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Never Care For What They Say ? Platform vs Genre Rules in Online Horror Narratives (2007–2024)

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Abstract

Research on online cultural production shows that platforms are acting as mediators that can heavily shape textual form. Yet, empirical work is often platform-bounded, making it difficult to assess whether stylistic regularities that we observe are indeed genre signals or if some of them are platform artefacts. We address this question through a cross-platform design focused on *creepypasta*, a digital-born horror genre circulating across heterogeneous infrastructures. Using a corpus of ~23,000 English-language stories published from 2007 to 2024 on Reddit's /r/nosleep and the Creepypasta Fandom wiki, we compare stylistic profiles across platforms and relate them to differences in rule regimes and moderation practices, established through qualitative extraction and close reading of platform guidelines. Across readability indices, lexical diversity measures, syntactic proxies, and a cross-fit feature-based model, we find that platform membership leaves only a narrow stylistic imprint, largely reducible to a single architectural rule: r/NoSleep's mandatory first-person narration. Beyond this constraint, differences are modest and fail to form coherent platform-specific stylistic signatures. This helps us define what is stylistically common in creepypastas, and understand what the genre is to its writers beyond the topics it deals with or the platform it is written on.

Keywords: creepypasta, platform studies, computational stylistics, online literature, digital humanities

1 Introduction

While literary sociology has long emphasised that genres and canons emerge through the action of mediating institutions (Guillory, 1993), and distant-reading approaches have shown how large-scale stylistic patterns map onto such mediation (Moretti, 2000; Piper, 2018), online vernacular writing is

still often treated as if it circulated in a homogeneous digital space. Yet cultural production is increasingly organised by platforms whose technical architectures, rule regimes, and visibility metrics structure how texts are written, read, and circulated (van Dijck et al., 2018; Poell et al., 2021; Nieborg et al., 2022). In this sense, platforms could operate as new mediators: they reward certain formal choices, penalise others, and thereby shape stylistic equilibria in ways comparable to publishers, editors, or periodicals in earlier media regimes (Poell et al., 2021).

At the same time, a large share of empirical work remains platform-bounded: researchers typically analyse cultural production within a single socio-technical environment—for instance social reading and writing on Wattpad (Pianzola et al., 2020; Kraxenberger and Lauer, 2022; Rebora et al., 2021), evaluation practices on online book-reviewing platforms (Boot, 2023), or the poetics of Twitter/X bot poetry (Waliya and Tijani, 2024; McNulty, 2025). Even studies that synthesise how Reddit is used as a research site largely describe one platform at a time rather than comparing textual outcomes across infrastructures (Proferes et al., 2021). These single-platform designs are indispensable for internal validity, but they make it harder to test whether a genre's stylistic regularities generalise across hosting environments, or whether they are artefacts of platform-specific affordances.

Research on online literature communities nonetheless strongly suggests that textual form diverges across sites. Interface constraints, tagging systems, moderation cultures, and feedback mechanisms have been shown to condition not only circulation and reception but also the textual properties of user-generated writing (Pianzola et al., 2020; Kraxenberger and Lauer, 2022; Silberstein-Bamford, 2024). This implies that even when a genre label is shared, its realisation can be platform-specific: each site constitutes a distinct ecology of

