Age Differences in Adults' Emotional Motivations for Exposure to Films

Marie-Louise Mares a; Mary Beth Oliver b; Joanne Cantor a

a University of Wisconsin-Madison, b Pennsylvania State University,

Online Publication Date: 01 October 2008

To cite this Article Mares, Marie-Louise, Oliver, Mary Beth and Cantor, Joanne(2008)'Age Differences in Adults' Emotional Motivations for Exposure to Films'. Media Psychology, 11:4, 488 — 511

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/15213260802492026

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15213260802492026

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Age Differences in Adults’ Emotional Motivations for Exposure to Films

MARIE-LOUISE MARES
University of Wisconsin-Madison

MARY BETH OLIVER
Pennsylvania State University

JOANNE CANTOR
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Participants in three age ranges (younger adults, 18–25, N = 188; middle adults, 26–49, N = 92; and older adults, 50 and over, N = 93) completed a questionnaire assessing motivations for everyday affective experiences as well as affective motivations for film viewing. In line with Arnett’s (2000) view of emerging adulthood and Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles’s (1999) theory of socioemotional selectivity, younger adults expressed the greatest interest in experiencing negative emotions in their everyday lives, in viewing dark, creepy, or violent content, and in viewing media to escape boredom and for amusement; older adults were most interested in experiencing emotional stability and in viewing films with uplifting, heartwarming content. Results suggest that lifespan differences may help explain the allure of hedonically negative programming among some groups.

To some extent, we can modify the world we live in by selecting our media environment. There are constraints created by program scheduling or by access to films, videos, and music, but within these constraints, we can decide (for at least part of each day) whether to spend time, for example, with a comedy or a tearjerker, with escapist humor or thought-provoking drama. The central question of this article is whether the emotional experiences we seek out via media use vary across the adult lifespan. Do younger, middle-aged, and older adults want different media experiences?

Address correspondence to Marie-Louise Mares, Communication Arts, 821 University Avenue, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI 53706. E-mail: mares@wisc.edu
Research on emotional development suggests that there are substantial changes across the lifespan in responses to emotion-related stimuli, preferences for different emotional experiences, and levels of emotion regulation. However, empirical work on emotional development to date has not included media use. Conversely, adult development is a new consideration for research on emotional responding to media. This article explores the intersection between these two areas. The main argument is that by looking at adult emotional development, we can gain a more complete understanding of the attractions and functions served by different types of media content.

MEDIA EFFECTS RESEARCH ON EMOTIONAL PREFERENCES AND RESPONDING

The starting point for much of the emotion and media research was Zillmann’s (1985, 1988; Bryant & Zillmann, 1984) theory of mood management. Zillmann focused on the effect of pre-existing moods on individuals’ selection of positively or negatively valenced media content. To summarize, the central argument was that individuals want to experience positive affect and, therefore, try to repair bad moods by exposing themselves to positively valenced content that is absorbing (preventing negative rumination) and does not remind them of the cause of their bad mood. Individuals who already feel fine should show weaker preferences for positive, absorbing content, because they are less motivated to actively use media to alter their emotional state. Bored individuals should be more likely to seek out exciting content than should individuals who are over stimulated and stressed. Thus, this was not a theory about enduring individual preferences—why one person loves situation comedies and another prefers complex human dramas—but rather an account of why an individual may strongly prefer a comedy one night and be interested in watching a drama another night.

The effects of mood on media choices have been tested on an array of age groups, although no systematic age comparisons have been made. Masters, Ford, and Arend (1983) manipulated the moods of preschool children and found that boys (but not girls) who had been treated in a comparatively hostile manner spent more time watching nurturing scenes from *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* than watching a less nurturing program. In various studies with college students, individuals’ choices of which programs to watch or which songs to listen to were predicted by their moods—whether they had been made to feel bored versus stressed (Bryant & Zillmann, 1984; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002) or angered (Zillmann, Hezel, & Medoff, 1980), or if were in a relatively uncomfortable part of their menstrual cycle (Meadowcroft & Zillmann, 1987). Another study found that women in more uncomfortable stages of their pregnancy showed stronger preferences for comedy and more avoidance of action adventure programming than
did women who were in more pleasant stages (Helregel & Weaver, 1989). Overall, then, there is considerable empirical support for the claim that individuals often seek to reduce negative affect by selecting positive media content.

A puzzle raised by mood-management theory, though, is the appeal of media content that would not obviously help repair moods, for example, material that is frightening, dark, hostile, gory, or sad. Several explanations have been put forward and are discussed below. This article considers an additional explanation: This type of content serves developmental functions of growth and exploration for young adults.

One explanation that has been previously explored is that at least some types of dark media content have material embedded within them that can ultimately make one feel better. Scary films often end with the protagonists escaping danger, and the arousal created by the preceding suspense may serve to intensify the pleasure and relief of the positive ending (Sparks, 1991; Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986). In addition, sad or bleak depictions sometimes contain content relevant to the viewer’s situation and may make some viewers feel better through downward social comparison, that is, the misery suffered by the protagonist may serve to remind the viewer that he or she is not alone or is doing relatively well (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003; Mares & Cantor, 1992).

