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The psychology behind morbid reality: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the fascination with blood, gore, injury, and death on the internet

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ABSTRACT

The psychological effects of viewing fictional, morbid and often, violent material are long researched and often in a negative light; yet despite the abundance and growing popularity of factual morbid material, predominately on the internet may be having on their psyche. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was crucial to gain best insight into participants' experience with blood, gore, injury, and death; and ultimately, the research question; "why *do* people view (Anderson, 2012), few studies have explored the effects of watching someone become injured or die. Using five male and three female adult participants from around the world, this study looked to address the motivations behind viewing factual morbid material on the internet and the effects it reality material involving injury and/or death?" Themes identified participants' keen interests in the material, along with reporting both positive and negative psychological consequences. In comparison with previous literature based on both factual and fictional morbid material (e.g. Zuckerman & Litle, 1986), albeit largely based on short-term exposure, results were mixed and further research with these participants or from other similar internet domains would be necessary to further explore the effects of viewing factual morbid material. This is an entirely original study and themes identified and conclusions drawn should be taken with caution, acting merely as an introduction to the psychology behind the fascination in viewing morbid material.

KEY WORDS:	MORBID CURIOSITY	MORBID MATERIAL	DESENSITISATION	DEATH	INTERNET CENSORSHIP

Introduction

Humans love to feel alive. In a safe environment where life and death scenarios are rare, extremes faced in western, first world cultures are somewhat deadened compared to those of our ancestors; fighting for food, a mate, and survival are no longer necessary. To surpass experiences faced in everyday life, some partake in dangerous sports, some take illicit drugs, and some leave the physical side of extreme experiences alone by watching others fight and often fail to survive in fictional or factual scenarios via different media portals; television programmes, films, and the internet. With the strong emotional responses provoked from their viewers, almost everyone has reported to have been disturbed by a fictional or factual image in the past. Despite these disturbances, there is a huge market for fictional morbid material, with horror films currently at number seven in the top ten highest grossing genres in the US (Nash Information Services, 2012), plus a growing market for factual morbid material via 'shock sites'; websites containing links to graphic accidents, crime scenes, or even medical conditions (Anderson, 2012). For many people, morbid materials are an exciting topic of conversation, provoking mixed reactions to different facets, such as the blood and gore in a leaked Al-Qaeda execution film, or the satisfying resolution often seen at the end of horror films.

Zuckerman and Litle (1986) were two of the initial researchers to explore curiosity of morbid material, devising the 'Curiosity About Morbid Events' scale (CAME) to measure curiosity, questioning the belief that consuming large amounts of negative media appealed to a small proportion of individuals. Zuckerman and Litle (1986) also used a 'Sensation Seeking' scale (SS), together with personality scales, including a Psychoticism (P) scale. Results revealed high P scores were correlated with high SS and CAME scores, with higher scores seen in males than females, across all adult ages. Zuckerman and Litle (1986) suggested high SS scorers are interested in material, such as X-rated or horror movies, which increase activity in central catecholamine systems; responsible for preparing the fight-or-flight response, with increased heart rate and blood pressure as typical effects. Furthermore, an earlier study looking into news interests by Schafer (1976) using the SS scale revealed high levels of boredom and alienation – often a characteristic of introversion, resulted in a high interest level to death related events. A later study by Aluja-Fabregat (2000) using adapted versions of the CAME and SS to examine adolescents' perception of violent television and film viewing found male high scorers of SS and CAME were rated by their teachers as more aggressive and excitable. Aluja-Fabregat (2000) attributed high scores in the SS and CAME scales to high levels of arousal provoked by watching fictional violent media materials, with Schafer (1976) highlighting arousal to cure boredom; a motivator in factual material. Aluja-Fabregat (2000) further compared her results with Zuckerman and Litle's (1986), suggesting that viewing violent films and the provocation of interest and arousal and the production of catecholamine can result in feelings of 'intrinsic reward' or a sense of motivation, explaining why more aggressive sensation seekers may be enticed by violent material.

Zillman (1998), also intrigued by adolescent fascination with horror material, suggested the appeal of morbid material is dependent on the contrasting emotions after watching the material, such as relief, sensed by a viewer who felt stressed or bad whilst viewing the material. However, Sparks, Spirek, and Hodgson (1993) found viewing horror films could result in negative psychological effects; it was not

uncommon for viewers of horror films to become nervous after viewing, suffering from sleep disturbances and a fear of entering certain rooms in their homes. Zillman (1991, as cited in Goldstein, 1998) later attributed this behaviour to arousal from the horror film, which can be linked to stimulation of the fight-or-flight response suggested by Aluja-Fabregat (2000) and Zuckerman and Litle (1986), and also as a potential factor in empathy and emotional display towards a fictional victim. In contrast, viewers of an online forum viewing morbid material involving death or injury reported positive psychological effects; witnessing another suffering caused them to feel better for being in a more desirable situation (www.reddit.com/r/morbidreality). This attitude can be linked to Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory, a concept of self-evaluation by comparison to others in order to reduce uncertainty in domains, such as self-efficacy (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005). Similarly, the German loanword, 'schadenfreude' is used to describe the enjoyment someone might feel when witnessing or hearing about this misfortune of another person; an act attributed to viewing morbid material. Furthermore, Johnston and Dumerauf (1995, as cited in Prince, 2004) found that with enjoyment from feeling scared and 'freaked out', the idea of harm and destruction was also made pleasurable viewing.

Although televised news programmes primarily convey facts and information, there is empirical evidence to suggest emotions play a major role viewer perception. A recent study by Unz, Schwab and Winterhoff-Spurk (2008) explored the influence of violent television news reports on viewers' emotional experiences. Unz *et al.* (2008) found emotions such as sadness and contempt were a rare reaction to another's suffering in contrast with emotions of anger and fear, and participants expressed significantly higher levels of sadness and disgust when presented with violence against animals than when viewing violence against humans. These negative emotions when viewing animal harm are consistent with the 'biophilia hypothesis', coined by Wilson (1984) to explain the instinctive bond between humans and other living systems, particularly if the victim is innocent (Unz *et al.,* 2008). However, the struggle to explain the nonchalance when viewing the suffering of other human beings remains, suggesting a complex web of relations lies between televised news variables and emotional processes of viewers (Unz *et al.,* 2008).

