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Beyond Haunted Screens:
Techno Horror and Cyberspace in Kairo and Unfriended

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Beyond Haunted Screens: Techno Horror and Cyberspace in Kairo and Unfriended
Hayaletli Ekranların Ötesinde: Kairo ve Unfriended Filmlerinde Tekno korku ve Siberalan

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ABSTRACT

Techno horror is perceived as a genre reflecting society's inner fears and anxieties towards technological advancements. With the rapid development of communication technologies and the interconnected digital world, these fears are integrated into the narratives of the movie industry. This thesis explores the cinematic depictions of the digital environment as a portal for supernatural entities in the evolving domain of techno (digital) horror genre.

The movies of *Kairo* (2001) and *Unfriended* (2014) are analyzed through content and genre analysis, drawing on theoretical frameworks from media studies, technoculture, and the horror genre. The analysis reveals how supernatural forces symbolize societal anxieties towards the Internet through historically changing dynamics of online platforms and youth engagement in the digital realm. The ghosts in *Kairo* represent isolation and the risks of excessive online reliance, while *Unfriended* displays the permanent effect of our activities online. The thesis opens a discussion on the evolving landscape of online horror, the representation of cyberspace, and the effects on youth culture by underscoring the societal anxieties towards the Internet and the need for responsible digital engagement.

Keywords: Post-millennial Horror, Techno Horror, Social–Moral Panics, Cyberspace, Social Media

ÖZET

Tekno korku genellikle toplumun teknolojik ilerlemelere karşı içsel korku ve kaygılarını yansıtan bir tür olarak değerlendirilir. Hızla gelişen iletişim teknolojileri ve dijital ortamın getirdiği korku ve endişeler film endüstrisinin hikayelerine entegre edilmektedir. Bu tez, dijital ortamın doğaüstü varlıklar için bir portal olarak sinematik tasvirlerini ve evrilen teknokorku türünün alanını keşfetmeyi amaçlamaktadır. *Kairo* (2001) ve *Unfriended* (2014) filmleri, içerik ve tür analizi yoluyla incelenmiş, medya çalışmaları, teknokültür ve korku türünden teorik çerçevelerden yararlanılmıştır. Analiz, doğaüstü güçlerin internete yönelik toplumsal kaygıları sembolize ettiğini ortaya koymaktadır. *Kairo*'daki hayaletler izolasyonu ve aşırı çevrimiçi bağımlılığın risklerini temsil ederken, *Unfriended* çevrimiçi etkinliklerimizin kalıcı etkisini sergiler. Çalışma ayrıca çevrimiçi platformların ve gençlerin dijital dünyadaki katılımının, İnternet'in ilk günlerinden bugüne kadar değişen dinamiklerini ortaya çıkarır. Çevrimiçi korkunun evrilen manzarasını, sanal mekanın tasvirini ve genç kültürü üzerindeki etkilerini tartışmaya açan çalışma aynı zamanda internete yönelik toplumsal kaygıları görünür kılarak sorumlu dijital katılımın gerekliliğine vurgu yapar.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Post-Milenyal korku, Tekno korku, Sosyo-Moral Panik, Siber Alan, Sosyal Medya

INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of the Internet, communication and interpersonal connections have experienced tremendous changes. The rise of social media has brought individuals closer together than ever before. However, in addition to these developments, the digital age has given rise to new worries and anxieties in modern horror films. These worries have been imaginatively incorporated into cinema by filmmakers who have explored the possible dark side of the digital environment. This study investigates the relationship between film depictions of the Internet as a new realm for supernatural, technological breakthroughs in digital space, and cultural worries about supernatural components. It examines the representation of haunting screens and their consequences in two horror films, *Unfriended* (2014) and *Kairo* (2001).

This study examines how cyberspace has been used in the horror genre as a portal to supernatural entities from the early days of the Internet to the rise of the social media era. Social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram and communication apps like WhatsApp and Snapchat have grown in importance over time in various horror subgenres, inviting and transforming the supernatural entities from hunted mansions and cabins into our digital devices. Several horror movies have also frequently used the Internet, with protagonists using email, search engines, and other online resources to face off against supernatural forces within the digital realm. This study offers insight into how modern fears and anxieties about digital technologies are reflected and commented upon in these cinematic depictions and how young people navigate and deal with cyberspace.

The research can be placed within the broad field of media studies, namely digital media studies. As digital technologies became more prevalent, they altered how we communicate, interact, and

consume media. This field's researchers have investigated the transforming influence of digital media on our social, cultural, and political environments. While much has been written about the impact of social media on numerous aspects of our lives, this study takes a different approach by examining how horror films depict haunted screens. Understanding these cinematic depictions can help us understand the cultural shifts, worries, and concerns arising from increased internet usage. Furthermore, this study adds to the discipline of horror studies, which examines horror films as reflections of cultural concerns and fears. Scholars have been particularly curious on how horror films interact with technological improvements. This research attempts to shed light on how horror films have become fascinated over digital space and how they cooperate this “space” into horror narratives. Finally, this study looks into the depiction of haunted screens in horror films to analyze societal worries and the consequences of technology in our life. This research provides valuable insights into the increasing interaction between technology and supernatural components in contemporary society by examining the junction of cinematic portrayals, digital media studies, and horror studies.

The following chapters lay the groundwork for the subsequent sections of the thesis, which include the literature review chapter, which delves into the methodologies and approaches employed in analyzing horror films and their representation of social media and the Internet. It explores genre theory, defining horror as a genre and examining its evolution in response to technological advancements. The review also investigates contemporary horror, focusing on techno-horror and its incorporation of digital technology, including social media and the Internet. The theoretical frameworks chapter introduces the theoretical underpinnings used to analyze the selected horror movies. It examines horror film theory, horror movie aesthetics, and techno-horror, to provide a foundation for analyzing the representation of social media and the Internet in the selected films.

Additionally, media and cultural theory are explored to understand how horror cinema reflects and comments on the cultural effects of technology on social interactions. This chapter also provides a better framing for understanding the realm of the Internet, better known as cyberspace, by bringing many new-age researchers' and scholars' definitions of the modern phenomena.

In the methodology chapter, not only the approaches and methodologies used for this study are highlighted, but the results of the analysis of *Kairo* and *Unfriended* using genre analysis and cultural studies are included within the discussion chapter themes such as digital space as a liminal realm, youth and the digital frontier, navigating identity in the tech savvy era will be discussed in depth using the results. The thesis culminates with a thoughtful contemplation on the research inquiry, the significance of the study in relation to contemporary cultural trends and technological advancements, and potential avenues for further investigation.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The exploration of the horror genre in film has yielded a wealth of insights into its cultural significance and artistic elements through a diverse range of methodologies and approaches. Scholars have engaged in content analysis to dissect recurring themes, motifs, and narrative structures within horror films. Genre analysis, on the other hand, has facilitated the identification and comprehension of conventions and distinct characteristics inherent to the horror genre. Sociocultural investigations have delved into the broader societal influences and anxieties that find expression within horror narratives. Meanwhile, psychoanalytic and gender studies have meticulously examined horror's psychological and gendered dimensions, deconstructing the portrayal of fears, desires, and power dynamics. Historical surveys have charted the evolutionary trajectory of horror cinema, spotlighting pivotal trends and transformative shifts. Additionally, cognitive-emotional approaches have probed the psychological impact of horror films on audiences, casting a spotlight on emotions, cognitive processes, and the visceral experience of fear. Through this convergence of multidisciplinary methodologies and approaches, a comprehensive comprehension of the horror genre and its significance in film has been achieved.

Of particular note is Noel Carroll's influential contribution to the cognitive-emotional understanding of genres, including horror, which has significantly shaped the viewpoints of critics and scholars in their classification of contemporary horror films. Carroll's proposition stipulates that a horror film must feature an antagonist that transcends the boundaries of current scientific understanding. While the subject of both deliberation and critique for being simultaneously too restrictive and all-encompassing, this definition has played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse surrounding cinematic horror. Researchers have embraced many perspectives in examining horror, employing methodologies ranging from historical surveys and sociocultural analyses to

philosophical inquiries, psychoanalytic and gender studies, and comprehensive anthologies. Recent scholarship has witnessed a shift toward cognitive-emotional approaches, emphasizing the psychological dimensions of horror, moving beyond rigid patterns that once predominated the field.

1.1. Genre Theory

Within the realm of cinematic exploration, the intricacies of film genres have long captivated theorists, igniting inquiries into differentiation, delineation, and the dynamic interplay between industry dynamics and audience perceptions. As I delve into the profound questions surrounding the scope and classification of genres, I aim to uncover their multifaceted significance across both the creative and critical dimensions of filmmaking.

What is the scope of film genres? How do we differentiate and delineate various genres? These questions have long fascinated film theorists throughout the history of cinema. The notion of genre and its definition hold substantial significance in two critical aspects of the film industry: production, marketing, and distribution, as well as the perception of audiences, critics, and scholars. Establishing a genre can provide filmmakers with a clear blueprint during the creative process while also shaping viewers' expectations.

It is essential to acknowledge that genre classification and hierarchical taxonomy are subjective endeavors, lacking definitive and universally agreed-upon guidelines. No fixed rules or regulations exist for categorizing a genre, as personal perspectives and individual interpretations inherently influence the process (Feuer, 1992.p. 144). Furthermore, David Buckingham contends that genres are constantly negotiated and evolving rather than being dictated by culture (Buckingham, 1993,

p. 137). These constant changes can be linked to factors such as rapid cultural transitions, globalization, continuous technology improvements, and socioeconomic differences, which may give rise to new subgenres. Genre theory is a branch of film theory that focuses on categorizing and classifying films based on common themes, motifs, and conventions. It aims to comprehend how genres operate in the film industry and how audiences view and interpret them. According to the theory, movies are not just standalone art pieces but a part of broader categories with their standards and norms. According to Bazin (1955,p.18), genres do not result from arbitrary conventions imposed by filmmakers but rather from audiences' collective desires and tastes, which express their unconscious aspirations.

Another influential figure in genre theory is American film critic Robin Wood, who argues that the horror genre is characterized by its exploration of "our deepest, most unconscious fears and anxieties" (2003). More recent genre theorists have focused on how genres are constructed and maintained by the film industry. According to film scholar Steve Neale, genres are not just a collection of films with similar themes but rather a set of expectations that guide the production, marketing, and consumption of those films. Neale (2000) argues that genres are created and maintained through repetition and variation, in which filmmakers draw on established conventions while introducing new elements.

The idea of intertextuality, which describes how movies reference and borrows ideas from other movies of the same genre, is another significant aspect of genre theory. Filmmakers can reinterpret well-known themes and motifs by referencing and defying established genre standards. For instance, *Kairo* and *Unfriended* adapt well-known horror clichés like haunted houses and spectral appearances to depict the worries and fears of technology and the Internet.

The study of genres in film or any other medium should be approached as a historical phenomenon. Scholars typically focus on the evolution of conventions within a genre over time. However, idealistic approaches that seek to categorize genres based on essential textual characteristics are only helpful if genres are dynamic processes that change over time (Neale, [1990]1995, p. 464). Neale argues that genre definitions are always historically specific and historically relative. Similarly, Tomashevsky contends that no fixed logical classification of genres is possible and is only valid for a specific historical moment (as cited in Bordwell, 1989, p. 147).

When examining movies, we can observe how they encapsulate a particular time and era. Genres are shaped by the social, cultural, and historical context in which they are produced. Consequently, studying genres in film can provide insights into the cultural and historical significance of movies as both art and entertainment. This factor of genre theory is specifically essential for this study since one of the goals of this study is to display the advancement of communicational technologies. The horror genre, for example, has undergone significant reinvention throughout its history, evolving from monster and creature features in the 1940s and 1950s to slasher films aimed at young victims in the 1970s and 1980s and eventually incorporating contemporary themes like haunted technologies in the early 2000s.

1.2.1. Defining Horror as a Genre

The horror genre is a unique literary and cinematic genre that effectively captures humanity's deep-seated anxieties about the external world. It taps into our fears of the unknown, the supernatural, and mortality, amplifying the emotion of "fear" as a means of evasion and survival.

Thomas M. Sipos emphasizes distinguishing between genre and style, as film genres are typically defined by story conventions such as plot, characters, and settings. In contrast, kind pertains to the

techniques and methods of storytelling. According to Sipos (2014), not all movies that evoke a sense of fear can be classified within the horror genre, as this would overly broaden its scope and complicate its definition.

According to Bodo Winter, the horror genre can be understood as an ancient cultural practice with the primary purpose of instilling fear. This practice spans cultures worldwide and has been present for millennia (Bosco, 2003; Felton, 1999). As stated by Kawin (2012), horror has held significant importance as a genre throughout history, and contemporary horror movies, with their diverse subgenres, serve as a manifestation of this enduring practice in popular culture. Similar to ancient cautionary tales, effective horror narratives function as a reflection of societal anxieties and symbolic shifts within a given culture (Powell, 2017). Dominic Strinati provides a definition that characterizes horror as a genre that explores the need for suppressing uncomfortable and disturbing desires that require containment (Cherry, 2009). It is worth noting that the horror genre is not a singular entity but encompasses various subgenres (Cherry, 2009).

However, the horror genre encompasses several subgenres that vary based on the behavior and types of characters involved, such as monsters, creatures, or people, as well as the structured storyline, including elements like slashers, gore, thriller, sadomasochism, cannibalism, and torture-porn, to name a few (Cherry, 2009). Horror films delve into the fears of society and individuals by openly addressing and amplifying them through violent imagery, which inspires horror filmmakers (Cherry, 2009). Horror films have the power to reflect and comment on the fears and concerns of society by exaggerating and confronting them through vivid and often disturbing imagery. By pushing boundaries and exploring taboo subjects, horror filmmakers aim to elicit intense emotional responses and provoke introspection among viewers (Cherry, 2009, pp. 201). This genre serves as

a mirror, enabling audiences to confront their deepest fears and examine the darker aspects of the human psyche.

Furthermore, Kinal (2000) emphasizes the interactive nature of horror films, highlighting how audiences can establish a connection with the characters and situations portrayed on screen. Through this connection, viewers can experience the fear and threat depicted in the story and relate it to their lives. The social relevance of horror films lies in their ability to tap into collective worries, providing a cathartic and shared experience that resonates with audiences on a deeper level (Kinal, 2000).

Overall, the horror genre is a dynamic and multi-faceted realm of storytelling that explores the depths of human fears and reflects the societal context in which it is created. By encompassing various subgenres and engaging with audiences on both emotional and intellectual levels, horror films continue to captivate and challenge viewers while shedding light on the fears and anxieties that shape our collective consciousness.

