



RESEARCH PAPER

Digital Gothic: Examining the Impact of Creepypasta on Adolescent Digital Reading Trends in Contemporary Society

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Amara Faheem¹
Misbah Iqbal²
Saleha Bilal³

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary digital landscape, children's literature has undergone substantial transformation, facilitated by online platforms that grant access to a diverse range of narratives. Creepypasta, a distinct subgenre of internet-based horror fiction, has gained traction among children and adolescents. Its popularity among young readers stems from its online accessibility, interactive forums, and relatable subject matter. Creepypasta narratives enthrall children through suspense, dark themes, urban legends, personal resonance, virtual communities, and succinct, varied plots. These stories adeptly engage readers' cognitive and emotional dimensions, eliciting suspense and fear through techniques such as gradual revelation, foreshadowing, and vivid imagery. Nevertheless, Creepypasta's impact is not devoid of potential consequences. This study delves into the influence of Creepypasta, a distinctive subgenre of internet-based horror fiction, on young readers. This research employs the lens of Cognitive Dissonance Theory, proposed by Leon Festinger, to explore the potential impacts of Creepypasta on children's cognitive and emotional dimensions. This theory suggests that psychological tension arises from inconsistencies in beliefs or behaviors, leading individuals to alter or add elements to reduce or restore dissonance. The qualitative research, conducted on the said horror contents, examines the experiences of young readers through the framework of this theory. The findings underscore the importance for parents, educators, and guardians to guide, communicate openly, and foster responsible online behavior, placing emphasis on the education and well-being of young readers in the digital age.

Keywords: Creepypasta, Digital reading trends, Cognitive dissonance theory, online adolescent behavior

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1. Department of English, Lahore Leads University. ammara.eng@leads.edu.pk
 2. Department of English, Lahore Leads University. Misbah.eng@leads.edu.pk
 3. BS English, Lahore Leads University. Salehabilal25@yahoo.com
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Introduction

In the digital era, the way people consume literature has undergone a significant transformation, especially among adolescents. This shift is facilitated by the widespread availability of digital platforms, leading to unprecedented ways of engaging with narratives (Biswell, 2020). Within this evolving milieu, a distinctive genre has emerged, blurring the lines between traditional storytelling and digital culture. Creepypasta, a unique online storytelling genre, combines "creepy" and "copypasta" to create short, easily shareable stories that evoke fear and unease. It relies on accessibility and communal storytelling, creating a unique digital space (Ondrak, 2022).

Creepypasta, an online storytelling platform, has gained popularity due to its rapid dissemination and active participation. However, its blurred fact-fiction lines have raised concerns about its potential influence on vulnerable audiences (Biswell, 2020). Understanding its evolution and impact on adolescent reading habits is crucial.

This research embarks on a rigorous exploration into this digital frontier, under the theoretical lens of Cognitive Dissonance Theory. The essence of this theory lies in the assertion that when individuals encounter information, that contradicts their existing beliefs or values, they experience a psychological discomfort, known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). In their effort to alleviate this discomfort, individuals are propelled towards a process of cognitive reevaluation and adaptation: "As a behavioral biologist, I feel it is appropriate to examine the theory of cognitive dissonance in terms of its scientific merit and social relevance." (Festinger, 1962).

Within the context of Creepypasta, where narratives often challenge conventional norms and expectations, understanding the interplay between cognitive dissonance and narrative reception becomes pivotal. The amalgamation of Gothic elements within the digital realm presents a unique juncture for investigation. The Gothic, known for its predilection for the macabre, the mysterious, and the unsettling, finds an intriguing extension in the domain of Creepypasta. Digital platforms become the canvas for narratives that elicit fear, uncertainty, and a sense of unease.

The research aims to explore the relationship between digital Gothic, cognitive dissonance, and adolescent reading habits. It focuses on dark and eerie themes in digital storytelling and how conflicting beliefs may arise in digital narratives, particularly within the Creepypasta genre. The research aims to enrich discourse on digital literacy, illuminate the influence of digital narratives on young readers, and contribute to understanding the relationship between technology, literature, and adolescent identity in the 21st century. The ultimate goal is to contribute

valuable insights to the broader digital literacy discussion.

