiguity between actor and character. The public, involved in this communicative game, reacted with enthusiasm, generating millions of organic shares. With a relatively small budget (around \$58 million), *Deadpool* has grossed over \$780 million worldwide, making it one of the most profitable superhero films ever. The promotional campaign is now considered a benchmark for cross-media viral marketing²⁰.

²⁰ Grauso, A. (2016, February 17). *In hindsight: How the marketing for 'Deadpool' broke the mold*. Forbes. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alishagrauso/2016/02/17/in-hindsight-how-the-marketing-for-deadpool-broke-the-mold/>

Although this thesis focuses on the film industry, it is worth mentioning an emblematic case of experiential marketing buzz applied into a different context: Red Bull Stratos (2012). This campaign represents a benchmark in demonstrating the ability of a brand to generate global attention without resorting to traditional advertising, relying solely on high-impact content and the philosophy of viral word of mouth.

Red Bull, through a scientific and sporting event on the border between reality and myth, orchestrated the jump from the stratosphere of the athlete Felix Baumgartner, who for the first time in history exceeded the speed of sound in free fall. The entire event was streamed live on YouTube, generating over 8 million simultaneous live views and becoming, at that time, the most watched live streaming event ever.

The strength of this strategy lays in the use of buzz hooks: they are highly shareable as well as being memorable elements, such as the perceived risk fell to the event, the heroic character of the protagonist, the uniqueness of the experience, and the suspense created by the waiting and postponing it

Without ever making the brand the direct protagonist of the story, Red Bull has been able to occupy a cultural space, positioning itself as a promoter of extreme and out-of-the-ordinary feats. As observed by Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan (2017), it was an advanced example of "marketing 4.0", in which the experience lived and shared by the public becomes itself promotional content²¹. The campaign achieved an estimated media exposure of over 6 billion dollars, demonstrating how buzz marketing can, if well structured, completely replace traditional forms of communication and transform an event into a global cultural phenomenon²².

²¹ Kotler, P., Kartajaya, H., & Setiawan, I. (2017). *Marketing 4.0: Moving from Traditional to Digital*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

²² Allison Melrose, "Red Bull Stratos: Public Relations Case Study," 2018, source: <https://allisonmelrose.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Allison-Melrose-Red-Bull-Stratos.pdf>.



Figure 3: Felix Baumgartner prepares to jump from the edge of space during the Red Bull Stratos mission (2012). Source: Red Bull Media House / Zenith Watches.

1.2 Why Horror Works: History, Emotion, and Audience Engagement

1.2.1 *The historical evolution of Horror*

The horror genre was not created with the cinema; it was developed gradually as part of a broader cultural process and articulated first in literature. Its birthplace is clearly Britain, where in the 18th century, Gothic was raised and developed, and etymologically the mother of modern horror imagery. The undisputed founder is *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) by Horace Walpole, recognized as the first gothic novel in history. In this work as well as in the following one, the distinctive traits of the genre are developed: the taste for the supernatural, the presence of monstrous creatures, the fascination for the macabre and the constant oscillation between rationality and the unknown.

During the 19th century, romanticism fueled a real revival of gothic, giving impetus to a flourishing literary production centered on terror and irrationality. Works such as *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by Oscar Wilde and *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker become pillars not only of fantastic literature, but also of the future cinematic imagination. Most of the monsters who will invade the screen

in the following decades are really direct descendants of these literary models, transported into decadent environments, dreamlike and symbolically overweighted, rewritten in a modern key by the poetry of the new filmic language.

If literary horror was an English creation, Germany can be considered the birthplace of cinematic horror.

At the beginning of the 20th century, within a cultural context shaped by avant-garde movements and a crisis of rationalist values, the Expressionist movement emerged in Germany. This artistic style, characterized by a visionary and unsettling aesthetic, had a profound influence on early German cinema.

Films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) by Robert Wiene and *Nosferatu* (1922) by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau are among the most iconic examples of the genre: visually striking, filled with shadows, distorted geometries, fragmented identities, and demonic presences.

The German Expressionist film therefore created a new horror film language in which existential dread combines with supernatural and symbolic forces. Germany descended into a dark era with the eruption of Nazism in the 1930s. Many of the intellectuals, directors and actors left the country to avoid censorship and propaganda.

A good number of them found refuge in the United States, and that contributed to the development of the horror genre on American soil, more specifically in Hollywood.

America was the platform on which the mighty monsters of British fiction found success on the screen. Universal Pictures pioneered with two movies in the year 1931 which became classics: James Whale's *Frankenstein* and Tod Browning's *Dracula*. They were followed by *The Mummy* (1932) and *Freaks* (1932), solidifying Universal's hold on horror movies. In the 1940s, Hollywood continued to churn out movies with the same monsters and presented many sequels to build on their mythology filmography. The fall of the classics coincides with the outbreak of the Cold War: with the fear of invasion, the threat of an atomic conflict, and the slow and relentless growth of a series of common fears. Classic horror is then replaced by horror science fiction and *The Thing from Another World* (1951) is a perfect example. The monster is now alien and scientific and comes from space or a lab: a mirror to the fears of the era.

In 1968, with *The Night of the Living Dead* by George A. Romero, a new era of horror began. The modern zombie becomes a symbol of a consumerist society, depersonalizing

and dehumanizing. *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *The Last House on the Left* (1972) explored the terror hidden within everyday life. In the 1980s, Hollywood horror fused with pop culture: slasher was born, a subgenre focused on serial killers and teenagers. Films such as *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) became cult and generated endless sequels.

The 1990s marked a phase of transformation. Horror became contaminated with elements of thriller and detective cinema, producing films such as *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Se7en* (1995), and *In the Mouth of Madness* (1995). In particular, *Scream* (1996) by Wes Craven revitalized the genre with a meta-cinematic, ironic, and self-reflective approach that would go on to influence horror cinema throughout the 2000s.

Entering the new millennium, the genre is forced to reinvent itself: remakes and prequels started to proliferate, while new subgenres such as video game adaptations (*Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill*), mockumentaries (*The Blair Witch Project*, *Cloverfield*), and torture porn (*Hostel*, *Saw*), characterized by extreme and hyper-realistic violence, gained popularity.

At the same time, Italy was developing its own horror language, albeit in a more fragmented way. Italian culture, less permeated by the Gothic imaginary and more influenced by the dominant presence of the Catholic Church, struggled to welcome a genre considered "immoral" and often relegated to B-series productions. The first Italian horror is Riccardo Freda's *I vampiri* (1956), but it is with Mario Bava that the real golden season begins. Titles such as *La Maschera del demonio* (1960) and *I tre volti della paura* (1963) open the way to the so-called Italian horror, a genre characterized by craftsmanship, visionary atmospheres, and esoteric undertones.

In the 1970s, the baton passed to Dario Argento, who with *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (1970) inaugurated a long season of international success. Italian horror stands out because of its sophisticated aesthetics, evocative use of colour, urgent music and a blend of violence and symbolism. In the 1980s it was the turn of the extreme as main character, with titles like Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) and Lucio Fulci's films of gore and mystical horror (*L'aldilà*, *Quella villa accanto al cimitero*). Beginning from the 1990s production fell drastically and sought refuge in the independent circuits while losing most of its visibility and international prestige.

Nowadays, the horror genre, irrespective of its ongoing transformations, is a privileged mirror to shared fears and is able to adapt to cultural and technical changes without losing any of its close and unending relation to the unconscious and the uncanny²³.

1.2.2 Contemporary Trends in the Horror Genre

The global horror film market has seen significant growth in recent years, consolidating not only as a film category with strong cultural impact, but also as an economically profitable and continuously expanding sector.

According to a report by Business Research Insights (2024), “The global Horror Film Market in terms of revenue was estimated at approximately USD 112.01 billion in 2024. Over the forecast period from 2024 to 2033, the market is anticipated to grow at a CAGR of 7.2%, reaching an estimated valuation of around USD 195.35 billion by 2033”²⁴.

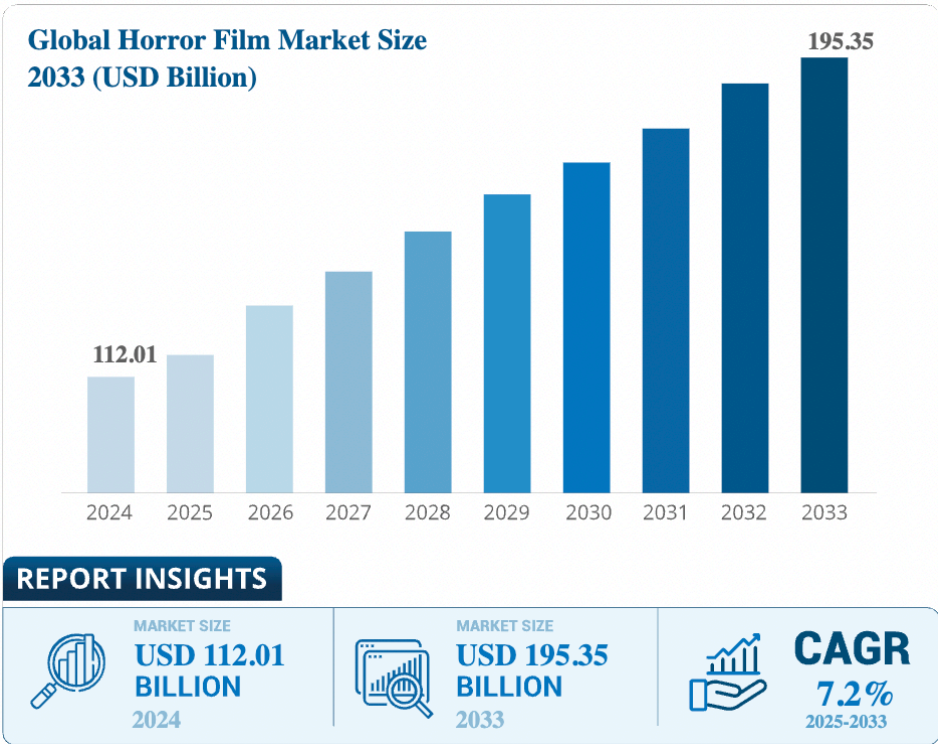


Figure 4: Global Horror Film Market Forecast (2024–2033). Source: Business Research Insights (2024)

²³ McCracken, G. (2011). *Spettatori perturbati. Cinema horror e nuovi percorsi di visione. Marketing Theory*.

²⁴ Business Research Insights. (2024). *Horror Film Market Size, Share, Growth 2024–2033*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessresearchinsights.com/market-reports/horror-film-market-117666>

According to Statista, in 2024, 55 horror movies were released in Canada and the United States, the highest value recorded since 2000. In comparison with the most recent data from 2024, horror films represent about 10% of North American box office, doubling their share compared to 2013. This is particularly significant when you consider that, unlike other genres, horror continued to thrive even in the post-pandemic period, attracting audiences back to the cinema.

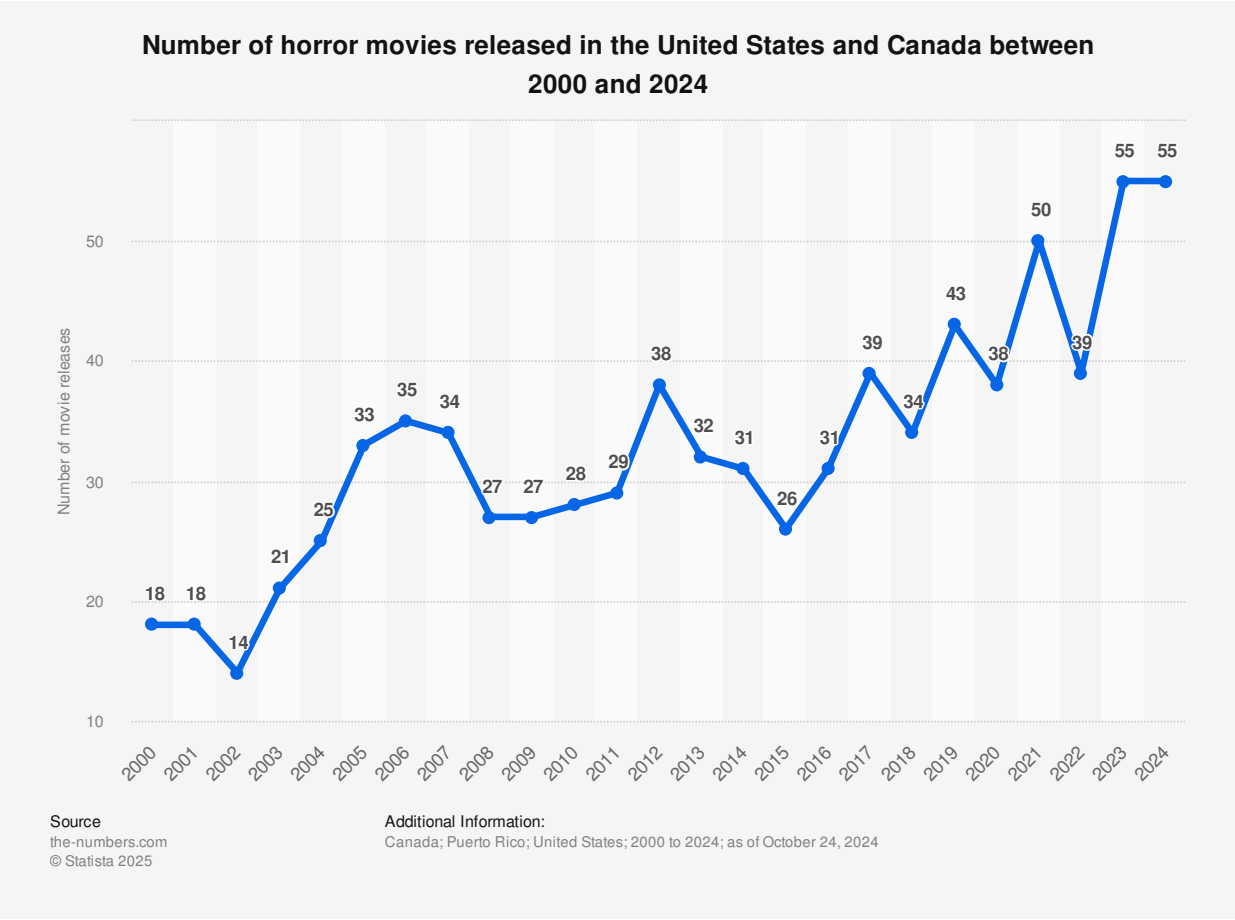


Figure 5: Number of horror movie released in the USA and Canada between 2000 and 2024. Source: Statista (2024)

Another important piece of data concerns the internal architecture of the horror genre, which is divided into several subgenres. In 2024, the most prevalent subgenre in US cinema was the supernatural, with 16 new releases. Movies featuring monsters ranked second, with 15 movies that same year, tripling the number recorded the year before. Following those, in prevalence, there were psychological horror, slasher, and dark comedy.

This internal heterogeneity confirms the horror’s ability to adapt to different tastes and sensibilities, maintaining audience interest through ever-evolving narrative formulas.

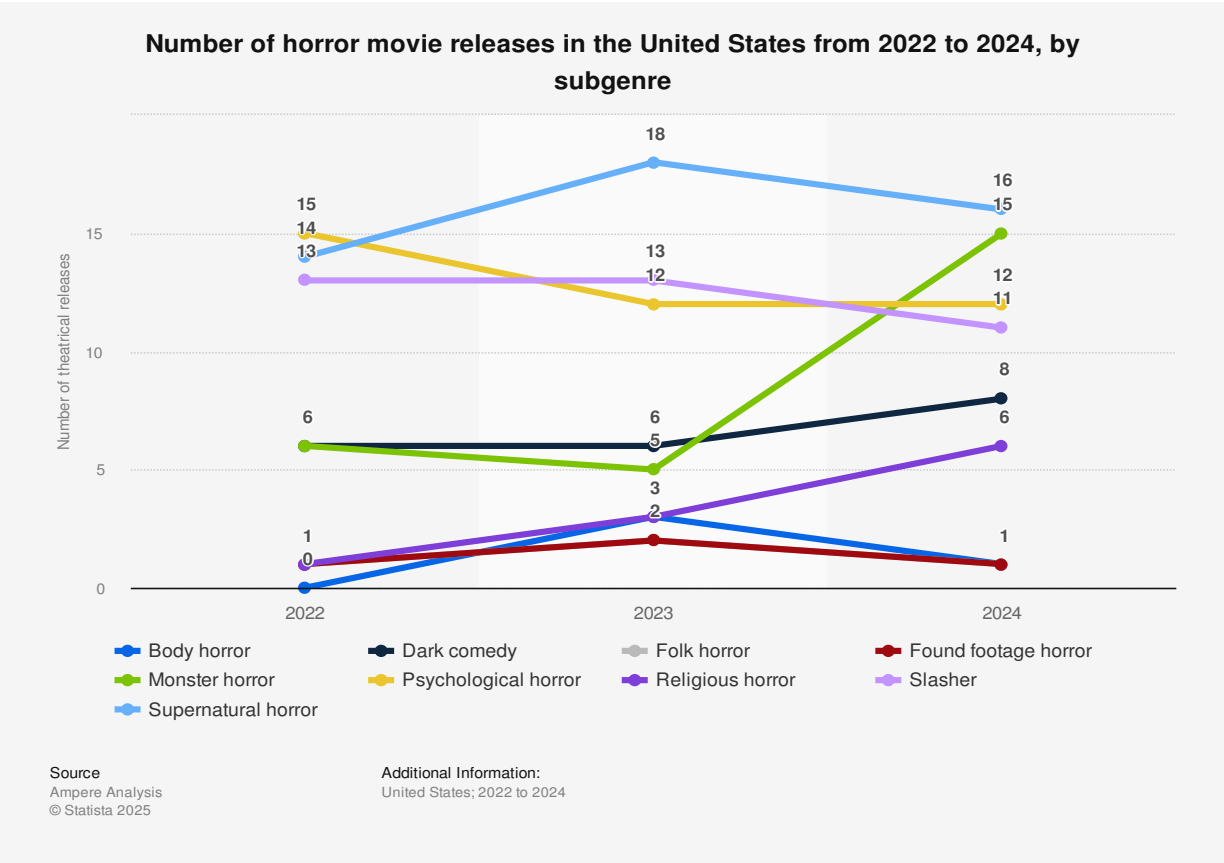


Figure 6: Number of horror movie released in the USA from 2022 to 2024, by subgenre. Source: Statista (2024)

Statista’s global data indicates that horror audiences are predominantly young. Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) shows the greatest affinity with the genre: 91% of them report regularly consuming horror movies or TV series.

