Elderly Viewers’ Responses to
Televised Portrayals of Old Age

Empathy and Mood Management Versus Social Comparison

This study examined the effects of differently valenced portrayals of old age on the emotional responses of elderly viewers. Lonely and nonlonely elderly people (as determined in a pretest) were given a series of descriptions of television offerings and indicated the degree to which they desired to see each program. In a separate session, they were randomly assigned to view a negative portrayal (involving an unhappy, isolated old man) or a positive portrayal (involving a happy, socially integrated old man). The results indicated that lonely subjects showed greater interest in viewing negative than positive portrayals, whereas nonlonely subjects exhibited the opposite preference. In addition, lonely subjects felt better after watching the negative portrayal than after the positive portrayal, whereas nonlonely subjects felt better after the positive than after the negative portrayal. The findings therefore indicated that elderly viewers may benefit from varied portrayals of old age more than from uniformly positive or negative depictions.

The present study involved observing the emotional effects on elderly viewers of watching a positive or a negative portrayal of old age. The study compared the explanatory power of two theoretical accounts of possible effects of positive and negative portrayals. One was based on empathy and mood management; the other was based on social comparison.

Several researchers have argued that television has negative effects on elderly viewers. This argument seems immediately compelling because media messages about old age are relatively scarce, and when they exist, they
typically contain negative stereotypes (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980; Greenberg, Korzenny, & Atkin, 1979).

In addition, some researchers contend that elderly viewers are particularly dependent on television. The argument is made that old age presents new roles and challenges and, hence, creates a need for information about how to adjust and cope successfully (Davis & Davis, 1985; Hess, 1974). Television may be an important source of such information. Moreover, old age has been described by a number of writers as a time of isolation because of physical immobility (Meyersohn, 1969), deaths of spouse and friends, and retirement with its associated reduction in income and workplace contacts (Hess, 1974). Such isolation may mean lack of exposure to information from sources other than the mass media. Furthermore, deficits in vision or hearing may make it difficult for elderly adults to use mass media resources other than television (Young, 1979). The finding that older adults watch a lot of television—more than all other age groups (e.g., Davis & Westbrook, 1985)—supports the argument of strong television dependency in old age. Given the presumed need for information and the dependence on television, the possibility obviously exists that elderly adults will suffer negative consequences from exposure to negative portrayals of old age. Davis and Davis (1985) argue that elderly viewers will internalize the notion that old age is a time of disease, physical decay, and social insignificance. They write: "The promotion and maintenance of stereotypes about aging through inappropriate or biased modelling of characters on television has obvious consequences. Aging, a natural process, is made undesirable. Being old is made an unwanted state" (p. 58).

Some support for the hypothesis that exposure to television is associated with negative images of the elderly and negative attitudes toward aging comes from research done by Gerbner et al. (1980) and Korzenny and Neuendorf (1980). These authors (and others such as Davis & Davis, 1985; Hess, 1974) conclude that negative television portrayals of old age do have negative effects on elderly viewers. They appeal for more positive portrayals of old age on television.

Although this makes intuitive sense, the conclusion is based entirely on correlational data. Moreover, there has been virtually no research on the short-term effects of exposure of the elderly to specific types of portrayals. It is possible that effects of negative and positive portrayals are more complex than these researchers suggest. Before making recommendations about ways to improve programming in order to make viewing a beneficial experience for the elderly, more systematic investigations of effects of portrayals are required.

In order to examine these effects, we showed subjects a portrayal of an old man who was either isolated and lonely or happy and well integrated into society. Because social comparison theory bases its predictions on the subjects' perceptions of their own situation relative to the "other," we first determined, in a screening questionnaire, the degree to which subjects perceived themselves as lonely. We then selected the respondents for the experiment on the basis of their loneliness scores. In addition, because the theories being tested involve predictions of selective exposure, as well as emotional effects, subjects were asked to rate their interest in viewing a series of programs, some of which described content involving positive portrayals of the elderly and some of which suggested negative portrayals. At a later session, subjects were randomly assigned to view the portrayal of either the happy, socially connected old man or the unhappy, isolated old man. Their emotional states before and after exposure to the portrayal were assessed.