Research Question

What are the potential cognitive and emotional impacts of Creepypasta, an internet-based horror fiction subgenre, on young readers, and how does this relate to Cognitive Dissonance Theory?

The digital age in the late 20th century revolutionized information access, sharing, and consumption, leading to the rise of digital subcultures like Creepypasta. Creepypasta is a genre of internet-based horror fiction, originating in the early 2000s. Its short, engaging narratives evoke fear, unease, or suspense, often based on common fears, urban legends, or supernatural themes. The genre's accessibility, brevity, and shared experience within online communities distinguish it from traditional horror fiction. Creepypasta's unique and contemporary form of storytelling has flourished in the digital age.

Creepypasta is a genre of horror and suspense stories, often shared online through forums, social media, and websites. Its popularity is attributed to its diverse themes, online dissemination, appeal to adolescents, interactive nature, ability to elicit fear, and participatory culture. Creepypasta stories are crafted with the intention of evoking fear and suspense, making them suitable for online consumption. The genre's interactive nature fosters a sense of community and shared experience among Creepypasta enthusiasts. The genre's success can be attributed to its ability to tap into universal themes, its online dissemination, appeal to adolescents, and the interactive and contributory nature of the community.

Creepypasta, a genre of horror and interactive storytelling, has significantly influenced adolescent digital reading trends. Its unique blend of horror and interactive elements, coupled with its easy accessibility on online platforms, has made it a favorite among young readers seeking an unconventional and thrilling reading experience. Adolescents, often digital natives, are at the forefront of navigating the digital landscape, making Creepypasta a perfect fit for their digital fluency. The genre's immersive, suspenseful, and engaging narratives cater to the shorter attention spans of digital readers, making it a popular choice for young readers seeking a unique and thrilling reading experience.

Creepypasta, a popular digital narrative, engages young readers' cognitive and emotional dimensions through intricate plots and suspenseful narratives. These narratives encourage critical thinking and imaginative interpretation, contributing to the cognitive development of young readers (Balanzategui, 2019). However, exposure to intense content may lead to negative emotional responses, anxiety, or fear, and blurred lines between fiction and reality, raising concerns about mental well-being. Creepypasta's popularity reflects the evolving landscape of digital literature and the cultural significance of unconventional storytelling methods. Understanding the potential outcomes of engagement with this genre is crucial for understanding the dynamic relationship between digital literature, contemporary society, and younger audiences'

preferences in the digital age.

Research Objective

To investigate the influence of Creepypasta, a digital Gothic subgenre, on adolescent digital reading trends in contemporary society using the Cognitive Dissonance Theory proposed by Leon Festinger as a theoretical framework. The study aims to understand how exposure to Creepypasta narratives affects adolescents' cognitive and emotional dimensions, thereby providing insights for educators, parents, and stakeholders in the digital age.

The digital landscape has dramatically reshaped how literature is consumed, especially among younger audiences. Within this evolving realm, Creepypasta emerges as a unique and compelling subgenre, capturing the attention and imagination of adolescents. To comprehend its influence fully, it's crucial to delve into existing literature that discusses both Creepypasta and the underlying psychological frameworks, notably the Cognitive Dissonance Theory proposed by Leon Festinger.

Fedina and Olga (2021) argued in a research article titled “CreepyPasta: Images of Waiting for Death and Danger in the Online Space” that Creepypasta is a genre using graphic materials and digital text to create mythical images. It differs from oral folklore narration and encourages reader participation on social networks.

In one of the articles, titled “Creepypasta, ‘Candle Cove’, and the Digital Gothic”. Balanzategui (2019) mentioned that Creepypasta, a digital storytelling style, has evolved into 'the digital gothic', focusing on dead and residual media, navigating tensions between analogue and digital cultures, and highlighting vernacular online genres.

In another article Andrew and Caleb (2018), “Haunted Objects, Networked Subjects: The Nightmarish Nostalgia of Creepypasta” they discuss the Creepypasta genre, which blurs the line between subjects and objects in digital horror. It argues that creepypasta legends like 'Candle Cove' and 'BEN Drowned' disrupt the subject/object relationships of technological nostalgia, revealing that these narratives are not just about strange properties, but also about the perversion of nostalgic texts.

