



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Older adults' television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies

van der Goot, M.J.; Beentjes, J.W.J.; van Selm, M.

DOI

[10.1515/commun-2014-0025](https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2014-0025)

Publication date

2015

Published in

Communications : The European Journal of Communication Research

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van der Goot, M. J., Beentjes, J. W. J., & van Selm, M. (2015). Older adults' television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies. *Communications : The European Journal of Communication Research*, 40(1), 93-111. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2014-0025>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Van der Goot, M.J., Beentjes, J.W.J., & Van Selm, M. (2015). Older adults' television viewing as part of selection and compensation strategies. *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research*, 40(1), 93–111. doi: 10.1515/commun-2014-0025.

Older Adults' Television Viewing as Part of Selection and Compensation Strategies

Abstract

A large share of the available literature on television and ageing depicts old age as a life stage characterized by losses in which people use television as a substitute for decreased activities. The aim of the present study is to investigate how television viewing is part of both selection and compensation strategies. Based on a qualitative interview study among a diverse sample of older adults ($N = 86$, aged 65-92 years), we found three ways in which television viewing is part of selection strategies and three ways in which it is part of compensation strategies. In contrast to the focus on compensation in previous research, we found that selection strategies appear to provide a better characterization of older people's television viewing than compensation strategies. Moreover, particular television viewing behaviour does not automatically signal whether television viewing is part of selection or compensation strategies.

Keywords: ageing, compensation, life span, media use, older adults, selection, television

Older Adults' Television Viewing as Part of Selection and Compensation Strategies

Older adults watch more television than younger adults (e.g., Harwood, 2007, p. 179; Mares and Woodard, 2006; Van der Goot, Beentjes, and Van Selm, 2006). Regarding their content preferences, studies have shown that they watch more news (e.g., Mares and Woodard, 2006; Mares and Sun, 2010) and quiz shows (e.g., Gunter, Sancho-Aldridge, and Winstone, 1994) than younger people, and that they have a heightened preference for “gentle” content (e.g., Dhoest, 2007; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999).

In attempts to make sense of such age differences in television viewing behaviour, the emphasis has been on old age as a life stage characterized by losses in which people use television as compensation for decreased activities (Östlund, 2010; Van der Goot et al., 2006). It has been suggested that television viewing is a substitute for previous activities such as work, that it serves social functions that were previously fulfilled by interpersonal communication, and that older adults watch news and information because they miss the information that they previously received through work and other social contacts (e.g., Bliese, 1986; Chory-Assad and Yanen, 2005; Doolittle, 1979; Graney, 1974, 1975; Kubey, 1980; Lim and Kim, 2011, Schramm, 1969). This notion of television functioning as a substitute was not only “popular” in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Graney, 1974; 1975; Wigand and Craft, 1985), but is also echoed in more recent research on older viewers (e.g., Chory-Assad and Yanen, 2005; Lim and Kim, 2011).

However, there are at least three reasons why this focus on compensation, when trying to understand older adults' television viewing, may be too limited. First, gerontological research has progressed from a deficit model of ageing to a life-span perspective that studies development throughout life (e.g., Baltes, 1997; Baltes and Baltes, 1990; Freund, 2008; Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Baringer, and Kundrat, 2002). This life-span perspective, as advanced by Baltes (1987), puts

forth the idea that development is multi-directional and assumes that gains and losses jointly occur over the entire life-span. This body of research implies that a focus on losses does not provide an adequate understanding of ageing, because it leads to an underestimation of potential development in later life, and suggests that older adults' television viewing should be seen in the context of both gains and losses that people experience in their lives (Van der Goot et al., 2006).

The Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model (Baltes and Baltes, 1990; Freund and Baltes, 2000) has been developed in order to conceptualize how people adapt to these gains and losses throughout life. The SOC-model is based on the idea that successful ageing is a lifelong process of maximizing gains and minimizing losses by means of three processes: selection, optimization, and compensation (Freund, 2008). Optimization has been suggested to be a higher-order strategy than the other two: People strive to optimize their life circumstances through the processes of selection and compensation (Heckhausen and Schulz, 1993, p. 295). Selection and compensation are seen as basic characteristics of any human action: Human action always requires selecting from an extensive variety of options, and compensating for negative effects of failures or decline (p. 296). In the SOC-model, selection is defined as the adaptive task of persons to concentrate on high-priority domains that are appropriate, given environmental demands and individual motivations, skills, and biological capacity, whereas compensation becomes operative when behavioural capacities are lost or reduced below a standard required for adequate functioning (Baltes and Baltes, 1990, p. 21-22). Thus, gerontological research, particularly the SOC-model, urges us to study older adults' television viewing from a gains-and-losses perspective instead of a compensation-for-deficits perspective.

