

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Toward a Theory of Entertainment Persuasion: Explaining the Persuasive Effects of Entertainment-Education Messages

Emily Moyer-Gusé

School of Communication, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210-1339

*A growing body of research indicates that entertainment-education programming can be an effective way to deliver prosocial and health messages. Some have even speculated that entertainment-education may be more effective than overtly persuasive messages in certain circumstances. Despite empirical advances in this area, more work is needed to understand fully what makes entertainment-education unique from a message-processing standpoint. To this end, the present article has three objectives. First, the article examines the involvement with narrative storylines and characters that is fostered by entertainment programming. This includes a much-needed explication and separation of several related constructs, such as identification, parasocial interaction, similarity, and others. Second, the article reviews and synthesizes existing theories that have addressed entertainment-education message processing. Third, the article builds on these theories, presenting an expanded theoretical framework. A set of propositions is advanced and directions for future research are discussed. In total, the article offers a clarification of existing concepts that are critical to the study of entertainment-education, a synthesis of relevant theory, and a set of propositions to guide future research in entertainment-education message effects.*

doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2008.00328.x

Entertainment-education is a popular strategy for incorporating health and other educational messages into popular entertainment media with the goal of positively influencing awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and/or behaviors (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). To date, entertainment-education messages have been systematically evaluated across a variety of topics. The majority of these efforts have taken place outside of the United States. For instance, one large-scale program, *Soul City*, has used dramatic television programming to influence knowledge and attitudes toward HIV prevention, condom use, awareness of domestic violence, rape, and other social issues (Singhal & Rogers, 2001; Soul City Institute, 2008). Indeed, a variety of other

---

Corresponding author: Emily Moyer-Gusé; e-mail: moyer-guse.1@osu.edu

topics have been addressed with entertainment-education across a variety of countries (for review, see Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004). To a lesser degree, entertainment-education has also been investigated in the United States. For example, studies have examined the presence of a condom efficacy message embedded in the hit situation comedy *Friends* (Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003), an HIV storyline in the daytime drama *The Bold & The Beautiful* (Kennedy, O'Leary, Beck, Pollard, & Simpson, 2004), and teens' knowledge about emergency contraception depicted in the prime-time drama *ER* (Brodie et al., 2001). Generally speaking, these and other studies have found that prosocial messages embedded in entertainment television programs can influence viewers' awareness and attitudes toward the issues they cover.

Some have speculated that entertainment-education may offer a *more* effective way to influence attitudes and behavior than traditional persuasive messages by arousing less resistance to the persuasive messages contained within a narrative. For example, researchers have speculated that "the insertion of socially responsible messages in entertainment media is a potentially powerful way of affecting sexual behavior because the 'selling' of a particular behavior isn't as obvious as it may be in a public service advertisement, and thus, audiences may not be as likely to resist the message" (Brown & Walsh-Childers, 2002, p. 459). More formal theorizing has also addressed the resistance-reducing potential of entertainment-education programming (Bandura, 2004; Slater & Rouner, 2002). This speculation warrants an examination of what is unique about entertainment-education programming. Because of its narrative structure, entertainment-education facilitates an emotional experience of being swept up into the narrative itself and becoming involved with the characters therein. This "involvement" may help to overcome various forms of resistance to persuasion. Unfortunately, much conceptual confusion exists in the literature on involvement. Thus, to advance our theoretical understanding of how entertainment-education effects occur, it is necessary to first explicate and then consider the role of involvement in an entertainment-education narrative.

To this end, the present article begins with an overview of involvement in the context of entertainment-education messages. This discussion focuses on viewers' involvement with a narrative itself as well as with characters, defining and distinguishing several related constructs, such as identification, wishful identification, parasocial interaction (PSI), similarity, and transportation. In the next section, two theories that address the role of involvement in the processing and effects of entertainment-education messages are reviewed. The following section builds on these theories, advancing a preliminary theoretical framework leading to a set of propositions regarding how narrative entertainment programming may lead to persuasive outcomes. The article concludes with a set of recommendations and challenges for future research.

## Defining entertainment-education

Throughout this article, I will use the term *entertainment-education* to refer to prosocial messages that are embedded into popular entertainment media content.

This term does not necessarily imply persuasive intent on the part of the message producer. In some cases, these embedded storylines are developed with the intent of influencing behavior, in conjunction with advocacy groups or pressure from parents. In other cases, the storylines may be added for their dramatic appeal but nonetheless incidentally promote healthy behaviors. In this article, narrative persuasion refers to all these messages, as they all share the feature of promoting healthy and/or prosocial behaviors and/or negatively portraying “risky behaviors.”

## Examining involvement in entertainment-education

### Narrative involvement

Because of their narrative structure, entertainment-education messages foster involvement in the storyline. Involvement in this sense refers to the interest with which viewers follow the events as they unfold in the story. However, this notion of narrative involvement has been given several different labels across the literature, including absorption, transportation, engagement, immersion, and engrossment (Bandura, 2004; Gerrig, 1993; Green & Brock, 2000; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Despite these different terms, the main idea is consistently that of being primarily engaged in the storyline, rather than in one’s immediate environment, and experiencing vicarious cognitive and emotional responses to the narrative as it unfolds. Perhaps most commonly used is the term *transportation* (Green & Brock, 2000). Transportation is defined as “a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative” (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701). This notion of being swept up into the storyline distinguishes entertainment-education message processing from that of overtly persuasive messages.

### Involvement with characters

In addition to transportation into a narrative itself, entertainment-education also facilitates various forms of involvement with *characters*. In this section, the term *involvement with characters* will be used to refer to the overarching category of concepts related to how viewers interact with characters. This broad category is made up of identification, wishful identification, similarity, PSI, and liking.

