

## **Theorizing Entertainment-Education: A Complementary Perspective to the Development of Entertainment Theory**

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The Oxford Handbook of Entertainment Theory

*Edited by Peter Vorderer and Christoph Klimmt*

Print Publication Date: Apr 2021

Subject: Literature, Television, Film, Literary Theory and Cultural Studies

Online Publication Date: Feb 2021 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190072216.013.42

### **Abstract and Keywords**

Entertainment-education (EE) is a theory-based social and behavior change communication strategy. The Sabido methodology of producing commercially successful prosocial *telenovelas* was instrumental in establishing EE as a social scientific field of research and practice globally. Early experimentations with applying theories in EE productions began in the 1970s, when entertainment theory gained a foothold in media psychology and communication research. The evolution of EE theorizing provides a parallel and complimentary perspective to the development of entertainment theories. This chapter provides a historical account of EE, highlighting its foundational theoretical strains. It also discusses the more contemporary theoretical models in EE, especially the ones that are converging in the area of narrative persuasion. Finally, we explicate on the new phenomenon of transmedia edutainment and how it could benefit and challenge the ongoing developments in entertainment theory.

Keywords: entertainment-education, Sabido methodology, transmedia, edutainment

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STORYTELLING is one the oldest forms of human communication and a fundamental mechanism for information sharing, sense-making, and social transformation (Fisher, 1989). The narrative structure of a story often draws us into a plot that twists and turns, transporting us from our existing reality to the world of another, marked by a different time and space (Gerrig, 1993). Such narrative experiences have expanded greatly with the rapid growth of mass media in the 20th century, especially radio and television, that brought hundreds of millions of new listeners and viewers into its fold (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Zillmann, 2000b). While these new technologies were expected to lead societies into the so-called information age, much of the media production and reception studies suggest that they also brought along an “entertainment age” (Vorderer, 2001; Zillmann, 2000b). For instance, some 65 years ago, Herzog (1944) pioneered the investigation of daytime radio serials as an entertainment genre, analyzing the sociodemographic characteristics of their listeners and reasons for their high levels of involvement. A dozen years

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later, Horton and Wohl (1956) theorized the phenomenon of parasocial interaction, describing the one-way conversations and relationships that emerge between highly engaged television viewers and entertainment media personalities.

Notwithstanding these early publications that heralded the dawning of an entertainment era, deliberate efforts to theorize entertainment in a systematic manner began with the work of Dolf Zillmann and his collaborators in the 1970s (for more detailed reviews, see Vorderer & Halfmann, 2019; Vorderer & Reinecke, 2015). (p. 820) Since then, the field of entertainment theory has gone through different phases, reaching multiple milestones:

1. From the 1980s into the early 2000s, entertainment came to be defined as a legitimate field of social scientific inquiry and mostly framed as escapism—that is, it helps people escape from their sufferings through psychological diversion, instantaneous pleasure, and/or delayed gratifications. The notion of media enjoyment was central to this hedonic approach. Entertainment theories in this phase focused on how media helped people to elevate their moods (e.g., Vorderer, 2001; Zillmann, 1988, 2000b).
2. Starting in the late 2000s, entertainment theorizing underwent a paradigm shift from “mood to meaning,” whereby there was an increased attention on investigating media appreciation along with media enjoyment, that is, the so-called two-factor model (Vorderer, 2011; Vorderer & Ritterfeld, 2009). The theoretical frameworks during this time centered on the capacity of entertainment to provoke deeper thinking among its audiences and facilitate their search for meaning in life through their experiences of media consumption (e.g., Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010; Tamborini, Bowman, Eden, Grizzard, & Organ, 2010).
3. More recently, entertainment theorizing has turned toward an inward-driven relational perspective, emphasizing the connectedness between one’s self and the outside world through “self-transcendent media experiences” (Oliver et al. 2018). Rosa (2018) calls such experiences as “resonance”—that is, when an individual relates to the world by feeling moved or understood in a mediated encounter (Vorderer & Halfmann, 2019).

These theoretical perspectives have provided significant insights into entertainment media and narrative experiences in the last 50 years. In 2020, most scholars would agree that information and entertainment are not two mutually exclusive domains. In fact, they are more intertwined in our postmodern societies than ever before. There are plenty of informative programs that are also entertaining and entertainment programs that are informative and educational. Simply put, if entertainment and information/education represent two ends of a continuum, the development of entertainment theory started off on the entertainment end. And entertainment-education (or EE) theorizing, the focus of the present chapter, started off at the education end.