A second reason why an emphasis on compensation may be too limited is that studies of older adults' television viewing showed that an essential characteristic of the older audience is its

heterogeneity (e.g., Mares and Woodard, 2006). Analyses of General Social Survey data showed that amount of television viewing was relatively homogeneous among middle-aged adults, but became more idiosyncratic as viewers got older (Harwood, 2007, p. 181; Mares and Woodard, 2006). Moreover, traditional predictors of television viewing such as gender, marital status, employment status, class, education, social interaction, race, and happiness were good predictors of young adults' viewing, but not for viewing levels in old age. The cohort analysis showed that with each successive life stage, demographic and social predictors explained increasingly less of the variance in viewing (Mares and Woodard, p. 612). It seems highly unlikely that the idea that television serves as a substitute for diminishing activities provides an adequate description for an audience that is so exceptionally varied in terms of television viewing behaviour as well as life circumstances.

A third reason for challenging the compensation emphasis is that communication research does not provide conclusive empirical evidence for the idea of television as compensation (Van der Goot et al., 2006). First, there is no clear empirical support for the idea that television viewing increases in response to a decrease in other activities. For example, some studies found positive correlations between watching television and other activities (e.g., Mayer, Maas, and Wagner, 1999). Second, some support for the notion that television replaces social functions can be found in studies in which part of the older sample explicitly said that they used media instead of unavailable or difficult interpersonal communication (e.g., Bliese, 1986; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999) and that they watched television because it provided company (e.g., Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Haddon, 2000; Östlund, 2010; A. M. Rubin and R. B. Rubin, 1982a, 1982b; Scherer, Schneider, and Gonser, 2006; Vandebosch and Eggermont, 2002). However, choosing to watch television because it offers company does not necessarily mean that it is a

replacement for diminishing social contacts. Third, the explanation that older adults watch certain programmes, particularly news and information, because they miss the information that they previously received through employment and other activities (Chory-Assad and Yanen, 2005; Kubey, 1980; Lim and Kim, 2011; Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson, and Thompson, 2000) is in contrast with recent empirical findings that older adults watch news and certain types of entertainment because these genres match their orientation on meaningfulness and emotional balance (Bartsch, 2012; Mares, Oliver, and Cantor, 2008; Mares and Sun, 2010). Recently, the socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, and Charles, 1999) has been used to explain older adults' television content preferences (Bartsch, 2012; Hofer, Alemand, and Martin, 2014; Mares et al., 2008; Mares and Sun, 2010). The socioemotional selectivity theory holds that older adults develop a heightened sense that lifetime is limited and precious, which leads them to focus more on achieving meaningfulness and emotional balance in the present instead of accepting negative experiences for the sake of long-term goals (Bartsch, 2012). This orientation on meaningfulness and emotional balance may explain why, compared to younger adults, older adults have more interest in news (Mares and Sun, 2010) and contemplative entertainment experiences (Bartsch, 2012), whereas they show less interest in sitcoms and violence (Mares and Sun, 2010), films with dark, violent, scary and sad content (Mares et al., 2008), and thrilling and tear-jerking experiences (Bartsch, 2012).

In order to examine to what extent the view of television as compensation is too limited, the current study focuses on what older adults themselves have to say about the topic. We conducted a qualitative interview study about television viewing among Dutch older people ($N = 86$) and interpreted their accounts with the help of the Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) model (Baltes and Baltes, 1990; Heckhausen and Schulz, 1993). Applied to television

viewing, selection means that “people can choose to watch television over other activities for reaching goals in high-priority domains”, whereas compensation means that “people use television as a substitute for diminished abilities or activities” (Van der Goot et al., 2006, p. 435).

By analyzing older adults’ accounts of the meanings of television viewing in light of these two strategies we investigate to what extent the compensation view depicts the meaning of television viewing in the lives of older adults accurately, and to what extent alternative views are more appropriate. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to describe, on the basis of older adults’ own accounts, how television viewing is part of both selection and compensation strategies. We also analyze whether television viewing behaviours (i.e., amount of viewing and content preferences) and circumstances (i.e., other activities and household composition) are related to whether television viewing is part of selection or compensation strategies. In this way, the study provides a deep reassessment of what television means in the lives of older adults.

Method

Sampling

Interviews were conducted with people aged 65 years and older, because 65 years is the most common social demarcation of “old age” (Thorson, 2000), and because 65 is the official retirement age in the Netherlands. Purposeful sampling (e.g., Patton, 2002) was done on the basis of age, gender, and household composition ($N = 86$). We distinguished two age groups: 65-74 years ($N = 39$) and 75-92 years ($N = 47$). The sample consisted of 55 women and 33 men. For household composition we ensured that both people who lived alone ($N = 46$) and people who lived together with other people ($N = 40$) were interviewed. Most of the respondents lived independently, whereas seven of them lived in an old people’s home or nursing home.