Atalie Gerhard (2018) in her article, “Creepypastas: How Counterterrorist Fantasies (Re-)Create Horror Traditions for Today’s Digital Communities” (P-223), discusses that The article explores creepypastas' origins and their connection to U.S.-American Wars on Terror culture, where counterterrorist state institutions and the rise of the internet exacerbate national values. Creepypastas dramatize ordinary people seeking knowledge about an enemy, influencing Gothic mystery fiction and sublimating cultural fears around abstract evil and mystical otherness.

Mirvoda and Tatyana (2018) conducted research on the topic “Creepypasta Parodies as a Component of Scary Internet Folklore” and remarked that Creepypasta is an internet culture trend where web creativity and folklore are combined to create parodies, recasts, or parodic works. These works alter the original text's structure, transforming it from

scary to funny and incorporating fanfics, rejected stories, and new texts. Stwora (2018), in her research article on “Internet Discourses Revisited: the Language of Creepypastas”, examines the linguistic analysis of Creepypastas, horror-like stories on the internet, focusing on English Creepypastas and its features, as well as the influence of Netspeak on these works of fiction.

There is some research done on the horror-based fiction of Creepypasta; however, it is mostly related to the presentation style of the stories, while this paper explores the influence of Creepypasta, a digital Gothic genre, on adolescent digital reading trends using Cognitive Dissonance Theory. It aims to advance digital literacy studies by revealing the psychological reactions involved when adolescents encounter worrying narratives.

The research also bridges digital culture and literary analysis, demonstrating how digital platforms have become fertile ground for Gothic storytelling. Understanding how adolescents engage with Creepypasta narratives can inform educational practices, particularly in digital literacy education. The study also has implications for media literacy education, encouraging critical examination of online content and responsible digital consumption. The 'Cognitive Dissonance Theory' is being applied to Creepypasta narratives, thereby broadening its application beyond traditional settings and promoting ethical digital engagement.

Methodology

This research explores the impact of Creepypasta on adolescent digital reading trends using Cognitive Dissonance Theory. The methodology involves a systematic selection process to curate a collection of Creepypasta narratives, focusing on factors like popularity, thematic diversity, and reader engagement. A qualitative component involves gathering accounts from adolescents about their experiences with Creepypasta, using methods like interviews, surveys, or open-ended questionnaires. The research also explores the experiences of adolescent readers and their adaptive strategies to reconcile conflicting beliefs or emotions. This comprehensive approach provides a deeper understanding of how Creepypasta influences cognitive and emotional dimensions of adolescent readers.

The study uses a comprehensive methodology to explore the complex relationship between Creepypasta narratives, cognitive dissonance, and adolescent reading trends. It uses a holistic approach, incorporating multiple data sources to gain a comprehensive perspective. The research employs Cognitive Dissonance Theory to provide a robust and nuanced analysis, focusing on the complexities of how Creepypasta narratives intersect with adolescent readers' cognitive processes and emotional experiences. The ultimate goal is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving relationship between digital literature and young readers' cognitive and emotional landscapes. The study's emphasis on robust and nuanced analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving

digital literature landscape.

4. Creepypasta Content Analysis

The study conducted a targeted analysis of nine meticulously chosen adolescent-oriented stories, each distinguished by their high ratings and accompanied by commendatory feedback.

Here are some of the selected and well-known Creepypasta stories:

Powers/Skills: Mind Control; Teleportation; Ability to cause "Slender Sickness"; Immortality; Omniscience

(Vast) Supernatural powers and Kinetic abilities

Status: Alive

Species: Unknown Humanoid Entity

Hobby: Kidnapping and murdering children and adults

Brainwashing people into becoming his servants; Possibly devouring humans

Goals: Unknown (Slender Man's goals are left to depiction, but it's possibly to kill all those who oppose him, feed on humans, or an even greater goal which is possibly in mind)