This data explains the strong presence of the genre on digital platforms, social media and streaming services. The typical emotions associated with the horror genre - shock, tension, and, generally, all those causing intense emotional reactions - lend themselves particularly well to being shared as clips, memes or reaction videos, triggering organic marketing buzz mechanisms.

This percentage decreases with the increasing of age: in fact, less than 60% of Boomers report regularly consuming horror content.

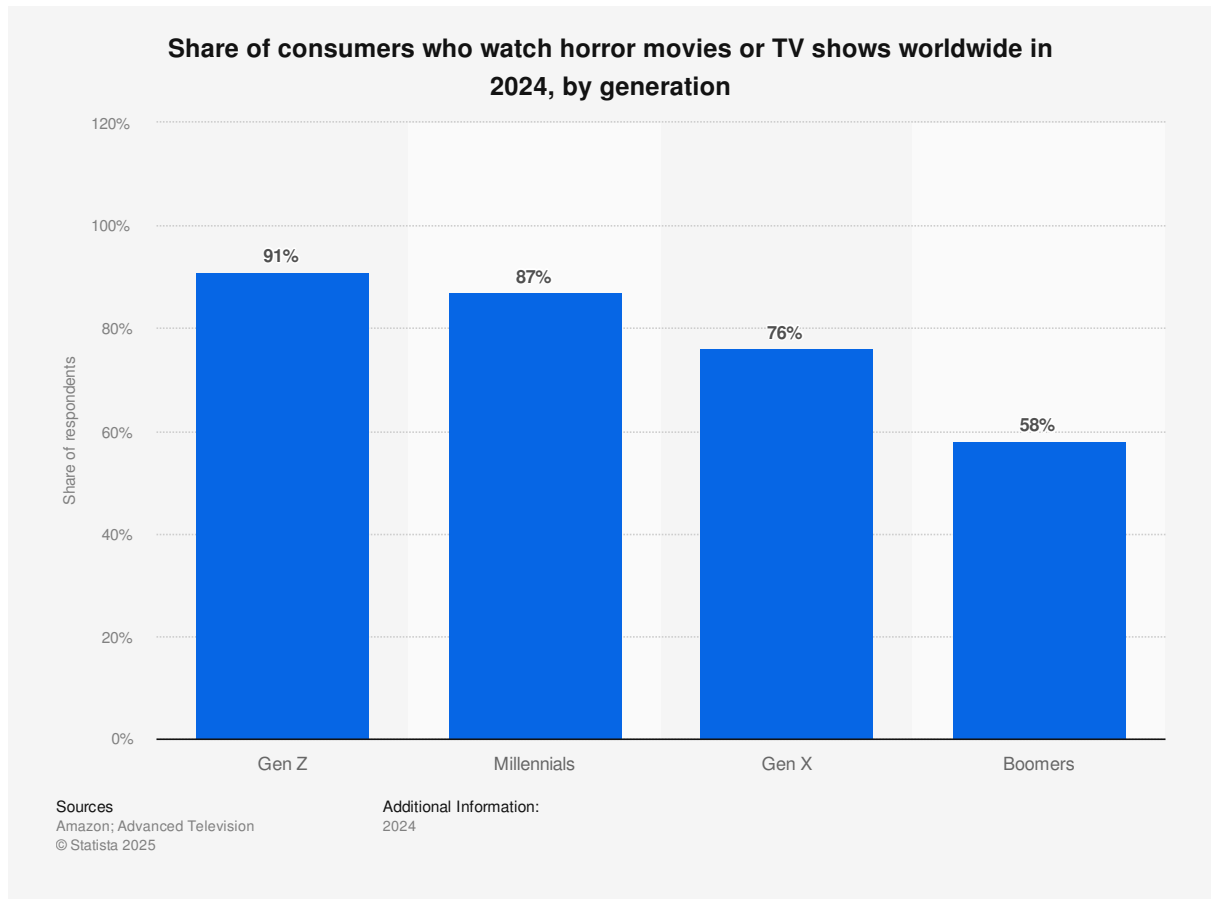


Figure 7: Share of consumers who watch horror movies or TV shows worldwide in 2024, by generation.
Source: Statista (2024)

Despite its seemingly niche structure, horror ranked fifth among the most-watched genres by the American public in 2023–2024. Preceded by comedy, action movies, drama and adventure, the horror genre remained stable in the top five, surpassing musicals, fantasy, documentaries and westerns.

This positioning demonstrates how horror has overcome the "B-movie" stigma, consolidating itself as a mainstream genre, capable of resonating with a broad and cross-demographic audience²⁵.

Finally, from an economic perspective, some horror sagas have proven particularly fruitful. The Conjuring Universe, for example, has generated more than \$2.36 billion

²⁵ Movie genre distribution in the United States and Canada from 2010 to 2025, by box office market share. Source: Statista (2024)

globally, with a total budget of less than \$250 million. Other profitable franchises include Alien, Saw and Paranormal Activity.

This collection of data confirms the high profitability of the horror genre, often able to obtain substantial profit margins with relatively low budgets – an essential factor for the choice of viral and unconventional marketing strategies.

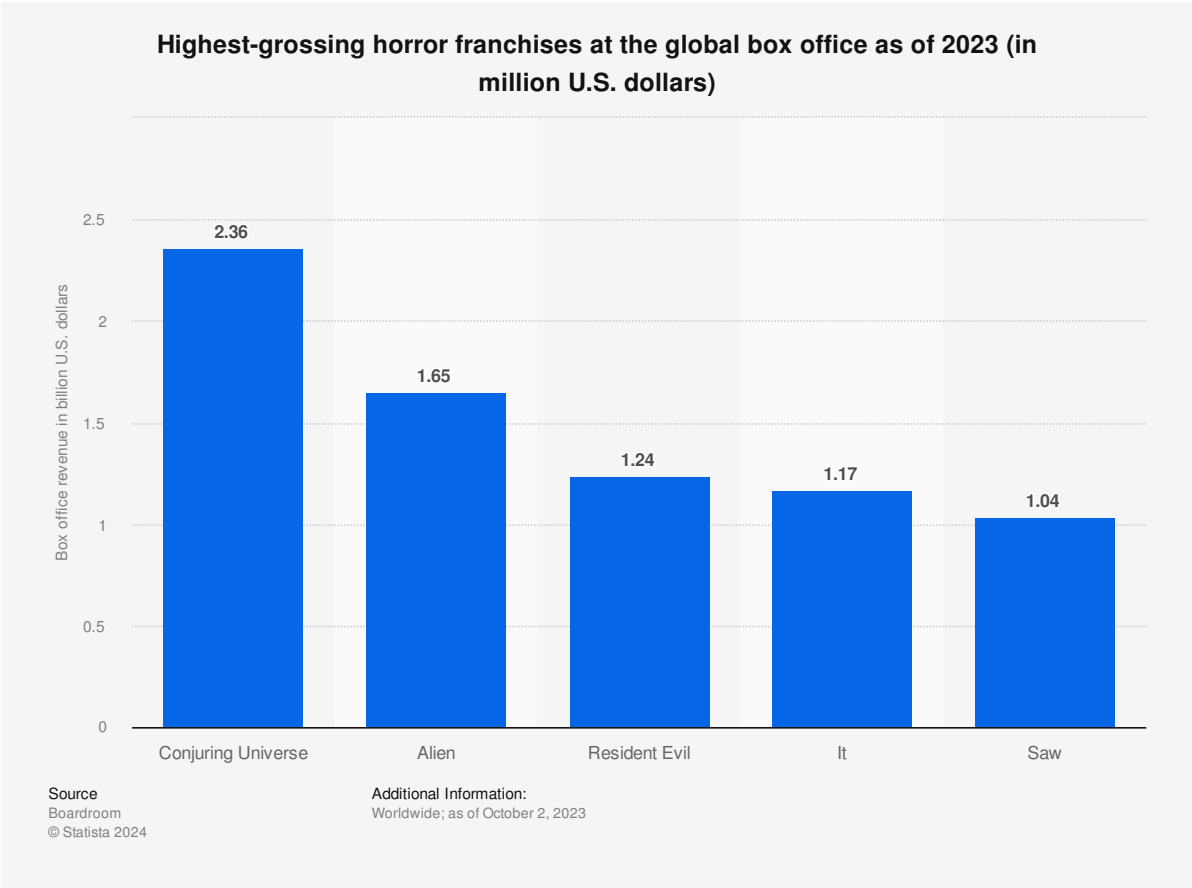


Figure 8: Highest-grossing horror franchises at the global box office as of 2023(in million U.S. dollars).
Source: Statista

The numbers speak for themselves: horror is one of the few film genres in constant growth both in terms of production and revenue. Its audience is young, loyal and highly active on social media, making it fertile ground for buzz marketing strategies, which is the focus of this research.

1.3 Analysis of buzz marketing campaigns in the horror film industry

A study conducted by Jun Zhang e Wasin Praditsilp (2023), published in *Science, Technology, and Social Sciences Procedia*, has analyzed the role of the 4P's of the marketing mix (product, price, placement and promotion) in influencing the behavior of horror film audiences.

The study highlights that the impact of the product on horror film revenues is a key factor. Audiences, when choosing a film, evaluate the plot, cast, direction and production budget. In addition, it was found that films with well-known actors and directors tend to perform better than independent films.

Regarding price, it is also a strategic element: a price that is too high may reduce the audience while discounts and special offers can encourage viewing. In addition, promotions, such as student discounts and loyalty cards, help influence consumer choice. The role of distribution in horror films today is closely linked to streaming platforms, which are becoming increasingly important. While it is true that cinemas remain essential, it is also true that young audiences tend to prefer on-demand services.

When it comes to promotion, the horror film industry is moving away from traditional marketing and shifting increasingly towards Word-of-Mouth²⁶. Buzz marketing has proven to be an effective tool for attracting audiences by exploiting mystery and suspense. Iconic campaigns such as “The Blair Witch Project” “Paranormal Activity” and “Smile”, have demonstrated how innovative marketing strategies can turn independent films into commercial successes. At the same time, the role of e-commerce and digital platforms is transforming content distribution and promotion, helping in creating viral marketing campaigns on a global scale.

²⁶ Zhang, J., & Praditsilp, W. (2023). *Horror film's marketing mix and its effect on revenues*. *Science, Technology, and Social Sciences Procedia*.

1.3.1 *The Blair Witch Project (1999)*

“*The Blair Witch Project* is 1999 American Psychological horror movie, written, directed, and edited by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez. It is one of the most successful independent films of all time, it is a "found footage" pseudo-documentary in which three students, interpreted by 3 three college friends of the producers, hike into a forest to shoot a documentary about a local myth known as the Blair Witch”²⁷.

This film tells the story of three students, Heather Donahue, Joshua Leonard e Michael Williams, who on October 21, 1994, went into the Black Hill Forest in Maryland, to make a documentary on Elly Kedward, a woman who, in 1700s, was accused of witchcraft and banished from the town of Blair. From that moment, a popular legend spread, claiming that an evil presence haunted the woods. The three students follow a planned route, but soon get lost in the forest. As they struggle to find their way, they begin to argue, feeling increasingly helpless. They discover stones arranged in a cross, hear strange howls, losing and finding each other repeatedly, unsure of where to go. When the night comes again, Heather staring directly into the camera that records everything, apologizes to her parents before disappearing into the darkness²⁸.



Figure 9: Official poster of the film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). Source: <https://www.sentieriselvaggi.it/il-caso-the-blair-witch-project/>.

²⁷ AllMovie. (n.d.). *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) – Overview. Retrieved March 11, 2025, from <https://www.allmovie.com/movie/the-blair-witch-project-am5963>.

²⁸ Cinematografo. (n.d.). *The Blair Witch Project - Il mistero della strega di Blair*. Retrieved March 11, 2025, from <https://www.cinematografo.it/film/the-blair-witch-project-il-mistero-della-strega-di-blair-nefskmei>.

After the screening of the film at the Sundance Film Festival, the film distributor Artisan Entertainment chose to acquire *The Blair Witch Project* for \$1.1 million²⁹.

The film was released nationwide on July 16, 1999, immediately becoming a box office success and achieving cult film status. After sixty days of screenings, the film had grossed over \$145 million. (Box Office Report, 1999)

The Blair Witch Project is the emblem of how clever advertising and smart positioning, combined with a good-quality film, can compete with Hollywood giants.

Corliss (1999) described the impact of *The Blair Witch Project* as follows: “The impact of ‘The Blair Witch Project’ is utterly unprecedented. Never has a – let’s be honest – weird movie budgeted at a ludicrously low \$35,000 stormed both the box office and the national pop consciousness”. He also said that: “the marketers at Artisan Entertainment, who built the fervent want-to-see for the film through cunning use of the Internet, have been credited with revolutionizing the way films are sold. “‘Blair Witch’ is the must attend social event for plugged-in America”³⁰.

In August 1997, the marketing campaign for *The Blair Witch Project* began, with Haxan's producers gaining the exposure they had been seeking through John Pierson's Split Screen cable television series. A segment of the program was dedicated to the film, featuring an eight-minute short created by the directors and a fabricated backstory about the "Blair Witch." Haxan used the money earned from Split Screen to fund a trip to Maryland, where they spent eight days filming in June 1998³¹.

The production incorporated elements of military survival tactics to enhance the actors' performances, making them feel more natural. The cast members went into the woods with handheld cameras and were told where to go at specific times. The directors avoided direct contact with the actors and, instead, tortured and confused them by deprivation of sleep and, by the end, even food. The hyperrealism of this movie would let the viewers momentarily suspend their disbelief until something terrifying happens³².

Film critic Atkinson (1999) described *The Blair Witch Project* as an experience that goes beyond mere conviction, emphasizing its raw authenticity: “To say ‘The Blair Witch

²⁹ Associated Press (1999) ‘Blair Witch’ bodes well for independent film” at Salon.com – August 3, 1999

³⁰ Silver, J. (1999). *The Blair Witch Project: A marketing case study*. Queensland University of Technology, p1.

³¹ Silver, J. (1999). *The Blair Witch Project: A marketing case study*. Queensland University of Technology, p5.

³² Boyar, Joy (1999) “Bewitching cinema” Orlando Sentinel On-Line June 4, 1999 06.33 pm EST

Project' is a convincing experience is only scratching the surface. Because you believe it, because your vision is limited, because the actors are in reality alone in the dark, because it doesn't even seem to be a movie but rather somebody's home footage gone terribly, sickeningly berserk, it might be the scariest movie ever made³³".

Similarly, Corliss (1999) highlighted the film's unconventional approach to horror, noting its absence of typical genre elements such as explicit violence, music, or a visible antagonist: "It has no sex or even sexual tension, no music of any kind, no demonic power tools. No prowling, voyeuristic camera from the killer's point of view; this movie is about victims and the victims they make of each other. There are no cuts to the monster. In fact, no visible monster! The audience sees only what the camera does. At night it is sometimes pitch black³⁴".

The marketing phenomenon of the film began in 1998, even before there was a script. Sanchez built a website (<http://www.blairwitch.com>) dedicated to the history of the "Blair Witch". Initially, the idea was to show it to his friends and to present the project to possible investors. However, when Internet users discovered the site, the myth of the "Blair Witch" began to spread.

³³ Atkinson, Michael (1999) "The Blair Witch Project" Mr Showbiz Movie Review

³⁴ Corliss, Richard (1999) "'Blair Witch' Craft" Time Magazine August 16, 1999 pp 56-62



Figure 10: Fake missing person poster distributed as part of *The Blair Witch Project*'s viral marketing campaign. Source: *The Guardian*

Kevin Foxe, executive producer of the film, said that: "The biggest part of the buzz was that we wouldn't let anyone see it (*the movie*) ... That frustrated the press. People were calling me from the LA Times and Entertainment Weekly saying they'd spent four hours on the site, begging me for an advanced screening. I'd just tell them 'You'll have to wait for Sundance'"³⁵.

Artisan Entertainment, the distribution company, began preparing the marketing campaign during the Sundance Film Festival, immediately after the acquisition of distribution rights. Obviously, to invest \$1.1 million. The company must be convinced that the movie would be an enormous success. Furthermore, *The Blair Witch Project* is a low budget movie without famous stars or special effects. This means that the film needed a strong marketing strategy to succeed at the box office and the first step was to target young audiences. This group is, in fact, the one who most frequently goes to the cinema in the USA³⁶. Marketing research indicates that teenagers are the primary horror film audience, determining the success or failure of horror films, while audiences in their twenties have a lesser influence.

³⁵ Silver, J. (1999). *The Blair Witch Project: A marketing case study*. Queensland University of Technology, p6.

³⁶ Dortch, Shannon (1996) - "Going to the movies" Vol 18 Issue 12 American Demographics Ithaca Dec 1996 pp 4-7

Artisan, at the time, was a small company with limited financial capacity. To attract its target audience, it could not compete in terms of budget. For this reason, Artisan chose to use low-cost marketing tactics, specifically guerrilla marketing. Malin, co-president of Artisan, estimated that they had spent only \$1 million to promote the film nationwide.³⁷ Intelligent marketing positioned the film as a pseudo-documentary. This helped to fuel intense discussions in chat rooms on the Internet about whether the film was real or fiction, generating huge interest from fans.

