



## Comparing the Personality Traits of Horror Movie Characters from East Asia and North America

Kennedy Zellous

### ***Introduction***

Ever since the creation of film, filmmakers from different nations and cultures have been using it as a medium, not only to tell their own creative stories but also to tell stories in which they display critique their own cultures as well as aspects of human society. Take for example, the first installment of the Godzilla franchise, *Godzilla (Gojira 1954)*. At surface level, the movie is about a giant dinosaur-like creature who terrorizes a Japanese village, however, the film has been interpreted over time to be a metaphor for the danger of nuclear weapons. Tomoyuki Tanaka, the producer of *Godzilla*, also confirms this, having stated in the article “*Godzilla’s Footprint*” that “The theme of the film, from the beginning, was the terror of the bomb” (Ryfle et. al 2005). While it is interesting for the films themselves to carry overarching themes and metaphors within their plots, some creators like to utilize the characters in order to convey their message. Some characters tend to have qualities that reflect common positive traits of people within their culture while others have or reject the common negative traits of their culture. What this study seeks to understand is the common personality traits within a group of characters from the same cultural region, but to also compare those aspects with that of another cultural region, indirectly showing how the different cultural and personality psychology is being portrayed through these characters.

In this study, the researcher will look at eight different horror films chosen from the two regions, North America (NA) and East Asia (EA) (See Appendix X) with four movies being pulled from each region. The researcher will then select at least one, but no more than four, characters from each movie for analysis which includes observing the characters’ behavior, actions and spoken words. This analysis of characterization will be used to rate the characters on a numeric scale for multiple aspects of personality including the aspects that are usually measured with the Five Factor Personality Model. Using this analysis, which can be tied to the psychological research discipline of Personality, this study can also contribute to the to the understanding of how non professionals are able to comprehend and interpret psychological concepts through movies.

### ***Literature Review***

According to Psychology professor, Steven Heine, “Humans are cultural creatures” and we depend heavily on cultural learning for the majority of our lives (Heine 254). It is apparent in the way we address each other, show affection towards each other, how we eat, what we eat and more. Each thing we do can be considered as a result of the cultures we live in. Some behaviors are more overtly different than that of other cultures, however some are more nuanced and reside under the category of simple interactions and casual conversation. For example, in the United States, people are usually more comfortable with engaging with strangers, even if it is likely they will never see those same strangers ever again. According to an article from MIT, many Americans participate in small talk, “where you make conversation

with strangers or acquaintances about non-controversial topics, such as the weather, sports, or popular television shows” (MIT). It is also mentioned how there are Americans who are not okay with the idea of small talk but participate in it because “it’s part of the American culture” (MIT). However in many other cultures, the idea of making idle chat and sometimes sharing more private information about yourself with complete strangers is considered to be odd. Using Japan as an example, Noriko Huruse, a researcher from Portland State University, noted that “Lack of verbalization, high value placed on silence, and importance of facial expression are identified as major characteristics of [an] (indirect) communication style” (Huruse 2). Rather than attempting to avoid the silence between each other, it seems as though Japanese people tend to embrace the silence and don’t put as much emphasis on verbal communication with the people around them as Americans tend to do. Given this implication of cultural relations to one’s behavior and social understanding, it can be concluded that this should also ring true in terms personality and the expression of certain personality traits.

Regarding the use of horror movies, there are many research projects and studies related to the analysis of horror movies and all movies within their encompassed subgenres (i.e. Slasher, Thriller, Psychological). However, these studies mainly seek to find how these movies have influenced the viewers of them as well as the behavior exhibited by these characters. Mary Lou Quillen, in her paper title “J-Horror”, expresses similar views and ideas to that of this study. She introduces the concept of film being used to reflect cultural ideas and perspective as well as how a movie changes cross culturally. Citing the film the Ring as an example, she believes that while changes maybe artistic they may also carry cultural significance. She also is able to explain the reasoning for why horror movies specifically are good for studying individually given their universal nature. She states that “...while certain facets of fear are culturally specific, the horror film serves as a universal tool of communication, surpassing cultural boundaries” (Quillen 2006).

Overall, despite there being research on cultural psychology, horror movies and their effects on viewers psychology, as well as utilizing individual characters for research, there is not a present care to look at all of these factors in a unified way. In an attempt to bridge the gap of combining these factors, this culminated in the research question of ‘What are the differences in common personality traits for East Asian and North American horror movie characters, and are those common traits representative of their culture’s values?’.