Other explanations have focused on a cluster of personality characteristics, such as sensation seeking or empathy (some of which are correlated with gender), that draw some viewers to dark material on the one hand or sad material on the other. For example, Hoffner and Levine’s (2005) meta-analysis of research on the enjoyment of fright and violence found that males reported enjoying scary or violent content more than females, as did individuals who were lower in empathy, those higher in sensation seeking, and those with more aggressive personality traits. Weaver (1991) reported that individuals scoring high on neuroticism preferred watching television news or listening to music with sad themes, whereas those high in psychoticism sought out graphically violent horror films. Women and individuals high in empathy reported relatively stronger attraction to tragic content than did men or individuals lower in empathy (Oliver, Sargent, & Weaver, 1998; Oliver, Weaver, & Sargent, 2000).

A third, more recent explanation is that there can be more complex pleasures than simple positive affect, derived from the combination of affective and cognitive satisfaction. Oliver (1993) argued that tearjerker movies may be appealing because some viewers experience not only the direct emotion (sadness) but also a positive meta-emotion about feeling sad (e.g., “I really needed a good cry”). More recently, Oliver (2008) suggested that research would benefit from a greater distinction between hedonic motivations for viewing entertainment and more contemplative (or eudaimonic) motivations. That is, some media content that appears negative in affective
tone may be appreciated by viewers because it provides opportunities for greater insight and examination of meaningful human conditions.

The explanation being explored in this article builds on this last account. The argument is that there are a variety of pleasures that viewers may seek from media use, including short-term relief from negative affect offered by positive and absorbing content, the eudaimonic appeal of material that is affectively meaningful and complex, and the seemingly paradoxical appeal of dark or bleak material. The importance attached to each of these functions may vary across the lifespan, as individuals move from one stage to another and develop different sets of emotional preferences. The aim of this article is to investigate the extent to which emotional development across the adult lifespan helps explain media preferences, including attraction to negatively valenced content.

**EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH**

Adult emotional development is a relatively new field of research, largely spearheaded by Carstensen and her colleagues. In summarizing the main findings of this area, Carstensen et al. (1999) argued that there are several important changes that occur as people age: fewer experiences of negative affect, greater focus on achieving positive emotional stability, and greater focus on emotional meaningfulness in social relationships. These changes are discussed below, together with hypotheses about their implications for responses to media content.

Positive versus Negative Affect

Despite various bleak stereotypes of old age, and despite the objective hardships that may accompany aging, there is some empirical evidence that it is in fact youth that is marked by the most negative emotional experiences. Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, and Nesselroade (2000) used experience sampling on a diverse group of 18- to 95-year-old participants, asking them to record their emotions at random intervals each day for a week. They found that although there were no age differences in the subjective intensity of emotions, there were linear age declines until age 60 (followed by a leveling off) in the frequency and duration of negative feelings. Older adults (and to a lesser extent middle-aged adults) appeared better able to avoid and shake off negative affect, although they were also more likely to report what the authors called “poignancy”—a blend of positive and negative emotions. Longitudinal research on individuals ranging in age from 44 to 90 (Charles, Reynolds, & Gatz, 2001) has also found steady declines in negative affect until age 60, with slight declines occurring after that even into the oldest groups.
Carstensen, Fung, and Charles (2003) suggested that declines in negative affect may be the result of increasingly effective mood regulation. In a study comparing older adults with their middle-aged children, and with college students, Lawton, Kleban, Rajagopol, and Dean (1992) found that emotional stability and deliberate emotion regulation (e.g., “I choose activities carefully so as to give me just the right amount of emotional stimulation”) increased with age, and emotional intensity decreased with age. Phillips, Henry, Hosie, and Milne (2006) surveyed participants aged 18 to 88 and found that aging was associated with a decrease in self-reported trait anger (e.g., “I have a fiery temper”), a substantial increase in the use of calming strategies (“I take a deep breath and relax”), and a reduced tendency to ruminate about upsetting situations (see also Barrick, Hutchinson, & Deckers, 1989; Gross et al., 1997).

Consistent with these findings, research on attention and memory has repeatedly found that younger adults paid more attention to negative images (e.g., bugs, mutilation, sad or angry faces) and remembered them better than positive images (e.g., babies, animals, happy faces); older adults showed the opposite pattern (Isaacowitz, Wadlinger, Goren, & Wilson, 2006; Leigland, Schulz, & Janowsky, 2004; Mather & Carstensen, 2005; Mikels, Larkin, Reuter-Lorenz, & Carstensen, 2005). A series of studies by Mather and Knight (2005) suggested that older adults’ positivity bias is at least partly volitional—it occurs because older adults expend cognitive resources to make it occur. Older adults who did better on tasks involving cognitive control had greater memory for positive than negative pictures, and when older adults were distracted (thus, prevented from recruiting their cognitive resources) they no longer remembered positive better than negative images.

Overall there has been a burgeoning line of research over the past 20 years suggesting that younger adults pay more attention to negative input and experience more negative emotions than older adults. As age increases, individuals work at maintaining stable positive affect. Why should there be these developmental changes? Initially, Gross and colleagues (1997) suggested that lifelong experience may gradually teach adults “how to regulate effectively the inner experience of emotion” (p. 597). Thus, perhaps young adults have more negative emotions because they lack knowledge about how to control their responses to stimuli.

More recently, Carstensen and colleagues (2003) have offered a different account of age differences, which they labeled socioemotional selectivity theory. The core argument is that emotional experiences are affected by the goals associated with different life stages. Young adults (who typically perceive themselves as having a long future for which they must prepare) have primary goals of knowledge gain and personal achievement. In the pursuit of these goals, they may be willing to undergo experiences that cause negative emotions; put simply, young adults are willing to do a variety of unpleasant things because they expect it to benefit them in the long
run. As individuals grow older, they perceive the future to be more finite, and their emphasis shifts from long-term goals to a focus on achieving emotional satisfaction and meaningfulness in the present. Greater emphasis on current emotional goals may make older adults less willing to undergo unpleasant or unsatisfying experiences and more careful to regulate negative emotions.