Indeed, the notion that involvement with characters is an important component of entertainment-education theory and research has been suggested elsewhere (e.g., Bandura, 2004; Brown & Fraser, 2004; Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2002; Slater, 2002a; Slater & Rouner, 2002; Sood, 2002). For example, a recent study noted that “television can teach the risks and responsibilities that accompany sexual activity in a way that books, pamphlets, and classroom instruction cannot, by portraying the experiences of sexually active individuals with whom adolescents identify” (Collins et al., 2003, p. 1119). However, this literature has brought on conceptual confusion in two ways. First, several distinct concepts—identification, similarity, and PSI—have often been used interchangeably and/or used very differently. Second, a more thorough explanation is needed of *why* each form of involvement with characters should

increase the effectiveness of entertainment-education programming. This section aims to first separate these related constructs before examining how each may help overcome resistance, thus influencing attitudes and behaviors.

#### *Identification with characters*

Identification refers to an emotional and cognitive process whereby a viewer takes on the role of a character in a narrative. The viewer forgets about his or her own reality and temporarily becomes the character, taking on the character's perspective (Cohen, 2001). During identification, a viewer imagines "being that character and replaces his or her personal identity and role as audience member with the identity and role of the character" (Cohen, 2001, p. 251). This process involves four dimensions: empathic (shared feelings with the character); cognitive (sharing the character's perspective); motivational (internalizing the character's goals); and absorption (the loss of self-awareness during exposure; Cohen, 2001).

One issue that needs to be addressed here is the extent to which identification and transportation are isomorphic. Notice that the fourth dimension in the definition of identification, absorption, overlaps with the definition of transportation. Despite this overlap, identification goes beyond transportation by also including three other dimensions directed at one particular character within the narrative rather than a storyline overall. The extent to which these differences matter for entertainment-education processing and persuasive effects remains an important empirical question for future research.

#### *Wishful identification*

Identification has often been confused with a related construct—"wishful identification." Wishful identification occurs when a viewer wants to be like the character, experiences an active "desire to emulate the figure" (Giles, 2002, p. 12), and looks up to the character (Lonial & Van Auken, 1986). This idea has been explored by social cognitive theory (SCT), where viewers are expected to emulate attractive models (Bandura, 1986). Identification is distinct from wishful identification in that it represents an emotional and cognitive *process*, whereby the viewer takes on the role of the character she or he is viewing, rather than a desire to make himself or herself more like the character.

#### *Similarity*

Perceived similarity (sometimes called homophily) refers to the degree to which an individual perceives that he or she is similar to a character. This similarity can refer to physical attributes, demographic variables, beliefs, personality, or values (see Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). Though perceived similarity is often considered a prerequisite to identification (Cohen, 2001), it is nonetheless a distinct concept (Eyal & Rubin, 2003). Similarity refers to a cognitive assessment of what one has in common with a character, whereas identification is characterized by empathy, shared emotions, and a loss of self-awareness. In this way, similarity involves maintaining one's own perspective while making judgments about a character, whereas identification requires taking on the role of and experiencing events as a character (Cohen, 2001).

*Parasocial interaction*

PSI is defined as “the seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). This refers to the interaction between an audience member and a media figure such that a pseudorelationship forms. These parasocial relationships have similar characteristics to traditional interpersonal relationships except that they are not reciprocated by the media character (Giles, 2002). Past research has shown that children and adults form parasocial relationships with newscasters, radio hosts, and fictional TV characters, seek guidance from them, and see these characters as part of their social world, like a friend (Hoffner, 1996; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). PSI can be distinguished from related concepts in that neither similarity nor role taking are necessary components of this process. Although some evidence suggests that perceived similarity and social attraction are positively associated with the strength of parasocial relationships, these are not necessary components of the process by definition (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Turner, 1993).

*Liking*

Liking simply refers to positive evaluations of a character (Cohen, 2001; Giles, 2002; Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). This idea has also been referred to as social attraction and affinity and is often measured with straightforward questionnaire items such as “I would like to be friends with this person.” Liking is similar to PSI in that it involves an evaluation of a character and some (if even hypothetical) desire for a friendship. This is a useful construct for understanding how viewers experience and relate to characters that they encounter for the first time before a parasocial relationship has had time to form.

Taken together, these constructs differ in terms of the perspective taken by the viewer: that of him- or herself or that of the character. During identification, the viewer temporarily loses his or her own perspective and experiences events as does the character. In the case of similarity, PSI, and liking, the viewer is entirely him- or herself, making judgments about the character and/or the relationship between them. Wishful identification falls somewhere in the middle of this continuum, with the viewer simultaneously aware of his or her own perspective (an awareness of his or her own desire to be like the character) while also imagining him- or herself as the character in a wishful way. Now that these different types of involvement have been defined, the next section will turn to an examination of existing theories that have addressed how these features may lead to entertainment-education effects. Following this review, a new theoretical framework will be advanced.

**Extant theoretical application**

A range of theories have been applied to entertainment-education efforts (for a review, see Sood, Menard, & Witte, 2004). However, the two most relevant theories to this discussion are those that have addressed how unique features of entertainment-education messages may exert persuasive effects by overcoming resistance.

Two such theories, SCT and the extended elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM), will be reviewed here.