Type Of Pasta: Mind-Breaking Stalker

Occupation: Serial Killer

Powers/Skills: Combat Prowess; Enhanced Senses

Athleticism; Inhuman Durability; Inhuman Stamina; Great Stealth

Status; Alive

Species; Human

Hobby: Murdering people to satisfy his bloodlust; Stalking his next victim

Goals: End as many lives as possible (On-going)

Kill his parents and brother (Succeeded)

Kill Randy, Troy, and Keith (Succeeded)

Type Of Pasta: Psychopathic Serial Killer

Full Name: Benjamin Lawman

Occupation: Hostile Spirit; Leader of the Moon Children

Powers/Skills: Madness induction; Manifestation in the physical world; Electronic distortion and bugging;

Status: Undead

Species: Human (Possibly); Supernatural Being (Possibly)

Hobby: Torturing and haunting players; Taunting Jadasable with his dreams; Chatting with people on Cleverbot

Goals: Escape from the Majora's Mask cartridge (Succeeded); Gain access to the internet (Succeeded)

Type Of Pasta: Urban Legend

Thematic Analysis

The juxtaposition of reality and the supernatural blurs the boundaries, adding complexity and intrigue. The induction of a sense of impending doom and fear within these narratives is achieved by bestowing familiar characters with perilous knowledge. In the realm of the Internet, it is often a challenge to definitively trace the origins of a specific Creepypasta, as crucial details such as its inception, authorship, or originating platform are

seldom reliably documented. This enigmatic quality is inherent to the digital landscape, characterized by what Vermeulen and Akker (2010) aptly term "conscious naivety" (p. 5) towards the perceived reality it presents.

Creepypasta is a digital gothic genre that explores moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas. These elements create the distortion between good and evil, forcing readers to confront complexities and question their moral frameworks. The narratives also humanize characters, revealing their vulnerabilities and flaws. The synergy between moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas in Creepypasta narratives adds depth and resonance to the genre, engendering emotional investment and character growth.

Moral ambiguity presents ethical dilemmas, prompting readers to contemplate the ethical implications of the characters' choices. Individuals whose anticipation of danger is shaped by encounters with Creepypasta' operate under the assumption that the cultural text they encounter reflects the thoughts and actions of an actual person residing behind the screen. In alignment with Deleuze and Guattari's (2010) concept that "panic is making" (p. 122), Creepypasta serves as an inconspicuous mechanism for birthing new expectations. These anticipations not only find their footing in social networks but, more significantly, proliferate through oral recounting and written reproduction, perpetuating their influence far beyond the confines of the digital realm.

The genre features characters grappling with existential crises and ontological uncertainties, blurring the lines between reality and illusion. The exploration of identity prompts readers to question their own sense of self, while agency is the locus of power and autonomy. The interplay between these elements allows for character development, illuminating human resilience and adaptability. Creepypasta's synergy of identity and agency in narratives deepens the genre, provoking introspection and emotional engagement: the story "The Russian Sleep Experiment" demonstrates that:

"Russian researchers in the late 1940s kept five people awake for fifteen days using an experimental gas based stimulant. They were kept in a sealed environment to carefully monitor their oxygen intake so the gas didn't kill them, since it was toxic in high concentrations. This was before closed circuit cameras so they had only microphones and five-inch-thick glass porthole sized windows in the chamber to monitor them..... The subject smiled. "Have you forgotten so easily?" the subject asked. "We are you. We are the madness that lurks within you all, begging to be free at every moment in your deepest animal mind. We are what you hide from in your beds every night. We are what you sedate into silence and paralysis when you go to the nocturnal haven where we cannot tread." (2020).

Fear is a driving force that influences characters' decisions and actions, creating a psychological depth. The influence of Creepypasta on an

individual's perception of danger, death, or horror is a dynamic interplay between narration and reception. Stuart (2014) suggests that individuals can both act as narrators, forming images from Creepypasta, and as listeners, having their expectations influenced by these narratives. This dual role highlights the reciprocal relationship between creators and consumers of Creepypasta content. This illustrates how Creepypasta has the potential to introduce entirely novel expectations of danger, introducing new figures like "Slender Man" into the collective consciousness. This underscores the transformative power of Creepypasta in shaping contemporary folklore (Trevor & Blank, 2018).

