

# This Isn't Your Parent's TV Show...Oh Wait, It Is

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## **ABSTRACT**

Popular conception holds that Millennials and Gen Z'ers do not like old stuff. Whether it be old games, books, technology, movies, or TV shows, the prevailing thought is that the younger generation prefers newer things. While this view may be perpetuated online and in popular press, it may also be less than accurate as data actually shows younger generations preferring older content. Utilizing Uses and Gratifications Theory, this research tests this assumption by tracking favorite TV shows of Millennials and Gen Z'ers over a seven-year period. Results show that these individuals actually prefer non-current TV shows and that the level of "non-currentness" of their preference is growing over time.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*OK Boomer! – said every Millennial to their parents or grandparents*

"What's a Board Game?" It's commonly said that Millennials and Gen Z'ers often don't know how to use older technology, much less actually like "old things." For example, data has shown that less than half of millennials have seen classic movies like "Gone with the Wind" or "The Sound of Music," with only 28 percent of polled Millennials saying they've seen Casablanca (SWNS, 2017). Millennials and Gen Z'ers are also the drivers behind falling numbers of traditional cable subscribers with the predominant portion of this demographic watching streaming services as opposed to traditional television mediums such as over the air (OTA) or cable (Meek, 2019) leading to a six percent drop in cable subscriptions in 2018 alone. Given these numbers, it can be said that current Millennials and Gen Z'ers are steering away from older TV and cable mediums for newer online streaming platforms for their entertainment needs. Furthermore, the fact that Millennials are not familiar with classic TV and movies further suggests that these individuals may not be interested in older technologies and content.

While the sentiment that Millennials and Gen Z'ers do not prefer older content seems prevalent, it's surprising to find that it also may be incorrect. For example, the global market value for board games is predicted to be \$9.27 billion in 2020, a rise of \$2.11 billion since 2017 (O'Connell, 2019), with part of this board game resurgence attributed to Millennials (Graham, 2016). Millennials also read more than any other age group with 72% of young adults having

read a physical print book over the past year (Brown, 2019). Fifty-three percent of Millennials also claimed to have visited a bookmobile or library in the same year, almost 10% more than Gen X'ers. Fifty-six percent of the people belonging to the 18 to 34 age group would rather purchase books than borrow them. This statistic coincides with the fact that 81% of Gen Z'ers prefer to purchase in stores and 73% stating they like to discover new products in stores (Wu, 2019). Gen Z'ers have also been found to listen to music their parents or grandparents listened to (Kaufman, 2019). On the topic of music, while the sales of CDs have declined, the sales of vinyl records has increased. A survey by YouGov found that out of 1444 people, one in four 18-24 year-olds bought a vinyl record in the previous month (Asprou, 2019). It's not just music on an older medium being enjoyed; in 2018 one million people under the age of 35 tuned into Classic FM, an over-the-air and online radio station which broadcasts classical music as well as movie and video game soundtracks (Gosling, 2018). Interestingly, in the same article claiming Millennials don't care about older movies, the article states that 74.60% of Millennials have seen *Forrest Gump* and 66.80% had seen *Back to the Future* (SWNS, 2017).

Even though there are still remnants of the sentiment that younger folk do not like older technology or other cultural items, this does not seem to be the case. With this in mind, we investigate the area of television show preference. With the rise of streaming networks, are teens and young adults still watching current shows or are they consuming TV shows that have been off the air? Viewing this question through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz, 1959), this research examines the supposition that younger people actually like older shows. Our findings show that, over a seven-year period, the percentage of Millennials and Gen Z'ers whose favorite TV show is currently on the air has substantially diminished over time. Furthermore, the average amount of time these favorite shows have been off the air has increased considerably over this same time period. Results support UGT as the delta between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained is less for older, more vetted, TV shows. These results hold important implications for content providers and marketers for reaching this valuable consumer age group.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Television Viewership**