Entertainment, for the longest time in history, was a privilege afforded predominantly to the higher social classes (Zillman, 2000b). Further, to date, most work in entertainment theory has been conducted in North America and western Europe. Most entertainment theories thus are built on the assumptions of an individual’s autonomy, choice, and prefer-

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ence. Not surprisingly, most empirical research on entertainment has been conducted through controlled experiments among college students, with a unimethod approach and a sample bias characterized as “WEIRD,” that is, Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (Eden, Tamborini, Grizzard, Lewis, Weber, & Prabhu, 2014, p. 514). On the other hand, EE theory, research, and practice that we (p. 821) review here emerged out of decades of work in developing countries, and even as EE made inroads in developed contexts, the initiatives were designed to serve underprivileged population groups unlike the participants in most of the entertainment theory literature. However, EE theorizing got underway in the 1970s just as entertainment theorizing gained a foothold in the field of media psychology and communication research. We argue that the evolution of EE theorizing provides a parallel and complementary perspective to the development of entertainment theories across different social scientific disciplines.

In this chapter, we first provide a historical perspective on EE, highlighting its foundational theoretical strains. We then discuss the more contemporary theoretical models in EE, especially the ones that are connecting and converging in the area of narrative persuasion. Last but not least, we explicate on the new phenomenon of transmedia storytelling in EE, namely, transmedia edutainment and how it could benefit and challenge the ongoing developments in entertainment theory.

## The Establishment and Founding Theories of Entertainment-Education

Theoretical interest in EE has increasingly risen over the past several decades, keeping pace with its evolving practice. To gauge where EE is headed, a look back on the journey thus far is instructive.

### The Beginning of Entertainment-Education

In its early years, EE was defined as “the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message to both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, and change overt behavior” (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, p. 9; also see Singhal, Cody, Rogers, & Sabido, 2004, p. 5). The field of EE gained currency more or less by accident when a *telenovela*, *Simplemente María* (*Simply María*), took Peru by storm with its 448 hour-long episodes broadcast from 1969 to 1971. Subsequently, the *Simplemente María* fever swept across Central and South America (Singhal, Obregon, & Rogers, 1994). It was a Cinderella story revolving around its protagonist, María, a rural-urban migrant who gets seduced by a handsome medical student, then abandoned when she becomes pregnant, and struggles to make a life working as a maid. María is determined to survive so she works during the day and enrolls in adult literacy classes at night. With hard work and strong motivation, she soon develops seamstress skills using a Singer sewing machine, becomes a fashion designer, and eventually builds a business empire in Paris (Singhal et al., 1994). *Simplemente María* attracted a record-breaking average rating of 85%, with some episodes

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nearly (p. 822) 100%. The sale of Singer sewing machines skyrocketed; so did the enrollment of adult literacy classes everywhere the program was broadcast in Latin America as the viewers emulated *María* (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). What was supposed to be just another engrossing television soap opera on a commercial network to help people pass time turned out to be something much bigger.

Inspired by the audience success and the incidental educational effects of *Simplemente María*, the Mexican television writer-producer-director Miguel Sabido developed a production method known as the Sabido methodology to deliberately leverage the power of storytelling in entertainment media for prosocial purposes. Its key elements include: a set of moral guidelines; a constellation of positive, negative, and transitional characters as role models; a narrative structure that confronts the status quo and progresses through stages of suffering, doubting, and overcoming obstacles to achieve the ultimate triumph; and the use of epilogues and infrastructure/existing resources to facilitate public discourse and support social change (Singhal, Wang, & Rogers, 2013). Between 1975 and 1982, Sabido experimented with producing seven EE *telenovelas* to promote issues such as adult literacy and family planning, improving the lives of millions (Sabido, 2004): For example, his first EE *telenovela Ven Conmigo (Come with Me)* shifted the shameful norms around illiteracy and inspired half a million viewers to enroll in Mexico's national adult education program; three of his earliest EE *telenovelas* on family planning together were the principal reason for reducing Mexico's population growth rate from 3.7 to 2.4; without such powerful and effective EE interventions, Mexico would have had 50 million more people today (Sabido quoted in Friedman, 2013).

From there, the Sabido methodology snowballed globally, inspiring the development of television soap operas such as *Hum Log (We People)* in India and radio soap operas such as *Twende Na Wakati (Let's Go with the Times)* in Tanzania (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). These early efforts in the 1970s and 1980s had strong and measurable psychological and social impacts on the underprivileged audience members, paving the way for EE to be recognized as a social scientific field of inquiry in its own right and all in the last five decades (SBCC Summit Report, 2018; Singhal et al., 2013; Storey & Sood, 2013).

