
Television drama and audience identification: Experiences from Tsha Tsha

Warren Parker, Pumla Ntlabati & Helen Hajjiannis (2005)

Tsha Tsha is a multi-part entertainment education (e-e) television drama series focusing on young people living in a world affected by HIV/AIDS and other social problems. It explores young people's lives as they make their transition to adulthood, developing self-efficacy and humanity at individual and community levels. The characters in the series touch on many of the challenges facing young people in South Africa today, and the problem-solving approach reflects on their capacity to address problems, to engage in developing solutions, and to become active agents in crafting the circumstances of their own lives. Identification has often been thought of as a central mechanism within educational television production and is related to the notion that, by representing certain characters or processes in particular ways, audience members come to adopt similar approaches in their own thinking, or integrate such thinking within their own practices. Identification has to do with, in some way, thinking from within the perspective of the character or the situation portrayed. It is a vicarious translation of a representational reality communicated via a mass medium into elements of an individual's subjective reality. The theoretical framework of identification provides a useful foundation for guiding the development and implementation of an educational television series. The concept of identification was used in Tsha Tsha as a mechanism for drawing viewers into the lives and perspectives of characters, and this in turn, was related to the development of approaches to problem solving (expressed educationally as lessons). Viewers identified with characters to the point that particular values and problem solving strategies were internalized, and identification included 'wanting to be like' particular characters in the drama. Quantitative and qualitative research methods allowed for processes of identification to be measured. These findings were used to guide the development of subsequent series.

Tsha Tsha is a multi-part entertainment education (e-e) television drama series focusing on young people living in a world affected by HIV/AIDS and other social problems.

The series takes place in the fictional town of Lubusi, a small rural town in the Eastern Cape. It explores young people's lives as they make their transition to adulthood, developing self-efficacy and humanity at individual and community levels. The characters in the series touch on many of the challenges facing young people in South Africa today and the problem-solving approach reflects on their capacity to address problems, to engage in developing solutions, and to become active agents in crafting the circumstances of their own lives.

HIV/AIDS is portrayed in the series along a

continuum of aspects including prevention, care, support, treatment and rights. The situations portrayed include living in a resource-constrained environment; caring for sick family members; caring for and providing for siblings; learning one's HIV status; living with HIV; disclosure of HIV status; safer sexual practices; sexual violence; parenting; and bereavement. Ballroom dancing is used to provide a space for exploring life skills, relationships, mutual respect and intimacy.

Tsha Tsha has been broadcast on SABC1 since 2003 and is a co-production of CADRE and Curious Pictures. Additional support has been provided by the Health Communication Partnership of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Communication Programs.

The concept of identification

Identification has often been thought of as a central mechanism within educational television production and is related to the notion that, by representing certain characters or processes in particular ways, audience members come to adopt similar approaches in their own thinking, or integrate such thinking into their own practices. Identification has to do with, in some way, thinking from within the perspective of the character or the situation portrayed. It is a vicarious translation of a representational reality communicated via a mass medium into elements of an individual's subjective reality.

Identification is about internal processes – about adopting perspectives that inform one's own emotional, intellectual and behavioural responses, and, in the case of dramatic representation, drawing these perspectives from events in the drama.

Identification is different from identity. The latter has to do with adopting norms and values in a generalised way, and is related to one's functioning within a social group or society as a whole, whilst the former has to do with narrower aspects. In this sense, identity is general, identification is particular, and it is this latter aspect that drama has the potential to engage. Cohen (2001: 249) sees identification "with characters in books, films and television" as a means to "extend [our] emotional horizons and social perspectives".

Identification incorporates a sense of affinity with, or relation to, characters that informs emotional and intellectual development of ideas about particular subjects, and about ways one might act or respond to particular situations. This may include responses to negative (antisocial) and positive (pro-social) portrayals.

In relation to the former, for example, studies have demonstrated the relation to portrayals of violence (Huesmann et al 1984) and sex (Collins et al 2004).

