When meaning matters more: Media preferences across the adult life span
(Mares, Bartsch, & Bonus).

ABSTRACT: Two studies considered age differences in the roles of emotion and meaningfulness in adults' media preferences. Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST) suggests that with increasing age, positive emotions become more meaningful, and meaningfulness matters more for situation selection. Other developmental descriptions suggest that negative affect may be meaningful and interesting in youth. In Study 1, US 18-86 year olds read descriptions of TV programs that varied in levels of warmth, funniness, sadness, and fright; in Study 2, US and German 18-82 year olds watched film trailers that varied in levels of gore and meaningfulness. Participants rated their anticipated emotions, anticipated meaningfulness of the content, and their viewing interest. Consistent with SST, in both studies, anticipated meaningfulness was a stronger predictor of viewing interest for older adults relative to younger adults, and the indirect path (emotion -> meaningfulness -> interest) was stronger for older relative to younger adults. In Study 1, warmth (but not funniness) was more predictive of meaningfulness for older relative to younger adults; sadness and fear were not more predictive of meaningfulness for younger adults. In both Study 1 and Study 2, there was a small negative effect of anticipated fright on viewing interest among the oldest adults but not among those younger. Taken together, the results provide only limited support for arguments that positive versus negative emotions would be more meaningful or interesting at different ages, but they support the argument that meaningfulness matters more as age increases.