With the use of content analysis, it is evident that televised negativity in terms of negative news has risen over recent decades, with further evidence showing bad news actually makes good news in the public eye, attracting more viewers than positive news (Patterson, 1996; Pinkerton & Zhou, 2007). A regular news viewer may recall images from heavily documented incidents with ease, such as people throwing themselves from the Twin Towers, to children injured in the current unrest in Syria (Pinkerton & Zhou, 2007). In fact, since the 1960's, negative news has increased threefold, and is dominant in television news programmes (Patterson, 1996; Pinkerton & Zhou, 2007). However, documenting the full truth of reality is not always welcomed, as photojournalist Ken Jarecke (2005) found after photographing an incinerated Iraqi soldier in 1991 was deemed too disturbing to print. Jarecke (2005) argued that morbid events are not documented in their true form, and the public will therefore be misled into believing events such as wars and natural disasters are exactly how they are depicted in films; rarely the case. Similarly, the late photographer Kevin Carter was heavily criticised for photographing a vulture waiting for a child to die in Sudan and failing to help her – an image printed in many newspapers worldwide, causing the world to weep with grief (MacLeod, 1994). It was

later reported documenting the reality of the world was a leading factor in Carter's suicide; he was haunted by memories of corpses and executioners (MacLeod, 1994). More recently, a photographer, R. Umar Abbasi, captured a man falling into the path of an oncoming New York City subway train, initiating further debate regarding the moral obligations of photographers to help the victims; suggesting the notion of being human should outweigh one's occupation of photojournalism (Bercovici, 2012). This highlights the blurred line between moral and legal obligation in regard to America's "no duty to rescue" rule that can result in punishment to onlookers who do not help those in desperate need – a rule rarely enforced (Weber, 2012). These examples suggest confusion and disagreement regarding the obligations of photographers and types of images either censored or published by the media, yet all three photographed victims eventually suffered the same, natural, unavoidable fate: death.

With such morbid material abundant in television, film, gaming, and print, it is not surprising one of the most controversial focuses of inquiry on current material within mass media is the theory of desensitisation; a serious diminishment in an individual's response following repeated exposure to material would usually provoke a strong and emotional reaction, such as horror, disgust, or violence (Hogg & Vaughan, 2012). According to the 'Model of the Effects of Exposure to Media Violence' (MEEMV), devised by Carnagey, Anderson, and Bushman (2007) the process of desensitisation can lead to the extinction of fear or anxiety reactions, manifesting in the diminishment of initial physiological effects associated with the stimulation of the fight-or-flight response, such as increased heart rate, and also strong cognitive and affective outcomes; decreased perception of situation severity, decreased attention to violent events, decreased sympathy for victims, decreased negative attitudes towards violence, and an increased belief that violence is normative. Similarly, a recent laboratory study using undergraduate students by Bushman and Anderson (2009) found such cognitive and affective outcomes from viewing fictional films of a violent nature can lead to damaging behavioural outcomes, which could result in the decreased likelihood of helping someone in a similar situation and an increased likelihood of involvement in aggressive behaviour. The suggestion that viewing a violent act can influence a viewer's behaviour and attitude has raised frequent and heated debates on how much exposure to morbid material should be shown in society (Hogg & Vaughan, 2012).

The theory that viewing a violent event can lead to aggressive behaviour has been repeatedly tested, with the bulk of research originating from Bandura's classic Social Learning Theory, developed from visible behaviour modelling seen in children viewing aggression towards a Bobo doll (Hogg & Vaughan, 2012). Many examples of violent and criminal acts, such as rape or murder have been likened, in a virtually identical fashion, to acts portrayed within films, television programmes, or video games (Hogg & Vaughan, 2012). One of the most discussed cases of the effects of violence in films concerns the brutal murder of James Bulger by Robert Thompson and John Venables, who abducted, tortured, and murdered two year old Bulger, leaving his mutilated body on a railway line (Firth, 2010). Aspects of the murder were likened to the horror film; *Child's Play 3*, with the belief that having viewed the film, Thompson and Venables were inspired to commit murder (Firth, 2010). This belief, fuelled by sensationalised tabloid reports, became a factor leading to stricter censorship rules in the UK introduced in 1994 (Davenport-Hines, 2012). Although

research suggests a strong link between media violence and aggression, there is weak evidence showing a direct link between media violence and actual crime, yet when a particularly violent act occurs, details of the perpetrators private life are made public, encouraging the media to formulate opinions on what made them offend.

Morbid reality material can include photographs, moving images, and video recordings of real-life workplace injuries, motor accidents, war crimes, suicides, and capital punishment. One of the first and most popular reality films of its time was 'Faces of Death' (1978) a VHS film combining real scenes of executions, accidental fatal and non-fatal injuries, and suicide. It is important to note this was not a 'snuff movie'; a deliberate recording of a murder to gain profit. No scene involved in the Faces of Death (1978) was made specifically for the VHS, and it is most likely that real snuff films are an urban legend and do not actually exist, despite circulating rumours at the time (Mikkleson, 2006). In 1996, as internet use increased, an early form of what would be known today as a 'shock site', www.rotten.com, became the internet mother-ship of morbid material, including images showing meat-grinder accidents and leaked celebrity autopsies. The growth in shock site popularity has seen further development of sites such as www.bestgore.com and www.ogrish.tv, both geared towards viewer satisfaction from blood and gore with little intellectual discussion, www.liveleak.com, and www.theync.com, also referred to as 'reality websites', appearing as news websites but containing highly morbid material, along with material also surfacing on YouTube; a well-known video sharing site, Reddit; a social news website, and 4Chan; an anonymous imageboard website. Within these websites are links to the most prolific videos in internet and arguably criminal history such as: *'1 lunatic 1 ice pick'*; recent recordings of failed porn star, Luka Magnotta, stabbing and dismembering his victim with an ice pick. In a time where technology has allowed society to access the internet in the palm of one's hand, and with the efficiency of search engines such as Google; morbid material is easy to find, and hard to avoid. Disturbing material, such as photographs of crime scenes and autopsies, which may once have been only accessible to the criminal justice system, are fast becoming available to the general public instantly. Yet, despite the growing ease of accessibility to real life morbid material, there is little research exploring those on the 'front line'; their motivations and the potential effects on their psyche.

This study aimed to explore the attitudes of viewers who watch morbid material, some of which can be likened to the graphic yet real life emergency scenarios seen on television documentaries shown after the watershed. This study not only recruited participants who viewed factual morbid material within a natural setting, such as their home, but through their own choice and admission, purposely viewed the material for their own benefit, for a significant amount of time. This study can be considered the first known study of its kind and therefore lacking previous research in this area resulted in the inclusion of a self-devised qualitative questionnaire, gaining greater depth of knowledge on individual and homogenous group opinions than quantitative designs. This research sought to confirm or dispute the findings by Schafer (1976), Zukerman and Litle (1986), and Aluja-Fabrgat (2000), and the stimulation of the fight-or-flight response, together with any psychological effects of watching factual morbid material, comparing it with the findings of Sparks *et al.* (1993), and the need for arousal noted by Zillman (1998) and Unz *et al.* (2008). The development of desensitisation and aspects of the MEEMV identified by Carnargy *et al.* (2007) was

also explored, along with the use of morbid material in society today. The main research question this study focused on was:

"Why *do* people view reality material involving injury and/or death?"