The film was first released in just 27 theaters in July 1999, earning \$1.5 million on its opening weekend, with an average of \$56,002 per screen.

By its third weekend, the movie had expanded to 1,101 screens and grossed \$55 million, outperforming *Runaway Bride* and *The Haunting* in the same genre.

The *Blair Witch Project* continued to grow in popularity, reaching 2,538 screens in its sixth week and accumulating a total of \$123 million. It became one of the most profitable films in cinema history, grossing over \$500 million over the seven-year cycle of the franchise.

The success of the movie demonstrated the marketing power of the Internet, even with a very low investment compared to Hollywood standards. This case study became a pioneer in the film industry, representing how buzz marketing and Word of Mouth can transform an independent film into a global cultural phenomenon³⁸.

³⁷ Carvell, Tim (1999) "How the 'Blair Witch' Project built up so much buzz" *Fortune* Vol 40 Issue 4 New York August 16, 1999 start pp 32

³⁸ Silver, J. (1999). *The Blair Witch Project: A marketing case study*. Queensland University of Technology, p7-13.

1.3.2 *Paranormal Activity (2007)*

Paranormal Activity was born as a horror film with a low budget; it was shot with only \$15,000, but it became one of the most successful movies of all time, earning more than \$100 million only between the USA and Canada³⁹.

This movie represents one of the best examples of viral marketing success in horror cinema; it demonstrates how innovative strategies can compensate for the lack of a consistent budget and transform a small independent project into a global phenomenon⁴⁰. Oren Peli was the screenwriter and director of the film, and he thought of the idea after he moved into a house in the suburbs with his girlfriend, Toni Taylor. After he started hearing weird noises during the night, Peli thought about installing a camera to see if he could capture anything unusual. From this event, the project of Paranormal Activity began. Peli wrote the screenplay and, afterwards, he and Taylor renovated the house with new wooden flooring, reorganized the bedroom, hung paintings on the walls, etc., and then they selected the cast for the film.

The movie was shot in 2007, in only seven days, with the participation of only three crew members: Peli, Taylor, and Amir Zbede, one of Peli's best friends.

When the film was completed, Peli presented it to Screampfest, a niche film festival held every October at the legendary Chinese Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard, dedicated to horror and cult independent films. During the festival, the producer Steven Schneider noticed the film and shared it with his colleague and producer Jason Blum.

The Paramount Pictures president, Adam Goodman, watched the movie and decided to schedule a limited release for the autumn of 2009. That moment was the beginning of something incredible.

At first, on September 25, 2009, the film was distributed in only seven cities in the USA. Then, in another 12 university cities, followed by 20 more. Finally, on October 16, less than a month later, Paranormal Activity was distributed nationwide⁴¹.

The great success is attributable, in part, to the viral marketing campaign based on the "Demand It" platform, an innovative strategy that made viewers active promoters of the

³⁹ Sentient Decision Science. (2022). *Paranormal Activity: Viral marketing used to generate \$100 million*. Retrieved from <https://www.sentientdecisionscience.com/paranormal-activity-viral-marketing-used-to-generate-100-million-dollars/>

⁴⁰ Denson, S., & Leyda, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, p398.

⁴¹ Sentient Decision Science. (2022). *Paranormal Activity: Viral marketing used to generate \$100 million*. Retrieved from <https://www.sentientdecisionscience.com/paranormal-activity-viral-marketing-used-to-generate-100-million-dollars/>

film. For this campaign, Paramount collaborated with Eventful.com, a website that allowed fans to request the film in their own city, emphasizing the idea of exclusivity and direct participation. The system then collected demographic data, in order to have a clear picture of which cities had the highest demand. The goal was to optimize the distribution⁴².

Moreover, the audience, feeling involved in the distribution of the film, had a sense of belonging and hype around the cinematic event.

Thanks to this strategy, the film managed to expand its distribution progressively, strengthening the perception of a growing cinematic phenomenon.



Figure 11: *Paranormal Activity* (2007) Demand It! Campaign – source: Paramount Pictures

Contributing to the success of *Paranormal Activity* was also the strategic use of social media, which created a sense of mystery and anticipation. First of all, the official website of the film allowed users to share one word to describe it, which was then shown in a loop together with reviews from other viewers. Moreover, the hashtag *#TweetYourScream* went viral on Twitter, encouraging viewers to share their reactions, generating even more

⁴² Denson, S., & Leyda, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, p399.

curiosity. Word of mouth on Reddit, Digg, and Facebook then amplified the reach of the film, by involving online communities of horror fans⁴³.

Another key element of the marketing campaign was the choice to use the *Found Footage Trailer* strategy, based on audience reactions rather than scenes from the film. In fact, the official trailers showed only the terrified reactions of viewers in the cinemas, without revealing anything from the actual movie.

The mystery, the curiosity, the desire to discover what was causing so much fear, together with spontaneous word of mouth, generated such intrigue that audiences felt compelled to see the film⁴⁴.

Achieving success inevitably brings public scrutiny and differing opinions. Some critics argued that the campaign was merely a marketing strategy disguised as a popular initiative, that the studio had already planned the national release of the film, and that the "Demand It!" mechanism was just an illusion.

However, Megan Colligan, co-president of domestic marketing for Paramount, stated that without the demand generated by the audience, the film would not have been distributed on a large scale⁴⁵.

The marketing model of *Paranormal Activity* profoundly influenced the future of horror cinema, inspiring films like *The Devil Inside* (2012) and *Smile* (2022), which adopted similar strategies based on viral campaigns and social media.

⁴³ Sentient Decision Science. (2022). *Paranormal Activity: Viral marketing used to generate \$100 million*. Retrieved from <https://www.sentientdecisionscience.com/paranormal-activity-viral-marketing-used-to-generate-100-million-dollars/>

⁴⁴ Denson, S., & Leyda, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, p401.

⁴⁵ Denson, S., & Leyda, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, p402.

1.3.3 *Smile* (2022)

The campaign for the movie *Smile* was noted for its performance by a number of awards it received. Specifically, it won a category of "Brand Awareness Campaign" in the 15th Annual Shorty Awards⁴⁶. Moreover, the campaign earned Clio Awards 2023: Gold Award for its viral marketing technique⁴⁷. Such a laurel badge emphasizes the influence and creativity of the marketing techniques that were employed in favor of the film.

Smile is a 2022 film directed by Parker Finn with Sosie Bacon and Kyle Gallner. The movie tells the story of psychologist Rose Cotter, who is haunted by strange and frightening phenomena after a traumatic episode involving one of her patients. In order to survive and escape a new and chilling reality, Rose will have to confront her past.

After witnessing the suicide of her patient with her own eyes, Rose begins to be tormented by mysterious and terrifying events. A dark presence even haunts her other patients, infecting them with a malevolent smile before leading them to take their own lives as well, either by inflicting fatal wounds upon themselves or falling victim to acts of extreme violence. When it seems that her turn has come, Rose is drawn into a spiral of fear and horrifying visions. However, only by confronting her past will she be able to uncover the mystery-before her mind is completely consumed by madness⁴⁸.

In 2022, the marketing team took advantage of the approaching Halloween season to carry out their campaign, sending "strange people" with eerie smiles onto public broadcasts, with the goal of frightening viewers.

On September 23, 2022, during a Yankees-Mets match, a man smiled for 40 minutes. Many of these actors, protagonists of this campaign, wore a yellow T-shirt with the word "Smile" stamped on it. This simple message served to warn the public that they were part of the campaign. However, this actor who smiled for 40 minutes was not wearing the T-shirt, making everything even more unsettling.

⁴⁶ Shorty Awards. (2023). *15th Annual Shorty Awards - Awareness Campaign*. Shorty Awards. Retrieved from <https://shortyawards.com/category/15th/awareness-campaign>

⁴⁷ Clio Awards. (2023). *Smile – Viral Marketing Campaign*. Clio Awards. Retrieved from <https://clios.com/winners-gallery/details/163487>

⁴⁸ Movieplayer.it. (2022). *Smile (2022) - Scheda film*. Retrieved from https://movieplayer.it/film/smile_60335/



Figure 12: Marketing campaign for the film *Smile* (2022). Source: <https://www.rockandpop.cl/2022/09/smile-sonrie-pelicula-de-terror-fotos-por-que-la-gente-sonrie-terrorificamente-en-los-partidos-de-beisbol-en-estados-unidos-eeuu/>.

This campaign caused a stir on social media. The sports media company Jomboy Media shared clips of the public that revealed different disturbing sightings of the actors. Besides the impact left on the audience by the fear it provoked, fans of the film's campaign could report the smiles they saw in public on the official website. To further increase engagement, a phone number was even made available, allowing fans to call or send messages to report the smiles. Snapchat also released a filter that distorted normal smiles, transforming them into a creepy grin. The engine that created all of this was Paramount Pictures, which managed to promote the film everywhere: online, in public spaces, and in cinemas.

The brilliance behind *Smile* is that, being a psychological horror film, it incorporated this very aspect into its advertising campaign, scaring people to attract them to cinemas. If a smile is almost always a positive sign in real life, in this case, the film suggests that seeing a person smile meant that something bad was about to happen. It is a sinister smile, typical of predators, a smile capable only of unsettling everyone.

When the movie was released in Australia, in Sydney, there was a group of people, motionless, with a smile plastered on their faces. In front of the iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge, groups of over 20 people were spotted in various locations, including Mrs.

Macquarie's Chair, Pitt Street Mall, Central Station, Surry Hills, Hyde Park, and Martin Place.

Behind this marketing strategy is the advertising and digital media agency Hello Social, which is responsible for the advertising activities in Australia. The partner and managing director, Sam Kelly, explained the brilliant strategy behind this campaign: "Our strategy was to drive beyond pure key art and trailer promotion. The multi-pronged activation provided us with a disruptive real-life moment, an earned PR opportunity and made for epic social content that localized the films narrative and could be served digitally to the masses"⁴⁹.

Thanks to the marketing campaigns and the quality of the film, *Smile* achieved a surprising box office success.

With a production budget of \$17 million, it grossed over \$216 million at a global level, with \$105.8 million coming from the United States. This result made it one of the most profitable horror films of the year⁵⁰.

1.4 Gaps in existing literature

As demonstrated by the marketing campaigns of the aforementioned films, interest in buzz marketing within the film industry, particularly in the horror genre, is growing. Nevertheless, the current literature still has some shortcomings:

- Lack of quantitative studies: There are several studies on buzz viral marketing in the film industry; however, most of them are based on qualitative case studies and analyses. It would be an added value to understand the real effect of buzz marketing strategies on audience perception and how much they influence the propensity to watch the film. Due to this flaw, it is not possible to accurately assess the effect of these campaigns compared to traditional promotions.
- Limited understanding of the emotional dynamics that drive viral horror marketing: The emotional factor is known to have a significant impact on the virality of content. However, the literature lacks experimental evidence on which specific emotions, such as fear, surprise, or suspense, are most effective in engaging the audience and sparking

⁴⁹ Marketing Mag. (2022). *Smile's marketing campaign: A horror movie marketing masterpiece*. Retrieved from <https://www.marketingmag.com.au/news/smile-campaign-freakingly-terrifying/>

⁵⁰ Movieplayer.it. (2022). *Smile (2022) - Scheda film*. Retrieved from https://movieplayer.it/film/smile_60335/

discussion. It remains unclear whether strategies based on terror are more viral than those driven by curiosity or mystery.

- Absence of standardized models to evaluate the success of viral marketing campaigns: When it comes to horror movies, the only metrics used to measure the success of a viral campaign are box-office receipts or social media statistics such as views and shares. Nevertheless, there is no organized framework to quantify the relationship between campaign exposure, emotional involvement, and the decision to watch the film.
- Lack of comparative analysis between different buzz marketing strategies in horror films: Literature examines different marketing campaigns, but there is no comparison between them to identify best practices.

The next chapter will aim to address some of these gaps.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Overview of the Research Design

This research adopts a mixed methodological approach, divided into two main phases: an initial phase of exploratory qualitative analysis, followed by an experimental phase built on the basis of a theoretical model developed from existing literature.

The general objective is to understand how effective buzz marketing strategies are in the world of horror cinema, with a particular focus on the role of emotions and audience involvement in the viral diffusion of content and the intention to see the film. The research aims, first of all, to fill some gaps in the literature: from the scarcity of quantitative studies conducted in the field, to the limited understanding of the emotional dynamics that fuel virality, to the absence of conceptual models capable of clearly explaining the relationship between exposure, psychological response and spectator behavior.

The first phase involves a comparative analysis of three viral campaigns considered emblematic in the horror genre: *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *Smile* (2022). Through this qualitative analysis, we will try to identify recurring elements at the narrative level, promotional strategies adopted, psychological levers used and mechanisms of engagement activated, with the aim of laying the foundations for the construction of a theoretical model.

Only starting from the evidence emerging from the literature review and the study of these case studies, we will then move on to the definition of a simplified experimental proposal. This phase will be oriented towards testing, in a preliminary way, some key relationships between exposure to an immersive teaser campaign and possible audience reactions, with particular reference to emotional involvement, viewing intention and word-of-mouth propensity. The variables to be considered and their measurement methods will be selected and justified based on theoretical models and scales validated in the literature.

2.2 Qualitative Phase: Case Study Analysis

2.2.1 Methodological Rationale and Selection Criteria

The qualitative phase of this research aims to analyse three promotional campaigns that, at different times, represented turning points in the application of buzz marketing to the horror genre: *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *Smile* (2022). The selection of these cases is based on three main criteria: historical relevance in the dissemination of viral strategies, innovation in the narrative and promotional construction of the campaign, and the ability to generate broad audience participation and involvement. Although the three campaigns belong to different technological contexts, they all share a strategy based on emotional activation, mystery and active interaction with the viewer. The objective of this phase is to identify recurring patterns and evolutionary differences in horror buzz marketing techniques, laying the foundations for the construction of a theoretically grounded conceptual model to be explored in the subsequent experimental phase.

2.2.2 The Three Case Studies: Strategies and Impacts

The choice of the three case studies - *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *Smile* (2022) - stems from the desire to closely observe how buzz marketing strategies in horror cinema have evolved over time. Each of these films represents a key moment, inserted in a different historical, technological and media context, and offers valuable insights to understand how the way of telling, promoting and engaging the public has changed.

Each of these campaigns marked a turning point in the relationship between marketing, narration and the viewer, helping to redefine the ways in which a strong emotional impact and viral diffusion of content can be generated.

The Blair Witch Project is considered a true pioneering case of digital buzz marketing. The promotional campaign revolved around an ambiguous and disturbing narrative, presented as if it were real. The film's official website (blairwitch.com) presented itself as a sort of investigative dossier on a local legend, while the protagonists were declared "missing" even on authoritative platforms such as IMDb, further fueling the sense of mystery. This approach enhanced the illusion of authenticity and actively involved the

audience in online discussions, forums and chatrooms, turning marketing into an extended and immersive component of the story itself. The whole strategy was based on ambiguity and the suspension between reality and fiction, acting as an early example of transmediality (Jenkins, 2006). The result was an extraordinary success at the box office, with global takings of over 248 million dollars on an extremely low budget.

In the case of *Paranormal Activity*, the truly innovative element was the participatory approach activated through the 'Demand It!' platform, which allowed users to request the screening of the film in their city. In this way, the public became an active part of the distribution, transforming from simple spectators into direct promoters of the work. This generated a strong sense of exclusivity and urgency, pushing people to mobilize so as not to be excluded. Another particularly effective aspect of the campaign was the trailer, which did not show scenes from the film, but only the terrified reactions of the spectators during previews. A choice that stimulated curiosity and enhanced the emotional effect, without revealing anything about the plot. The entire strategy leveraged collective emotional involvement, amplified by the intelligent use of social media. The hashtag #TweetYourScream encouraged users to share their experience on Twitter, giving life to a lively and participatory community. In this context, the public did not just consume the content, but actively contributed to building its communicative value: a clear expression of participatory marketing, which was able to intertwine cognitive, emotional and social dimensions.

Smile, finally, represents a contemporary example of high-visibility buzz marketing, designed for a natively digital audience. The campaign stood out for a series of disturbing appearances at highly followed public events - such as baseball games or iconic places like the Sydney Harbour Bridge - where professional actors, smiling in a disturbing way, remained immobile staring at the camera or the audience. The absence of a clear narrative context generated a mix of discomfort and curiosity, which quickly fueled online virality. This form of performative shock marketing was then amplified by social media, in particular TikTok, Snapchat and Twitter, where users spontaneously shared videos of the sightings. The campaign thus combined physical guerrilla marketing actions with a well-orchestrated digital strategy, obtaining great resonance and several awards, including the Clio Award and the Shorty Award. The result was a worldwide success: the film grossed

over 216 million dollars, confirming the effectiveness of an integrated approach, capable of speaking the language of the network and its users.

2.2.3 Comparative Analysis: Similarities and Differences

The comparative analysis of the three campaigns highlights both some common elements that recur across the board, and significant differences that reflect the changes in the media landscape and in the public's consumption habits over time.

One of the aspects that all the strategies analyzed have in common is the wise use of emotional activation: in any case, the public's involvement occurs through the stimulation of strong emotions, often linked to fear, curiosity and anxiety. Although with different tools and tones, each one aims at arousing strong, high-intensity emotions, such as fear, anxiety or curiosity, thus stimulating deep psychological involvement. The strength of these emotions lies not so much in the explicitness of the content as in its ability to evoke - through the unspoken - a sense of disquiet, expectation or surprise. Suspense and mystery thus become central levers to favour the memorability of the message and, above all, its viral diffusion.

A second recurring element is the use of ambiguous and mysterious content, which avoids revealing too much and instead leaves room for the viewer's imagination. This type of approach, linked to the concept of "curiosity gap", creates a sort of cognitive tension, in which the viewer feels the need to fill that information gap, and this pushes him to actively seek out further details, to inform himself and to talk about it with others. It is a strategy that does not limit itself to capturing attention, but also stimulates participation and social interaction, two key elements for fueling word of mouth and the viral spread of content.