### **Social cognitive theory**

The most commonly applied theory in the area of entertainment-education is SCT (Bandura, 1986, 2004; Sood et al., 2004). Most generally, SCT contends that in addition to direct, experiential learning, people learn vicariously by observing models (Bandura, 2002). That is, models, such as those on television, transmit “knowledge, values, cognitive skills, and new styles of behavior” to viewers (Bandura, 2004, p. 78). An important component of SCT is that not all observed behaviors are imitated. In particular, SCT specifies four cognitive subprocesses that govern observational learning, including attention, retention, production, and motivation. This final process, motivation, is a key part of the theory, accounting for the fact that people do not choose to engage in every behavior they learn (Bandura, 1986). Rather, an individual must be motivated to enact the behavior. Although not typically considered “resistance,” this motivational component of the theory does imply that people vary in their motivation toward behaviors. Motivation is influenced by outcome expectancies and self-efficacy. Outcome expectancies refer to the observer’s perceptions of the consequences (positive and/or negative) that are likely to result from a given behavior. Observing a model who is rewarded for his or her behavior serves to positively motivate and reinforce the behavior in the mind of the viewer, whereas behavior that is punished is negatively reinforced (Bandura, 2004). Moreover, attractive and/or similar models are more likely to be observed and imitated. In this way, Bandura highlights the potential for entertainment-education messages to motivate behavior by using characters with whom viewers experience wishful identification.

Self-efficacy—the observer’s confidence in his or her ability to enact the behavior—also determines motivation to imitate modeled behavior. Exposure to a similar model in an entertainment program should influence a viewer’s sense of self-efficacy. The simple argument is that seeing similar others accomplish a challenging health behavior change will increase one’s own self-efficacy regarding this behavior. SCT contends that media messages are particularly likely to influence outcome expectancies and self-efficacy when they feature successful characters with whom the viewer identifies, perceives as similar to himself or herself, and/or finds attractive. It is difficult to separate the role of identification with models and perceived similarity as these labels have both been used in literature about SCT (e.g., Bandura, 1986, 2002, 2004). Nevertheless, by highlighting involvement with characters and motivation as key processes governing behavior, SCT recognizes that resistance to certain “healthy” behaviors can exist among observers. In other words, viewers do not come into a media exposure as a blank slate. Instead, individuals bring preexisting values, norms, and attitudes that influence their motivation to engage in various health behaviors.

### Extended elaboration likelihood model

Although SCT has been used most often, recent theorizing about narrative persuasion in entertainment-education has included the E-ELM (Slater, 2002b; Slater & Rouner, 2002). The E-ELM focuses on the unique ability of entertainment-education to influence beliefs, attitudes, and behavior by reducing message counterarguing, a form of resistance characterized by the “generation of thoughts that dispute or are inconsistent with the persuasive argument” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 180). At its core, the E-ELM posits that when viewers are engaged in the dramatic elements of an entertainment program, they are in a state of less critical, more immersive engagement (Shrum, 2004). Thus, viewers are less likely to counterargue with the embedded persuasive message, making it easier to influence beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. This enhanced state of engagement is dependent upon the appeal of the storyline, the quality of production, and the “unobtrusiveness of persuasive subtext” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 178). The theory discusses two main components of engagement, including transportation and identification with characters.

#### *Transportation*

According to the E-ELM, transportation should reduce counterarguing because viewers are swept up in the narrative and thus not motivated to counterargue story points (Green & Brock, 2000; Knowles & Linn, 2004; Slater & Rouner, 2002). There is empirical evidence to support the idea that transportation into a narrative can reduce counterarguing and increase acceptance of the messages contained in a narrative even after controlling for initial attitudes several weeks earlier (Deighton, Romer, & McQueen, 1989; Green & Brock, 2000). Thus, the E-ELM posits that the narrative format of entertainment-education messages can increase transportation into a story, reduce counterarguing, and increase persuasion.

#### *Identification*

Like transportation, identification with characters is expected to increase absorption, reduce counterarguing, and thus increase viewers' acceptance of the values and beliefs portrayed in the program (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Identification, in this model, is defined as a process “in which an individual perceives another person as similar or at least as a person with whom they might have a social relationship” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 178). Unfortunately, this definition blends together several related constructs, including homophily, identification, and PSI. In fact, Slater and Rouner (2002) acknowledge the complexity of this construct and the need for further examination.

Thus, further explanation of how identification reduces counterarguing is warranted. The loss of self that takes place during identification with a character can also make viewers less critical of messages (Cohen, 2001), which may then reduce counterarguing. This argument is based on the same premise as that of how transportation into a narrative should reduce counterarguing but focuses on immersion into one character's perspective. Because identification, by definition, requires a temporary loss of one's own perspective and immersion into the world of a character, this

counterarguing process is not consistent with identification. The extent to which identification and/or transportation is more effective at reducing counterarguing remains an empirical question in need of examination.

In summary, SCT and the E-ELM are both useful in understanding how entertainment-education programs may overcome resistance to persuasion via involvement with characters and storylines. SCT highlights the importance of motivation in modeling behaviors, whereas the E-ELM addresses how these programs may reduce counterarguing.