A third, related explanation for these age patterns is suggested by Arnett’s (2000, 2004) description of emerging adulthood (roughly ages 18–25) as marked by relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations about how to behave. Emerging adults are typically no longer embedded in parental family structures nor yet embedded in their own set of enduring adult responsibilities. As such, they tend not to see themselves as full-fledged adults and are conscious of the opportunity to explore their identities in love, work, and world before taking on more permanent adult roles. Various risk-taking behaviors (e.g., unprotected sex, substance abuse, and risky driving) peak during this period (Arnett, 1992; Schulenberg, O’Malley, & Bachman, 2005), which may reflect the desire to have as many intense experiences as possible. Perhaps for this age group, strong emotions—both positive and negative—are seen as inherently valuable for exploring the range and depths of possible experience and escaping boredom.²

Thus, one possible explanation for the popularity of gore, horror, and other intensely negative media content is that this material offers emerging adults the opportunity to have arousing, novel experiences that cannot readily (or safely) be had otherwise. To the extent that older adults value positive emotional stability over intensity, they would not be expected to be attracted to this content.

The current project sought to investigate this line of reasoning by exploring whether there were age differences in self-reported preferences for positive versus negative emotional experiences while watching films, and whether these age differences (if they emerged) would be explained by age differences in more general, everyday affective preferences. Respondents (aged 18–82) were asked about their preferences for different emotional experiences in their everyday lives, their interest in experiencing different types of emotional and cognitive responses to films, and their perceptions of how their tastes had changed (if at all) since adolescence.

Given the theoretical perspectives of Arnett (2000) and Carstensen et al. (1999) we hypothesized that:

H1a: Young adults, relative to middle-aged adults and older adults, will express more willingness to experience negative emotions in their everyday lives.

H1b: Older adults, compared to young adults, will show more interest in experiencing positive emotional stability in their everyday lives.
Then, given these developmental changes in everyday affective preferences, we hypothesized that there would be age differences in preferences for negative affective experiences while watching films.

H2a: Young adults, relative to middle-aged adults and older adults, will be more likely to report watching media to make themselves scared and sad.
H2b: Young adults, relative to middle-aged adults and older adults, will report more attraction to films containing negative emotional content.
H2c: Middle-aged and older participants will report less current interest in watching films to feel scared and sad than in retrospective ratings regarding their preferences when they were teens.

What about interest in experiencing positive emotions while watching films? Older adults’ greater interest in and success at controlling negative affect suggests that they might be particularly likely to use media in the manner described by Zillmann (1985; 1988) as a way of cheering themselves up and preventing negative rumination. However, in proposing socioemotional selectivity theory, Carstensen et al. (2000) emphasized that older adults do not simply pursue happiness. Rather, they argued, aging is associated with a greater emphasis on satisfying emotionally meaningful goals, in contrast with younger adults’ emphasis on knowledge and growth. One way in which this has been studied is by examining developmental changes in individuals’ manipulation of their social environments. Various studies have found that older adults, compared to younger adults, had smaller social networks that were disproportionately composed of emotionally close social partners (Fung, Carstensen, & Lang, 2001; Lang, Staudinger, & Carstensen, 1998). Lang (2000) followed a sample of 206 adults aged 70–104 over four years and found that more than half reported intentionally ridding themselves of peripheral social contacts as they aged.

What does this imply for media preferences? Perhaps, it suggests that older adults, compared to young adults, will be more motivated to watch content with uplifting or heartwarming content where the emphasis is on meaningful positive emotions. In contrast, young adults (according to socioemotional selectivity theory) may perceive less of a need to be frugal with their time. This suggests that they may be more willing than older adults to watch films “just for fun” and more willing to spend time watching humorous material (even if such material is acknowledged to be silly or lightweight). Moreover, Arnett’s (1992) account of emerging adults as seeking intensity and novelty suggests that young adults may watch films as a way of alleviating moments of boredom. Given this line of reasoning, our hypotheses were:

H3a: Older adults, relative to younger adults, will show more attraction to heartwarming, uplifting film content.
H3b: Younger adults, relative- to middle-aged adults, and older adults will show more interest in watching for fun and boredom alleviation motives and more attraction to humorous content.

H3c: Middle-aged and older participants will report less current interest in watching films for fun and boredom alleviation than in retrospective ratings regarding their teens.

Mediation

Our suggestion has been that age groups predict differences in everyday affective preferences, with everyday affective preferences then predicting differences in media preferences. Thus, we would expect that differences between age groups with regard to interest in experiencing negative affect in everyday life would mediate differences in attractions to negative film content. We would also expect that differences between age groups with regard to interest in experiencing positive emotional stability in everyday life would mediate differences in attractions to heartwarming, uplifting film content.\(^3\)

H4a: Interest in experiencing negative emotions in everyday life will mediate the relationship between age and attraction to negatively valenced film content.

H4b: Interest in experiencing positive emotional stability in everyday life will mediate the relationship between age and attraction to heartwarming film content.