Only three people in the sample had a paid job. As was common for this generation of women, many female respondents had stopped being employed when they were in their twenties or thirties ($N = 31$ out of $N = 55$). Of the women who had worked into their fifties, some had had jobs that mainly involved physical work, such as cleaning, whereas others had had white-collar jobs such as teaching. The men typically had worked into their fifties. Some had had physical jobs like car mechanic, but most men ($N = 24$ out of $N = 31$) had had white-collar jobs like product developer or business owner.

The sample was highly varied in terms of activities outside the home, satisfaction with social contacts and health, and limitations because of physical constraints. The sample ranged from people who travelled the world to people who were homebound, and from people who were satisfied with their social lives to people who were lonely. Respondents lived in different regions in the Netherlands, in cities as well as in villages.

Interviews

An interview guide (e.g., Dhoest, 2007; Patton, 2002) was used to ensure that the in-depth interviews provided the required information. The guide contained two starting points: Respondents were asked to describe when their television was on, and what they watched on television. Subsequently, the interviewer asked why the television was on at those times, and why the respondent chose these particular programmes. The interviews had two purposes: to investigate change and continuity in television viewing (Van der Goot, Beentjes, and Van Selm, 2012) and to assess television viewing in selection and compensation strategies (present study). To enable the analysis in terms of selection and compensation strategies, the interviewer probed until the following aspects were clear: reasons why respondents chose television viewing and particular programmes; how television viewing was related to domains and developments in

respondents' lives; how television viewing was related to decreases in abilities or activities, and how satisfied the respondent was with television viewing. For example, when a respondent chose to watch television programmes on history because history was his/her hobby, the interviewers were instructed to probe into this domain "history" as well. Thus, interviewers took television viewing as a starting point, and subsequently probed into aspects of everyday life that television viewing was related to.

After the in-depth part about television viewing, additional insight in the context of television viewing was generated with questions about marital status; household composition (i.e., living alone or together with others); living situation (i.e., independent, assisted living or nursing home); until what age they had a paid job; occupation; activities outside the home; satisfaction with social contacts; satisfaction with health, and limitations because of physical impairments.

The interviewers were the first author and students whom she trained in a research seminar on television viewing and ageing. The interviews lasted from thirty minutes (those were exceptions; typically interviews were longer) to three hours, and took place in the interviewees' homes. Interviews were in Dutch, audio-recorded and fully transcribed.

Analysis

The first step was open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), also called initial coding (Charmaz, 2006). We divided the interviews in fragments and added codes to them, both on paper and in the computer programme Atlas.Ti. We read the interviews line-by-line to remain open to respondents' formulations and to all the meanings they expressed. We did not work with a priori categories. In order to create a first structure in the material, we distinguished three

categories in all television experiences: meanings of (1) the activity television viewing amidst other activities, (2) television viewing in the social context, and (3) television content.

The second step is often referred to as focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). The definitions of selection and compensation as presented above were the sensitizing concepts, i.e., these concepts provided the angle from which we looked at the empirical material (Blumer, 1954). Within each of the three categories, we interpreted respondents' accounts in light of the two definitions. This led to a description of three ways in which television viewing was part of selection strategies and three ways in which it was part of compensation strategies, which will be presented in the first part of the results section.

The third step was an analysis of the relation between the meanings of television viewing, television viewing behaviour, and circumstances. We composed a table in which we noted for each respondent whether television viewing was part of selection and/or compensation strategies, their amount of television viewing, their content preferences, their other activities and their household composition. The findings derived from this table will be presented in the second part of the results section.

We used five procedures to insure internal validity as much as possible. First, peer debriefing (e.g., Guba, 1981): We had detailed discussions about the coding, definitions and categorizations, and the first author discussed the findings with experts on television and ageing. Second, member checks (e.g., Guba, 1981): One respondent commented elaborately on a summary of the findings, and during the interviews interviewers gave summaries of respondents' accounts so that respondents could indicate it in case the interviewer had misinterpreted their story. Third, looking for negative cases and rival explanations (Charmaz, 2006, p. 101): This strategy was particularly employed during the third step which included the analysis of the

relationships between the strategies and television viewing behaviour. Fourth, extensive engagement with the people under study (Guba, 1981, p. 84): The first author did volunteer work with older people and established long-standing relations with a few older people. Fifth, memo-writing (e.g., Charmaz, 2006): The first author wrote many memos during the whole course of the study. These memos helped to reconstruct the data collection and analyses as precisely as possible and to detect biases.

Results

Television Viewing as Part of Selection Strategies

Television viewing was part of selection strategies when television viewing was a positive choice: Respondents chose television in order to achieve goals in domains that were important to them, and television was not chosen because of a lack in other activities. We distinguished three ways in which television viewing was part of selection strategies (see table 1, first and second column).