This research was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to gain the best insight into participants' experiences with viewing reality material. This study ultimately looked at motivations behind those who view morbid material, along with both short and long term psychological and physiological effects, viewing behaviours, and how viewing may have altered their outlook on life. IPA allowed the researcher to interpret the data in relation to participants' inclusion of morbid material in their world and how they made sense of the material they viewed. Due to the infancy of this area of research, the findings act as an introduction to the use of qualitative research towards the psychology behind reality material and those who choose to watch it.

Method

Design

This study was non-experimental, with online participants required to complete one questionnaire with open-ended questions relating to feelings and opinions about morbid material. This study used purposive sampling using a group of homogenous participants, as selection was guided by inclusion criterion – participants were over the age of 18, and essential they had previously viewed morbid material. To increase validity, demographic variables were recorded and analysed. This study adopted a self-report method, and results yielded qualitative data, analysed using IPA. There was no incentive for participants to take part. This study used online participants already viewing reality material and no morbid material was shown; thereby eliminating physical risk and minimising psychological risk to both participants and researcher.

Participants

This study aimed to explore the use of reality material which may offend or upset those who have not viewed it prior to this research. Therefore participants were adults over the age of 18 years old and already exposed to reality material by their own admission. The researcher did not ask any participants to view any reality material. Participants who had not watched reality material before or were under the age of 18 were asked not to take part in this study. Participants from around the world were recruited via an active reality website forum (www.reddit.com/r/morbidreality), through a post advertising the study. Initially 20 participants were hoped to be recruited, with a minimum of eight to be analysed to retain an ideographic emphasis recommended by Smith and Osborn (2007), but the study gained a much greater interest than originally thought, and a total of 801 participants opened the link to the questionnaire, having answered more than one question, with 317 participants having completed the questionnaire fully. The initial sample size of 20 participants was to allow for any incomplete questionnaires and to gain enough depth in the data, but due to the sheer volume of data collected, the researcher was only able to analyse a small proportion within time constraints. A

random number generator (www.randomm.org/integers) was used to select eight questionnaires from the 317 fully completed, to gain as much information as possible. A total of 8 participants, as outlined in Table 1 below, were used for analysis; five males and three females, with ages ranging between 18 and 43 (*M=19.6yrs, SD=1.5yrs*, discounting participant B's age as an outlier in this small sample), three of which were from America, and the remaining five from Australia, Great Britain, Canada, The Netherlands, and Finland. Half of participants considered themselves Atheists, along with two Agnostics, a Buddhist and a Christian. Discounting participant F's high viewing frequency of 20 hours per week, average viewing frequency was 1.93 hours per week.

Table 1.
Participant Characteristics.

Participant	Gender	Age	Nationality	Religion	Viewing Frequency (per week)
A	Male	19	British	Agnostic	3 hours
B	Male	43	Dutch	Atheist	1 hour
C	Male	20	American	Christian	1.5 hours
D	Male	19	American	Buddhist	2 hours
E	Male	22	Australian	Atheist	2 hours
F	Female	18	American	Atheist	20 hours
G	Female	21	Canadian	Agnostic	2 hours
H	Female	18	Finnish	Atheist	2 hours

Materials

An online internet post within www.reddit.com/r/morbidreality advertised the study, and provided an overview of the study. Willing participants were directed to the participant information sheet within an external website powered by www.surveymonkey.com to provide consent. Participants were unable to proceed to the questionnaire unless they had given appropriate consent. They were then directed to the questionnaire, and finally, the debrief. The method of data collection involved the use of an original self-devised questionnaire because the research area was so new, with questions devised from previous discussions within the forum and issues raised from previous research. The questionnaire involved the use of short but open-ended exploratory questions about the participants and their reality material viewing experiences, keeping the task simple yet stimulating. Such questions explored possible motivations for viewing morbid material, possible desensitisation, favourites themes and limitations of viewing, physiological and psychological changes during and after viewing, disclosure of the activity and opinions on fictional morbid material and media censorship; all of which connect with previous research mentioned earlier and were also modelled around past discussion within the forum itself. The breadth and depth of the findings would not have been achieved through a quantitative-styled questionnaire. There was no time limit to complete the questions, so if participants wished, they could pause and reflect if necessary.

Procedure

The researcher created a post with www.reddit.com/r/morbidreality, introducing the study and including a direct link to the information sheet. As this study used online participants, participants were able to take part at any time of day, from any country in the world. Participants checked three boxes to confirm they were over the age of 18, were already viewers of morbid material, and they understood the information outlined in the information sheet; and were unable to proceed until all three boxes were checked. Once informed consent was given, participants were directed to the questionnaire which they had an unlimited amount of time to complete. Participants did not have to answer every question if they felt uncomfortable, and this was explained within the information sheet. Once the questions were complete, participants were directed to the debrief, where they were thanked and told of the nature of the study. Participants were given the option to contact the researcher or Southampton Solent University with any questions. As a mood repair, participants were advised to view another area of the website commonly used within the community of Reddit to make one feel happier (www.reddit.com/r/aww). A link to the Samaritans was also provided for emotional support for those who might have been affected by the study, where trained volunteers would be able to discuss the participant's thoughts and feelings with them, via email, independent from the researcher and university. Participants were also made aware they would be able to receive a summary of the study's findings if requested.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher completed a full ethics form gaining approval from the British Psychological Society (BPS), and also followed the Code of Human Research Ethics (CHRE, 2010) and the guidelines outlined in the Report of the Working Party on Conducting Research on the Internet (CRI, 2010); both devised by the British Psychological Society. All participants had the right to remain anonymous; no identifying information was released outside of Southampton Solent University, and any participant was able to withdraw from the study during participation, without any consequence to them (Principles 2 of CHRE, 2010). The information participants disclosed was only available to the researcher via a survey website (www.surveymonkey.com) which remained inaccessible to the general public (Principle 2 of CRI, 2010). Risk of psychological harm of participants was no greater than already encountered in their daily life, as participants were not shown additional morbid material (Principle 2.4 of CHRE, 2010). As this study involved the discussion of sensitive topics, participants were offered a mood repair, emotional support from the Samaritans, and contact details of Southampton Solent University if they felt they had suffered psychologically through completion of the study, to help remedy a solution (Principle 3 of CHRE, 2010). All participants were over the age of 18 and gave full consent; understanding the nature of the study together with the use of data collected before participating, and were fully debriefed upon completion (Principles 4 & 8 of CHRE, 2010). All individual participant data remained anonymous and confidential to the researchers and tutors involved, although a summary of the findings was made available to all participants involved after analysis, by request (Principles 5 of CHRE, 2010). Participants were also made aware that the data collected may be used for further analysis by the researcher outside this original study. This study did not involve the use of deception (Principle 7 of CHRE, 2010).