## **Method**

### **Study Design**

The purpose of this research is to score multiple traits of personality using a list of observed behaviors from characters within different horror films. One group of characters are meant to represent one cultural region (East Asia/EA) while the other represents a fundamentally different cultural region (North America/NA). Therefore, the design being used is a mixed-method correlational study. It is mixed-method because the study uses both quantitative and qualitative data. It is quantitative in that the personality traits being analyzed in these characters will be rated using a numerical scale, similar to the likert scale but based off of observation and not on self report. It is also qualitative in that how these characters will be scored is based upon the researcher’s analysis of the characters’ patterns of behavior, the words they say, emotionality among other things that cannot be expressed in simple numerics.

### **Procedure**

The researcher will watch scenes featuring specific characters from the films, and, using the Five Factor Personality Model as a basis for the traits to be studied, will give a rating for each trait based upon the observed behavior of the character in question. What this study is trying to observe is if there are any commonalities between horror film characters within the same regional culture, if there are any major differences between characters from different regional cultures, as well as if the traits with stronger rankings (i.e. 4/5, 5/5) can show if these characters can be considered representative of their respective cultures.

**Regions**

The two regions being utilized in the study have been given the geographical titles of East Asia and North America to represent multiple countries within them. The East Asian region is identified with the countries of South Korea, Japan and Taiwan (Appendix B) and the North American region is identified with the countries of the United States and Canada (Appendix A).

**Traits**

For this study, the researcher created a list of traits to be considered when analyzing the behavior of each character. The list includes Neuroticism, Openness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Compassion, Honesty, Empathy. Five of these traits (Neuroticism, Openness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) are taken from the Five Factor Personality Model created by Robert McCrae and Paul Costa Jr.

**Table 1**

*Trait Definitions Chart*

<b>Trait</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Neuroticism	The tendency of a person to respond to adversity with either overwhelming negativity or underwhelming complacency; A measure of one’s emotional stability.
Openness	The measure of one’s ability to be open-minded; A person’s willingness to try new experiences.
Extraversion	A personality type characterized by high sociability, high stimulation from external events, being talkative or gregarious.
Agreeableness	The measure of one’s ability to be compatible with others; characterized by kindness, warmth, friendliness.
Conscientiousness	The measure of one’s ability to be organized, control impulses, be goal oriented as well as delay gratification.
Honesty	The ability to be truthful.
Assertiveness	The ability to be confident in and openly share one’s own beliefs/ideas without being defensive or close minded to others beliefs/ideas.

The researcher chose to utilize traits from the Five Factor Personality Model as the traits identified in the model have been proven to remain as core elements in personality ever since

the model was first developed. According to an article from Simply Psychology, “The Big Five remain relatively stable throughout most of one’s lifetime. They are influenced significantly by genes and the environment, with an estimated heritability of 50%” (Lim et. al 2023). The two other traits represented in the table, Honesty and Assertiveness were utilized by the researchers for they are essential traits that are able to encompass a person’s core values and self, depending on how much the trait is expressed. For instance, the VIA Institute on Character relates the trait of Honesty to being “linked to improved accuracy of your goals, reflecting your true values and interests” (VIA 2024).

### **Items**

The items being studied will be a list of selected characters from eight horror movies (four from EA, four from NA) that the researcher will be watching. Those movies include, Hereditary (NA), American Mary (NA), The Blair Witch Project (NA), Ginger Snaps (NA), Gonjiam (EA), Kairo (EA), Audition (EA) and Detention (EA). While the researcher will watch the movies entirely at first, they will rewatch multiple scenes from each movie featuring the selected characters from their respective movies. All of the characters being observed are fictionalized, meaning that neither the characters nor the premises of the films they appear have ever occurred in reality. Because of this, some films will utilize supernatural characters such as vampires, werewolves, ghosts, etc. These types of characters will not be observed, all characters that were chosen for observation were fully human throughout the film, or if they eventually evolved into something supernatural, only the scenes where they were fully human were to be observed. Another criteria for the characters were that they would have to talk or be present throughout the movie for a significant amount of time. While there were no stipulations set to determine how long a character must be present for, it was established that the characters had to appear in at least five different scenes, and they would also have to have speaking parts for majority of those scenes. Characters who were only present in few scenes or had no speaking parts were not chosen to be observed. Lastly there were criteria for how the movies were to be selected. All of the horror movies selected had to fall under the horror subgenres of ‘thriller’ and ‘psychological’. These subgenres were chosen specifically due to more sophisticated the nature in which characters are usually portrayed. For example, ‘slasher’ films were not an ideal choice of subgenre considering that the plots expressed in those stories tend to have heavily flanderized characters who act mainly as catalysts for their films to progress rather than as regular, realistic human beings. In terms of quality, all of the movies selected had to have at least a 2.5/5 star rating across multiple review sites. While the minimum rating may not set a movie to have the highest levels of production or screenwriting, it excludes the movies that fall beneath it, in which stories may not be fully developed, conceptually unclear as well as having characters that are greatly developed.