Cohen (2001) focuses his analysis on developing a framework for understanding identification. He sees affinity and empathy as important aspects of identification, with characters in drama shaping a viewer's perspectives to the point of adoption. The emotional dimension of this is a sense of sharing the world of the character.

The concept of identification in Tsha Tsha

Identification has been framed as a central component of the theoretical underpinnings of Tsha Tsha and it can be thought of in a number of ways including:

- ❑ Identification with the series and its setting (a small South African town)
- ❑ Identification with the context (young people finding their way in challenging circumstances)
- ❑ Identification with situations and challenges (with an emphasis on HIV/AIDS)
- ❑ Identification with characters (with an emphasis on the four lead characters)

E-E programme development seeks to translate messages or lessons into the portrayal of characters and events. This may include the concept of identification, although the process may in some cases, be guided intuitively rather than from the basis of an established theoretical framework. Identification may be defined narrowly, with a specific focus on its relation to characters, or broadly, where other elements in the drama, including structural elements such as setting, may be encompassed by the concept.

The utility of identification as a theoretical approach



in Tsha Tsha has been consciously integrated in series development, including a central focus being on identification the progress of lead characters through transformative situations.

In the series, the interplay between the opportunities and limitations of the rural setting provides a useful context for highlighting the relationships between personal self-efficacy and environmental resources as factors in personal development. Tsha Tsha's characters face problems, go through processes of critically examining and reflecting on them, and adopt one or more strategies towards their solution.

The approach has emphasised the concept of 'lessons' rather than 'messages' – lessons being process-oriented complex movements towards problem solving, whereas messages tend to be simplified and more discrete. For example, a lesson on the importance of condom use for HIV prevention might involve a range of steps, mistakes, reflections, without the conclusion of the idea being formally stated. In contrast, a message-based approach would emphasise the articulation and often repetition of the 'condoms prevent HIV' message.

Studying identification

The 'affinity' approach to studying identification has to do with measuring an audience's positive relation to various aspects of the drama including characters. This depends on an overarching identification – that of identification with the series itself. This is expressed in terms of viewership (ie. viewing of initial and subsequent episodes). Identification and frequency of watching episodes is interdependent.

A number of studies were designed to evaluate audience responses to the Tsha Tsha series. These included quantitative and qualitative approaches, and allowed opportunities to assess the concept of identification, as well as a range of related responses. Broader elements were also studied including, for example, viewing contexts informed understanding of how and where the series was watched, and how it was discussed during and after viewing.

Quantitative methods

A three-stage questionnaire-based panel study was used to assess audience responses to the series in three settings – a metropolitan area, a small town and rural community. Systematic and random sampling methods were used. The panel of respondents comprised a base of 960 individuals aged 16-26, totalling 320 in each community. In the three-stage panel process, questionnaires were administered after the first 4 episodes of Tsha Tsha, at the end of 13 episodes, and then at the end of 26 episodes, giving a time-lagged measure of the outcome variables. The completion rate at wave 2 was 88% and wave 3 was 81%.

Propensity score matching – a relatively new statistical procedure – was used to analyse the



responses to the series (This fulfilled one of the aims of the research – ie. to develop useful research tools for evaluating responses to mass-media education programmes). The propensity score method effectively overcomes the problem of confounding variables that influence exposure being associated with outcome variables – one of the most vexing challenges in communication research. Via this method, it is possible to establish equivalent exposed and unexposed groups and to control for exposure to the series as a primary variable.

Questionnaire's combined a range of demographic, attitudinal, behavioural measures and indices with specific measures designed to understand perceptions of, and response to the series. These included measures of identification.

Qualitative methods

A range of qualitative approaches were adopted for the series, taking place at various stages of the broadcast of the series spanning over 40 episodes. These included:

- ❑ Focus group discussions conducted with male and female respondents in the three study sites in the 16-26 age range. Discussions included separate male and female groups and mixed groups;
- ❑ Focus groups conducted with a wide age of respondents in various communities and including scholars, students, youth, persons living with HIV/AIDS (amongst others);
- ❑ Interviews conducted with a wide age range of respondents in various communities and including students, youth, parents teachers (amongst others).

