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# Cultural participation of older adults: investigating the contribution of lowbrow and highbrow activities to social integration and satisfaction with life

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the contribution that cultural activities make to social integration and satisfaction with life for older adults, using a nationally representative Dutch sample. Older people participate less frequently in social gatherings and have fewer close contacts than the adult population in general. They also experience increased feelings of loneliness. In contrast, older Dutch adults feel better integrated socially, which suggests that feelings of social integration and loneliness are independent of one another. Older adults show higher participation rates in highbrow activities compared to the adult population as a whole. This study, however, shows that lowbrow or indiscriminating behaviours may increase social integration and satisfaction with life. Consequently, it may be appropriate to stimulate older people to participate frequently in lowbrow activities such as popular music events, cabaret, and cinema. Public policy-makers, therefore, can consider changing focus from highbrow to lowbrow activities in order to respond to the social challenges associated with older age.

**Keywords:** ageing; highbrow culture; popular culture; quality of life; social capital; social indicators.

## Introduction

The increasing size of the older adult population segment and the resulting growth in public expenditure on this group have led to rising international interest in issues related to the enhancement of life satisfaction in older adulthood (1, 2). Social integration is believed to be essential to successful ageing because it embeds an individual within social systems containing norms, control, and trust as well as access to information and other resources (3–5). Having multiple social ties gives people routes to valuable resources that are important for

well-being and improved satisfaction with life (4, 6–8). Social health has been found to be at least as important an indicator for satisfaction with life as mental and physical health (9). Social disengagement theory argues that ageing can be thought of as a mutual withdrawal or disengagement that inevitably takes place between the ageing person and others (10). The reduction of ties with others and the relinquishing of roles are conceptualized as removing a certain amount of normative control from the individual and making them less likely to assimilate into new groupings. According to socio-emotional selectivity theory, older people discard peripheral relationships and focus on close ones to focus their limited time and energy on those relationships that are most beneficial (11).

Much has been written about the relationship between ageing and social isolation. Age has been found to be negatively related to social participation and network size (6). In addition, age has been found to be positively related to the experience of loneliness (1, 9). The consequences of social isolation include bad health, depression, and personal disorders (12, 13). Given the association between ageing and loss of social contacts, these negative consequences make the prevention and treatment of social isolation an important priority in ageing populations.

The relationship between social integration and leisure has received considerable attention in the leisure field (14–21). Activity-related pastimes are perceived to be instrumental in determining whether the increasing levels of social isolation experienced with advancing age result in feelings of loneliness (11, 22–24). The cultural sector is recognized as an integral part of social life (25). Cultural activities may, therefore, be a tool for reducing the social isolation of older adults, especially since participation in cultural activities increases with age (26–28). Having a drink in a bar or going to the theatre are occasions where the company of others is enjoyed and relationships with friends, relatives, and acquaintances are strengthened (29).

Cultural participation can be divided into two forms: the “highbrow” (classical, elitist, legitimate) culture, and “lowbrow” (popular, folk, mass) culture (30–32). Cultural activities that are in line with the “high” culture are often subsidized cultural institutions like museums and theatres. Popular cultural activities that are engaged by the masses, like visiting pop concerts and cinemas, are generally referred to as “lowbrow” (or popular) culture (33). The “highbrow” taste is primarily based on economic or cultural capital. In “lowbrow” culture, distinction depends mainly on the age of the person (31). Undiscriminating cultural behaviour refers to participation in both highbrow and lowbrow cultural activities.

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Little is known about the contribution of cultural activities to social integration and satisfaction with life for older adults. This paper develops a profile of the social integration behaviour of older people, focusing on the relationship between measures of social integration and satisfaction with life with different types of cultural activities based on highbrow and lowbrow categories. Adults aged 18–54 years were compared with older adults (age 55 years and older). It was hypothesized that social isolation and feelings of loneliness would be higher for older adults. In addition, it was hypothesized that cultural activities would reduce social isolation and feelings of loneliness. Further, cultural activities and social integration were expected to increase satisfaction with life.