METHOD

Procedures

Multiple copies of a questionnaire were distributed to undergraduate students at a large midwestern and a large northeastern university. To ensure that the sample of participants would represent an adequate range of age groups, students were asked to fill out the questionnaire by themselves and to have at least one family member complete the questionnaire during the fall break. All procedures were approved by the internal review boards of both institutions, and consent was obtained for all participants prior to their completing the questionnaires. A total of 167 students participated in the study, with students having an average of 1.47 (\(SD = 0.60\)) additional family members complete the questionnaire. Thirty-nine participants neglected to indicate their age and were therefore excluded from all analyses, resulting in a sample of 373 participants (262 females) ranging in age from 18 to 82 (\(M = 34.71, SD = 16.61\)). Participants were grouped into three age ranges: 18 to 25
for younger adults, which is consistent with Arnett's (2000) time frame for emerging adulthood (N = 188; 144 females); 26 to 49 for middle adults (N = 92; 65 females); and 50 and older for older adults (N = 93; 53 females).

Measures

A variety of different measures were employed to assess participants’ media preferences and their preferences for everyday affective experiences. Within each set of questions that employed Likert-type data, factor analytic procedures were employed for purposes of data reduction and scale construction, employing principal components analysis and Varimax rotation. Scales were constructed by averaging the scores of the items that loaded highly on a given factor. To test the specific hypotheses of interest, conceptually similar factors from these different sections of the questionnaire were analyzed together. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the scales that were constructed on the basis of these factor analyses.

_Everyday affective preferences_. The first section of the questionnaire asked about participants’ preferences for affective experiences across a variety of domains in everyday life. Items were based in part on those used by Lawton et al. (1992) to measure age differences in interest in emotion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday affective preferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in negative affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in positive emotional stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective motivations for viewing films&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scared motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplative motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen affective motivations for viewing films&lt;sup&gt;a,b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen sad motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen scared motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen fun motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen boredom alleviation motives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred film characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heartwarming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slapstick comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughtful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>All motivation variables were recorded on scales ranging from 1 to 5; all other scales ranged from 1 to 7.

<sup>b</sup>Descriptive statistics for the teen affective motivations are for middle-aged and older participants only.
regulation. A total of fourteen positive and negative items were intermingled. On the basis of interpretability of the factor loadings, two factors explaining 46.25% of the variance were extracted.

The first set of eight items asked about interest in experiencing sad/negative emotions (Cronbach’s alpha = .81). Participants indicated on a 7-point scale the extent to which they avoided (1) or sought out (7) “thinking about social issues even if they make me feel sad or depressed,” “thinking about day-to-day interpersonal issues even if they make me feel sad or depressed,” “allowing myself to fully experience my negative emotions,” and “get swept up in sad music.” They also used a 7-point scale (anchored at 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree) to indicate whether they agreed that it was valuable or useful for them to have each of the above experiences.

A second set of six items asked about preferences for emotional stability and positive affect in everyday life (Cronbach’s alpha = .75). Participants indicated the extent to which they sought out or avoided and agreed or disagreed “trying to stay on an even emotional keel,” “remaining cheerful and upbeat,” and “finding joy in the world around me.”

Affective/cognitive preferences while viewing films. Participants indicated their preferences for 12 affective and cognitive experiences while watching films. For each experience, participants indicated on 5-point scales the extent to which they would (1) avoid films that would result in that experience or (5) seek out films that would result in that experience. Three interpretable factors with eigenvalues >1 were obtained explaining 69.3% of the variance. The first factor was labeled “contemplative motivations,” (“make you think,” “make you reflect on life,” “make you feel inspired,” “draw you into the story”; Cronbach’s alpha = .77). This variable was not hypothesized to show age differences and is not directly related to experiences of positive and negative affect, but is presented in Tables 1 and 2 because of the light it sheds on the complexity of affective and cognitive responding to films. The second factor was labeled “sadness motivations” (“make you cry,” “make you feel sad”; $r = .61$). The final factor was labeled “fun motivations” (“make you laugh,” “make you excited”; $r = .50$). Two items were not retained in the factor analysis because of low loadings and cross loadings: “make you scared” (scared motivations) and “help you alleviate boredom” (boredom avoidance motivations). However, because of the relevance of these two items to the hypotheses, these two items were included in subsequent analyses as single-item measures.

Subsequent to indicating their current motivations for viewing films, middle-aged and older adults were asked to indicate the extent to which they had avoided or sought out films for the same list of motivations when they were teenagers. The same factors obtained for participants’ current motivations were revealed for the retrospective teen motivations (explaining 75.2% of the variance), including the single-item measures. These items included
TABLE 2 Age Group Differences in Affective and Film Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferences</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Partial r with age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday affect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in negative affect</td>
<td>4.26a (.09)</td>
<td>4.01ab (.12)</td>
<td>3.90b (.11)</td>
<td>−.21***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in positive stability</td>
<td>5.54a (.07)</td>
<td>5.72ab (.09)</td>
<td>5.84a (.08)</td>
<td>.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movie affect motivations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scared*</td>
<td>3.05a (.12)</td>
<td>2.49b (.16)</td>
<td>1.99c (.15)</td>
<td>−.35***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness*</td>
<td>2.86a (.08)</td>
<td>2.56b (.11)</td>
<td>2.47b (.10)</td>
<td>−.23***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun*</td>
<td>4.57a (.05)</td>
<td>4.37b (.06)</td>
<td>4.21b (.06)</td>
<td>−.28***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alleviate boredom*</td>
<td>4.22a (.07)</td>
<td>3.96b (.09)</td>
<td>3.76b (.09)</td>
<td>−.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemplative*</td>
<td>4.00 (.05)</td>
<td>3.95 (.07)</td>
<td>3.98 (.07)</td>
<td>−.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferred movie characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark</td>
<td>3.85a (.12)</td>
<td>3.07b (.16)</td>
<td>2.56b (.15)</td>
<td>−.43***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>4.05a (.12)</td>
<td>3.58b (.16)</td>
<td>3.77b (.15)</td>
<td>−.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heartwarming</td>
<td>5.46a (.08)</td>
<td>5.73b (.10)</td>
<td>5.77b (.10)</td>
<td>.21***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny</td>
<td>6.12 (.09)</td>
<td>5.96 (.12)</td>
<td>5.89 (.11)</td>
<td>−.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slapstick comedy</td>
<td>4.90a (.15)</td>
<td>4.57ab (.20)</td>
<td>4.32b (.18)</td>
<td>−.15**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughtful</td>
<td>5.69 (.08)</td>
<td>5.63 (.10)</td>
<td>5.72 (.10)</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means within the same row associated with different subscript differ at p < .05 using stepwise Bonferroni post hoc procedures. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. The partial correlations controlled for gender.