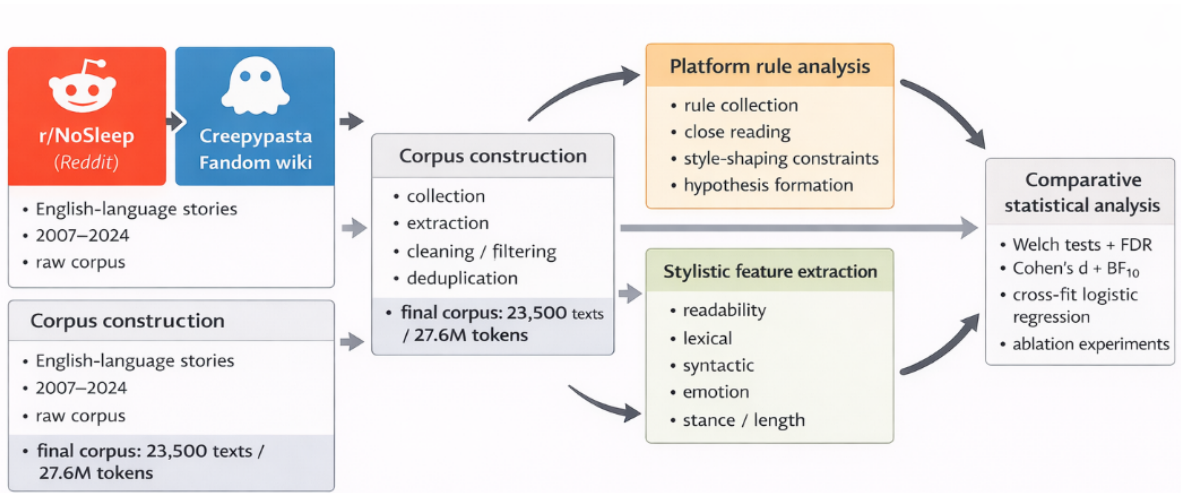


Figure 1: Analytical workflow of the study.

writing and reading, with its own norms of style and its own incentives for particular narrative postures.

Digital-born genres such as creepypasta provide an unusually clear window onto these dynamics. Creepypasta is a vernacular horror genre spanning subreddits and wikis, with relatively low editorial gatekeeping and vast quantities of comparable short-form narratives. We have previously approached creepypasta through the lens of bottom-up canon formation (Lionnet-Rollin and Cafiero, 2025); here, we shift the focus from canonisation outcomes to the cross-platform stylistic regimes through which the genre is produced and stabilised.

In this paper, we conceptualise creepypasta as a platformed genre: a set of shared narrative motifs realised through divergent stylistic norms depending on the hosting infrastructure. Using a corpus of approximately 23,000 English-language stories published between 2007 and 2024 on Reddit and the Creepypasta Fandom wiki, we systematically compare their stylistic profiles. Building on computational stylistics and platform studies (Piper, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018; Poell et al., 2021), our analysis addresses two questions: do creepypastas exhibit consistent stylistic differences across platforms? can eventual differences be linked to platform-specific rule regimes, interfaces, and visibility logics?

2 Material and methods

2.1 Corpus constitution

Creepypasta is not disseminated in a unified online field but across heterogeneous infrastructures:

Reddit’s /r/nosleep, with rule-bound immersion and upvote-driven visibility, and the Creepypasta Fandom wiki, with community editorial practices and quality guidelines. These environments embed authors in distinct regimes of affordances and constraints, potentially shaping prose style as directly as thematic conventions do.

2.2 Examining the rules of each platform

The rules of each platform were extracted and close-read to find differences that could generate significant differences in the texts proposed to the platform, or in those removed by the moderators.

2.3 Methods

We collected texts from two main sources: the Creepypasta fandom, using *Selenium* and *BeautifulSoup* to navigate and extract story content, and the /r/nosleep subreddit via the Pushshift database, from which we selected a balanced subset of posts to ensure temporal and qualitative representativeness. The texts were preprocessed through a multi-step pipeline including HTML stripping and normalization, language detection and duplicate removal, sentence segmentation and tokenization, and stop-word masking for lexical analyses.

From the cleaned corpus, we extracted 23,500 texts (27.6 million tokens) with associated metadata capturing publication date, author, subreddit score, and comment count.

Emotion scores (fear, disgust, anger, sadness, surprise, joy, neutral) were obtained by applying a DistilRoBERTa model fine-tuned on GoEmotions (Demszky et al., 2020) to each story, retaining the per-label probability as a continuous feature.