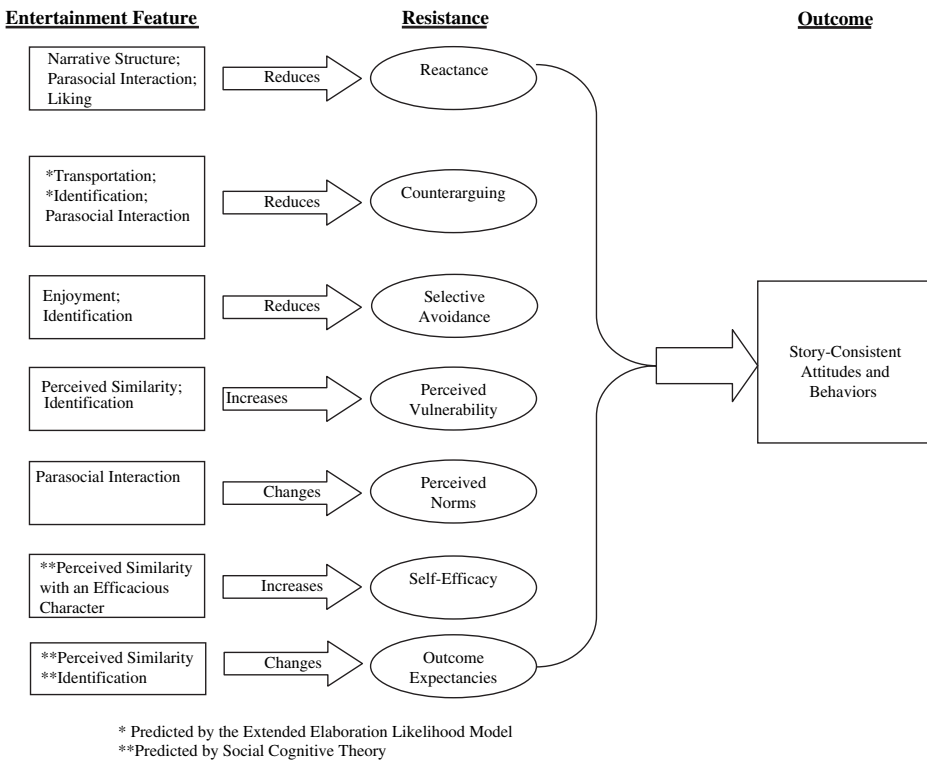
### **Moving forward: Overcoming resistance with entertainment programming**

In order to build on these contributions, it is critical to more fully consider the role of narrative involvement and involvement with characters in entertainment-education effects. In the next section, a theoretical model will be advanced based on the above as well as seven new guiding propositions. This model treats each of the above constructs separately in order to understand their unique contribution to entertainment-education effects. The purpose is to examine how each type of involvement may help to overcome resistance, resulting in persuasive effects. Taken together, these contributions offer a theoretical framework with which to move toward an understanding of the persuasive effects of entertainment-education programming (Figure 1).

There are many different definitions of resistance, but at its core, it can be thought of as “the antithesis of persuasion” (Knowles & Linn, 2004, p. 3). One consistent theme across definitions is that resistance is a reaction against change in response to some *perceived* pressure for change (Knowles & Linn, 2004). One of the most prominent forms of resistance is psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966). Although psychological reactance theory has not yet been formally tested or applied in the context of entertainment-education, it is indeed relevant. Psychological reactance theory contends that humans have a need for freedom to choose their own attitudes and behaviors (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Thus, reactance, a form of arousal, occurs with the perception that a freedom is being threatened. According to the theory, persuasive communication is often perceived as a threat to one’s freedom, even if the message recommendation is in the receiver’s best interest, resulting in message rejection in order to reassert independence. Psychological reactance theory also predicts “boomerang effects,” whereby individuals are motivated to engage in *more* of the discouraged behavior as a result of reactance. This accounts for why some persuasive messages not only fail to produce desired changes but even lead to an increase in the unhealthy behaviors they are intended to prevent (Bensley & Wu, 1991; Burgoon, Alvaro, Grandpre, & Voloudakis, 2002; Bushman, 1998; Bushman & Stack, 1996).

There is theoretical reason to suggest that entertainment messages, using a more subtle form of persuasion, may overcome this type of reactance. Indeed, one unique





**Figure 1** Entertainment overcoming resistance model.

aspect of entertainment-education programs is their narrative format, allowing a viewer to become “sucked in” to the world in which the drama takes place, reducing viewers’ perception that the message is persuasive in nature. The E-ELM emphasized the implications of unobtrusiveness of a persuasive message for reducing counterarguing, but the narrative format of entertainment-education programming may also be able to reduce reactance. To the extent that an entertainment-education program is not perceived as having persuasive intent, it should not induce the kind of reactance that is often evoked by overtly persuasive messages. In fact, research shows that the less overtly persuasive a message is perceived to be, the more accepting receivers are to the influence (McGrane, Toth, & Alley, 1990; Weinstein, Grubb, & Vautier, 1986). Thus, by disguising its persuasive intent, entertainment programming may side step reactance.

Proposition 1: The narrative structure of entertainment-education messages will overcome reactance by diminishing the viewer’s perception that the message is intended to persuade.

PSI with characters within an entertainment-education program may offer another way to reduce reactance. Using peers to deliver persuasive risk messages can be an

effective persuasive strategy because peers are seen as less authoritative and controlling (Burgoon et al., 2002), thus arousing less reactance. This argument may apply to parasocial relationships as well in that these characters act as a “superpeer” to whom viewers look for guidance (Hoffner, 1996; Rubin et al., 1985). Therefore, characters with whom viewers have parasocial relationships should similarly lead to reductions in reactance when presented in the context of entertainment-education messages.

Proposition 2: PSI with a central character can enhance the persuasive effects of entertainment-education content by reducing reactance.

This argument may also apply, though perhaps in a weaker form, to characters whom viewers merely like but with whom they have not yet established a parasocial relationship. In the same way, a liked character may reduce the perception of a threat to one’s freedom and subsequent reactance.

Proposition 2b: Liking a central character can enhance the persuasive effects of entertainment-education content by reducing reactance.

### Counterarguing

The E-ELM addressed how identification with characters and transportation may reduce counterarguing. PSI may also reduce this type of resistance, but in a different way. Viewers may be more trusting of a character with whom they have a parasocial relationship given their “history” together. In fact, one study found that PSI facilitated perceptions that a favorite radio host was a credible source of societal information (Rubin & Step, 2000). As an anecdotal example, consider a woman speaking about her PSI with Joan Lunden: “I will stop to watch Joan Lunden in a commercial because it’s like having a friend in for coffee. I trust her and enjoy seeing her and her baby” (Alperstein, 1991, p. 48). Taken together, these examples suggest that the trust of and familiarity with characters that viewers develop can have important effects on willingness to accept information, even persuasive, without counterarguing with the source’s claims. Indeed, this may explain the use of “transitional characters”—those who reform their behavior in keeping with the underlying persuasive message over the course of a program or series—in some entertainment-education programming. Although these transitional models may model behaviors as predicted by SCT, they may also effectively reduce counterarguing through PSI. In this way, PSI may offer an important technique for overcoming counterarguing.