### The Theoretical Foundation of Sabido Methodology

What has been less recognized is that Sabido actually studied human communication theories while he was developing the EE *telenovelas* and incorporated them into the Sabido methodology. Four theories were particularly influential in Sabido's experimentation with the social use of melodramatic serials: Bentley's (1967) dramatic theory, Jung's (1953/1970) theory of archetypes, MacLean's (1973) triune brain theory, and Bandura's (1977/1986) social learning/cognitive theory (see Table 41.1).

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(p. 825) Table 41.1 The Founding Theories of Entertainment-Education

<b>Theory</b>	<b>Theorist</b>	<b>Year of Publication</b>	<b>Proposition</b>	<b>Influence</b>
Dramatic Theory	Eric Bentley	1967	Theatrical narratives have different genres and tonality (e.g., melodrama, tragedy).	Choosing the genre of melodrama for creating EE narratives, pitting the desirable (the good) against the undesirable (the bad), and allowing audience members to navigate the space in-between.
Theory of Archetypes	Carl Jung	1953	Certain patterns and images have a universal appeal for our collective unconscious (e.g., the hero, and the heroic struggle).	Constructing moral structures and archetypal frames within which characters—both protagonists and antagonists—function.

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Triune Brain Theory	Paul MacLean	1973	Human brain has three information processing pathways.	Understanding how actors should channel their energy through different body parts to elicit physical, emotional, and intellectual responses from audience members.
Social Learning Theory	Albert Bandura	1977	Social modeling and observational learning can boost self-efficacy and enable change.	Using positive, negative, and transitional characters as role models that audiences can observe in mass media to initiate knowledge, attitude, and behavior change.

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Bentley (1967) categorized theater into five genres: tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, farce, and melodrama. His book, *The Life of Drama*, helped Sabido understand the various forms of dramatic storytelling, informing his choice of using the genre of (p. 823) melodrama for creating entertaining commercial *telenovelas* that bring social benefits to audience members (Sabido, 2002, 2004). In contrast to a theatrical production of an hour or two (or for that purpose 30-second public service announcements used for media campaigns today), melodramatic serials in the Sabido methodology last for 100+ episodes, allowing the creative writers and producers to develop characters, plots, and trajectories so they can address complex health and social issues over time. With its nuances and subtleties, including the use of techniques like long shots and extreme close-ups, melodramatic serials hold a strong emotional appeal for audience members.

Jung's (1953) theory of the collective unconscious argued that the human mind has innate characteristics such as ancestral memories imprinted on it as a result of the evolutionary process. As Jung (1953) would say, "The form of the world into which [a person] is born is already inborn in him, as a virtual image" (p. 188). Archetypes are such patterns and images with universal meanings across cultures (Jung, 1970). In applying Jung's theory to EE drama serials, Sabido (2004) developed a moral framework for the educational themes, constructing protagonists and antagonists based on archetypal images—such as "The Hero's Journey"—and all associated values of the "heroic struggle," (p. 824) that is, instead of being vanquished by evil, the hero prevails over evil with honor and grace. Through a careful delineation and incorporation of Jungian archetypes in his *telenovelas*, Sabido was able to tap into the deeper recesses of a universal human psyche.

MacLean's (1973) triune brain theory emphasized that there are three primary pathways used by the human brain to process information: The first is the primitive part of the brain, responsible for body movements and intuitive physical reactions; the second is the limbic system of the brain, responsible for deep feelings and making people respond emotionally; and the third is the neocortex of the brain, responsible for logical reasoning and decision-making, guiding people as rational beings. Sabido (2002, 2004) studied MacLean's triune brain theory extensively and developed his own "theory of tones" to articulate how actors could focus and channel energy from different parts of their body (e.g., from the pelvis or from the eyes) to potentially activate the physical, emotional, and intellectual parts of the viewers' brain. Depending on what kind of a viewer response was desired for which scene, different triggers could be sent to activate different pathways among the audience members. For instance, even in a simple close-up, an actor could use his eyes to channel energy either as anger (a physical response), compassion (an emotional response), or reason (an intellectual response).

Bandura's (1977/1986) social learning/cognitive theory provided the guideposts for Sabido to operationalize and orchestrate the character arcs in his melodramatic serials—who did what, when, and with what consequence. Essentially, this theory explains how humans learn new behaviors through observational learning—whether from real or vicarious models (e.g., in a television drama serial), how the acquisition of a newly learned behavior does not necessarily mean that it will be performed, and that the likelihood of a

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newly acquired behavior being performed depended on the degree of positive and negative reinforcement that it receives. The work of one of the most prominent social psychologists of our time, Bandura's social learning/cognitive theory not only influenced media effects research on violence in the 1960s and 1970s but also provided the field of EE the interrelated theoretical constructs of role modeling, observational learning, self-efficacy, and collective efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 2004).