1.3. Contemporary Horror

Classical horror films of the early 1930s, such as iconic titles like *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, drew inspiration from the horror fiction of the time. These films featured structured and linear narratives, showcasing monstrous characters that embodied societal fears related to scientific advancements and the erosion of traditional beliefs. They often depicted the tragic demise of young female characters and concluded with the heroic actions of male protagonists. To create a sense of otherworldliness, these films often situated their monsters in exotic settings or time periods. (Wood, 1985)

Furthermore, David Buckingham contends that genres are more than just labels. On the other hand, horror films from the 1950s adopted a different strategy, placing their monsters in modern

America, typically in small towns, to create a sense of immediacy and familiarity with the spectator. These films popularized creature feature films like *The Thing*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *The Blob* by introducing a new wave of creatures from the domain of science fiction. This subgenre merged science fiction's scientifically realistic aspects with horror films' terror and violence, representing America's fundamental social worries during the Cold War era. The post-modern horror film genre saw the emergence of several notable entries, including *The Night Of The Living Dead* (1968), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *The Thing* (1982), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1990). These films depicted ordinary individuals using everyday objects to confront supernatural threats, psychotic killers, or alien invaders.

On the other hand, alongside the rapid changes in culture, in horror movies, the concept of "spaces" plays a significant role in creating an atmosphere of fear and suspense. These spaces often represent different realms of the supernatural, offering a glimpse into the unknown and tapping into our deepest fears and anxieties. One such space is the haunted house or mansion, which has become an iconic setting in supernatural horror films. These locations have a dark history, tragic events, or evil spirits. They are physical manifestations of the supernatural, serving as a stage for terrifying encounters. The haunted house represents a liminal space, a threshold between the world of the living and the realm of the dead, where the boundaries between the two become blurred. It becomes a character, exuding a sense of confinement, claustrophobia, and an overwhelming presence that fills every corner with dread.

Another space frequently explored is the dream realm. Dreams, with their fluidity and surreal nature, offer a fertile ground for supernatural horror. In movies like *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, dreams become a dangerous playground where the line between reality and the subconscious is

blurred. The dream realm represents a shifting and unpredictable space where the deepest fears and repressed desires come to life, often as an evil entity. It challenges the notion of a stable reality and exploits our vulnerability when we are most defenseless.

Additionally, supernatural horror movies often venture into other dimensions or realms beyond our own. These alternate realms, such as the spirit world or the abyss, exist parallel to our reality and are inhabited by supernatural entities. They represent a departure from the familiar, a plunge into the unknown and the unknowable. Exploring these realms allows filmmakers to unleash unimaginable horrors, drawing on folklore, mythology, and the collective human imagination to create terrifying creatures and scenarios.

Horror films that explore many realms of supernatural beings create a terrifying sensation of unearthly horror on the screen. These films frequently explore the domain of ghosts, adding an eerie and ethereal quality. The *The Conjuring* (2013-2021) as well as *Insidious* (2010-2023) series are perfect examples in which renowned paranormal investigators find malicious spirits imprisoned between realms, frightening innocent families. Dreams are another enthralling area where the boundaries between the mind and reality blur, allowing inconceivable atrocities to emerge. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) is a mind-bending classic that introduces Freddy Krueger, a disfigured killer who preys on teenagers in their dreams, converting their deepest nightmares into horrifying reality. These films expertly negotiate these mysterious worlds, keeping spectators on the edge of their seats and engrossed in a world where the boundary between reality and fantasy is blurred.

One example is the Japanese film *Ju-On: The Grudge* (2000), which takes place in a haunted house with a tragic past. The vengeful spirits within the house haunt anyone who enters, causing a series

of horrifying and interconnected events. Another renowned film is *The Others* (2001), a Spanish-American production that unfolds within a secluded mansion. This atmospheric ghost story follows a mother and her children as they encounter eerie phenomena, questioning their sanity and unraveling dark secrets. Expanding beyond Western and Asian cinema, the South Korean film *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003) delves into psychological horror within a secluded family home. Additionally, the Spanish film *The Orphanage* (2007) explores the haunting of an old orphanage turned into a family home, delivering a poignant mix of supernatural suspense and emotional depth. By utilizing these different spaces and realms, horror movies invite audiences to confront the supernatural, the uncanny, and the unexplained. They provide a canvas for filmmakers to delve into our primal fears, existential anxieties, and the mysteries of the unseen. These spaces serve as gateways to a terrifying world, inviting us to question the boundaries of reality and the depths of our fears.

Previous research has recognized the emergence of horror in cinema as a reflection of societal conditions, posing the question of how horror could not emerge given the social context (Iles, 2005). The roots of techno-horror can be traced back to Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818), which depicted the fear of technology and industrial advancements in the 19th century. Shelley's creation, the monster, symbolized the consequences of tampering with nature and using electricity to defy death. Moving into the 20th century, the horror genre found a new medium to explore its themes. Films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) responded directly to the advancements in reproductive technology, reflecting the introduction of ultrasound and the birth control pill.

1.3.1. Techno Horror

Defining subgenres can be complex, particularly when examining the interplay between science fiction, horror, and fantasy. These genres intertwine and form a 'fantastic triangle,' encompassing

elements of fear and imagination (Prohaszkova, 2012). Within the realm of techno-horror, the genre becomes even more intriguing. Anthony Magistrale explores how these films provide unsettling answers to the modern dilemma of humanity's relationship with nature. As our scientific knowledge and technological advancements grow more sophisticated, there is an inherent risk of losing control over them. It is worth noting that the techno-horror genre primarily stems from Western civilization, with Japan also contributing to its development. Other countries, such as India, Iran, China, Indonesia, and Egypt, boast thriving and diverse cinemas but do not have a distinct techno-horror subgenre (Magistrale, 2021).

The feature of the technical uncanny has been intricately intertwined with the emergence of modernity (Collins & Jervis, 2008). Within the realm of cinema, Fritz Lang's 1927 German expressionist film "Metropolis" stands as a herald of techno-horror. This dystopian masterpiece unfolds a society wherein technology is wielded as a tool of oppression and manipulation (Lang, 1927). Nestled within a futuristic urban landscape, the film delves into the complexities of human-machine interactions, social hierarchy, and the dehumanizing repercussions of technological advancement. As the 20th century unfurled, accompanied by the relentless march of technological progress, the blend of trepidation and fascination enveloping the potential adversities burgeoned, ultimately finding its artistic expression on the grand cinematic canvas.

In her discerning essay "Subcultural Tastes, Genre Boundaries, and Fan Canons," Cherry artfully elucidates how diverse subgenres have sprouted across cultural junctures, resonating with distinct identity groups across temporal epochs (Cherry, 2008, pp. 201-215). The presence of technology within the realm of horror cinema has undergone remarkable metamorphoses. It has traversed the spectrum, ranging from the dread of sentient robots immortalized in films such as Donald Cammell's "Demon Seed" (1977), Wes Craven's "Deadly Friend" (1986), and Richard Stanley's

"Hardware" (1990) - serving as a poignant reflection of societal apprehensions towards burgeoning robotics - to the exploration of interstellar enigmas in science fiction horror gems like James Cameron's "Alien" (1979). Moreover, the portrayal of modern electronic marvels has significantly etched its mark within the canvas of techno-horror films, further enhancing the genre's multifaceted discourse.

The rise of cable television subscriptions in the early 80's led director's imagination to introduce horror on cable with *Poltergeist* (1982). The influence of Japanese cinema brought forth a wave of techno-horror/supernatural films, infusing technological devices and the supernatural beings, exemplified by titles such as *Ring* (1998), *The Suicide Manual* (2003), and *One Missed Call* (2003), which explored technology-related fears and societal anxieties. In recent years, the focus has shifted towards the "internet" as a source of fear. However, the emergence of social media horror movies presents a challenge due to the ever-evolving nature of technology and the changing definition of social media itself. For the purpose of this discussion, social media refers to modern electronic technology that facilitates digital social connections. Social media horror is characterized by intentional communication through these platforms, excluding pioneering found-footage films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and the *Paranormal Activity* series (2007-2015) that do not fit the classification of social media horror due to their use of different technologies. Nonetheless, these films still hold significant value within the techno-horror genre.

Social media horror movies delve into narratives that explore the fantastical portrayal of websites and applications based on social interaction. It is noteworthy to mention that these films often depict the internet and social media in a manner that deviates from authentic representations. For instance, the 1998 film *The Last Broadcast* showcases a killer targeting victims through an internet chat room, presenting an exaggerated perspective that diverges from the reality of online

interactions. Similarly, in *My Little Eye*, the use of CCTV footage to revive the slasher genre alters the function of surveillance culture and manipulates its nature for dramatic effect. *Pulse* (2006), a remake of *Kairo* (2001), introduces the concept of a computer virus enabling spirits to cross into our world, emphasizing the transformative power of technology in a fantastical manner. The 1995 film *The Net* portrays the internet as a magical tool with boundless capabilities, deviating from the nuanced complexities of online identity. *FearDotCom* (2002) showcases a dark web page resembling Craigslist, distorting its purpose to facilitate voyeuristic murder and torture. In *Smiley* (2012), a monstrous urban legend preys on teens through the platform of Chatroulette, presenting an exaggerated and sensationalized depiction. *Antisocial* (2013) focuses on a fictional social media platform, Social Redroom, during a zombie apocalypse, altering the functionality and impact of social media in an apocalyptic context. *#Horror* (2015) explores the deadly consequences of 12-year-old girls engaging in cyberbullying through Instagram and networked games, amplifying the negative effects for dramatic effect. Through their fantastical lenses, these films redefine and manipulate the functions of applications and websites within the context of the horror genre. The emergence of supernatural entities contacting humans through the internet was first introduced in the groundbreaking *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode "I, Robot...You, Jane" (s01e08, 1997). This episode depicted Willow accidentally releasing a demon into the online realm while scanning a book. The demon used chat rooms and the web to manipulate and deceive followers, even attempting to establish a romantic connection with Willow. However, Buffy and Xander warned Willow about the dangers of trusting strangers online. While the demon itself did not pose a physical threat, its presence served as a metaphor for the potential hazards of engaging with unknown individuals in the digital realm.

Fast forward to the present day, and we can see that highly popular TV series like *Black Mirror* continue to explore futuristic techno-horror scenarios, often offering insightful glimpses into potential technological advancements and the anxieties that may accompany them. *Black Mirror* has garnered critical acclaim for its dark and thought-provoking portrayal of modern technology's impact on society. With a recurring theme of social media and supernatural elements, the series raises unsettling questions about the consequences of our increasing reliance on digital platforms.

One noteworthy episode that exemplifies *Black Mirror's* exploration of techno-horror is "Nosedive" from the third season. This episode immerses viewers in a world where individuals rate their social interactions using a star system. Through the character Lacie, the episode delves into the addictive nature of seeking validation on social media platforms, leading to catastrophic outcomes. By highlighting social media addiction, obsession, and the potential dangers of living in a society governed by online validation, "Nosedive" serves as a cautionary tale, predicting the psychological toll that our increasing reliance on social media may have in the future.

These examples illustrate how TV shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Black Mirror* have played a pivotal role in introducing and exploring the supernatural contacting humans through the internet. By depicting futuristic techno-horror scenarios, these series serve as cultural mirrors, predicting the potential technological advancements and anxieties that may arise in our increasingly digital world. Through their storytelling, they encourage viewers to critically examine the impact of technology on our lives and contemplate the ethical implications of our ever-evolving relationship with digital platforms.

In recent years, Japanese horror films that delve into the fusion of technology and the supernatural have gained international acclaim, offering a distinct and unsettling viewing experience by

blending traditional Japanese horror tropes with modern technological advancements. A standout example within this genre is the film *Ringu* (1998), which follows a journalist as she investigates a mysterious videotape that allegedly causes the death of its viewers within a week of watching it. By utilizing the concept of a cursed videotape, the movie delves into themes of technology, obsession, and the supernatural. *Ringu's* success prompted an American remake, *The Ring* (2002), which achieved both critical and commercial success.

Another noteworthy film is *Pulse* (known as "Kairo" in Japanese), directed by Kiyoshi Kurosawa and released in 2001. *Pulse* centers on a group of friends who experience eerie supernatural phenomena after visiting a cryptic website. The film delves into the concept of isolation in the modern world and explores the potential dangers of excessive reliance on technology. In the South Korean film *Phone* (2002), a journalist embarks on an investigation into a mysterious phone number that appears to be connected to a series of murders. However, she soon discovers that a vengeful spirit possesses the phone itself, leading to a chilling and suspenseful narrative.

These Japanese and South Korean horror films highlight the intricate interplay between technology and the supernatural, providing audiences with thought-provoking explorations of societal fears and the potential repercussions of our increasing reliance on digital devices.

The emergence of computers and the Internet gave rise to new possibilities for techno horror narratives. One notable example is the 1984 film *The Terminator*, directed by James Cameron. The movie depicts a future in which artificial intelligence becomes self-aware and begins a war against humanity, employing cyborg assassins to eradicate human resistance (Cameron, 1984). More recently, the *Black Mirror* television series created by Charlie Brooker has become synonymous with contemporary techno horror. The show explores the dark side of technology and

its impact on society through standalone episodes. From dystopian virtual realities to the dangers of social media and surveillance, *Black Mirror* presents a chilling reflection of our modern technological anxieties (Brooker, 2011-present).

1.3.2. Digital Horror

Techno horror primarily focuses on the fears and dangers associated with devices, while digital horror goes beyond just the devices and screens. Digital horror specifically explores films that not only use digital media for production, exhibition, and distribution (which is typical for most films nowadays) but also delve into the anxieties and risks associated with digital technology. These films aim to comment on contemporary fears, particularly the political and ideological implications of the digital world since the introduction of the Internet to the public.(Leeder, 2016, p. 342) . Dean Koontz provides insight into the factors contributing to the increase in techno-digital anxieties depicted in films, emphasizing the shift in human interaction from face-to-face communication to online interactions. In his words, he highlights the absence of human nuances conveyed through voices and facial expressions, the pursuit of empathy and tenderness without physical touch, and an underlying sense of losing our humanity (Koontz, 2010).

According to Tucker's book, "Interfacing with the Internet in Popular Cinema" (2014), he explores significant changes in history related to the Internet. He categorizes the Internet's development into three eras: the "pre-popular Internet" (1960-1993), which began as a military invention, followed by the "Internet for the masses" (1993-2003), when it became accessible to everyone, and finally, the current era of the interconnected and globalized Web 2.0 (from 2003 to the present). Tucker also examines the emergence of a machinic audience alongside this chronological history. Tucker explains that a machinic audience is different because they strongly understand digital technology. This is because they are regularly exposed to it, often shown in movies and other popular media.