In all three campaigns, moreover, the audience takes an active role. Whether investigating an alleged true story (Blair Witch), deciding where to screen the film (Paranormal Activity), or filming and sharing disturbing public experiences (Smile), the user is always involved as an integral part of the narrative. Marketing is no longer a message to be received, but an experience to be lived, shared and in some cases even generated.

The channels used also deviate radically from traditional promotional media. The three campaigns avoid television commercials, institutional posters or glossy interviews. Instead, they prefer forums, social media, live performances and participatory platforms.

In this scenario, the boundary between promotion and narration tends to blur: marketing intertwines with the film's plot, helping to expand its universe both in digital space and, in some cases, in physical space.

The campaign becomes an integral part of the story, extending it beyond the screen and transforming the audience into an active protagonist of the experience. Alongside these analogies, however, a strong evolution over time of the strategies adopted clearly emerges. The Blair Witch Project, at the end of the 1990s, moved in a still digitally immature environment, where the web was used in a pioneering way through forums and dedicated sites. Paranormal Activity, on the other hand, was placed in a moment of transition, when social networks began to consolidate as central tools for sharing and collective participation. Finally, Smile was born in a now fully digital context, in which communication was rapid, especially on platforms such as TikTok or Snapchat.

This transformation is also reflected in the way in which the public was involved. If Blair Witch focuses on ambiguity and the illusion of reality, Paranormal Activity introduces a mechanism of direct participation in distribution, making viewers part of the decision-making process. With Smile, the focus shifts to the immediate emotional impact, thanks to public performances designed to strike the collective imagination and generate virality. The target also evolves: from frequenters of forums and niche sites of the 1990s, we move on to the first users of social media, up to Generation Z, accustomed to short, visual and constantly shared content.

At the same time, investment in campaigns also grows, from artisanal and low-budget projects like Blair Witch, we arrive at the strategic and technical care guaranteed by specialized agencies in the case of Smile. An evolution that shows how buzz marketing, born as a marginal and experimental practice, has gradually structured itself, until it has become a central component of contemporary film marketing.

In short, the comparison between these three cases highlights a thematic continuity - based on strong emotions, mystery and interaction - but also an evident transformation in the means, languages and logics of diffusion. The subsequent theoretical-experimental phase of the research is built on these foundations, aimed at investigating how the mechanisms that emerge from the analysis can influence the emotional involvement of the spectator and, consequently, his or her intention to see the film or to share the experience with others.

2.3 Experimental phase: Concept and Objectives

2.3.1 Variables

The research question guiding this study is the following: *“To what extent can word-of-mouth (WOM) generated by horror teasers be influenced by emotional involvement, sharing on social media and passion for the genre? And how do these elements contribute, together, to the viral diffusion and recommendation of the experience, both online and offline?”*

The qualitative analysis of the three case studies has allowed us to identify some recurring dimensions, which seem to play a key role in the effectiveness of buzz marketing strategies in the horror field. In particular, three central mechanisms stand out: the constant use of an ambiguous and mysterious narration, capable of intriguing and fueling the desire for discovery; emotional involvement as a fundamental lever to capture attention and stimulate an intense personal response; and finally, the strong tendency of the public to spontaneously share the experience, transforming themselves from simple spectators into active promoters of the contents.

Based on this evidence, it is possible to hypothesize a conceptual model to be tested in the experimental phase of the research. This model is based on the idea that exposure to an immersive and unconventional teaser campaign can generate significant emotional involvement, which in turn influences two key behaviors for the viral success of a film, intended as the amplification of audience reach and engagement: viewing intention and propensity to engage in word of mouth (both offline and digital).

The main conceptual variables that will emerge in the quantitative phase are therefore the following:

- Independent variable:
 - Word-of-Mouth (WOM): Indicates s the predisposition of participants to talk about the teaser game and recommend it to others, both in real life and on digital channels, with particular attention to the role of social media and amplifiers of sharing.
- Dependent variables:

- Enthusiasm: Expresses the level of emotional involvement and enthusiasm aroused by the teaser game, considered a central element in generating word of mouth.
- Sharing on Social Media (TikTok): Measures how much participants are inclined to share content related to the teaser on TikTok, reflecting the active role of digital platforms in the propaganda of WOM.
- Passion for the Horror Genre: Represents the interest and affinity of participants towards horror cinema, a factor that is hypothesized to increase their willingness to recommend the teaser to others.

This transition from the qualitative to the quantitative phase allows for the construction of a solid and coherent experimental design, based on empirical observations and supported by a theoretical basis. In this way, the research aligns itself with the main methodological indications foreseen for applied marketing studies.

2.3.2 Research Hypotheses

Starting from the conceptual model developed through qualitative analysis and the main contributions of the literature on buzz marketing, the psychology of emotions and consumer behavior, it is possible to formulate a series of research hypotheses aimed at exploring the psychological dynamics activated by an immersive teaser campaign in the context of horror cinema.

Numerous studies highlight how emotions play a central role in decision-making processes and consumer choices⁵¹. In particular, contents capable of arousing strong emotional involvement are often more memorable, more easily shareable and more effective in influencing purchase intention⁵². In light of this evidence, it is hypothesized that exposure to an immersive teaser campaign can generate an intense emotional response, capable of strengthening both the desire to see the film and the tendency to talk about it with others, thus activating a spontaneous and viral word of mouth.

The research hypotheses are as follows:

⁵¹ Bagozzi, R. P., Gopinath, M., & Nyer, P. U. (1999). *The role of emotions in marketing*. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 27(2), 184–206.

⁵² Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). *What makes online content viral?* Journal of Marketing Research, 49(2), 192–205.

H1. Exposure to an immersive teaser campaign can significantly amplify the emotional engagement perceived by participants.

H2. Emotional engagement is positively associated with the intention to view the promoted film.

H3. Emotional engagement is positively associated with word-of-mouth and eWOM propensity.

2.3.3 Experimental Design: Stimulus, Procedure and Sample

The experimental phase of this research is based on a single-group post-test design, in which participants are exposed to a communicative stimulus specifically designed to simulate an immersive teaser campaign related to the world of horror cinema. The aim is to evaluate whether this experience is able to generate a significant emotional response and influence participants' self-reported behaviors.

The proposed stimulus is an interactive digital game, inspired by the escape room format and built around a short horror narrative.

During the experience, participants will face multiple-choice puzzles, will have to make narrative choices and will find themselves immersed in disturbing atmospheres, designed to stimulate emotional involvement and active participation.

The game subsequently structured:

- A first symbol puzzle challenges players to decipher a cryptic clue ("Time does not go up. Time goes down.") and to identify the correct salvation symbol from four possible options.
- A mirror challenge follows, in which three voices (each reflected in a broken mirror) provide conflicting messages. It is up to the participants to figure out which of the three is telling the truth, relying on logical cues scattered throughout the scene.

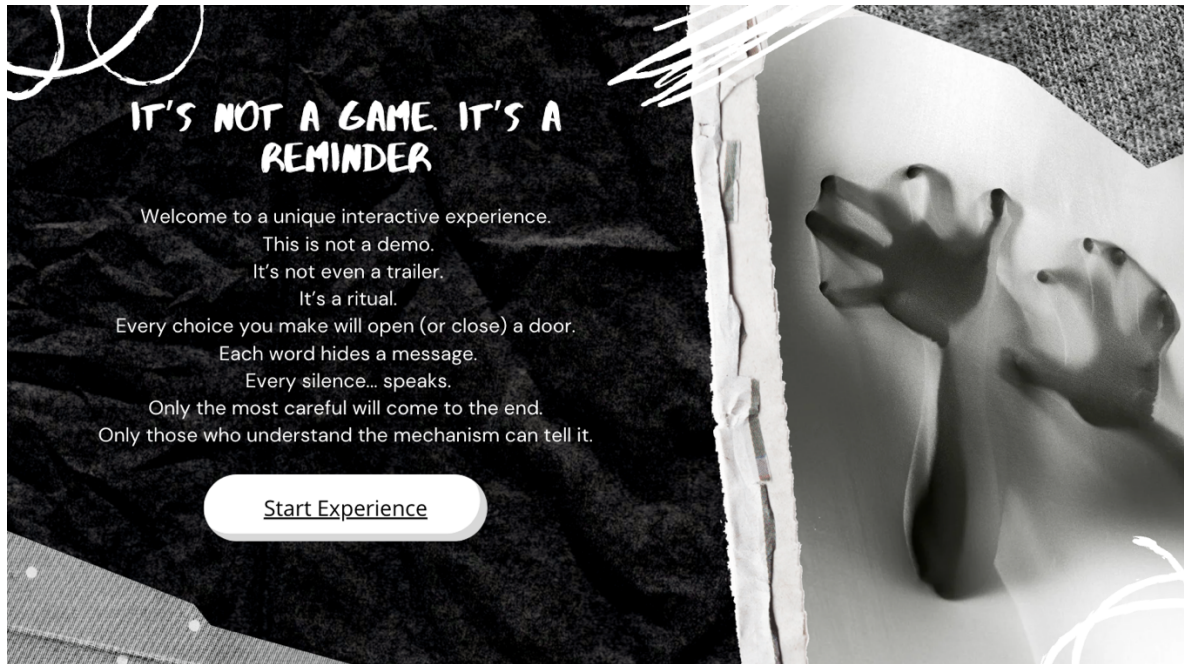


Figure 13: Cover of the interactive game created by the author, introducing the experience with the slogan "It's not a game, it's a reminder."

At the end of the journey, participants are greeted by a cryptic final screen that unexpectedly reveals the title of a supposed horror film accompanied by a release date. This twist reverses the narrative perspective: the player discovers that he has been, all along, an integral part of the story, transforming the experience into an immersive prelude to the film itself.



*Figure 14: Teaser poster of the fictional horror film *Viral Terror*, created by the author.*

To make the simulation as realistic as possible and faithfully reproduce the typical dynamics of buzz marketing, ad hoc promotional materials were created, such as a teaser poster and simulated social content in Instagram and TikTok formats.



*Figure 15: Promotional Instagram post created by the author, simulating content published by an influencer for the launch of the fictional horror film *Viral Terror* (June 2026).*



Figure 16: Promotional teaser image generated by the author with ChatGPT, designed to simulate a TikTok post for the fictional horror film *Viral Terror*.

However, to maintain narrative coherence and ensure a deeper emotional immersion in the horror experience, these materials have not been directly inserted into the game.

Instead, the teaser contents are presented later, within the questionnaire, in order to:

- Evaluate separately the emotional impact aroused by the narrative experience of the game and the more rational and cognitive perception linked to the promotional materials;
- Measure the perceived credibility of the contents (e.g. realism, narrative coherence) under controlled conditions;

- Prevent the immersive experience from being influenced by exposure to promotional content, thus preserving its authenticity and ensuring greater internal validity to the entire research design.

This methodological choice allows to preserve the immersion during the teaser experience, analyzing in parallel, and separately, the impact of the simulated buzz marketing elements. In this way, the dynamics of multi-channel fruition typical of the horror film industry are reflected, where narration and promotion coexist but operate on different levels.

Participants will access the teaser game through a dedicated web link and, once they have completed the path, they will be invited to fill out an online questionnaire aimed at collecting the necessary data for the analysis.

The questionnaire will be divided into different sections, including:

- basic biographical questions (age, gender, declared familiarity with the horror genre),
- validated psychometric scales to measure the key variables identified,
- control items aimed at verifying the attention and consistency of the answers.

The questionnaire will also include some fictitious promotional materials, with the aim of evaluating their perceived credibility by the participants.

The entire experience, including the game phase and the completion of the questionnaire, will have an estimated duration of 10-12 minutes.

The sample will be selected through convenience sampling, involving mainly university students and young adults, a target consistent with the audience favored by horror marketing strategies and the typical usage dynamics of social platforms.

The goal is to collect a sufficient number of participants to carry out descriptive and correlational statistical analyses. To this end, a minimum of 60-80 respondents is considered desirable, as it is considered adequate for an initial validation of the research hypotheses.

2.3.4 Operationalization of Variables: Scales and Measures

In order to ensure reliability and validity in the measurement of the theory-derived constructs outlined in the conceptual model, the experimental stage shall utilize established psychometric scales, appropriately fitted to the particular situation of this study. A 5-point Likert scale from 1 ('Not at all') to 5 ('Very much') shall be utilized for the evaluation of all the items to maintain consistency and comparability of the responses. This selection is based on the methodological standards for quantitative analysis in studies of customer behaviour⁵³.

The independent variable, Word-of-Mouth (WOM), was measured with a scale modified from the study of Chu and Kim to measure both offline and online WOM behavior specifically⁵⁴. The scale measures how willing the participants are to recommend and talk about the teaser game experience, including recommending or talking about it to social networks like TikTok. Sample items include: "I would discuss this campaign with people" and "I would post similar things on my social networks," both emphasizing the personal recommendation component and the online sharing activity.

The following are the measures of the dependent variables:

- **Enthusiasm:** This dimension aims to capture the excitement and emotional involvement aroused by the teaser game experience. It will be detected through a series of items inspired by the PANAS - Positive and Negative Affect Schedule - scale, appropriately adapted to reflect the sense of immersion and interactivity typical of this type of experience⁵⁵. Some examples include statements such as: "During gameplay, I felt enthusiastic" and "The experience was exciting and captivating." The aim is to measure the degree of emotional activation perceived by participants.
- **Social Media Sharing (TikTok):** To investigate the role of digital platforms in the spread of WOM, this variable will assess the propensity to share content related to the teaser on TikTok. Based on the most recent research on online engagement⁵⁶, the items will include statements such as: "I would upload this teaser on my TikTok profile"

⁵³ Churchill, G. A., & Iacobucci, D. (2005). *Marketing Research: Methodological Foundations*. South-Western College Pub.

⁵⁴ Chu, S. C., & Kim, Y. (2011). Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites. *International Journal of Advertising*, 30(1), 47–75.

⁵⁵ Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(6), 1063–1070.

⁵⁶ Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59-68.

and "I would actively participate in comparable horror-themed campaigns on social media." This approach allows for targeted, platform-specific detection of viral participation intent.

- **Horror Genre Passion:** This measure takes the participant's inherent passion for horror films, which should dictate how willing they are to interact with the teaser and spread the word about it to other people. From scales that assess engagement to particular genres⁵⁷, items like "I'm passionate about horror movies" will be utilized to assess the level of passion and how this would affect WOM. As a measure of the perceived credibility of the campaign, a modified version of the Source Credibility Scale will be applied⁵⁸. This scale, adapted to viral marketing contexts, is designed to capture participants' perceptions of the authenticity, coherence, and professionalism of the experience. Example items include phrases such as: "The campaign felt realistic and well-conceived" and "The information felt credible and reliable". The goal is to understand how the perception of reliability influences the propensity to spread the word.

The joint administration of these validated scales will provide a solid empirical basis for testing the research hypotheses, allowing for a structured and in-depth analysis of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions elicited by the immersive teaser campaign.

⁵⁷ Oliver, R. L. (1999). Whence consumer loyalty? *Journal of Marketing*, 63, 33–44.

⁵⁸ Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. *Journal of Advertising*, 19(3), 39-52.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Structure of the Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis, conducted using SPSS software, aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the previously designed immersive teaser campaign in the context of horror films, with a focus on the emotional impact generated and the consequent propensity for word of mouth (WOM). This quantitative research approach seeks to verify whether the experience during the interaction with the teaser can stimulate a greater intention to share among participants and a positive predisposition towards the film product.

The structure of the survey focuses on three main variables:

1. Passion for the horror genre – This variable represents the participants' level of interest and involvement in horror films. It was measured through specific questions in the administered questionnaire to categorize participants into *fans* and *non-fans*. The goal is to see whether a prior preference for the genre has an effect on how effectively the teaser has created expectations and the urge to share.
2. Enthusiasm generated by the teaser game – The experience offered by the teaser game was intended to evoke suspense and emotional investment, both of which are the core aspects in the horror experience. Through a Likert scale rating system, participants expressed their degree of enthusiasm, allowing the emotional impact of the interaction with the game to be measured.
3. Propensity to word of mouth (WOM and eWOM) – One of the main metrics of the analysis concerns the participants' willingness to share their experience, both through traditional word of mouth and through digital platforms such as social media, forums, and online communities. In fact, virality of a horror movie product is directly associated with their capacity to provoke conversations and interactions among users.

The survey was conducted on the sample of 80 participants, who were chosen to provide a representative balance across gender and age.

The statistical analysis conducted through SPSS involved several methodological steps:

- Descriptive data analysis, to understand the distribution of the sample with respect to socio-demographic variables and interest in the horror genre.
- Correlation analysis, aimed at identifying relationships between key variables and their statistical significance.
- Multiple regression model, used to assess the combined influence of the independent variables on the propensity for word of mouth, both offline and digital.

The objective of this quantitative analysis is to understand how the immersive experience proposed by the teaser game can stimulate emotional engagement and boost buzz marketing dynamics in the horror context, identifying the most effective levers to generate conversation and viral visibility.

3.2 Descriptive Statistics

3.2.1 Sociodemographic Analysis

The descriptive analysis conducted via SPSS made it possible to examine the sociodemographic characteristics of the analyzed sample, consisting of 80 participants.

		Gender			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	44	55,0	55,0	55,0
	Male	36	45,0	45,0	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 17: Gender distribution of the sample generated through SPSS.

The output shows a slight female predominance, with 55% women compared to 45% men. In numerical terms, the sample consists of 44 female and 36 male participants. With this spread, there is a representative proportion across both genders to compare the perceptions of men to women across the horror genre.