*All motivation scales were recorded on scales ranging from 1 to 5; all other scales ranged from 1 to 7.
**p < .01; ***p < .001.

“teen sadness motivations” (r = .70) and “teen fun motivations” (r = .49). The two single-item measures were labeled “teen scared motivations” and “teen boredom avoidance motivations.”

Preferred film characteristics. To assess preferences for various characteristics of movies, respondents were presented with a series of 23 movie descriptors and were asked to indicate on 7-point scales the extent to which each of the characteristics would make them (1) much less likely to watch the film to (7) much more likely to watch the film. The factor analysis revealed three interpretable factors with eigenvalues >1 explaining 63.6% of the variance. These factors were labeled “dark characteristics” (“creepy,” “scary,” “disturbing,” “dark,” “violent”; Cronbach’s alpha = .88), “uplifting characteristics” (“heart warming,” “cheerful and upbeat,” “uplifting,”; Cronbach’s alpha = .79), and “thoughtful characteristics” (“thought provoking,” “critically acclaimed,” “inviting,” “well written,”; Cronbach’s alpha = .72). Three single characteristics, “sad” “slapstick comedy,” and “funny,” were omitted from the analysis because of low item loadings and issues of interpretability, but were retained in subsequent analyses because of their relevance to the hypotheses. Because “slapstick comedy” and “funny” were only correlated at r = .30, they were not combined and were analyzed as separate dependent variables in a multivariate analysis.
Analytic Strategy

Because of the large number of related dependent variables, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) seemed appropriate as a way of controlling for Type I error. This necessitated dividing the sample into age groups rather than using age as a continuous variable; however, we present the partial correlations between age and each outcome variables (controlling for gender) in Table 2.

In addition, because the ratio of men to women varied by age group, gender was used as a factor in all analyses to examine whether or not gender moderated any of the expected age group differences. Except in one instance (noted in the results section), Gender X Age Group interactions were non-significant. Although numerous other studies (see Hoffner & Levine’s, 2005, meta-analysis) have reported gender differences in emotional responses to media, gender was not of theoretical interest in this research. Therefore, this article does not report results pertaining to gender main effects (although these data are available from the first author on request).

RESULTS

Preferences for Everyday Affective Experiences

The first set of hypotheses (H1a and H1b) pertained to the idea that younger people would show greater interest in experiencing negative emotions in their everyday lives, whereas older adults would show greater interest in positive emotional stability. The test of this hypothesis employed a 3 (age group) X 2 (gender) MANOVA, with interest in everyday negative affect and interest in positive emotional stability serving as dependent variables. As expected, this analysis revealed a significant multivariate main effect of age group, Wilks’ Λ = .96, F (4, 732) = 3.57, p < .01, ηp² = .02, with significant univariate effects obtained for interest in everyday negative affect, F (2, 367) = 3.46, p < .05, ηp² = .02, and for interest in positive emotional stability, F (2, 367) = 3.98, p < .05, ηp² = .02. As Table 2 shows, these main effects reflected that younger participants reported significantly higher scores on interest in everyday negative affect than older participants, and older participants reported significantly higher scores on interest in positive emotional stability than younger participants. Middle-aged participants’ scores fell between these two extremes on both measures.

Interest in Negative Affect While Watching Films

Hypotheses 2a predicted that younger participants would be more likely than older participants to report viewing to make themselves sad and scared. Hypothesis 2b predicted that they would show more attraction to films
containing dark or sad content. To examine these hypotheses, a 3 (age group) × 2 (gender) MANOVA was employed on two affective motivations for viewing films (scared motivations and sadness motivations) and on two preferred film characteristics (dark and sad).

As predicted, a significant multivariate main effect of age group was obtained, Wilks’ \( \Lambda = .86, F(8, 696) = 6.85, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07 \) (see Table 2).

Consistent with H2a, this analysis showed significant age group differences for scared motivations, \( F(2, 351) = 16.50, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09 \), and for sadness motivations, \( F(2, 351) = 5.03, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .03 \), with highest scores among the younger participants. Consistent with H2b, significant univariate effects were also obtained for preferences for both dark film characteristics, \( F(2, 351) = 24.54, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12 \), and for sad characteristics, \( F(2, 351) = 3.44, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .02 \), with highest scores among the younger participants.