According to Zillmann's mood management model of emotional responding to television (Zillmann, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985), individuals choose media that are likely to have the most beneficial effects on their mood. Among the variety of ways that programs can have effects on viewers' moods, a prominent mechanism is empathy, by which individuals experience emotions that are more appropriate to the observed person's situation than to their own. If empathy occurs during exposure to portrayals of the elderly, viewers should feel worse after viewing negative depictions, for example, images of people who are physically ill, weak, or unhappy, than after viewing positive depictions, such as people who are fit, empowered, and enthusiastic. Mood management theory predicts, therefore, that if empathy occurs, viewers of media should generally prefer positive portrayals to negative ones and that people should feel better after viewing positive than after viewing negative material (Zillmann, 1988).

Mood management theory specifies, moreover, that people experiencing negative emotional states (e.g., loneliness) at the time of media exposure are especially drawn to programs of positive hedonic tone to enhance their mood; people already in a good mood are not as likely to differentiate between programs on the basis of hedonic valence (Zillmann, 1988; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). Empathy and mood management theory thus lead to the following expectations:

Hypothesis 1a: There will be a main effect of type of portrayal on selective exposure: When asked to rate how much they would like to see specific programs, subjects will give higher ratings to positive portrayals than to negative ones.
Hypothesis 1b: If lonely subjects are experiencing more negative affect than nonlonely subjects, there will be an interaction between loneliness and types of portrayal, such that the difference in ratings between positive and negative portrayals will be larger for the lonely group than for the nonlonely group.

Hypothesis 2a: There will be a main effect of type of portrayal on subjects' affective state, with subjects being in a more positive mood after the positive portrayal than after the negative portrayal.

Hypothesis 2b: If those who consider themselves as lonely are also unhappy, the improvement in mood brought about by the positive portrayal will be greater for the lonely subjects than for the nonlonely subjects.

Contrasting predictions may be derived from social comparison theory. Festinger's (1954) initial specification of social comparison processes outlined three broad postulates. First, people are motivated to compare themselves with others in order to evaluate themselves. Second, people prefer to compare themselves with others who are similar to themselves, because information derived from comparison with similar others is likely to be useful. Third, people often choose to compare themselves with others who have performed at a higher level than themselves, either because seeing themselves as similar to those who are superior to them is ego enhancing or because upward comparison provides information on how to improve.

As originally set forth, social comparison theory would predict that the elderly would be strongly motivated to view depictions of other elderly people who were successful. However, the theory has been extended to predict situations in which individuals are not motivated to compare themselves to those who have performed at a higher level. Brickman and Bulyer (1977), Suls (1977), and Wills (1981) have argued that exposure to information about a more fortunate or successful person may produce negative affect because the comparison may become invidious, focusing attention on the individual's relatively poor showing. Furthermore, in some situations, individuals may be motivated to enhance their own self-esteem by comparing themselves to a less fortunate other (downward comparison).

In reviewing the research on social comparison, Wills (1981) concluded that the primary precursor of downward comparison is a decrease in an individual's subjective well-being. When individuals are unhappy, they are likely to look for others who are even more unhappy in order to gain reassurance that their own situation is not so bad. Evidence that this occurs and that it results in a decrease in negative affect can be found in a variety of laboratory studies (Gibbons, 1986; Hakimiller, 1966; Thornton & Arrowood, 1966) and in research done outside the laboratory among people suffering from misfortunes such as health problems (Affleck, Tennen, Pfeifer, & Fifield, 1987; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman, 1985).

Research on social comparison has also indicated that messages about the success of others may have negative effects on those who are uneasy about their own situation (Tesser & Collins, 1988; Tesser, Miller, & Moore, 1988). A study by Wood et al. (1985) on women with breast cancer found that media exposure was correlated with negative self-esteem. The authors argued that the media tend to portray women with breast cancer as highly successful in overcoming their illness and in maintaining an active lifestyle. Therefore, one possible explanation was that exposure to portrayals of women coping very successfully led to negative affect and, ultimately, negative self-esteem.

When applied to the situation of the elderly in this experiment, social comparison theory would make the following predictions:

Hypothesis 3: There will be an interaction between loneliness group and type of portrayal on selective exposure, such that the lonely group will prefer to see negative portrayals over positive portrayals, whereas the nonlonely group will exhibit the opposite preference.