## Methods

Data come from the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) Panel (34). The LISS panel is an online household panel representative of the Dutch (speaking) population in the Netherlands aged 16 years and older. The recruitment of panel members is based on a random sample of addresses drawn from the community registers in cooperation with Statistics Netherlands. In February 2009, a questionnaire on social integration and leisure time was administered to 8160 members of the LISS panel and completed by 5910 respondents (response rate 72.4%). Quantifying social integration is difficult. There is a distinction between objective measures of social isolation (e.g., number of close contacts, number of social gatherings) and more subjective measures (feelings of social integration or loneliness) (35). In this study both types of measures were used to quantify social integration. The number of social gatherings attended and number of close contacts were used as objective measures of social integration. The number of social gatherings was measured by four statements: (a) spend an evening with family (other than members of your own household), (b) spend an evening with someone from the neighbourhood, (c) spend an evening with friends outside your neighbourhood, and (d) visit a bar or café. Responses were categorized as follow: 1=never, 2=about once a year, 3=a number of times per year, 4=about once a month, 5=a few times per month, 6=once or twice a week, and 7=almost every day. Responses to the four questions were summed to form a single score that could be considered interval. Close relationships were determined to be those in which the participants lived were tightly interwoven, with both partners affecting and being affected in important ways (36).

Examples included parents and their children, siblings, romantic partners, husbands and wives, and friends. To concentrate on the closest contacts, respondents were asked to name people with whom they discussed important things. The six-item De Jong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (37) was used as a subjective measure of social integration. In addition, the Inclusion of Others in the Self Scale (38) as shown in Figure 1 was used to assess the degree to which people feel connected to other people. In addition to these measures of social integration, respondents were asked about their satisfaction with life using a response scale ranging from 0 (not at all satisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied).

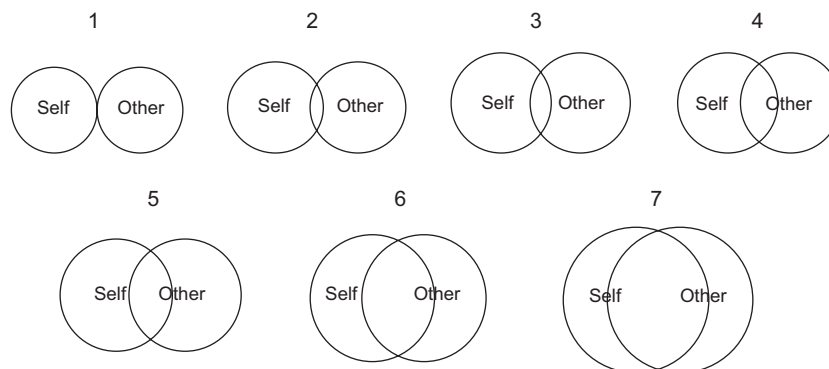
Ten cultural activities were selected and used in the study: (a) visits to a theatre, concert of classical music, opera, ballet, art gallery, or museum were classified as highbrow activities; and (b) visits to concerts of popular music (including musicals), dance events, cabaret, and cinema were classified as lowbrow activities. A variable was created per category, with one indicating that the respondent participated in the cultural activity. In addition, three variables were computed to measure whether respondents participated only in highbrow or in lowbrow, or in both types of activities (undiscriminating).

## Results

A social profile of older adults is presented in the next subsection. This is followed by a subsection that present results on social integration as predicted from cultural activities. The last subsection presents results for life satisfaction as explained from social integration and highbrow, lowbrow, and indiscriminating behaviour.