Semi-structured question guides were used to inform the research and all focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Allowance was made for multilingual response. Responses were coded using computer-based software.

Quantitative findings

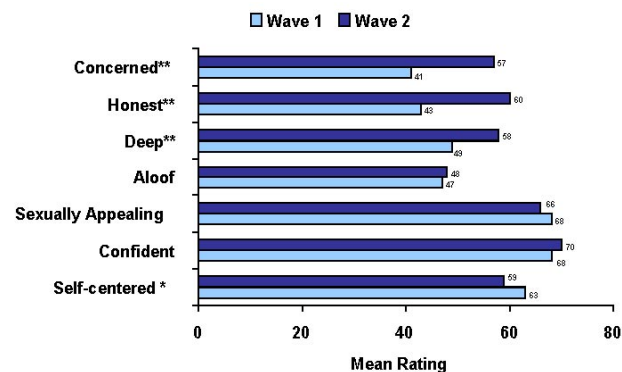
Propensity score matching involves establishing within the dataset:

- A treatment group that had a high level of recall of Tsha Tsha (above the median), and
- A matched control group with low or no recall of Tsha Tsha.

The two groups are statistically equivalent along the following matched variables including: Gender; age; education level; household income; Xhosa language; Zulu language; frequency of television viewing; frequency of radio listening; hearing about AIDS on television; watched Soul City on television; watched Gazlam on television; knew someone who was HIV positive; and condom use.

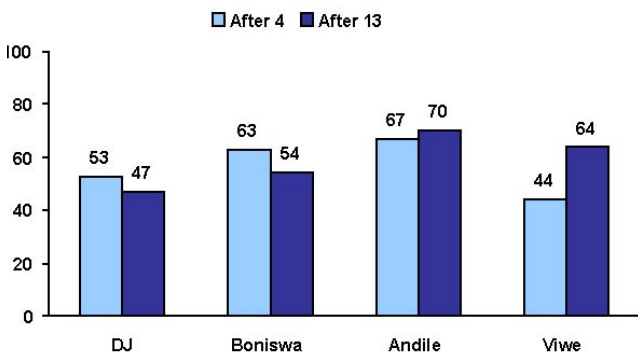
In the first series of Tsha Tsha (episodes 1-13), emphasis was placed on changing relations of identification with characters over time based on the journey they followed in the series. For example, Viwe, a young woman who is the daughter of Lubusi's wealthy funeral director starts out as egotistical and selfish, but undergoes change as a product of learning that she is HIV positive. As Figure 1 shows, statistically significant changes were achieved in relation to perceptions that Viwe is concerned, honest and deep (n=825, statistically significant, ** p<0.001; * p<0.05)

Figure 1: Changes in the perception of Viwe, episodes 4/13



Caring about what happens to characters is another important aspect of identification. Figure 2 illustrates shifts in caring about the four lead characters, and reflects the important positive transitions that occur for Andile and Viwe, whilst viewers are less concerned about DJ and Boniswa over time (n=408-466).

Figure 2: Caring what happens to characters in Tsha Tsha, episodes 4/13



The desire to be like particular characters was also measured. Figure 3 shows identification in terms of wanting to be like one of the four lead characters (and support character Mimi) after 26 episodes (n=511).

Figure 3: How much would you like to be..., episodes 4/26

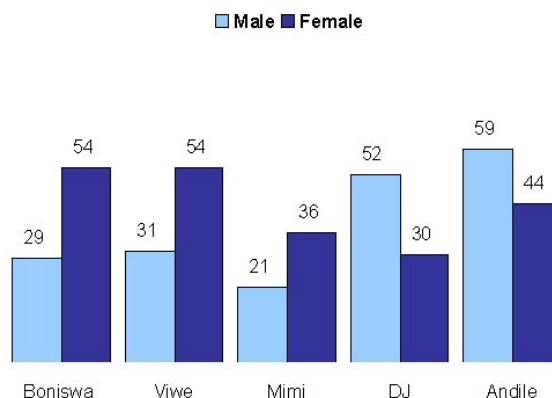


Figure 4 illustrates how the combination of recall of the drama and identification with characters have direct and indirect effects on HIV/AIDS attitudes. This takes the mediating variables into account and explains one of the ways that the drama effects attitudes towards HIV/AIDS