### **Scale**

The scale was established in a way that is similar to the likert scale, however it will mostly be based on the researcher’s observation. First, the researcher established a grounder with the score of 3 being the median of trait expression. A score of three represents a neutral expression of a trait meaning the behavior associated with the trait was present for the character, however, not enough of the behaviors were displayed to warrant a score of 4 or 5. The scores of 1 and 2 represent the negative end of the trait expression scale. 1 representing no expression of the trait and 2 represent minimal expression. Accordingly, 4 and 5 represent the positive end with a score of 4 meaning ‘more expressed’ and 5 meaning ‘fully expressed’.

## Results

After viewing each movie thoroughly as well as going through notes documenting character observations, the researcher estimated the approximate score for each trait for each character, using the aforementioned scale. Due to the number of characters being studied, the researcher has broken up the results into two separate charts, each containing seven characters.

**Table 2**  
*Character Personality Trait Expressions Scores 1*

Personal ity Traits	Heather (TBP)	Josh (TBP)	Mike (TBP)	Aaosam a (AUD)	Asami (AUD)	Ha-joon (GJA)	Mary (AM)
<i>Neuroticism**</i>	4	3	4	2	4	4	4
<i>Openness**</i>	4	3	3	3	1	4	3
<i>Extraversion**</i>	5	3	2	2	2	3	2
<i>Agreeableness**</i>	3	3	3	4	2	2	3
<i>Conscientiousness**</i>	3	3	3	3	2	2	3
<i>Honesty+</i>	4	4	3	3	1	1	3
<i>Assertiveness+</i>	5	3	4	3	3	3	3

**Note.** \*\* Refers to Traits from the Five Factor Personality Model. + Refers to Traits selected by the Researcher. TBP = The Blair Witch Project, AUD = Audition, GJA = Gonjam, AM = American Mary.

**Table 3**  
*Character Personality Trait Expression Scores 2*

Personal ity Traits	Charlie (HER)	Annie (HER)	Bridgett e (GS)	Wei Chung	Fang Ray Shin	Michi Kudo (K)	Ryosuke Kawashi
------------------------	------------------	----------------	--------------------	--------------	------------------	-------------------	--------------------

				Ting (DET)	(DET)		ma (K)
Neuroticism**	3	5	4	2	4	3	3
Openness**	3	2	2	3	2	3	3
Extraversion**	2	3	2	3	3	3	4
Agreeableness**	3	2	3	3	3	4	3
Conscientiousness**	3	3	3	4	2	4	3
Honesty+	4	4	3	3	1	4	3
Assertiveness+	2	5	3	3	2	3	4

**Note.** HER = Hereditary, GS = Ginger Snaps, DET = Detention, K = Kairo.

As seen in the table, most characters had majority neutrally expressed traits (Score = 3) with only six out fourteen characters showing a higher score for 2 or more traits. However, each character analyzed scored a four or higher for at least one trait. In order to determine the most common highest scoring traits, a trait would need at least two character from the same cultural region to have a score of 4 or 5 in order to be considered for one of the highest scoring traits. (i.e. 5/7 characters from North America scored a 4 or 5 for Neuroticism). Given this criteria, the table produced interesting results. For North America, the highest scoring traits for characters were Neuroticism (Average Score: 3.9), Honesty (Average Score: 3.6), and Assertiveness (Average Score 3.6). For East Asia, the highest scoring character traits were Neuroticism (Average Score: 3.1), Agreeableness (Average Score: 3) and Assertiveness (Average Score: 2.9).