Current versus retrospective motivations. Hypothesis 2c predicted that among middle-aged and older participants, interest in watching films to experience negative affect would be lower than when they were teens. To examine this hypothesis, 2 (time: current vs. teen motivations) × 2 (gender) mixed model ANOVAs were conducted among the middle-aged and adult participants for two affective motivations for viewing films, scared and sad.

A main effect of time was revealed for the analysis of scared motivations, \( F(1, 179) = 104.65, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .37 \), with current scores \( (M = 2.22, SE = .09) \) lower than retrospective teen scores \( (M = 3.22, SE = .11) \).

In contrast, the analysis of sadness motivations revealed no significant main effect of time, \( F(1, 181) = 0.19, p = .66, \eta_p^2 = .00 \). However, a Time × Gender interaction was revealed, \( F(1, 181) = 6.52, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .04 \). Although males’ current scores \( (M = 2.36, SE = .11) \) and retrospective scores \( (M = 2.19, SE = .13) \) did not differ, females’ scores were consistent with H3, with current scores \( (M = 2.68, SE = .08) \) lower than retrospective scores \( (M = 2.90, SE = 10) \).

Interest in Positive Affect While Watching Films:
Heartwarming versus Fun

Hypothesis 3a predicted that interest in films associated with emotionally meaningful positively valenced content would increase with age; H3b predicted that fun and boredom alleviation motivations and preferences for funny films and slapstick comedies would decrease with age. This hypothesis was tested using a 3 (age group) × 2 (gender) MANOVA on five dependent variables: preferences for heartwarming characteristics in films (i.e., heartwarming, cheerful, uplifting), fun motivations (i.e., laugh, feel excited), boredom alleviation motives, and preferences for films that are funny or slapstick comedies.
This analysis yielded a significant multivariate main effect for age group, Wilks’ $\Lambda = .83$, $F (10, 716) = 7.05, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .09$ (see Table 2 for means and standard errors). Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the univariate test showed a significant main effect of age group for preferences for heartwarming characteristics, $F (2, 362) = 8.77, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .05$, with older participants reporting significantly higher scores than younger participants. Thus, H3a (that older adults would be more interested in positive, emotionally meaningful content) was supported.

The univariate test for fun motives also showed the predicted significant main effect of age group, $F (2, 362) = 12.45, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .06$, as did the test for boredom alleviation motives, $F (2, 362) = 8.92, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .05$, with younger participants reporting higher scores than older participants. The univariate tests of attraction to humor in films showed partial support for the hypothesis—there were no significant effects of age group on attraction to funny films, but there were the predicted effects on attraction to slapstick comedies $F (2, 362) = 3.14, p < .05$, $\eta^2_p = .02$, with younger adults showing more attraction to such films. Thus, H3b (that young adults would be more interested in viewing for fun and boredom alleviation and more attracted to humor) received partial support.

H3c proposed that there would be self-reported change in motives for viewing. That is, middle-aged and older adults would currently report less interest in watching for fun and boredom alleviation than when they were teens. To test this, 2 (time: current vs. teen motivations) X 2 (gender) mixed model ANOVAs were conducted on current and retrospective teen fun and boredom alleviation motives among middle-aged and older participants. Consistent with predictions, there was a main effect of time for fun motivations, $F (1, 181) = 26.84, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .13$, with current fun motivations ($M = 4.28, SE = .05$) lower than retrospective teen motivations ($M = 4.51, SE = .05$). The analysis of boredom avoidance motivations also revealed the predicted main effect for time, $F (1, 179) = 29.13, p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .14$, with current scores ($M = 3.87, SE = .06$) lower than retrospective teen scores ($M = 4.24, SE = .07$).

Mediation Analyses

In this article, we argue that many age-related differences in preferences for media content reflect developmental differences in emotional motivations and experiences. As such, interest in experiencing negative emotions was predicted to mediate the relationship between age and attraction to negatively valenced content (H4a), and interest in experiencing positive emotional stability in everyday life was predicted to mediate the relationship between age and attraction to heartwarming film content (H4b). To explore this reasoning, mediation analyses were conducted for each type of relevant media preference/media content that evidenced significant age group differ-
ences in the previous analyses, with everyday affective motivations employed as mediators. Because middle-aged participants' scores on these motivations were not significantly different from younger or older participants' scores, these mediation analyses included only younger and older groups. Media measures that were significantly different between younger and older groups were the dependent variables in the analyses.

Two methods of analysis were employed to examine mediation, with gender used as a covariate in both. For the first analyses, a series of regressions were performed as outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, age group (the independent variable) was employed as a predictor of everyday affective motivations (the mediators). Second, everyday affective motivations were employed as predictors of media preferences (the dependent variable). Third, age group was employed as the predictor of media preferences, and finally, age group was employed as the predictor after controlling for everyday affective motivations. For mediation to be plausible, predictors should be significant for the first three steps in the analysis and, in the final step, the effect of the independent variable (age group) on the dependent variable (media preference) should be diminished (partial mediation) or reduced to nonsignificance (complete mediation). Figure 1 illustrates the regression weights associated with these analyses. Based on these criteria, as described by Baron and Kenny, preferences for everyday affective experiences appeared to serve as at least a partial mediator for all four media measures: sadness motivations, scared motivations, and preferences for dark entertainment content and heartwarming entertainment content.