Proposition 3: PSI with characters will enhance the persuasive effects of embedded messages in entertainment content by reducing counterarguing.

### Selective avoidance

Rather than discount a persuasive message by counterarguing, individuals may also resist by selectively avoiding certain content. Though similar, this selective avoidance prior to exposure is distinct from counterarguing, whereby an individual considers

an argument and rejects it based on counterarguments. This section discusses selective avoidance due to inertia and to fear.

### *Inertia*

Inertia is the idea that individuals prefer not to change their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs rather than to change them, all things being equal (Knowles & Linn, 2004). This notion is grounded in the idea that individuals strive to keep their attitude system in balance and will resist persuasion based on the desire to avoid dissonance. This inertia results in selective avoidance of arguments that contradict one's existing beliefs and attitudes.

Identification with a character in an entertainment-education program may overcome inertia. While identifying with a character, viewers may be more willing to consider dissonant perspectives and to imagine themselves doing, thinking, or feeling something they ordinarily would not because they are experiencing it vicariously as the character. These activities (e.g., shared feelings, perspectives, goals with the character) are part of the identification process by definition (Cohen, 2001). In this way, identification with characters may be an important mechanism by which entertainment media may overcome this type of selective avoidance among viewers. For example, a smoker may simply change the channel any time an antismoking public service announcement comes on television. However, if this individual identifies with a character who smokes in an entertainment-education narrative, and this character encounters health problems as a result, perhaps the viewer would continue to view the program, thus overcoming selective avoidance.

Proposition 4: Identification with a character in an entertainment-education program will overcome the selective avoidance due to inertia

### *Fear*

An additional reason individuals selectively avoid health or other prosocial messages is fear about the topic. This idea has been examined in the fear-appeal literature, revealing that under certain conditions when a topic arouses a great deal of fear, individuals attempt to cope by ignoring or defensively processing the message (Witte, 1994). Specifically, messages that evoke fear can lead to defensive avoidance if they do not also include adequate information about self-efficacy (e.g., confidence in one's ability to use contraceptives) and response efficacy (e.g., confidence in the ability of contraceptives to work effectively; Rogers, 1975; Witte, 1992). This defensive processing refers to "the allocation of attention away from threatening or unpleasant stimuli, and one's emotional reactions to those stimuli" (Brown, 2001, p. 194). In other words, certain topics may elicit high levels of fear such that a viewer does not want to consider them, resulting in selective avoidance of the topic.

The media enjoyment literature suggests that entertainment-education programming may have potential to subvert the selective avoidance associated with fear. Because of the engaging structure of a narrative, viewers may be uniquely willing to attend to messages that are personally fear inducing to them in a way they

otherwise would not. More specifically, the enjoyment associated with transportation into a narrative may allow individuals to process messages they would otherwise find too fear inducing. This proposition is supported by the finding that the enjoyment associated with transportation is not related to the valence of the fantasy world into which a viewer enters. In fact, people frequently report enjoyment from being transported into horror and very sad drama (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). Similarly, Zillmann's (1996) work on suspense suggests that viewers are often willing to experience intense arousal, anxiety, and fear during a narrative because they expect that there will be a payoff. Because of this suspense element, viewers often do not know what topics will come up, thus allowing an individual to attend to a portrayal she or he may otherwise try to avoid (Dal Cin et al., 2002). Although getting viewers to attend to an entertainment-education message does not guarantee that they will not subsequently discount the message, it does at least overcome this resistance due to selective avoidance of fear-inducing topics.

Proposition 5: The enjoyment associated with viewing an entertainment-education narrative will overcome selective avoidance due to fear.

### Perceived invulnerability

Individuals may also resist persuasive messages due to perceived invulnerability. This tendency is sometimes labeled as the "personal fable" or "optimistic bias"—the belief that one is unique, invulnerable, and that negative consequences of risky behavior will not affect him or her (Goossens, Beyers, Emmen, & van Aken, 2002). This perceived invulnerability represents a psychological bias where a person underestimates his or her own risk compared to that of others (Frankenberger, 2004). In some cases, perceived invulnerability may be responsible for the lack of correspondence between an individual's knowledge of potential negative consequences of a behavior and actually engaging in that behavior. For example, in the context of sexual behavior, research has demonstrated that perceptions of invulnerability lead to avoiding condom and other contraceptive use (Burger & Burns, 1988; Siegel & Gibson, 1988).

Perceived similarity with a character who is portrayed as vulnerable to the harmful consequences of a risky behavior may increase viewers' perceived vulnerability. If this perceived similarity is combined with identification, the effect on perceived vulnerability may be especially strong given the nature of the identification process. While identifying with a character, viewers imagine themselves doing, thinking, or feeling something they ordinarily would not because they are experiencing it vicariously as the character. For example, consider a viewer who identifies with a similar character who is worried about contracting a sexually transmitted infection. Because the viewer is immersed into the character's world, she or he would vicariously experience the emotions associated with the health risk as does the character. This experience may be uniquely effective at conveying perceived vulnerability to a viewer. Although a traditional persuasive message can tell a viewer his or her objective risk of

contracting an infection, this lacks the emotional involvement present during identification and therefore may not overcome a perception of invulnerability.

Proposition 6: Perceived similarity and identification with a vulnerable character will enhance the persuasive effects of entertainment-education content by increasing a viewer's perceived vulnerability.