Analysis

IPA Methodology

IPA was used due to its consistency with the aims of the research; focusing on participants' attitudes and experiences with viewing reality material by identifying commonalities and differences between the data, exploring how participants made sense of viewing reality material as a feature in their world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As this research area is new and relatively unexplored, IPA was the key factor in exploring the research question inductively without the use of unavailable pre-conceptions, assumptions, or expertise from previous research, yet still drawing on the background research relating to the psychological and physiological effects predominantly of fictional morbid material. This study used the researcher's own interpretation of participants' interpretation of their experience, known as a 'double hermeneutic', and the ideographic nature of IPA ultimately treated participants as experts in the field of consensually viewing reality material, not only as individuals but as an homogenous group (Smith *et al.,* 2009). This study's use of IPA was not to make premature generalisations about everyone who views morbid material but to use general claims with caution following an in-depth analysis of the inclusive sample used. The following steps devised from Langdridge and Hagger-Johnson (2009) were completed with utmost accuracy to ensure reliability within the analysis.

1. *Transcription –*line numbers were added to the transcripts for easy quote retrieval.
2. *Immersion* – transcripts were re-read for familiarisation, initial thoughts were noted.
3. *Annotation* - comments and summaries were made, and smaller, embedded was data de-contextualised.
4. *Identification of emerging themes* – notes were transformed into statements, with emerging themes recorded chronologically for each data set.
5. *Restructure* - common links of identified themes between data sets were noted, and broad themes were broken down where necessary.
6. *Identification of subordinate and superordinate themes* - broader themes were identified to encompass specific themes between data sets.
7. *Tabulation* – a table of superordinate, subordinate, and sub-subordinate themes was created including quotes and line numbers.

Reflexivity

As this study used the qualitative method of IPA, often beliefs and assumptions of the researcher may influence the analysis of the data (Elliott *et al.,* 1999). It may be of some importance to outline the researcher's own experience with viewing of morbid material, within a personal statement, allowing for reflexivity; the reflection of the impact of the researcher on the research procedure (Elliott *et al.,* 1999).

Self-Reflexivity

At the time of submission, the researcher is a 26 year old female student studying for a BSc (Hons) in Psychology with a Criminal Behaviour pathway. The researcher first stumbled across graphic material at the age of 14, behaviour discouraged by her parents, which she abided by. The researcher was later exposed to graphic material aged 25 via the social news website, Reddit, sparking her curiosity when she discovered several communities of people who enjoyed viewing morbid material, with one community (/r/morbidreality) dedicated to intelligent and mature discussion about such material. After browsing many conversations, or 'threads', the researcher became interested to know what attracted people to view such graphic material. Although the researcher does not view morbid material in the form of moving images such as GIFs or videos, she has viewed photographs and is familiar with the type of material available to view and specific videos often discussed by participants of this study and within the forum itself. Without prior knowledge of internet-based morbid material, or indeed with excess knowledge through regular exposure, the data may have been interpreted differently, but as the researcher falls somewhere in-between this continuum, which could be argued best for this research, interpreting the data as an 'informed outsider'.

Summary of Themes

The researcher initially identified 50 sub-subordinate themes across the data, capturing the interpreted meaning behind each quote. Each sub-subordinate theme was further categorised under an appropriate subordinate theme, and then further grouped under six superordinate themes. The six superordinate themes identified within the data are as follows; 'clear motivation' (Theme 1); reasons behind viewing morbid material, 'positive significances' (Theme 2); the benefits of viewing, together with any 'negative experiences' (Theme 3) felt by participants during and after viewing, 'emotional numbness' (Theme 4) to highlight any features of desensitisation, 'opinions of morbid material and society' (Theme 5) to encompass participants' views on morbid material in the world today, and finally 'individual differences and similarities' (Theme 6); commonalities in aspects of participants lives and viewing behaviour. Due to the sheer volume of themes identified within the data, it was not possible to analyse all themes, and the researcher has chosen to focus on particular subordinate themes of four superordinate themes; 'clear motivation' (Theme 1), 'positive significances' (Theme 2), 'negative experiences' (Theme 3), and 'emotional numbness' (Theme 4), not only because of the abundance of these themes across the participants, but more importantly to keep the focus on the research question; "why *do* people view reality material involving injury or death?"

Analysis of Selected Themes

Table 2.
Theme 1 - Clear Motivation.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Sub-Subordinate Themes
Clear Motivation (1)	▪ Learning and Understanding (1.1)	▪ Genuine Interest (1.1.1) ▪ Intellectual and Emotional Growth

		(1.1.2)
	▪ Genuine Enjoyment (1.2)	▪ Favourite Content (1.2.1) ▪ Pleasure (1.2.2) ▪ Fantasy (1.2.3) ▪ Envy (1.2.5)
	▪ Passing Pleasures (1.3)	▪ Drug-Like Feelings (1.3.1) ▪ Obsession and Addiction (1.3.2) ▪ Therapeutic (1.3.3)

Although guided by the questions, one of the fundamental themes evident across all eight participants and many of the question responses was the similarities between their motivations to view the morbid material. The superordinate theme, 'clear motivation' (Table 2, Theme 1) was created to encompass the reasons behind why participants had made this activity part of their life, capturing such motives into subordinate themes, with the most abundant, 'learning and understanding' (Theme 1.1), 'genuine enjoyment' (Theme 1.2) and 'passing pleasures' (Theme 1.3) analysed below.

With six participants expressing an interest in the material they were viewing, being able to learn and understand issues that might arise from viewing a particular piece seemed to be the most popular motivations for viewing. The main consensus appeared to be the fascination of a morbid event resulting in death;

"*I think death is something very interesting and I want to know about experiences that surround it*" (G, 32-33)

However, one participant wanted to make it clear they *"didn't go there because [they] had a strange obsession with seeing people die"* (A, 20), as if it was a worry to him others might think it was his sole motive. Some participants seemed particularly enthusiastic if the material included a story behind the morbid event; *"I'm always hopeful that someone posts information on a backstory"* (B, 38), with one participant expressing annoyance if this information is not present; *"I'm often annoyed by lack of backstory to material that interests me"* (H, 36), signifying feelings of incompleteness if there is no access to information behind the morbid event. This suggests viewing morbid material teaches participants about death in a way like no other. These participants enjoy learning about the event they have viewed, the factors leading up to it and how or why it took place; demonstrating that availability of context is an important factor when viewing morbid material.

Participant E was particularly expressive in what he hoped to gain from viewing the material, using it as an emotional stimulator when feeling bored or depressed;

"later in more boring or depressed moments I would directly seek out morbid content" (E, 23-24).