### Social profile of older adults

Table 1 presents descriptions and analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests for the variables of interest. The objective measures of social integration “social gatherings” and “number of close relationships” are lower for the older two age groups than the younger adult age group. The number of close relationships is similar between the adult group and the older age group (55–64 years), suggesting that the decrease in the number of close relationships is associated with a relinquishment of roles from the age of 65 years onward. On the one hand, older respondents tended to report more feelings of loneliness; on the other hand, they felt more socially



**Figure 1** Assessment of the degree to which people feel connected to other people.

**Table 1** Mean score and ANOVA of key variables per age group (standard errors are in parentheses).

Age, years	18–54 (n=3892)	55–64 (n=1171)	65+ (n=847)	ANOVA	
				Across 3 groups	Across 2 older groups
<b>Social integration</b>					
Social gatherings (0–4)	15.43 (4.24)	13.82 (3.60)	13.10 (3.94)	141.23 <sup>b</sup>	16.40 <sup>b</sup>
Close relationships (0–5)	0.62 (1.2)	0.63 (1.2)	0.48 (1.08)	5.32 <sup>b</sup>	8.77 <sup>b</sup>
Loneliness scale (0–18)	6.92 (2.48)	7.70 (2.16)	7.92 (2.20)	4.13 <sup>a</sup>	4.91 <sup>a</sup>
Feeling of social integration (0–7)	4.66 (1.5)	5.06 (1.4)	5.13 (1.37)	51.80 <sup>b</sup>	1.27
Satisfaction life (0–10)	7.48 (1.36)	7.60 (1.37)	7.66 (1.45)	7.20 <sup>b</sup>	1.04
<b>Cultural activity</b>					
<b>Highbrow</b>					
Theatre	0.30 (0.46)	0.31 (0.46)	0.25 (0.44)	4.05 <sup>a</sup>	6.73 <sup>a</sup>
Concert of classical music	0.11 (0.31)	0.24 (0.43)	0.31 (0.46)	145.55 <sup>b</sup>	12.49 <sup>b</sup>
Opera	0.04 (0.19)	0.08 (0.27)	0.09 (0.29)	25.57 <sup>b</sup>	1.68
Ballet	0.05 (0.21)	0.07 (0.25)	0.08 (0.28)	11.19 <sup>b</sup>	1.52
Art gallery	0.19 (0.39)	0.33 (0.47)	0.32 (0.47)	76.93 <sup>b</sup>	0.08
Museum	0.43 (0.50)	0.54 (0.50)	0.57 (0.50)	37.24 <sup>b</sup>	1.73
<b>Lowbrow</b>					
Concert of popular music/musical	0.45 (0.50)	0.34 (0.47)	0.18 (0.39)	113.17 <sup>b</sup>	59.12 <sup>b</sup>
Dance event	0.12 (0.33)	0.02 (0.12)	0.01 (0.10)	107.57 <sup>b</sup>	1.03
Cabaret	0.26 (0.44)	0.26 (0.44)	0.17 (0.38)	14.97 <sup>b</sup>	23.25 <sup>b</sup>
Cinema	0.67 (0.47)	0.41 (0.49)	0.29 (0.45)	310.13 <sup>b</sup>	31.10 <sup>b</sup>
Only highbrow	0.06 (0.23)	0.18 (0.38)	0.32 (0.47)	279.83 <sup>b</sup>	51.62 <sup>b</sup>
Only lowbrow	0.27 (0.44)	0.12 (0.33)	0.07 (0.26)	116.13 <sup>b</sup>	12.96 <sup>b</sup>
Undiscriminating	0.54 (0.50)	0.32 (0.50)	0.40 (0.49)	29.58 <sup>b</sup>	28.63 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>p<0.05, <sup>b</sup>p<0.01. Variables “theatre” to “friend” are dummies.

integrated. Although older people felt more connected to other people, this did not help them to avoid experiencing feelings of loneliness. Loneliness and feelings of social connectedness seemed to be two separate concepts. Therefore, social disengagement theory and socio-emotional selectivity were both confirmed. Table 1 also shows that older people are more satisfied with their life than the adult age group. There is no significant difference between the two older groups (55–64 and 65+ years), while the difference between these two groups and the adult age group (18–54 years) is significantly more positive.

Older people had higher participation rates in highbrow activities compared to the adult group (18–55 years). Visiting a concert for classical music increased with each age group. Visiting an opera, ballet, art gallery, or museum was the same for both older age groups, but significantly higher compared to the adult group (<55 years of age). Participation in lowbrow activities decreased per age group. Undiscriminating behaviour (visiting both highbrow and lowbrow activities) decreased from 54% in the adult age group to 32% in the age group 55–64 years. The participation rate increased again to 40% for respondents aged 65 years and older.