In the mid-1970s, Sabido flew to Stanford University to meet with Bandura in the formative days of EE theorizing (*Just Legends*, 2013). Bandura's (1977) theory helped Sabido to tap into the power of role modeling through positive characters (with rewards for prosocial behaviors), through negative characters (with punishments for antisocial behaviors), and through transitional characters—who begin with negative thoughts and actions but over time confront the challenges and overcome the barriers to accomplish the desirable knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Bandura, 2004; Sabido, 2004). Bandura (2004) calls the incorporation of his theory in EE as a strategy for “enabling media” that essentially promotes human agency through empowering narratives for behavior and social change. To this date, Bandura's (1977, 1986) social learning/cognitive theory remains the most predominant theory in EE research (Sood, Menard, & Witte, 2004; Sood, Riley, & Alarcon, 2017).

### **Connecting Entertainment-Education with Entertainment Theorizing**

The timeline of these theoretical developments and understandings that served as the foundation for the establishment of EE runs parallel to the early developments of entertainment theory, especially its first three decades (1970s onward). The difference is that media psychologists focused on the selection, uses, and gratifications of entertainment consumers in countries such as the United States, while EE practitioners and researchers focused on messaging and modeling in the entertainment content to inspire and facilitate behavioral and social change in countries such as Mexico. In recent years, EE and entertainment theorizing seem to be converging, particularly related to narrative persuasion.

To appreciate this convergence, it is useful to analyze Oliver and Bartsch's (2010) study among 268 American undergraduate students. Students were surveyed on the gratification they experienced in consuming the most recent full-length entertainment film. They found that the genre of drama was most strongly associated with the audience's eudaimonic experiences—that is, they found dramatic narratives to be more emotionally moving, thought-provoking, and meaningful, compared to genres such as comedy and action (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Similarly, convergence between EE and entertainment theorizing is reflected in the work of Tamborini and colleagues, who in their online experiments with American college students found that the narrative structure of serial dramas offers advantages for complex cognitive and behavioral role modeling, especially when it comes to engaging the audience in moral deliberations and judgments associated with real-life scenarios (Eden et al., 2014; Tamborini, Weber, Eden, Bowman, & Grizzard, 2010). Interestingly, Tamborini et al. (2010) used a combination of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and Zillmann's (2000) disposition theory to predict and explain daytime soap opera



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viewers' moral judgments. They found that the more the viewers were exposed to the dramatic serials, the more extreme they perceived the main characters to be. The negative characters got worse and positive characters got better over time. In turn, such polarization of character disposition affected viewers' perception of the program outcome as righteous.

## **The Evolution and Emerging Theories in Entertainment-Education**

The growth of EE has intersected and flourished with evolving research on entertainment media. In particular, media psychologists and communication researchers have been advancing theoretical models to better comprehend the underlying processes of narrative persuasion.

### **(p. 826) The Growth and Diversification of Entertainment-Education**

The definition of EE has evolved over the years with the advent of new technologies and the ever-changing mediascape. A reformulated definition of EE was proposed in 2009 to emphasize that EE is "a theory-based communication strategy for purposefully embedding educational and social issues in the creation, production, processing, and dissemination process of an entertainment program, in order to achieve desired individual, community, institutional, and societal changes among the intended media user populations" (Wang & Singhal, 2009, pp. 272–273). This reformulation of the definition was necessary as EE programs expanded beyond radio and television dramatic serials to include music videos, cartoons, comic books, web series, and digital games, and spread from developing countries to include vulnerable audience groups in industrialized developing countries (Singhal, 2013; Singhal et al., 2004; Singhal et al., 2013; Wang, Choi, Wu, & DeMarle, 2018; Wang, Wu, Choi, & DeMarle, 2019).