This can be interpreted as participant E using the morbid material as an emotional tool rather than just something to pass the time; *"…to feel a strong emotional response during emotionally dull moods"* (E, 47-48). Furthermore, upon viewing the morbid material, the "dull mood" was discontinued and replaced by less neutral emotions, later described to be emotionally stimulating to the participant. This can be related to Schafer's (1976) study which saw boredom as a motivator to view factual material. Other participants, G and H, also mentioned they viewed the material to be able to grow emotionally stronger from viewing a death or serious injury, hinting they would like to reduce elements of shock and upset, recognised by Carnagey *et al.* (2007) as part of the process of desensitisation; *"I want to not be shocked if similar events occurred around/to me"* (H, 22-23), along with participant G professing she wants to *"somehow grow stronger from the experience"* (G, 20-21).

Another popular opinion spanning across the data as a motivation was participants expressing 'genuine enjoyment' (Theme 1.2) when viewing morbid material. Although participants were varied with what they considered to be the most enjoyable material, the most abundant choice was historic morbid material;

"The theme I most often enjoy would be cases of historical morbid realities" (C, 29-30).

This preference could be synonymous with participants' desire to gain an understanding of particular incidents and because historical events, such as wars and methods of punishment, are well documented and participants are able to learn from what they are seeing, absorbing information about why this event occurred rather than just seeing the material on face value.

Participants expressed how they found viewing the morbid material enjoyable, interpreted as pleasure originating from other emotions, such as anxiety and even relief, experienced when viewing someone's death or serious injury;

"All new posts give me that same anxiety which I have come to enjoy" (B, 20-21).

Although participant B initially experienced negative emotions when viewing, he has been able to enjoy that emotion, anxiety, from repeated exposure to the morbid material, yet later professes: *"I consider myself always desensitised to this sort of material"* (A, 45), perhaps suggesting the desensitisation that was always present has grown greater and he is more emotionally resilient to morbid material than on initial viewings. Participants E and H also mention the pleasure they gain from viewing the material as entertaining;

"while I may indulge a dark humour at time, it is a guilty pleasure" (E, 76-77) and *"it's amusing in a twisted way"* (H, 28)

Participants appeared to recognise something is not quite right about finding the material pleasurable in such a way it might make them laugh, particularly where participant E admits it leaves them feeling guilty (Theme 1.2.2). However, this could be perceived as *'schadenfreud'* and also as participants feeling better about themselves for not being in the situation they have just witnessed, linking to Festinger's (1954, as cited in Hogg & Vaughan, 2010) Social Comparison Theory.

Furthermore, participant H admits viewing motives are related to violent fantasies (Theme 1.2.3); *"I, like many other people (I like to think), sometimes harbour violent fantasies and always have"* (H, 17-18) along with a hint of voyeurism, or feelings of a sexual nature arising when viewing something is not classed as pornographic; *"my desire to view the material is almost voyeuristic"* (H, 37-38), also admitting she would like to experience some of the pain the victims were feeling in the morbid material (Theme 1.2.5); *"sometimes, when I'm going through a depressive episode, I find myself envying the victims"* (H, 59-60). Compared with the other seven participants, these comments are 'unusual' as participant H's motives are different, particularly because viewing the material seems to enhance and act as a fuel for negative emotions, such as depression, violent fantasies, and maybe even suicide. This, along with the feelings of amusement mentioned above, can be linked to Johnston and Dumerauf's (1995, as cited in Prince, 2004) theory that pleasure comes from negative yet stimulating emotions when viewing harm and destruction.

Many participants explained how their interest for morbid material developed when they experienced 'passing pleasures' (Theme 1.3) with two participants in particular, E, and F, articulating obsessive viewing behaviour that might be seen in those with physical addictions (Theme 1.3.2); *"I would gorge on morbid content intermittently"* (E, 29-30), binging and purging on the morbid material as a bulimic would on food. The initial response by participants E and F suggests the material was incredibly appealing; *"it's addicting"* (F, 22), and even feeling a similar response after many years' experience of viewing;

"I couldn't get enough of it at first, and it's almost the same now" (F, 16).

It could be interpreted that this kind of behaviour suggests the activity of viewing morbid material may have been a significant importance in the lives of participants E and F upon first viewing, and remaining of a similar importance later as their viewing experience grows.

Table 3.
Theme 2 - Positive Significances.

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme	Sub-Subordinate Themes
Positive Significances (2)	▪ Change in Attitude (2.1)	▪ Awareness of Life (2.1.1) ▪ Gratitude & Appreciation (2.1.3) ▪ Reality Check (2.1.4)

Throughout the questionnaires, participants also discussed how viewing the material has changed them for the better, making them more aware of their own mortality and the lives they are living now, all of which were encompassed in the superordinate theme 'positive significances' (Table 3, Theme 2). Participants not only found they changed the way they thought but also changed the way they behaved, both consciously and subconsciously, which can be seen in the two subordinate themes; 'change in attitude' (Theme 2.1) and 'change in behaviour' (Theme 2.2.).

All eight participants were from western, first world countries and many seemed to appreciate their own countries and cultures (Theme 2.1.3);

"I consider myself lucky I live in the country I do. Less violence and better standards of living really…" (A, 66-67)

Much of the content featured on /r/morbidreality consists of civil unrest in war-torn countries, of those who practice barbaric punishment techniques and many participants expressed their gratitude, with such inhumane content being seen as worlds apart from the lives they are living in the west; *"…these stories/images make me realise truly how much I appreciate living on this end"* (G, 80-81).

One participant mentions the importance of being exposed to morbid material to bring awareness to one's own life (Theme 2.1.1); *"life is a series of experiences and we need to stop and smell the roses often"* (B, 67) suggesting viewing such different ways of life can facilitate the ability to appreciate the fortune of being born in a first world country. Similarly, participants also express the 'reality check' (Theme 2.1.4) they gain from watching morbid material: *"it gives you a sense of reality"* (A, 24), together with *"you see the world for what it really is and it gives a sense of normality in some ways"* (A, 25), insisting death itself is normal, and something everyone will face one day.

Table 4.
Theme 3 - Negative Experiences.

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme	Sub-Subordinate Themes
Negative Experiences (3)	▪ Personal Limitations (3.1)	▪ Dislike of Animal Suffering (3.1.1) ▪ Dislike of Sexual Assault (3.1.2) ▪ Cannot Explain Why Animal Suffering is Harder to Watch (3.1.4)

Despite being avid viewers of morbid material, the activity is not without a downside, all encompassed under the superordinate theme 'negative experiences' (Table 4, Theme 3). Although participants were given the opportunity to discuss their favourite content, many participants voiced their 'limitations' of the morbid material (Theme 3.1), guided by two questions asking them to compare animal and human suffering, and content they feel unable to watch. One of the most distinctive outcomes of the research was almost all participants expressed a firm 'dislike of animal suffering' (Theme 3.1.2), with comments such as *"I find animal suffering to be absolutely abhorrent"* (C, 90) and

"…most videos about animals being harmed or murder (especially household pets) usually won't be viewed by me" (D, 79-80).