According to Nick Rombes (2008), digital horror focuses on exploring the problematic aspects of modern life in the digital age. It shows the fears and dangers of information overload, online networks, virtual reality, and excessive visual stimulation. This type of horror makes these fears explicit and turns them into the story's primary focus and overall look and feel.

According to Gibson (1982), the term "cyberspace" was first used in his story published in *Omni* magazine and later in his book *Neuromancer*, describing it as a computer network inhabited by artificially intelligent beings. Gibson (1984) defines cyberspace as:

Cyberspace is a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts... A graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Gibson. 1984. p.128)

According to Cohen (2007), "the cyberspace metaphor first originated in science fiction, whether in literature or cinema. Even the idea of uploading human consciousness came from Ken Liu's 2014 apocalyptic short story "The Gods Will Not Be Chained" and introduced digital immortality and entire existence within the digital realm.

Cinema as a visual medium has had this problem from its early use of the concept of the Internet in movies like *The Net* (1995). According to Wesley Grubbs, the founder of data visualization studio Pitch Interactive, visualizing the Internet is a complex task comparable to representing love. As cited in Megan Logan's (2016) article, Grubbs expresses the challenge of capturing the intricate nature of the Internet onscreen (Logan, 2016). The latest genre of social media horror or "screen

life” horror movies is considered a subgenre of The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "Social Media" as the following:

Forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos) (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Movies that solely focused on cyber panic through social media, *Friends Request* (2017) and *Unfriended* (2014), and *#Horror*, which Sobczynski's Review of the movie states that it is a terrible mix of slasher nonsense, social satire, and a poorly executed message. Despite aiming to show the dark consequences of cyberbullying, the movie falls flat and is just overall bad. It fails to provide humor, scare, or meaningful insights (Sobczynski, 2015).

Movies like *Spree* (2020) and *Tragedy Girls* (2017) display many functions of social media, such as live streaming, whereas movies like *Cam* (2018) add more unrealistic and supernatural elements to these functions. *FearDotCom* (2002), *Halloween: Resurrection* (2002), *Dot. Kill* (2005) and *Untraceable* (2008) all featured serial killers and psychopaths broadcasting their murders.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study draws from multiple fields of inquiry to provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and technological factors that shape contemporary horror films. The first framework, known as genre theory, offers a basis for examining the tropes and themes of horror movies and placing them within a larger cultural context. Horror film theory is specifically used to investigate how the aesthetics of horror films have changed over time and how they represent societal values and social fears.

The second framework, media theory, sheds light on how media and technology are used in modern horror movies. As a subcategory to media theory, technoculture theory is also used to

examine how technology in horror movies mirrors current concerns and reservations about the place of technology in our lives. Since this study focuses on the presence of the supernatural within the realm of the Internet, defining cyberspace and its potential negative aspects will support this research to illustrate the meaning of the Internet domain.

Together, these frameworks provide a holistic approach to analyzing contemporary horror films, drawing on cultural and technological perspectives to explore these films' social and cultural implications.

2.1. Horror Film Theory

Horror film theory, a subset of genre theory, focuses on the conventions and themes of horror films and their cultural significance. Analyzing the historical and cultural context of horror films can help to shed light on how films like *Kairo* and *Unfriended* use horror tropes to explore contemporary anxieties around technology and communication (Gelder, 2017).

Horror film theory is a subset of genre theory focusing specifically on horror films and their cultural significance. By analyzing the conventions and themes of horror films, as well as their historical and cultural context, horror film theory can help to shed light on the ways that *Kairo* and *Unfriended* use horror tropes to explore contemporary anxieties around technology and communication (Neale, 2000).

One key aspect of horror film theory is the idea of the "monstrous other." According to Carol J. Clover in her book "Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film," horror films often feature a "monstrous other" that represents a threat to Society's norms and values (Clover, 1992). In *Kairo* and *Unfriended*, the threat comes from the digital realm, with ghosts and

malevolent spirits haunting the Internet and using technology to invade the physical world. These films use horror tropes to explore the anxieties and fears of living in a hyper-connected digital age. Another important aspect of horror film theory is the idea of the "uncanny." Sigmund Freud defined the "uncanny" as something familiar yet strange or eerie, and horror films often rely on this feeling to create tension and suspense (Freud, 1919). In *Kairo* and *Unfriended*, standard digital technologies such as webcams and social media platforms create a sense of familiarity. At the same time, the supernatural elements and haunting imagery make these technologies feel strange and eerie.

Horror film theory also emphasizes the importance of the "final girl" trope in horror films, which refers to the surviving female protagonist who faces a monstrous threat (Clover, 1992). In the selected movies, the female protagonists are integral to the narratives and play a central role in the resolution of the films. However, these films also subvert the final girl trope by blurring the line between reality and the digital realm, calling into question the traditional notion of a physical "final girl" who can defeat the monster and survive.

Overall, horror film theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how *Kairo* and *Unfriended* use horror tropes and conventions to explore contemporary anxieties around technology and communication. By analyzing the "monstrous other," the uncanny, and the final girl trope, horror film theory can help illuminate these films' cultural significance and impact on the horror genre.

2.1.1. Horror Movie Aesthetics

This subsection explores the visual and auditory elements that contribute to the horror aesthetic and how they shape the audience's experience of fear and anxiety. Horror films use various techniques to create an atmosphere of dread and tension, such as low-key lighting, disorienting

camera angles, and ominous soundscapes. According to film theorist Noel Carroll, horror films often play on the audience's natural fear responses, such as fear of the unknown, fear of bodily harm, and fear of the supernatural. By manipulating these responses through visual and auditory techniques, horror films can create a visceral and emotional response in the audience.

The unfriended movie is entirely set on a computer desktop, specifically a Mac. "Screen Life" is the term used by producer Timur Bekmambetov to describe this idea for a movie. Camera placement and framing of the scenes act as the audience's gaze. In the case of *Kairo* and *Unfriended*, the horror aesthetic is primarily achieved through digital media and technology. Both films combine found footage and screen capture to immerse the audience in the characters' digital world, creating a sense of claustrophobia and confinement. The camera's vision encourages the audience to adopt an individual viewpoint, and in doing so, the audience temporarily assumes the role of the killer, victim, or "final girl." The horror genre allows Society to distinguish between "Us" and "Them." We identify ourselves, and our identities, by defining the "Other" by defining what we are "not" (Hall, 1996, p. 6). This technique was predominantly used in *Unfriended*, as the camera places the audience in the position of a computer user in front of the screens, adding to the layers of the storytelling and forcing the audience's gaze to a limited fixed screen.

According to Forsans (2020), "digital horror films often use the glitch aesthetic to create an atmosphere of uncertainty and terror" (para. 2). As a newly developed effect generated for the genre of techno-horror, "glitch" effects and distorted soundscapes also contributes to a feeling of unease and disorientation, as if the digital realm itself is corrupted and unstable. These visual and auditory techniques heighten the sense of Horror and reinforce the films' themes of technology-induced anxiety and fear.

The language used in horror films also significantly impacts the movie's tone and atmosphere. According to film theorist Noel Carroll, "the effectiveness of dialogue in horror films has been underrated" (Carroll, 1987, p. 201). In *Unfriended*, the protagonists' discussion of cyberbullying and online harassment echoes real-world worries about the risks of the Internet. The characters' conversations successfully convey the conflicts and concerns of modern digital Society. One crucial scene in the movie involves Val's account of how she was cyberbullied and how it ruined her life. Her description of the incident highlights the movie's perspective on the social and emotional repercussions of cyberbullying and draws attention to the psychological impacts of online abuse.

The characters' discussions in *Kairo* regarding the essence of life and death help to emphasize the movie's existential themes. The language highlights the film's main point, which is the vulnerability of human existence and the ability of technology to obfuscate the distinction between life and death. For instance, the character Michi's thoughts on the afterlife and the potential for communication with the dead give nuance and complexity to the movie's study of existential topics. The characters' conversations underscore the movie's more significant philosophical themes, enhancing the Horror aesthetic by giving it depth and substance.

2.1.2. Techno horror

As discussed in more detail in the literature review section, the techno horror theory is a subcategory of horror film theory that focuses specifically on the use of technology as a source of horror in films. This theoretical framework will analyze the representation of technology and its relationship to horror in the films *Kairo* and *Unfriended*. If we dissect two main parts of techno-horror, in spectral, haunted house stories, ghosts' presence often induces emotions like remorse and yearning. On the other hand, internet horror infuses sentiments of inadequacy in depictions of

ostracism and dread of loneliness (Powell, 2019). Techno-horror is a perfect marriage of said emotions.

According to Ken Gelder and Sarah J. Jackson in their article "Techno-Horror," techno-horror films are defined by their portrayal of technology as a monstrous force threatening humanity. The fear of technology in these films is often rooted in anxieties about loss of control and the unknown consequences of technological progress (Gelder & Jackson, 2007). In the context of horror films like "*Kairo* and *Unfriended*, techno-horror theory can help explain how using technology as a narrative device creates a sense of unease and dread. The presence of ghosts and malevolent spirits that can manipulate technology highlights the idea that technology can be used for harmful purposes and that we may not always be in control. In *Kairo*, for example, the ghostly presences that haunt the Internet and spread through technological devices suggest that our reliance on technology has opened a portal to a dangerous and uncontrollable otherworldly realm.

Another critical aspect of the techno-horror theory is that technology can be seen as an extension of the body. As Gelder and Jackson note, incorporating technology into the human body blurs the boundaries between the self and the monstrous other (2007). This concept is explored in films like "*Unfriended*," where supernatural forces take control of a character's computer and uses it to force her to harm herself. The use of webcams and other digital technologies in the film reinforces the idea that our digital selves are an extension of our physical bodies and that we are vulnerable to attack through these channels.

Overall, the techno-horror theory provides a valuable lens through which to analyze the themes and conventions of horror films that focus on technology. By examining the fear of technology as a monstrous force and the blurring of boundaries between self and other, techno-horror theory can

shed light on the cultural anxieties that drive these films and how they reflect our relationship with technology.

2.2. Media Theory

The horror movie genre has always been fascinated with supernatural elements. From ghosts to demons, the genre has thrived on the fear and suspense these otherworldly beings bring to the big screen. However, with the advent of the Internet, the way these supernatural elements are presented in horror movies has significantly shifted. No longer are they limited to traditional storytelling methods, but they have found a new platform in the form of the Internet. In this theoretical framework section, I will explore the Internet's role in portraying supernatural elements in horror movies, drawing on media theory to understand how this shift has occurred.

Media theory has long been interested in how media shapes our world understanding. Even though it is considered a general theory covering many aspects of media in the modern world, Technoculture and media convergence are two key concepts particularly relevant to discussing the Internet's impact on portraying supernatural elements in horror movies. As a subsection of media and cultural studies, Technoculture examines how technology and culture interact and impact one another. This can include investigating how technology is represented in cultural output, how cultural values drive technological development and use, and how technological advancements affect cultural practices and social norms. Media convergence, on the other hand, refers to how different forms of media are merging, often through digital technologies.

These concepts have significantly shaped how supernatural elements are portrayed in horror movies. The Internet has allowed for the rapid spread of information and ideas, making it easier for filmmakers to draw in a broader range of cultural sources when creating films. Additionally, the rise of social media and other online platforms has created new opportunities for interactive storytelling, allowing audiences to engage with supernatural elements in previously impossible ways.

In this section, I will draw on media theory to explore the impact of these changes on the horror movie genre, examining how the Internet has become a portal for supernatural elements and how this has transformed how audiences encounter these elements. I will also consider the implications of these changes for our broader understanding of the media and its role in shaping our understanding of the world around us.

2.3. Technoculture

As an interdisciplinary approach, Technoculture addresses the intricate interrelationships between technology and culture and how they form and impact one another. Technoculture is frequently used in media and cultural studies to evaluate many forms of media and cultural expression, such as science fiction, video games, and social media. It can be a valuable theoretical framework for understanding how technology and culture interact and shape one another in certain situations (Lupton, 2014).

Lupton asserts that technoculture is the synthesis of technology and culture, resulting in a new way of living, interacting, and experiencing the world. The author suggests that technoculture has significantly impacted modern Society, affecting how we think, behave, and interact with one another. She discusses how technology's pervasiveness in modern Society has revolutionized

culture, resulting in new relationships and pursuits, and how it has resulted in significant changes in education, work, social connections, politics, and the economy.

Undeniably, the extensive use of digital technology has resulted in a new type of social order marked by fluidity, fragmentation, and decentralization. As a result, new forms of social relationships have emerged that are less hierarchical and more networked, decentralized, and personalized (Lupton, 2015)

However, 'technoculture' is frequently used loosely to refer to the technology involved in Western cultures and cultural creations incorporating technological features. In the generality of this everyday usage, the opportunity for the term to convey a specific meaning is lost. For the sake of this study and discussion and because culture is a social construction involving communication and more than one person, technoculture entails the communication of cultural material in technological contexts — that is, other than face-to-face. If this term is used, future discussions of technoculture will refer to a technology that enables the development of culture across space and time (Green, 2001) and will only focus on communicational technologies. For the sake of the core argument of this study, defining cyberspace plays a crucial role in giving meaning to what the internet realm is and how it is displayed in the selected films for this study.

2.3.1. Cyberspace

Although many scholars have tried to explain and define what cyberspace is, most of them only defined one aspect of this lengthy discussion; many of their different views will be discussed in this subsection. The Oxford English Dictionary defines cyberspace as: "The space of virtual reality; the notional environment within which electronic communication (esp. via the Internet) occurs." The best definition comes from Simon Cooper in "Technoculture and Critical Theory: In the Service of the Machine?" cyberspace is a social construct molded and impacted by social and

cultural elements rather than being a separate and independent domain. This viewpoint contends that social and cultural interactions and practices shape cyberspace, noting that it is neither neutral nor objective. As a result, digital media can shape and impact online identities that are different from offline selves. Online identities can be created thanks to the affordances and limits of cyberspace, but the predominant offline societal norms and values can also influence them. Loader (1997, p. 1) offers a comprehensive definition of cyberspace:

Cyberspace is a computer-generated public domain with no territorial boundaries or physical attributes and is in perpetual use. To date, its most potent manifestation is that matrix of electronic telecommunication and computer networks, usually referred to as the Internet, which links millions of people globally, is growing at a rapid rate daily and is taking new shape and direction as a consequence of the voluntary actions of its participants, and, it is claimed, is not controlled by any single authority. (Loader, 1997)

With these primary definitions, we can distinguish three critical aspects of the digital environment, which are human, virtual, and physical. Since all these elements will be extracted, analyzed, and discussed from the movies selected for this study, each must be explained separately. We might turn to psychoanalysis to examine what is to be gained or lost in such a change, given that Western societies have undergone significant alterations over the past several decades, made possible by the fast rise of the techno/information sciences (Cooper, 2002).