While the four founding EE theories we reviewed previously informed and guided a considerable amount of EE practice and research in the early decades, other theoretical perspectives have emerged to provide insights into the underlying psychological mechanisms to explain how narratives affect their audiences. Some scholars and EE practitioners incorporated general persuasion theories such as the theory of reasoned action and planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), stages of change (DiClemente & Prochaska, 1985), and the elaboration likelihood model/ELM (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) in their work (see examples in Sood et al., 2004; Sood et al., 2017). However, EE works differently from traditional persuasion strategies in that the educational messaging is implicitly, subtly, and creatively incorporated into purposive narratives to appeal, engage, and influence the audience (Slater, 1997, 2002a, 2002b). Therefore, it is imperative to understand how these narratives affect the audience psychologically, that is, how audience involvement in EE helps create the psychosocial conditions for change. While EE research traditionally focused on parasocial interaction (Papa et al., 2000; Sood, 2002), there has been a surge of interest in incorporating theories of narrative communication

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(Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007; Walter, Cody, & Ball-Rokeach, 2018), particularly narrative persuasion (Bálint & Bilandzic, 2017; Bilandzic & Kinnebrock, 2009).

### Understanding Narrative Persuasion in Entertainment-Education

In this section, we review four interrelated and overlapping theoretical perspectives/models that have emerged as being salient to EE: Green and Brock's (2000) transportation theory, Cohen's (2001) identification with media characters, Slater and Rouner's (2002) extended elaboration likelihood model, and Moyer-Gusé's (2008) entertainment overcoming resistance model (see Table 41.2).

Theory	Theorist(s)	Year of Publication	Proposition
Transportation	Melanie Green & Timothy Brock	2000	A mechanism through which an audience member feels transported and immersed into a narrative world
Identification	Jonathan Cohen	2001	A process when an audience member experiences cognitive and affective empathy for a media character
Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model/E-ELM	Michael Slater & Donna Rouner	2002	Instead of dual processing, narrative absorption and character identification together facilitate change
Entertainment Overcoming Resistance Model/EORM	Emily Moyer-Gusé	2008	Parasocial interaction, transportation, identification, perceived similarity, and liking play different roles in reducing counterarguments

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(p. 827) Green and Brock (2000) explicated a mental process that explains why people can get “lost” in the world of stories, a common experience and “an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings” (p. 701). Be it the readers, listeners, or viewers, when immersed in a story world, they may lose the sense of their immediate surroundings and feel that they have traveled to different places and times to experience alternative realities (Green & Brock, 2000, 2002; see also Gerrig, 1993). Transportation into the story worlds may represent a form of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) as the narrative unfolds. In general, the more the audiences feel transported, the more likely they would adopt story-consistent beliefs (Green & Brock, 2000, 2002). Transportation can mediate the effects of EE messages to provide positive reinforcement of psychological and even behavior outcomes such as supportive attitudes toward maintaining a patient’s normal lifestyle and engaging in discussions and information seeking efforts about a critical health condition featured in an EE storyline (Murphy, Frank, Moran, & Patnoe-Woodley, 2011).

Cohen (2001) defined identification as “an imaginative process through which an audience member assumes the identity, goals, and perspective of a character” (p. 261). When one identifies with a media character, he/she would become empathetic, put him/herself in the character’s shoes to view the world, consider the situation, and feel the emotions; this process will necessarily diminish one’s self-awareness (Cohen, 2001, 2006). This theoretical framework of identification distinguishes itself from other types of psychological reactions the audience may harbor toward a media character, such as perceived similarity, liking, affinity, imitation, transportation, parasocial interaction, and worship (Brown, 2015; Cohen, 2001, 2006; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). In general, the more the audiences identify with a media character, the more likely they would (p. 828) be to report positive attitudes and intentions toward the issue and behavior modeled by the character, such as feeling more efficacious about discussing sexually transmitted infections with a partner and getting tested (e.g., Moyer-Gusé, Chung, & Jain, 2011).

Slater (2002b) argued that people process information differently based on their goals and message genres, hence, it is vital to extend the elaboration likelihood model of traditional blatant persuasion to account for the hedonic processing of entertainment content. In terms of hedonic processing, EE falls into the categorization of implicit rather than explicit persuasive messages (Slater, 1997, 2002a, 2002b). Slater and Rouner (2002) outlined the extended elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM) for the processing and effects of persuasive content embedded in EE narratives and pointed out that absorption (aka narrative engagement/transportation) and identification with media characters can work together to reduce counterarguing and mediate the process of audience involvement to achieve intended outcomes. Their experimental testing of this model using two drama stimuli found viewers’ policy support for death penalty despite their prior ideology but not for gay marriage (Slater, Rouner, & Long, 2006).