Figure 4: Path model of effects of the drama series

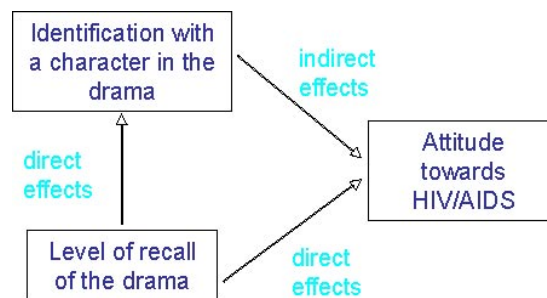
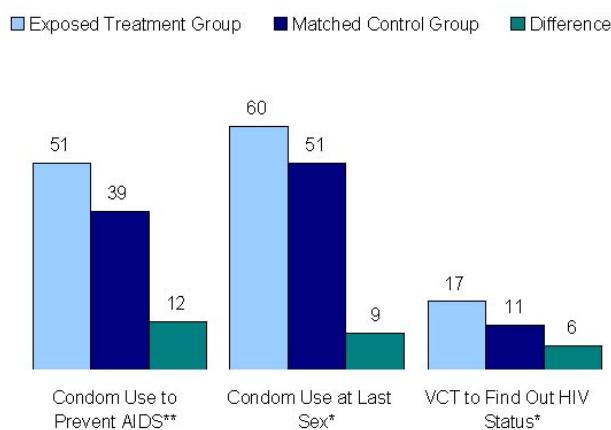


Figure 5 illustrates the self-reported impacts of the series on specific HIV-related practices after 26 episodes (n = 726; *p<0.05; **p<0.001).

Figure 5: Self-reported behaviour in relation to watching Tsha Tsha, episodes 4/26



Qualitative findings

Identification with educational television

Identification may be expressed in many ways in relation to the series. Viewers are motivated to watch for a range of reasons, and select Tsha Tsha over other programmes on a sustained basis as a product of an affinity to the series. This includes affinity to the concept of educational television and extends to other educational series:

“Well, I can take Tsha Tsha, Soul City and Soul Buddyz - they are very encouraging episodes... Eeh...those series, cause they give you positive attitude, they are full of positiveness inside.”¹

Identification with the context

Identification with Tsha Tsha on the basis of context extends from a relation to the small rural town in which the series is set, and extends to a relation to the language and realism of the series:

“I watch Tsha Tsha because of a number of reasons, one being that its a mini series which reflects on the rural lifestyle and the vulnerability of rural communities to a number of diseases. It shows us the underdevelopment which is actually prevailing in the rural communities. And also on the other hand I watch it because it's a Xhosa movie and I'm also a Xhosa”;²

“There is lot of information and what is happening in Tsha Tsha is what is really happening, it is reality, like the taxi violence, it was reality. It did happen, it was like that. And then, everything in Tsha Tsha is a reality”;³

“Because for my experience I think Tsha Tsha is doing the things that I am coming from, from experience, the things that are happening, even to me and other persons...”⁴

Another aspect that is compelling is the drawing together of young people that occurs through dancing:

“This dancing part... shows that there are so many things that you can do for community and there are so many things that could bring the community together, because if we look at Tsha Tsha... these dance classes are what brings community”.⁵

Such contextual identification draws viewers into the series, and the relation to lived experience helps establish the basis for identification with characters.

Watching events unfold in the series may also be connected to events in the lives of the audience, and their portrayal may be deeply moving:

“Yesterday the time I was watching, I was crying. I said, ‘You know the thing that happened to her after the mother passed away is the thing that is happening to me about my boyfriend, because I am staying with my boyfriend’.”⁶

“And so sometimes my problem is that I take the series very personally. I cry when I watch TV.”;⁷

“...And sometimes I do get emotional when I watch it, cause those episodes are very touchy sometimes...”⁸

Identification is interdependent with emotional responses to events and the characters that participate in them. Although some viewers cry when watching the series, this does not translate into diminishing interest as a product of stirring sadness – rather, it is this process that contributes to making the series compelling.