Some participants compared animal suffering with child suffering; *"It is heart-breaking to me and resembles watching an innocent child being abused/killed"* (G,

97-98), highlighting the innocence and vulnerability: *"…I see them as more defenceless"* (D, 90). Participants A and H also admitted they found themselves more uncomfortable with animal suffering than human suffering; *"funnily enough, I don't like seeing animals being abused more than humans"* (A, 78) and *"…it is harder for me to watch animal cruelty than human suffering"* (H, 81-82) yet these participants, seek out morbid content of human suffering, which could be argued as more relatable to than animal suffering. Furthermore, some participants 'cannot explain why animal suffering is harder to watch' (Theme 3.1.4) than human suffering; *"can't explain it"* (C, 95) and *"I don't know, I just can't deal with animal suffering for some reason"* (F, 85). One participant almost jokingly explains *"I love kitties and dislike most humans, so I guess that could be a motive"* (F, 85-86) which could be interpreted as this individual having had a bad experience with many human beings and is aware of how damaging both psychologically and physiologically human behaviour can be. This is consistent with the findings by Unz *et al.* (2008) together with Wilson's (1984) 'biophilia hypothesis' where humans feel the need to protect other living systems, but further highlights the mystery to why some humans react with more negativity towards animal suffering than human suffering.

Another reoccurring opinion expressed by half of participants, three of whom were female, was the 'dislike of sexual assault' (Theme 3.1.2) and perhaps for the female participants in particular they could find it easier to imagine themselves in the victim's shoes; *"In terms of videos surrounding rape or sexual abuse, I can't stomach that sort of thing anymore and don't view them"* (G, 33-35) along with *"…it makes me (rather irrationally) uncomfortable"* (H, 67-68). This could be due to the fact sexual assault is more common in life and female participants may more feel vulnerable to the possibility of being a victim in this event, more so than other aspects of morbid content, such as beheading. Furthermore, if the victim is not guilty of wrongdoing; they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, unlike someone receiving a capital punishment; they may not be seen as totally innocent and participants may even think some people in the material deserve their punishment. This can also be seen within the superordinate theme, 'emotional numbness' (Theme 4);

"I feel little sympathy towards the dead/injured, in a "Darwin rewards nominee" kind of way" (H, 40-41)

This participant proposes that if the individual is foolish enough to be involved in whatever the material is depicting, then it is simply a case of natural selection; survival of the fittest. However, this cannot be applied to rape or sexual assault, which may be why participants are not happy to view this kind of material.

Table 5.
Theme 4 - Emotional Numbness.

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Themes	Sub-Subordinate Themes
Emotional Numbness (4)	▪ Desensitisation (4.1)	▪ Self-Reported Desensitisation (4.1.1) ▪ No Barriers (4.1.2)
	▪ Adaptation (4.2)	▪ Developing Desensitisation (4.2.1)

- Reduced Shock (4.2.2)

One of the more anticipated themes that occurred through the data was that of 'emotional numbness' (Table 5, Theme 4), seen in the form as lack of emotions, a disregard for others, and reduced negative emotions towards the morbid material itself. Although participants were directly asked if they had become desensitised, it was self-reported quite nonchalantly by more than half of participants (Theme 4.1.1); *"I know I have become desensitised to it..."* (B, 46) along with *"I would consider myself extremely desensitised…"* (C, 45). This suggests participants are only too aware repeated exposure has indeed resulted in desensitisation, and one participant casually mentions;

"I am desensitized greatly, to where I can see someone's head get chain-sawed off while they're still alive and not think anything of it" (F, 45-46)

This explains she is able to remain composed when seeing what would be perceived as extremely disturbing to someone who is not accustomed to such material, which can be interpreted as the participant F being 'comfortably numb' with the type of material they are watching. Similarly, two participants, A and E, professed they had 'no barriers' (Theme 4.1.2) to the morbid material they watch; *"there is nothing I'll not watch really…"* (A, 70), though this could be because he has not discovered the worst that the internet has to offer. Further to this, participant E recognises he is yet to discover what really repulses him/her to the point where he would not watch particular type of material age; *"technically I have no set limitations, I am still exploring them"* (E, 120), suggesting he is open to the possibility that something may truly shock him. This could also be interpreted as a lack of fear of what he might come across, with an element of pleasure in exploring the dark underbelly of the internet.

Not all participants considered themselves to be desensitised but some are finding a reduced reaction, captured as the subordinate theme 'adaptation' (Theme 4.2) to the morbid material as exposure increases; *"gore is slightly less shocking as I become more familiar with what it actually looks like"* (E, 84-85) suggesting he is getting used to the process of injury and death, particularly the graphic aspects. One participant admits *"I search for increasing drastic material as the older, lamer stuff fails to thrill me"* (H, 44-45), indicating this participant is needing more graphic content to satisfy his/her desire to be thrilled by the material.

Similarly, some participants seem aware they are 'developing desensitisation' (Theme 4.2.1) as exposure continues; *"I got more comfortable with what I was seeing"* (B, 17-18), suggesting the content did cause discomfort at first but as exposure continues the discomfort is diminishing for this participant. Participant G can also be shown to believe desensitisation will come for him/her eventually, stating *"I don't think I have become desensitised quite yet"* (G, 58). These comments all suggest participants are aware of desensitisation, yet no one seemed to be particularly concerned about becoming desensitised, and one participant even viewed it as a strength; *"I'm slowly growing stronger in my ability to view morbid material"* (D, 52-53). The aspects mentioned above of the superordinate theme of 'emotional numbness' (Theme 4) are consistent with part of Carnagey *et al.'s* (2007)

MEEMV, with participants showing a decrease in emotional response upon viewing graphic material which would usually provoke a reaction such as horror or disgust.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth insight into the attitudes of those who chose to view morbid material on a regular basis, using IPA to facilitate understanding the meaning behind the thoughts and feelings expressed by participants themselves through the researcher's own interpretation of data. In terms of the previous research mentioned, some themes identified were consistent with findings relating to both factual and fiction morbid material yet other themes identified were grossly different, highlighting the complexities surrounding the differences between viewing fictional and factual morbid material. One of the most striking outcomes of this study was participants passion and interest for the material they were watching, evident in two superordinate themes; 'clear motivation' (Theme 1), when discussing their reasons for viewing and the attraction of the material, and 'positive significances' (Theme 2), especially when expressing their outlook of life. Despite the horrors they might have seen, all participants seemed positive yet cautious about their lives, and their individual and homogenous experiences with viewing morbid behaviour will be discussed below.