Furthermore, the psychoanalytic approach might help us understand the human aspect of it. In his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud claimed that the advances of civilization and culture, including technological advances, had a price. He held that to preserve societal order and stability. One must repress one's irrational inclinations, especially sexual and violent impulses. However,

this suppression of desires generates a psychological conflict between a person's primal instincts and societal expectations, resulting in frustration and unhappiness.

Freud also proposed that several psychological diseases, such as anxiety, sadness, and neurosis, are brought on by suppressing innate impulses. People have internal conflicts due to trying to repress their fundamental wants, which can lead to psychological issues. In other words, according to Freud, societal order and personal mental health are sacrificed as part of the cost of civilization(Freud, 1966)cyberspace provides a platform where individuals can shape and explore their identities, engaging in consequence-free experimentation and connecting with others in a dynamic virtual environment.

According to Sherry Turkle, Identity plays in cyberspace involve changing names and virtual locations. Joining online communities often requires crossing boundaries into new and highly interactive social spaces. Cyberspace has various psychological effects, serving as a stage for some individuals to act out unresolved conflicts or work through personal issues. For some, it is a psychosocial moratorium, intense interaction, passionate friendships, and experimentation (Turkle, 1999). In this "time out," actions carry relatively fewer consequences, allowing for exploration and developing a core sense of self, commonly referred to as "identity" by Erik Erikson (Erikson, 1950).

Turkle also proposes an essential aspect of being present in cyberspace; Turkle employs the metaphor of "windows" to depict the process of identity pluralization. This metaphor represents how working with a computer allows people to exist in multiple scenarios at the same time. Although users concentrate on one window at a time, their presence is felt across all. In essence, one's digital identity is a synthesis of their distribution company. This metaphor offers a fresh perspective on the self as a complex, diverse creature. It goes beyond just changing roles in

different circumstances, such as a woman switching from lover to mother to lawyer throughout the day. Instead, it presents a distributed self that exists in various realms and plays multiple parts simultaneously (Turkle, 1997, p. 1096).

Slavoj Žižek offers an interesting angle of our understanding of cyberspace and the digital world. He claims that in the postmodernist view of cyberspace, we accept things as they appear on the surface without trying to understand the inner workings. We do not seek transparency or analytical understanding like in the modernist approach. Instead, we trust and rely on the experiences we encounter in the digital world without questioning what lies behind them (Žizek, 2002).

In the modernist world, technology operates through complex components like electricity-powered bytes, wires, and chips. On the other hand, the postmodernist world emphasizes a simple trust in the screen itself, searching for what is behind it unimportant. This viewpoint involves trusting what we see and experience on the surface. Modernist programmers seek solace in cyberspace, viewing it as a clear and organized space that temporarily escapes the complexities and control of everyday life governed by unfamiliar rules and institutions.

According to Stella Ting-Toomey's Intercultural Communication theory, the advent of social media has given rise to Echo Chambers, where individuals tend to isolate themselves and primarily interact with others who share similar beliefs and ideologies. This behavior leads to the creation of separate spaces between different religious, political, or cultural groups. Paradoxically, even attempts to promote communication and bridge the gap between "Us" and "The Others" can inadvertently result in the formation of exclusive communities in the online realm.

The rapid development of technology and the exchange of information should smooth out the process of recognition and understanding between cultures. However, the extent of access to information and the insistence of the multicultural world in the real world create exclusive spaces

in the other world, the virtual world. The presence of social networks on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp makes it increasingly challenging for individuals to break free from their community's bubble. They become trapped in a cycle of polarized information, often aligning themselves with a single community. This phenomenon, referred to as Echo Chambers, Convergent Practice, or homophily, is further intensified by modernization and globalization (K. Garimella, G. D. F. Morales, A. Gioneis, & M. Mathioudakis, 2018).

For instance, exclusive friendship groups that revolve around a particular faith within religious circles might be observed. These groups predominantly interact with individuals with the same religious background and beliefs, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. Similarly, in political spheres, echo chambers can form around specific ideologies, such as conservative or liberal viewpoints. In these exclusive friendship groups, individuals reinforce their political beliefs and often dismiss alternative opinions, further polarizing the larger Society.

In social media, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit can serve as breeding grounds for echo chambers. Users can join and actively participate in groups or communities that align with their religious or political affiliations. These groups often discourage dissenting opinions and primarily reinforce the shared beliefs and values of the members. Over time, these exclusive friendship groups can contribute to the polarization of Society as communication with individuals holding opposing views becomes increasingly limited.

Recognizing the unintended consequences of echo chambers in both religious and political contexts is essential. While they provide individuals with a sense of belonging and affirmation, they also reinforce the separation between different groups, hindering meaningful intercultural communication.

3. METHODOLOGY

The following sections provide insights into the research methodologies employed to investigate the representations of the Internet and its connection to supernatural phenomena. These sections outline the rationale behind the utilization of qualitative research and the selection of specific films. Qualitative research involves delving into the subjective experiences of individuals, groups, or cultures to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives. Given the complex nature of the portrayal of the Internet as a gateway to the supernatural, a qualitative approach is well-suited to examine the meanings and interpretations associated with these representations. By employing qualitative research, a comprehensive analysis of *Unfriended* (2014) and *Kairo* (2001) can be conducted, scrutinizing elements such as plot, characters, and motifs. This enables an exploration of how these films depict the Internet as a conduit to the supernatural and how viewers interpret and make sense of these portrayals.

This study aims to address the multifaceted and intricate themes portrayed in the selected films, which include technological advancements, particularly in the realm of digital and communication technology from the late 90s to the mid-2010s, as well as societal concerns and anxieties surrounding the Internet during that period. To comprehensively analyze these aspects, a combination of various research methodologies will be employed.

Genre analysis, content analysis, and cultural studies methods will be utilized in this thesis to delve into the transformation of the Internet into a gateway for supernatural elements. By conducting an

analysis of the two horror movies, *Unfriended* (2014) and *Kairo* (2001), this research will identify genre conventions, explore how the Internet serves as a portal for supernatural phenomena, and examine the broader cultural context within which these films exist. These methodologies will provide valuable insights into the portrayal of the Internet and its connections to the supernatural, shedding light on the societal and cultural implications of this cinematic representation.

3.1. Choice of Method

As cultural products, movies and their scripts offer valuable reflections of cultural processes and representations, shedding light on the prevailing ideologies within society, as noted by Leavy and Trier-Bieniek (2014). Therefore, movies serve as invaluable resources for gaining insights into the circulating meanings within society and contribute significantly to our understanding of societal dynamics. Leavy and Trier-Bieniek (2014) also highlight the value of movies and scripts in providing insights into the prevailing ideologies within society.

Analyzing the genre of the selected horror movies is crucial for understanding their themes and conventions, especially regarding the portrayal of the Internet as a gateway to the supernatural. Genre analysis provides insights into the common motifs and patterns associated with the horror genre and how these movies utilize and subvert them. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the cultural representations and meanings attributed to the supernatural within the context of the Internet.

In addition to genre analysis, cultural studies will be used in this research. As an interdisciplinary discipline, cultural studies investigate how social, political, and economic variables impact and

shape culture. We can get insights into the specific era depicted in the selected films by using cultural studies and investigating how these films reflect cultural worries, fears, and beliefs. Furthermore, cultural studies assist us in comprehending the power dynamics and cultural institutions that shape our experience and understanding of the supernatural.

Through the combination of genre analysis and cultural studies, this research aims to comprehensively examine the selected horror movies, delving into their cultural significance, representations of the supernatural, and the societal factors that shape their narratives.

3.2. Genre Analysis

Film genres are dynamic and subject to change, influenced by technological advancements, societal shifts, and audience preferences. This fluidity highlights the ongoing dialogue between filmmakers and audiences, shaping the evolution of cinema as a creative medium (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995).

Genre analysis in film studies delves into a specific film genre's conventions, formulas, and recurring elements. It involves examining how films share common characteristics, such as similar storytelling techniques, visual aesthetics, and underlying themes. By understanding these shared elements, viewers can better comprehend and appreciate the genre.

This analytical approach allows for exploring how different film genres evolve, reflecting the cultural and historical contexts in which they emerge. It provides insights into how genres adapt to societal changes, technological advancements, and shifting audience expectations.

By applying genre analysis to our research, we aim to uncover the distinct characteristics and patterns within the horror genre, specifically regarding the internet as a gateway for out of worldly

entities. This analysis will help researchers understand how these films contribute to the genre and how they engage with and challenge audience expectations.

By applying genre analysis, we can situate digital horror within the broader tradition of the horror genre, providing insights into its unique features and contributions. This methodology will allow for a focused examination of specific scenes in the selected films that highlight the connections between the characters, internet, and ghosts.

By conducting a genre analysis of *Unfriended* (2014) and *Kairo* (2001), this research aims to investigate how these films utilize the established conventions and distinctive features of the horror genre. Through this analysis, various recurring codes and themes may come to light, encompassing elements such as:

Supernatural activities: Both movies incorporate supernatural aspects inherent to the horror genre, such as ghosts and paranormal phenomena. These magical elements evoke fear and suspense, adding to the overall atmosphere of the films.

Isolation and vulnerability: The horror genre often utilizes themes of isolation and vulnerability to heighten tension and create a sense of unease. In both *Unfriended* and *Kairo*, the characters find themselves isolated from others, intensifying their vulnerability to the supernatural threats they encounter.

By analyzing these critical aspects of the films, we can better understand how the horror genre is employed and manipulated to convey the interplay between social media, the characters, and the supernatural. This genre analysis approach will provide valuable insights into digital horror cinema's unique storytelling techniques and thematic elements.

In both *Unfriended* (2014) and *Kairo* (2001), technology is pivotal in driving the narrative. *Unfriended* takes a unique approach by presenting the story on a computer screen, immersing the

audience in the characters' online interactions. On the other hand, *Kairo* delves into the dangers associated with the Internet and online communication, highlighting the potential threats lurking in the digital realm.

Psychological horror is a prominent element in both films, aiming to create fear and tension within the audience. *Unfriended* taps into the fear of being watched and the looming sense of paranoia as the characters grapple with the consequences of their online actions. In contrast, *Kairo* explores themes of loneliness, depression, and suicide, evoking a psychological unease that adds depth to the horror narrative.

Violence and gore, standard features in the horror genre, are also present in both films, albeit with varying degrees of graphic content. These scenes of violence and gore are strategically employed to shock and scare audiences, heightening the overall sense of dread and horror.

By examining these aspects of the films, including the use of technology, psychological horror, and violence/gore, we can better understand how these movies align with and contribute to the broader conventions of the horror genre. This genre analysis approach allows us to dissect *Unfriended* and *Kairo*'s specific techniques and themes, offering valuable insights into their unique storytelling approaches and their place within the digital horror subgenre.

3.3. Justifying the Movies Selected for This Study

During the 1990s, Japan faced significant socio-economic challenges that profoundly impacted its population. The period, known as the "Lost Decade," was marked by a prolonged economic recession and stagnation. The bursting of the asset price bubble in the late 1980s led to a severe economic downturn, resulting in high unemployment rates, corporate bankruptcies, and a decline in household incomes.

During this tumultuous time, the Internet began to enter Japanese households, offering a new means of communication and connection. As the Internet gained popularity, chat rooms emerged as spaces where like-minded young adults could come together and share their experiences, including the traumas caused by the socio-economic problems of the era.

Kiyoshi Kurosawa's film *Kairo* (2001) serves as a time capsule, capturing the anxieties and concerns surrounding the Internet's arrival in Japanese society. The film reflects the search for solace and escapes from the harsh reality through these chat rooms. For some, these online spaces provided a temporary respite from the socio-economic challenges and offered a sense of community. However, these platforms also became a gathering place for discussions on sensitive topics like suicide, contributing to the emergence of social panic.

The media's portrayal of this phenomenon amplified the public's fears and intensified the ongoing social anxiety surrounding the Internet and early social networking platforms. The combination of economic hardships and the advent of the Internet in Japanese households created a unique backdrop that influenced the themes and narratives depicted in *Kairo* and reflected the societal concerns of the time.

The film *Unfriended* (2014) directed by Levan Gabriadze provides a unique portrayal of our digital lives, presenting various social media platforms with their extensive range of features. Set during the era of the rapid rise of social media use, the film captures the cultural shift towards online connectivity and virtual interactions. It explores the prevalent discussions surrounding cyberbullying and the invasion of online privacy, which emerged in the late 2000s and early 2010s alongside the growing popularity of social media platforms. During this period, numerous incidents drew attention to privacy concerns, such as the unauthorized release of Hollywood celebrities' intimate photos in 2012 and the disturbing trend of teenagers sharing private and

explicit images of their peers as a means of revenge and bullying. These incidents prompted widespread scrutiny of social media platforms' privacy policies, instilling a sense of anxiety among users and raising questions about the safety and security of personal data shared online.

Both the films *Kairo* and *Unfriended* provide a valuable perspective on the evolution of communication technologies and the impact of digital spaces on society. This study aims to analyze the portrayal of these advancements and the resulting social anxieties depicted in the respective timelines of the films. The cultural influence of both the United States and Japan on global culture and the internet/social media landscape is undeniable. Each country has made unique and significant contributions in these fields. The United States is renowned for its pop culture exports, including Hollywood movies and television shows, while Japan is recognized for its distinctive anime and manga creations. Regarding Internet and social media advancements, the United States has pioneered many popular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In contrast, Japan has seen a surge in social media use in recent years, with many unique platforms, such as Line and Mixi, gaining popularity. In the context of the United States, issues surrounding the Internet and social media platforms have sparked social panics, primarily revolving around the safety of online experiences, particularly for children and teenagers. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center revealed that 59% of American parents express worry over their children spending excessive time online, while 57% are concerned about their exposure to inappropriate content (Perrin, 2018). Cyberbullying has also been a prominent concern, as a survey conducted by the Cyberbullying Research Center found that 34% of students in the United States had encountered instances of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018).

Similarly, in Japan, social panics related to the Internet and social media platforms have centered on issues of addiction and social isolation. The Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications conducted a survey indicating that over 10% of high school students in Japan are addicted to the Internet (Watanabe, 2017). Furthermore, there have been concerns about the impact of social media on the social skills and mental well-being of young individuals, as well as anxieties regarding internet addiction (Saito, 2018).

Although there are shared concerns surrounding the Internet and social media platforms in both the United States and Japan, the specific issues and cultural contexts driving these panics exhibit some variations between the two countries. In the United States, the emphasis has often been on ensuring online safety for children and adolescents, whereas in Japan, the focus has been on addiction and social isolation.