We employ three complementary analytical strategies. First, we conduct univariate Welch *t*-tests with Benjamini–Hochberg FDR correction across all stylistic features, reporting Cohen’s *d* and Bayes factors as measures of effect magnitude. Second, we run a cross-fit logistic regression with held-out GLM inference to obtain defensible *p*-values and identify which features most robustly predict platform membership. Third, we run a series of ablation experiments to disentangle the contribution of first-person narration from other stylistic dimensions.

3 Results

3.1 Qualitative analysis of the platforms’ rule and hypothesis formation

Reddit’s r/NoSleep and the Creepypasta Fandom wiki regulate the genre in fundamentally different ways. r/NoSleep is primarily an editorial and narratological regime: its rules tightly specify how stories must be written and received (first-person “as if real” immersion, a protagonist able to write the account, strict formatting and length constraints, and strong restrictions on out-of-character interaction), and they also delimit admissible horror content through detailed thematic prohibitions. By contrast, Fandom’s governance is largely about platform use and community order (behavioral norms, anti-abuse provisions, account/security rules), with editorial constraints that are comparatively general and oriented toward originality and compliance (no plagiarism/unauthorized reuse, no AI-generated content, no trollpastas), rather than a single mandated storytelling dispositif. Finally, the two sites operationalize “quality” differently: Fandom explicitly frames deletion around low-quality or overly generic writing, whereas r/NoSleep’s removals are mainly driven by conformity to its immersive storytelling apparatus and content boundaries, with quality enforced indirectly through language and format requirements.

This leads us to test the following set of hypotheses:

- **H1** (Variance compression on r/NoSleep). Because r/NoSleep imposes strict constraints on narration (first-person, “as if real”), format, and language correctness, texts published there should display lower dispersion than Fandom on core stylistic metrics (readability indices, sentence-length proxies, lexical-

density measures), even if mean differences are small.

- **H2** (Readability standardisation on r/NoSleep). Due to minimum-length requirements and explicit expectations of “correct English,” r/NoSleep stories should show fewer extreme readability outliers and more central clustering on standard readability indices than Fandom (i.e., shorter tails and fewer highly noisy/fragmentary texts).
- **H3** (Lower lexical density on r/NoSleep). The enforced first-person experiential stance on r/NoSleep should increase the relative frequency of function words and stance markers (e.g., first-person pronouns, perception verbs), yielding lower lexical density (content-word share) than on Fandom, where narratorial stance is less constrained.
- **H4** (Lower nominal/passive style on r/NoSleep). r/NoSleep’s immersion rules and bans on “found media” formats should reduce the prevalence of report-like registers; consequently, r/NoSleep texts should exhibit lower nominal style indices and lower passive-voice ratios than Fandom on average.
- **H5** (Greater register heterogeneity on Fandom). Because Fandom does not enforce a single storytelling dispositif, its creepypasta corpus should exhibit greater between-text heterogeneity in syntactic proxies (sentence length, passive ratio, nominal style) and lexical measures (lexical density, diversity), reflected in higher variance and potentially multimodal feature distributions.

3.2 Quantitative comparisons between platforms

All pairwise comparisons use Welch’s unequal-variance *t*-test. We report *Cohen’s d* as a standardised effect-size measure and the Bayes factor BF_{10} (alternative vs. null) to evaluate evidential strength independently of sample size. A $BF_{10} < 1$ signals that the data favour the null hypothesis of no difference; values between 1 and 3 are conventionally regarded as anecdotal evidence, and values above 10 as strong evidence for a difference. Cohen’s *d* thresholds follow conventional

Table 1: Cross-platform comparison of stylistic features by domain. Values are reported as mean \pm SD. Cohen’s d gives the standardised effect magnitude; BF_{10} reports Bayesian evidence for the alternative over the null. The “Eff.” column provides a compact interpretation of effect size: 0 = negligible ($|d| < 0.20$), + = small-to-medium ($0.20 \leq |d| < 0.50$), ++ = moderate ($0.50 \leq |d| < 0.80$), +++ = large ($|d| \geq 0.80$). † indicates $BF_{10} < 1$, i.e. evidence favouring the null.