### **Cultural Perspective**

While it can't be said for sure that the highest scoring traits are fully representative of characters respective region, the journal *Eastern and Western Perceptions of Casualty* can possibly give an explanation to why characters from specific regions may be more expressive of certain traits. The journal states that "Americans are individual centered. They expect their environment to be sensitive to them" which could explain why neuroticism and assertiveness

had fairly high averages with the North American characters given that five out of the seven North American characters selected were from the United States. Another factor to be considered is that though East Asia is not referenced blatantly, the journal also states that “...most of the rest of humanity this highly individualist theory of behavior. Most people live in social worlds that are highly constrained by roles, by relationships within a broad network of extended family and community”. This could explain why agreeableness, the measure of one’s compatibility with others was ranked second high for East Asian characters. Interestingly, the highest scoring trait for both regions was Neuroticism, however, as approached in a study regarding cross-cultural examinations of Neuroticism specifically, Radek Trnka and Inna Čábelková are able to provide an explanation for why that is. As they state in their paper, “Neuroticism Across Cultures”, “Neuroticism as a temperamental trait is not likely to be a product of socialization without any influence of genetic predispositions, but the national levels of neuroticism may be moderated, at least to some extent, by cultural influences” (Trnka and Čábelková 13). In other words, Neuroticism is not a characteristic derived from social behaviors, however certain cultural influences may limit the expression Neuroticism as seen in the cross-cultural comparison. This can be seen in the average score for Neuroticism in the different regions with NA having an average score of 3.9 for the trait and EA having an average of 3.1.

## ***Discussion***

### **Limitations**

Given the nature of the study, there are multiple limitations to be taken into consideration for the observed outcome of this study. While the researcher will take time to properly analyze and observe the characters, the researcher is not a certified professional within the field of personality psychology, nor the general field of psychology. Due to this, the score of traits, which is based off of the researcher’s observations and personal perspective, may not be fully representative of what majority of psychologists would understand and pull from these characters. Regarding the correlation of characters’ strong scoring traits with popular traits of people within their culture, while the traits may align with popular traits of the cultural group a character belongs to, there is no way to tell if this was the intention of the film writers without reaching out to them exclusively to hear their thoughts and ideas when creating these characters. Another factor to take into consideration is that, considering all of the films are within the horror genre, their plotlines tend to contain stories wherein the characters are having strange, abnormal, paranormal and sometimes intensely stressful experiences. Due to this, in some scenes, the characters being observed may not be functioning in their regular, normal state of mind and therefore may act in a way or exhibit behavior that is not representative of their usual character. Finally, while multiple countries will be grouped into the same cultural region, it should be acknowledged that these individual countries have cultural variances between them which could possibly be distinguished when reviewing the traits of characters from different countries.

### **Implications**

As far as implications go, there are two key things that could be taken away from this study. The first being the cross cultural variances of personality. Though it is not confirmed, it is assumed that these characters are products of their native cultures given that they are characterized as regular civilians. With this assumption, the results demonstrating the difference in common personality traits among cultures can be seen here. This could potentially open a



gateway to the study of value personality traits and the cultures they are associated with. The other thing that can be taken away from this study is how it displays non-professional understanding of psychological concepts. Though not the core purpose of this study, there is ongoing discussion about the use of movies in teaching psychological ideas.

### **Future Studies**

For future researchers who attempt to replicate this study, there should be minor changes made to the criteria of movies, the characters as well as the number of countries from each region. Firstly, despite the uniqueness of studying mostly horror movies, this study could be expanded to be performed using another genre, or the inclusion of multiple genres in order to obtain a broader perspective the characters that represent each cultural region. Secondly, the number of characters from each movie should remain consistent as to not overrepresent one country in a specific region or one specific cultural region as seen with the imbalance of United States characters to Canadian characters (ration of 5:2). Finally, the same number of countries should be selected from each region considering the previously stated reasons of over representation for one group of selected characters.