Moyer-Gusé (2008) built on previously established psychological constructs in media message processing (i.e., parasocial interaction, transportation, identification, perceived similarity, liking, and enjoyment) and proposed the entertainment overcoming resistance model (EORM). She articulated how one or more of these interrelated and seemingly

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overlapping processes might go through different pathways to overcome a specific form of audience resistance to the implicit persuasion in the narrative experience: reducing reactance, reducing counterarguing, reducing selective avoidance, increasing perceived vulnerability, changing perceived norms, and changing outcome expectancies (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). The empirical findings are mixed with some support for reduced counterarguing and delayed increase in perceived vulnerability (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010) while others failed to support the reduction of counterarguing (e.g., Igartua & Casanova, 2016).

### Connecting Entertainment-Education with Narrative Persuasion

It is important to clarify that the use of Sabido-style EE strategy was challenging in a media-saturated environment such as the United States (Sherry, 2002). One way that EE practitioners used to adapt to such an environment is to provide expert consultation to creative writers when they are interested in developing a storyline related to certain health and social issues (Singhal et al., 2013). An outstanding example is the Hollywood, Health & Society program based at the Norman Lear Center in Los Angeles (Singhal et al., 2013). Such strategic and collaborative partnerships allowed researchers to examine some EE examples such as a cancer storyline incorporated in popular primetime television programs such as *ER* and *Grey's Anatomy* (Hether, Huang, Beck, Murphy, & Valente, 2008). Other studies on narrative persuasion might take a more liberal definition (p. 829) of EE and investigate any health topics that happen to be present in popular entertainment such as the portrayal of teen pregnancy in *The OC* (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010), and discussions about sexually transmitted infections in *Sex and the City* (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011).

While these examples are significantly different from those guided by the Sabido methodology and other similarly deliberate efforts in the EE message design, they nonetheless serve as a promising trend of cross-disciplinary research that help connect EE with entertainment theorizing. It might be useful to view EE interventions as one particular type of narrative in the research of narrative engagement and persuasion and keeping this in mind during research design to ensure the alignment of the specific educational content embodied by certain media characters and their intended portrayal of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors as desirable outcomes. As the literature on narrative persuasion becomes more accessible to the international community, there will be more empirical research testing these psychological models on a wider range of EE programs in and out of the United States.

## Transmedia Edutainment and Its Implications for Entertainment Theorizing

In today's digital world, narrative experiences offered across different media platforms are becoming increasingly personalized and immersive. Thus, it is important to consider the implications of this trend for EE and entertainment theorizing.

## The Rise of Transmedia Edutainment

In present times, EE is well-established as a social and behavior change communication (SBCC) strategy that leverages theories from multiple disciplines to inform its creative process of production, guide our analysis of the audience's narrative engagement, and foster our understanding of its programmatic impact (Orozco-Olvera, Shen, & Cluver, 2019; SBCC Summit Report, 2018; Shen & Han, 2014; Singhal et al., 2013). As the media markets continue to fragment with different programs competing for different audience segments, EE initiatives have increasingly adopted innovative strategies to broaden their audience reach and enhance their educational messages (Sood et al., 2017; Storey & Sood, 2013). A more recent trend is EE through transmedia storytelling (or transmedia edutainment), a strategy to engage audience members through a coordinated narrative experience that unfolds across different media platforms over time (Singhal et al., 2013; Wang & Singhal, 2016, 2018; Wang, Singhal, Quist, Sachdev, & Liu, 2019; Wang, Xu, Saxton, & Singhal, 2019).

(p. 830) Transmedia storytelling holds several unique advantages for bringing people together from otherwise fragmented media markets (Jenkins, 2006, 2007) and for reaching underprivileged audience members (Wang, Singhal et al., 2019). First, transmedia does not bombard the audience with the same narrative over and over again on different media platforms. Second, transmedia does not create a single story in a linear fashion but rather an overarching narrative world connected and coordinated across multiple communication channels. Although ideally each communication channel carries its own narrative content independently, it is the interwoven tapestry that makes a richer whole, deepening the audience members' relationship with the characters, the plotlines, and the issues. Third, transmedia has multiple entry points and a much lower threshold for audience engagement, because each narrative element is self-contained and can appeal to the users who have a preference and consumption habit of a particular modality, for example, television dramas versus newspapers versus short videos. Taken together, the audience experience with transmedia storytelling is more exploratory, sensory, robust, and fun. Although transmedia storytelling has been successfully employed in recent decades to further commercial interests in such programs as *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Doctor Who*, and *Pokémon*, its purposeful implementation as EE initiatives is a relatively newfangled reality (Singhal et al., 2013).

