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Morbid Curiosity in Actuality
**Exploring the Relationship between Interest in Death-
Related Imagery and Age**

by

Matthew Tyler Byrne

An Honors Capstone
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors Diploma

to

The Honors College

of

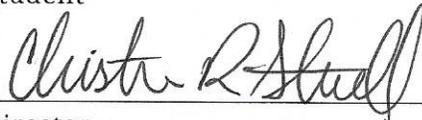
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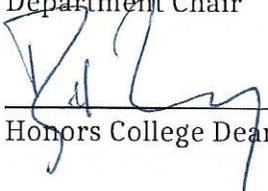
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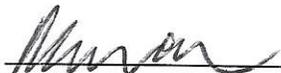
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Abstract

This study seeks to expand the existing research concerning morbid curiosity by examining demographic factors that may influence the degree to which an individual is interested in morbid content. The researcher specifically examined the effects that age and religiosity has on morbid curiosity as these factors align with Zillman's theory of morbid interest as death rehearsal. 133 respondents were recruited using snowball sampling. Initial respondents were invited through email invitations to an online survey and then asked to pass the survey on to more participants. Results indicate that age may be a significant indicator of morbid curiosity, while religiosity was found to not be a significant indicator of morbid curiosity in this study. Younger respondents were found to be more interested in morbid content on the Internet, as age was found to have a negative relationship with morbid curiosity in this sample. The relationship between age and morbid curiosity highlights the elevated risks faced by young individuals, as morbid curiosity may result in aggression; introversion; and psychosis. Future research should be conducted with a random sample to more accurately determine if religiosity is a significant indicator of morbid curiosity, as the subjects of this study were predominantly religious.

Introduction

For a phenomenon with a reputation of being taboo or non-normative, morbid curiosity influences our personal lives frequently and impacts the way we understand our social world. For instance, most individuals have likely experienced a traffic jam caused by “rubbernecking,” a phenomenon in which motorists slow their cars to observe a car accident or traffic stop. News providers, both online and on television, frequently feature videos or photographs of horrific events, including helicopter crashes or terrorist attacks. Reminders of death are all around us, and we find it hard enough to look away to necessitate the cliché about not being able to pry our eyes from train wrecks.

We can see that morbid curiosity exists based on our own experiences, but why would individuals seek out negative images purposefully? What factors in a person’s life makes them more interested in morbid content than others? This paper seeks to explore these questions by gauging interest in morbid content and then gathering demographic information in order to determine if age or religiosity has a statistically significant relationship with morbid curiosity. In doing so, I hope to determine which demographic factors influence who seeks out videos or images of actual death or mortal injury. This study focuses on images and videos of actual death or bodily harm in news articles and videos on the Internet as opposed to fictional depictions of death presented in films portraying war or murder to answer the following questions: Are older individuals more or less interested on average in morbid content than younger individuals? Are irreligious individuals more interested in morbid content than those who define themselves as religious?

The Phenomenon of Morbid Curiosity

Sociologists emphasize that individuals control what they choose to consume, meaning that the content that an individual views is chosen by the consumer intentionally (Oosterwijk 2017). Therefore, individuals are not forced to view certain content in their private lives, but are willful participants in their selection of sensory material. Oosterwijk, moving beyond studies that *required* participants to view morbid content, allowed participants to select what kind of content they wished to view. Each participant was given content choices in the following categories: positive, neutral, and negative. While participants unsurprisingly preferred positive options over the latter two, the researchers found that participants were more likely to choose a negative image over a neutral one, showing that individuals select morbid content willingly even with the agency of selection.

Knowing that individuals choose to view morbid content, studying the motivations behind that selection becomes necessary for understanding morbid curiosity. Hoffner et al. (2009) found that individuals were highly likely to view morbid content for personal reasons, including a fear of their own mortality. Respondents that reported high levels of personal distress were also highly curious about morbid content, showing that a fear of mortality or personal harm is a potential motivator for morbid curiosity. Individuals frightened by frequent news articles related to mass murder and massacres are interested in watching morbid content so that they may prepare themselves for such occurrences.