4. RESULTS OF THE GENRE ANALYSIS

The following is a mixture of genre analysis and cultural studies of the movie's scenes involving technology, the Internet, and spirits; this analysis will enable me to extract and narrow down the critical themes and contents relative to this study.

4.1. Kairo: The Haunting Consequences of Technology

Kairo, which premiered in 2001, emerged during heightened Y2K Trepidation. In conjunction with *Ringu*, both movies demonstrate a clash between Japan's increasing reliance on modernization and technology and its deeply rooted traditional values. The director Kiyoshi Kurosawa displayed a darker side of Tokyo amid the economic crash and the Internet in its infancy. The movie was an educated prediction of the opposing sides of the Internet, opening discussions about the possibilities of technology dependency, loss of identity, and collapse of society, as we know it. Kurosawa's story reflected the trauma the entire country was experiencing, and is a definitive representation of the failed economy, a deeply rooted respect towards suicide, and an age-old belief that the spirits of the dead remain on Earth in the modern world.

Kairo is a thought-provoking movie that presents a dystopian view of the connections between technology, social isolation, and a viral outbreak that blurs the boundaries between humans and machines. The story is set in Tokyo and follows the parallel narratives of two main characters: Michi, a young woman who works at a plant nursery, and Kawashima, a university student. The two protagonists are brought together after interacting with a website that invites people to meet a ghost. Michi investigates the suspicious deaths of her coworkers, while Kawashima experiences strange phenomena after using the Internet.

Taguchi's Suicide

The character introduction reveals that Taguchi, a missing colleague of Michi Kudo, Junko Sasano, and Toshio Yabe, is highly skilled and knowledgeable in technology. He has dedicated the past week to working on a disk. Michi Kudo decides to pay a visit to Taguchi in order to check on him and seek his assistance.

Upon arriving at his place and finding her way inside Taguchi's apartments, Michi immediately spots the eerie workstation where the disc should be. In the background, a shadow catches her eye. Taguchi is unexpectedly home but has not been responsive to calls, door knocks, or work. Despite his disheveled appearance, he calmly directs Michi to the disc's whereabouts before casually picking up some cables and heading toward another room. After finding the disc, Taguchi suddenly disappears, leaving Michi concerned. She begins searching for him and is confronted with a chilling sight. Taguchi took his own life in one of the back rooms, using the computer cable he had in his possession.

Taguchi's death scene is essential for establishing the tone of the movie. It foreshadows the film's core events, from being technology literate to displaying several computers and monitors in his department to his weapon of choice for hanging itself, all pointing to the main characteristics of the "victims."

After overcoming the shock of his death, his colleagues decided to investigate the computer disk, only to find a blurry image of Taguchi standing in his room, staring at one of the monitor screens that capture the protagonist's gaze. In contrast, another adjacent monitor displays an infinite reflection of the same image. By enlarging the photo, they discover another face on the screen, staring back at them.

Do You Want to Meet A Ghost?

Entering the following narrative, student Ryosuke Kawashima has decided it's time to connect to the world wide web, clumsily setting up his very first dial-up Internet service provider; he playfully experiments, tapping on the keyboard, reading instructions while being annoyed by persistent error messages popping up on his windows. Frustrated, he eventually decides to abandon his efforts and relax. Suddenly, the familiar dial-up tones come to life. Regrettably, his success in establishing

dial-up connections' ushers in several peculiar live video feeds. His monitor becomes a window into darkened rooms, revealing unfamiliar individuals in their bedrooms, caught in distress and displaying expressions of despair, staring directly at the camera/Kawashima's screen. Eventually, the screen asks, "Would you like to meet a ghost?" In panic and shock, Kawashima disconnects from the Internet, unplugging his computer completely.

The dial-up internet scene is a pivotal moment in the movie with several meanings. Firstly, Kawashima is portrayed as a technologically illiterate technophobe that needs help understanding the basics of this new phenomenon, he is encountering for the first time. However, this illiteracy and his immediate withdrawal from what the Internet offered him makes him one of the last survivors of the film.

Secondly, the peculiar imagery that constantly changed from one server/user to another highly resembled the online video chat services such as Chatroulette (n.d.), MeetMe (n.d.), and Omegle (n.d.), which have similar mechanics for randomly matching users to real-time, video chat rooms. The allure of these services lies in the timeless appeal of meeting new individuals in a face-to-face setting, albeit in a virtual realm (Tian et al., 2013). However, what takes place in the movie seems less consensual for both parties involved and seems more of a tour around cyberspace, bouncing between individuals having private moments supposedly in their bedrooms.

Finally, Kawashima's instinctive response to unplugging and unengaging with the device in front of him is an act that many characters in the movie and by extension many of the digital native users today, fail to do so, even at the height of danger and disturbance. The concept of unplugging will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

After the strange interaction, Kawashima takes a lazy snooze, physically and emotionally disengaging. However, the unplugged computer device turns back on its own, the nostalgic sound

of dial-up can be heard from it, yet again connecting Kawashima to another online video footage of a man sitting in a dark room with a plastic bag over his head, which makes Kawashima take action once more to disconnect the computer device and walk away from it.

Despite the incorporation of fantastical cinematic elements, this scene lends itself to nuanced interpretations, and it can be a hint of the concept of cyberspace as a living and active mechanism, which is often associated with the idea that the Internet and its various components continue to exist and function even when individuals disconnect from it. This notion highlights the inherent resilience and persistence of the Internet as a dynamic entity (Lippert & Cloutier, 2021).

Exploring the underlying infrastructure that allows the Internet to function continuously is one method to expand on this topic. Whether people turn off their devices or unplug from the Internet, the infrastructure of servers, routers, cables, and data centers remains alive and interconnected. These components work together to keep information flowing and the Internet running smoothly (Lippert & Cloutier, 2021).

The Forbidden Room

One of Tagichi's coworkers, Toshio Yabe, receives a phone call, presumably from the beyond, asking for help which leads Toshio to investigate his deceased colleague's apartment and discovers a computer printout titled "The Forbidden Room." He exits the residential complex. Walking, he spots an apartment with the door edges wholly covered in red tape. Curiosity gets the best of Toshio Yabe as he removes the red tape and steps inside the room, only to discover that the room is not empty. He encounters a female ghost approaching him slowly; the spectre only gives him a longing gaze but means no harm.

The film Kairo, "the forbidden room," *figure1.1*. presents a unique interpretation of infamous Internet-based suicide groups' cyber communities and chatrooms. In the movie, these virtual

spaces are transformed into physical rooms within reality. As the story unfolds, whenever a character enters one of these rooms, marked by red tape sealing, they encounter a ghostly figure desperately seeking connection with the living. Tragically, the living characters who engage with these spectral entities become profoundly affected or "infected," gradually withdrawing from the real world and real-life connections with their friends and families and ultimately resulting in their self-destruction or the eerie residue of their presence etched onto the walls in a dark, ash-like form. Korosowa's narrative hints at and predicts a dark era in Japan that was heavily fueled by the rise of internet use, which became a sensational topic in Japanese mass media. According to Matthews (2008), Tsuko Horiguchi researched how mass media in Japan covered cases of Internet-based suicide. In her study focusing on major national newspapers, Horiguchi discovered that between February 11, 2003, and December 31, 2004, 599 articles discussed topics such as 'group suicide' (shūdan jisatsu), 'internet suicide' (netto jisatsu), or 'internet double-suicide (netto shinjū) (Horiguchi, 2005a). With the rise in suicide rates, computer devices, and, by extension, dial-up Internet entering Japanese homes, they caused a new social panic in Japanese society.



Figure 1.1. the Forbidden Room

At the turn of the millennium, Japan and South Korea experienced a substantial increase in Internet usage when technology entered these countries. However, along with the introduction of the Internet, both nations also encountered a wave of social problems related to technology. Issues such as Internet and computer game addiction, mass suicide through webcams, and even *karoshi* (death by overwork) linked to excessive computer use became widespread within these societies (Daniel, 2020). This newly emerged anxiety was linked to the youth no longer wanting to participate in real-life social activities, which *Korosowa* displays to the audience using horror cinematic depictions.

As the plot unfolds, it becomes evident that the virus infecting the characters is not your typical computer virus but the spectral forces that can invade the world through the Internet and other technologies. The consequences of this viral outbreak led to numerous deaths and disappearances, and the only thing left behind was the ash print on the walls. This effect can be interpreted as the visualization of a deep-rooted fear of Japanese society, the youth's complete isolation, and the disappearance from society altogether. Their physical body dissolves in real life, and the essence of their existence continues to live on in cyberspace as individual and isolated units, only to yearn to connect to the living once again through the screens.

Computer Science Student Harue

Harue plays a significant role in representing one of the film's core themes, loneliness, and isolation. In her many discussions with Kawashima, we understand her loneliness, as she expresses how she always feels a void, unable to fill it with real-life connection, in contrast to Kawashima, as he always seems happier around real people. Her loneliness and sorrow only intensify after encountering one of the ghosts, as she expresses her ideas about death and the afterlife morbidly and abnormally. Kawashima asks about Harue's parents, but she dismisses their significance as

"irrelevant." She expresses that she used to believe that the afterlife would be a joyful gathering until she reached high school and realized that death could mean endless loneliness. The concept frightens her because it implies that her estrangement will continue after she dies. Harue is depressed and lonely, concealing her sadness behind a cheerful and busy facade.

After a failed attempt to flee the infested city with Kawashima, Harue returns to her array of monitors, observing unsettling video feed depicting empty rooms and desolate figures in despair. She focuses on a particular feed on Kawashima's monitor, featuring a person wearing a red T-shirt and a bag over their head against a graffiti backdrop. Harue prints an image of the feed, which bears the words "The Forbidden Room." As the printer operates, the figure on the screen moves in a jerky and blurry manner. Eventually, the figure fills the screen, still with the bag on its head. Harue watches as the figure removes the bag, places a gun against their head, and pulls the trigger, causing a flash. The unsettling nature of the blurry video feed intensifies the chilling sequence. The printout concludes with the text "construction materials - red tape," conveying clear instructions.

Harue switches off the monitor, but to her surprise, it turns back on, displaying an eerie image of herself seated in her chair, facing the monitors. This scene evokes a sense of spookiness and displays inventive voyeuristic elements. Feeling shaken and bewildered, she looks behind her and notices that her bedroom door is partially open, as if a camera is filming her in that room. Despite her apprehension, Harue gathers her courage and slowly approaches the door, all while her monitor captures her movements towards the door. With determination, she switches on the bedroom light, causing her image on the monitor to brighten. She walks into the room, heading towards her bed, while the monitor feed displays her progress. A smile forms on her face as she confidently declares her presence:

Harue: I am...not alone...

As her image glitches in the monitor and our view, she reaches the invisible ghostly figure, embracing it with a smile, ignoring Kawashima's pleas at her front door, asking them to be together in real life. What can be interpreted from Harue's behaviors is that she, like many other people, found comfort in virtual connections. Many scholars have attempted to justify this preference and its possible outcomes. Some of their arguments are as follows; the Internet provides various social contexts that individuals engage with, ranging from the expansive connectivity offered by online social networking applications (Dunbar, 2012). Online interactions encourage individuals to open up and share personal thoughts and feelings more freely, leading to greater interpersonal disinhibition and intimate self-disclosure. (Jiang et al., 2011; Joinson & Paine, 2007; Ledbetter et al., 2011; Shim et al., 2011). While online social networking can enhance social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008), it does not guarantee a proportional increase in meaningful real-life connections (Dunbar, 2012). This phenomenon has been coined as the state of being "alone together," where individuals are simultaneously connected and isolated (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Schultze, 2010).

The online environment allows for comfort and freedom that may be challenging in face-to-face interactions. Additionally, the convenience and accessibility of online platforms offer opportunities for individuals to connect with others despite geographical or logistical barriers (Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016).

In retrospect, even though Korosowa would not possibly know what is about to come, it is remarkable how he predicted that the Internet, while serving as a tool or sometimes a detriment, paradoxically contributes to our contemporary world's sense of isolation despite its ability to connect us all.

Society Collapses In On Itself

The events escalated to epidemic proportions, leading to mass disappearances and Subsequent disasters. Ultimately, Kawashima and Mitchi, the two protagonists, join forces and decide to escape the crumbling ghost town. They emerged as the sole survivors, even though Kawashima succumbed to despair in his final moments and ventured into one of the forbidden rooms, where he encountered a ghost. As a result, he turned into ashes and left his mark on the wall. Throughout this unsettling event, Michi observed everything, wearing a smile on her face.

On absurd levels, the ending displays a sense of unease and strong repulsion towards the Internet in early 2000s Japan. This sentiment, commonly called "The Fear," was characterized by apprehension and disdain towards the online world. It was categorized as "mass paranoia," suggesting that the fear surpassed the rational evaluation of associated risks. According to Matthews (2005), in his interview with Kiyoshi Kurosawa, as evidenced by the movie's ending, Kurosawa saw the Internet as the downfall of society. As he put it in the interview, "This unknown force that was spreading like a virus throughout the country and had that kind of ominous and menacing feel to It." almost describing it as a plague. He strongly asserted that if enough people chose this mysterious place called "the internet" and refused to take part in traditional Japanese society, not only they will fall into endless despair, but also it would result in the nation's collapse.

4.2. Unfriended: Online Privacy Invasion and Its Implications

The core demographic for the film *Unfriended* primarily consists of young adults, specifically teenagers and college students. The movie's plot and subject matter directly resonate with this audience, as it revolves around technology and social media, two integral components of their daily lives. The film's tagline, "Online, your memories last forever. But so do your mistakes," highlights the negative repercussions of cyberbullying and the use of social media, issues that hold significant relevance for the target audience.

The identification of the film's target audience is crucial for effective marketing, production, and distribution strategies, especially when dealing with potentially controversial or sensitive content. In the case of a film centered on social media like *Unfriended* (2014), understanding the target audience becomes even more essential to ensure the material aligns with their interests and resonates with them. Given that social media has become deeply ingrained in people's lives across different age groups, comprehending the target audience becomes vital for filmmakers to create a compelling narrative that connects with their audience's preferences, behaviors, and interests. By identifying the target audience, filmmakers can tailor their content and imagery to align with the social media platforms and social interactions commonly utilized by their intended viewers.