Feature	Fandom	Reddit	Cohen’s d	Eff.	BF_{10}
<i>Readability</i>					
Flesch Reading Ease	81.87 \pm 12.73	83.55 \pm 13.84	0.126	0	7.45×10^{19}
Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level	5.61 \pm 4.00	5.43 \pm 4.99	0.040	0	2.81
Gunning Fog Index	7.55 \pm 4.05	7.39 \pm 5.09	0.035	0†	0.67
SMOG Index	8.09 \pm 1.65	7.85 \pm 1.15	0.169	0	2.27×10^{34}
Automated Readability Index	6.98 \pm 5.13	6.60 \pm 6.33	0.066	0	1.95×10^4
Coleman–Liau Index	6.58 \pm 1.90	5.98 \pm 1.35	0.374	+	9.34×10^{172}
Dale–Chall Score	6.98 \pm 1.13	6.79 \pm 0.80	0.206	+	6.42×10^{51}
LIX	31.72 \pm 8.87	30.31 \pm 13.58	0.121	0	1.57×10^{19}
<i>Lexical richness</i>					
Lexical Density	0.48 \pm 0.04	0.46 \pm 0.03	0.398	+	2.02×10^{191}
Hapax Legomena	371.4 \pm 297.89	325.4 \pm 162.87	0.196	0	1.11×10^{45}
Honoré’s R	2084.31 \pm 388.14	1974.47 \pm 251.82	0.342	+	3.07×10^{142}
Type–Token Ratio	0.68 \pm 0.11	0.70 \pm 0.03	0.191	0	7.78×10^{39}
<i>Syntax</i>					
Sentence length	14.41 \pm 9.69	14.41 \pm 9.67	0.001	0†	0.014
Perplexity (GPT-2)	2.89 \pm 0.39	2.80 \pm 0.30	—	—	—
Noun–verb ratio	1.15 \pm 0.36	1.06 \pm 0.24	0.291	+	2.40×10^{103}
Noun–adj.–verb ratio	1.56 \pm 0.47	1.43 \pm 0.31	0.321	+	1.12×10^{126}
Passive-voice ratio	0.04 \pm 0.03	0.03 \pm 0.02	0.277	+	9.72×10^{91}
<i>Emotion</i>					
Fear	0.36 \pm 0.25	0.46 \pm 0.24	0.409	+	1.19×10^{217}
Disgust	0.23 \pm 0.18	0.17 \pm 0.15	0.361	+	8.58×10^{164}
Anger	0.09 \pm 0.10	0.08 \pm 0.08	0.142	0	1.09×10^{24}
Sadness	0.07 \pm 0.13	0.06 \pm 0.08	0.165	0	9.59×10^{31}
Surprise	0.08 \pm 0.11	0.09 \pm 0.10	0.017	0†	0.036
Joy	0.02 \pm 0.05	0.01 \pm 0.04	0.043	0	3.19
Neutral	0.14 \pm 0.15	0.13 \pm 0.12	0.057	0	234
<i>Descriptive / stance</i>					
Text length (chars)	11 622 \pm 28 899	8 592 \pm 6 504	0.151	0	1.42×10^{24}
First-person pronoun ratio	0.398 \pm 0.256	0.549 \pm 0.145	0.746	++	∞

benchmarks: $|d| < 0.20$ small, 0.20–0.50 small-to-medium, 0.50–0.80 medium, > 0.80 large (Cohen, 1988). Descriptive statistics (mean \pm SD) are retained in Table 1 so that the reader can gauge absolute magnitudes alongside standardised effects.