Hypothesis 4: There will be an interaction between loneliness group and type of portrayal viewed on emotional state, such that the lonely group will feel better after the negative than after the positive portrayal, whereas the nonlonely group will feel better after the positive than after the negative portrayal.

Method

Subjects

Potential subjects (people over 70 years old) were contacted through church organizations, community groups, and meals programs, recommendations of local church ministers, and then an expanding network of recommendations made by people who had agreed to participate. All subjects lived in a medium-sized midwestern city. People who lived in nursing homes were not recruited. As an incentive, subjects were told that everyone who participated in both stages of the project (the background questionnaire and the experiment) would be entered into a lottery for which the prize was $60. Approximately 250 people agreed to participate in the experiment. Of these, 99 were selected on the basis of scoring in the top or bottom 20% of respondents on a loneliness scale developed for the study. Of the 99 selected, 5 declined to participate further.
The mean age of the final sample was 75.1 \((SD = 5.0)\). There were 38 males and 56 females. The ratio of males to females was approximately equal in all conditions.

**Design**

In a \(2 \times 2\) design, subjects grouped into two conditions on the basis of their loneliness scores (lonely, nonlonely) viewed one of two versions of a videotaped program in which the life-style of the elderly protagonist (isolated, socially integrated) was varied. Subjects were randomly assigned to viewing condition within loneliness groups.

**Procedure**

**BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE**

Initially, subjects who agreed to participate were given the background questionnaire to be filled out at their leisure and mailed back to the experimenter. Because the response rate was very low and because subjects seemed to have problems writing and filling out the questionnaire, this procedure was changed after 60 questionnaires had been received. Twenty-three of these initial 60 questionnaires had only one or two answers missing or inappropriately entered and were therefore used with the problematic answers scored as missing data. The other 37 questionnaires had so many errors that they were discarded.

The remaining questionnaires were administered by having the experimenter read each question aloud and write down the subject’s answers, with the subject watching what was being written. Approximately 80% of the questionnaires were filled out at church or club centers, and in those cases, interviews were carried out one at a time so that responses could be given in private. The remaining questionnaires were filled out at subjects’ homes, usually because the subject had physical disabilities that made it difficult to travel to a center. As a check on the effect of testing site on responses to the program, within-condition comparisons were made between subjects who participated at centers and subjects who participated at home. Results of the analyses indicated that there were no significant effects of location of testing on selective exposure, affective responding to the experimental program, or judgments of the main character.

The questionnaire contained sections assessing habitual levels of television viewing, attitudes toward various types of programming, demographic information, levels of interaction with friends and family, levels of depression, and degree of loneliness.

**SELECTIVE EXPOSURE**

At the end of the questionnaire session, the subjects were told they were being given a chance to indicate the types of programs that they would like to watch in the second part of the research project. A series of brief scenarios of television programs was presented, and the subjects rated their desire to see each one.

**EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE**

The subject always participated in the experimental session within one week of filling out the background questionnaire. Subjects tested in centers were tested in groups with a maximum size of 4. Subjects were greeted and told that the second part of the project was about their reactions to specific types of programming. The experimenter read a brief paragraph informing subjects that the first thing that was needed was to find out how they were feeling before they watched the program. The subjects were told that they were about to be given a sheet of paper that had a list of words on it and that they were to read each word and decide if the word reflected the way they were feeling. The experimenter then handed the subjects the short version of a mood checklist. Subjects working in groups were told not to talk to one another.

Once the mood checklist had been filled out, subjects were told that they were about to see a program and that after the program, they would be asked a number of questions. The experimenter then played the appropriate recording and did not interact with the subjects while the program was being viewed.