Literature Evaluation

As this study took a unique qualitative approach, scales such as the CAME and SS utilised by Zuckerman and Litle (1986), Aluja-Fabregat (2000), and Schafer (1985) were not used, however, aspects of the studies were be looked at in a similar context. As the participants expressed high levels of interest in the material available, there is evidence of arousal in participants who viewed the material to gain intellectual and emotional stimulation (Themes 1.1 & 1.4). This can be compared to Schafer's (1985) study explaining boredom as a motivator, but could also reflect the stimulation of the production of catecholamine, provoking the fight-or-flight response outlined by Zuckerman and Litle (1986) and Aluja-Fabregat (2000), particularly when the participants mentioned themselves imagining what they might do if they were in a similar situation (e.g. Theme 1.4.3). Therefore, it would be interesting to apply the SS and CAME scales to these participants to confirm participants in this study had high levels of SS and CAME as they were actively seeking morbid material, along with an arousal measure to be able to draw a conclusion on this possible correlation.

Zillman (1998) outlined that individuals are drawn to the rollercoaster of emotions experienced through the process of viewing fictional morbid material, such as fear and stress which may be later followed by relief, which is also seen in the eight participants analysed in this study. Within the subordinate theme 'psychological consequences' (Theme 3.2), many participants expressed feelings of deep psychological discomfort (Theme 3.2.1) whilst viewing the material; such as feelings of helplessness and despair, (Theme 3.2.4) with some reporting sleepless and fear of the dark, also consistent with Sparks *et al.'s* (1993) study looking at the emotional effects of horror film viewing. However, this myriad of emotions seemed more drawn out than identified by Zillman (1998) and Sparks *et al.* (1993) as participants admit these effect last long after the viewing had taken place (e.g. Theme 3.2.5). In contrast, participants expressed positive feelings of gratitude and appreciation

(Theme 2.1.3), some described in an elated manner, professing how viewing such material has changed their lives for the better. Moreover, Zillman (1991, as cited in Goldstein, 1998) attributed negative emotions to feelings of empathy for a fictional victim, which can also be seen across participants of this study (Theme 2.2.1). However, not all participants expressed empathetic emotions (e.g. Theme 4.3), highlighting the complexity of an individual's own 'rollercoaster ride' of emotions before, during, and after viewing morbid material. Furthermore, a small proportion of participants gained pleasure in an almost comical form (Theme 1.2.2) even though they may feel guilty about doing so and know it might be frowned-upon by others. This could be hinting at *'schadenfreude'* and Festinger's (1954, as cited in Hogg & Vaughan, 2005) Social Comparison Theory, where viewing the morbid material makes participants feel good about themselves and their lives with some even experiencing enjoyment from the idea of harm and destruction (Themes 1.2.3, 1.2.4, & 1.2.5); feelings also identified by Johnston and Dumerauf (1995, as cited in Prince, 2004).

Although one question asked participants to reflect on their experiences with difficult material, especially animal suffering, all eight participants expressed a firm dislike of animal suffering (Theme 3.1.1), particularly focusing on the helplessness, vulnerability, and innocence of animals, with many participants unable to express why they felt this way (Theme 3.1.4) but were reasonably nonchalant about human suffering. This shows similarities with *Unz et al.,'s* (2008) study as participants expressed feelings such as sadness and disgust towards animal suffering, describing it as "heart-breaking" and "abhorrent". This is consistent with the 'biophilia hypothesis' recognised by Wilson (1984, as cited in *Unz et al.,* 2008), however the confusion over the differences between human and animal suffering and participants' reactions persists. Two participants offer explanations; a dislike of other human beings, or the feeling many humans deserve what they receive, though a larger analysis of all 317 participants may offer further explanations.

With the continual debate surrounding media violence and aggressive behaviour it was interesting to report only participant H exposed violent fantasies (Theme 1.2.3), and although there were no questions directly relating to criminal behaviour, none of the eight participants hinted any past, present, or future criminal activity. Furthermore, only one participant (see G, 22-23) mentioned anger as a big factor of her personality yet expressed no feelings of violence; suggesting viewing might act as catharsis (Theme 1.2.6), which contests the findings by Aluja-Fabregat (2000) suggesting high CAME scorers are likely to be perceived as more aggressive as this was not evident in the other seven participants. Bushman and Anderson (2009) also suggested viewing fictional violence could lead to a decreased likelihood in helping others in immediate need, however, many participants in this study explained how they wanted to be "more prepared" if they happened upon a situation where someone needed desperate help (Theme 2.2.2); indicating compassion. However, not all material on /r/morbidreality is violent; therefore this could be referring to accidental incidents rather than criminal acts, which people might feel wary about getting involved in.

Although the theme encompassing 'opinions of morbid material and society' (Theme 5) was not analysed fully, participants showed mixed attitudes on whether factual morbid material could either be beneficial (Theme 5.1) or detrimental (Theme 5.2) to

society. Interestingly, participants gave mixed and contradictory views on privacy, insisting the victims and their families deserved privacy and respect, expressing feelings of invasion (Theme 5.2.1), yet the same participants were more enthusiastic about a morbid piece if it included a detailed backstory (Theme 1.1.1), indicating possible cognitive dissonance. Similarly, some participants expressed censorship involving this type of material is needed to protect children (Theme 5.2.3), yet others argue that hiding morbid material from society is hiding the way the world really is (Theme 5.1.3). Many participants expressed exposure to graphic material may create necessary awareness within society, with one participant using safe driving as an example (Theme 5.1.1) Furthermore, another participant suggests showing society what results from criminal acts many people might see as victimless, such as the cartel warfare involved in drug trafficking, could be the only way to change or stop these things going on; by shocking people into responsibility (Theme 5.1.2). Seemingly, this was what photojournalists Jarecke, Carter, and Abbasi, were trying to achieve when photographing the incinerated soldier, the starving child, and the ill-fated train passenger, yet the deep criticism they all received, together with participants; experts in viewing morbid material, and their mixed messages towards morbid material in society suggests there will always be an on-going debate surrounding what should be censored. Despite laws across the UK and the USA, there are disputable grey areas, and until these are clarified, photojournalists like Jarecke, Carter, and Abbasi are likely to continue to photograph distressing events, but also respecting their moral obligations to help anyone in distress, both of which, contrary to popular belief, can be utilised at the same time. After all, the newspapers that print such material are in high demand, reinforcing Patterson's (1996) discovery that bad, often morbid news, makes an interesting and popular read.