The results confirm that older people tend to participate more in highbrow cultural activities (27, 39, 40). Whereas adults showed higher participation rates for lowbrow rather than highbrow activities, respondents aged 55 years and older showed higher participation rates for highbrow activities compared to lowbrow. However, for all age groups, the segment with indiscriminating behaviour (visiting both highbrow and lowbrow activities) is the largest.

### Predicting social integration from cultural activities

Multiple regression analyses were carried out to find out how well participation in cultural activities predicts the four different measures of social integration. These analyses also revealed which cultural activity was the best predictor of social integration. In addition to the 10 cultural activities, variables for highbrow, lowbrow, and indiscriminating behaviour were taken into account to see which predicted social integration best.

Table 2 shows the results of the linear regression for the objective measures of social integration (“number of social gatherings” and “number of close relationships”). For “social gatherings,” the R<sup>2</sup> shows that the percentage of variance explained by the various cultural activities was lower for the older age groups than for the adult group; 22% of the variance in “social gatherings” was explained by cultural activities for the adult group, 13% for the age group 55–64 years, and 16% for respondents aged 65 years and older. In contrast, cultural activities explained more of the variance in the number of close contacts for respondents aged 65 years and older (5% for the age group 18–54 years, 6% for the age group 55–64 years, and 16% for the age group 65+ years).

Looking at the activities individually, one can see that seven out of 10 cultural activities made a significant positive contribution to the number of social gatherings for the adult group. The best explanatory variables for the number of social gatherings were lowbrow activities, with “dance events” as the best predictor. Fewer cultural activities had a significant positive influence for the older age groups;

**Table 2** Standard multiple regression on objective measures of social integration (number of social gatherings and number of close relationships) by cultural activities (standardized  $\beta$ -coefficients are presented).

Age, years	Social gatherings			Close relationships		
	18–54	55–64	65+	18–54	55–64	65+
<b>Highbrow</b>						
Theatre	0.05 <sup>b</sup>	0.07 <sup>a</sup>	0.17 <sup>b</sup>	0.03	–0.01	–0.05
Concert of classical music	–0.02	–0.01	–0.00	–0.02	0.09 <sup>a</sup>	0.12 <sup>b</sup>
Opera	–0.02	0.05	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.13 <sup>b</sup>
Ballet	–0.001	0.03	–0.04	0.02	0.02	0.04
Art gallery	0.06 <sup>b</sup>	0.11 <sup>b</sup>	0.11 <sup>b</sup>	0.01	0.04	0.01
Museum	0.05 <sup>a</sup>	–0.07	–0.02	0.04	0.04	0.07
<b>Lowbrow</b>						
Concert of popular music	0.08 <sup>b</sup>	0.05	0.07	0.00	–0.07	–0.01
Dance event	0.26 <sup>b</sup>	0.04	0.02	–0.02	0.02	0.00
Cabaret	0.07 <sup>b</sup>	–0.04	0.06	–0.01	–0.01	–0.06
Cinema	0.11 <sup>b</sup>	0.10 <sup>a</sup>	0.10 <sup>a</sup>	0.01	0.01	0.04
Only highbrow	–0.01	0.05	–0.03	0.05 <sup>a</sup>	–0.01	0.02
Only lowbrow	–0.03	0.08	–0.02	0.02	0.02	0.00
Undiscriminating	–0.02	0.11	–0.03	0.07	0.00	0.07
n	3512	1064	762	3571	1084	771
R <sup>2</sup>	0.22	0.13	0.16	0.05	0.06	0.16
ANOVA	56.44 <sup>b</sup>	8.88 <sup>b</sup>	8.62 <sup>b</sup>	9.82 <sup>b</sup>	4.30 <sup>b</sup>	8.42 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> $p < 0.05$ , <sup>b</sup> $p < 0.01$ . Control variables: gender, education, and other social capital variables.

visiting a theatre, art gallery (both highbrow), and cinema (lowbrow) contributed positively to the number of social gatherings. No cultural activities contributed to the number of close contacts for the adult population; for the older age groups opera and classical music were significant predictors for the number of close contacts an individual had. Investigating the typologies of highbrow, lowbrow, and undiscriminating behaviours, we see that visiting only highbrow cultural activities had a significant positive effect on the number of close contacts for the adult age group (18–54 years). No typology showed a significant effect for the older age groups.