3.2.1 H1 — Variance compression on r/NoSleep

H1 receives partial support. The clearest difference concerns text length: Fandom displays much greater dispersion, whereas r/NoSleep appears more constrained at the document level. By contrast, most readability and sentence-level measures remain very close across platforms. In other words, r/NoSleep seems to compress coarse formal properties more than fine-grained stylistic ones.

3.2.2 H2 — Readability standardisation on r/NoSleep

H2 is only weakly supported. A few readability indices point to slightly greater standardisation on r/NoSleep, but the pattern is not consistent across the full set of measures. Overall, the two platforms remain close on readability, and no strong platform-specific profile emerges from these indices alone.

3.2.3 H3 — Lower lexical density on r/NoSleep

H3 is supported, and this is one of the clearest results in the paper. r/NoSleep texts show lower lexical density and substantially more first-person marking than Fandom texts. This pattern is fully consistent with the platform’s mandatory

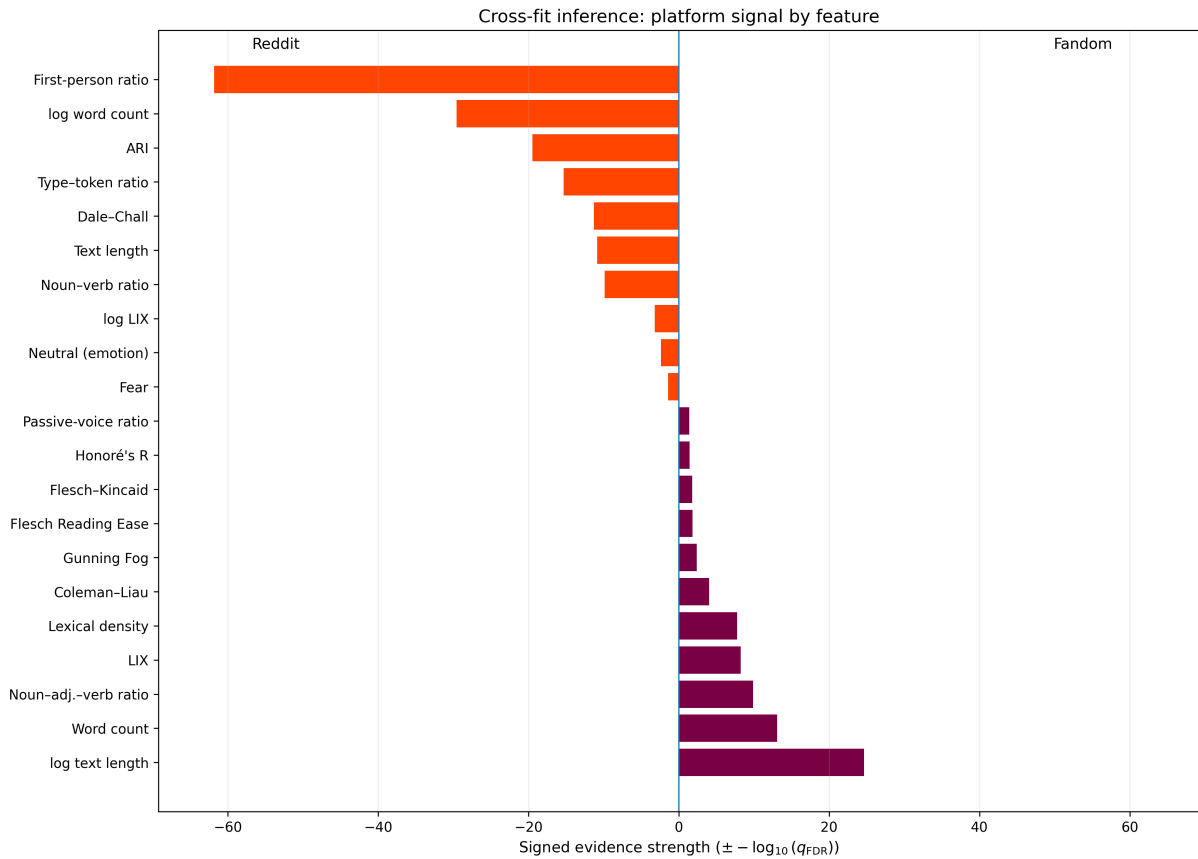


Figure 2: Cross-fit inference by feature. Bar length represents signed $-\log_{10}(q_{FDR})$: negative values indicate features associated with higher odds of Reddit, positive values indicate features associated with higher odds of Fandom. Greater distance from zero indicates stronger evidence after FDR correction. Exact values for odds ratios, aggregated p -values, and corrected q -values are reported in Appendix Table 2.

first-person immersive regime. At the same time, the result appears concentrated rather than diffuse: much of the lexical difference seems to flow from this single narratorial constraint rather than from a broader stylistic divergence.

3.2.4 H4 — Lower nominal/passive style on r/NoSleep

H4 is supported in direction, but the magnitude of the effect remains modest. Relative to Fandom, r/NoSleep shows a less nominal and less report-like style, which fits its immersive first-person storytelling norms. Still, these differences are small-to-medium and do not amount to a sharply distinct platform style.

3.2.5 H5 — Greater register heterogeneity on Fandom

H5 is also only partially supported. Fandom is clearly more heterogeneous in document-level properties, especially text length, but this greater heterogeneity is much less visible in sentence-level and stylistic measures. The result therefore points