Television viewing has changed significantly (Hur) since the invention of the electronic television in 1927. In the late 1940's cable television was initially provided in rural areas to enhance the poor reception of over-the-air television. In 1950, 70 systems provided service to 14,000 subscribers but within ten years there were 640 systems with 650,000 subscribers ("The Rise of Cable Television," 2020). In 1972, loosened FCC regulations lead to the creation of HBO and the pay-per-view system. In 1975, the FCC allowed satellites to be used for TV broadcasting and HBO took advantage of the ruling and began broadcasting nationwide. This sudden reduction in FCC regulation led to great growth where the amount of cable subscribers rose from 10 million to 40 million in just 10 years. In 1997, Netflix was started as a service to send VHS tapes and DVDs through the mail to subscribers, but in 2007 Netflix introduced online streaming with Hulu soon following the next year (Lamare 2018). In 2011, Hulu began to release exclusive content and Netflix followed the next year (Grush, 2020). With the rising popularity of online video content, the number of people paying for TV dropped from 73% in 2017 to 67% in 2018 and Netflix usage surpassed cable and satellite for the first time in 2018 (Meek, 2019). Sixty-one percent of those in the 18-29 age range say they watch television by way of streaming services ("Pew Research Center," 2017).

While the medium for television shows has changed quite substantially in recent years, viewership of content has not changed as quickly. In 2017 four out of the 20 most binged television shows were shows already off of the air (Iqbal, 2020). Netflix shelled out \$100 million in 2018 to keep the streaming rights to Friends (Gavin, 2018) with many people taking to twitter to protest the leaving of Friends from the platform again in January 2020 (Villarreal, 2019). While Netflix likes to keep specific streaming numbers to themselves, it's safe to say that Netflix had a sizeable amount of people viewing Friends. Lots of outrage about the leaving of Friends was easily seen on Twitter (Perrone, 2018), where over 50% of users are between the ages of 18 and 49 years old (Aslam, 2020). Therefore, it's reasonable to believe that many viewers of Friends expressing their emotions about the departure were likely those of that age range. Another show receiving the same fate was The Office in January 2021, with fans again already taking to Twitter (Fama, 2019). This data points towards younger viewers preferring TV shows that have been off the air for several years to decades. While counter to the popular narrative, this supports much of the data detailing a resurgence in Millennial/Z'ers preferences for older content.

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) is a theory for understanding the reasons individuals seek out specific media. The theory found its origins as a divergence from other media effect theories looking at the *effects of media on people* and instead focused on *what people do with media* (Katz, 1959). The theory traces back to early research investigating audiences and why they engaged in various media-related consumption behavior (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013), including radio, newspaper, and other early mediums (Cantril & Allport, 1935; Schramm, 1949). The primary focus of the theory is to identify and understand how individuals deliberately choose media to satisfy given needs (Cantril, 1941).

Later UGT research started to focus on gratifications sought through the consumption of media. Entertainment media such as television was identified as offering several different gratification opportunities including mood management (Zillmann, 1988), excitation (Vorderer, Wulff, & Friedrichsen, 2013), sensation seeking (Eysenck, 1980), mood adjustment (Knobloch, 2003), and vicarious relationship functions (Igartua, 2010). Thirty four other gratifications were identified and categorized based on the social and psychological functions that they fulfilled including cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension release needs (Katz, Haas, & Gurevitch, 1973; West & Turner, 2010).

As research progressed, several researchers began to investigate not only the gratifications sought, but also the gratifications actually obtained. Ruggiero describes this difference and how users seek to minimize this gap when deciding which media to consume (Ruggiero, 2000). Ideally, users wish for their gratifications obtained to be greater than their gratifications sought, thereby maximizing their choice (Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985). Given this, users attempt to make informed choices when deciding which media to consume to minimize this "delta" between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained.

Given this, UGT points towards users minimizing this GS/GO gap. We contend that one way to minimize this gap is going with "tried-and-true" content that has been well vetted by other users. This vetting process takes place over time and therefore requires that a show be available for a length of time to be vetted. The next section describes this linkage for hypothesis development.