## Transmedia Edutainment Exemplars

One pioneering example of transmedia edutainment is Award-winning series *East Los High (ELH)*, which ran from June 2013 to December 2017. On the surface, *ELH* could be any popular teen drama set in a fictional high school in East Los Angeles. However, the producers seamlessly incorporated role modeling and credible resources about safe sex, family planning, and women's reproductive rights while addressing the social stigma and cultural barriers that young Latinx routinely face in the United States. *ELH* represents an effort of, by, and for the Latino community (Wang & Singhal, 2016; Wang, Singhal et al., 2019). It was a story world with multiple narrative elements strategically rolled out

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across nine other digital platforms: (1) extended *ELH* scenes to deepen character development and issue engagement; (2) *The Siren*, the school student newspaper that gave young people a voice to tell their own stories; (3) “Ask Paulie”—a platform that allowed Paulie, a funny and lovable character to answer embarrassing questions about sexuality; (4) Ceci’s vlogs opened up a channel through her video blogs so that viewers could follow her teen pregnancy journey of dilemmas, options, and social support; (5) Tia Pepe’s Mexican cooking recipes for tasty and healthy meals; (6) dance tutorials of the high school’s Bomb Squad with signature moves as they prepare for the Big Five competition; (7) *La Voz* with Xavi to take pride in exploring cultural activities in East Los Angeles; (8) comic strips for trendy but important social topics; and (9) public service announcements delivered by *ELH* lead actors on behalf of partnering organizations such as StayTeen.org to inform and spur action among Latinx youth about health and social topics. These transmedia narrative experiences were further extended through (p. 831) the resource links and widgets on the *ELH* website along with other audience engagement strategies on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Wang & Singhal, 2016; Wang, Xu, et al., 2019).

Another innovative transmedia edutainment initiative is *Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon/ MKBKSH (I, A Woman, Can Achieve Anything)* in India. This initiative challenges entrenched regressive gender norms and advocates for women’s empowerment through positive role modeling of its protagonist Dr. Sneha. Sneha, who leaves behind a lucrative medical practice in Mumbai and returns to her home village after her sister’s death from a forced abortion, stays on to tackle multiple social ills—child marriage, sex selection in favor of male offspring, violence against women, and multiple manifestations of gender inequality. From March 2014 to September 2019, three seasons of *MKBKSH* have been broadcast on the Indian national television network and hundreds of All India Radio stations as well as mobile and community networks to reach “media dark” rural areas (Wang & Singhal, 2018). It was the first to use of an interactive voice response system to engage the EE audience at scale and in real time, allowing them to access and interact with curated content, answer questions, and share personal opinions and actions inspired by *MKBKSH* (Wang & Singhal, 2018). The interactive voice response platform, as a core component of *MKBKSH*’s transmedia strategy, represented a “voicebook” for millions of audience members, especially the rural, the socioeconomically poor, and the less privileged (Wang & Singhal, 2018). A series of minidocumentaries titled “Reel to Real” documented Dr. Sneha visiting real communities where the impact of *MKBKSH* was profound. Two other miniseries were carved out of *MKBKSH*’s television content, extending the storyline on *MKBKSH*’s Facebook page and YouTube Channel. In 2019, Season 3 added a new transmedia extension by launching a chatbot called *SnehAI* (for Sneha AI) via the Facebook Messenger. This chatbot has created a safe, nonjudgmental, and private platform to fill in the gap of India’s essentially nonexistent youth counseling services about sexual and reproductive health education.

## Theoretical Challenges and Opportunities

As shown in *ELH* and *MKBKSH*, transmedia edutainment represents the co-evolution of EE with the ever-changing mediascape that is driven by the various entertainment media and content consumed by the target audiences and increasingly characterized by digital technologies, networked communication, and participatory culture. This growing trend—from conventional edutainment to transmedia edutainment—challenges us to reconsider, realign, and revisit the founding and emerging theories in EE with more recent forays into a convergent and digital world of storytelling to identify connections, alignments, and future directions. The four founding theories of EE were greatly influential for the program production and evaluation of narrative programming predominantly delivered through traditional mass media such as radio and television. The four emerging theories in EE have been useful for providing more nuanced insights into the underlying mechanisms of how educational messages built into the entertainment (p. 832) programming affect the audience members cognitively and emotionally, helping or hindering their suspension of disbelief and reducing psychological resistance to accomplish the intended outcomes. The empirical testing of these narrative persuasion mechanisms, understandably, has thus far been limited to lab experiments with individual college students and short form narrative stimuli. When EE goes transmedia, the audience's diverse narrative experiences may differ starkly from what occurs when one is listening to a radio soap opera, watching a *telenovela*, or reading a comic book. While the process of transmedia edutainment program design and monitoring may include many of the same processes from before, a caveat is in order—that they may be able to only capture one part of an audience member's experience and not its entirety. This can potentially present both challenges and opportunities to the existing theoretical frameworks in EE and further developments of entertainment theories.