Zillman (1998) theorized that morbid curiosity is primarily a manner in which individuals rehearse death. Following this theory, consumers are able to accustom themselves to the reality of their own mortality by viewing either dramatized or real deaths. In viewing death and imagining that experience, individuals can prepare themselves for their own end. Both Hoffner et al. (2009) and Zillman have found that morbid curiosity is part of the process of preparing for death, as individuals who are morbidly curious seek out death-related content in order to acquaint themselves with the possibility of a violent death.

In contrast, Fox (2013) theorizes that individuals view morbid content as a type of adrenaline-seeking, equating the activity to skydiving and mountain climbing. She argues that, as life becomes easier, individuals have grown to need danger, and those who do not engage in physical adrenaline-seeking sometimes turn to morbid content in order to inject danger into their lives. Similarly, research conducted regarding morbid curiosity has found that high sensation-seeking individuals are highly likely to seek out morbid content (Zuckerman and Litle 1986). Sensation seekers likely desire the rush caused by the release of the chemical catecholamine, and the morbidly curious may be viewing morbid content in an effort to release higher levels of catecholamine (Zuckerman 1984).

Would an older person or a younger person be more interested in morbid content? Research shows that older individuals are less concerned about death than younger adults (Cicirelli 2001). Young adults reported higher degrees of fear regarding the process of dying and the potential death of loved ones than older individuals. He reasons that this difference arises because younger individuals have had less time to familiarize themselves with the reality of their

own mortality, while older individuals have frequently experienced familial deaths and perhaps even close calls themselves.

When considering age in conjunction with Zillman's (1998) theory of morbid curiosity as death rehearsal, two conflicting possibilities become apparent. First, it stands to reason that older individuals would be less interested in morbid content than younger individuals due to their experiences with death and their having more time to consider their own mortality. If older adults have seen loved ones die and had more time to come to terms with their own mortality, they should have less of a need to rehearse their own death. However, it also seems reasonable that older individuals would be more interested in morbid content due to their being closer to a natural death than younger individuals. As health conditions worsen, individuals may have a greater need for death rehearsal as death seems more imminent. Although it also seems sensible that older individuals would instead have an escalated fear of death due to their decreasing health and their being nearer to a natural death, Cicirelli's (2001) results show that older individuals are less afraid of death than younger adults, with younger respondents reporting a higher degree of fear of their own deaths and the death of their loved ones. This shows that, following Zillman's theory, older adults would have less of a need for death rehearsal as they will likely have already had to cope with the death of a primary loved one and have come to terms with their own mortality.

Zillman's (1998) theory also implies that younger individuals would be more interested in morbid content due to their fear of death and subsequent need for death rehearsal.

Aluja-Fabregat (2000) found that a sample of eighth-grade boys in Spain had seen, on average, over six of twelve "Rambo-type" films from a list provided by the researcher. They also found

that eighty-four percent of boys placed on the medium or high end of the Curiosity About Morbid Events (CAME) scale. This familiarity with violence may also be indicative of a cultural process of desensitization, as young boys are exposed to violent material at an early age.

A similar study conducted by Zhou (2008) found that, no matter their CAME score, respondents were frequently more interested in negative stories that related to death than positive stories. Zhou's oldest respondent was 40 years old and his respondents were selected from The University of Alabama's body of student. This indicates that Zhou's sample was likely predominantly young, supporting Cicirelli's (2001) findings. Cicirelli found that young individuals are more afraid of death than older individuals, and Zhou's results show that this greater fear may be associated with greater morbid curiosity, following Zillman's (1998) theory of morbid curiosity as death rehearsal.

Based on Zillman's theory of morbid curiosity as death rehearsal and the results of these studies, I hypothesize that:

H1: Older Americans will report less interest in and prior engagement with morbid material than younger Americans.

Another potential personal issue that may influence morbid curiosity is religion. Krause (2015) explains that older individuals report deeper engagement with religious beliefs and practices than young people. He also found that, in a sample of adults over the age of fifty, religiosity has a negative relationship with death anxiety, with data showing that religious individuals report lower death anxiety than irreligious individuals. Similarly, Cicirelli (2001) found that viewing death as passage to the afterlife was related to a lower degree of fear regarding death. Cicirelli employed the Death Scale, which Cicirelli had designed for a previous

study, which asks respondents to indicate their degree of agreement with the following death meanings: Death as Legacy, Death as Afterlife, Death as Extinction, and Death as Motivator. No matter the respondent's age, those who indicated a death meaning of Death as Afterlife reported lower degrees of fear of death than those who did not. So, based on Krause's and Cicirelli's results, it becomes apparent that religiosity may have an effect on morbid curiosity independent of age. I hypothesize:

H2: Individuals who identify as being religious will report less interest in morbid content than those who identify otherwise.