## Study Hypothesis Development

In the area of television consumption, users now have an almost endless array of possibilities for gratifications. Current streaming services have made the ability to procure older TV shows easier than ever before. UGT postulates that individuals try to minimize the gap between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained to enable greater success at achieving the latter (Ruggiero, 2000). Older TV shows have the advantage of time when it comes to helping to minimize this expectation gap. Time provides the ability for TV shows to be vetted to a larger degree in the social arena. TV shows will have t-shirts, gifs, memes, reviews, word-of-mouth, etc. as a mechanism for providing feedback as to the type of gratifications to be obtained by watching a specific show. This holds true for shows that are popular and shows that are not. Furthermore, time will provide this advantage to older TV shows that currently airing TV shows will not enjoy. In this study we refer to TV shows that have ended their run as “concluded”. We therefore hypothesize that:

H1: The number of concluded TV shows that rank as favorite viewing choices for Millennials/Z’ers will increase over time.

The older the TV show, the greater the amount of time for it to be vetted by individuals, leading to a greater amount of time for reviews and social feedback to surface for popular TV shows. Given the desire for individuals to lessen the gratifications sought/gratifications obtained delta, the amount of feedback from multiple review sources will lead to a higher favorability rating for older TV shows that are chosen by the Millennial/Gen Z viewers as compared to newer shows. Given this, we hypothesize:

H2: There will be a strong positive correlation between the age of a TV show and the show review scores.

Figure 1 shows the proposed research model, where multiple TV shows compete for the favoritism of the viewer, with the winning TV show having the least delta between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained.

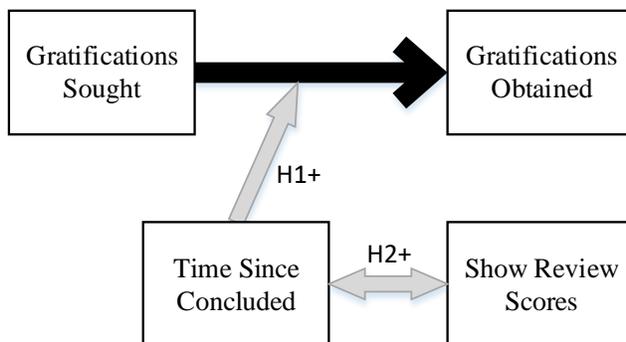


Figure 1. Research model.

## STUDY DESCRIPTION

Subjects for this study were 318 students from a large Midwestern university. Data was collected starting in Fall 2014 through Spring 2020.<sup>1</sup> The course is a mandatory core course for all MIS majors in the college. Given the changing average birthdate of individuals over this seven-year timespan, this data started with Millennials and changed over to Gen Z'ers (Dimock 2019). This sample was chosen given the prevalence of this population for utilizing streaming platforms for their television show consumption. Over the Air (OTA) and cable television place higher emphasis on current programming and only offer access to historical shows through syndication. Streaming platforms provide the opportunity for individuals to choose either current shows or historical shows, thereby providing an almost natural experimental condition with regard to television show choice.

On the first day of each semester at the beginning of each class, the instructor asked the students to 1) give their name, 2) where they are from, and 3) their favorite TV show. A teaching assistant recorded these favorite TV shows as the students went around the room.

The collected data was entered into a spreadsheet with each subject as a line in the dataset. Once entered, data about each show was gathered from [thetvdb.com](https://thetvdb.com)<sup>2</sup> pertaining to various aspects of the show, including first air date and last air date (if the show had ended) as well as the date of the data collection. To calculate whether or not a show was current, the last air date was compared to the date of the data collection and, if greater, then it was marked as a current show. Shows currently still in production (i.e. no last air date) were also recorded as current shows. The number of months since the last air date were calculated by finding the number of months between the current date of the data collection and the last air date of the show, with current shows entered as zero months.

## FINDINGS

Overall, 140 different shows were reported, equating to an average of two individuals reporting each show. Further analysis showed that 28 different reported shows were found to be greater than the third quartile while nine different shows were found to be greater than one standard deviation above the mean and five greater than two standard deviations above the mean.