to broader formal looseness on Fandom rather than to a strongly differentiated internal stylistic landscape.

3.2.6 Emotion profiles

Emotion scores reveal a modest but interpretable contrast. r/NoSleep tends more strongly toward fear, whereas Fandom leans more toward disgust. This likely reflects a difference in narrative framing: r/NoSleep's first-person experiential mode foregrounds psychological threat, while Fandom's looser narratorial conventions leave more room for graphic or grotesque effects. These differences remain limited in magnitude and should be read as secondary to the much stronger first-person effect.

Globally, most features show either very small effects or no meaningful divergence at all, and only the first-person pronoun ratio stands out as a strong discriminator. The clearest platform effect is therefore not a broad stylistic signature, but a narrow architectural constraint: r/NoSleep's mandatory first-person narration. Beyond that rule, the two corpora

Table 2: Cross-fit inference results for the 21 features that remain significant after FDR correction ($q < 0.05$). All reported features were selected in all five folds. OR > 1 indicates higher odds of Fandom; OR < 1 indicates higher odds of Reddit.

Feature	OR	p_{agg}	q_{FDR}
First-person ratio	0.519	4.6×10^{-64}	1.5×10^{-62}
log word count	2.7×10^{-7}	1.7×10^{-31}	2.6×10^{-30}
log text length	1.1×10^6	2.2×10^{-26}	2.3×10^{-25}
ARI	0.071	4.3×10^{-21}	3.4×10^{-20}
Type-token ratio	0.668	7.3×10^{-17}	4.7×10^{-16}
Word count	126.5	1.5×10^{-14}	8.0×10^{-14}
Dale-Chall	0.454	1.1×10^{-12}	4.9×10^{-12}
Text length	0.015	3.2×10^{-12}	1.3×10^{-11}
Noun-adj.-verb ratio	1.990	3.9×10^{-11}	1.3×10^{-10}
Noun-verb ratio	0.469	4.0×10^{-11}	1.3×10^{-10}
LIX	8.675	2.1×10^{-9}	6.1×10^{-9}
Lexical density	1.342	6.8×10^{-9}	1.8×10^{-8}
Coleman-Liau	1.779	4.0×10^{-5}	9.8×10^{-5}
log LIX	0.330	2.7×10^{-4}	6.3×10^{-4}
Neutral (emotion)	0.643	2.0×10^{-3}	4.2×10^{-3}
Gunning Fog	3.152	2.2×10^{-3}	4.3×10^{-3}
Flesch Reading Ease	1.820	7.8×10^{-3}	1.5×10^{-2}
Flesch-Kincaid	3.784	9.8×10^{-3}	1.7×10^{-2}
Honoré’s R	1.818	2.3×10^{-2}	3.8×10^{-2}
Fear	0.527	2.4×10^{-2}	3.8×10^{-2}
Passive-voice ratio	1.100	2.9×10^{-2}	4.3×10^{-2}

remain surprisingly similar.