Morbid Curiosity and the Internet

Morbid images of death or dying are not visible on television or newspapers due to content regulations passed by the federal government, but morbid content is widely available on the Internet for those who desire to view it. While the FCC will not allow morbid content on television, websites like LiveLeak and 4chan cater to the morbidly curious.

If we expect that the audience for morbid material is largely young, it would seem obvious that young people would be capable of accessing such content on the Internet. As Martins et al. (2013) explains, a recent Kaiser Family Foundation (2010) study found that most adolescents and preadolescents have no restrictions on what types of content they can engage with across all mediums. This freedom to seek out content without restraint coupled with the convenience of the Internet makes it easier for young people to find and engage with morbid material than it has ever been previously.

The presence of images of actual death or bodily harm on the Internet makes online material especially attractive to the morbidly curious. A qualitative study conducted by Bartsch et al. (2016) found that respondents preferred realistic depictions of fictional violence over exaggerated depictions, stating that unrealistic violence was simply for entertainment and therefore a waste of time. With the Internet providing a unique opportunity to view that content, morbidly curious individuals would likely choose to seek out morbid content online.

While morbid content has always been available in some form (i.e. magazines or films like *Saw*), the Internet provides this content for free and allows the viewer to consume morbid content without guilt due to the anonymity of website profiles. Researchers have discovered that individuals who have taboo interests feel more comfortable pursuing and discussing those interests online. This is due to the greater likelihood of negative social interaction in person than online, as online interactions are largely anonymous. In their study on reactions to reports on mental illness following mass shootings, Hoffner et al. (2017) found that individuals with a history of mental illness were more likely to seek support online than offline. Similarly, Bridges et al. (2010) conducted a content analysis of pornographic films and discovered that 88.2 percent of popular pornographic scenes included some form of physical aggression (Bridges et al. 2010). Violent sex is a social taboo, and the anonymity of the Internet gives those interested in such content the confidence to seek it out. If individuals are more likely to indulge taboo interests online due to the anonymity of the Internet, the morbidly curious can similarly seek out morbid content without the fear of social repercussions.

Scholars have yielded contradictory results regarding the relationship between age and the Internet. Taylor et al. (2003) found that younger individuals were more likely to have access

to the Internet in Queensland, Australia, and that homes with children were much more likely to have Internet access than childless homes. However, Akman and Mishra (2010) found that younger individuals in Turkey were less likely to have Internet access, perhaps due to lower socioeconomic status and less academic advancement. 98 percent of adults aged 18-29 and 97 percent of adults aged 30-49 in the United States use the Internet in 2018; However, only 66 percent of individuals over the age of 65 in the United States use the Internet in 2018 (Pew Research Center 2018). This disparity may indicate a difference in the accessibility of morbid content between younger and older adults.

Data and Methods

1. Research Participants

Data was collected for this study using an online survey. The selection method for this study was snowball sampling. The researcher sought out respondents among peers and acquaintances from the campus of The University of Alabama in Huntsville, the congregants of a local church, and their familial connections, asking those who participate to then pass on the survey to other individuals. In doing so, the researcher was not able to control the sample for representativeness, a potential weakness of the study. 133 individuals responded to the study, but only 85 respondents answered each question. Thus, for many of the statistical models utilized, only 85 respondents could be considered.

2. Variables

My dependent variable is morbid curiosity, defined for the purposes of this study as an interest in images or videos pertaining to actual death or bodily harm. In order to measure this variable accurately, I have created two categories of survey questions. The first category consists of two questions asking the respondent to rank three video titles from least to most interesting. The titles included are negative, neutral, and positive, allowing the respondent to relate which type of content they are most interested in. For example, the following titles were among the choices available: Top 10 Documented Roller Coaster Disasters; Will an iPhone Break in the Microwave?; and People are Amazing: Feeding the Homeless. These questions were recoded into a binary variable in which respondents who selected a negative title as their most interesting choice for at least one of the questions were 1 and those who never selected a negative title as most interesting were 0. This allows me to predict whether or not an individual is morbidly curious by emphasizing those respondents who were highly interested in morbid content options.