Age					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	17	1	1,3	1,3	1,3
	21	3	3,8	3,8	5,0
	22	6	7,5	7,5	12,5
	23	14	17,5	17,5	30,0
	24	3	3,8	3,8	33,8
	25	3	3,8	3,8	37,5
	26	2	2,5	2,5	40,0
	27	5	6,3	6,3	46,3
	28	7	8,8	8,8	55,0
	29	7	8,8	8,8	63,7
	30	5	6,3	6,3	70,0
	31	3	3,8	3,8	73,8
	32	5	6,3	6,3	80,0
	33	6	7,5	7,5	87,5
	34	6	7,5	7,5	95,0
	35	3	3,8	3,8	98,8
	38	1	1,3	1,3	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 18: Age distribution of the sample generated through SPSS.

As for age, the generated output shows a significant concentration of participants around the age of 23, with a total of 14 participants, making it the largest age group in the sample. Conversely, the 17 and 38 groups are underrepresented, with just one participant per group.

The sample has an average age of 27.7 years, which on rounding up is 28 years. All the individuals in the sample are from Generation Z and Millennials, an aspect that is especially significant with respect to this analysis given the fact that these generations are more predisposed towards digital content consumption and buzz marketing on social media platforms.

How passionate are you about horror movies, on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much)?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	33	41,3	41,3	41,3
	2	8	10,0	10,0	51,2
	3	19	23,8	23,8	75,0
	4	9	11,3	11,3	86,3
	5	11	13,8	13,8	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 19: Level of passion for the horror genre among the sample, generated through SPSS.

The analysis also revealed a limited interest in the horror genre within the sample. Specifically, 33 out of 80 participants stated that they did not particularly enjoy this type of film. Conversely, only 20 participants, representing approximately one-quarter of the sample, identified themselves as *passionate* or *very passionate* about the horror genre. The findings were also visualized using a histogram that was produced with SPSS, which efficiently displays the preferences' distribution, resulting in a more nuanced perception of the level of overall interest in the genre.

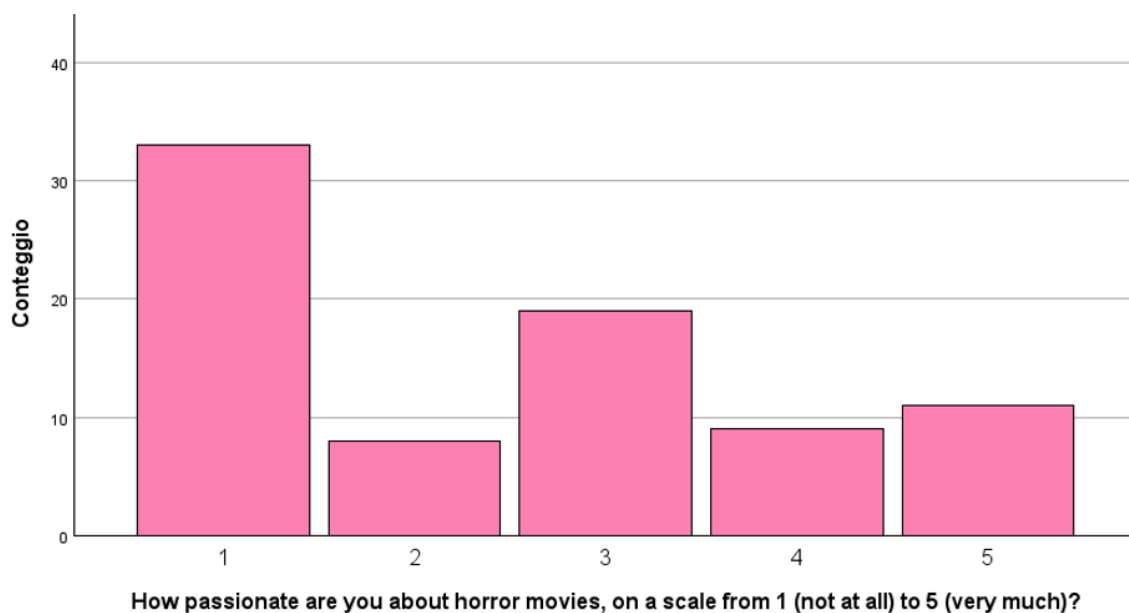


Figure 20: Histogram representing the level of passion for the horror genre among the sample, generated through SPSS.

3.2.2 Analysis of Emotions Evoked by the Teaser Game

The output generated via SPSS allowed a detailed analysis of the main emotions aroused by the teaser game within the sample of 80 participants. The emotions that are going to be explored include: Enthusiastic, Inspired, Attentive, Interested, Excited, Scared, Nervous, Distressed, Uneasy and Confused. Each emotion was rated on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much). This allows to measure the participants' level of emotional involvement during the immersive experience.

Indicate how much you felt each of the following emotions during the teaser game, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much): [Enthusiastic]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	13	16,3	16,3	16,3
	2	20	25,0	25,0	41,3
	3	17	21,3	21,3	62,5
	4	16	20,0	20,0	82,5
	5	14	17,5	17,5	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 21: Level of enthusiasm felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

The analysis of the [Enthusiasm] generated by the teaser game showed a clear polarization. 13 participants gave a score of 1 out of 5, while 14 participants gave the maximum score of 5 out of 5. This figure suggests a divided opinion regarding the level of emotional involvement aroused by the experience.

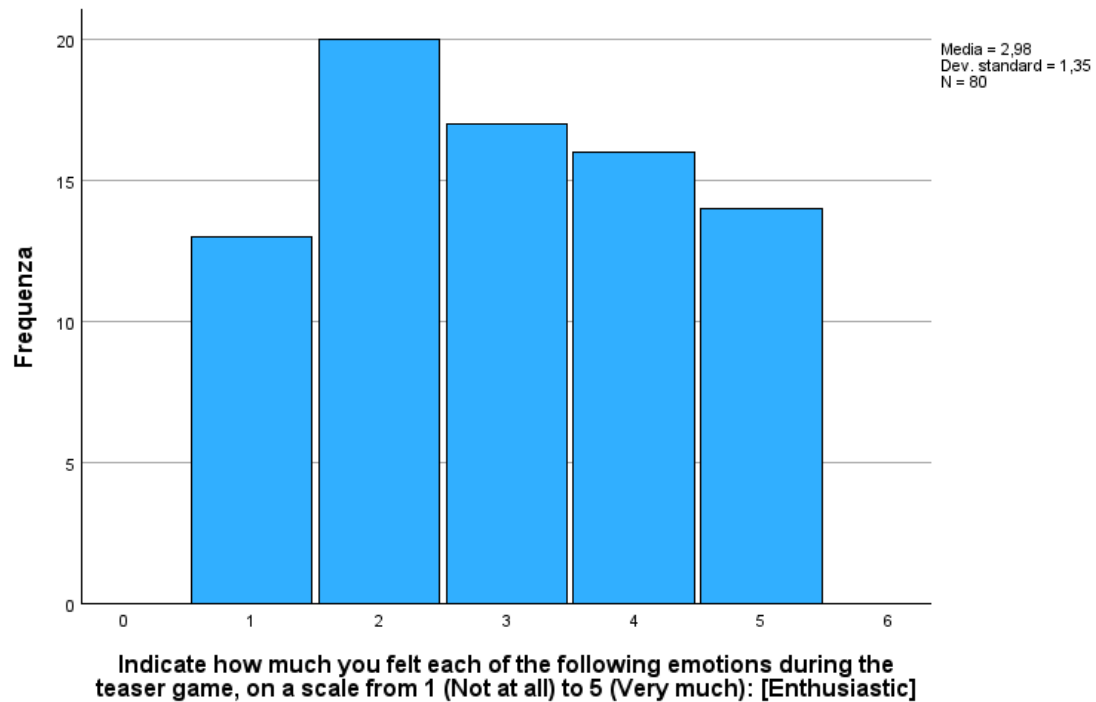


Figure 22: Histogram representing the level of enthusiasm felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

The histogram allows us to clearly visualize this distribution, showing a segmentation between those who perceived a strong enthusiasm and those who, on the contrary, remained less involved.

- Mean: 2.98
- Standard deviation: 1.35

The mean is just below the midpoint of the scale at (3), which suggests moderate but not very high enthusiasm. The standard deviation suggests a fair degree of variability in participants' perceptions.

Indicate how much you felt each of the following emotions during the teaser game, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much): [Inspired]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	12	15,0	15,0	15,0
	2	18	22,5	22,5	37,5
	3	18	22,5	22,5	60,0
	4	18	22,5	22,5	82,5
	5	14	17,5	17,5	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure23: Level of inspiration felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Regarding the emotion of [Inspiration], the analysis showed a balanced distribution between the different categories, with a slight prevalence of the intermediate ratings (2, 3 and 4), accounting for almost 70% of the total. This suggests that the teaser was perceived as inspiring by a good proportion of the participants, although it did not generate extreme peaks of enthusiasm.

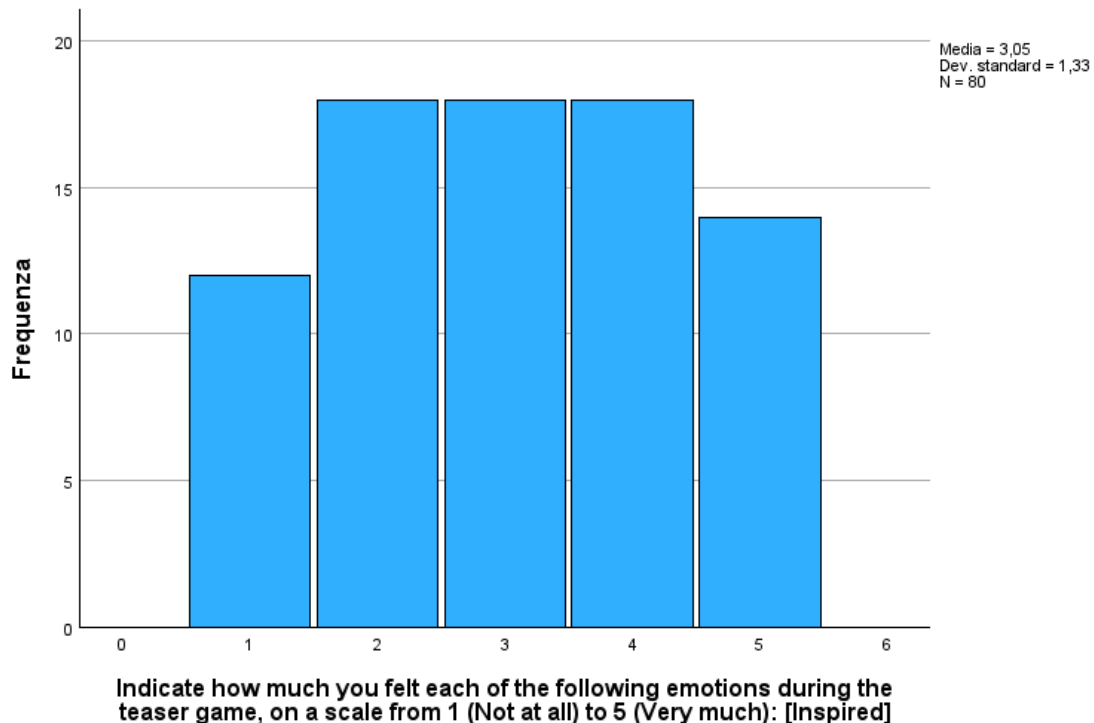


Figure 24: Histogram representing the level of inspiration felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

- Mean: 3.05
- Standard Deviation: 1.33

These values indicate a neutral overall assessment, slightly above the middle of the scale, with a fair amount of variability in the responses.

Indicate how much you felt each of the following emotions during the teaser game, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much): [Attentive]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	4	5,0	5,0	5,0
	2	9	11,3	11,3	16,3
	3	21	26,3	26,3	42,5
	4	24	30,0	30,0	72,5
	5	22	27,5	27,5	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 25: Level of attentiveness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

The response to the [Attention] emotion has a distinct clustering of assessments toward the 4th and 5th categories that cover 57.5% of the sample. This information indicates that the teaser game captured the majority of the participants' attention, eliciting a high level of engagement.

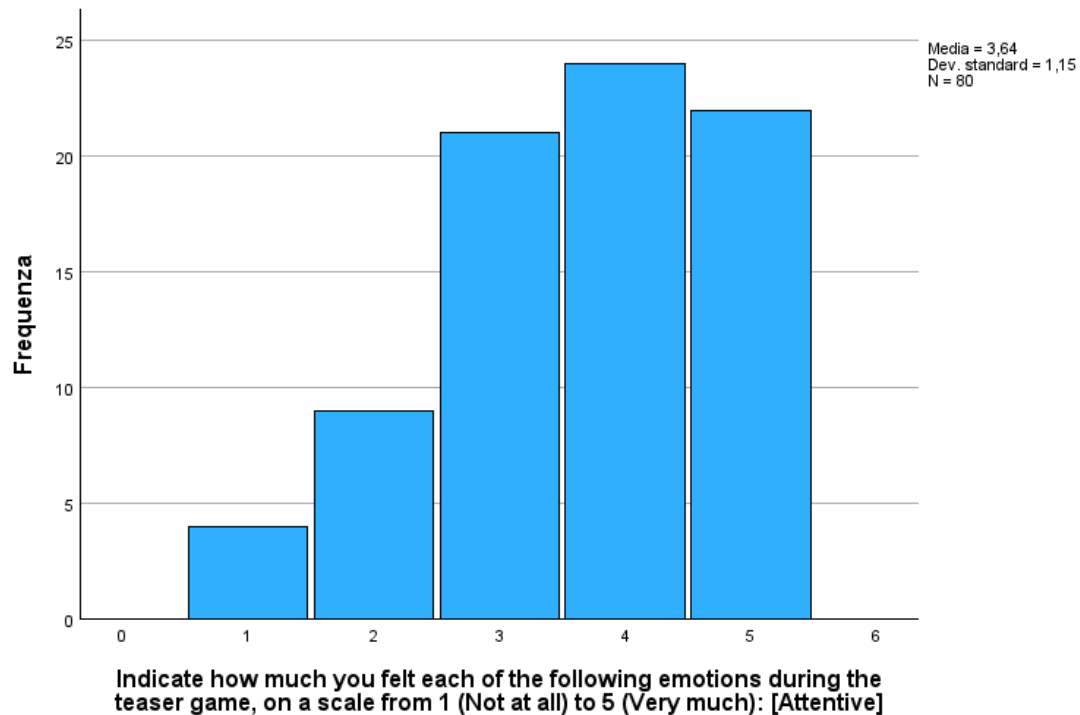


Figure 26: Histogram representing the level of attentiveness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

- Mean: 3.64
- Standard deviation: 1.15

The distribution, represented graphically by means of a histogram, shows a peak among the higher categories, indicating active involvement and attentive participation during the interaction with the teaser.

Indicate how much you felt each of the following emotions during the teaser game, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much): [Interested]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	6	7,5	7,5	7,5
	2	9	11,3	11,3	18,8
	3	20	25,0	25,0	43,8
	4	29	36,3	36,3	80,0
	5	16	20,0	20,0	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 27: Level of interest felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

For the emotion of [Interest], the analysis shows a strong concentration of responses in categories 3, 4 and 5, representing a total of 81.3% of the sample. This suggests that the teaser game did indeed stimulate a good degree of interest in the majority of participants.

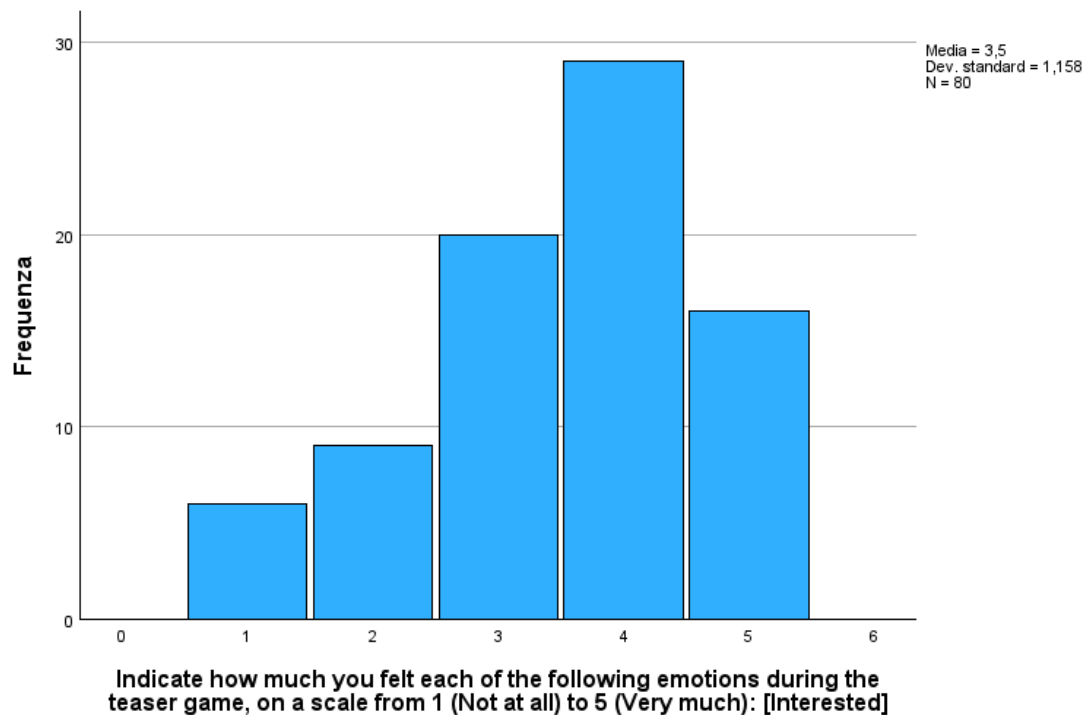


Figure 28: Histogram representing the level of interest felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

- Mean: 3.5
- Standard Deviation: 1.158

The slightly positively skewed distribution shows a well-defined peak in category 4 (36.3%), highlighting constant involvement and a good ability of the teaser to attract the interest of the audience.