Immediately after the program ended, the experimenter told subjects that they were to complete another mood checklist. This form contained the long version of the mood checklist, which subsumes the short version. Only those items that composed the short version were later used for analysis, but the long version was given to subjects in order to decrease the tendency to remember previous responses. Subjects were then asked to fill out the same depression scale they had answered earlier as part of the background questionnaire. Finally, subjects were asked about their attitudes toward the main character and their perceptions of their similarity to him.
Materials

The stimulus tapes were created for the experiment. In order to reduce the possibility of confounding variables, such as attractiveness of the main character, the visual component of the videotapes was identical, and the manipulation was contained in the soundtrack. The visual component consisted of emotionally ambiguous shots (an old man walking down a street, packing things away in his house, painting, and talking to an off-camera interviewer). These scenes were edited together from a documentary about an elderly man who was an artist.

Two scripts were written. Both involved a narrator and an old man who discussed his life and current emotional state. The narration was read by a local radio news announcer, and the old man’s dialogue was read by an elderly actor. Because the elderly man’s dialogue was in the form of voice-overs, lip-synching was not necessary. Both tapes were approximately 9 min long.

Manipulation of Elderly Portrayal

The tape about the isolated man was presented by the narrator as focusing on “one of the major problems facing many elderly Americans—loneliness.” In it, the old man, Joseph Barnett, described the recent death of his wife, his sense of loneliness and isolation, and his desire for more news from his children. The narrator informed the audience that Joseph Barnett had recently tried to commit suicide and was currently in counseling for depression. Piano music in a minor key was dubbed onto the tape as background music (see Hampton, 1945). The tape ended with the narrator asking the audience to consider how many elderly Americans lived in similarly lonely, miserable conditions.

The tape about the integrated man was presented by the narrator as designed to shatter the myth that old age need necessarily be a time of negative change. In this script, Joseph Barnett was a successful and happy artist who lived with his wife, also an artist, and who had many friends and doting children and grandchildren. He and his wife were constantly being visited by former art students, and they spent their days painting together. The music dubbed onto this tape was played by an orchestra and was in a major key.

Prior to the experiment, the videotapes were shown to 20 elderly people who were not otherwise participating in the experiment in order to confirm that the soundtrack could be heard and understood, that the story made sense, and that the programs seemed realistic.

Measurement

Prior Depression

To determine that participants represented a normal, nondepressed elderly population, depression was measured using the 15-item Geriatric Depression Scale (Yesavage, Brink, Rose, & Leirer, 1983). This scale was specifically created for measuring levels of depression among the elderly. In order to introduce more sensitivity, the response range was expanded from yes or no to a 5-point scale on which 1 indicated strongly agree and 5 indicated strongly disagree. Scores on negative items were reversed so that a high score indicated high levels of depression. The maximum total score was 75, and the minimum total score was 15. Of the experimental sample, 85 subjects (90.4%) scored below 50 and, hence, would not be considered depressed. Nine subjects had scores that fell into the moderately depressed range (see Yesavage et al., 1983). Thus even the lonely subjects in this study were representative of a normal elderly population.

This scale was also administered to subjects after they viewed the program, but because this is a scale designed to measure stable levels of depression (Yesavage et al., 1983), it was not considered appropriate to look for changes in levels of depression as a function of exposure to the program. Observed changes would reflect a “noisy” measure of mood rather than real changes in depression level. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha. Reliability was .87 before viewing the program and .96 after viewing.

Loneliness

Feelings of loneliness were measured by a five-item loneliness scale. All the items followed the style of the items on the Geriatric Depression Scale: They were in the form of a statement about the respondent. The five statements were “I am pleased with the number of friends and relatives I see,” “I want to meet more people,” “I feel lonely,” “I have some really good friends,” and “I worry about being alone in the future.” The subject indicated strength of agreement or disagreement with each statement on the same 5-point scale that was used for the depression scale.

In computing levels of loneliness, scores on the positive items (such as “I have some really good friends”) were reversed, so that for all items a 5 indicated the highest level of loneliness and a 1 indicated the lowest level of loneliness. The scores were then added together, so that the maximum possible score was 25, and the minimum possible score was 5.
The content of the statements was based on previous research. The first two were designed to reflect discrepancies between perceived and desired levels of interaction, because this has been shown to be crucial in determining perceptions of loneliness (Paloutzian, Janigan, & Van Mouverick, 1982). The fourth statement specifically mentioned satisfaction with friendships, based on research by Arling (1976) and Kivett (1979), which indicates that lack of involvement with friends is strongly related to levels of loneliness. The third and fifth items directly assessed perceptions of current loneliness and concerns about future loneliness. Reliability, computed by Cronbach’s alpha, was .85.