### Perceived norms

An individual's perception of norms surrounding a given behavior can also lead to resistance of a persuasive message. If a risky behavior is perceived as normative, information about the potential negative consequences of such behavior can be discounted on this basis. Individuals may engage in "false consensus"—normalizing one's risky behavior by claiming that "everyone" does it (Gerrard, Gibbons, Benthin, & Hessling, 2003). For example, one could disregard a safe-sex message by saying "no one uses condoms all the time" or "none of my friends have ever become pregnant," thus processing the message in a way so as to reduce the perceived risk. This resistance is not the same as a simple unawareness of the risk of unprotected sex. Rather, a person may be aware of the risk information, but change his or her thinking about these risks to facilitate engaging in the behavior (Gerrard et al., 2003). This overestimation of peers' risky behaviors may exert a dampening influence on motivation to engage in healthy behaviors. In fact, believing that one's peers engage in higher levels of sexual activity is related to having more and riskier sexual experiences oneself (Page, Hammermeister, & Scanlan, 2000; Whitaker & Miller, 2000; Winslow, Franzini, & Hwang, 1992). Conversely, the perception that one's friends use condoms predicts one's own intentions to use condoms (Brown, DiClemente, & Park, 1992).

Although the media have been criticized for portraying unrealistic depictions of health-risk behaviors as being normative and the potential influence this may have on young viewers' perceived norms (Ward, 2002), a program depicting a character who does not engage in risky behavior, may have the reverse effect. The critical factor is to select a character with whom a viewer experiences PSI. When a viewer parasocially interacts with a character, the character is seen as a part of his or her social network (Brown, Childers, & Waszak, 1990; Rubin et al., 1985). In this way, entertainment-education programs may be able to change perceived norms by showing characters that resonate as normative referents among viewers in ways that contradict the existing perceived norms about the prevalence of a health-risk behavior. Of course, it is likely that perceived norms are more malleable in certain contexts than in others. Perhaps norms become more changeable when viewers believe that "everyone is doing" some risky behavior. In such a case, showing even one character going against this standard may be sufficient to change the notion that "everyone" behaves a certain way. Alternatively, this may be a particularly effective approach in the case of pluralistic ignorance, where individuals have very little knowledge of others' behavior because of the private nature of the particular behavior.

It is also worth noting that, while this article deals with PSI with characters, in some cases PSI may develop with an actor and/or celebrity himself or herself. This is beyond the scope of the present article except to say that should the actor's actions in the real-world publicly reinforce and/or contradict the actions depicted in the program, this could certainly impact the effects of an entertainment-education program accordingly.

Proposition 7: PSI with a character displaying counternormative behavior will enhance the persuasive effects of entertainment-education content by changing viewers' perceived norms.

Taken together, these ideas suggest that various features of entertainment media may explain persuasive effects of entertainment-education content. In particular, features of entertainment media that facilitate involvement with characters and/or narrative involvement should lead to story-consistent attitudes and behaviors by overcoming various forms of resistance. Figure 1 depicts the theoretical model suggested by the above propositions as well as those of SCT and the E-ELM.

## Discussion

This article has taken a crucial step forward by examining the unique elements of entertainment-education messages and by building on existing theory to put forth a theoretical framework to explain the persuasive effects of entertainment-education content. Additionally, several mainstream media message constructs such as narrative involvement, identification, PSI, and similarity have been distinguished and their role in this process considered.

Future research in this area should incorporate this theoretical framework in order to gain a more complete understanding of the unique ways in which entertainment-education messages are processed and the resultant effects. Looking forward, several distinct directions of research are needed. First, empirical tests of these propositions regarding which features of entertainment programming may overcome various types of resistance are needed. To this end, entertainment-education programming should be systematically evaluated with the above constructs in mind, including narrative engagement and involvement with characters. In testing these ideas, there are a number of design and measurement issues that will arise. For example, one relevant design consideration is that of entertainment quality. Like entertainment in general, entertainment-education programs will vary in terms of quality. Particularly challenging may be achieving the appropriate balance of entertainment and education in a program so that the education and/or health message is not so subtle that it is undetected by the audience but is also not overly "preachy." In fact, several of the propositions above are based on the foundation that embedded messages will not be perceived as overtly persuasive in nature. This reasoning no longer holds if viewers feel that the "entertainment" program has an agenda. It is therefore important to measure the extent to which viewers feel that a program attempts to persuade.

Many of the constructs described above are difficult to measure inasmuch as they occur outside of an individual's awareness, making it difficult to evaluate self-reports of these resistance processes. Another measurement issue arises from the conceptual confusion surrounding identification. Not only is identification conceived of in different ways across the literature, but as of yet, there is no agreed-upon scale to measure identification. Many of the existing scales tend to combine identification with similarity, liking, and wishful identification. Before identification with characters can be adequately measured, a reliable scale must be agreed upon.

Additionally, these propositions would best be tested by using discriminant validity. The various forms of involvement with characters and their proposed relations to resistance should be evaluated using this standard. For example, PSI—and not identification with characters, wishful identification, or similarity—should influence perceived norms as specified in Proposition 7. This method will allow for an empirical test of the stated conceptual differences among these related concepts.

It is argued in the present article that involvement with characters and with narrative storylines are important determinants of the persuasive effects of entertainment-education programming. As such, a second area for future research is to explore how these processes can be maximized. While there is some existing theorizing in this area, much more empirical work is needed. Of particular interest is a greater understanding of what features of a program or character facilitate each type of involvement. One potential problem is that perhaps certain forms of resistance will prevent a viewer from becoming involved with a character who does not already match his or her perspective. If this is the case, then the types of involvement with characters detailed above may not be effective at overcoming resistance. However, an expanded version of disposition theory suggests that viewers often decide somewhat automatically that they like or dislike characters, without first going through a moral judgment procedure (Raney, 2004). The theory contends that viewers often use schema and quick judgments to make on-the-spot evaluations about characters. Then, once characters are established in a viewer's mind as "good guys," they are evaluated more favorably thereafter (Raney, 2004). This expansion on disposition theory allows for the possibility that viewers may become involved with characters who may not exactly match their existing attitudes, morals, or behaviors. This suggests that selecting characters that resonate with viewers may lead to reductions in resistance in the ways detailed above.