Table 3 presents the results for the subjective measures of social integration. For both measures, the percentage of variance explained was similar across the three age groups. About one-third of the variance in loneliness was explained by the various cultural activities. About 10% of the variance in feelings of social integration was explained by the various cultural activities. Feelings of loneliness were reduced by visiting a dance event (lowbrow) for the adult age group. For older adults, visiting a theatre (highbrow) reduced feelings of loneliness. Feelings of social integration were increased by visiting a theatre, ballet (both highbrow), or cabaret (lowbrow). No cultural activities increased feelings of social integration for the adult age group.

Visiting only highbrow activities showed no significant relation with the subjective measures of social integration. Visiting only lowbrow activities increased feelings of social integration for the older age groups and reduced feelings of loneliness for the adult age group. Undiscriminating behaviour reduced loneliness for the adult population as well. Undiscriminating cultural behaviour was the best predictor for loneliness within the adult age group, while visiting only

lowbrow activities was the best predictor for social integration within the older age groups. It was interesting to see that, although older adults visited highbrow activities more frequently than lowbrow activities, a pattern of visiting only lowbrow activities was substantially associated with increased feelings of social integration.

### Predicting satisfaction with life by social integration and cultural activities

Now that we know which cultural activities predicted social integration, it may be of interest to investigate what type of cultural behaviour increased satisfaction with life. In addition, it is valuable to see which social integration variables were the best measures for satisfaction with life. The results in Table 4 show that loneliness was the best predictor for satisfaction with life. Respondents who experienced lower feelings of loneliness rated their satisfaction with life significantly better than respondents with higher levels of loneliness. Feelings of social integration also had a significant effect on satisfaction with life. Subjective measures of social integration were better predictors for satisfaction with life than objective measures of social integration. Only the number of social gatherings had a significant positive influence on satisfaction with life for the adult age group (18–54 years). The number of close contacts had no significant effect on the satisfaction with life rating.

Visiting only highbrow activities had no significant effect on satisfaction with life; however, visiting only lowbrow activities had a significant positive influence on satisfaction with life for the oldest age group (65+ years). Undiscriminating behaviour had a significant effect on satisfaction with life for both older age groups. Although older people seem to prefer visiting highbrow activities, the results suggest that they

**Table 3** Standard multiple regression on subjective measures of social integration (loneliness and feeling of social integration) by cultural activities (standardized  $\beta$ -coefficients are presented).

Age, years	Loneliness			Feeling of social integration		
	18–54	55–64	65+	18–54	55–64	65+
<b>Highbrow</b>						
Theatre	0.01	-0.08 <sup>a</sup>	0.02	0.00	-0.02	0.10 <sup>a</sup>
Classical music	-0.01	0.01	-0.02	0.01	-0.02	0.02
Opera	0.01	0.01	-0.02	-0.03	0.05	0.03
Ballet	0.00	0.03	-0.03	-0.00	0.05	0.08 <sup>a</sup>
Art gallery	0.01	0.02	0.07	-0.01	-0.05	-0.03
Museum	0.01	-0.07	0.02	-0.01	0.00	0.03
<b>Lowbrow</b>						
Popular music	-0.00	-0.01	0.05	-0.01	0.02	-0.03
Dance event	-0.05 <sup>b</sup>	-0.02	0.02	-0.03	0.04	0.04
Cabaret	-0.03	0.02	-0.5	0.02	0.00	0.11 <sup>a</sup>
Cinema	0.02	-0.01	-0.02	0.01	0.04	-0.05
Only highbrow	-0.03	-0.01	-0.07	0.04	-0.04	-0.05
Only lowbrow	-0.07 <sup>a</sup>	-0.01	0.01	0.03	0.11 <sup>a</sup>	0.10 <sup>a</sup>
Undiscriminating	-0.12 <sup>b</sup>	-0.01	-0.12	0.04	-0.09	0.09
n	3512	1064	762	3150	1023	726
R <sup>2</sup>	0.35	0.35	0.34	0.10	0.10	0.08
ANOVA	111.60 <sup>b</sup>	33.39 <sup>b</sup>	22.11 <sup>b</sup>	19.64 <sup>b</sup>	6.36 <sup>b</sup>	3.06 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>p<0.05, <sup>b</sup>p<0.01. Control variables: gender, education, and other social capital variables. A negative sign on loneliness means that respondents feel less lonely.