The second set of analyses conducted to examine mediation employed bootstrapping procedures (5,000 samples) to examine indirect effects as described by Preacher and Hayes (2004, 2008). These analyses confirmed the conclusion of the previous analyses with indirect effects of age group obtained for all media measures (see Table 3). For negatively valenced content, the indirect effect of age group was significant only via preferences for negative affect; for heartwarming content, the indirect effect of age group was significant only via preferences for positive emotional stability.

**DISCUSSION**

The central question of this article was whether there would be age group differences in the types of emotional experiences viewers wanted (or sought to avoid) while watching films. The point of asking this question was to expand current accounts of the emotional functions of media content by offering a developmental explanation for the appeal of specific types of experiences. In particular, we argue that developmental considerations can help illuminate the puzzle of attraction to intense, negative film content. Why would viewers want (or even be willing) to see characters suffer horrible
outcomes? As outlined in the introduction, most prior accounts have either focused on the role of social comparison or on the roles of personality and gender. The additional explanation offered here is that dark or frightening film content may serve emotional needs associated with certain life stages.

In looking for developmental theories to help understand how and why media preferences might change over the lifespan, the work of Arnett (2007) on emerging adults and Carstensen’s socioemotional theory, suggested a potentially coherent set of predictions. Arnett described emerging adulthood as period of conscious exploration of emotions, personality, and life expe-
TABLE 3 Indirect Effects of Age Groups on Media Preferences: Bootstrapping Mediation Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media preferences</th>
<th>Bootstrap estimate</th>
<th>LL</th>
<th>UL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scared motivations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total indirect effects</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via preference for negative affect</td>
<td>-.04*</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via preference for positive affect</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad motivations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total indirect effects</td>
<td>-.12*</td>
<td>-.25</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via preference for negative affect</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via preference for positive affect</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences for dark characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total indirect effects</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via preference for negative affect</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via preference for positive affect</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences for heartwarming characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total indirect effects</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via preference for negative affect</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via preference for positive affect</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.

experiences (including dangerous, exciting ones). As such, it made sense that this age group might be attracted to films that offered the chance to vicariously experience danger, horror, sadness, and so on in addition to trying to have these experiences directly. It also made sense that this attraction would decrease as individuals moved away from exploration toward more committed, busier lives. Further, socioemotional theory and related work on emotion regulation suggested that older adults, with their heightened sense of time as a scarce commodity, would feel that life was too short to spend on unnecessary unpleasant experiences. Thus, our prediction was that negatively valenced film content would not be equally appealing to all age groups, but rather would be most attractive to young adults because of their greater interest in experiencing negative emotions.

This prediction was supported. Young adults expressed greater interest in experiencing negative affect in everyday life, greater interest in watching films to feel sad or scared, and more attraction to films with dark, violent, scary, and sad content. Age group differences in interest in experiencing negative affect in everyday life mediated attraction to negative film content.

There are a number of implications of these findings. First, they suggest that downward social comparison is not the only (or even the primary) motivation for watching sad or dark film content. If ego enhancement or ego protection via seeing less fortunate others were the primary motivation, then we would expect to see negative content watched primarily by respondents
who express a desire to feel cheerful and happy (rather than a desire to experience negative feelings in their everyday lives).

Second, the results suggest that the prevalence of negative emotions among young adults (Carstensen et al., 2000; Charles et al., 2001) is at least partly volitional and not merely the result of failure of affect regulation as suggested by Gross et al. (1997). This pattern (desiring negative affect and seeking it out via film exposure) supplements Arnett’s (2007) description of emerging adulthood and adds to the understanding of developmental changes in affect regulation.

In addition to exploring attractions to negatively valenced film content, we were also interested in examining the types of content that would be appealing to middle-aged and older adults. Carstensen et al. (1999) have argued that individuals who (even unconsciously) think that they have relatively little time left, focus on achieving emotional satisfaction and meaningfulness in the present. Our predictions were that older adults would express more interest in positive emotional stability in their everyday lives, and that this interest would mediate age differences in interest in watching positively valenced film content with uplifting or heartwarming content and less interested in watching just to escape boredom or to have fun.

This hypothesis received partial support. Older adults were more interested in positive emotional stability, more interested in watching heartwarming content, less interested in watching to escape boredom or for fun, and less interested in watching slapstick comedies. However, as Table 2 shows, older and middle-aged adults were as interested in watching funny films as younger adults, and their interest in funny films was as high as their interest in heartwarming films. Thus, the older adults in this sample were not averse to humor per se, but appeared to be drawing a distinction between funny films in general and slapstick comedies in particular. At present, it is unclear what aspects of slapstick humor were unappealing—it could be that such content was seen as relatively lightweight and meaningless and/or it could be that slapstick comedy was seen as more hostile and aggressive in nature. Either possibility is consistent with the predictions offered by socioemotional selectivity theory (i.e., increased focus on meaningfulness, decreased tolerance for unnecessary negative affect), but this issue deserves further examination.

Here, we would like to briefly discuss the lack of age differences in contemplative viewing motives and attraction to thought-provoking film content. The findings discussed so far may make it seem as though young adults are uninterested in meaningfulness and seek only the two extremes of trivial fun and intense sensation. This is not what socioemotional selectivity theory and Arnett’s (2000, 2004) description of emerging adulthood really suggest. The argument is not that young adults are uninterested in having experiences that they find meaningful; rather that they may be less exclusively interested in them and more willing to tolerate viewing that is just for fun or to pass
a bored moment. In addition, of course, it is possible that younger and older adults derive meaning from different sources. In our study, all age groups showed very similar levels of desire to watch films that would make them reflect on life or make them think. Ratings for such films were higher than ratings for dark or sad films even for younger adults. Thus, we are not suggesting that young adults are foolish sensation seekers and older adults are wise and humorless, but rather that beyond the cognitive pleasures sought from films there are age group differences in the types of emotional experiences preferred.

