

# Avoiders, reappraisers, or meaning-seekers?

## Exploring traits that could heighten tragic insight & self-awareness

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IGEL The 21st conference of the International Society for the  
Empirical Study of Literature  
The Thompson Conference, Austin, TX, USA



### Introduction

Reflecting on tragic entertainment promotes psychological benefits, and individual differences may heighten those effects or underlying processes

- Tragedy, a form of eudaimonic entertainment - promotes complex emotion, reflective thoughts
- Catharsis as *emotional clarification* - venting model has been debunked (Khoo & Oliver, 2013)
- Clarification from tragedy engagement requires contemplation
- Openness to character distress mediates psychological benefits (Khoo, June 2024)



Tragedy stimulus films

- Q: Are there individual differences that could raise openness to tragic character distress?**

### Discussion & Conclusion

- Openness to distress* likely a key mechanism for catharsis
- Searchers of life meaning* are more open to distress, potentially more conducive to cathartic processes and tragedy's benefits
- Tragic entertainment provides a space to contemplate meaning, purpose in life



### Selected References

Khoo, G. S. (2024, June). Processing emotionally challenging entertainment with openness enhances self-compassion: Tragedy and catharsis revisited. Paper presented at the Mass Communication Division of the International Communication Assoc. (ICA) at the 74th annual conference in Gold Coast, Australia.

Khoo, G. S. (2016). Contemplating tragedy raises gratifications and fosters self-acceptance. *Human Communication Research*, 42, 269-291.

Khoo, G. S., & Oliver, M. B. (2013). The therapeutic effects of narrative cinema through clarification: Reexamining catharsis. *Scientific Study of Literature*, 3(2), 266-293.

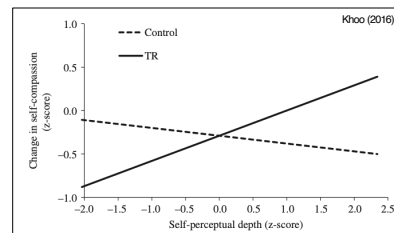
Sikora, S., Kulkarni, D., & Mail, D. S. (2010). An uncommon resonance: The influence of loss on expressive reading. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 28(2), 135-153.

Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53, 80-93.

### Previous Findings

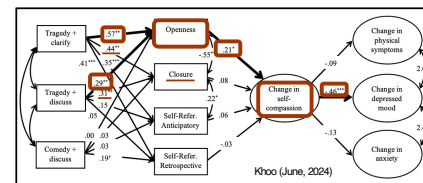
- Finding:** For tragic film reflectors (TR), self-awareness → greater self-acceptance

**Takeaway:** Tragedy may “teach” emotion regulation skills to those deeply self-aware after reflection



- Finding:** Openness to distress in tragedy reflection essays mediates psych. benefits

**Takeaway:** Type of reflection (openness, but not desire for closure) is linked to downstream benefits



Model fit:  $\chi^2 = 23.41$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $p = .27$ , CFI = .99, RMSEA = .04 (90% confidence interval: .00 - .09), SRMR = .05  
Direct paths: tragedy+clarity to symptoms (-.12), depression (.16), and anxiety (.04);  
tragedy+distress to symptoms (-.09), depression (.09), and anxiety (.12);  
comedy+distress to symptoms (-.07), depression (.15), and anxiety (.21).

- Finding:** Flexibility in written reflect. (rather than inflexibility) is linked to psych. benefits



Khoo, G. S., and Graham-Engeland, J. E. (2016)

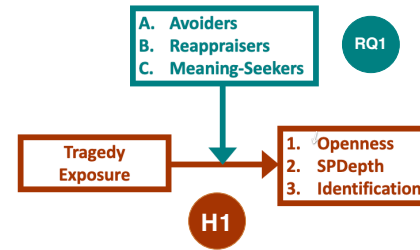


Full References



Key Measurements

### Hypothesis & Research Q



Traits tested for interaction effects

- A. Experiential Avoiders:** Psychologically inflexible when distressed (Bond et al.; Kashdan et al.)
- B. Reappraisers:** Trait emotion regulation/coping by changing the way one thinks (Gross)
- C. Searchers of Life Meaning:** Tendency to be reflective about life purpose (Steger et al.)

### Method

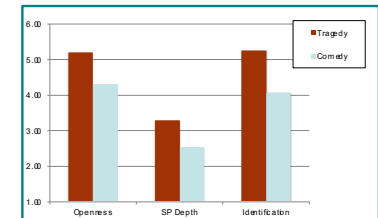
- Online Experiment: 2 Conditions**
  - Tragedy exposure (n = 92)
  - Comedy exposure (n = 95)
- Stimuli:** Watched one film, 15-min, shortened
- Story themes:** loss, wrongful death, revenge
- Short Writing:** 1.5 mins minimum “what went through your mind during and after the film...”
- Sample: U.S. participants**
  - N = 187, after checks & outliers filtered out
  - 43% female, 61% white (26% Black)
  - Age (M = 38.4, SD = 13.1)
- New Measures: Openness to distress** ( $\alpha = .71$ ,  $M = 4.76$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ )
  - The movie character should have taken time to understand their difficult experiences and reactions to them
  - The movie character should have been more open to different choices or possible courses of action
  - I have mixed feelings about what the character did in the movie

### Results

All analyses controlled for gender, age, seen movie

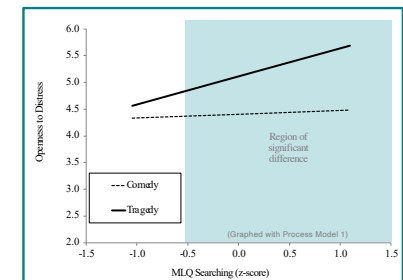
**H1 supported! (Control group: Comedy)**

- Tragedy exposure led to greater openness to distress,  $F(1, 182) = 8.75$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$
- Tragedy exposure led to greater self-perceptual depth,  $F(1, 182) = 8.01$ ,  $p = .005$
- Tragedy exposure led to greater character identification,  $F(1, 182) = 36.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .16$



### Exploring RQ1

For tragedy exposure group, only search for life meaning was sig. positively related to openness  
 $F(1, 180) = 5.95$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$



### Acknowledgements & Credit

I wish to thank my mentor and co-author Jennifer E. Graham-Engeland (BioBehavioral Health Penn State University) for discussing these results.

I want to also thank Jeeyun Oh (Advertising and PR, UT Austin) for her advice on data analysis.

I also wish to thank the School of Advertising and PR at the Moody College of Communication for funding my research conference activities.

Image top right: Scene from *Into the Wild* (2007)