would increase their social integration by also visiting lowbrow activities.

**Discussion**

In order to investigate how cultural activities contribute to social integration and satisfaction with life, data from the Dutch LISS Panel (a representative panel of the Dutch population) were analysed. Older people were found to have fewer

social gatherings and a smaller number of close contacts. They also experienced more feelings of loneliness. They reported feeling more socially integrated, however, which suggests that feelings of loneliness and feelings of social integration are two separate concepts. Both social disengagement theory and socio-emotional selectivity theory were felt to carry explanatory power within these findings. Older people have fewer social contacts, but focus more on the social contacts they have and, therefore, they are more satisfied with the contacts that they do have.

Activity theory was also affirmed in that cultural activities contributed positively to social integration. While many cultural activities contributed to social integration for the adult population (18–54 years old), fewer activities contributed to social integration for the older age groups. Older people showed higher participation rates in highbrow cultural activities and lower participation rates in lowbrow activities compared to the general adult population. Lowbrow activities were better predictors for social integration, however. Therefore, it can be contended that older people should focus more on lowbrow activities to prevent social isolation. This conclusion goes not only for social integration, but also for satisfaction with life. A pattern of visiting only lowbrow activities or a pattern of visiting both highbrow and lowbrow activities contributed positively to satisfaction with life, while a pattern of visiting only highbrow activities was not significant in predicting satisfaction with life. Subjective measures of social integration (loneliness and feelings of social integration) were better explanatory variables for satisfaction with life than objective measures of social integration (number of social gatherings and number of close contacts).

**Table 4** Standard multiple regression on satisfaction with life by social integration and cultural activity variables (standardized  $\beta$ -coefficients are presented).

Age, years	Satisfaction with life		
	18–54	55–64	65+
<b>Social integration</b>			
Social gatherings	0.06 <sup>b</sup>	0.05	0.05
Close relationships	-0.00	-0.05	-0.00
Loneliness	-0.22 <sup>b</sup>	-0.22 <sup>b</sup>	-0.14 <sup>b</sup>
Feeling of social integration	0.07 <sup>b</sup>	0.05	0.11 <sup>b</sup>
<b>Cultural activities</b>			
Only highbrow activities	0.02	0.03	0.08
Only lowbrow activities	0.01	0.06	0.08 <sup>b</sup>
Undiscriminating	0.01	0.08 <sup>b</sup>	0.10 <sup>b</sup>
n	3131	1012	724
R <sup>2</sup>	0.23	0.26	0.23
ANOVA	92.81 <sup>b</sup>	35.82 <sup>b</sup>	21.16 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>p<0.05, <sup>b</sup>p<0.01. Control variables: gender and education.

A note has to be made on the design of the study. The decision to use a cross-sectional research design may not have been optimal for investigating the relationship between cultural behaviour and social integration. To develop a theoretical model for satisfaction with life and social integration in old age, longitudinal research is needed to measure any dynamic features, cohort and ageing effects. Future research may meet this need by surveying older people over time to distinguish between ageing and cohort effects.

Based on this study, it can be suggested that a specific strategy to increase social integration for older people appears to be in encouraging lowbrow activities. Governments often provide subsidies for highbrow activities in order to stimulate participation. The findings from this study would suggest a change of focus. By stimulating participation in lowbrow activities such as popular music, dance events, cabaret, and cinema, social integration may be increased and feelings of social isolation reduced, thereby increasing satisfaction with life for older adults.

### Conflict of interest statement

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