Creepypasta narratives are characterized by themes of isolation and alienation, which are integral to their narrative dynamics. Isolation is a crucible for character development, as it allows readers to explore the depths of human resilience when confronted with the challenges of being alone. Alienation, on the other hand, explores the sense of otherness and estrangement experienced by characters, often heightened by encounters with unknown or malevolent entities. This interplay amplifies the psychological tension, contributing to the genre's distinctive digital gothic ambiance. Creepypasta stories provoke visceral responses in readers, leaving a lasting impact. Additionally, temporal and spatial dislocation are integral elements, as they manipulate time and create environments that defy conventional notions of space, adding an additional layer of disorientation and psychological tension.

Creepypasta narratives have a powerful emotional impact, surpassing established cultural tropes due to their deliberate tone of sincerity and authenticity. These narratives present eerie and macabre events as genuine experiences shared by real individuals, enhancing the emotional resonance. The consumption of Creepypasta narratives within the online network reinforces the notion that these stories are rooted in the genuine thoughts and experiences of "real" individuals.

The blurring of lines between fiction and reality in Creepypastas intensifies the emotional resonance, as readers are drawn into a narrative space where the distinction between the fictional and real becomes ambiguous. The interconnected nature of online communities further solidifies the emotional resonance of Creepypastas. The heightened emotional impact of Creepypastas is a potent force in shaping contemporary cultural perceptions of the eerie and macabre, contributing to the evolving landscape of horror and the uncanny in the digital age.

Creepypasta narratives use uncertainty as a key theme to create an atmosphere of unpredictability, often involving unclear situations. This uncertainty heightens the sense of unpredictability and contributes to the overall eerie atmosphere of the stories. Creepypasta stories generate novel expectations of danger by subverting or recontextualizing familiar cultural codes and imagery. For example, "Squidward's Suicide" uses uncertainty to generate a sense of danger by involving an alleged unreleased episode of the beloved animated series "SpongeBob

SquarePants." The narrative structure involves a participant's firsthand account, adding authenticity to the uncertainty. The blurred lines between fact and fiction intensify the emotional impact, evoking fear and anticipation in the audience. In summary, uncertainty in Creepypasta narratives is a powerful storytelling technique that evokes fear and unease in its audience.

"Squidward's Suicide" is a Creepypasta narrative that subverts well-known cultural references, such as an animated series, to create new and unsettling expectations of danger. The narrative follows trainee animators who review and edit an episode of "SpongeBob SquarePants," encountering an alternative narrative with eerie visual sequences, auditory cues, unconventional character dialogues, and off-screen sounds. The subversion of cultural references is a key characteristic of Creepypasta storytelling, using the known to create the unknown. Adolescent protagonists serve as relatable lenses, making the narrative more accessible and engaging for readers. The themes of uncertainty, isolation, and alienation contribute to the depth and complexity of the narrative, making it impactful on both emotional and intellectual levels. This showcases Creepypasta's unique storytelling approach within the digital landscape.

□ Narrative Techniques

It examines the author's use of descriptive language, which establishes a sensory-rich environment and engages readers. The analysis also examines the narrative's suspense and pacing, which sustains anticipation and intrigue. A well-calibrated pacing balances tension and respite, ensuring a continuous thread of reader engagement from the narrative's inception to its denouement: "Finally, after a long day you get a moment to yourself. You take a deep breath, sigh out the weight of the day's pressures and collapse onto a bean bag, lifting the controller, to load up a game and enjoy some much needed escapism. This time, however, escape might not be so easy..." (BEN Drown, 2017).

. In the realm of the Internet, it is often a challenge to definitively trace the origins of a specific Creepypasta, as crucial details such as its inception, authorship, or originating platform are seldom reliably documented. This enigmatic quality is inherent to the digital landscape, characterized by what Vermeulen and Akker (2010) aptly term "conscious naivety" (p. 5) towards the perceived reality it presents. Individuals whose anticipation of danger is shaped by encounters with Creepypasta operate under the assumption that the cultural text they encounter reflects the thoughts and actions of an actual person residing behind the screen.