SELECTIVE EXPOSURE

Twelve brief scenarios of television programs were given at the end of the background questionnaire. All the scenarios were created for the experiment, although they were based on films and documentaries that were available at the media resources center on campus and at local libraries.

Six scenarios described documentaries in which the chief protagonist was an elderly person. Three described a very happy, successful person, and three described an unhappy, lonely person. Two further scenarios described self-help programs, one about exercise for the elderly, the other about overcoming deafness and remaining involved in community activities. Two scenarios had young people as the main characters; one was positively valenced, the other negatively valenced. These were intended to provide instances of valenced content less relevant to the subjects’ own situation. Interspersed among these items were three more documentaries (about music of the 1940s, the history of the 20th century, and problems of gang warfare in modern Los Angeles). These were filler items, included to avoid making the research focus obvious.

Respondents were asked to indicate which programs they would like to see in the second session by rating each scenario on a 7-point scale. On the scale, 1 was labeled NO!! 4 was labeled maybe, and 7 was labeled YES!!

SELF-REPORTS OF AFFECT

The affective state of the subjects immediately before and after viewing the stimulus tape was measured by the short version of the Multiple Adjective Affect Checklist (MAACL; Zuckerman & Lubin, 1965). The checklist contains a list of 43 words, and subjects were instructed to put a mark next to words “that fit in with the way you have been feeling.” The list contained 17 positive words (e.g., agreeable, merry) and 26 negative words (e.g., unhappy, worrying). Subjects received a point for each negative word checked and for each positive item that was not checked. The maximum possible score was 43 (indicating maximum negative mood), and the minimum possible score was 0. Reliability for the short version of the MAACL, assessed using Cronbach’s alpha, was .96 before viewing the program and .94 after viewing.

MANIPULATION CHECKS

Two measures of perception of the main character were used as manipulation checks. Subjects indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement with the following statements regarding the elderly protagonist: “I felt sorry for him,” and “I think I am like him,” on a 7-point scale on which 1 was labeled NO!!, 4 was labeled maybe, and 7 was labeled YES!!

Other measures were collected that do not relate directly to the hypotheses. These assessed habitual levels of viewing, preferences for specific genres of programming, and additional ratings of the main character in the experimental program. The data for these measures are reported elsewhere (Mares, 1990).

Results

Loneliness

Subjects who were classified as lonely (i.e., their scores on the loneliness scale fell in the top 20% of initial respondents) had a mean loneliness score of 14.9 (SD = 1.6) of a possible 25. Those who were classified as nonlonely (their scores fell in the bottom 20%) had a mean loneliness score of 8.1 (SD = 1.2).

Selective Exposure

Mood management theory and social comparison theory offered alternative predictions (see Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 3). Basically, mood management theory led to the prediction that positive programs would be preferred and that unhappy lonely people would be particularly likely to prefer positive programming. Social comparison theory predicted that lonely people would prefer negative programming, whereas nonlonely people would prefer positive programming.

The relationship between levels of loneliness and type of program preferred was examined using a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ repeated measures analysis of variance in which the age of the main protagonists in the programs and the valence of the programs were the two within-subjects factors. There was no main
effect for subjects' loneliness. The main effect for age of character was significant ($F(1, 89) = 4.31, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$). The main effect for program valence was significant ($F(1, 89) = 12.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$). Program valence interacted with loneliness ($F(1, 89) = 35.60, p < .001, \eta^2 = .28$) and age of character ($F(1, 89) = 5.74, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$). Loneliness interacted with age of characters in the program ($F(1, 89) = 110.56, p < .001, \eta^2 = .54$). Finally, there was a significant three-way interaction between loneliness, age of the characters, and valence of the program ($F(1, 89) = 106.42, p < .001, \eta^2 = .53$). Scheffé analyses are reported in Table 1.

As Table 1 shows, lonely subjects preferred negative to positive portrayals, and nonlonely subjects preferred positive portrayals to negative ones. Thus the results indicate support for the social comparison hypothesis (Hypothesis 3). The table also shows that lonely subjects preferred to watch negative portrayals of the elderly to negative portrayals of younger people. Similarly, nonlonely subjects preferred positive portrayals of the elderly to positive portrayals of young people.

