We Are What We Watch: Film Preferences and Personality Correlates

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Abstract

Movies and film make up a large component of our cultural landscape, but what those films say about our personalities is relatively under-studied. With this research, I set out to discover any connections between our film and movie preferences and our personalities, using the Big Five Factor model of personality as a guideline. Another important factor in my analysis was the interaction of gender. Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they enjoyed various film genres, and then were given a brief Big Five Factor personality test. Notable correlations were found between the personality factor of extraversion and the genres of comedy and romance, and between the factor of openness to experience and the genres of documentary and science fiction. Significant gender differences were also observed, with women rating the genres of drama and romance higher than men, and men rating action and science fiction higher than women. These differences likely explain some of the correlations between traits and film preference in this study, as the sample was predominantly female. The findings of this study help lay the groundwork for a comprehensive, media-based model of personality, but further research is needed to develop the model to its full extent.

We Are What We Watch: Film Preference and Personality Correlates

Film has been a significant part of global culture since the turn of the 20th century, and with the advent of the digital age, the sharing and consuming of film is easier than ever. In 2013, global box offices grossed over 35 billion dollars, up 4% from 2012, and 22% from 2009 (*Boxoffice*, 2014). Those numbers still fail to take into account the number of movies rented, purchased, or streamed online. Everyone has favorite movies, but what do those preferences say about us? Intuitively, the concept makes sense. If you meet someone and learn that their favorite movie is *Saw*, their favorite character in *Batman* is the Joker, and they listen to death metal music, you have probably already formed a set of assumptions about them, regardless of the fact that you know nothing else about them. Are these types of assumptions unfair? Despite the cultural and economic impact of film, there is a dearth of research about the psychological implications of our preferences in film and media. The ability to gauge someone's personality simply by examining their favorite films might be disconcerting to some, but it comes one step closer to answering the age-old question of whether we really are what we consume.

There are a small number of studies that attempt to discover the nature of the connection between psychology and film or media preferences. A potentially useful framework through which to approach this connection is the Big Five, or five-factor personality model (Digman, 1990; Goldman, 1993). The five-factor model is comprised of the factors of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. A person who scores high in extraversion on personality tests is characterized by energy, positivity, talkativeness and a tendency to seek out the company of others. High agreeableness scores indicate compassion, cooperation and helpfulness, rather than suspicion and distrust of others. Individuals who score highly in conscientiousness tend to be organized, dependable and planful rather than spontaneous or disorganized. Neuroticism

represents the amount of emotional stability exhibited by a person, with persons scoring highly in this area are often impulsive, and frequently experience unpleasant emotions such as anger, anxiety, and depression. The final factor is openness to experience, and individuals with high openness scores are often appreciative of art, adventure, and a variety of experiences. Openness also tends to characterize imaginative, intellectual and independent individuals. When considered all together, the factors form a composite model of someone's personality.

There have already been a few studies whose aim was to discover the connection between personality and film, and one such study indicated a relationship between Eysenck's traits of extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism personality traits and media preferences, with individuals high in neuroticism enjoying "downbeat" music and informative media like news, and individuals high in psychoticism enjoying violent or horror films (Eysenck, 1947; Weaver, 1991). A similar analysis was performed where these differences were examined between American and German subjects, and correlations were found suggesting that the connection between film and personality was valid cross-culturally (Weaver, Brosius, & Mundorf, 1993). A more recent study examined media preferences (television shows) and cultural participation as they relate to the Big Five personality factors, and found that personality serves as a predictor for a wide range of tastes and cultural practices (Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2005). Yet another study examined these connections, and found among other things that the trait of openness correlated positively with pleasure reading activity and the trait of extraversion correlated negatively with pleasure reading (Finn. 1997). These studies serve to illustrate the connection between personality and preferences, but neglect to address several potentially meaningful factors such as gender or age.