Character development, the next parameter, encapsulates the depth and intricacy of character portrayal. This encompasses their underlying motivations, their evolution or metamorphosis, and the reader's capacity to form a genuine connection with these fictional personas. A deft handling of character development fosters reader empathy, allowing them to resonate with the characters' triumphs and tribulations. It is through the

characters' relatability and emotional resonance that the narrative acquires a profound authenticity, rendering it a compelling literary work: “The challenge is laid out. The offer is huge. Five hundred dollars just to stroll through some old house? How hard could it be? Obviously, you could really use the money. So you agree to take the challenge....” (NoEnd House, 2011).

At the heart of Creepypasta lies a primal fear—the fear of the unknown. In this respect, Creepypasta draws inspiration from the literary legacy of H. P. Lovecraft. Unlike conventional tales that often feature vampires, demons, or witches as malevolent forces, Creepypastas introduce a different kind of monster—an enigmatic entity referred to simply as “it”. This entity embodies a force beyond human comprehension, shrouded in mystery and defying conventional understanding. Among the most renowned and distinctly named examples of this phenomenon is none other than “The Slender Man”.

The final dimension, narrative voice, pertains to the chosen perspective from which the story is relayed. Whether adopting a first-person or third-person perspective, or even a more unconventional approach, this facet substantially shapes the reader's immersion and engagement with the narrative. For instance, a first-person perspective invites an intimate and subjective connection with the protagonist, while a third-person viewpoint offers a broader vista of events and characters. “A nameless woman arrived at the Cedar Senai hospital in June 1972, wearing a bloodied white gown..... A surviving nurse of the attack named the unknown woman as “the Expressionless”. There had never been another sighting of the woman since that incident. (“The Expressionless” 2013). The narrative voice contributes significantly to the narrative's tonal quality, stylistic nuances, and accessibility, profoundly influencing the reader's interpretation and experience of the text.

□ Emotional Triggers

The narrative effectively engages its audience by eliciting fear through suspense and unease, introducing uncertainty and ambiguity to challenge cognitive engagement. The narrative's comprehensive methodology, involving various storytelling techniques, creates a multifaceted experience that captures the reader's attention and leaves a lasting impression. The shared emotional experiences of the characters, such as vulnerability, loss, or triumph, enhance the overall impact and make the narrative memorable. Introducing moral dilemmas for critical evaluation further deepens intellectual engagement and encourages reflective thinking. Overall, the narrative's comprehensive methodology enhances its effectiveness, creating a nuanced and impactful reading experience.

The content analysis examines the narrative elements and techniques in Creepypasta that may induce cognitive dissonance in adolescent readers. The central theme is vulnerability and empathy, which enrich the genre's digital gothic tapestry. The stories feature characters grappling with fears, insecurities, and inner conflicts, evoking a sense of vulnerability and

empathy. This humanizing approach humanizes characters, making them relatable to readers. The emotional complexity introduced by vulnerability and empathy can lead to cognitive dissonance, as readers may experience conflicting emotions as they navigate unsettling situations. The analysis highlights the potential for cognitive dissonance in Creepypasta by introducing emotional complexity and fostering a connection with readers.

The passage discusses how Creepypasta elicits empathy in readers through strategic use of emotional elements. It highlights the powerful emotional response readers experience when they identify with the characters' experiences. Creepypasta creators weave moments of vulnerability, loss, and triumph into the narrative to evoke specific responses. This vicariously experiences the emotional journeys of the characters, allowing readers to feel a range of emotions. This empathetic connection turns readers into active participants, enhancing their engagement with the story. The emotional investment created through empathy heightens the narrative's impact, leaving a lasting impression on the reader. "In 1983, a team of deeply pious scientists conducted a radical experiment in an undisclosed facility. The scientists had theorized that a human without access to any senses or ways to perceive stimuli would be able to perceive the presence of God..." (Gateway of the Mind, 2009).