## References

- Heine, S. J. (2001). Self as cultural product: An examination of East Asian and North American selves. *Journal of Personality*, 69(6), 881–905.
- Heine, S. J. (2010). Cultural psychology. In S. T. Fiske, D. T. Gilbert, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *Handbook of social psychology* (5th ed., pp. 1423–1464). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Honda, I. (Director). (1954). *Gojira* [Godzilla] [Film]. Toho Co., Ltd.
- Huruse, Noriko, "A Comparative Study of Communication Style in Japan and the United States as Revealed Through Content Analysis of Television Commercials" (1978). *Dissertations and Theses*. Paper 2869.
- Lahey B. B. (2009). Public health significance of neuroticism. *The American psychologist*, 64(4), 241–256.
- Lim, A. G. Y., on, U., 20, D., & (Hons), A. G. Y. L. P. G. B. (2023, December 20). *Big 5 personality traits: The 5-factor model of personality*. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/big-five-personality.html>
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Medium definition & meaning*. Merriam-Webster.
- Norenzayan, A., Choi, I., & Nisbett, R. E. (1999). Eastern and Western perceptions of causality for social behavior: Lay theories about personalities and situations. In D. A. Prentice & D. T. Miller (Eds.), *Cultural divides: Understanding and overcoming group conflict* (pp. 239–272). Russell Sage Foundation.
- Prentice, D. A., & Miller, D. T. (Eds.). (1999). *Cultural Divides: Understanding and Overcoming Group Conflict*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Quillen, MaryLou, "J-Horror : A discourse in cross-cultural communication and cinematic hybridity" (2007). Theses. 399
- Ryfle, S., Vaidhyanathan, S., Petrusich, A., Bradley, R., Kolbe, L., & Alison, J. (n.d.). *Godzilla's footprint*. VQR Online.
- Saavedra, J. (n.d.). *Openness: Definition, examples, & traits*. The Berkeley Well-Being Institute. <https://www.berkeleywellbeing.com/openness.html>
- Small talk*. ISO. (n.d.-b). <https://iso.mit.edu/americanisms/small-talk/>
- Trnka, R., & Čábelková, I. (2016). Neuroticism across cultures: Macro-level insights into the worldwide distribution of neuroticism. In A. Di Fabio (Ed.), *Neuroticism: Characteristics, impact on job performance and health outcomes* (pp. 161–185). Nova Science Publishers.





## Part IV. Appendices

### Appendices Table of Contents:

- Appendix A. Map of North American Countries Selected
- Appendix B. Map of East Asian Countries Selected
- Appendix C. Hereditary (2018), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps
- Appendix D. The Blair Witch Project (1999), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps
- Appendix E. Ginger Snaps (2000), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps
- Appendix F. American Mary (2012), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps
- Appendix G. Detention (2019), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps
- Appendix H. Audition (1999), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps
- Appendix I. Kairo (2001), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps
- Appendix J. Gonjiam (2018), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps
- Appendix K. Five Factor Personality Model Example
- Appendix L. List of Elements to Prevent Bias

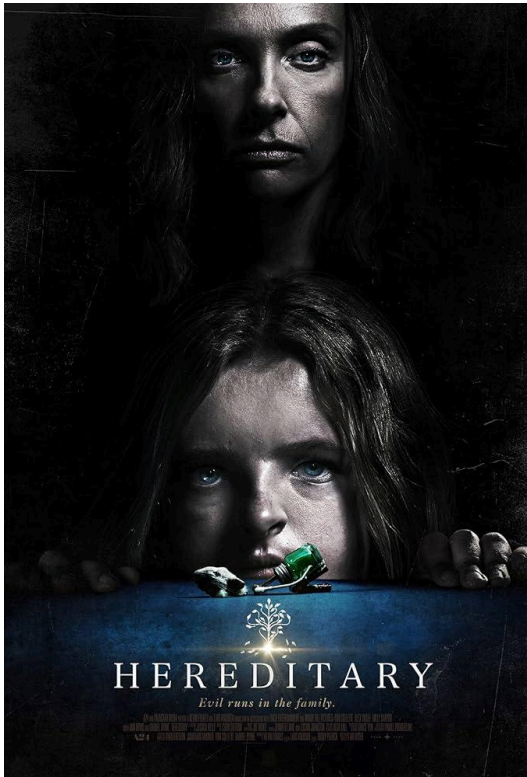
## Appendix A. Map of North American Countries Selected



Appendix B. Map of East Asian Countries Selected



Appendix C. Hereditary (2018), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps



<https://hulu.tv/4a17EBI>

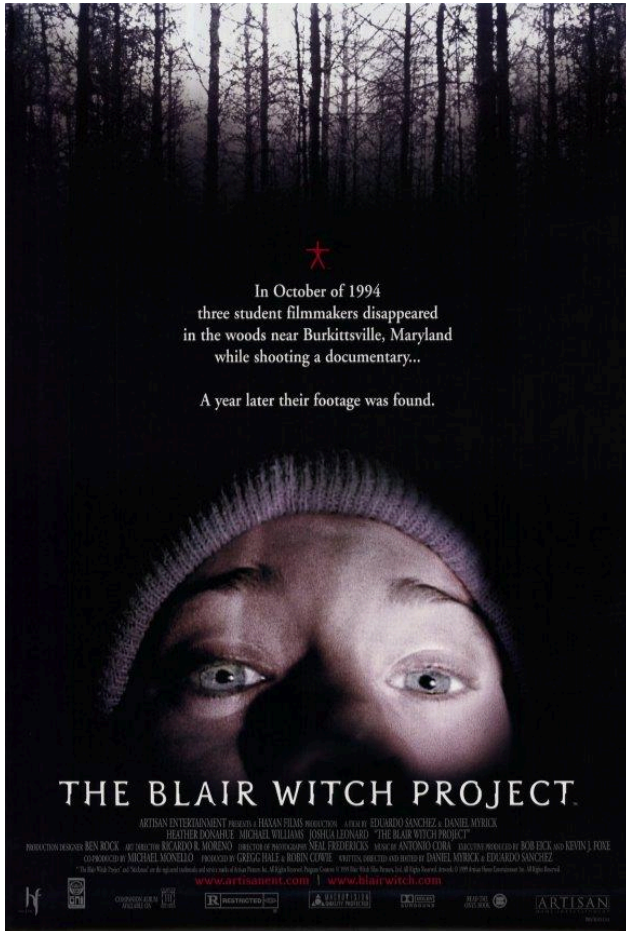
**Characters:**

- Charlie Graham
- Annie Graham

**Scene Timestamps:**

**\*Researcher was not able to access the video at the time of IRB submission\***

## Appendix D. The Blair Witch Project (1999), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps



<https://amzn.to/3UBEiFa>

### Characters:

- Heather Donahue
- Joshua Leonard
- Michael C. Williams

### Scene Timestamps:

Majority of the video will be used excluding these timestamps

- 2:59-3:19
- 4:05-9:26
- 11:55-13:42
- 57:07-1:21:21

## Appendix E. Ginger Snaps (2000), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps



<https://bit.ly/3w4HO1r>

### Characters:

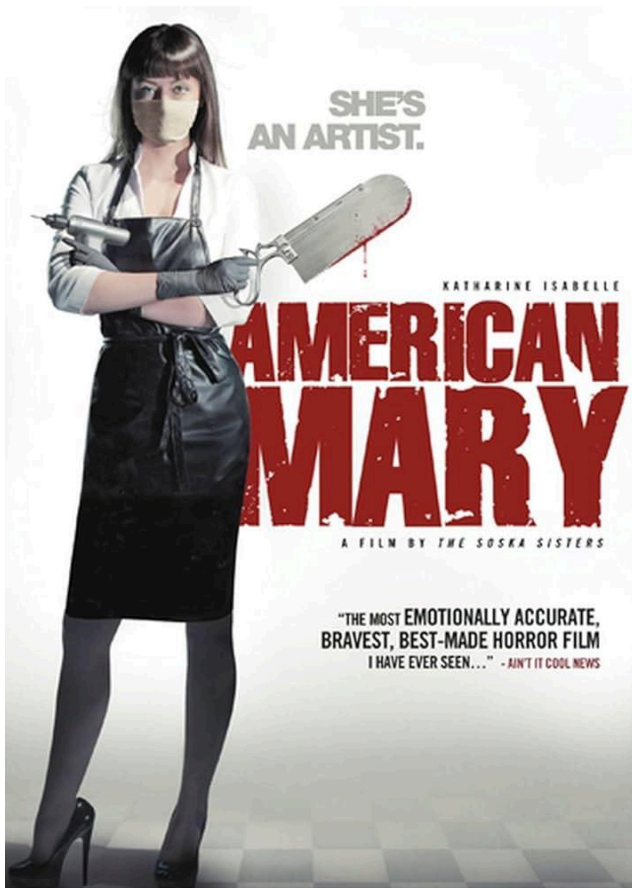
- Bridgette Fitzgerald

### Scene Timestamps:

- 2:47-4:33
- 7:09-8:03
- 8:08-12:56
- 13:00-15:01
- 15:18-17:46
- 22:51-24:13



Appendix F. American Mary (2012), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps



<https://bit.ly/3xZGJIR>

**Characters:**

- Mary Mason

**Scene Timestamps:**

- \*10:43
- \*12:34
- \*25:58
- \*43:36

**\*The researcher forgot to record the ending timestamps for this movie**

## Appendix G. Detention (2019), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps



<https://bit.ly/3wfHVao>

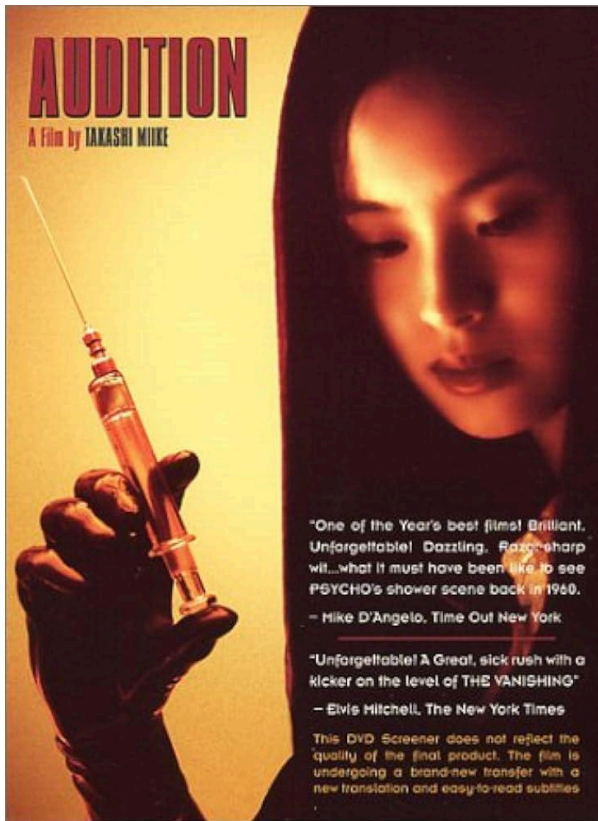
### Characters:

- Wei Chung Ting
- Fang Ray Shin

### Scene Timestamps:

**\*The researcher failed to document the timestamps prior to IRB submission\***

## Appendix H. Audition (1999), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps



<https://bit.ly/3WnHm94>

### Characters:

- Shigeharu Aoyama
- Asami Yamazaki

### Scene Timestamps:

- 3:33-12:27
- 22:31-21:43
- 29:19-32:43
- 32:57-34:18
- 34:27-35:22

Appendix I. Kairo (2001), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps



<https://bit.ly/3xYxHf8>

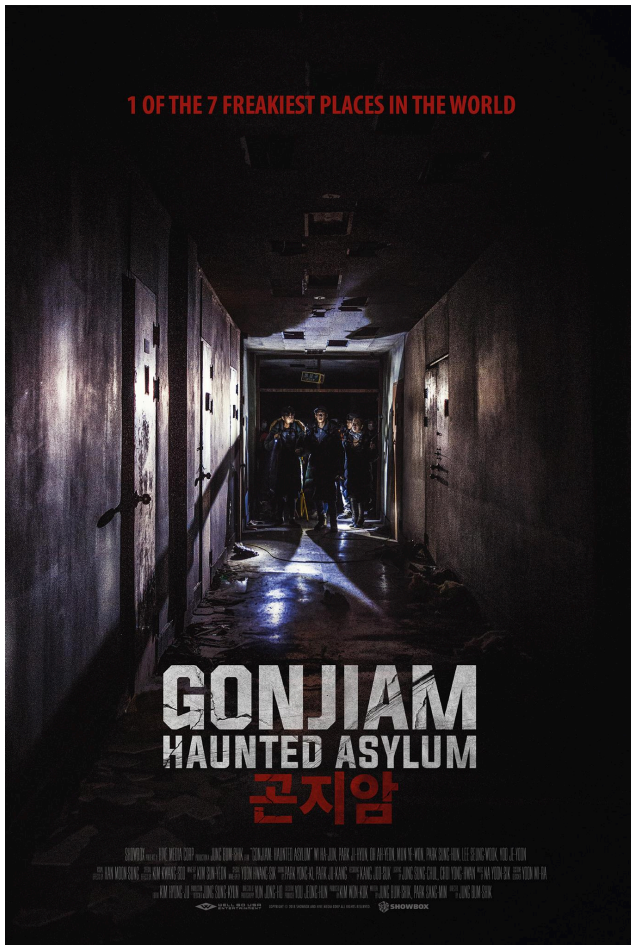
**Characters:**

- Michi Kudo
- Ryosuke Kawashima

**Scene Timestamps:**

**\*The researcher failed to document the timestamps prior to IRB submission\***

Appendix J. Gonjiam (2018), Poster, Characters, Scene Timestamps



<https://bit.ly/4dmhfFu>

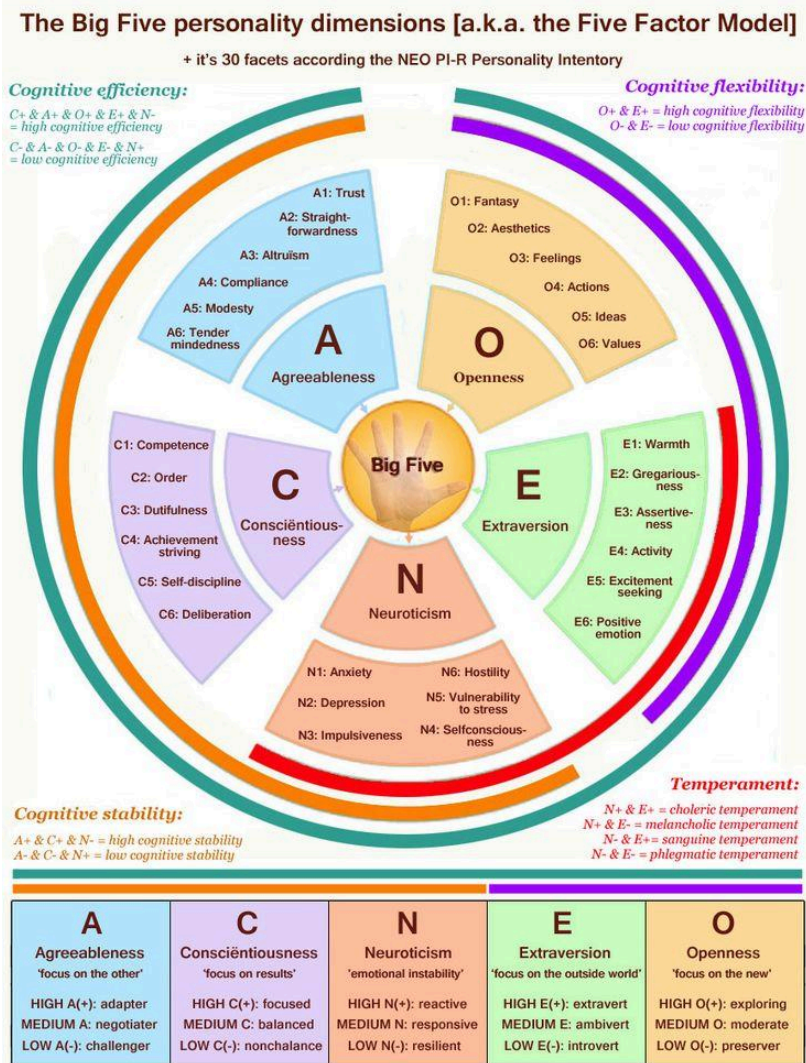
Characters:

- Ha-Joon

Scene Timestamps:

**\*The researcher failed to document the timestamps prior to IRB submission\***

## Appendix K. Five Factor Personality Model Example





## Appendix L. List of Elements to Prevent Bias

The scenes that the researcher will observe from the previously listed movies will include the following:

1. Characters behaving normally
2. Interactions with other people
3. When the characters are speaking
4. What they are saying and how they are saying it
5. Characters responding to highly emotional situations and revelations