The current study serves as a more comprehensive look into the factors that drive film preference. Film preference will be examined as it relates to all five dimensions of the five-

factor model and demographic variables such as gender or age group. Gender differences in film preference and personality have not been adequately studied, and there is evidence to suggest that significant discrepancies exist in Big Five personality traits across genders and cultures (Schmitt, Realo, Voracek, & Allik, 2008). Despite seeming like common sense, when shown a list of films, men and women indicated different preferences, despite similarly ranking the overall quality of the films listed (Hutchinson, 1998). If there is variation between genders in both Big Five traits and film preferences, it is logical to believe that there is also variation in how those traits and movie preferences interact between males and females.

Given all these factors, it is possible that psychologists could determine someone's personality by assessing sets of preferences, rather than making them complete a lengthy questionnaire. Such media-based personality models could be particularly useful in the digital age, in which we are constantly consuming and sharing media, and film and media preferences are publically visible on social networking sites. In fact, it may be that the media we consume has an impact on the development of our personality and values, so a model combining the two could be particularly robust. There has been a small amount of research looking to connect personality to broad, archetypal media types (Faber, 2009). The current research is to more closely examine this approach, and to begin to build a model based solely on just one form of media: film. While the purpose of this research is largely exploratory, I hypothesize that individual personality traits will correlate with different film genre preferences. Additionally, I predict that male personality trait scores and film preference ratings will differ from female scores. If the connections between film preference and personality can be illustrated, it is possible further studies can solidify the connection between other media preferences, and a comprehensive personality model can be developed using entirely entertainment preferences.

Method

Participants

After removing incomplete responses, there were a total of 179 participants in the study, 141 (78.8%) of them were female. Participants were typically between the ages of 18 and 22, as self-reported in the survey, with a mean age of 20.45 years old. The participants were predominantly White (80.6%), and the next largest ethnicity represented was Native American (7.2%). All of the students were enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses at Oklahoma State University.

Materials

In order to assess individual film preference, a simple questionnaire was designed (see Appendix A). The measure asks participants to indicate the degree to which they enjoy various film genres on a Likert scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing a genre they do not enjoy, and 7 representing a genre they enjoy very much. The following questions examined individual favorite films, and the aspects of those films that are enjoyable. Following the film preference section, participants were then asked to complete Saucier's Mini-markers Big Five factor personality inventory, which asks participants to indicate the degree to which certain terms describe them as a person (Saucier, 1994). The questionnaire was concluded with a series of basic demographic questions. No individual names or unique identifiers were attached to the data in any way.

Procedure

The participants were selected using convenience sampling at Oklahoma State
University. The survey was distributed electronically via the Oklahoma State University
Department of Psychology Research Participation System, which is operated by Sona
Systems. Students enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses were recruited to
participate in the study in exchange for a small amount of course credit. Participation in the

study was voluntary, and alternate assignments were available to students who did not wish to participate. The study was prefaced with a consent form detailing the study's purpose, risks involved, and contact information for the researchers. Before completing the survey participants had to indicate they read and understood the form. Responses were collected via the online survey tool Qualtrics, and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 22.

Results

To analyze the correlations between film preferences and personality I first calculated the personality scores for each individual, and created a new variable for each participant's score on each of the five factors (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism or emotional stability, and openness to experience).

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Extraversion	179	-16	19	2.91	7.706
Agreeableness	179	-17	32	17.18	9.424
Conscientiousness	179	-16	32	12.12	9.485
Neuroticism	179	-39	4	-15.94	9.381
Openness	179	2	52	30.98	8.306
Valid N (listwise)	179				

As can be seen in the table below, positive correlations were found between the personality trait of extraversion and the film genres of comedy and romance (r = .199, p = .008, r = .266, p = .000). The factor of agreeableness correlated positively with the romance genre (r = .278, p = .000), as did the factor of conscientiousness (r = .198, p = .008). The factor of openness to experience positively correlated with the genres of documentary (r = .269, p = .000) and science fiction (r = .216, p = .004). Finally, the factor of neuroticism correlated negatively with science fiction (r = -.179, p = .017), and openness correlated with drama ratings (r = .163, p = .030), both at the 0.05 level.