Laura's Suicide Video

The film begins with a close-up of a computer screen, displaying a desktop interface. This immediately immerses the audience in a familiar and relatable setting, emphasizing the film's central focus on technology. The perspective shifts to an unidentified user navigating the screen, hovering over a link titled "Laura Barns Suicide" on the Liveleaks webpage. Clicking on the link leads to a distressing video featuring blurry and muffled footage of a high school girl holding a gun to her chest, while individuals outside the frame attempt to intervene but ultimately fail. The user proceeds to click on another YouTube link, revealing a separate video that exposes Laura in a humiliating manner, eliciting negative reactions from viewers. This particular video has amassed over 75,000 views and 5,318 dislikes.



Figure 1.2. The Opening Scene

Although this opening scene is brief, it plays a crucial role in setting the tone and introducing the unique setting of the film. It also serves to underscore the significance of the Internet in people's lives. Laura's decision to take her own life, while deeply disturbing, can be seen as her attempt to reclaim some measure of control after experiencing the violation of her privacy and the subsequent online torment. Social media users, especially teenagers, often share personal information on these platforms, as the design of these platforms makes it difficult to avoid sharing intimate details. Defining and measuring privacy in the digital world can be challenging, but recent theoretical approaches highlight the importance of individual control over information sharing and exposure. Westin provides a comprehensive definition of privacy, emphasizing individuals' right to determine how and to what extent their information is communicated to others. Unauthorized disclosures of personal information expose individuals to the unwanted scrutiny of others, eroding their privacy. In Laura's case, the dissemination of her most vulnerable and humiliating moments reflects society's fear of losing agency over their personal lives. The film aligns the audience with the screen, confronting them with the reality of privacy violations and suggesting their complicity in cyberbullying by consuming someone's private moments. A year after her suicide, Laura, as a digital ghost, possesses supernatural access to victims' digital devices, enabling her to navigate various social networks and manipulate data at will. While the extent of Laura's digital proficiency is unknown to viewers, the film implies that her supernatural abilities have transformed her into a skilled hacker.

The Skype Call

The following scene transitions to a Skype call, where we meet two characters, Blair Lily and Mitch Rousell. Through Blair's computer screen, the viewers witness their casual and lighthearted banter, setting a sense of normalcy before the horror unfolds. As their conversation progresses, it

takes a more intimate turn, with Blair showing her feet and Mitch appearing shirtless on his bed when he turns on his camera.

Introducing these characters holds significance in two aspects. Firstly, social media plays a significant role in the lives of most teenagers. According to a survey conducted by Pew Research Center, a large majority of teenagers (92%) go online daily, with a significant portion (24%) reporting being online "almost constantly." Social media platforms, such as Snapchat, Instagram, Skype, and Twitter, are particularly popular among teenagers as they facilitate quick and visual communication, allowing for easy sharing with a broad audience. These platforms serve various purposes, including staying in touch with friends and family, making new connections, sharing information, news, and creative expressions. While social media can have both positive and negative effects on teenagers' relationships, it often helps them maintain friendships, especially when separated by distance.

By reimagining the scene with Blair and Mitch engaging in online communication, the film captures the pervasive influence of social media in today's teenage lives. Furthermore, social media platforms offer teenagers a means to connect with like-minded individuals who share their interests and passions, fostering a sense of community and providing an outlet for creative expression. However, it's important to acknowledge that social media can also introduce stress, anxiety, and conflict into teenagers' lives. The pressure to maintain a perfect online image and the fear of missing out on social events can contribute to these negative experiences. Additionally, cyberbullying and online harassment pose significant risks in the online realm.

Within the film's narrative, it is implied that Blair, Mitch, and the other characters engaged in the Skype call share a close friendship and regularly interact during their school days. Despite their offline conversations, they also rely on social media as a means to sustain their connections and extend their discussions. While the specific subjects they discuss online remain undisclosed, it is conceivable that the content may differ from their in-person interactions, underscoring the distinct dynamics of social media communication.

One significant distinction between online and face-to-face conversations can be observed in the level of intimacy and self-disclosure. Online communication platforms offer teenagers a certain degree of anonymity and distance, which often facilitates the sharing of personal information and emotions more freely than in in-person interactions. This can foster candid and open dialogues that might not occur in traditional face-to-face settings. However, it is important to acknowledge that this increased level of intimacy also carries inherent risks. The sense of anonymity and distance may encourage teenagers to divulge excessive information, potentially exposing them to inappropriate or harmful situations.

Furthermore, the deliberate inclusion of an intimate and sexual tone in the conversation between the two teenage characters serves as a calculated choice by the filmmakers to underscore the behaviors exhibited by teenagers on social media, particularly on platforms with video chat features like Skype. Various factors contribute to why some teenagers engage in inappropriate and potentially harmful behaviors on such platforms. These factors encompass the anonymity afforded by social media, a lack of parental supervision, peer pressure, competition, the desire for attention or validation from others, limited understanding of consequences, and constant exposure to explicit

content. It is crucial to address these factors in order to mitigate the negative effects of social media usage among young individuals.

Do Not/Call the Police

As the narrative progresses, Laura's spirit hijacks the group Skype call, which at first, the victims consider her presence as a glitch, asking Blair to remove the unknown account. However, Blair needs to be more tech-savvy, as she frequently complains about not knowing how to remove/report the seemingly intrusive profile. After the group realized that the profile belonged to their decade's friend Laura, the ghost, utilizing social media functions, manipulates the popular sleepover game "Never Have I Ever" to expose the dangers of online platforms. Laura reveals the participants' hidden, shameful acts in this twisted version—failure to confess results in Laura posting evidence of the act on Facebook. Players face fatal consequences upon admitting to five acts, which included private and personal secrets, including allegations of theft, spreading rumors, and even incidents of sexual assault. In the context of Laura's extraordinary death and her existence in the digital afterlife, this concept of social death blurs the boundaries between the living and the non-living. It presents a different kind of life and death to both the audience and the participants. Experiencing public exposure akin to social death, the division between public and private becomes intertwined with societal judgments of right and wrong. Consequently, social media is portrayed as restricting the power of those who hold secrets and granting agency to those who aim to reveal them (Hrynyshyn, 2017).

As the game progresses, it gradually becomes clear that every person in the Skype call has been involved in cyberbullying Laura Barns to some extent. While the level of participation varies

among the teens, with some leaving anonymous comments on the well-known YouTube video and others simply displaying indifference towards her suffering and death, they all share responsibility for invading Laura's privacy, causing her to lose control over her own life, and ultimately leading to her suicide. This information causes Laura to kill the teenagers' one after the other, seeking poetic justice. In an attempt to escape Laura's terror, one of the characters attempts to call the police; although successful, upon the arrival of the police force, she is shown dead in the bathroom while still connected to the Skype call.

In another failed attempt, Ken, the only tech-savvy person in his group, provides the group with a link that could eliminate Laura's account from their group call. Even though the link successfully kicks Laura from the call, the effect is temporary since Laura's supernatural grip on the digital domain again connects her to her victims. The fact that only one out of six teenagers in the movie is knowledgeable about digital technology can be interpreted as although all these teenagers are born in an era dominated by digital technology, and not all are digitally incompetent. Young users of digital technologies often overestimate their ICT skills (Information and Communication Technologies). According to a study conducted in 2014, there is a significant difference between how young people assess their computer skills and their actual knowledge. For instance, 84% of the participants believed they had a 'very good' or 'good' understanding of the Internet. However, when their skills were put to practical tests, 49% performed poorly, receiving ratings of 'bad' or 'very bad'(Manea & Stan, 2016).

Revenge

In the film's climax, Blaire confronts Laura alone, thinking she has triumphed over the ghost's game. However, her relief is short-lived when she receives a message from the ghost through

Laura's old Facebook profile, revealing that there is one more thing she must admit. Desperate and in tears, Blaire pleads with the ghost on Facebook and Skype. Suddenly, Laura's profile shares an extended version of the humiliating video titled "LAURA BARNS KILL URSELF" on Facebook. The video exposes Blaire as the person who recorded and maliciously posted it online, disregarding Laura's pleas to keep it a secret. As the video spreads, Blaire's friends and classmates begin commenting, condemning her for her actions and blaming her for Laura's suicide.

These final moments painfully demonstrate that nothing remains private on social media, regardless of one's efforts. Just as it happened with Laura's video, Facebook's community swarms and creates different societies around the moments of private matters that inevitably become public.

In both movies, *Kairo* and *Unfriended*, we witness the portrayal of technologies like laptops, smartphones, social media platforms, and internet communication software as bridges connecting the living world to the supernatural realm. The analysis findings suggest that these technologies serve as portals through which ghosts can enter the physical world.

One of the prominent themes that emerged is the idea of the "Internet as a gateway for supernatural phenomena." In both films, we see spirits manifesting through online interactions, inhabiting digital devices, and utilizing the digital realm to transcend into the physical world. This raises discussions about how supernatural entities exploit the functionalities of technology to communicate with the living effectively.

Another significant theme revolves around "Technology and isolation." The characters in both movies experience emotional and physical isolation due to their reliance on technology, making them vulnerable to supernatural forces. *Unfriended*'s victims, for instance, are depicted as more physically isolated, glued to their screens in their bedrooms, and disconnected from the outside world. On the other hand, *Kairo* delves into the psychological and physical effects of the characters' isolation over a more extended period.

The use of technology as a means of control or manipulation is also explored, as evident in *Unfriended*, where the ghost manipulates characters through their online activities, taking control of their devices completely. In *Kairo*, the spirits are compared to computer viruses, appearing without the user's consent and obstructing screen functions.

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the characters' vulnerability through online communication. Personal information disclosure online leads to cyberbullying, manipulation, and deception by supernatural entities. Seeking information about the paranormal through online platforms exposes characters to haunting experiences.

The notion of "Technological dependency" is evident in both movies, where characters rely heavily on communication technologies to interact with the supernatural. Attempting to unplug or disconnect from the digital space is presented as a potential escape route, but the outcomes differ. In one instance, characters successfully evade supernatural forces by unplugging. At the same time, on the other, they find it difficult or impossible to fully disconnect, possibly due to their dependency on technology or the influence of supernatural entities.

The characters' "online identities" are significantly influenced by the presence of the supernatural, leading to tensions and strains in their offline relationships. Many characters in both films maintain dual identities, presenting themselves differently online and hiding aspects of their true selves. This double life has lasting effects, mainly seen in *Kairo*, where encountering ghosts online leads to increased isolation and dependency on digital devices.

In both movies, social media platforms play vital roles in the plot, serving as channels for characters to communicate and interact with supernatural forces. However, the specific platforms used differ, with *Unfriended* featuring Facebook, Twitter, and Skype, while *Kairo* involves online chat rooms and forums, adding an element of anonymity and suspense to interactions.

In conclusion, the genre analysis provides valuable insights into how technology, social media platforms, and online communication are depicted in *Kairo* and *Unfriended*. The movies explore various themes, such as the Internet as a gateway for supernatural phenomena, technology and isolation, online vulnerability, technological dependency, and the influence of online identities. These findings shed light on the portrayal of cyberspace and its impact on characters' experiences, reflecting contemporary anxieties and complexities of navigating the digital world in the horror genre.

5. DISCUSSION

The discussion section presents and elaborates on the results of the research. The previous areas of this thesis explored the evolution and many aspects of cyberspace and its impact on youth, from the early days of the Internet to the explosion of social media platforms. This study used genre analysis to investigate how the Internet has become a personal medium for social interaction, drawing on theoretical frameworks from media studies, technoculture, and the horror genre. Several themes and concepts were extracted from *Kairo* (2001) and *Unfriended* (2014) to make case studies that have provided valuable insights into the changing dynamics of online platforms and how young people interact with the digital realm.

In this discussion section, I will delve deeper into the key themes that have emerged from the analysis, focusing on what the supernatural represents, the concept of digital space as a liminal realm, and the specific dynamics of youth and online communication. By exploring these themes, I hope to shed light on the larger ramifications and societal anxieties of the cyberspace revolution, as well as how we interact with the digital environment in the present day. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings.

5.1. What Does the Supernatural Element Represent?

The horror genre has always served as a fertile ground for social commentary due to its ability to challenge our perception of villainy. It provides a unique opportunity to empathize with the entities we fear while delving into the underlying reasons behind our fears. (Solórzano and Yosso 2002)

One of the critical themes in horror film theory is the concept of "the other," which refers to the portrayal of those perceived as different or threatening, in other words, villainy. The selected movies for this study use spectral forces to convey dread in the viewers, though each ghost and supernatural event presented in *Kairo* and *unfriended* bear different meanings.

The lonely ghosts in *Kairo* first appear on a website that supposedly the users are involuntarily connected to, all sitting alone in despair and distress, never conversing through these videos. The movie justifies their existence as ghosts that have invaded the digital realm to communicate with the living and perhaps share their loneliness even in death. The encounters in the film had a surreal effect on the living characters, symbolized by their physical bodies disintegrating into dust. Furthermore, unlike the vengeful spirit of Laura in *Unfriended*, they never physically harm any characters, as they seem to yearn for a connection, only to pass on a message from the beyond. Considering the era, the movie *Kairo* was made and released, the ghosts can represent the very early anonymous chat room, The computer bulletin board system, commercial online services, and early social network users in the early years of the Internet. Internet chatrooms provide a platform for unrestricted communication with a wide range of individuals worldwide.

During the 1990s, the popularity of chat rooms skyrocketed, reaching a point where AOL users alone were spending an astonishing one million hours chatting daily (Dewey, 2014). The time people spent engaging in online conversations during this era has marked a new chapter in digital communication. Despite enduring the frustrations of dial-up connections, frequent interruptions, and slower internet speeds compared to today, users persevered. Beyond the surface-level chaos and explicit content, a significant phenomenon occurred. People were finding connections, forming communities, and experiencing an unprecedented sense of belonging (Walker, 2021). Though the time spent on mentioned platforms raised concerning states globally, according to

Pendry and Salvatore (2015), some scholars suggested the concept of the "internet paradox," which indicates that more online interaction may lead to decreased well-being by interrupting and preventing offline social interactions. Individuals who spend too much time online may miss out on required face-to-face contact with loved ones, which may have long-term detrimental repercussions for their psychological well-being (Mesch, 2001; Nie et al., 2002).

Research has provided evidence that excessive online activity can negatively affect users. Studies have found that heavy internet users feel isolated from society and have fewer interactions with their family and friends (Nie & Hillygus, 2002; Nie et al., 2002). These findings suggest that relying too much on online interactions may impede the quality and quantity of offline social connections, ultimately affecting individuals' overall well-being in a harmful way.