Identification with situations and challenges

For people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA), Tsha Tsha has had particularly strong meaning. PLHA have identified strongly with scenarios, and these have been filtered through their own experiences as well as representing possible scenarios for their own lives.

“I started watching it when Viwe got tested and then she was suffering from stigma and her mother and father – her father did not want to live with her in the same place. I had that interest to watch it. So, I loved it, but since that time – then I said, because it's for HIV and I am a person who is living with HIV and maybe there will be something that I will gain from that.”⁹

Internalising scenarios extends to contemplation of death, and they way one might be remembered as a person with HIV/AIDS. This relates to the death of Andile's mother from AIDS, where mourners who were gathered around the graveside threw red ribbons onto the coffin, and resonated strongly with one PLHA focus group participant. This is articulated as something that she hopes will happen when she dies:

“I gained something, more especially when the mother died with HIV, Andile's mother, and I was happy because after the coffin fell down this lady came with a red ribbon and threw it down. I was very interested in that. Eish...For me, if ever I can die, I don't want ntlabati (soil)...I wish for my funeral that everybody can throw that ribbon for me when they say goodbye, because I am the one, the person living with HIV and it was hard for me to speak with my HIV status. I did not want to talk about it, but as time goes on and when I go to support groups and watch Tsha Tsha play, actually I can do it.”¹⁰

Viewers also identify with the pathways to action depicted in the series. It is this aspect that relates to the concept of lessons, whereby characters reflect on a problem in a range of ways, typically taking action in gradual and step-wise ways. In this example, a focus group participant reflects on her personal dilemma as a mother who has not told her children who their father is.

“For me it was a big part of the role that I enjoyed, because Boniswa, she didn't want to tell the child the reality of who his father is, but for me eish...it was very

*interesting for me. I liked that part because for me it is my experience and my children. I don't stay with the father to my children, so it was interesting because I gained something and in which way should I tell my children who their father is?"*¹¹

In the two examples above, it can be seen how identification deepens reflection on one's own life circumstances, suggesting scenarios that can be applied directly to one's own situation.

Identification with characters

Identification is often thought of as identification with particular characters to the exclusion of others. In Tsha Tsha however, the lessons of the series are embedded in a range of characters, with particular emphasis on the lead characters. This allows viewers to develop a relation to a number of characters:

*I am fascinated by the fact that we see young people on Tsha Tsha doing things that are done by us as young people. So, that's what attracts me, like... it teaches me a lot because there is a lot that I have learned from it".*¹³

Each of the lead characters are also vehicles for identification with particular scenarios alongside an individualised approach to problem solving. Andile, for example, copes with the adversity of his mother's death from AIDS, unemployment and needing to care for his sister. This is interpreted as representing what it means to be 'a man' and is linked to personal identification. The relation to the character is layered, including multiple dimensions of identification:

*"What I really liked... this guy Andile... he was a man. He was a man to his mother, a father to his sister, the father she did not have... who passed away a long time ago. Even though he had nothing, no work, he persevered. He knew that his sister had to go to school and his mother needed vegetables which she couldn't get herself anymore. We see him sleeping outside that business place waiting for the business owner to give him whatever job, even if it meant sweeping the floors in order for him to bring food home. I really wish I could be like him."*¹⁴



The concept of Andile's representation of an alternative masculinity was closely identified with, and overlapped with the lesson that had to do with stretching the bounds of social definitions of masculinity:

*"I think it's a lesson to all who were watching Tsha... It teaches that caring for the sick is not a woman's job, it's everyone's responsibility";*¹⁵

*"I like Andile because when he found out that his mother is dying from AIDS, he made himself available to her, doing everything for her and took good care of her."*¹⁶