Creepypasta's digital gothic narratives are infused with a human element, highlighting the importance of vulnerability and empathy. The characters' grapple with their frailties, inviting readers to confront their own vulnerabilities. This empathetic connection transcends the digital realm, fostering profound emotional connections with readers. Creators manipulate reality and perception, creating situations where characters find themselves in surreal circumstances. This blurs the lines between known and supernatural, leaving readers questioning the narrative's reality. Ambiguity is used to leave certain elements unresolved, challenging readers to confront cognitive dissonance and engage with the text, fostering intellectual curiosity and exploration:" I had a Menom for a roommate and I ended up asking him about it. And to sum it up, it's basically a fucking man with the head of a goat and he can shape shift and he gets among groups of people to terrorize them. It's also supposed to be kind of like the Wendigo, and it's bad mojo to even talk about it and even worse if you see it." (Anasi's Goatman Story, 2005)

Creepypasta's digital gothic aesthetic is characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity, inviting readers to participate in the narrative's construction. These elements create a liminal literary space, where the known and unknown converge, and cognitive dissonance thrives. Creepypasta's influence extends beyond the digital realm, influencing adolescent readers' cognitive and emotional responses. Understanding these themes is crucial for comprehending Creepypasta's enduring appeal and significance in contemporary digital storytelling.

□ Psychological Effect by Dissonance Theory

As society hurtles towards an era of unprecedented technological advancement, a peculiar singularity emerges: crimes that draw inspiration from the realm of Creepypastas increasingly find their way into the headlines. For the uninitiated, Creepypasta represents a form of online storytelling, birthing urban legends like ‘Slender Man’ (2010) and ‘Jeff the Killer’ (2012). These spectral figures are contemporized versions of the age-old bogeymen that once haunted childhood nights, adorned with a distinctive modern flair.

Cognitive dissonance, as described by Frymier and Nadler (2007), is an uncomfortable psychological state that arises when an individual holds conflicting attitudes, values, beliefs, or behaviors simultaneously. To trigger cognitive dissonance effectively, three conditions must be met: the presence of aversive consequences, the freedom to make a choice, and a lack of external justification (Frymier & Nadler, 2007). This theory underscores the discomfort individuals experience when they find themselves torn between contradictory cognitive elements.

In the wake of ‘Slender Man’s subterranean rise to prominence, propelled by the YouTube series ‘Marble Hornets’ and a wave of video games featuring the character, instances of Creepypasta-inspired crimes began cropping up in the quiet corners of American towns. Yet, discerning whether these acts were genuinely conceived in the wake of a chilling online tale or if these stories were merely interwoven into the fabric of real-life events to rationalize the inexplicable remains a challenge. Ultimately, it is imperative to acknowledge that Creepypastas fundamentally exist as narratives—engrossing tales that, at their zenith, leverage their medium to offer a fresh rendition of age-old legends. They were never engineered with the intent to incite violence, yet, for some, this distinction may forever elude comprehension.

Findings

The study "Digital Gothic: Examining the Impact of Creepypasta on Adolescent Digital Reading Trends in Contemporary Society" explores the relationship between Creepypasta narratives and adolescent readers' cognitive and emotional engagement. The research uses Cognitive Dissonance Theory, which suggests that individuals experience discomfort or psychological tension when they hold conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or values. The study reveals that Creepypasta narratives engage adolescent readers' cognitive faculties, creating scenarios where they grapple with conflicting beliefs or ideas, triggering cognitive dissonance. Emotional engagement is also explored, with the study revealing the emotional responses elicited by these stories. The research contributes to understanding the contemporary relevance of Creepypasta in the digital age, offering insights into the dynamic landscape of adolescent reading in contemporary society.

Creepypasta narratives effectively evoke fear, uncertainty, and unease in adolescent readers through the use of descriptive language, suspenseful pacing, ambiguity, atmospheric details, and well-timed plot

developments. These techniques create an immersive and emotionally charged experience that resonates with the audience, aligning with the genre's aim to evoke a strong emotional response. Descriptive language and vivid imagery create a clear and unsettling picture, while the pacing strategically unfolds the plot, introducing elements of mystery and gradually escalating tension. Ambiguity and uncertainty intensify the psychological impact, while atmospheric details enhance the eerie atmosphere. Well-timed developments and climactic peaks ensure consistent engagement and sustained emotional impact. Creepypasta narratives aim to create a strong connection between the audience and the content, enhancing the impact of fear and unease.