Results show that, over the first four semesters, a significant proportion of individuals' favorite TV show was current ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 40.64$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) with at least 29 percent more reporting a favorite TV show that was currently airing (CI=[0.29, 0.53]). After this, the percentage changed over the next five semesters to where the favorite TV show was effectively equal with no significant difference between current vs. non-current ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.46$ ,  $p = 0.23$ ). By the spring of 2020 the numbers had completely flipped with a significant proportion of individuals indicating a *non-current* as compared to a current favorite TV show ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 21.74$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) with at least 28 percent more reporting a favorite TV show that was *not* currently airing (CI=[0.28, 0.66]). These results offer support for H1. See Figure 2.

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<sup>1</sup> The instructor did not teach the course in 2017.

<sup>2</sup> <https://thetvdb.com/>

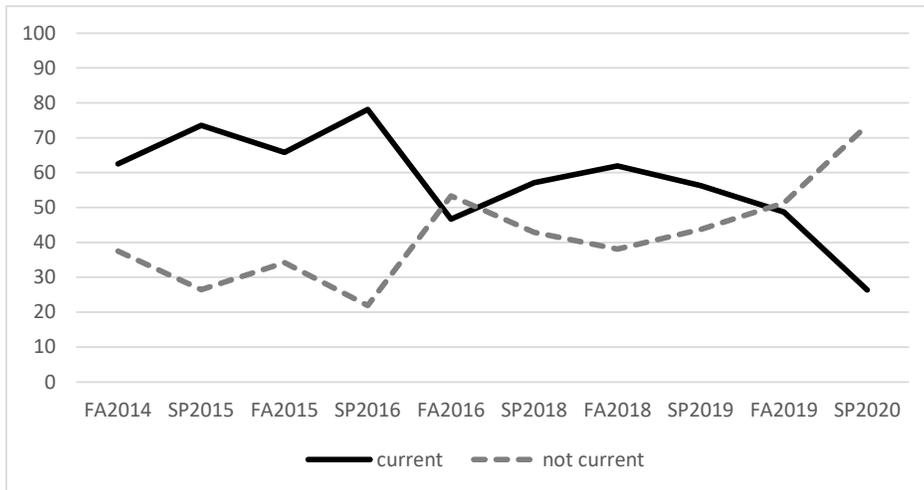


Figure 2. Percent of Current versus Noncurrent Favorite TV Shows

To better understand the level of “non-currentness” of the favorite TV shows, the average number of months since the show’s last aired was analyzed. Results show that in the first three semesters of data collection the average number of months since the last air date of favorite TV shows was around 10 months. This steadily increased over time where the average time since the last air date of favorite TV shows was over five years in Spring 2020.<sup>3</sup> This indicates that not only are favorite TV shows of Millennials and Gen Z’ers less likely to be current TV shows but their level of “non-currentness” has grown over time. See Figure 3.