For example, Routledge (2019) argued that Jung's archetypes are prominent in commercial transmedia franchises such as *Star Wars*. They tap into the audience's preexisting knowledge and emotions and can easily convey the messages through archetypal characters. She also suggested that the triune brain theory can provide insightful heuristics for transmedia design that highlights all three information processing pathways: "lower level processing such as instinct and emotion and higher level, conscious processing that creates directed attention and meaning" (Routledge, 2019, p. 6).

One might also ask how might narrative persuasion processes such as transportation and identification manifest across different communication channels over time, and how audience engagement is shaped and influenced by their participation, and their networks, in transmedia edutainment's multiprong story worlds. Transmedia storytelling provides the audience members more freedom to choose the trajectory of their own personal experience with the entertainment content and opportunities to immerse themselves into the narrative environment. In many ways, they are similar to the "choose your own adventure" type of user-directed interactive stories with looser narrative structure and better user control (Green & Jenkins, 2014). On one hand, the audience may elect to binge watch a drama series such as *ELH* and explore additional content all in an intense period

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of time which can easily heighten the experience of narrative transportation without much distraction. On the other hand, the audience may also include long gaps and breaks between intense exposures to the various narrative components, stretching out for a much longer period of time in and out of the story world which can easily diminish the experience of narrative transportation.

The audience's identification with media characters in transmedia edutainment shares the similar dilemma as for transportation into the story world. As Cohen (2001) acknowledged, identification is a rather temporary and fleeting phenomenon and an audience member's feeling as one and the same as a media character can vary from time to time and hard to sustain a high-level engagement over a longer term. Cohen and Klimmt (this volume) have attempted to address some of the challenges associated with this dynamic interaction between an audience member and a media character by conceptualizing their positionings toward media characters inside or outside of the story (p. 833) world. As illustrated through Ceci's vlogs in *ELH*, specific narrative content and media platforms to deepen the audience's interactions and engagement with key characters are an integral part of the transmedia edutainment design and experience. And by aligning character-based transmedia extensions, we can create conditions to facilitate the highest level of character identification—protagonist identification—to optimize the potential of positive change through perspective-taking as the audience member merges with the positive character/role model, seeing their point of view on critical educational issues, empathizing their emotions, and sharing their prosocial goals.

Furthermore, the example of Snehai chatbot shows that transmedia edutainment initiatives can afford new possibilities for parasocial interactions in the digital and networked story worlds. The television devotees in the 20th century, as described by Horton and Wohl (1956) and other researchers alike, who make imaginary friends with media personalities and have imaginary conversations with them are arguably hard to come by in the postmodern entertainment era when people have myriads of options to choose from. However, the digital and interactive elements of the transmedia experience may allow the audience to develop a deeper and richer relationship with the central characters. In the case of *MKBKSH*, the Snehai chatbot serves as an avatar of the protagonist Dr. Sneha in the main storyline on television and radio and can act as an extension of her being through a computer-generated interface as a bot to have custom, confidential, and non-judgmental conversations about sensitive topics such as sex with curious young audience members in India. Such a hybrid form of parasocial interaction holds tremendous potential for theoretical development in entertainment theory beyond the traditional television and radio characters or the digital game player-avatar communication.

Finally, meaningful media will expand the shared interests and common ground between EE and entertainment theory. The intellectual pursuits about the unique attributes and underlying mechanisms for entertainment experiences beyond individual concerns will provide additional insights into meaning-making processes of our oldest human communication experiences. The acknowledgment that entertainment theorizing simply cannot take place in a vacuum and be divorced from its social, cultural, and historical contexts



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(Vorderer & Halfmann, 2019) is a significant step forward in broadening our perspectives and understandings of entertainment media and narrative experiences. It is equally important to acknowledge that many people in this world, especially those who live in an underprivileged environment, do not always have the autonomy or freedom to choose what information or entertainment they consume and how such experiences would influence them as individuals as much as part of a larger social units such as couples, families, communities, and organizations. Singhal and Rogers (2002) called for a multitheoretical multimethod approach for EE research and practice. Now some two decades later with transmedia edutainment gaining ground, media psychologists and communication scholars have the responsibility to dig deeper, wider, and sideways in the increasingly fragmented yet networked story worlds to appreciate the moral beauty, raise collective consciousness, and facilitate positive change.

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