Correlations

		Action	Comedy	Documentary	Drama	Horror	Romance	Sci Fi
Extra.	Pearson Correlation	.000	.199**	.063	.113	027	.266**	139
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.996	.008	.406	.132	.720	.000	.063
	N	179	179	179	179	179	179	179
Agree.	Pearson Correlation	014	.137	.073	.087	064	.278**	085
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.856	.067	.330	.245	.396	.000	.258
	N	179	179	179	179	179	179	179
Consc.	Pearson Correlation	.021	.014	027	.120	.040	.198**	081
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.779	.847	.725	.111	.597	.008	.284
	N	179	179	179	179	179	179	179
Neurot.	Pearson Correlation	.130	047	.100	075	095	109	179 [*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.083	.535	.182	.318	.206	.146	.017
	N	179	179	179	179	179	179	179
Open.	Pearson Correlation	030	076	.269**	.163 [*]	.128	.111	.216**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.693	.314	.000	.030	.088	.139	.004
	N	179	179	179	179	179	179	179

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

The figures below illustrate that differences exist between male and female personality scores. Specifically, males and females differ on scores of agreeableness (F = 18.771, p = .000) and conscientiousness (F = 8.081, p = .005). Males scored lower on agreeableness (\overline{x} = 11.58, s = 10.046), and lower on conscientiousness (\overline{x} = 8.32, s = 10.046) than women. Men and women also differed on film preference, with significant differences in mean score for action (F = 8.523, p = .004), drama (F = 7.629, p = .006), romance (F = 51.533, p = .000), and science fiction (F = 10.114, p = .002). Men rated action and science fiction higher than women, and drama and romance lower.

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

Gender vs. Personality

Gender		Extra.	Agree.	Consc.	Neurot.	Open.
Male	Mean	1.53	11.58	8.32	-13.92	29.45
	N	38	38	38	38	38
	Std. Deviation	7.901	10.461	10.046	9.137	11.108
Female	Mean	3.28	18.70	13.15	-16.49	31.40
	N	141	141	141	141	141
	Std. Deviation	7.639	8.554	9.095	9.403	7.369
Total	Mean	2.91	17.18	12.12	-15.94	30.98
	N	179	179	179	179	179
	Std. Deviation	7.706	9.424	9.485	9.381	8.306

ANOVA (Gender vs. Personality)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Extra.	Between Groups	91.699	1	91.699	1.549	.215
	Within Groups	10479.686	177	59.207		
	Total	10571.385	178			
Agree.	Between Groups	1515.767	1	1515.767	18.771	.000
	Within Groups	14293.150	177	80.752		
	Total	15808.916	178			
Consc.	Between Groups	699.213	1	699.213	8.081	.005
	Within Groups	15314.083	177	86.520		
	Total	16013.296	178			
Neurot.	Between Groups	197.444	1	197.444	2.259	.135
	Within Groups	15467.997	177	87.390		
	Total	15665.441	178			
Open.	Between Groups	113.796	1	113.796	1.655	.200
	Within Groups	12167.154	177	68.741		
	Total	12280.950	178			

Gender vs. Film Genre

Gender		Action	Comedy	Documentary	Drama	Horror	Romance	Sci Fi
Male	Mean	6.16	6.39	4.47	4.63	3.89	3.97	5.26
	Ν	38	38	38	38	38	38	38
	Std. Deviation	.916	.755	1.656	1.496	1.752	1.778	1.519
Female	Mean	5.54	6.29	4.33	5.27	4.43	5.77	4.24
	N	141	141	141	141	141	141	141
	Std. Deviation	1.216	.841	1.481	1.195	2.136	1.234	1.816
Total	Mean	5.67	6.31	4.36	5.13	4.32	5.39	4.46
	N	179	179	179	179	179	179	179
	Std. Deviation	1.184	.823	1.516	1.287	2.067	1.548	1.803