The second category of questions that examine an individual's history with morbid content. One such question asks the respondent if they would self-identify as being interested in morbid content. The responses to this question were transformed into a binary variable where 1 indicates a self-identified interest in morbid content. Another question asked the respondents to indicate how often they click on morbid content based on the following options: very often; somewhat often; infrequently; almost never; and never. Responses of somewhat often or very often were recoded as 1 in a binary variable to measure how often an individual *chooses* to view morbid content. A fourth morbid curiosity variable was created based on the following question: How often, on average, do you view videos or images containing actual death or bodily injury on

the Internet? Responses of twice per week or more were recoded as 1, which separates frequent viewers of morbid content from infrequent viewers. Finally, another question asked how recently the respondent had viewed morbid content. The results from this question were recoded into a binary variable in which responses that indicated the respondent had viewed morbid content within the last month were coded as 1, allowing the researcher to focus on frequent viewers of morbid content. See Table 1 for an overview of variables:

Table 1. Descriptives

Variables	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation
Religiosity	0-1	.82	.39
Age	19-76	39.14	14.73
Good Health	1-6	4.65	.98
Familial Death	0-1	.63	.49
Internet Usage	0-1	.94	.23
Male	0-1	.39	.49
College	0-1	.52	.50
Morbid Title Interest	0-1	.44	.50
Self-reported Curiosity	0-1	.26	.44
Morbid Clicks	0-1	.15	.36
Views (How Often)	0-1	.04	.20
Views (Last Time)	0-1	.16	.37

The key independent variables in this study are age and religiosity. Age is measured continuously, as reported by respondents. The mean age of respondents included in this study was 39.14. There is a significant amount of deviation for the age variable in this sample, with the standard deviation falling at 14.73 years. This is beneficial for this study as this indicates that there is a large amount of deviation in ages among respondents.

Religiosity is measured using a multiple-choice survey question in which respondents select one of the following options: irreligious, spiritual but not religious, not very religious, somewhat religious, religious, or very religious. Those answers were included in a binary variable in which somewhat religious, religious or very religious were recoded as 1. Of the 85-plus respondents who responded to each question used in the models for statistical analysis, 82 percent of respondents indicated that they were at least somewhat religious, while only 18 percent of respondents were irreligious or spiritual.

A number of control variables are also included in my models, including: gender, Internet access, familial deaths, education, and health condition. Gender is important to examine as prior research (Aluja-Fabregat 2000) has shown that females are, on average, less interested in violent content than males. Gender is measured in the survey based on the respondents' self-identification as either male, female, or other. As males have been found to be more interested in morbid content, these results became the maleness variable, which consisted of a binary in which male is 1 and female or other is 0. The mean of the binary variable for male was .39, indicating that more females responded to the survey than males.

The most vital control variable in this study is Internet access, as respondents with slower Internet access or who lack Internet access at home would be incapable of viewing videos of

actual death online. Internet usage was operationalized in this study as how much time an individual uses the Internet for activities unrelated to work. Respondents who indicated that they used the Internet for non-occupational activities for more than one hour were coded as 1 in an Internet usage binary variable. Controlling for this variable allows the researcher to test the independent variables for spuriousness.

Familial deaths may influence morbid curiosity in that individuals who have experienced a death in the family may be more comfortable or familiar with death, causing them to be less interested in morbid material. Conversely, individuals who have had a loved one die may be more interested in morbid content in an effort to better understand mortality and what their relative went through. Familial death was measured in this study through the following question: Have you experienced a death in your immediate family? Those who indicated yes were coded as 1 in the binary variable for familial deaths, allowing the researcher to determine if experiencing a familial death is an indicator of morbid curiosity.