3.3 Logistic regression with cross-fit inference

To obtain more defensible inferential statistics than standard p -values from a single fitted model, we implement a cross-fit procedure: an L1-regularised logistic regression selects features on each training fold, and held-out GLM inference is then conducted on the corresponding test fold alone. P -values are aggregated conservatively (Bonferroni across folds) and then corrected for multiple testing via the Benjamini-Hochberg procedure.

The out-of-fold AUC of the full logistic model is 0.795, indicating moderate but not overwhelming discriminability from the engineered feature set. This is consistent with the broader pattern observed throughout the paper: platform differences are real, but they are concentrated in a limited number of dimensions rather than distributed across the full stylistic feature space.

Figure 2 and Table 2 show that the cross-fit signal is dominated by a small number of features. The strongest and most stable predictor is the first-person ratio, which is selected in every fold and aligns directly with r/NoSleep’s narratorial rule. Length-related variables also contribute, reflecting the broader dispersion of Fandom texts. Other readability, lexical, and emotion features remain significant after correction, but their contribution is weaker and more diffuse. The main lesson is

therefore not that many independent stylistic dimensions sharply separate the two platforms, but that a narrow cluster of cues—above all narrator stance—accounts for most of the learnable difference.

Several features that appear significant in the univariate comparisons do not survive the cross-fit procedure. This suggests that part of their apparent signal is either redundant with stronger predictors or too weak to remain robust once features are considered jointly. In that respect, the cross-fit analysis reinforces the paper’s main conclusion: platform differences exist, but they are concentrated in a limited number of dimensions rather than spread across the full stylistic feature space.

3.4 Ablation study: disentangling first-person narration

To directly test whether the first-person pronoun ratio drives most of the platform signal, we run a series of ablation experiments on the logistic classifier. Each experiment removes or isolates a block of features and evaluates out-of-fold AUC. A key additional experiment *residualises* all remaining features on the first-person ratio within each training fold before classification on the held-out fold, thus removing the variance of every feature that is linearly attributable to narrator stance.

Results are summarised in Figure 3.

The ablation results clarify the hierarchy of signals. Removing the first-person ratio alone reduces performance only modestly, because part of its effect is absorbed by correlated features such as lexical density and nominal style. The more revealing test is residualisation: once the variance attributable to first-person narration is removed from the remaining features, classification performance drops much more sharply. This shows that narrator stance is not just one predictor among others, but the main organising signal in the model. Other feature blocks still contribute, especially readability and length, but their role is clearly secondary.

4 Discussion

The point of this paper was not simply to measure platform effects, but to ask how far a genre can resist them. In the case of creepypasta, the answer seems mixed. Some rules do leave a strong mark: the clearest example is r/NoSleep’s first-person requirement, which produces the most visible and robust difference in the corpus. But beyond such