There is evidence that excessive online activity can negatively affect users. Heavy internet users' express feelings of social isolation and fewer interactions with family and friends (Nie & Hillygus, 2002; Nie et al., 2002). These findings suggest that an overreliance on online contacts may reduce the quality and frequency of interactions. This overreliance on technology for connection and the sense of dread and isolation was not exclusively belonged to the early 2000s, as AOL's Instant Messenger canceled its chat rooms in 2010, marking a significant shift in the era of anonymous instant messaging. Following the example, Yahoo Messenger discontinued its public chat rooms in 2012, claiming that they were not a core feature of Yahoo! followed by the complete shutdown of MSN Messenger in China, the service's remaining platform, marking the end of the mainstream chatroom era. Despite this, the lingering effect of social isolation and loneliness caused by technology did not stop, as users were exposed to thousands of other platforms catering to their interests that kept them occupied for hours, glued to their screens. The variety of social media platforms offers what feels like an endless amount of content, virtual reality games, and the recent

attempt of the mastermind behind Meta platforms, Mark Zuckerberg, to create a virtual environment similar to reality all are just part of the reasons why individuals might choose to remain in the cyberspace longer than real life.

To wrap up this discussion, the surreal and unsettling portrayal of youth turning into ash and losing their physical body to merge into the digital world and the apocalyptic ending of the film *Kairo* feels alarmingly relevant today. The visionary portrayal by director Kiyoshi Kurosawa, depicting the tragic vanishing of the physical presence of youth, has become eerily close to reality. This serves as a thought-provoking commentary on the contemporary state of society.

The portrayal of the supernatural in *Kairo* emphasizes the negative aspects of early online communities, where individuals could easily hide behind false identities and engage in harmful behaviors without accountability. The film taps into society's concerns about the anonymity of online interactions and the potential for manipulation and exploitation. By personifying these fears through supernatural entities, the film highlights the possible risks of navigating the digital realm and the potential for individuals to fall victim to unseen threats.

Online anonymity refers to interactions where the user creates usernames, avatars, or other social profiles for a social purpose online (Keipi & Oksanen, 2014). *Kairo's* events were heavily inspired by the Netto shinju, also known as Internet group suicide, a modern phenomenon in Japan where strangers connect online and arrange suicide together. Since the early 2000s, there have been several incidents in which young Japanese people have used the Internet to communicate, share information about suicide methods, and organize offline meetings for group or individual suicide purposes (Ikunaga et al., 2013).

As s massive social panic in Japan, the idea of individuals finding like-minded users online and conspiring to form dangerous groups, a danger to either themselves or others, hit the global scale. Since then, has undergone massive changes and can be seen in various forms even today. Kurosowa's ghosts, although mute most of the time, attract characters that have many things in common; most of them are young individuals with social isolation tendencies that are pretty tech-savvy or are willing to learn more about modern technology. Communicating with these selected individuals seems to influence or infect the victims, dragging them to the depth of depression and creating a reliance on communication with supernatural ghosts rather than the living.

Another notable aspect to consider is how ghosts in the film gain access to the physical world. Initially, the phenomenon is attributed to an internet-based virus, but it becomes evident that the ghosts possess supernatural capabilities to infiltrate and manipulate the digital realm. They can connect themselves to computers connected to the Internet, bypassing user consent or awareness. This parallel can be drawn to websites such as Chatroulette and Omegle, where individuals can engage in video chats with anonymous users. While the mechanisms differ, both scenarios involve connecting with unknown entities through digital platforms, even though in different contexts and with varying levels of control and consent. Overall, *Kairo* serves as a thought-provoking reflection on the potential dangers and societal implications of online anonymity and the powerful influence of the digital realm on individuals' well-being. It urges viewers to consider the risks and consequences of their online interactions and to prioritize meaningful connections and support in both the virtual and physical realms.

The ghosts in *Kairo* not only invaded the digital space but also would reach out to the characters in real life, make themselves visible in their everyday environment and pose a disturbing presence in their lives, an unsettling feeling of the possibility of a real-life encounter with faceless, anonymous users with hidden identities. The online connection could inspire offline engagement in the late 90s and early 2000s, allowing people to connect and develop digital and physical relationships. Online platforms enabled people with similar interests to connect, arrange events, and participate in offline activities. This combination of online and offline participation fostered community creation and real-world connections. However, it is essential to acknowledge that there were also risks associated with online interaction during that time. The anonymity and distance afforded by the Internet meant that some individuals could misrepresent themselves or engage in harmful behaviors. This raised concerns about online predators, cyberbullying, and frauds. Users needed to be cautious and aware of these dangers when transitioning from online interactions to face-to-face encounters. The conscious choice Kurosowa made to not limit his depressed ghosts to the screens of users' computers signaled the lurking concerns of Japanese society and the world's world when it came to the vast possibility the Internet provided us with connecting with everyone.

Unfriended presents a distinct form of spectral encounter, suggesting that the ghosts we encounter in the present are not anonymous entities lurking in the shadows but somewhat familiar figures who confront us with our real-life and online actions. The vengeful spirit of Laura, portrayed in the film, embodies this notion. Unlike the ghosts in *Kairo*, Laura's identity is known, highlighting the shift in our understanding of social media use.

The film's portrayal reflects the transformation in how adolescents engage with social media. While we may have numerous online "friends" and "followers" whom we may not know personally, social media's primary purpose has shifted towards extending and strengthening our

real-life relationships. Friendships are crucial in adolescents' lives, contributing to their emotional well-being and happiness. Schwartz-Mette et al. (2020) research suggests that adolescents with higher-quality friendships experience fewer internalizing problems. Positive qualities of friendship, such as warmth and support, have been demonstrated to have a considerable impact on the well-being of adolescents (Raboteag-ari & Aki, 2014). As a result, when investigating the association between social media use and well-being, the quality of friendships is a critical issue to consider.

Furthermore, Social media platforms offer a unique space for young people to expand and amplify their friendships. Koo et al. (2015) highlight the social nature of social media use, which is closely intertwined with offline friendship dynamics. Adolescents often use social media to enhance friendships, stay connected, and share experiences. These platforms provide an avenue for continuous communication, allowing youth to engage with their friends beyond face-to-face interactions. Through sharing photos, videos, and messages, social media enables youth to strengthen their bonds and create lasting memories.

Shockingly, *Unfriended* showcases social media's positive aspects in fostering connections and amplifying friendships. The characters use social media platforms to communicate, support each other, and share their experiences. They rely on these digital spaces to stay connected and find solace in their friendships, even facing challenges. However, throughout the movie, the characters navigate their friendships and reveal their true selves through online interactions. The story highlights the potential consequences of hostile online behavior and how our actions can shape our relationships. As the characters' secrets and past mistakes are exposed, we see the fragility and vulnerability of their friendships.

Another element depicted in the film is the examination of how social media can both strengthen and complicate relationships through the creation of digital footprints. The tagline, "Online, your memories last forever. But so do your mistakes," succinctly captures the enduring consequences of our actions in the digital realm. The astonishing revelation of the ending is a cautionary tale for avid social media users about the massive amount of personal data we leave behind on social media no longer feels personal, as it is floating in the digital world and is available for about anyone with access to the Internet.

The movie emphasizes that the data, i.e., various types of media such as images, sound recordings, and videos we upload, may harm everyone included in them, such as a seemingly innocent video of Laura in a vulnerable position uploaded on Facebook that caused profound emotional harm to her and ultimately people who were involved with the incident. Shockingly, Laura's close circle of friends uploaded the embarrassing footage and once confronted by the vengeful ghost, no matter how much they denied it, the data remaining will always reveal the truth.

Laura, who has suffered the devastation of cyberbullying, seeks vengeance by utilizing similar strategies that lead to her tragic demise. Her purpose is to cause her pals anguish by tormenting them, spreading vicious rumors about them, exposing their secrets, and turning them against one another. This representation is a striking reminder of the negative consequences of cyberbullying and the long-term effects it may have on people's mental and emotional well-being. Laura's familiarity with the group gave her the upper hand in taunting her fellow ex-friends; various layers of influence surround individuals as they grow and develop. These layers encompass both their real-life and online friends and networks. The environments impact what young people perceive as typical conduct based on what they observe others doing. For example, social media has unspoken conventions and expectations about sharing personal information with peers. These

regulations may differ based on the platform or social group to which someone belongs. When paired with individual behaviors and beliefs, these influences can contribute to the wide range of issues that young people confront.

One particular challenge developed is cyberbullying, which involves using personal information to harm or harass others online. Cyberbullies may use social networking norms and expectations to carry out their actions. They may target specific people based on personal information they have access to, such as private messages, images, or other sensitive material. Personal information misuse can have severe repercussions for victims, such as emotional discomfort, social isolation, and a deterioration in mental well-being (Meter & Bauman, 2015).

As a result, Laura's vindictive spirit shows how young individuals must be cautious about their online personal information and be aware of the risks connected with cyberbullying. Individuals can make efforts to protect themselves and promote a safer online environment for everyone by understanding the link between personal information and cyberbullying.

5.2. Digital Space as a Liminal Realm

Cyberspace, the digital domain of interconnected computer systems, has grown substantially over time. It evolved from a simple information-sharing network to the vast and dynamic world of social media platforms we know today. In this section, I will look at various perspectives of cyberspace and its relevance as a liminal environment where the lines between the physical and digital worlds blur and individuals navigate an intricate relationship between social norms and personal identities. In this section, I will argue that the films *Kairo* (2001) and *Unfriended* (2014) portray different

meanings of cyberspace, presenting it as a dark and haunting realm where supernatural entities exploit the vulnerabilities of individuals through technology. The horror genre has long been known to reflect societal fears and anxieties, and by integrating the Internet and social media platforms into their narratives, these films respond to the concerns surrounding technology and its potential negative consequences (Clover, 1992). As cautionary tales, they delve into the darker side of cyberspace, highlighting the potential dangers and exploring the complexities of online interactions.

Stella Ting-Toomey's Intercultural Communication theory reveals that the rise of social media has brought about the emergence of Echo Chambers. These chambers refer to the tendency of individuals to isolate themselves and engage predominantly with like-minded individuals, creating distinct spaces between different religions, cultures, or groups. Paradoxically, efforts to foster communication and bridge the gap between "Us" and "The Others" can unintentionally contribute to the formation of exclusivist communities in cyberspace.

In the movies *Kairo* and *Unfriended*, various manifestations of Echo Chambers are depicted, shedding light on the consequences of isolated online environments. In *Unfriended*, the cyberspace portrayed showcases a distinct echo chamber characterized by homophily. Homophily refers to the tendency of individuals to associate and interact with others who are similar to them in terms of beliefs, interests, and backgrounds (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

In *Unfriended*, the group of friends is trapped within a closed online world where their interactions are limited to their small circle. The characters' imprisonment amplifies the echo chamber effect, reinforcing their previous views and attitudes without being exposed to varied opinions or

alternative viewpoints. The concept of homophily becomes evident as the characters engage primarily with people who share similar interests and beliefs. They connect via video calls, chats, and social media platforms, allowing them to remain a close-knit community with limited exposure to opposing perspectives. This homogeneous atmosphere strengthens their common biases and precludes effective intercultural communication. The group's homophily supports its shared views and further isolates them from other perspectives. It is worth mentioning that the group's homophilous tendencies led to Laura's downfall in the first place, as it seems like they all excluded her from the group while uploading disturbing videos about her on social media that, at least in the beginning, was limited to the circle of their school. Towards the movie's end, while Blair attempts to reach out for help within the cyber environment, she seems to struggle to break from the echo chamber. While she tries to explain the danger she and her friends are in frantically, the anonymous users on Chatroulette, no one seems to connect or even bother to engage with her. This interaction can indicate the exclusiveness of said chambers and the difficulties of breaking away from our personal preferences, and complex algorithm keeps us within a specific circle (Karlsen, Johnsen, Wollebaek, & Enjolras, 2017).

Kairo and *Unfriended* depict blurring the border between reality and the digital realm. Both movies hint at the concept of interfaces and question what is real. Viewing reality through interfaces can be disconcerting, much as it is in the film when characters begin to wonder if the digital ghosts, they encounter are a part of their reality. The characters in *Kairo* struggle to distinguish between the actual and digital worlds as the lines between them become increasingly blurred. Moreover, the characters of *Unfriended* seem to get hurt by the spirit physically. This blurred reality and the appearance of digital ghosts highlight the uncomfortable aspect of relying

excessively on interfaces, the difficulty distinguishing between what is real, and what is not (Zizek, 2002).

In *Kairo*, the disappearance of the characters' physical forms reflects the profound connection to the ideas we have discussed. As technology improves, the line between our inner self and the outside world blurs. The film demonstrates this when the characters get absorbed into the digital realm and lose their physical presence. Similarly, in our contemporary world, virtual reality and technological enhancements challenge our perception of our bodies and their relationship to the environment. Our internal organs and artificial extensions blur the boundaries between what is inside and outside us. Furthermore, when we immerse ourselves in virtual experiences, the line between reality and simulation becomes hazy, engulfing us. The movie *Kairo* exemplifies this blurring of boundaries, highlighting how the characters' physical disappearance symbolizes the erasure of conventional distinctions between the self and the digital world.

In contrast, *Unfriended* highlights worry about the digital space harming us in real life and our double life. Both worlds cross over. As we as users might consider the digital space as harmless and innocent role-playing, a concept that was promised by the introduction of communication technologies; according to (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997, p. 10), the use of the phone and the Internet can lead to a unique communication experience where people feel freer to express themselves compared to face-to-face interactions. In this context, the absence of physical presence and the anonymity of online communication can remove inhibitions, enabling individuals to share thoughts and feelings they might hesitate to express in person. *Unfriended* is aware of this ability and uses this thought against its characters. At the movie's climax, Blair, still hopeful she can manipulate Laura's restless spirit, turns the blame on publishing Laura's embarrassing video on her boyfriend. Unfortunately for her, the delusion of the freedom of technology does not work. Not

only does she attempt to lie and deceive, but also another aspect of cyberspace comes to hunt her, as she is revealed the one recording Laura, hinting that although we are seemingly free to be whomever we want, all our actions remain in cyberspace, despite our denial of them in real life.

5.3. Youth and the Digital Frontier: Navigating Identity in the Tech-Savvy Era

Comparing and analyzing films such as *Kairo* and *Unfriended* in this research gives a valuable lens to see how young people's attitudes regarding the Internet evolve. These films act as a narrative timeline, helping us see the evolving roles that the Internet plays in the everyday lives of young people and the anxieties they face at each stage. We get more insights into the complex relationships between young people and the digital environment by evaluating these cinematic representations. The research provides a glimpse into variations in their views, habits, and worries as they navigate the ever-expanding digital realm.

While *Kairo*'s characters are navigating and contemplating joining the newly introduced realm, *Unfriended* teenagers are digital natives, a phrase created by Marc Prensky in 2001 to characterize the generation of people who grew up in an era of omnipresent technology, such as computers and the Internet (Prensky, 2001). Prensky cleverly does come up with another term that can describe the characters in *Kairo* as Digital Immigrants. This creative wordplay not only helps us distinguish and separate generations before and after the introduction of the Internet but might also be interpreted as the digital realm as an already existing and well-established environment that invited new users in and considered the new generation born in it as native citizens of the realm.