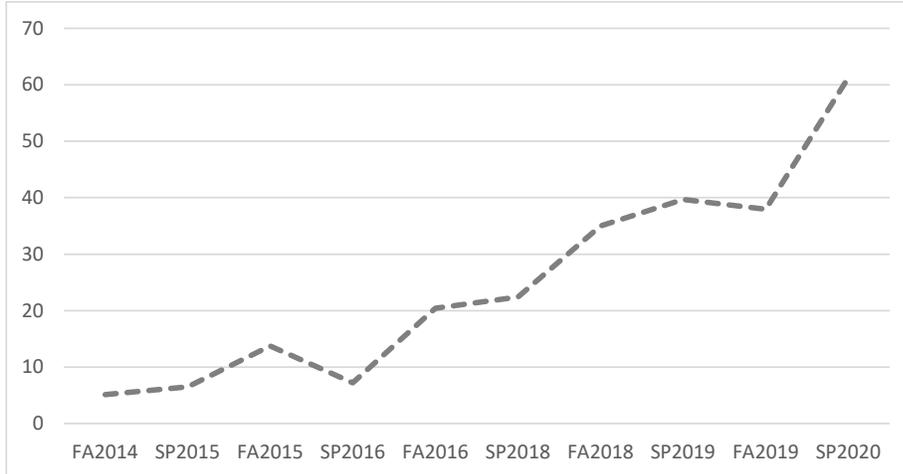


Figure 3. Months Since Last Air Date of Favorite TV Show

Next, we measured the gratification delta. Per previous research, this delta represents the gap between gratification sought and gratification obtained (GS/GO). We hypothesize that the GS/GO delta is smaller for older shows as compared to newer shows given the extensive social vetting surrounding older shows. To test this, review star ratings were gathered from tvdb.com

<sup>3</sup> Posthoc analysis showed the number of months since the first air date to the current date followed the same basic trend, indicating that the length of time the show aired (i.e. number of seasons) did not have an impact.

for each of the shows. This website uses community responses to rate shows and has collected these responses since 2006.

Hyperbolic discounting has been used in behavioral economics to discount historical stock data as newer data provides a clearer picture with regard to the value of the stock (Ainslie, 2016; Grüne-Yanoff, 2015). Given the reviews of TV shows are *current* assessments of shows, we would expect newer TV shows to have a higher effect due to recency (Ebbinghaus, 1913). Reviews of older TV shows would be diluted over time which would present an inverse effect of hyperbolic *upcounting*. We therefore applied a hyperbolic upcounting function to the review score for each TV show whereby the upcounting factor was computed as following.

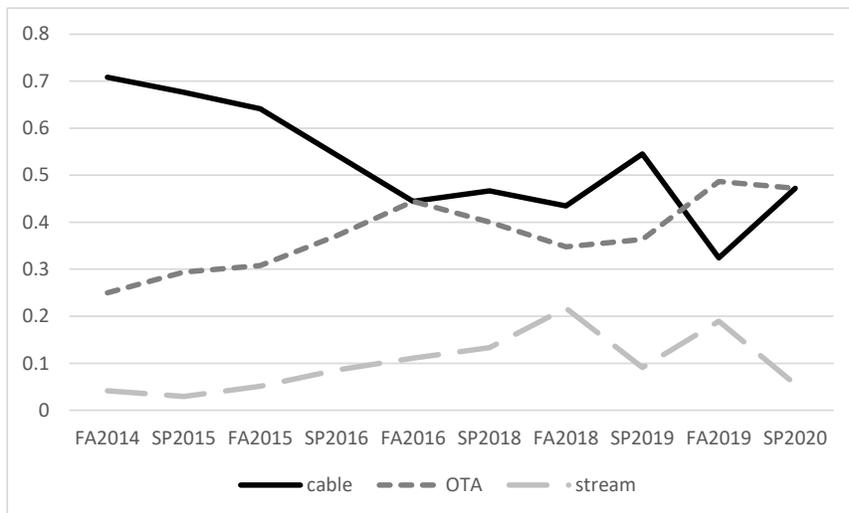
$$g(U) = 1 + T$$

This upcounting factor of  $g(U)$  is the inverse of a discounting factor of  $g(D)$ .

$$g(D) = \frac{1}{1+T}$$

where  $T$  is the time in months since the show has ended. This upcounting factor of  $g(U)$  was then multiplied by the review score for the show. Finally, all the upcount review scores were correlated with the number of months since the show had ended with a high correlation ( $\rho = 0.57$ ). This provides credence to the claim that social vetting, as measured using review scores positively impacts shows as they age, supporting H2.

