

Effects of educational television drama beyond primary audiences: qualitative evaluation and multiple meanings

Authors: Warren Parker, Kevin Kelly, Helen Hajjiannis and Pumla Ntlabati
Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation, Johannesburg, South Africa
 warren@cadre.org.za • www.cadre.org.za



HIV/AIDS-oriented entertainment-education programmes target specific audiences such as youth, but also reach secondary audiences including PLHA, children, parents, and families. Whilst evaluation focuses on primary impacts, ripple effects include intended and unintended impacts on other audiences. Qualitative evaluation of an educational TV drama series allowed for insights into complex and multilayered meanings of the series, including both intended and unintended effects.

It was found that groups such as PLHA responded positively and negatively to depictions of being affected by, living with, and/or dying of HIV/AIDS. Such portrayals provided PLHA with important opportunities for reflection as well as ideas on how to manage processes of dealing with the disease.

Such qualitative explorations informed understanding of perceptions and meanings that lie beyond those intended for the primary audience and illustrated the importance of taking these into account when developing and evaluating educational drama.



Tsha Tsha is an educational television drama series broadcast since 2003 in South Africa. Set in a small rural town, it explores the lives of young people facing challenges including poverty, unemployment, alcoholism and HIV/AIDS.

The series was developed in partnership between the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the Centre for AIDS Development Research and Evaluation (CADRE), Curious Pictures and the Johns Hopkins University Health Communication Program, and to date 72 episodes have been produced.

A multi-stage quantitative panel study allowed for impacts on the primary youth audience to be identified, whilst parallel and repeated qualitative studies assessed responses by both primary and secondary audiences.

Responses by secondary audiences are often not considered in programme evaluations, yet aspects of the series resonate with diverse subsets of viewers. Emerging effects may be positive or negative, and contextual factors may influence how the series is watched.

Viewing contexts

Although the primary intended audience of Tsha Tsha was youth, our qualitative findings highlighted the importance of viewing contexts in accessing the series.

Tsha Tsha is a prime-time drama series, but this time slot competes with prime-time shows on other channels. In particular, conflicts arose between the selection of Tsha Tsha versus wrestling:

I watch with a friend of mine. He doesn't like Tsha Tsha and when Tsha Tsha is playing, he panics because he wants to watch wrestling. So we like to argue about that. Yesterday, I begged him to watch Tsha Tsha with me and he agreed. At the end of the episode he said to me: 'this Tsha Tsha of yours is not bad at all'. And I said to him, 'if only you had watched it from the beginning'. The thing is if you are not used to it, you only watch it part time, so to you it has no influence that will cause you to stay glued to it.

Conflicts arose between parents and youth who reported not being allowed to watch at home because of parental perceptions about the sexual content of the series.

Sometimes I do not get to watch it because my mom thinks every episode is gonna have that particular portion where they have sex. I'm just thinking that part is a problem because I want to watch it, but at the end of the day I cannot get to watch it because my mother thinks it's too much of it.

Qualitative research during the first series allowed the producers to identify concerns about sexual content and moderate approaches to depicting sex in subsequent series.

For me firstly I was not interested to watch Tsha Tsha because it was this thing of sex things inside and there were children. If you watch the tv with the family, there are some small children and I do not want them to see other things because they are



Identification with characters in a TV drama

Identification has often been thought of as a central mechanism within educational television 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 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



still young. As time went on, I realised that it's an interesting thing because it is talking about HIV and AIDS. Now it seems like they realised that Tsha Tsha... now Tsha Tsha is not doing those sex things...

Talking about Tsha Tsha

The meaning of educational television drama is primarily designed around assumptions about individual viewers watching and internalising the drama. Processes of engaging with the series extend into the collective viewing space, and extend into contexts beyond immediate viewing.

I watch it with the whole family... my two children. We stay together and watch it. But they don't ask me a lot of questions if I'm with some company. If Tsha Tsha is ends I start to talk: 'Most of the time when I go back to work it is when we can talk: 'Did you see Tsha Tsha yesterday, did you see that one and that one'. It is then that I start communicating with other people about it.