[Please insert Table 1 about here]

First, television viewing was part of selection strategies when respondents experienced the activity of viewing television as a positive choice amidst other possible activities. Here, respondents were engaged in a variety of activities that were meaningful to them and that they were able to do, and watching television was one of these meaningful activities. This can be illustrated with the words of a woman (77 years), whose story is summarized in exemplar story 1 (see appendix 1). About television she says: “Oooooooh, I think it is a wonderful invention; I would not be able to do without it!”, and “As soon as I come in, I check the TV guide, it is always laying here on the table”. At the same time, she is also happy with the social contacts she

has in the apartment building where she lives: “I have so many distractions; we are laughing a lot here!”

Second, television viewing was part of selection strategies when respondents chose television viewing because television fulfilled social functions that were important to them. First, television was appreciated (by some) because it was something that respondents could share with their partner or other persons. Some partners especially valued television viewing as a shared activity, because they had many separate activities and therefore did not spend much time together otherwise. As a man (67 years) explained about watching television together with his wife: “Television is made to enable people to do something together. We are both rather active [with activities outside the home], my wife is even more active than me, and there are not that many things that we do together”. Second, television was appreciated (by some respondents who lived alone) because it brought “people” and life inside their homes and provided company. We considered this use of television to bring life inside the home as part of selection strategies in case respondents indicated that they chose to use television in this way because of what television contributed, and when they did not see this use of television as substitution for missing contacts. This can be exemplified by the following account of a woman (74 years) who switched on the television when she came home late at night:

When I come home at night, and it doesn't matter where I've been, a concert or the children, or a birthday, then the first thing I do: I take off my shoes, have a drink and switch on the TV. (...) I don't know what it is, whether it is because I had people around me the whole evening and... It's not that I have problems with coming home. Maybe it is that empty house, that I want some movement or life around me. I don't know, I always do it, always, I switch on the TV.

This respondent switched on the television for some movement in the empty house, and she did not think, or communicate in any way, that underlying problems were the reason for this habit.

Third, television viewing was part of selection strategies when respondents chose television content because it offered information and/or pleasure. Some respondents focused on information attainment, choosing predominantly current affairs and documentaries, whereas other respondents watched for pleasure and relaxation, and were enthusiastic about for example series, shows, and music programmes. For instance, the woman in exemplar story 1 was laughing while she explained how funny she thought the American comedy series *The Nanny* was. She watched *The Nanny* every night, and she talked about the different characters in the show: she found the nanny and her mother very funny and the butler terrific. Typically, respondents had television-content menus that were mixtures of both information and entertainment programmes. Some content choices were related to activities or events in life domains that were relevant in respondents' everyday lives, such as their hobbies, professions, or life philosophies. As an example: the man (65 years) in exemplar story 2 (see appendix 1) watched specific sports such as running because he did running and triathlons himself, and he liked documentaries about people who started businesses because he himself was a manager and business owner.

Television Viewing as Part of Compensation Strategies

Television viewing was part of compensation strategies when respondents used television viewing as a substitute for activities or abilities that had diminished. In this case, respondents explicitly related the use of television to a loss or a decrease, and they used television to serve the same goal that was previously attained by another activity. We discerned three ways in which television viewing was part of compensation strategies (see table 1, third column).

First, television viewing was part of compensation strategies when respondents watched television as a substitute for other activities. Here, they literally explained that television took the place of activities that were not possible anymore. In this case, the choice for television was not based on particular content, but on the fact that television was available and offered a way to pass the time. The man (72 years) who is brought to the fore in exemplar story 3 said:

Filling the time is a very large problem. I fall back on television because I like it, but in fact it is not an active life that I am leading. It is very much, I'll say it, an awful life isn't it? When you're so dependent on television. I just do not know what else to do.

Second, television viewing was part of compensation strategies when respondents used television in adaptation strategies after losses in the interpersonal sphere, such as a divorce or the loss of a spouse. The social loss had left a void, and in order to combat feelings of loneliness or isolation after these losses television was used as a new means to reach the goal of spending the day in an agreeable manner. Functions that television fulfilled in reaction to such loss were: television provided company, helped to pass the time, helped to structure the days, and offered distraction from sadness. The man (84 years) whose experiences are summarized in exemplar story 4 expressed that after his wife had died he sometimes watched a comical series that made him laugh: "Then I release a lot of dark feelings. Because when you are by yourself, in the evening, it comes to haunt you. And then I think, when I can find that series, then my mood will go back up". Another way in which television was part of compensation strategies in the social context was that some couples watched television together to obtain input for their interaction, because they were homebound and therefore lacked topics to talk about.

Third, television viewing was part of compensation strategies when interviewees used television content as a substitute for input that they had previously gained from other activities.