ANOVA (Gender vs. Film Genre)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Action	Between Groups	11.465	1	11.465	8.523	.004
	Within Groups	238.088	177	1.345		
	Total	249.553	178			
Comedy	Between Groups	.323	1	.323	.477	.491
	Within Groups	120.157	177	.679		
	Total	120.480	178			
Documentary	Between Groups	.651	1	.651	.282	.596
	Within Groups	408.467	177	2.308		
	Total	409.117	178			
Drama	Between Groups	12.181	1	12.181	7.629	.006
	Within Groups	282.601	177	1.597		
	Total	294.782	178			
Horror	Between Groups	8.660	1	8.660	2.038	.155
	Within Groups	752.189	177	4.250		
	Total	760.849	178			
Romance	Between Groups	96.152	1	96.152	51.533	.000
	Within Groups	330.250	177	1.866		
	Total	426.402	178			
Sci Fi	Between Groups	31.266	1	31.266	10.114	.002
	Within Groups	547.170	177	3.091		
	Total	578.436	178			

Discussion

The results obtained offer some support for the research hypothesis that there would be correlations between film genre ratings and personality traits. There was also some support for the hypothesis that men and women would differ in personality trait scores and film genre ratings. Most of the correlations found make intuitive sense, but further research to study their implications could be useful. A somewhat surprising result was that all of the significant correlations found were positive, with the exception of neuroticism and science fiction which was negative.

The finding that higher scores in the extraversion factor tended to align with higher ratings of the comedy and romance genres is intuitive. Extraverted people tend to seek out connections with other people, and human connections are paramount to the romance genre, which is almost always about people connecting with each other in some way or another. Comedy synergizes with the energetic and talkative aspects of the extraversion factor, with modern comedies often involving fast-paced dialogue, jokes and physical comedy. Agreeableness also significantly positively correlated with romance, which could be explained by the compassion and cooperation often employed in the scripts of romances. Conscientiousness was also correlated with romance, however. These results therefore are likely due to the fact that females scored significantly higher on agreeableness, conscientiousness, and ratings of the romance genre. The sample was predominantly female. Another interesting correlation was that of openness and documentaries and science fiction. This makes sense because individuals high in openness are often intellectual, which the informational style of documentary caters to. Their openness to adventure and a variety of experiences makes sense with the correlation to science fiction, which is characterized by these traits.

The differences between genders proved to be interesting as well. These differences should be analyzed with significant caution however, because the sample was overwhelmingly female. Males scored lower on agreeableness and conscientiousness, which is consistent with the findings of previous research on gender differences in personality (Schmitt, et. al., 2008). Men and women also differed in film genre preferences, with women rating drama and romance genres higher than men, and men rating action and science fiction higher. These findings conform to our stereotypes about film genre preference, but could be affected by specific content factors such as number of female characters, expressions of sadness, and the amount of violence, which vary between films considered under the same genre (Hutchinson, 1998).

There are some major limitations to the current study that should be discussed. Chiefly among them is the convenience method of sample with which participants were recruited. The participants were all college undergraduate students, were overwhelmingly white, and the vast majority female. This is not a representative sample, and future research should attempt to widen the reach of its sample. The gender make-up of the sample likely influenced the correlations between agreeableness and conscientiousness and romance.

Another limitation to the research is the broad way in which genres were presented. Films within genres vary significantly, and a representative sample of films from each genre might prove to be a more useful descriptive tool to explore these connections. The issue with that approach is that participants may not have seen or heard of the films on that list, and therefore would not be able to rate their enjoyment of them. That could be a limitation of the current study as well. Participants may have employed perceptions of genres from mediums other than film such as books or TV to make their ratings of the film genres.

Further study is needed to solidify the connections found in the current research.