Finally, an important next step for this line of research is to examine the role of the viewing context more carefully. Indeed, much entertainment programming is watched in the company of others and is often talked about during and/or after exposure. As we continue to understand entertainment-education effects, we must also consider how these factors facilitate and/or hinder involvement, resistance, and persuasive outcomes. Indeed, a more sophisticated understanding of how these messages are processed will facilitate this line of research.

In order to move forward our understanding of entertainment-education effects, a thorough examination of the unique ways in which these messages are processed by

viewers is warranted. This involves considering narrative engagement and involvement with characters. Moreover, resistance to persuasion can and should be integrated with the study of persuasive effects of entertainment-education given speculation about this as a key component of entertainment-education effects. Gaining this understanding of how individuals process entertainment-education messages, and the implications for persuasive outcomes, is critical, given the widespread potential to use these messages to influence viewers' health-risk behaviors.

## References

- Alperstein, N. M. (1991). Imaginary social relationships with celebrities appearing in television commercials. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 35, 43–58.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (2002). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 121–154). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bandura, A. (2004). Social cognitive theory for personal and social change by enabling media. In A. Singhal, M. J. Cody, E. M. Rogers, & M. Sabido (Eds.), *Entertainment-education and social change: History, research, and practice* (pp. 75–96). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bensley, L. S., & Wu, R. (1991). The role of psychological reactance in drinking following alcohol prevention messages. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 21, 1111–1124.
- Brehm, J. (1966). *A theory of psychological reactance*. New York: Academic Press.
- Brehm, S. S., & Brehm, J. W. (1981). *Psychological reactance: A theory of freedom and control*. San Diego, CA: Academic.
- Brodie, M., Foehr, U., Rideout, V., Baer, N., Miller, C., Flournoy, R., et al. (2001). Communicating health information through the entertainment media: A study of the television drama *ER* lends support to the notion that Americans pick up information while being entertained. *Health Affairs*, 20, 192–199.
- Brown, J., Childers, K., & Waszak, C. (1990). Television and adolescent sexuality. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, 11, 62–70.
- Brown, J. D., DiClemente, R. J., & Park, T. (1992). Predictors of condom use in sexually active adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 13, 651–657.
- Brown, J. D., & Walsh-Childers, K. (2002). Effects of media on personal and public health. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 453–488). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Brown, S. L. (2001). Emotive health advertising and message resistance. *Australian Psychologist*, 36, 193–199.
- Brown, W. J., & Fraser, B. P. (2004). Celebrity identification in entertainment-education. In A. Singhal, M. J. Cody, E. M. Rogers, & M. Sabido (Eds.), *Entertainment-education and social change: History, research and practice* (pp. 97–115). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Burger, J. M., & Burns, L. (1988). The illusion of unique invulnerability and the use of effective contraception. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 14, 264–270.



- Burgoon, M., Alvaro, E., Grandpre, J., & Voloudakis, M. (2002). Revisiting the theory of psychological reactance: Communicating threats to attitudinal freedom. In J. Dillard & M. Pfau (Eds.), *The persuasion handbook: Theory and practice* (pp. 213–232). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bushman, B. J. (1998). Effects of warning and information labels on consumption of full fat, reduced-fat, and no-fat products. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *83*(1), 97–101.
- Bushman, B. J., & Stack, A. D. (1996). Forbidden fruit versus tainted fruit: Effects of warning labels on attraction to television violence. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, *2*, 207–226.
- Cohen, J. (2001). Defining identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters. *Mass Communication & Society*, *4*, 245–264.
- Collins, R. L., Elliott, M. N., Berry, S. H., Kanouse, E. E., & Hunter, S. B. (2003). Entertainment television as a healthy sex educator: The impact of condom efficacy information in an episode of *Friends*. *Pediatrics*, *112*, 1115–1121.
- Dal Cin, S., Zanna, M. P., & Fong, G. T. (2002). Narrative persuasion and overcoming resistance. In E. S. Knowles & J. A. Linn (Eds.), *Resistance and persuasion* (pp. 175–192). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Deighton, J., Romer, D., & McQueen, J. (1989). Using drama to persuade. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *16*, 335–343.
- Eyal, K., & Rubin, A. M. (2003). Viewer aggression and homophily, identification, and parasocial relationships with television characters. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *47*, 77–98.
- Frankenberger, K. D. (2004). Adolescent egocentrism, risk perceptions, and sensation seeking among smoking and nonsmoking youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *19*, 576–590.
- Gerrard, M., Gibbons, F. X., Benthin, A. C., & Hessling, R. M. (2003). A longitudinal study of the reciprocal nature of risk behaviors and cognitions in adolescents: What you do shapes what you think and vice versa. In P. Salovey & A. J. Rothman (Eds.), *Social psychology of health: Key readings in social psychology* (pp. 21–46). New York: Psychology Press.
- Gerrig, R. J. (1993). *Experiencing narrative worlds*. New Haven, CT: Yale University.
- Giles, D. C. (2002). Parasocial interaction: A review of the literature and a model for future research. *Media Psychology*, *4*, 279–305.
- Goossens, L., Beyers, W., Emmen, M., & van Aken, M. A. G. (2002). The imaginary audience and personal fable: Factor analyses and concurrent validity of the “New Look” measures. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *12*, 193–215.
- Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *79*, 701–721.
- Green, M. C., Brock, T. C., & Kaufman, G. F. (2004). Understanding media enjoyment: The role of transportation into narrative worlds. *Communication Theory*, *14*, 311–327.
- Hoffner, C. (1996). Children’s wishful identification and parasocial interaction with favorite television characters. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *40*, 389–402.
- Hoffner, C., & Cantor, J. (1991). Perceiving and responding to mass media characters. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Responding to the screen: Reception and reaction processes* (pp. 63–101). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, *19*, 215–229.