Creepypasta narratives intentionally introduce uncertainty and ambiguity, prompting readers to question the outcomes and motivations of characters. This creates cognitive dissonance, particularly when characters face moral dilemmas or ethical quandaries. The ambiguity creates a mental conflict, causing readers to grapple with the unknown. This psychological tension, as outlined in Leon Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory, is heightened when individuals hold conflicting beliefs or experience discomfort due to uncertainty. In Creepypasta, readers actively engage with the narrative to resolve this dissonance, seeking additional information, reinterpret events, or form their own conclusions. This heightened involvement contributes to the overall impact of the reading experience, as it adds complexity to the genre and elicits a strong and thought-provoking response from its audience.

Creepypasta narratives are characterized by a blend of reality and the supernatural, creating an immersive and emotionally engaging reading experience for adolescent readers. The narratives challenge conventional understandings of reality by blurring the lines between known and supernatural, enhancing the sense of uncertainty and unpredictability. This blend of reality and the supernatural also prompts active thought processes, enriching the reading experience. Character development is crucial in Creepypasta narratives, with complex, relatable characters grappling with fears, vulnerabilities, and inner conflicts. These characters evoke empathy and emotional investment, making readers emotionally connected to the unfolding events. The shared experiences of the characters amplify the emotional intensity of the storytelling. Overall, Creepypasta narratives effectively engage adolescent readers' cognitive and emotional dimensions.

The study reveals that Creepypasta, a form of digital Gothic literature, significantly influences adolescent readers in modern society. Through the lens of Cognitive Dissonance Theory, the study illuminates how the narratives' elements of fear, uncertainty, moral ambiguity, and the blurring of reality and the supernatural contribute to the cultivation of cognitive dissonance and emotional engagement in young readers. These findings not only enhance our understanding of the dynamics of digital storytelling but also have broader implications for the study of literature

in the digital age.

Conclusion

The study explores the impact of Creepypasta on adolescent digital reading habits using Cognitive Dissonance Theory. Creepypasta narratives are described as intricately designed experiences, challenging readers' preconceived notions and beliefs to create an immersive reading experience. The study reveals that Creepypasta narratives use fear, uncertainty, and the uncanny to disrupt readers' sense of security and familiarity, intensifying the overall impact. Characterization techniques in Creepypasta, such as complexity, vulnerability, and moral ambiguity, enhance reader empathy.

The study offered theoretical contributions to cognitive psychology, digital literacy, and literature education, providing insights for educators and parents. However, it acknowledged the limitations, such as the focus on English-language; Creepypasta, and called for further exploration in diverse contexts. Characterisation techniques, emphasising complexity, vulnerability, and moral ambiguity, have been revealed as tools to foster reader empathy, deepening their cognitive receptivity to the narrative's unsettling events. The strategic choice of point of view, whether first-person, third-person limited, or epistolary, exerted a profound influence on the reader's perspective, drawing them into the characters' subjective experiences.

Creepypasta is a crucible where cognitive dissonance thrives, challenging readers to confront reality and fiction, grapple with deep fears, and navigate complex emotions. The narratives blur the lines between reality and fiction, enhancing the sense of unease and psychological tension. Readers are prompted to question their understanding of what is real and imaginary, resulting in heightened emotional engagement. The unsettling content in Creepypasta induces a range of emotional responses, from suspense to terror, making it an integral part of the reader's experience. The discomfort and tension created by conflicting beliefs push readers to reevaluate their perspectives and emotions, leading to personal growth, reflection, and transformation.

The research highlights the importance of understanding the psychological foundations of digital literacy and adolescent reading trends. It highlights the evolving landscape of digital literacy, which includes shifts in reading habits, information access, and technology integration. Understanding the psychological underpinnings of digital content, particularly Creepypasta, is crucial for comprehending individuals' responses and behaviors. Creepypasta is not just a form of digital engagement but also reflects contemporary storytelling trends. Studying Creepypasta offers insights into broader patterns and trends in digital engagement, particularly among adolescents.

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