People living with HIV/AIDS

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 then maybe there will be something that I will gain from that.

Internalising scenarios extends to contemplation of death, and the way a person might be remembered as someone who was living with HIV/AIDS. This relates to the character, Andile, who's mother dies of AIDS. At the funeral, mourners who were gathered around the graveside threw red ribbons onto the coffin. This resonated strongly with one young woman living with HIV who found the scene to depict something that she hoped would happen. Especially when she died:

I gained something. When she died with the mother died with HIV – Andile's mother – and I was happy because after the coffin went down this lady came with a red ribbon and threw it down [onto the coffin]. I was very interested in that. Eish... For me, if ever I can die, I don't want ntlabati (soil) [thrown on the coffin]... 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 about 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.



Emotional resonance

Watching events unfold in the series may also be connected to events in the lives of audience members, and dramatic portrayals may be deeply moving to the point of heightening awareness of hurtful experiences.

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'.

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

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

Although some viewers cry when watching the series, this does not translate into diminishing interest in the series as a result of its capacity to bring about sadness – rather, it is this process that contributes to making the series compelling.

A young woman living with HIV found herself reliving the experience of discovering her mother was dying of AIDS. This particular disclosure was prompted by watching the series with her mother. In effect, watching the series together produced a profound and nuanced outcome far beyond the immediate intentions of the producers.

I mean this... this series. It is very sad when you think about yourself. Ok, my mom, she didn't tell what was happening to

her until last year when she passed away. She told me... I think it was only a few days before she passed away. So, you know it was very hard for me cause I am also HIV positive. My mother she is HIV positive and she knows about my status. I did tell her I 1993... But I was asking myself why my mother didn't tell me as she knows about me. So, now, as time goes on, when watching Tsha Tsha I thought maybe my mother would talk. But she talked at the end.

Disclosure and acceptance

Disclosure of HIV status within family contexts is difficult for PLHA. Tsha Tsha depicted an ongoing conflict between a father and daughter around her HIV status which played out over several episodes before achieving a modicum of resolution.

Myself, I think that thing of Viwe's father ... the discrimination. Why was he discriminating against Viwe because of her HIV status? But now I think the father of Viwe has accepted [her status]... I thought this thing [Tsha Tsha] was not teaching the parents because parents do not want to accept their children or whatever – this community, the HIV positive people. But now... I think it was last week's episode when Viwe's father accepted that Viwe is HIV positive. It solved all the problems. I was happy about that.



Accepting one's own status was also seen as a complex, but life-transforming process.

You can remember that Viwe was a very arrogant person. I think she was changed by her 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 was then that she was trying to bring people together.

Tsha Tsha was also seen as inspiring for PLHA, providing insight and support to living courageously and proactively with HIV.

I like Viwe because she has got strong guts and then other people who are watching Tsha Tsha will see that if [a person] is HIV positive it does not mean that you have to sit down and think about your HIV status. At least she is doing something for the community and then is like she shows people that if you are HIV positive it does not mean that you are disabled...

Scenarios for support

Early episodes of the series depicted young PLHA attending a support group. However, given that this was not seen as a primary area of educational content by the producers, activities of support group members were superficially depicted. PLHA noted that the lack of detail was disappointing:

We have seen a support group in Tsha Tsha but we didn't see what exactly are they doing in the support group. I mean, if it was going to be better then maybe we could grab some things there and there, but it is just a support group. I remember the first time when we were seeing the support group. I was watching and thinking I will see something, maybe they are discussing something different in what we are doing maybe we could learn something.

This finding informed the expansion of the activities and depiction of the support group in subsequent series.

Recommendations

The impacts of educational drama extend beyond primary audiences. Wider impacts and diversities in audiences are seldom considered in programme evaluation. Qualitative analysis informs understanding of layered meanings in response to entertainment education drama including intended and unintended effects. In the case of Tsha Tsha, producers were able to utilise subsequent research findings to inform the development of subsequent series with a view to addressing wider areas of HIV/AIDS interest.

References

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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)

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.