Exploring differences in preference across media types to see if they are related is one

potential avenue for study. This could lead to the type of archetypal media-based model of personality explored by Faber in his 2009 paper (Faber, 2009). The research will need to extend to other media types that are commonly consumed, such as TV, music, or even online reading activity. Continued research on the implication of gender and preference will be needed to accurately characterize personality as well. This study shows that these connections and differences between personality, film preference, and gender exist; taking the literature one step closer to a comprehensive, media-based approach to personality modeling.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument

Please indicate the amount which you typically enjoy watching films from each of the genres below. 1 represents a genre you typically dislike and avoid, and 7 represents a genre which you typically enjoy and seek out.



What is your favorite movie of all time? If you don't have a single favorite, indicate one of your top favorites.
In what genre would you consider that film to be a part of?
Action/Adventure
Comedy
Documentary
Drama
Horror/Thriller
Romance
Science Fiction

Please select the top 1-4 traits below that make that film your favorite.

Cinematography
Score
Acting
Favorite Actor(s)
Story/Plot
Humor
Love
Gore/Violence
Mystery/Suspense
Writing/Quotes
Likable Character(s)
Emotional Impact (Positive)
Emotional Impact (Negative)
Action
Information/Learning Benefit
Other

Please use this list of common human traits to describe yourself as accurately as possible.

Describe yourself as you see yourself at the present time, not as you wish to be in the future.

Describe yourself as you are generally or typically, as compared with other persons you know of the same sex and of roughly your same age.

	Extremely Inaccurate	Very Inaccurate	Moderately Inaccurate	Slightly Inaccurate	Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate	Slightly Accurate	Moderately Accurate	Very Accurate	Extremely Accurate
Bashful	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bold	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Careless	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cold	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Complex	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cooperative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Creative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Deep	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Disorganized	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Efficient	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Extremely Inaccurate	Very Inaccurate	Moderately Inaccurate	Slightly Inaccurate	Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate	Slightly Accurate	Moderately Accurate	Very Accurate	Extremely Accurate

	Extremely Inaccurate	Very Inaccurate	Moderately Inaccurate	Slightly Inaccurate	Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate	Slightly Accurate	Moderately Accurate	Very Accurate	Extremely Accurate
Energetic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Envious	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Extraverted	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fretful	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Harsh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Imaginative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Inefficient	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Intellectual	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jealous	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kind	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Extremely Inaccurate	Very Inaccurate	Moderately Inaccurate	Slightly Inaccurate	Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate	Slightly Accurate	Moderately Accurate	Very Accurate	Extremely Accurate

	Extremely Inaccurate	Very Inaccurate	Moderately Inaccurate	Slightly Inaccurate	Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate	Slightly Accurate	Moderately Accurate	Very Accurate	Extremely Accurate
Moody	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Organized	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Philosophical	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Practical	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Quiet	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Relaxed	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Rude	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sloppy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sympathetic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Extremely Inaccurate	Very Inaccurate	Moderately Inaccurate	Slightly Inaccurate	Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate	Slightly Accurate	Moderately Accurate	Very Accurate	Extremely Accurate

	Extremely Inaccurate	Very Inaccurate	Moderately Inaccurate	Slightly Inaccurate	Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate	Slightly Accurate	Moderately Accurate	Very Accurate	Extremely Accurate
Systematic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Talkative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Temperamental	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Touchy	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Uncreative	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unenvious	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unintellectual	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Unsympathetic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Warm	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Withdrawn	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Extremely Inaccurate	Very Inaccurate	Moderately Inaccurate	Slightly Inaccurate	Neither Inaccurate nor Accurate	Slightly Accurate	Moderately Accurate	Very Accurate	Extremely Accurate

In what year were you born? (i.e. 1991, 1993)
Please indicate your gender
Male
Female
Please specify your ethnicity
White
Hispanic or Latino
Black or African American
Native American or American Indian
Asian/Pacific Islander
Other