Indicate how much you felt each of the following emotions during the teaser game, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much): [Excited]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	16	20,0	20,0	20,0
	2	18	22,5	22,5	42,5
	3	23	28,7	28,7	71,3
	4	15	18,8	18,8	90,0
	5	8	10,0	10,0	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 29: Level of excitement felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

The emotion of [Excitement] showed a concentrated distribution in categories 2 and 3, with a significant drop in the highest ratings (4 and 5).

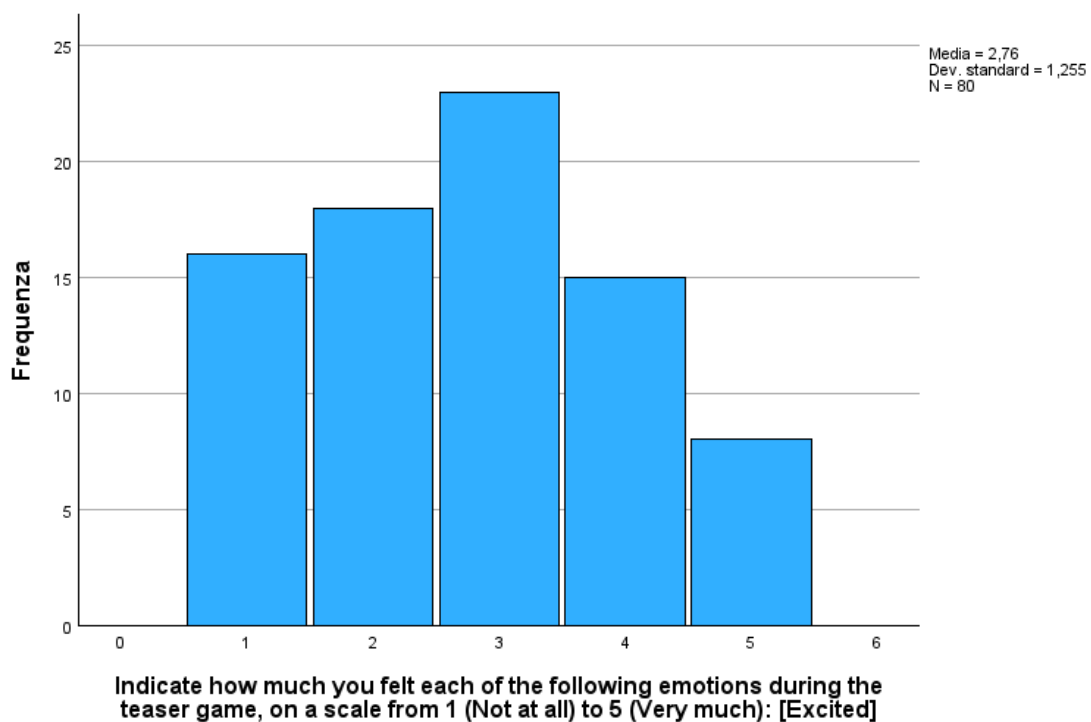


Figure 10: Histogram representing the level of excitement felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

- Mean: 2.76
- Standard deviation: 1.255

The majority of the participants awarded a score of 1 or 3, indicating a level of arousal that was low or moderate. It appears that while the teaser evoked some level of interest, it did not provoke very strong arousal.

Indicate how much you felt each of the following emotions during the teaser game, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much): [Scared]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	22	27,5	27,5	27,5
	2	21	26,3	26,3	53,8
	3	19	23,8	23,8	77,5
	4	15	18,8	18,8	96,3
	5	3	3,8	3,8	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 11: Level of fear (Scared) felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Regarding the emotion of [Fear], the output showed a clear prevalence of low ratings, with 77.5% of participants assigning a score of 3 or lower.

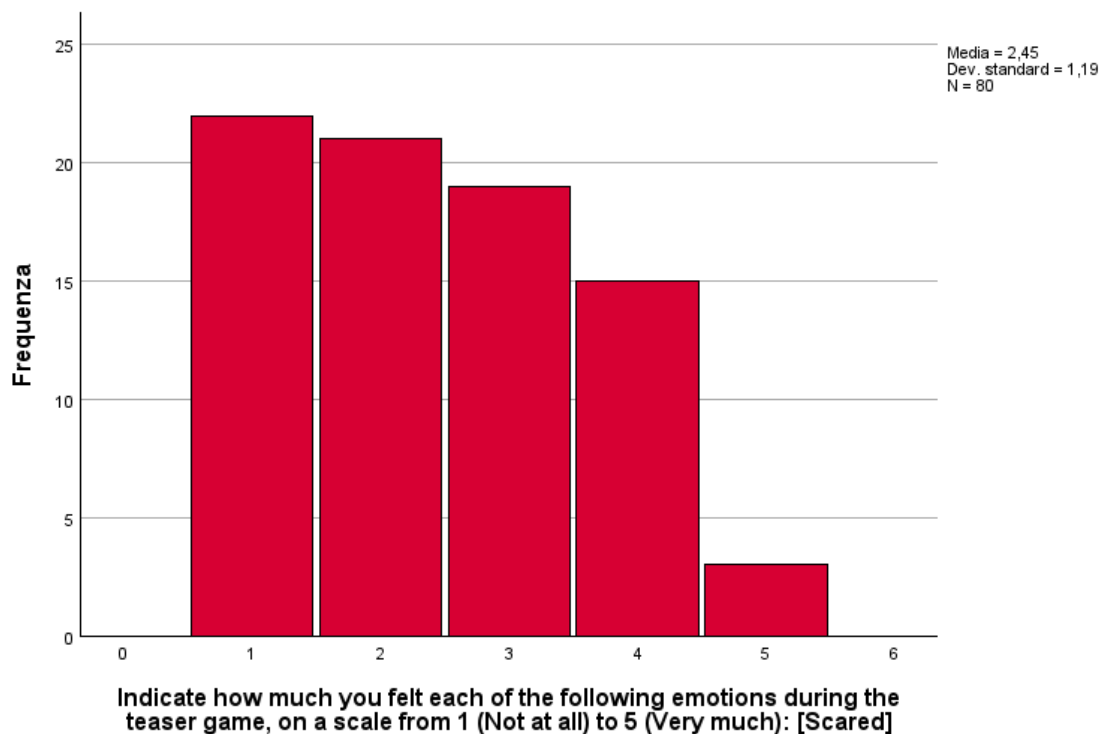


Figure 12: Histogram representing the level of fear felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS

- Mean: 2.45
- Standard Deviation: 1.19

The negative skewed distribution shows that the teaser game experience was not perceived as particularly frightening, suggesting a limited impact in generating emotional tension.

Indicate how much you felt each of the following emotions during the teaser game, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much): [Nervous]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	35	43,8	43,8	43,8
	2	16	20,0	20,0	63,7
	3	13	16,3	16,3	80,0
	4	11	13,8	13,8	93,8
	5	5	6,3	6,3	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 313: Level of nervousness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS

The emotion of [Nervousness] also reported a prevalence of responses in the lowest category (1), with 43.8% of participants stating that they did not feel nervous during the experience.

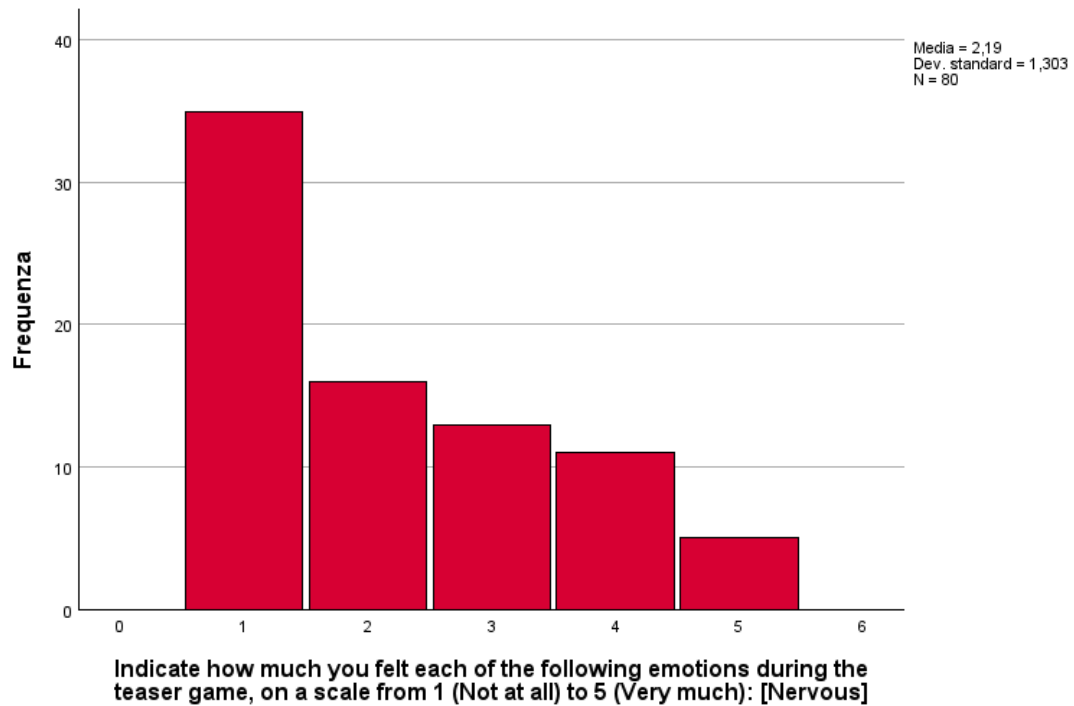


Figure 14: Histogram representing the level of nervousness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

- Mean: 2.19
- Standard deviation: 1.303

The histogram shows a strongly negative skewed distribution, confirming the absence of a marked emotional impact on psychological tension.

Indicate how much you felt each of the following emotions during the teaser game, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much): [Distressed]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	28	35,0	35,0	35,0
	2	19	23,8	23,8	58,8
	3	18	22,5	22,5	81,3
	4	10	12,5	12,5	93,8
	5	5	6,3	6,3	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 15: Level of distress felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

The analysis of the emotion of [Distress] caused by the teaser game shows a prevalence of low ratings, with a high concentration of responses in categories 1 and 2. In particular, 58.8% of the participants gave a score of 1 or 2, indicating a very low level of perceived emotional distress during the interaction with the teaser.

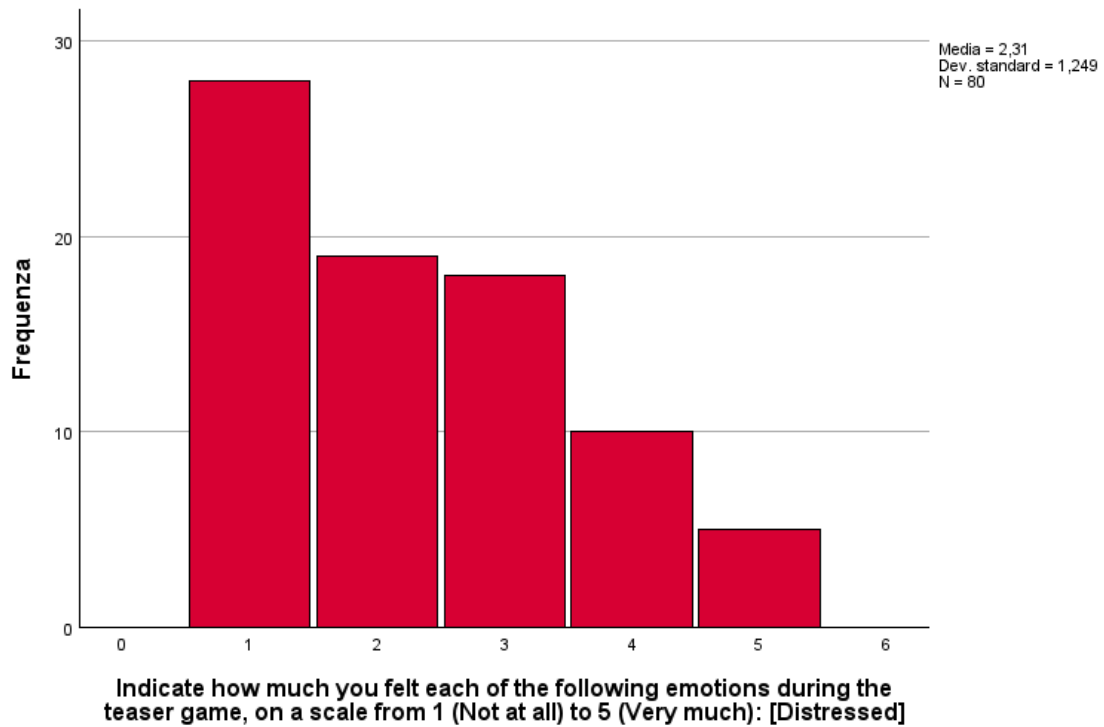


Figure 16: Histogram representing the level of distress felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

- Mean: 2.31
- Standard deviation: 1.249

The histogram processed using SPSS shows a negative skewed distribution, with a significant peak in category 1 (35%). This indicates that the teaser game experience was not perceived as particularly distressing by the majority of participants.

Indicate how much you felt each of the following emotions during the teaser game, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much): [Uneasy]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	26	32,5	32,5	32,5
	2	17	21,3	21,3	53,8
	3	15	18,8	18,8	72,5
	4	16	20,0	20,0	92,5
	5	6	7,5	7,5	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 17: Level of uneasiness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

With regard to the emotion of [Uneasiness], the output shows a prevalence of responses in the lowest categories of the scale (1 and 2), with 53.8% of participants stating that they did not perceive a high level of unrest.

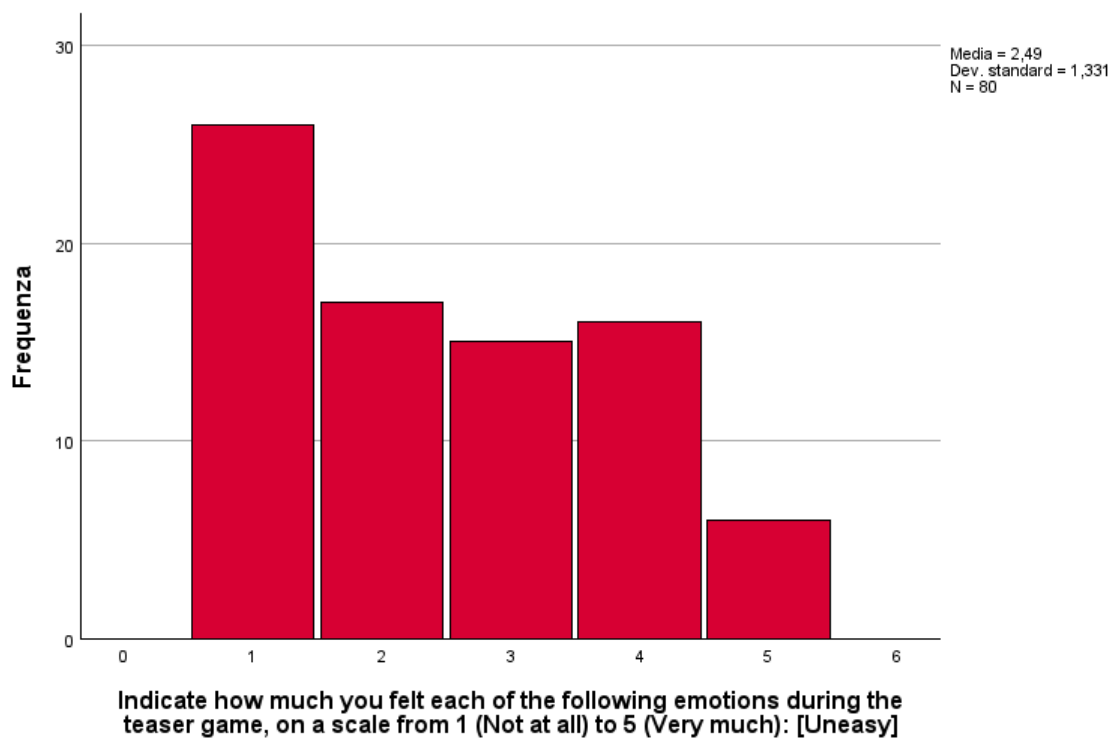


Figure 18: Histogram representing the level of uneasiness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

- Mean: 2.49
- Standard deviation: 1.331

The graph is negatively skewed, with the highest percentage occurring in category 1 (32.5%). There is, nonetheless, a minority of 20% who also stated a greater level of discomfort at a score of 4. From this, we can conclude that while not the majority, some portion of the sample experienced some emotional discomfort due to the experience.

Indicate how much you felt each of the following emotions during the teaser game, on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much): [Confused]

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1	12	15,0	15,0	15,0
	2	26	32,5	32,5	47,5
	3	17	21,3	21,3	68,8
	4	20	25,0	25,0	93,8
	5	5	6,3	6,3	100,0
	Total	80	100,0	100,0	

Figure 19: Level of confusion felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

The analysis of the emotion [Confusion] shows a balanced distribution among the middle categories, with a slight prevalence in categories 2 and 4.