This occurred in three ways. First, television content provided information that respondents had previously obtained by more active participation in society. In this case, they saw the information they received through watching news, current affairs and talk shows as a replacement for the information they previously obtained through more active societal participation, when they for example served on the board of a museum. Next, television content served as cognitive stimulation that was provided in the past by other activities. Especially quiz shows were mentioned in this way. Some participants explained that when they were younger they trained their cognitive skills in their jobs, or while helping their children with homework. Now quiz shows took over this function. Finally, television content provided a substitute for activities that older people had previously conducted themselves, such as watching church services instead of going to church; watching nature programmes instead of going out in the nature, and watching a dance show such as *Dancing with the stars* instead of dancing themselves. Regarding church services, a man (66 years) said: “Because of circumstances I cannot go, and then I watch the service on television as a surrogate, but an important one.”

Selection, Compensation, and Television Viewing Behaviour

Television viewing was part of solely selection strategies for a large share of the sample, it was part of both selection and compensation strategies for a smaller part of the sample, and for none of the participants television was part of solely compensation strategies. We found considerable variation in television viewing behaviour, i.e., amount of viewing and content preferences, both for respondents who used television solely in selection strategies and for respondents who used television in both selection and compensation strategies.

For respondents who used television only in selection strategies, amount of viewing and content preferences were highly varied. At one end of the spectrum, television viewing was enjoyed a lot. Respondents indicated that watching television constituted quite a large part of the day, and they chose to watch many programmes of many genres. This is illustrated by exemplar story 1, which is about the woman (77 years) who talked about television very enthusiastically. At the other end of the spectrum, television viewing played only a minor role. Respondents indicated that they were not avid television viewers and that they chose to watch only a few programmes that appealed to them. This is shown in exemplar story 2, in which we see the man (65 years) who liked running. He was highly interested in keeping abreast with current affairs and in certain topics, such as running and business, but he did not spend much time watching because he deemed other activities more important.

When looking at television viewing behaviour of respondents who used television as a substitute, again we see a wide range of behaviours. At one end of the range, respondents spent quite a large part of the day watching television. When this extended use of television was experienced as compensation, it was often considered unsatisfactory. In the most “severe” cases, television viewing was practically the only available option and respondents felt convicted to either watching television or staring at the wall. Here, the role of television viewing was bittersweet (see also Gauntlett and Hill, 1999, p. 207): Television did bring some pleasure, but at the same time these respondents felt that a life dominated by television was not a real life. These people wished that their situation would be different; television could not make the situation right. The stories of these respondents signalled feelings of depression and loneliness. This is apparent in exemplar story 3, which summarizes the situation of the man (72 years) who really felt convicted to watching television and who felt that his life “sucked”. At the other side of the

range, respondents also used television as a substitute, but within a context of meaningful activities. For these respondents, television still played only a minor role in their lives. This situation is illustrated in exemplar story 4.

As in selection strategies, the use of television in compensation strategies did not involve a specific type of content. When respondents used television after losses in the interpersonal sphere, they sometimes preferred cheerful, upbeat, optimistic, or comical television content. However, some uses of television after losses in the interpersonal sphere were not hinging upon a certain type of content, but were more determined by the time of day. In addition, a wide variety of television content provided a substitute, among others informative programmes, church services, and nature programmes.

In sum, various amounts of viewing and varying content preferences can be part of either selection strategies or compensation strategies, depending on whether people experience their viewing behaviour as a positive choice or as a response to a loss. This finding leads to the conclusion that particular television behaviour does not automatically imply that television viewing is part of either selection or compensation strategies.

Selection, Compensation, and Circumstances

We found that particular circumstances did not automatically mean that television was used in either one of the strategies. Being in a situation with very limited possibilities did not automatically entail that television was used to compensate for lost activities, nor that television viewing played a dominant role in everyday life. Some respondents who were forced to spend most of the time at home because of health problems (of themselves or their partner) had not increased the amount of television viewing in response to this new situation.

For couples as well as for people who lived alone, television viewing could be part of either selection or compensation strategies. Couples used television in selection strategies because they enjoyed sharing the activity of watching together, whereas television was a substitute when couples had nothing to talk about anymore and utilized television to fill that void. Some respondents who lived alone, especially widows, used television as compensation after they had lost their spouse. But this did not mean that widows' television viewing was automatically part of compensation strategies. Some widows did not change their television viewing pattern compared to before, and some explicitly chose to avoid watching television.

Conclusions and Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how older adults' television viewing is part of both selection and compensation strategies. Based on interviews with a diverse sample of older adults ($N = 86$), we described three ways in which television viewing is part of selection strategies and three ways in which it is part of compensation strategies.