The relationship of loneliness to ratings of the self-help videos were analyzed in a 2 x 2 mixed measures analysis of variance, in which the two programs constituted the within-subjects factor. The analysis revealed no main effect for program but a significant main effect for loneliness ($F(1, 92) = 12.46, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$). Nonlonely people showed more interest in these programs than lonely people (lonely $M = 5.1$; nonlonely $M = 5.8$). The interaction was nonsignificant.

Checks on Manipulation of Experimental Program

Results of the analysis of variance indicated that there was a main effect for program viewed on the degree to which subjects felt sorry for the protagonist ($F(1, 90) = 40.07, p < .001, \eta^2 = .31$). Subjects felt more sorry for the isolated man ($M = 5.6$) than for the integrated man ($M = 2.3$), indicating that they apparently perceived the content as intended. The main effect of loneliness and the interaction were nonsignificant.

Analyses of ratings of perceived similarity between the subject and the main character showed a significant main effect for loneliness ($F(1, 90) = 5.88, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05$). There was also a marginally significant main effect for program viewed ($F(1, 90) = 3.76, p = .056$). The interaction between loneliness and program viewed was significant ($F(1, 90) = 22.76, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$). Scheffé analyses revealed that lonely subjects rated themselves as more similar to the isolated man ($3.1_4$) than to the integrated man ($2.4_4$), but this difference was not significant. Nonlonely subjects felt significantly more similar to the integrated man ($3.5_4$) than to the isolated man ($2.6_4$). These results indicate that, in general, subjects in the two loneliness groups perceived the relationship between their own situation and the situation of the media character as intended by the experimental design.

Effects of Viewing on Affect

Affect was measured using the MAACL both immediately before subjects viewed the program and immediately after they had viewed it. Analyses of the previewing MAACL responses showed a significant effect for loneliness ($F(1, 89) = 574.27, p < .001, \eta^2 = .87$; lonely $M = 26.2$; nonlonely $M = 5.7$). This indicated that as expected, subjects reporting high levels of loneliness were significantly more unhappy than those reporting low levels of loneliness. There was no effect for the as-yet-unseen program (or interaction), indicating that equivalent viewing groups had been successfully achieved by random assignment to viewing conditions.

Analysis of the postviewing scores on the MAACL showed a main effect of loneliness ($F(1, 90) = 15.29, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$). There was no main effect of program viewed, but there was a significant interaction between loneliness group and program viewed ($F(1, 90) = 30.72, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$).

Scheffé analyses of the interaction revealed that in both the lonely and nonlonely groups, those who watched the program about the isolated man differed from subjects who watched the program about the integrated man. For nonlonely subjects, those who saw the isolated man experienced significantly more negative affect ($M = 16.7_2$) than those who saw the integrated man ($M = 8.7_2$). The pattern was the opposite for the lonely subjects. For
them, seeing the isolated man led to significantly less negative affect ($M = 14.1$) than seeing the integrated man ($M = 24.9$). These results again indicate support for social comparison predictions about the effects of viewing positive and negative portrayals (Hypothesis 4).

In addition to looking at differences in postviewing affect, it was possible to examine the amount of change in each condition. A repeated-measure analysis of variance was conducted with pre- and postviewing MAACL scores as the within-subjects factor. There was no main effect for the within-subjects factor, but there was a significant interaction between loneliness and the repeated measures of affect ($F(1, 90) = 47.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$). There also was a significant three-way interaction between loneliness, repeated measures, and program viewed ($F(1, 90) = 21.52, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$). Four matched-pairs $t$ tests were performed to see which groups had changed significantly. To control type I error, the alpha level for each test was set at .01. As Figure 1 indicates, lonely subjects’ levels of negative affect dropped significantly after seeing the isolated man ($t(48) = 5.46, p < .001$). There was no significant change in affect among lonely subjects who saw the integrated man. Nonlonely viewers who saw the isolated man showed significant increases in negative affect ($t(46) = 5.91, p < .001$). Nonlonely viewers who saw the program about the integrated man did not change significantly ($t(44) = 1.77, p = .09$). This effect does not even approach significance, because the alpha level for each test is .01. Nevertheless, these scores seem to indicate a tendency toward an increase in negative affect. This increase may reflect regression toward the mean. However, in the absence of a control group that was not exposed to the communications, it is difficult to assess this possibility.