Education level could influence morbid curiosity due to the fact that highly educated individuals may have more access to the Internet (Akman and Mishra 2010). Individuals who have completed higher education are likely on a higher income bracket, allowing them to pay for Internet access, and higher education also encourages curiosity and a desire to know despite discomfort, which may also influence morbid curiosity. Respondents were asked to indicate their highest form of education completed, ranging from less than high school to doctoral degrees. The results from this question were formed into a binary variable for college education in which a completed four-year degree, graduate degree, or doctoral program is coded as 1 and less than college is coded as 0. Over half of respondents had a college degree or graduate degree, as the

mean for the binary variable for college attendance fell at .52, meaning that slightly more respondents had graduated from college.

Individuals with poor health conditions may be more interested in morbid content due to their growing fear of dying. With health worsening, death may seem like a real possibility and thus inspire an individual to seek out death-rehearsal material. On the other hand, individuals with poor health may be too afraid of dying to view images or videos containing actual death. Controlling for this variable allows the researcher to determine if either possibility is true and separate poor health conditions from age, as older adults are more likely to have worsening health. Respondents were asked to rank their personal health from extremely good to extremely poor. Responses of somewhat good to extremely good were recoded as 1, while responses indicating poor health were recoded as 0. This allows the researcher to determine if a higher quality of health results in less interest in morbid content.

3. Research Limitations

This study's sample was only 85 respondents, relatively small for significance testing and generalizability. Therefore, further research should be employed to better prove the relationships described in order to solidify sociological understanding of this phenomenon. Including violent films or television news broadcasts about morbid events in this scenario may strengthen the connection between age and morbid curiosity.

Results

Table 2 presents the binary logistic regression results for five models related to morbid curiosity. The five models presented each represent a variable designed to gauge an individual's interest in morbid content, experience with morbid content, or general morbid curiosity. See Table 2 below:

Table 2. Regression

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Religiosity	.022	.008	.651	-.384	.571
Age	-.072***	-.052**	-.074**	.004	-.044
Male	.827	.807	2.965***	1.034	2.799***
College	1.150*	-.542	.397	1.554	.120
Intercept	1.368	.772	-1.514	-4.527	-2.177
N	86	88	88	85	88
R ²	.151	.151	.207	.027	.184

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Model 1: Selection of at least one morbid title as most interesting

Model 2: Self-reported morbid curiosity

Model 3: How often the respondent clicks on morbid content

Model 4: How often the respondent views morbid content on the Internet

Model 5: The last time the respondent viewed morbid content

In my first hypothesis I predicted that older individuals would be less interested in morbid content than younger individuals. The results in three of five models support the first hypothesis. For the first model, age was found to be a statistically significant indicator of morbid curiosity, with age having a negative relationship with curiosity. Each additional year of age resulted in a change of $-.072$ to an individual's likelihood of selecting a morbid title as that which they would be most interested in viewing. In the second model, age was again found to be significant indicator of an individual's curiosity regarding morbid material, as older individuals were found less likely to self-identify as being morbidly curious. Finally, age was also a significant indicator of how often an individual reported that they clicked on morbid content, with older adults indicating that they clicked on morbid content less frequently than younger individuals. Age did not significantly predict *how* often an individual views morbid content online or *how* recently the individual had viewed morbid content. These findings provide partial support for the first hypothesis.

My second hypothesis proposed that individuals who identified as being religious would be less interested in morbid content. Religiosity consistently had a positive relationship with morbid curiosity, indicating that respondents who identified as religious might be slightly more interested in morbid content. These results indicate a trend opposite to the prediction made in the second hypothesis. However, in all five models used in regression analyses, religiosity was not a statistically significant indicator of morbid curiosity. The second hypothesis is thus rejected, as the results indicate that religiosity is not an indicator of morbid curiosity. Future research should be conducted utilizing a larger, more diverse sample to more accurately determine if religiosity is a predictor for morbid curiosity.

Beyond the key independent variables, maleness was shown to be a significant indicator of morbid curiosity in models 3 and 5. In both models, being male was positively associated with morbid curiosity, indicating that males are more interested in morbid content than females. This supports previous research that found that female individuals were less likely than males to be interested in violent media (Aluja-Fabregat 2000).