The most important conclusion of this study is that selection strategies appear to provide a better characterization of older people's television viewing than compensation strategies. Respondents typically used television in selection strategies, i.e., they chose to watch television because television viewing added something to their lives; only part of the sample explained how watching television was a response to a loss or decrease. Moreover, compensation strategies did not occur in isolation from selection strategies: When respondents used television as a substitute in some way, they used television viewing as part of selection strategies in other ways as well. For instance, respondents watched church services because they were not able to go to church anymore (compensation), whereas they also watched the news because they were interested in current affairs (selection). Evidently, when we take the perspective of older adults, we have to

characterize the television-as-compensation view as limited and one-sided. Theoretically, this conclusion is in sharp contrast with the dominance of the compensation notion in previous research on older adults' television viewing.

The second conclusion is that particular television viewing behaviour (i.e., amount of television viewing and content preferences) and particular circumstances (i.e., other activities and household composition) do not automatically imply that television viewing is part of either selection or compensation strategies. For example, watching a lot of television is part of selection strategies when respondents experience this amount of viewing as a positive choice amidst other options, whereas this television viewing behaviour is part of compensation strategies for respondents who outline that they watch a lot of television because other activities are not possible. This warns us against jumping to conclusions about the meaning of watching television in later life too easily. It is not justified to infer from information about television viewing behaviour (e.g. that older people on average watch more than any other age group, that they like watching news or that some of them use television as company) that older people use television viewing as compensation after losses.

These findings show that applying a life-span perspective (e.g., Baltes, 1987; Nussbaum et al., 2002) improves our understanding of older adults' media use. The current analysis, based on the SOC-model, has helped to provide a more nuanced and realistic picture of the roles that television viewing fulfills in the lives of ageing individuals. Future research should expand this type of analysis to older adults' use of newer media. As with television, it also has been put forth that internet can have special importance for older adults because it can replace social contacts that older adults can no longer maintain (e.g., Nimrod, 2010; Wright, 2000). The present study strongly suggests that this depiction of older adults' internet use is most likely too limited.

The current study, based on older adults' elaborate accounts of television in their lives, serves as an in-depth addition to quantitative research that also showed the high variability in older adults' television watching. As said, analyses of General Social Survey data showed that variability in amount of television viewing was very high among older adults (Harwood, 2007; Mares and Woodard, 2006), and that traditional predictors of television viewing did not function as good predictors for viewing levels in old age (Mares and Woodard, 2006). In our results section, we described that we did not find a relation between circumstances (i.e., other activities and household composition) and the use of television in selection and compensation strategies. In addition, the current qualitative study did not reveal patterns in the meanings of television viewing according to age, gender, and (former) occupation. Thus qualitative and quantitative research go hand in hand in suggesting that any understanding of the older television "audience" should start with the acknowledgement that this is an exceptionally diverse category, and that identifying factors that may predict older adults' television viewing is an enormous research challenge.

A potential limitation of the study is that the interviews were conducted in the Netherlands. However, there are at least three reasons to assume that the current analysis in terms of selection and compensation also applies to older adults' television viewing in other Western countries. First, the SOC-model is used in both European as well as American research to understand how people cope with gains and losses (e.g., Baltes and Baltes, 1990). Second, the meanings of television viewing in the lives of older adults found in the present study show similarities with these meanings found in qualitative research in the United Kingdom (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999), Germany (Scherer et al., 2006), Belgium (Vandebosch and Eggermont, 2002), and the USA (Hajjar, 1998; Riggs, 1996, 1998). Third, patterns in television viewing behaviour,

such as that older adults watch more television than younger age groups and that they have a heightened preference for news and gentle content, have been found in both European countries and the USA (e.g., Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Mares and Sun, 2010; Mares and Woodard, 2006; Van der Goot et al., 2006).

All in all, the present study stresses the heterogeneity of the older television audience. Characterizing older adults as people who watch a lot of television because they experience a lack in other activities is far too simplistic. Instead, when listening to older adults' own accounts, it is more appropriate to consider television-as-selection to be the default. Older adults choose television in ways that fit their own personal lives, resulting in highly varied television viewing behaviour.

References

- Baltes, P.B. (1987). Theoretical propositions of life-span developmental psychology: On the dynamics between growth and decline. *Developmental Psychology*, 23, 611–626.
- Baltes, P. B., & Baltes, M. B. (1990). Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimization with compensation. In P. B. Baltes & M. B. Baltes (Eds.), *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioral sciences* (pp. 1–34). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Bartsch, A. (2012). As time goes by: What changes and what remains the same in entertainment experience over the life span? *Journal of Communication*, 62, 588–608.
- Bliese, N. W. (1986). Media in the rocking chair: Media uses and functions among the elderly. In G. Gumpert & R. Cathcart (Eds.), *Intermedia: Interpersonal communication in a media world* (pp. 573–582). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blumer, H. (1954). What is wrong with social theory? *American Sociological Review*, 19, 3-10.
- Carstensen, L. L., Isaacowitz, D. M., & Charles, S. T. (1999). Taking time seriously: A theory of socioemotional selectivity. *American Psychologist*, 54, 165-181.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Chory-Assad, R.M., & Yanen, A. (2005). Hopelessness and loneliness as predictors of older adults' involvement with favorite television performers. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 49, 182-201.
- Dhoest, A. (2007). Nostalgic memories: Qualitative reception analysis of Flemish TV fiction, 1953 - 1989. *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research*, 32, 31-50.