Because the program about the isolated man made lonely people experience less negative affect and made nonlonely people experience more negative affect, these two groups that were initially emotionally dissimilar were no longer significantly different. In fact, the program about the isolated man improved the affective state of the lonely subjects to the extent that these viewers no longer differed significantly from the nonlonely people in either condition.

**Power**

Cohen’s (1987) methods of power analysis were used to compute the amount of power for the present study. With the sample size of 94 and alpha at .05, power to detect an effect size of .20 was .91. When alpha was set at .01, power to detect an effect size of .20 was .73.

---

**Figure 1:** Pre- and postviewing measures of affect.

*Note:* The higher the MAACL score, the greater the negative affect.

"$p < .05$."

**Discussion**

The first set of predictions concerned selective exposure to programming as a function of subjects’ prior affect or situation. The finding that lonely, unhappy subjects gave higher ratings to negative programs than to positive programs and nonlonely subjects gave higher ratings to positive programs is consistent with the predictions made by social comparison theory.

According to social comparison theory, the unhappy, lonely subjects may have been motivated to expose themselves to portrayals of unsuccessful characters in order to engage in ego-enhancing comparisons and may have been motivated to avoid portrayals of successful characters in order to reduce the possibility of receiving threatening information. Social comparison theory also explains the behavior of the nonlonely subjects by suggesting that nonthreatened, reasonably successful people like to see successful, positive models because the information from such models may be useful for subjects’ future performance and because of subjects’ desire to perceive themselves as similar to these models.

These findings do not support the empathy/mood-management prediction that positively valenced content will be preferred by both groups. Nor do they
support the mood-management prediction that the lonely, unhappy group should express an even stronger preference for positive programming than the nonlonely, happy group, because the lonely group preferred negative programming.

The second set of predictions concerned affective responses to differently valenced content as a function of subjects’ prior affect or situation. As predicted by social comparison theory, lonely subjects felt better after viewing the negative program than after viewing the positive program, and nonlonely subjects felt better after viewing the positive program than after viewing the negative program.

Lonely subjects who saw the negative program were significantly less unhappy after viewing than they had been before viewing, which is in accord with the argument that exposure to less fortunate models may offer ego-enhancing comparisons. Although the lack of change in affect among lonely subjects who saw the positive program is not as clearly in accord with social comparison theory (which may have predicted increased negative affect because of unfavorable comparisons), the lack of control groups who did not see the videos makes it difficult to assess whether the positive program did have an effect on levels of negative affect that was obscured by regression toward the mean. Whether or not this is the case, the fact that lonely subjects did not become happier after seeing the positive program is not inconsistent with social comparison theory, but it is contrary to the predictions offered by mood management. According to mood-management theory, the valence of the program should eventually prevail over the viewer’s prior affect (Zillmann, 1988); hence, the unhappy, lonely subjects should have felt better after seeing the positive program.

Despite the seeming lack of support for the empathy/mood-management rationale, the results are consistent with the argument that individuals seek to expose themselves to content that will lead to positive affect. Both lonely and nonlonely people indicated a preference for content in the selective exposure part of the study that later was shown to have the most beneficial effects on mood. In addition, the study seems to indicate that the choices people make are, in fact, fairly successful in terms of mood management.

Results also revealed that subjects were more interested in viewing programs that were about people their own age. This is in line with social comparison theory’s postulate that information about similar people is most relevant in making comparisons. The results indicated that subjects did make distinctions between programs on the basis of the age of the characters in the programs. For lonely viewers, negative programs about elderly people were more attractive than negative programs about young people (although both were more attractive than positive programs). Similarly, nonlonely people also preferred seeing positive programs about elderly people to seeing positive programs about young people, although they preferred both to negative portrayals.