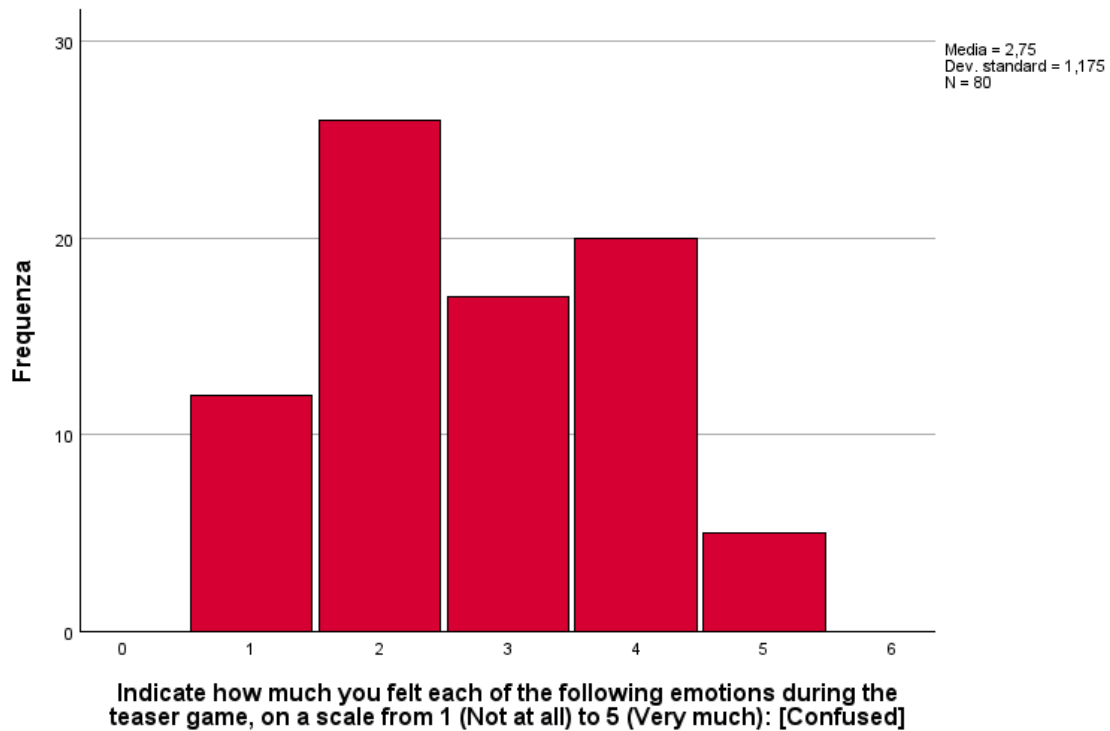


Figure 20: Histogram representing the level of confusion felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

- Mean: 2.75
- Standard deviation: 1.175

47.5% of participants gave a score of 1 or 2, indicating a generally low level of confusion. However, a significant number of participants (25%) rated the emotion with a 4, indicating that a proportion of the sample perceived a degree of disorientation. This result suggests that although the teaser game experience was understood by the majority, a significant proportion expressed a sense of uncertainty.

The investigation of emotions evoked by the teaser game made it possible to trace the main emotional patterns within the sample: Positive emotions, Neutral emotions, and Negative emotions.

- Positive emotions (Enthusiastic, Inspired, Attentive, Interested) are those that have shown the highest average scores, with quite a lot of responses evenly distributed in the highest categories of the scale. In particular, enthusiasm (Enthusiastic), interest (Interested), and attention (Attentive) recorded really high emotional involvement, effectively confirming the ability of the teaser game to catch people's eye and, thus,

tickle their curiosity and engage them. The finding supports the claim that the immersive experience has had a strong positive emotional effect, that is an essential element in promoting word-of-mouth (WOM) as well as in heightening social media engagement.

- The only emotion which one could define neutral was Excited. The analysis did not produce a clear pattern; nonetheless it was found that, on the whole, they were distributed quite equally, so, in spite of their enthusiasm, they did not provide any moments of passion. The results suggest a moderate level of emotional involvement which, with the addition of more captivating narrative elements and unexpected major turns, might lead to a higher degree of engagement.
- Negative emotions (Scared, Nervous, Distressed, Uneasy, Confused) have aroused minimal emotions. Fear (Scared) and nervousness (Nervous) have recorded the lowest average scores, suggesting that, despite the eerie atmosphere, the teaser game could not really frighten or worry people. The same was true for feelings of discomfort (Distressed), uneasiness (Uneasy) and confusion (Confused), which have registered mostly low scores, a hint that the participants have not felt highly distressed by what they have undergone.

3.3 Correlation Analysis

According to Monash University, correlation analysis is a statistical technique used to measure the closeness of the linear relationship between two or more intervally scaled variables⁵⁹.

In this case, the correlation analysis conducted with SPSS allowed to investigate the relationships between the intention to recommend the teaser game experience [Recommend] and the different emotions aroused during the interaction. The emotions analyzed were divided into three distinct groups:

- Positive Emotions: Enthusiastic, Excited, Inspired, Interested and Attentive.
- Negative emotions: Scared, Nervous, Uneasy, Distressed and Confused.
- Passion for the horror genre: Passionate.

⁵⁹ Monash University, *Marketing Dictionary - Correlation Analysis*, available at: <https://www.monash.edu/business/marketing/marketing-dictionary/c/correlation-analysis>

3.3.1 Correlation between [Recommend] and Positive Emotions

The output generated by SPSS presents a Pearson correlation table that examines the relationships between the intention to recommend the teaser game experience [Recommend] and the various positive emotions evoked during the interaction. This section focuses specifically on the first column, which highlights the correlation coefficients between Recommend and the other emotional variables considered in the study.

		Correlations					
		Recommend	Enthusiastic	Excited	Inspired	Interested	Attentive
Recommend	Pearson Correlation	1	,699**	,726**	,658**	,641**	,683**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Enthusiastic	Pearson Correlation	,699**	1	,856**	,804**	,729**	,679**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001		<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Excited	Pearson Correlation	,726**	,856**	1	,788**	,692**	,650**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001		<,001	<,001	<,001
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Inspired	Pearson Correlation	,658**	,804**	,788**	1	,772**	,657**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001	<,001		<,001	<,001
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Interested	Pearson Correlation	,641**	,729**	,692**	,772**	1	,746**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001		<,001
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Attentive	Pearson Correlation	,683**	,679**	,650**	,657**	,746**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001	
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 21: Pearson correlation table generated through SPSS, showing the relationships between the intention to recommend and positive emotions.

The table shows that:

1. Excited (0,726, $p < 0,001$): The emotion that has the strongest correlation with the intention to recommend the teaser game experience is [Excited], with a value of 0.726. This indicates that a higher level of excitement during the game is strongly associated with a greater likelihood of recommending the experience to others. Consequently, excitement emerges as a key driver in stimulating word-of-mouth (WOM).

2. Enthusiastic (0,699, $p < 0,001$): Enthusiasm is also strongly correlated with the intention to recommend, with a coefficient of 0.699. This indicates that participants who felt more engaged and positively stimulated by the experience were more inclined to suggest it to others, reflecting a high level of emotional involvement.
3. Attentive (0,683, $p < 0,001$): Focus and attention during the teaser are also significantly correlated with propensity to recommend. This implies that keeping attention high during the interaction can facilitate engagement and spreading through word of mouth.
4. Inspired (0,658, $p < 0,001$): Feeling inspired from the teaser game is positively associated with recommending the teaser. This is an indication of the emphasis that should be laid on evoking not only emotional arousal, but inspiration to the point that the participants are encouraged to provide positive word-of-mouth about the experience.
5. Interested (0,641, $p < 0,001$): Last but not the least, the intrigue generated for the teaser game also contributes to the recommendation intention but to a lesser extent than other emotions. This indicates that a sense of curiosity and cognitive engagement encourages word-of-mouth (WOM), even if its impact is somewhat less pronounced than that of excitement and enthusiasm.

3.3.2 Correlation between [Recommend] and Negative Emotions

The output generated by SPSS presents a Pearson correlation table that analyzes the relationships between the intention to recommend the teaser game experience [Recommend] and the different negative emotions evoked during the interaction. In this section, the focus will be on the last column, which highlights the correlation coefficients between Recommend and the other emotional variables considered in the study.

		Correlations					
		Scared	Nervous	Uneasy	Distressed	Confused	Recommend
Scared	Pearson Correlation	1	,835**	,827**	,790**	,435**	,397**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Nervous	Pearson Correlation	,835**	1	,851**	,796**	,511**	,429**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001		<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Uneasy	Pearson Correlation	,827**	,851**	1	,867**	,427**	,415**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001		<,001	<,001	<,001
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Distressed	Pearson Correlation	,790**	,796**	,867**	1	,451**	,284*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001	<,001		<,001	,011
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Confused	Pearson Correlation	,435**	,511**	,427**	,451**	1	,091
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001	<,001	<,001		,424
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80
Recommend	Pearson Correlation	,397**	,429**	,415**	,284*	,091	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	<,001	<,001	,011	,424	
	N	80	80	80	80	80	80

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Figure 22: Pearson correlation table generated through SPSS, showing the relationships between the intention to recommend and negative emotions.

The table shows that:

1. Nervous (0,429, $p < 0,001$): The sentiment [Nervous] has the highest correlation with the willingness to recommend the teaser gameplay, with a correlation coefficient of 0.429. This implies that players indicating they felt nervousness while participating in the experience tended to recommend the experience. This is a significant finding since this illustrates that emotional engagement, even with feelings of anxiety, has the potential to generate word-of-mouth.
2. Uneasy (0,415, $p < 0,001$): The emotion [Uneasy] is also positively correlated with the intention to recommendation the game. With a coefficient of 0.415, this emotion of discomfort and tension is associated with a higher propensity to recommend the teaser game. This finding may suggest that the sense of uneasiness stimulated a certain curiosity or emotional involvement, encouraging participants to share the experience with others.

3. Scared (0,397, $p < 0,001$): The emotion of fear [Scared] has a significant positive correlation with word of mouth, with a coefficient of 0.397. Although not among the most intense emotions, fear still has an impact on the desire to talk about the experience. This result is consistent with the nature of the horror genre, where emotional intensity often stimulates the need for sharing.
4. Distressed (0,284, $p = 0,011$): The sense of disturbance [Distressed] is positively correlated but with a lower intensity than previous emotions (0.284). The statistical significance ($p = 0.011$) indicates a link, although less marked, with the propensity to word of mouth. Participants who perceived some disturbance during the interaction were slightly more likely to recommend the experience.
5. Confused (0,091, $p = 0,424$): Confusion [Confused] seems not to have a significant correlation with the willingness to recommend the teaser game ($p = 0.424$). This implies that the feeling of confusion did not have a significant influence on the willingness to experience-share.

3.3.3 Correlation between [Recommend] and [Passionate]

The output generated by SPSS presents a Pearson correlation table that examines the relationship between the intention to recommend the teaser game experience [Recommend] and the level of passion for the horror genre [Passionate].

Correlations		Recommend	Passionate
Recommend	Pearson Correlation	1	,446**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001
	N	80	80
Passionate	Pearson Correlation	,446**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	
	N	80	80

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 23: Pearson correlation table generated with SPSS, illustrating the relationship between the intention to recommend (Recommend) and the passion for the horror genre (Passionate).

The data points to a high correlation between loving horror movies [Passionate] and the willingness to watch this kind of movies at the movies.

The statistical test indicated a level of significance of $p < 0.001$, less than the established significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), making it possible to reject the null hypothesis and affirm the presence of a correlation between the two variables.

From the interpretativist perspective, this finding is consistent: fans of the horror genre are more likely to go to the cinema to watch a horror film than people who are not interested in the horror genre. This link points to the role that emotional engagement plays in driving viewing intentions, implying that the horror fan is an attractive prospect for targeted campaigns.

3.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

According to Harvard Business Review, “Regression analysis is a statistical method used to identify which variables have a significant impact on an outcome. It addresses key questions such as: Which factors matter the most? Which can be ignored? How do these factors interact with one another? And how certain are we about the influence of these factors?”⁶⁰

The regression analysis aims to investigate whether the word of mouth (WOM) on the teaser game can be influenced by:

1. Passion for horror films (Passionate);
2. Enthusiasm generated by the teaser (Enthusiastic);
3. Sharing on social media, in particular TikTok (TikTokTalkerShare).

Research Question: *Can the word of mouth (WOM) on the teaser game be influenced by the passion for horror movies, promotional content on social media (Instagram and TikTok), and the enthusiasm generated after the teaser experience?*

To address this research question, the following variables were identified for the analysis:

- Dependent Variable (DV):
 - *Word of Mouth (WOM)* — Represents the intention to share the teaser game experience both offline and through digital platforms.

⁶⁰ Harvard Business Review, *A Refresher on Regression Analysis*, available at: <https://hbr.org/2015/11/a-refresher-on-regression-analysis>

- Independent Variables (IVs):
 - Passionate: Measures the level of passion and interest for the horror genre, hypothesized to affect the willingness to recommend the teaser.
 - Enthusiastic: Captures the excitement and emotional involvement triggered by the teaser game, which is expected to enhance WOM.
 - TikTok Talker Share: Reflects the engagement and sharing of teaser-related content specifically on TikTok, representing the impact of social media visibility on WOM.

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	,774 ^a	,598	,583	,852

a. Predictors: (Constant), TikTorkorshare, Passionate, Enthusiastic

Figure 24: Model Summary table generated with SPSS, illustrating the multiple regression analysis for the dependent variable Talkaboutfilm.

- $R^2 = 0,598$: The model explains approximately 59.8% of the variance in *word-of-mouth (WOM)*, indicating a substantial level of predictive capability.
- Adjusted $R^2 = 0,583$: The adjusted value, which accounts for the number of predictors in the model, further confirms the model's reliability and robustness.
- Std. Error of the Estimate = 0,852: The standard error of the estimate is within an acceptable range, supporting the accuracy of the model's predictions given the nature of the analysis.

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	82,225	3	27,408	37,761	<,001 ^b
	Residual	55,163	76	,726		
	Total	137,387	79			

a. Dependent Variable: Talkaboutfilm
b. Predictors: (Constant), TikTorkorshare, Passionate, Enthusiastic

Figure 25: ANOVA table generated with SPSS, providing the results of the multiple regression analysis.

The ANOVA test shows an $F(3.76) = 37.761$ with a $p\text{-value} < 0.001$, demonstrating that the overall model is statistically significant. This implies that at least one independent variable has an influence on the dependent variable (WOM).

Coefficients ^a								
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	,666	,264		2,525	,014		
	Passionate	-,005	,075	-,005	-,061	,952	,761	1,313
	Enthusiastic	,465	,092	,476	5,063	<,001	,599	1,670
	TikToktalkorshare	,389	,086	,401	4,499	<,001	,666	1,501

a. Dependent Variable: Talkaboutfilm

Figure 26: Coefficients table generated with SPSS, displaying the regression coefficients for each predictor variable.

According to the table

1. Enthusiastic ($\beta = 0,476$, $p = 0,003$): The enthusiasm generated by the teaser is the variable with the highest beta coefficient, which indicates that it is the main driver of word of mouth (WOM). This suggests that a high level of enthusiasm perceived during the interaction with the teaser significantly stimulates the willingness to share the experience with others.
2. TikTokTalkerShare ($\beta = 0,401$, $p = 0,001$): Sharing on TikTok is also significant, highlighting the importance of social platforms in generating visibility and word-of-mouth. This confirms the crucial role of social media, especially TikTok, in promoting viral engagement.
3. Passionate ($\beta = 0,052$, $p = 0,952$): Passion for horror films, although related to WOM, was not significant in the regression model. This can be interpreted as a signal that being passionate about the genre is not enough to push for sharing, while it is the enthusiasm generated by the experience itself that makes the difference.

In addition, the collinearity analysis shows VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) lower than 3 for all variables, indicating the absence of multicollinearity problems. This confirms that the independent variables chosen are not closely linked and that the model is statistically valid.

3.5 Conclusions of the Quantitative Analysis

From the quantitative analysis carried out using SPSS software, it emerges that the teaser game has aroused mainly positive emotions, such as enthusiasm, attention and interest. The role played by these emotions is fundamental, allowing to generate a high level of emotional involvement among participants, and to create the word of mouth, both online and offline.

The correlations that have come to light from the analysis clearly highlight the intensity of the positive emotions experienced by participants.

In particular, the enthusiasm and attention perceived during the interaction proved to be decisive factors to stimulate sharing and buzz marketing. This suggests that positive emotional engagement is a strategic lever to increase the virality of a promotional campaign in horror context. Furthermore, the excitement (Excited) generated during the teaser game emerged as a key driver of WOM, suggesting that marketing strategies aimed at amplifying this emotion could further enhance viral diffusion.

In contrast, the negative emotions typical of the horror genre, such as fear and nervousness, have been perceived to a limited extent. This shows that there is room for improvement in the creation of suspense and emotional tension, which are essential elements to stimulate even more effective word-of-mouth. However, feelings of slight tension and discomfort have nevertheless shown a positive correlation with the propensity to talk about the teaser game, suggesting that a moderate level of anxiety can actually encourage sharing.

Another relevant aspect of the analysis is the correlation between previous interest in horror movies and the propensity to recommend the experience. Participants who are passionate about the genre were more likely to suggest the teaser to others, confirming that an already interested audience is a strategic target for horror marketing campaigns.

The multiple regression analysis allowed for the identification of the main factors that stimulate word-of-mouth (WOM). In particular, positive affective engagement and social media sharing were found to be the main drivers of experience diffusion.

In contrast, while a passion for horror was associated with intention to recommend, it was not a significant predictor in the regression model once other factors were taken into account. Thus, interest in the genre alone does not seem to be able to generate WOM unless it is connected with emotional involvement.

An interesting aspect that is also generated by the analysis is the unlikeliness of the presence of multicollinearity problems among the variable analyzed, which contributes to the robustness of the model and the validity of the estimates that were established.

In summary, based on the analysis of the data, it is evident that positive emotions are the central force in word of mouth in the horror teaser game.

The ability to stimulate enthusiasm, attention, and interest has proven to be crucial for increasing digital engagement and promoting viral diffusion. However, the lack of a strong sense of suspense and tension could represent a limitation to the full effectiveness of the buzz marketing campaign.

Furthermore, the role of social media in word-of-mouth transmission emphasizes the strategic importance of digital marketing in promoting awareness and viral effects of the experience.

CHAPTER 4: LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Through the research conducted among participants, it became clear that buzz marketing strategies are effective in horror movie industry. Empirical analysis demonstrated how immersive experiences, characterized by strong sensory and narrative involvement, can stimulate the intention to watch a film promote word-of-mouth sharing.