- Doolittle, J. C. (1979). News media use by older adults. *Journalism Quarterly*, 56, 311–317, 345.
- Freund, A. M., & Baltes, P. B. (2000). The orchestration of selection, optimization, and compensation: An action-theoretical conceptualization of a theory of developmental regulation. In W. J. Perrig & A. Grob (Eds.), *Control of human behavior, mental processes, and consciousness* (pp. 35-58). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Freund, A.M. (2008). Successful ageing as management of resources: The role of selection, optimization, and compensation. *Research in Human Development*, 5, 94-106.
- Gauntlett, D., & Hill, A. (1999). *TV living: Television, culture and everyday life*. London: Routledge, in association with the British Film Institute.
- Graney, M. J. (1974). Media use as a substitute activity in old age. *Journal of Gerontology*, 29, 322–324.
- Graney, M. J. (1975). Communication uses and the social activity constant. *Communication Research*, 2, 347–366.
- Guba, E. G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal*, 29, 75-91.
- Gunter, B., Sancho-Aldridge, J., & Winstone, P. (1994). *Television: The public's view 1993*. London: John Libbey.
- Haddon, L. (2000). Social exclusion and information and communication technologies: Lessons from studies of single parents and the young elderly. *New Media and Society*, 2, 387–406.
- Hajjar, W. J. (1998). *Television in the nursing home: A case study of the media consumption routines and strategies of nursing home residents*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Harwood, J. (2007). *Understanding communication and aging: Developing knowledge and awareness*. Los Angeles: Sage.

- Heckhausen, J., & Schulz, R. (1993). Optimisation by selection and compensation: Balancing primary and secondary control in life-span development. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 16*, 287–303.
- Hofer, M., Alemand, M., & Martin, M. (2014). Age differences in nonhedonic entertainment experiences. *Journal of Communication*. Advance online publication.
- Kubey, R. W. (1980). Television and aging: Past, present, and future. *Gerontologist, 20*, 16–35.
- Lim, C.M., & Kim, Y.K. (2011). Older consumers' TV home shopping: Loneliness, parasocial interaction, and perceived convenience. *Psychology and Marketing, 28*, 763-780.
- Mares, M.L., & Sun, Y. (2010). The multiple meanings of age for television content preferences. *Human Communication Research, 36*, 372-396.
- Mares, M.L., Oliver, M.B., & Cantor, J. (2008). Age differences in adults' emotional motivations for exposure to films. *Media Psychology, 11*, 488-511.
- Mares, M. L., & Woodard, E. (2006). In search of the older audience: Adult age differences in television viewing. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 50*, 595-614.
- Mayer, K. U., Maas, I., & Wagner, M. (1999). Socioeconomic conditions and social inequalities in old age. In P. B. Baltes & K. U. Mayer (Eds.), *The Berlin aging study: Aging from 70 to 100* (pp. 227–255). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Nimrod, G. (2010). Seniors' online communities: A quantitative content analysis. *The Gerontologist, 50*, 382-392.
- Nussbaum, J. F., Pecchioni, L. L., Baringer, D. K., & Kundrat, A. L. (2002). Lifespan communication. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 26* (pp. 366–389). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Nussbaum, J. F., Pecchioni, L. L., Robinson, J. D., & Thompson, T. L. (2000). *Communication and aging* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Östlund, B. (2010). Watching television in later life: A deeper understanding of TV viewing in the homes of old people and in geriatric care contexts. *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences, 24*, 233-243.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, California: Sage.
- Riggs, K. E. (1996). Television use in a retirement community. *Journal of Communication, 46*, 144-158.
- Riggs, K. E. (1998). *Mature audiences: Television in the lives of elders*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Rubin, A. M., & Rubin, R. B. (1982a). Contextual age and television use. *Human Communication Research, 8*, 228–244.
- Rubin, A. M., & Rubin, R. B. (1982b). Older persons' TV viewing patterns and motivations. *Communication Research, 9*, 287–313.
- Scherer, H., Schneider, B., & Gonser, N. (2006). "Am Tage schaue ich nicht fern!" Determinanten der Mediennutzung ältere Menschen ["I don't watch TV at daytime!" Determinants of older adults' media use]. *Publizistik, 51*, 333-348.
- Schramm, W. (1969). Aging and mass communication. In M. W. Riley, J. W. Riley, & M. E. Johnson (Eds.), *Aging and society. Volume 2: Aging and the professions* (pp. 352–375). New York: Russell Sage.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