One interesting area found in the research was during a post-hoc analysis of the medium where the TV show originally aired. While many of these non-current TV shows were viewed by the Millennials and Gen Z'ers using a streaming platform, the question of the original medium was analyzed (i.e. over the air (OTA), cable, or streaming original). Results showed that during the same first four months where a significant proportion of individuals reported their favorite TV show as currently airing, a significant proportion of these currently airing shows originated on cable ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 26.80, p < 0.001$ ) with at least 20 percent more naming a favorite show on cable. Interestingly, over the last six semesters no significant difference was found between cable vs. OTA for reported favorite TV shows ( $\chi^2_{(1)} = 0.19, p = 0.66$ ). Furthermore, the correlation between upcount review scores and the number of months since the show had ended was much smaller for cable shows ( $\rho = 0.36$ ) as compared to OTA shows ( $\rho = 0.61$ ). Given that cable TV is already seeing a drop in subscriptions (Meek, 2019), this paints an even gloomier picture for cable providers as millennials and Gen Z'ers are decreasing in their favoritism for content that originally aired on cable (from 71 down to 47 percent over the seven year period). Conversely, syndicated content on streaming platforms seems to be aiding shows that originated OTA (up from 25 to 47 percent over the seven-year period). As a side note, original content from streaming platforms over the same seven-year period does not seem to be gaining much traction (average of 10 percent favored). Figure 4 shows the levels over time.



**Figure 4. Proportion of viewership by original show medium.**

## DISCUSSION

The supposition of many, as fueled in popular press, is that Millennials and Gen Z'ers do not like older things. Specifically, with regard to media, the fall in traditional cable subscriptions and the lack of knowledge of "classic" movies and television point to these generations preferring newer content (Meek, 2019). In all actuality this may not be the case. Data shows that Millennials actually consume more older content than their predecessors in Gen X in the areas of music, literature, and movies (SWNS, 2017). With the rise in the use of non-traditional online streaming services, the question then becomes whether these online platforms have an impact on the consumption habits of the younger generations.

This study investigates TV show preferences of Millennials and Gen Z'ers over a seven-year timespan. The results run counter to popular opinions by showing that over time, these individuals are preferring more and more noncurrent TV shows. Furthermore, the degree of non-currentness of these shows is increasing. This paints an interesting portrait of a younger generation that, while preferring newer streaming services, actually prefers older content from those streaming services.

Ruggiero (2000) explains that the gap between gratification sought (GS) and gratification obtained (GO) is key. Barton's paper tries to find out what those gratifications are, but this research could suggest that older media has a small GS/GO delta due to the extensive reviews, social vetting, etc. around the older shows. Anyone who decides to watch *The Office* for the first time is going to have a reasonable idea of what to expect. There are tons of memes, t-shirts, gifs, etc. around that show. So much so that even someone who hasn't watched the show knows what they are going to get from it. Additionally, if others have spent 15 years talking about how great *The Office* is you are really pushed to like it as well.

This research provides important information for online streaming platforms. The primary takeaway is that older content is still a valuable commodity for younger generations. As more and more streaming services start to appear, the ability of these services to provide not just novel but older content is necessary to fully appeal to a younger audience. Also, for more

established streaming services, while licensing for older content may be high, this price may be necessary to hold appeal for younger generations.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research investigates consumption of TV shows by millennials and Gen Z'ers. Using Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, 1959) findings from a seven-year sample show that older TV shows provide a smaller delta between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained. While running counter to some popular opinions that these younger generations do not like older things, the results actually coincide with evidence. Furthermore, findings show that this gap between favorite TV shows and the age of these individuals is actually growing, with television shows originally found over the air finding increasing reward.

This research is just a first step and has many limitations. One limitation is the sampling technique as students may feel peer pressure to answer in a certain way in front of other students in the class. Also, while a required course for all MIS students, the sample is majority male given the classic demographic differences for these majors. Given this, future research could examine other demographics as well as peer pressure effects for identifying favorite TV shows. Furthermore, actual usage data from online content providers such as Netflix could be used to bolster these findings. Finally, the interesting findings with regard to the medium provides possibilities for future research in the emergence of OTA television as viable content among younger generations.

Overall, this research provides a valuable first step at exploring and understanding the viewing habits of Millennials and Gen Z'ers in an attempt to better understand this valuable demographic. Findings can be used to tailor content by providers to better fit this demographic and the media needs they present.

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