Considering the level of genuine interest reported, it was without surprise the majority of participants either had become desensitised watching such graphic material, or hinted towards it (Theme 4). Those who did not admit they were fully desensitised were recognising signals that they were adapting, some slowly, to the material, such as reduced shock (Theme 4.2) (B, D, E, & G). Furthermore, these same participants reported physical symptoms such as increased heart rate or sweating upon viewing, together with psychological discomfort, such as repulsion and shock (Theme 3.2); indicating that this material was still stimulating the fight-or-flight response mentioned by Zuckerman and Litle (1986) and Aluja-Fabregat (2000). Interestingly, the participants (A, C, F, & H) who considered themselves becoming desensitised did not report any strong physiological effects when viewing the morbid material, which is consistent with the findings of Canagey *et al.* (2007) and further suggests this diminishment may be dis-inhibition of the fight-or-flight response due to participants' desensitisation to the morbid material, and no longer need to be psychologically prepared while viewing. Similarly, the participants considering themselves desensitised (Theme 4.1.1), also expressed unaffectedness and a lack of empathy for victims, particularly when in a preventable scenario (Theme 4.3.1); consistent with the work of Carnagey *et al.* (2007). However, most participants did express that the material they witness is real life and should not necessarily be kept hidden (Theme 5.1), which could be interpreted as belief that violence is normal, but not necessarily in their own lives, which is semi-consistent with elements of the MEEMV. As the MEEMV looked at desensitisation following the viewing of fictional violent material, it seems this model may be useful when studying desensitisation of

factual violent material, though further analysis of each participant individually would be required to fully compare the two.

Methodological Evaluation

Due to the high volume of data collected, a very small proportion was analysed, and although the eight participants represent the /r/morbidreality community, any conclusions drawn from this study should be treated with caution due to the infancy of the research area - there is a great deal of further exploring to be done. In terms of participants themselves, though recruited from a particular forum dedicated to the mature and intelligent discussion of morbid material, /r/morbidreality was a very small part of the large social news website, Reddit, and although entirely picked at random, the eight participants chosen did reflect the average users of the whole of Reddit in general. According to a study of nearly 3,000 Reddit users, as of December 2012, the average Reddit user, or 'Redditor' is aged between 16-20 years, white American, with over half of the users reported as male (67%) and atheist (48%) (Reddit user: inglorious_mustard, 2012). The results from this study recorded the average user of /r/morbidreality to be American (37.5%), aged 19.6 years, male (62.5%) and atheist (50%). Therefore, it would be interesting to see if the users of other websites entirely dedicated to graphic material, such as www.bestgore.com or www.ogrish.tv shared the same demographics. However, these sites are littered with extremely pornographic advertisements, suggesting there may be a link between graphic material and sexual gratification, identified in participant H, which, if analysing the entire data set may be more prevalent than it appears in this sample. Furthermore, it is possible that each of the demographics recorded in this study; age, gender, nationality, religion, and viewing frequency may have implications on aspects such as desensitisation levels or viewing preferences, though differences between each demographic could be an example of future studies in their own right, with a wider analysis potentially revealing new themes.

Like any opt-in study, it takes a particular sort of person to complete an online questionnaire for no reward, especially revealing opinions behind material of a sensitive nature, albeit anonymously. However, anonymity was a significant feature of this study, and had it been conducted using a social networking site where users had full profiles, or even just by using Reddit usernames, participants may have held back information, fearing the views of others, as expressed by many participants who chose to keep their viewing preferences to themselves (Theme 3.3.1). The self-devised questionnaire itself was somewhat rigid and inflexible, allowing participants to discuss whatever they wanted within the text box, with limited risk from 'going off track'. However, this also allowed participants to review what they had written, and some may have edited their answers, possibly multiple times, to give either the most accurate or most desirable response. An alternative method, such as an online interview over Skype, may have produced a different response; participants may not have been as descriptive or truthful than in this study, but the researcher would have been able to explore responses further than the online questionnaire allowed.

The use of IPA to analyse such personal opinions about such a sensitive matter was crucial to allow an in-depth exploration to participants' own experiences with morbid material, and the rigour in which the required steps were followed can be seen as a strength to this study. Each questionnaire was analysed in great detail and the small

sample size of eight participants, which might have been seen as a limitation, acted as a strength, thus ensuring each relevant opinion is taken into account; adhering to the ideographic nature of IPA. However, Smith and Osborn (2007) recommends a form of inter-rater reliability during analysis but considering time restraints and the special circumstances of the double hermeneutic in IPA, it would be unfair to expose another person, such as the researcher's supervisor, to the morbid material to be able to give a similar analysis of participants making sense of their own experiences, as the researcher already had some experience with morbid material herself.

It is recognised the questions themselves may have had a strong effect on the themes identified, and though the research did not intend to use leading questions, certainly some questions were directly requesting participants' opinions on certain matters they may not have discussed otherwise. Furthermore, the styling of the questions allowed the researcher to explore anticipated areas, based on past research and recreational browsing of the forum by the researcher, and any unanticipated themes (e.g. Theme 2.1.3) were regarded as a benefit to the results. In retrospect, some of the questions could have also been styled in a quantitative manner to allow for quicker analysis; such as participants' age at the start of exposure and sites visited to gain access to the morbid material. However, since such a large response was not foreseen and the questionnaire was styled to analyse around eight participants in mind; exactly what the researcher had to adhere to. However, such a positive response gives a good insight into further studies using the subscribers of /r/morbidreality and this is something the researcher hopes to pursue. It may also be beneficial to explore the participants' discussions with other viewers in /r/morbidreality, as for many viewers this is significant part of the whole process; and it would therefore be interesting to see how this interaction affects their experience with morbid material viewing.

Regarding the validity of the study, it was compulsory for any prospective participants to already be a viewer of morbid material, and the likelihood of all participants truthfully adhering to this criterion is high, as they would have needed to be browsing /r/morbidreality to have found the recruitment post. Furthermore, without browsing experience, it is unlikely participants would have been able to answer the questions with such detail and apparent accuracy as the data presented. Participants may have also been influenced in the way they answered the questionnaire by the researcher's personal details; they knew her full name, gender, study status, country of residence, place and area of study, and quick glance at the researcher's own Reddit username history, required to create the recruitment post, would reveal a love of nail polish and cats. Some may argue the latter could have been reduced by using a new account but previous comments on Reddit regarding new or 'rookie' accounts reflect strong feelings of distrust and suspected 'trolling' which may have resulted in a distinctly reduced interest or even negativity; which was fortunately not experienced by the researcher during this study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the primary aim of this study was to explore the experiences of individuals who watch morbid material on the internet, particularly blood, gore, injury, and death; using IPA to gain an in-depth understanding. The broadness of the research question; 'why *do* people view reality material involving injury and/or

death?' acted as an introduction to a unique yet current area of research. Superordinate themes found within the rich data included 'clear motivation', 'positive significances', 'negative experiences', 'emotional numbness', 'opinions on morbid material and society' and 'individual differences and similarities', all of which reflect why a person might view such material, any positive and negative emotions experienced, opinions on viewing preferences, and the effect viewing might have on other people; from the victims and their families to society as a whole. It is fair to describe this study as unique, especially taking a qualitative approach towards factual morbid material, and future research involving the entire data set, or perhaps incorporating scales such as the CAME or SS would be necessary to build on the results yielded from the smaller selection of participants, and to further develop the emerging themes. However, this study has highlighted both the positive and negative aspects surrounding factual morbid material, and the issues faced by those who record, view, or even avoid material containing blood, gore, injury, and death on the internet.

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