The finding that lonely subjects were less interested in viewing a program about happy young people than in viewing programs about unhappy elderly people is contrary to another mechanism of mood management proposed by Zillmann (1988). According to the theory, programs can improve a viewer’s emotional state by disrupting thoughts associated with the source of a bad mood. Programs that are unrelated to the issues involved in the viewer’s negative emotional state are expected to do this best. By this reasoning, lonely viewers should have been more interested in seeing positive portrayals of younger people than in seeing negative portrayals of the elderly.

The manipulation check indicated that there was an interaction between loneliness group and character portrayal on ratings of similarity to the main character, indicating the tendency for subjects to view themselves as more similar to the character who was objectively in a similar situation. Nonlonely subjects gave significantly higher ratings of similarity to the integrated man than to the isolated man. The pattern of means was reversed for the lonely subjects, although the difference was not significant. It is worth noting that whereas nonlonely subjects tended to agree that they were similar to the integrated man and tended to disagree that they were like the isolated man, lonely subjects tended to deny that they were like either character. This makes sense according to social comparison theory. The lonely subjects could not perceive themselves as similar to the integrated man. However, the reason why the portrayal of the isolated man reduced negative affect among lonely viewers was apparently that these viewers could feel that they were unlike him, that they were not as miserable and unsuccessful as poor Joseph Barnett. In fact, if the lonely subjects had perceived themselves as truly similar to the isolated Joseph Barnett, social comparison theory would not have predicted the result of viewing to have been an increase in positive affect.

One concern about the implications of this study is that it may lend itself to misinterpretation by seeming to suggest that negative portrayals of old age do not have any negative effects and that positive portrayals are counterproductive. In fact, the results indicate that people respond differently to portrayals of old age, depending on their prior preoccupations. Negative portrayals can have negative effects (as on the nonlonely viewers), or they can have positive effects (as on the lonely viewers). In the same way, positive portrayals had both positive and negative effects. Thus the support for social
comparison theory found in this study would suggest that relatively diverse portrayals might be more beneficial than the uniformly positive portrayals that have been suggested by other researchers.

In sum, the findings of this study indicate that emotional responses to media content are to some extent dependent on the prior concerns and emotional state of the viewer. Unlike earlier approaches, which suggested that the effects of portrayals of old age are relatively straightforward, the data suggest that more complicated processes, such as social comparison, may be involved. The findings in this study indicate that elderly viewers who are unhappy about specific aspects of their lives engage in social comparison with media figures whose portrayal includes information about related areas. When portrayals indicate that other people are coping less well than the viewer, the result is a decrease in the unhappy viewer's negative affect. The data also suggest that unhappy elderly viewers selectively expose themselves to such portrayals. Elderly viewers who are not personally concerned about those issues tend to expose themselves selectively to positive portrayals and prefer to avoid negative portrayals. When the portrayal suggests that other people are not coping well, the result is an increase in negative affect.

References


Characteristics of Vocal Communication Between Young Adults and Their Parents and Grandparents

This study examined characteristics of young adult children's vocal communication with parents and grandparents. Seven young adult women telephoned their parents and grandparents, had a brief conversation with them, and described a collage to them. Voice samples of the conversations were rated by groups of 12-15 male and female judges on scales reflecting vocal qualities and interpersonal attitudes. Judges also guessed with whom the speakers were talking. Finally, collage descriptions were coded for message complexity. The major findings were that although speakers did not manifest differences in the use of complex linguistic forms, their voices were generally higher in pitch and sounded more babyish, feminine, and unpleasant when conversing with grandparents versus parents. Moreover, speakers were judged to be more deferential and congenial when speaking to grandparents. Variations in the nature of young adult grandchildren's vocal behavior were interpreted more as reactions to familial obligations than to the perceived cognitive capacities of elderly grandparents.

The capacity for a person's voice to convey interpersonal attitudes has been well documented in the nonverbal behavior literature (Knapp, 1980; Zebrowitz, 1990). Moreover, people possess the keen ability to express their attitudes by modifying their vocal behavior in social interactions. For example, women's voices become louder and more dominant sounding when talking with unfamiliar men to offset their perceived power disadvantage (Hall & Braunwald, 1981; Markel, Prebor, & Brandt, 1972). On the other hand, women's voices become softer and less dominant sounding when