Identification with Viwe was particularly strong, and in the series the character offers an interplay between her social status as the girl in the town who has wealth and beauty, but at the same time struggles with her HIV status. She is recognised for her leadership and courage in relation to her transition over time:

*"The very best part of Tsha Tsha mmmm...you can remember that Viwe was a very arrogant person. I think she was changed by the HIV status, she was never quiet, that woman, she chose to do that because she is from the richest family, but after she tested HIV positive it's then that she is trying to bring people together";*¹⁷

*"I am impressed about Viwe. Really, she is so brave, I said you know sometimes you think you are brave, but that girl is so brave";*¹⁸

*"I like Viwe because she has got strong guts and then other people who are watching Tsha Tsha, they will see that if everyone who is HIV positive does not mean that you have to sit down and think about your HIV status. At least she is doing something for the community... she shows people that if you are HIV positive, it does not mean that you are disabled and then you need to do things for yourself. She is helping her father with the business and the way she is teaching people about HIV".*¹⁹

Her courage in the context of adversity resonates strongly, particularly with viewers who are themselves living with HIV. This includes motivating the disclosure of one's HIV status:

*"What I like best is when Viwe accepts that she is HIV positive and disclosed her status. I was also diagnosed as HIV positive and did not know what to do or who to tell. But the way Viwe discloses her status also gave me courage not to be scared about my situation that I am living HIV positive. It also gave me courage to tell my girlfriend that I have tested and results were that I am HIV positive. She also went for testing and her results also were HIV positive."*²⁰

Viwe's response to social action as a product of her HIV status resonates to the point of internalisation. Internalisation is an aspect of identification that is linked to modeling the approach of the character to her

one's own life and is expressed as 'wanting to be like' Viwe. This response is described further above in relation to Andile, and was found amongst viewers in different geographic locales and living in different circumstances:

"Viwe is doing the community thing...the community work and also that thing. So, I think - me, myself, I can do it again, those things. I want to do those things and I want to live a positive life";²¹

"When I look at Tsha Tsha, neh? Viwe is my role model";²²

"I think Viwe too, she made strong each and every time when I see Tsha Tsha. I tell myself that, eish... 'I want to be like this lady';²³

"So really, when I look at Viwe I see like, okay, she is strong and you know I am like that and I just have to keep on like that";²⁵

"So I really feel like I'm part of the way Viwe is, you know, I'm like her in a way that though we didn't go through the same thing".²⁶

Conclusions

A theoretical framework provides a useful foundation for guiding the development and implementation of an educational television series. The concept of identification was used in Tsha Tsha as a mechanism for drawing viewers into the lives and perspectives of characters, and this in turn, was related to the development of approaches to problem solving (expressed educationally as lessons). Viewers identified with the series as a whole, including characters, and this extended to the point that particular values and problem solving strategies were internalised. This was expressed as 'caring about', and 'wanting to be like' particular characters in the drama.

Quantitative and qualitative research methods allowed for processes of identification to be measured and these findings were used to guide the development of subsequent series.

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Endnotes

1. 31898,32087, Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
2. 2338,2363, AT Tsha2 GHT transcript2.txt;
3. 14339,14522 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
4. 32569,32668 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
5. 25990,26259 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
6. 12111,12202 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
7. 13294,13520 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
8. 18423,18646 TSHA church group.txt;
9. 2977,3353 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
10. 9600,10378 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
11. 28371,28790 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
12. 9245,9339 Tsha2QualFindings12May.txt;
13. 18423,18646 TSHA church group.txt;
14. 9709,10266 Tsha2QualFindings12May.txt;
15. 10430,10575 Tsha2QualFindings12May.txt;
16. 44959,45277 TSHA church group.txt;
17. 26749,27063 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
18. Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
19. "29986,30495 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
20. AT Tsha2 GHT transcript2.txt;
21. 39981,40176 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
22. 30805,30856 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
23. 31312,31463 Tsha Tsha Round III PLWHA.txt;
25. 41529,41659 TT3 HH FGD Black urb#1443D2.txt;
26. 42670,42800 TT3 HH FGD Black urb#1443D2.txt