The first impression of digital immigrants of *Kairo* saw the cyber environment as a vast, limitless place, somewhere that they can take refuge and flee from the burdens and loneliness of real life,

only to discover that this digital afterlife is the continuation of their despair. There is a visible separation between the characters and their choices; as mentioned before, Kurosawa seems to punish the ones who are open to exploring the Internet, while the last survivors are technophobes who refuse the temptation of whatever digital life offers. Highlighted in the narrative of Harue, the tech-savvy computer science graduate, people showing signs of depression and social isolation accepted this newly emerged technology, ushering in an era of problematic Internet use, i.e., Internet addiction and social retreat. As evidenced in a survey conducted by Kitazawa, M., Yoshimura, M., Hitokoto, H., Sato-Fujimoto, Y., Murata, M., Negishi, K., Mimura, M., Tsubota, K., & Kishimoto, T to study the effects of internet usage on the happiness of Japanese university students, with consideration that the concept of happiness varies from culture to culture. It was found that Japanese youths' happiness was negatively correlated with problematic internet use (PIU). Furthermore, having more Twitter followers, being female, having a better sleep, and attending school regularly were positively associated with happiness (Kitazawa et al., 2019).

On the other hand, the digital natives of *unfriended* exhibit a regular use of social media has become an extent of their social lives or even prefer virtual connections to real ones; as Turkle puts it, rather than addressing real personal and societal issues, a growing number of individuals seem to be opting to engage themselves in virtual realms. People express that the virtual spaces, such as the rooms and mazes on MUDs, offer a sense of safety compared to the unpredictability of city streets. They perceive virtual interactions, including virtual sex and friendships formed on MUDs, as more intense and controllable than real life. Additionally, quickly disconnecting from these virtual spaces provides an escape when things are unplanned (Turkle 1995: 244). However, this escape becomes more complex and challenging, as evidenced by the characters' behavior when escaping the danger presented on the screens.

The concept of unplugging was consistently emphasized in the previous chapters of this study, as it underscores a crucial concept concerning youth and their attitude towards cyberspace. In the face of terror and fear, Kawashima always manages to either disconnect from the Internet or completely unplug the devices, separating himself from the threat crossing over from cyberspace through his screen. This act can indicate the separation youth had at the beginning of the internet introduction, not yet accepting it as part of their lives.

In contrast, *unfriended* movie unfold exclusively within the confines of computer screens and Skype calls. Surprisingly, despite the escalating horror and witnessing the gruesome deaths of their friends, none of the teenage characters attempt to disconnect from the Internet or power down their devices. Despite being aware that the threat and supernatural forces emanate from the Skype call connection, they remain glued to their screens throughout the movie. This can be decoded as the technological dependency the modern generation experiences, as digital devices have become an extension of their bodies in a physical form. The notion of "content" discussed by McLuhan in his statement, "the user is the content," differs from the content referred to in this context. "The user is the content" pertains to how individuals interpret the information they encounter within an information system. However, with digital media, the system also plays a role in interpretation. It interprets the users, who essentially become the system's content, as their actions and the resulting data become part of the vast pool of Big Data that constitutes the system they interacted with. Consequently, users become an extension of the medium, aligning with McLuhan's foresight that "In this electronic age, we see ourselves being transformed into information, moving towards the technological extension of consciousness" (McLuhan, 1994) - a concept exemplified in the movie *Unfriended*, where the characters become intertwined with the terrifying content unfolding within the movie's digital realm.

When comparing the responses of the teenage characters to online threats and their willingness to seek help, considerable differences appear. When confronted with danger in the digital domain, the characters in *Kairo* tend to reach out to others and external resources. They actively seek aid from friends, family, and even professionals to comprehend and overcome the unsettling experiences they encounter online. This demonstrates a reliance on human connection and outside assistance when confronted with challenging conditions.

Unfriended's youngsters, on the other hand, take a different strategy. Although they initially try to call the police on their phones, their efforts are restricted to the digital realm. They prefer to remain engrossed in the online environment rather than seeking urgent physical assistance or contacting trusted individuals. Blair, one of the protagonists, resorts to using a chatroulette website as a proxy to seek help, illustrating her reliance on technology. The characters' reliance on digital platforms and inability to completely detach from the digital environment underscores their imprisonment within the boundaries of their technological dependency. According to a report by Anderson and Jiang (2018), titled "Teens, social media & Technology 2018," it was found that between 2015 and 2018, the percentage of adolescents reporting being online almost constantly climbed from 25% to 45% in the United States indicating a rapid growth of preferring online presence to real life.

A study by Lampe et al. revealed that younger adults were more inclined to use Facebook to ask questions than older adults did. The research indicated a negative correlation between age and the likelihood of using Facebook as a platform for inquiries. According to Forte, Dickard, Magee, and Agosto (2014), in a study examining what teenagers ask their online social networks, the data indicate that participants who post questions online are not aiming to seek information from a large and unknown group of potential responders. Instead, they intend to target specific audiences possessing the desired information. Teens feel confident in their ability to control their privacy

settings and often make an effort to manage who can see their shared content (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). This is primarily evident on popular platforms like Facebook, where privacy settings are becoming more complex, and teens use them more frequently to control and limit their target audiences (Stutzman, Gross, & Acquisti, 2012). When they ask a question by posting a status update, they can make it visible to a broad audience or limit it to a select few individuals, indicating that teenagers are becoming aware and educated when it comes to limiting the access of others to their data.

In conclusion, the films *Kairo* and *Unfriended* provide valuable portrayals of the youth's engagement with the Internet and the significance of understanding this dynamic. They depict the changing interaction between young people and technology, from exploring new territories to becoming deeply ingrained in the digital world. These movies serve as a reminder of the necessity of understanding the impact of technology on young people and the importance of taking a deliberate approach to their digital experiences.

This chapter outlined the most relevant themes in analyzing the selected movies for this study. By exploring the depths of Horror films, the study set on exploration that reveals the mysteries and fears hiding just below the surface. These films serve as a portal into the human psyche, demonstrating the psychological impact of technology on our lives and peeling back the layers of our deepest worries. Through their tales, horror films offer a sophisticated analysis of our changing connection with technology and its tremendous influence on our ideas, habits, and interactions.

The supernatural components in films such as *Kairo* and *Unfriended* take on symbolic roles, symbolizing various facets of the digital universe and online connections. *Kairo* depicts the lonely ghosts who haunt the digital domain, evoking the isolation and detachment of early internet users.

They reflect the early online communities where people could connect while still feeling a profound sense of loneliness. Moreover, the dissolution of physical bodies into the digital realm underscores the merging of the material and virtual worlds, emphasizing the potential risks of overreliance on online interactions at the expense of offline social connections. The ghosts in *Kairo* also serve as a commentary on the darker aspects of early internet communities, where anonymity allowed destructive activities to go unpunished.

In contrast, *Unfriended* introduces us to Laura's vengeful ghost, representing our digital deeds' consequences. This film digs at the changing dynamics of adolescent social media engagement and emphasizes the importance of real-life friendships. The inclusion of Laura in the film highlights the long-term consequences of our online behavior, emphasizing the hazards of cyberbullying and the misuse of personal information. It is a cautionary tale, urging us to be cautious when giving personal information online and to think about the consequences of our digital interactions.

Finally, by studying horror films and techno-horror narratives, we can obtain vital insights into the rapid changes occurring in cyberspace and the behaviors of today's youth. These film stories act as a mirror, reflecting our worries and hope in the digital age, and show that the monstrous other is not the ghosts terrorizing the main characters but is the unknown realm beyond their screens, the realm that promises them a safe place, but violates each of those promises. Understanding the intricate interplay between technology and human psychology allows us to navigate the ever-changing terrain of cyberspace with greater awareness, building a healthier and more responsible digital ecosystem for future generations.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of selected movies in this study has revealed that the techno horror genre primarily focuses on the devices and technologies on the surface. Nevertheless, in the case of digital horror, it is clear that cyberspace—a new dimension/space where supernatural beings can exist—is the primary antagonist. These entities serve as a representation of and response to the anxieties and concerns that society has towards the Internet. Through films like *Kairo* and *Unfriended*, it becomes apparent that supernatural components take on symbolic roles within the digital universe and online connections. In *Kairo*, the portrayal of lonely ghosts haunting the digital domain reflects the isolation and detachment experienced by early internet users. These apparitions serve as a commentary on the early online communities, where individuals could connect but still felt profound loneliness. In addition, the dissolution of physical bodies into the digital realm highlights the merging of the material and virtual worlds, underscoring the potential risks of excessive reliance on online interactions at the expense of offline social connections. Furthermore, the ghosts in *Kairo* also represent the darker aspects of early internet communities, where anonymity facilitated destructive activities without repercussion.

Moreover, *Unfriended* introduces Laura's vengeful ghost, representing our digital activities' consequences. The result of the analysis shows the changing dynamics of adolescent social media use and underscores the importance of real-life friendships. Laura's inclusion highlights the long-term implications of our online behavior, underlining the risks of cyberbullying and the exploitation of personal information. It serves as a cautionary tale, reminding people to be cautious when giving personal information.

Additionally, to explore the portrayal of technology and its interaction with the supernatural, horror movies have also embraced the concept of cyberspace as a new domain for their haunting narratives. Traditionally, haunted mansions and cabins have been the settings for horror stories. Still, supernatural entities have moved into the digital realm, making cyberspace the modern equivalent of these haunted locales.

Beyond reflecting society's inner fears, the horror genre has evolved to make educated predictions of the future or even display our worst nightmares of what the future could hold. With the widespread use of social media, virtual realities have emerged as significant developments in the online world. Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) and online art galleries have also become prominent elements of this digital landscape. Virtual reality has introduced realistic digital environments where users can immerse themselves and actively participate. These virtual worlds offer a profound sense of presence and enable more engaging and dynamic interactions with others compared to traditional social media platforms. VR social platforms like VRChat and Rec Room allow users to communicate through virtual avatars, providing shared spaces for socializing, gaming, and attending virtual events.

As we witness these technological advancements and the growing prevalence of cyberspace in our lives, it is intriguing to see how the horror genre has incorporated these changes into its narratives. Films like *Kairo*, which expressed Kurosawa's worries about humanity embracing cyberspace, have turned these concerns into a chilling reality, showcasing how supernatural entities have found new avenues to haunt and terrorize their victims.

As we continue to embrace cyberspace and its various innovations, horror movies can serve as cautionary tales, urging us to be mindful of advancing technology's potential consequences and

vulnerabilities. They offer us a glimpse into our anxieties about the digital age, making us ponder the implications of our actions and decisions in this ever-evolving virtual realm.

Furthermore, the horror genre's integration of cyberspace as a space for supernatural entities to haunt and terrorize reflects our changing world. Beyond merely reflecting society's inner fears, these films can serve as a cautionary mirror, providing insights into potential outcomes and consequences of our technological choices. The intersection of horror and technology invites us to navigate the digital landscape with awareness and caution, acknowledging cyberspace's transformative power while remaining mindful of its inherent risks and challenges.

This research's findings also indicate that the techno horror genre, specifically digital horror, shifts its focus from devices to cyberspace as the primary antagonist. This new realm allows supernatural entities to represent and transform into various manifestations that reflect societal anxieties and concerns related to the Internet. By employing more straightforward language, this study provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of online horror. It emphasizes the importance of responsible digital engagement for individuals of all proficiency levels.

The study's examination of cyberspace's evolution, social media's effects on adolescents, and the representation of technical phobias and anxieties in horror films shed light on relevant issues concerning our current cultural trends and technological advancements. In today's society, social media and the Internet play a crucial role in connecting, communicating, and perceiving the world. As these technologies continue to evolve, it is essential to understand their cultural effects and the societal changes they bring about.

The study's analysis of the depiction of technology and its effects on characters in horror films is relevant to our modern world. It invites us to critically examine our relationship with technology

and its potential impact on our lives. While horror movies may sensationalize technological fears, they continue the time-honored tradition of cautionary tales, urging us to contemplate the consequences of our technical choices and adapt responsibly to the ever-changing landscape of the digital era.

Moreover, an increasing number of people are worried about online relationships, privacy, cyberbullying, and digital addiction due to the extensive use of social media platforms. In order to gain an understanding of the worries, ambiguities, and anxieties related to young people's use of social media, this research investigates how horror cinema addresses and reflects these issues.

The study also illuminates the dynamics of changing online platforms and how young people interact with the digital world. It provides crucial insights into how young people have increasingly personalized their Internet use by charting the development from the early stages of the Internet to the explosion of social media platforms.

Through their portrayal of technology and the supernatural, horror movies continue the longstanding tradition of cautionary tales. They reflect our collective fears and anxieties about the unknown and the consequences of advancing technology. While I may not necessarily agree with these films' horrific portrayal of technological advances, I recognize the historical resistance to change, and development often depicted in horror stories.

While this study sheds light on how the internet is evolving, how social media is portrayed in horror movies, and how it affects adolescent culture, several limitations must be acknowledged and addressed. Firstly, this study focuses on two specific horror films, *Kairo* (2001) and *Unfriended* (2014). Even though these movies shed essential light on how social media, technology, and societal concerns connect, they represent a relatively small portion of the overall

landscape of horror film and its interaction with the internet. Future studies could expand the study's focus to examine a more comprehensive selection of horror movies to provide a more thorough knowledge of how horror stories reflect the connection between technology, social media, and cultural anxieties.

Furthermore, the primary methodological approach used in this study is genre analysis and cultural studies. While these methodologies enable an extensive review of the chosen films, they may only capture part of the full range of audience opinions and experiences. To acquire a more nuanced knowledge of how individuals perceive and participate in horror films that investigate the impact of social media, future studies should use qualitative research methodologies such as interviews or surveys.

Future research may examine horror films from other cultural backgrounds to better understand the artistic effects of technology and social media. This is because different cultures may engage with technology differently. It is also important to note that this study covers the early years of the Internet and the development of social media from the late 1990s to the 2010s. As technology continues to improve quickly, future studies could examine more recent horror movies to find the newest developments in the portrayal of technology and its effects on society.

Overall, this study offers a view of how cyberspace is portrayed in horror movies and how it affects adolescent society. In any case, there are limitations to consider. Future research can get around these restrictions by looking at more films, employing qualitative methods, learning about other cultures, studying contemporary films, and investigating the psychological effects of social media and technology. By exploring these areas, future studies can improve our comprehension of how technology, media, and culture interact in the digital age.

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