- Thorson, J. A. (2000). *Aging in a changing society* (2nd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Brunner/Mazel.
- Van der Goot, M., Beentjes, J. W. J., & Van Selm, M. (2006). Older adults' television viewing from a lifespan perspective: Past research and future challenges. In C. S. Beck (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 30*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Van der Goot, M., Beentjes, J. W. J., & Van Selm, M. (2012). Meanings of television in older adults' lives: An analysis of change and continuity in television viewing. *Ageing & Society, 32*, 147–168. doi:10.1017/S0144686X1100016X.
- Vandebosch, H., & Eggermont, S. (2002). Elderly people's media use: At the crossroads of personal and societal developments. *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research, 27*, 437–455.
- Wigand, R. T., & Craft, E. H. (1985). Television as a socializing agent and need gratifier in mature adults. *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research, 11*, 9-30.
- Wright, K. (2000). Computer-mediated social support, older adults, and coping. *Journal of Communication, 50*, 100–118.

Table 1

Television Viewing as Part of Selection and Compensation Strategies

Three categories in meanings of television viewing	TV viewing as part of selection strategies	TV viewing as part of compensation strategies
1: The activity television viewing amidst other activities	1. The activity television viewing as a positive choice amidst other possible activities	1. The activity television viewing as a substitute for activities that are not possible
2: Television viewing in the social context	2. Television viewing is chosen because of its social functions	2. Television viewing as a substitute after losses in the interpersonal sphere
3: Television content	3. Television content is chosen because it offers information and/or pleasure, sometimes in relation to domains in everyday life	3. Television content as a substitute for input that people previously gained from other activities

Appendix 1.

Exemplar story 1: Television as a positive choice

This is the story of a woman, aged 77 years, who had been widowed for 17 years. She was very enthusiastic about television viewing. As soon as she came home, she looked in the TV guide to find a programme she would like to see. She talked enthusiastically about the programmes she watched. Her favourites were watching sports, particularly tennis. She had favourite players in tennis and also in soccer. She watched the comedy series *the Nanny* every day; she loved this series and considered it very funny. She did not watch cabaret anymore; she used to love political cabaret in the 1970s and 1980s, but she did not like contemporary comedians. Her content preferences predominantly signalled watching for pleasure. In addition, she watched the news every day, but she did not want to watch a current affairs program when it focused on something dreadful such as a war. There had been a period in her life in which she had watched much more television than she currently did. After her husband had died, she had had a period of extensive television viewing in order to have company. So years ago she used television viewing as part of compensation strategies after the loss of her husband, but currently she did not use television as a substitute for something but as a positive contribution to her life.

Exemplar story 2: Television as a positive choice

This is the story of a man, aged 65 years, who had been divorced for 12 years. He worked as the director of his company, did not report any physical problems, and lived alone. He did not watch television during the day because he worked, and switched on the television at night for relaxation. He did not watch every night, because sometimes he was busy with his hobbies. He

liked his job and hobbies, and was satisfied with what he watched on television. He emphasized that he wanted to watch programmes of high quality. He watched the news and current affairs programmes to stay up-to-date, and quality quiz shows to acquire knowledge. He watched sport programmes, particularly the sports he had conducted himself all his life. Sometimes he watched documentaries in which he recognized aspects of his job, and he liked contemporary cabaret programmes.

Exemplar story 3: Television as compensation

This is the story of a man, 72 years, divorced for 23 years. He described himself as addicted to television. He saw television viewing as almost the only thing that he had, and he watched television from when he got up until when he went to bed. He said that previously he had done other things, but now he had problems to pass the time and he felt lonely. Television was what remained. He saw television as an agreeable repose; television helped to pass the days, and he did not feel lonely all the time because he had his television. However, he was not happy with this life. He felt that he did not lead an active life, and he said that a life in which he was so dependent on television “sucked”. Because he watched so much television, he had to watch programmes that he had not been interested in previously. For example, he watched German talk shows, mainly because he considered them to be the only decent content that was broadcast during the day. In addition, he had become a “news junk.” He had always considered it important to keep up with current affairs, and he was sincerely interested in it, but now he checked the news about 20 times per day and he did not like the feeling of being addicted to it.

Exemplar story 4: Television as compensation

This is the story of a man, 84 years, whose wife had died 2.5 years ago, and who spent more time at home than before because of physical problems. At night he sometimes felt sad, because his wife was not with him anymore, and then he occasionally watched comical television series to be released from sadness. Also, because of problems with his leg he had to stay at home now and then, unable to go out. When he needed to stay home, he watched a specific television programme as a substitute for going out, although he preferred going to the choir. In other words, on certain occasions he used television as compensation. Apart from that he had never really liked television, and television hardly played a role in his life. He only chose to watch some specific programmes about architecture because that was a topic he was really interested in.