The research demonstrated that viral marketing, when integrated with elements of suspense and direct audience interaction, can significantly amplify the level of engagement, fostering the spontaneous spread of the promotional experience. These results are particularly relevant in the context of the horror genre, where the intensity of the emotions provoked by the film plays a crucial role in determining the propensity to recommend the film to friends and peers.

In addition to providing a theoretical contribution to the dynamics of experiential marketing, this study opens the way for different future research and offers practical insights for professionals in the field, as illustrated in the following sections.

4.1 Contributions of the Study

The analysis highlighted encouraging results regarding innovation for future marketing practices in the film industry as well as representing a significant contribution to academic literature:

1. Exploitation of immersive experiences in horror cinema: the effectiveness of teaser-immersive campaigns for generating a high level of emotional involvement was successfully demonstrated. The narrative approach, combined with direct and sensory interaction, produced a strong impact on participants, stimulating curiosity and interest, the types of emotions that bring people to movie theaters. The data collected suggest that narrative immersion allows the audience to feel an integral part of the experience, creating an emotional bond that favors the willingness to watch the movie as well as the activation of Word-of-Mouth sharing with peers. This result highlights how experiential marketing, if applied in a strategic way, can be a powerful lever for the film industry, especially in genres such as horror, where the intensity of emotions represents and adds value. The creation of virtual settings, interactive teasers, and

digital role-playing games can further strengthen this dynamic, increasing audience engagement.

2. The potential of word-of-mouth in the context of horror films: research results confirm how important word-of-mouth is and the potential it has for viral amplification in the film industry from a marketing standpoint. Exposure to the immersive teaser generated, among participants, a strong desire for sharing, both through digital channels and in face-to-face interactions. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the horror genre, where the intensity of the experience stimulates the need to discuss and share one's emotions.

In this sense, the WOM becomes a natural promotional flywheel, able to increase the visibility of the product without additional costs for the production. As a result, the study suggests that teaser campaigns should be designed to maximize this effect which leads to peer-sharing by creating content that stimulates discussion and social interaction.

3. Effectiveness of the selected target: the choice to focus on a sample of the population belonging to Generation Z and Millennials proved to be strategic and consistent with the objectives of the study. This demographic, particularly active on social platforms and prone to horror content consumption, has responded positively to the teaser experience, demonstrating a high propensity for digital word of mouth sharing.

The analysis showed that this audience segment is not only more likely to interact with immersive content of this sort, but also inclined to share such experiences through their social channels, further amplifying the reach of the movie campaign. This suggests that the buzz marketing in horror cinema finds its main ally in younger audiences, and it is able to transform an individual experience into a collective phenomenon.

4.2 Limitations of the Study

Despite the innovative and significant results, it is necessary to consider some methodological and conceptual limitations, which represent opportunities for improvement as well as future research:

1. The study did use a “convenience” sampling, focusing mainly on young adults. This choice, while consistent with the horror genre target, limits the ability to extend results to other demographic segments. In particular, it is not possible to determine whether older age groups such as the Baby Boomers or Generation X would respond similarly to an immersive teaser campaign. It would be interesting for future research to broaden the population sample to analyze, including a segmentation by age groups, different cultural backgrounds and level of familiarity with horror movie content, in order to explore possible differences in perception and engagement.
2. The experimental design adopted, based on a single-group, post-test design, allowed to evaluate the impact of the teaser on engagement and word-of-mouth, but the absence of a control group limits the ability to isolate the causal effect of the experience from external variables. A more robust experimental design, including randomised control groups, would allow the effectiveness of the campaign to be tested more accurately, reducing the risk of bias and increasing the internal validity of the resulting conclusions.
3. The use of a self-completed online questionnaire allowed for rapid and efficient data collection, but introduced potential bias related to self-assessment and subjective interpretations of questions. The very nature of the questionnaire may have influenced responses, especially in relation to the emotions perceived.

In the future, the adoption of neuro-marketing techniques such as eye tracking or electroencephalogram (EEG) could improve the reliability of measurements by providing more accurate and objective data on participants' emotional reactions.
4. Although the analysis showed strong emotional involvement, the study focused mainly on positive emotions such as enthusiasm and interest. In the horror context, however, negative emotions - fear, anxiety and suspense - are also powerful word-of-mouth catalysts. Future studies may delve into the impact of these emotions, exploring how their intensity can influence experience memorability and word-of-mouth sharing propensity.

4.3 Future Research Perspectives

The findings from the study open up interesting prospects for future research. They aim at deepening and expanding the knowledge about buzz marketing in the film industry, particularly when it comes to horror movies. In this direction, it is possible to identify several development lines that could help enhance the validity of the results and even explore new fields of application.

A first approach to this in-depth analysis concerns its extension to broader and heterogeneous demographic segments. The study focused primarily on young adults belonging to Generation Z and millennials, a target that has proven particularly receptive to immersive experiences. However, extending the demographic sample to include different age groups, such as the Baby Boomers and Generation X, could provide valuable insights into the different perceptions of viral marketing and how such experiences are internalized and processed by audiences with different cultural and digital backgrounds. Furthermore, including comparative analyses between different cultural contexts (Europe, USA, Asia) could reveal interesting differences in the ways of engagement and spreading of WOM.

A further methodological enhancement could be achieved through the adoption of experimental designs with randomized control groups. The choice of single-group post-test design allowed to effectively measure the emotional impact that the teaser had on the individual, but the absence of a comparison, possible with a control group, limits the ability to isolate the causal effect of the experience from external variables. A more structured experimental design, including a control group not exposed to the teaser would allow to verify, with greater precision, the differences in perception and WOM between those who have lived the immersive experience and those who weren't. This approach would lead to a significantly more accurate measurement of the effectiveness of these immersive campaigns and lead to more detailed conclusions.

At the same time, a significant advance in knowledge could be achieved through the integration of advanced emotional measurement tools. Currently, participants' reactions have been collected using simple questionnaires, a valid tool but subject to self-assessment bias. The adoption of biometric and neuro-marketing technologies, such as eye-tracking, electroencephalogram (EEG) and micro-facial expression monitoring, would indeed make it possible to analyse emotional responses in a more objective and

detailed way. These tools would allow us to detect not only the intensity of emotions experienced, but also the reaction time to specific stimuli caused by the teaser, increasing the accuracy of engagement ratings.

A further area of development concerns the analysis of negative emotions in the context of WOM. The study showed that enthusiasm and interest are powerful catalysts for word of mouth sharing; however, in the horror movie sector, emotions such as fear, anxiety and tension also play a key role in viral amplification. Future research could explore how the intensity of these emotions affects the memorability of the experience and the propensity to share. A practical example could consist in measuring the heartbeat or galvanic response of the skin while the teaser is being played to assess the actual fear response and its link to subsequent social media sharing.

Finally, an important research perspective lies in the comparison of different buzz marketing techniques. The analysis focused mainly on immersive teasers, but there are other viral marketing strategies that could prove effective in the horror film industry.

These include:

- Guerrilla Marketing: “advertising strategy that focuses on using low-cost marketing techniques to generate maximum exposure for a product or service⁶¹”.
- Flash Mob: “a group of people who arrange, by mail or mobile phone, to come together in a place at the same time, do something funny or silly, and then leave⁶²”.
- Influencer Marketing: “a collaboration between popular social-media users and brands to promote brands’ products or services⁶³”.

A comparative analysis of these strategies would help identify the most effective techniques to generate WOM and amplify engagement, providing valuable indications for optimizing future film marketing campaigns.

⁶¹ Corporate Finance Institute. (n.d.). *Guerrilla Marketing*. Retrieved from <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/management/guerrilla-marketing/>

⁶² Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). *Flashmob*. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/flashmob>

⁶³ McKinsey & Company. (n.d.). *What is influencer marketing?* Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-influencer-marketing>

4.4 Managerial Implications

The results obtained offer important indications for marketing professionals and film production companies that intend to exploit the potential of buzz marketing in the horror film industry. The main managerial implications that emerged are:

1. Prioritize emotional involvement over the mere passion for the genre. The multiple regression analysis showed that the enthusiasm generated by the teaser is the main predictor of the tendency to word-of-mouth (WOM) sharing, while the propensity for the horror genre was not statistically significant. This suggests that the effectiveness of a viral campaign does not necessarily depend on a pre-established audience, but rather on the content's ability to elicit intense emotional engagement even among users that are not necessarily horror movie fans. The teaser campaigns should therefore aim at content that can stimulate emotions like surprise, curiosity, and engagement, regardless of the audience's taste in film genres.
2. Exploit the viral potential of TikTok and other social platforms. The second most significant predictor of WOM turned out to be sharing on TikTok. This data confirms the central role of social platforms - in particular TikTok - in the viral dissemination of promotional content. Industry professionals should develop specific strategies for these channels, encouraging user-generated content (UGC), interactive challenges, visual filters, and teasers optimized for short video formats.
3. Design teasers that can generate strong positive emotions. Correlation analysis has shown that positive emotions - such as enthusiasm, attention, inspiration, and interest - are strongly associated with the propensity to word-of-mouth sharing. Promotional campaigns should therefore aim to evoke these emotions through narrative elements with a high emotional impact: twists, immersive settings, and stimulating interactions. A positive emotional engagement not only increases the memorability of the experience, but also encourages spontaneous sharing.
4. Moderate negative emotions can also stimulate word-of-mouth sharing. Although the negative emotions typical of the horror genre (e.g. fear, tension) were not dominant, the analysis showed that slight feelings of discomfort or anxiety are positively related to the propensity for WOM. This suggests that it is not necessary to terrify the viewer to encourage virality: it is enough to generate a moderate level of emotional tension that stimulates curiosity and the desire to talk about it.

5. Reach out to fans. Although the potential for recommendation is related to the passion for the horror genre, it was not proven to be a significant predictive variable in the regression model. This means that effective teaser campaigns can attract all audiences regardless of genre preference, as long as they are able to elicit a strong emotional impact. Targeting strategies should therefore include segments of users that are emotionally reactive and curious, as well as highly active on social platforms, horror genre buffs or not.
6. Encourage active participation and immersive involvement. The success of the teaser game confirms that interactivity can be a strategic lever in strengthening user engagement. Production companies should consider the adoption of immersive formats such as online games, virtual escape rooms or augmented/virtual reality experiences, which transform the viewer from a simple user to the protagonist of the narrative experience.
7. Integrate a cross-media strategy to maximize virality. To amplify the reach of the teaser campaign, it is essential to synchronize content across multiple digital platforms (TikTok, Instagram, YouTube Shorts), monitoring engagement metrics in real time. This allows to identify the content with higher viral potential and re-launch them strategically, creating a continuous cycle of visibility and dissemination.

CONCLUSION

This research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of buzz marketing strategies applied to horror cinema, focusing in particular on the role of emotional involvement and interaction with immersive teaser content in generating word of mouth (WOM). The aim was to understand to what extent the emotions aroused, the tendency to share on social media and personal passion for the horror genre influence the intention to recommend the experience, both online and offline.

Through an integrated methodological approach—qualitative and quantitative—it emerged that enthusiasm represents the variable most strongly correlated with the propensity to WOM. Among emotions, positive ones, such as enthusiasm, attention and interest, showed a significantly greater impact than negative ones, such as fear, tension or nervousness. Furthermore, sharing on TikTok was confirmed as a powerful amplifier of viral diffusion, demonstrating the increasingly central role of social platforms in contemporary cinema promotion. On the contrary, passion for the horror genre, although correlated with recommendation intent, did not emerge as a significant predictor variable in the multiple regression model. This data suggests that the effectiveness of viral campaigns does not depend exclusively on an already loyal audience, but can also arise from immersive and emotionally engaging experiences, capable of attracting and involving even users who are less passionate about the genre.

Based on these results, some critical reflections can be drawn. First of all, buzz marketing campaigns in horror cinema seem to work better when they manage to build an autonomous and participatory narrative experience, capable of evoking strong and easily shareable emotions. Tools such as interactive teaser games or guerrilla marketing initiatives go beyond simple promotion: they contribute to the creation of a collective narrative, in which the audience is no longer just a spectator, but a co-creator of meaning. In this way, marketing becomes an extension of the cinematographic language, anticipating its tone, style and expressive codes.

Nonetheless, certain methodological and structural limitations of this research must be acknowledged. First, the use of a single-group post-test design does not allow for the causal effects of the teaser experience to be isolated with certainty, due to the absence of a control group or a pre-exposure measurement. Secondly, the sample used—composed

mainly of people belonging to Generation Z and Millennials—cannot be considered representative of the entire spectator population, reducing the generalizability of the results. In addition, the self-assessment nature of the questionnaire and the absence of objective measurements of emotional responses (e.g., biometrics) may have introduced cognitive bias or social desirability effects in the answers.

In light of these limitations, future research developments could move towards more structured experimental designs with randomized control groups and pre-/post-exposure measurements, in order to more accurately determine the effectiveness of immersive components compared to traditional approaches. Further investigations may also conduct comparative analyses of different campaign formats (e.g., teaser games, flash mobs, influencer marketing, fake news narratives, user-generated content), with the goal of identifying the most effective strategies according to the target audience, distribution context (cinema vs. streaming), and characteristics of the film product. It would also be advisable to broaden the sample to include participants with more diverse ages, cultural backgrounds, and levels of familiarity with the horror genre, in order to explore how sociodemographic variables influence reception and WOM propensity.

In conclusion, the results confirm that buzz marketing—when designed as an immersive experience and enriched with strategies capable of activating emotional involvement—proves to be a particularly effective promotional lever in the context of horror cinema. It is not so much fear that makes the difference, but the intensity of the emotional experience as a whole: this is what drives the generation of WOM the most, especially among the most active audience segments on social media. These data offer a clear indication for production companies, by investing in experiential marketing strategies that encourage early interaction with the content can amplify the hype around the film already in the initial stages, thus increasing the chances of success. In an increasingly competitive and fragmented landscape such as that of audiovisual entertainment, the ability to create authentic and viral involvement represents a decisive strategic advantage, capable of influencing both the commercial performance of the film and its cultural impact.

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FIGURES

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Figure 4: Global Horror Film Market Forecast (2024–2033). Projected market growth from USD 112.01 billion in 2024 to USD 195.35 billion by 2033, with a CAGR of 7.2%. *Business Research Insights* (2024).

Figure 5: Number of horror movies released in the USA and Canada between 2000 and 2024. *Statista* (2024). Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1499981/number-of-horror-movie-releases-north-america/>

Figure 6: Number of horror movies released in the USA from 2022 to 2024, by subgenre. *Statista* (2024). Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1538492/number-horror-movies-released-by-subgenre-us/>

Figure 7: Share of consumers who watch horror movies or TV shows worldwide in 2024, by generation. *Statista* (2024). Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1498439/horror-movies-tv-shows-age-generation-worldwide/>

Figure 8: Highest-grossing horror franchises at the global box office as of 2023 (in million U.S. dollars). *Statista*. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1538492/number-horror-movies-released-by-subgenre-us/>

Figure 9: Official poster of the film *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez. *Sentieri Selvaggi*. Retrieved from <https://www.sentieriselvaggi.it/il-caso-the-blair-witch-project/>

Figure 10: Fake missing person poster distributed as part of *The Blair Witch Project*'s viral marketing campaign. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2024/apr/22/the-blair-witch-project-original-cast-payment-residuals-request-rei-hance-joshua-leonard-michael-williams-lionsgate-letter>

Figure 11: *Paranormal Activity* (2007) *Demand It!* Campaign. *Paramount Pictures*. Retrieved from <https://www.filminquiry.com/paranormal-activity-marketing/>

Figure 12: Marketing campaign for the film *Smile* (2022), directed by Parker Finn. *Rock & Pop*. Retrieved from <https://www.rockandpop.cl/2022/09/smile-sonrie-pelicula-de-terror-fotos-por-que-la-gente-sonrie-terrorificamente-en-los-partidos-de-beisbol-en-estados-unidos-eeuu/>

Figure 13: Cover of the interactive game created by the author, introducing the experience with the slogan "*It's not a game, it's a reminder.*"

Figure 14: Teaser poster of the fictional horror film *Viral Terror*, created by the author.

Figure 15: Promotional Instagram post created by the author, simulating content published by an influencer for the launch of the fictional horror film *Viral Terror*

Figure 16: Promotional teaser image generated by the author with ChatGPT, designed to simulate a TikTok post for the fictional horror

Figure 17: Gender distribution of the sample, generated through SPSS.

Figure 18: Age distribution of the sample, generated through SPSS.

Figure 19: Level of passion for the horror genre among the sample, generated through SPSS.

Figure 20: Histogram representing the level of passion for the horror genre among the sample, generated through SPSS.

Figure 21: Level of enthusiasm felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 22: Histogram representing the level of enthusiasm felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure23: Level of inspiration felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 24: Histogram representing the level of inspiration felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 25: Level of attentiveness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 26: Histogram representing the level of attentiveness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 27: Level of interest felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 28: Histogram representing the level of interest felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure29: Level of excitement felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 30: Histogram representing the level of excitement felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 31: Level of fear (Scared) felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 32: Histogram representing the level of fear felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS

Figure 33: Level of nervousness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS

Figure 34: Histogram representing the level of nervousness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 35: Level of distress felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 36: Histogram representing the level of distress felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 37: Level of uneasiness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 38: Histogram representing the level of uneasiness felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 39: Level of confusion felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 40: Histogram representing the level of confusion felt during the teaser game, generated through SPSS.

Figure 41: Pearson correlation table generated through SPSS, showing the relationships between the intention to recommend and positive emotions.

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Figure 43: Pearson correlation table generated with SPSS, illustrating the relationship between the intention to recommend (Recommend) and the passion for the horror genre (Passionate).

Figure 44: Model Summary table generated with SPSS, illustrating the multiple regression analysis for the dependent variable Talkaboutfilm.

Figure 45: ANOVA table generated with SPSS, providing the results of the multiple regression analysis.

Figure 46: Coefficients table generated with SPSS, displaying the regression coefficients for each predictor variable.

MATERIALS AND SOFTWARE

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