Our final hypothesis, that desire for positive emotional stability would mediate age group differences in interest in heartwarming content was supported. Taken together with the other mediation result, these findings provide support for a novel explanation of why viewers vary in their affective preferences for media content, relating such preferences to broader patterns of emotional development across the adult lifespan. As such, the findings supplement (rather than contradict) personality/gender-based accounts of attractions to negative media content. Personality undoubtedly plays a role in attractions to media content as does gender. In fact, the lack of age by gender interactions in this study suggests that the effects of gender are remarkably stable across the adult lifespan.

Thus far, we have argued that the cross-sectional age differences we observed reflect developmental processes. An alternative possibility is that these age differences reflect cohort or generational differences; that is, it is possible that older adults’ greater interest in cheerful rather than dark content reflects longstanding preferences that were established in early adulthood rather than maturing later. Current generations of older adults grew up at a time when media offerings were less graphically violent and sexual than they are now (although it is not clear that they were any less bleak or dark). Perhaps current older adults’ avoidance of violent and dark media content reflects the socialization of their early adulthood (including socialization by media), and maybe they were never interested in such material. Obviously the best answer to the development versus cohort question is provided by longitudinal data, and this study does not have such data. However, we did ask participants to reflect on whether their tastes had changed over time, and their retrospective accounts of their own development are consistent with the cross-sectional findings. When asked whether their tastes had changed since they were in their teens, middle-aged and older adults reported that they were less likely now to watch to escape boredom, to be scared, or to have fun. Women reported that they were less likely now to watch to feel sad than when they were teens.

Of course it is possible to dismiss these self-reported changes as reflecting stereotypes about development. However, retrospective data need not simply be rejected as biased. For example, the developmental changes described in retrospective accounts of fear responses to media content turn out to be very consistent with developmental differences observed in cross-
sectional studies (Cantor, 1998). Moreover, even if the self-reported changes here were merely illusions, the mere perception of change in affective preferences is of interest. Suls and Mullen (1982) argued that, with increasing age, individuals come to rely increasingly on temporal comparisons (i.e., with their past selves) rather than interpersonal comparisons to judge their status. In this study, middle-aged and older adults perceived their film preferences as having changed rather than having remained consistent.

Of course, this study had numerous limitations. One of the most obvious is that we only had self-reports of motives and preferences even though Zillmann (1985, 1988) argued that individuals’ desires are often unconscious. The strength of his research lies in the fact that experimental manipulations of mood led to different behavioral responses in terms of the amount of time participants attended to positive versus negative media content. A logical next step in testing our developmental version of emotional preferences would be to look at real-world viewing choices made by viewers of different ages in various affective states.

Another limitation in this study is that we did not have a measure of time perspective to test mediation hypotheses about the role of time perspective in age differences in attraction to fun versus emotionally meaningful content. Thus, we could not move beyond simply describing these age differences. In addition, several variables had only single- or two-item measures. This was our first attempt to study this issue and the various inadequacies became apparent in hindsight. We are currently gathering data to help rectify some of these problems and to extend this line of research from film preferences to television-viewing preferences. This is particularly relevant for developmental examinations of media preferences, given the importance of television for many older adults (Mares & Woodard, 2006).

Ultimately, this line of research needs to further continue to examine the effects of exposure on viewers’ emotional states, not just the initial effects of emotional predispositions on exposure. One of the benefits of media effects research is that it allows investigation of responses to a standardized event—all viewers can see the same stabbing or kiss or poignant goodbye. There is a good deal of research documenting developmental differences in children’s emotional responses to media (e.g., Cantor, 2002). Perhaps the current project can be the first step in extending such investigations from childhood into adulthood, so that further studies will examine developmental changes in the emotional experiences and meaning derived from particular media events.

NOTES

1. Some research on conceptualizations of wellbeing has employed the Aristotelian terms “hedonism” versus “eudaimonia” to refer to happiness based on pleasure versus happiness based on meaningfulness or greater insight (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Waterman, 1993).
2. Socioemotional selectivity theory suggests that young adults (relative to older adults) are more tolerant of negative emotions and experiences, whereas Arnett's description of emerging adults raises the possibility that young adults sometimes actively pursue negative experiences. Unfortunately, our measures do not really distinguish between tolerance as opposed to enjoyment or pursuit of negative affect, an issue that deserves further consideration. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

3. We did not expect age group differences in “fun” and boredom-related motivations and attractions to comedic content to be mediated by interest in positive emotional stability given that these motives are expected to be lower among older adults and that interest in positive emotional stability is expected to be higher among older adults. Nor did we expect them to be mediated by interest in exploring negative affect in everyday affect, given that recent research on developmental changes in emotion suggests that positive and negative affect tend to be two separate continuums rather than opposite ends of a single continuum (Carstensen et al. 2000; Charles et al. 2001). While there are some types of humor that may reflect underlying negative affect (the malicious glee in someone else’s misfortune known as schadenfreude, or hostile comedy that derogates out groups), we did not ask specifically about interest in these types of humor. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this intriguing point.

4. All MANOVAs and ANOVAs reported in this article employed Type III sums of squares. Likewise, all means and standard errors are based on estimated marginal means.

REFERENCES