Discussion

This study sought to determine if there was a connection between age and morbid curiosity. Results seem to affirm Zillman's (1998) theory of morbid curiosity as death rehearsal, in that I find that older individuals are less morbidly curious than younger adults. Older individuals have had to come to terms with their own mortality, causing older individuals to have a lower degree of fear of death than their younger peers. The fact that interest in morbid content in this study is so greatly reduced for each subsequent year of age again shows that as an individual becomes less afraid of death, their interest in morbid content lowers. This also follows the research of Hoffner et al. (2009) who determined that interest in news reports about morbid events was dependent on an individual's fear of death or personal bodily harm. These previous studies have not considered the importance of age on morbid curiosity, however, which is a gap in the literature on morbid curiosity that this project seeks to fill.

This study also sought to determine what effect religiosity has on morbid curiosity, with the researcher hypothesizing that respondents who identified as religious would report less interest in morbid content. Both the lack of statistical significance and the frequent positive

relationship between religiosity and morbid curiosity are unexpected results. The implication of religiosity not being an indicator of morbid curiosity is that religious individuals are just as likely to seek out morbid content as irreligious individuals. Despite the taboo nature of morbid curiosity, religious respondents frequently indicated that they would prefer to view videos titled “Top 10 Documented Roller Coaster Disasters” or “Graphic Video from Las Vegas Mass Shooting Released” over more neutral or positive content. This contradicts the results of the study conducted by Krause (2015), who found that individuals who viewed death as a passage to the afterlife had less death anxiety. If morbid curiosity is an effect of being afraid of death, then contrary to Krause’s results it appears that religious individuals are as afraid of death as irreligious individuals.

The results that indicate that gender is a statistically significant indicator of morbid curiosity is a wholly unsurprising outcome, as numerous previous studies have found that females are less interested in morbid or violent content than males. Aluja-Fabregat (2000) found that young boys consumed far more violent films than females, and also scored higher on CAME tests, indicating a higher degree of morbid curiosity. Zuckerman and Litle (1986) similarly found that males scored higher on the CAME test, specifically regarding morbid, sexual, or violent content. The results of this study thus confirm previous research by showing that males are more likely to be interested in morbid content than females.

Conclusion

This study finds that older individuals are less likely than younger individuals to be interested in morbid content, with each year of age reflecting a lessening interest in documentation of death or bodily harm. These results support Zillman's understanding of morbid curiosity as death rehearsal, although age has not previously been considered in connection to this theory. Results show that religiosity is not a significant indicator of morbid curiosity, leading the researcher to conclude that religious individuals are just as likely to be interested in morbid content as irreligious.

The results of this paper broaden our understanding of the phenomenon of morbid curiosity by showing that younger people are far more curious than older and are thus more at risk for exposure or desensitization to graphic content. The potential risks of viewing morbid content at a young age include: increased aggression, introversion, and psychosis (Aluja-Fabregat 2000). While these personality differences are not established as definite outcomes for individuals with morbid curiosity, the risks remain. An elevated curiosity may drive children to graphic websites like LiveLeak or subreddits like /r morbidreality at higher rates than older individuals, and as such the risks posed by morbid curiosity are elevated for younger individuals. Considering the prevalence of morbid content on the Internet and the increasing rate of Internet access and usage by children, this paper shows that it may be necessary for parents and/or legal guardians to be more aware of what content their children are exposing themselves to.

There are significant limitations to this study arising from a low respondent count. One of these limitations is a relatively low number of irreligious respondents, which may have impacted the ability of the researcher to accurately determine the effect of religiosity on morbid curiosity. Future research conducted on a larger sample may find that religiosity has an effect on morbid curiosity. The low number of respondents also impacts the generalizability of this study, and research conducted on larger samples may be better able to draw conclusions regarding the general population of the United States about morbid curiosity.

Further research should be conducted to collect more evidence regarding a potential connection between age and morbid curiosity. To ensure the validity of Zillman's (1998) theory and its connection to age, future studies may conduct survey research that determines an individual's fear of death, which could then be used to statistically determine if older individuals are less afraid of death than their younger counterparts. Similarly, a study conducted on a larger sample could also more accurately discover if religiosity is a significant indicator of morbid curiosity. No matter the research question, morbid curiosity remains a social phenomenon in need of explanation, and future research should be conducted so that sociologists can better understand the factors causing interest in morbid content.

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