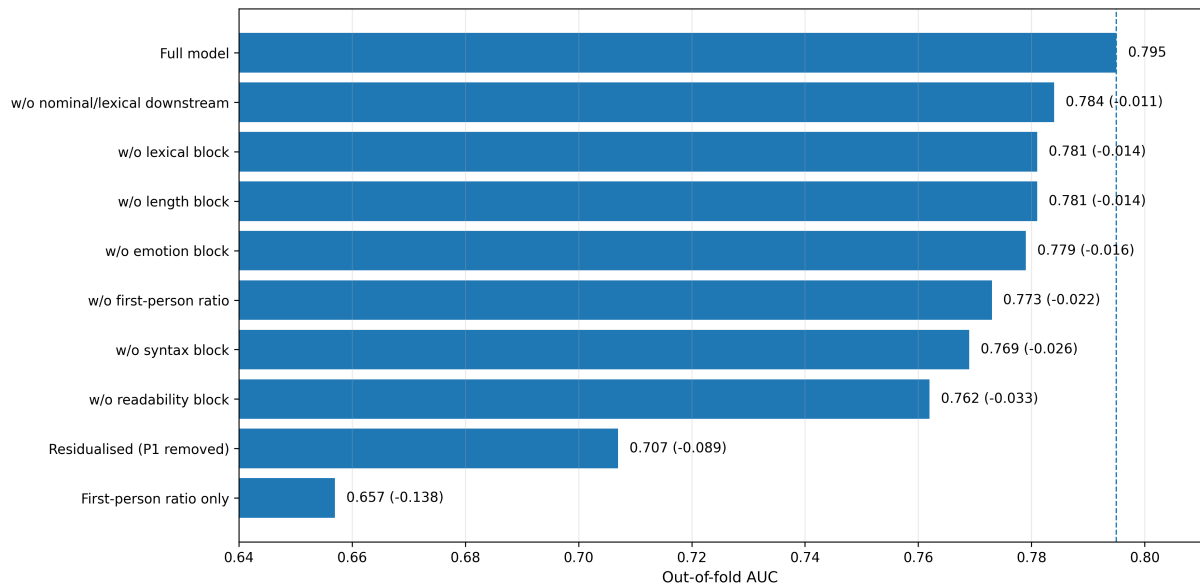


Figure 3: Ablation study across all experimental conditions. Bars report out-of-fold AUC, and labels indicate the change relative to the full model. The figure separates first-person-related conditions from broader feature-block ablations. The largest performance drop is observed when all remaining features are residualised on the first-person ratio, confirming that narrator stance accounts for a substantial share of the platform signal.

explicit and easily enforceable constraints, platform rules seem to shape style much less strongly. Most readability, lexical, syntactic, and emotional measures remain relatively close across the two corpora, and they do not add up to two clearly distinct prose styles.

This suggests that genre can prevail against platform rules, though not completely. The platforms do not produce identical texts, but neither do they fully reorganise the genre at the level of prose. A plausible interpretation is that many writers are responding not only to platform rules, but also to shared genre expectations: they read across sites, imitate successful stories, and carry writing habits from one environment to another.

Looking at what remains similar across platforms is therefore just as important as identifying what differs. Empirically, the two corpora share a common textual profile: they occupy broadly similar readability ranges, show near-identical average sentence length, remain fairly close on most lexical and syntactic measures, and draw on a comparable affective repertoire dominated by fear and disgust rather than sharply divergent emotional modes. Taken together, these regularities suggest that creepypasta is held together by more than topic alone. Across platforms, the genre appears to preserve a recognisable stylistic core: accessible narrative prose, strong experiential framing, and a relatively

stable horror texture.

We are of course not claiming that platform effects are weak in general. We do think on the contrary that more systematically examining texts from the same genre across platforms would be helpful in computational literary studies, to detect commonalities that help clarify what gives the genre its continuity.

5 Limitations

This interpretation remains provisional. We compare only two platforms, and both belong to the same broad online horror ecology. Our feature set also remains mostly surface-level; stronger contrasts might emerge from measures tied more closely to narrative structure, discourse organisation, or interaction with readers. Finally, we analyse published texts rather than rejected or removed ones, so some platform effects may be more visible in moderation outcomes than in the surviving corpus itself.

6 Data and code availability

Code is available at this repository https://anonymous.4open.science/r/acl_nlp4DH_creepy-B3CF/. Data are available upon reasonable requests but cannot be reshared for legal reasons.

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