- Kaiser Family Foundation. (2004). *Entertainment education and health in the United States. A report to the Kaiser Family Foundation*. Menlo Park, CA: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Kennedy, M. G., O'Leary, A., Beck, V., Pollard, W. E., & Simpson, P. (2004). Increases in calls to the CDC national STD and AIDS hotline following AIDS-related episodes in soap opera. *Journal of Communication*, *54*, 287–301.
- Knowles, E. S., & Linn, J. A. (2004). The importance of resistance to persuasion. In E. S. Knowles & J. A. Linn (Eds.), *Resistance and persuasion* (pp. 3–11). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lonial, S. C., & Van Auken, S. (1986). Wishful identification with fictional characters: An assessment of the implications of gender in message dissemination to children. *Journal of Advertising*, *15*(4), 4–11.
- McGrane, W. L., Toth, F. J., & Alley, E. B. (1990). The use of interactive media for HIV/AIDS prevention in the military community. *Military Medicine*, *155*, 235–240.
- Page, R., Hammermeister, J. J., & Scanlan, A. (2000). Everybody's not doing it: Misperceptions of college students' sexual activity. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, *24*, 387–394.
- Raney, A. A. (2004). Expanding disposition theory: Reconsidering character liking, moral evaluations, and enjoyment. *Communication Theory*, *14*, 348–369.
- Rogers, R. W. (1975). A protection motivation theory of fear appeals and attitude change. *Journal of Psychology*, *91*, 93–114.
- Rubin, A. M., Perse, E. M., & Powell, R. A. (1985). Loneliness, parasocial interaction, and local television news viewing. *Human Communication Research*, *12*, 155–180.
- Rubin, A. M., & Step, M. M. (2000). Impact of motivation, attraction, and parasocial interaction. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, *3*, 184–199.
- Rubin, R. B., & McHugh, M. P. (1987). Development of parasocial interaction relationships. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *31*, 279–292.
- Shrum, L. J. (Ed.). (2004). *The psychology of entertainment media: Blurring the lines between entertainment and persuasion*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Siegel, K., & Gibson, W. C. (1988). Barriers to the modification of sexual behavior among heterosexuals at risk for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. *New York State Journal of Medicine*, *88*(2), 6–70.
- Singhal, A., Cody, M. J., Rogers, E. M., & Sabido, M. (2004). *Entertainment-education and social change: History, research, and practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Singhal, A., & Rogers, E. M. (2001). The entertainment-education strategy in communication campaigns. In R. E. Rice & C. K. Atkin (Eds.), *Public communication campaigns* (3rd ed., pp. 343–356). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Slater, M. D. (2002a). Entertainment education and the persuasive impact of narratives. In M. C. Green, J. J. Strange, & T. C. Brock (Eds.), *Narrative impact: Social and cognitive foundations* (pp. 157–182). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Slater, M. D. (2002b). Involvement as goal-directed strategic processing: Extending the elaboration likelihood model. In J. P. Dillard & M. Pfau (Eds.), *The persuasion handbook: Developments in theory and practice* (pp. 175–194). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Slater, M. D., & Rouner, D. (2002). Entertainment-education and elaboration likelihood: Understanding the processing of narrative persuasion. *Communication Theory*, *12*, 173–191.

- Sood, S. (2002). Audience involvement and entertainment-education. *Communication Theory. Special Issue: A Theoretical Agenda for Entertainment-Education*, 12, 153–172.
- Sood, S., Menard, T., & Witte, K. (2004). The theory behind entertainment-education. In A. Singhal, M. J. Cody, E. M. Rogers, & M. Sabido (Eds.), *Entertainment-education and social change: History, research, and practice* (pp. 117–145). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Soul City Institute. (2008). *Soul city series*. Retrieved April 7, 2008 from <http://www.soulcity.org.za/programmes/the-soul-city-series/>
- Turner, J. R. (1993). Interpersonal and psychological predictors of parasocial interaction with different television performers. *Communication Quarterly*, 41, 443–453.
- Ward, M. (2002). Does television exposure affect emerging adults' attitudes and assumptions about sexual relationships? Correlational and experimental confirmation. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 31, 1–15.
- Weinstein, N. D., Grubb, P. D., & Vautier, J. S. (1986). Increasing automobile seat belt use: An intervention emphasizing risk susceptibility. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71, 285–290.
- Whitaker, D., & Miller, K. (2000). Parent-adolescent discussions about sex and condoms: Impact on peer influences of sexual risk behavior. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 15, 251–273.
- Winslow, R. W., Franzini, L. R., & Hwang, J. (1992). Perceived peer norms, casual sex, and AIDS risk prevention. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 22, 1809–1827.
- Witte, K. (1992). Putting the fear back into fear appeals: The extended parallel process model. *Communication Monographs*, 59, 329–349.
- Witte, K. (1994). Fear control and danger control: An empirical test of the extended parallel process model. *Communication Monographs*, 61, 113–134.
- Zillmann, D. (1996). The psychology of suspense in dramatic exposition. In P. Vorderer, H. J. Wulff, & M. Friedrichsen (Eds.), *Suspense: Conceptualizations, theoretical analyses, and empirical explorations* (pp. 199–232). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Copyright of *Communication Theory* (10503293) is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.