

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION WITH
THE TELEVISION SOAP OPERAS
"SIMPLEMENTE MARÍA"
AND "OSHIN"

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Abstract

Here we investigate the process of parasocial interaction in two highly popular television soap operas: (1) the Peruvian telenovela "Simplemente María," which was broadcast throughout Latin America in the early 1970s, and (2) the Japanese television serial "Oshin", which broke audience ratings records in many of the 45 countries in which it was broadcast in the 1984-1995 decade. Many individuals who viewed these soap operas developed parasocial relationships with their favorite television characters. This parasocial interaction with "Simplemente María" and "Oshin" has implications for other television soap operas, especially those consciously designed to both entertain and educate their viewers (in an entertainment-education approach). Parasocial interaction is one explanation for the strong effects of soap operas on audience behavior.

Parasocial Interaction with The Television Soap Operas "Simplemente María" and "Oshin"

The present article investigates the process of parasocial interaction with two extremely popular television soap operas: (1) the Peruvian telenovela "Simplemente María," broadcast throughout Latin America in the early 1970s, and (2) the Japanese television serial "Oshin", which set audience ratings records in many of the 45 countries in which it was broadcast after 1983. We selected these two television soap operas because (1) each elicited a high degree of parasocial interaction on the part of its viewers, (2) the audience responses are

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well documented, (3) the two soap operas are entirely independent, and (4) these television programs were broadcast at quite different times (14 years apart). We seek to advance understanding of how entertainment-education effects audience individuals through the process of parasocial interaction.

Here we draw upon (1) personal interviews with actors, producers, writers, and broadcasters of "Simplemente María" and "Oshin", (2) published and archival materials about these two television series, and (3) various qualitative and quantitative studies conducted on the effects of "Simplemente María" and "Oshin", including audience ratings, focus group interviews, and audience surveys.

Parasocial Interaction

The concept of parasocial interaction, coined by Donald Horton and R. R. Wohl in a 1956 article, was inspired by the research of Robert K. Merton with others on the highly effective Kate Smith War Bond Drive, broadcast by the CBS Radio Network on September 1, 1943. An incredible \$39 million of purchases and pledges for U. S. War Bonds resulted from popular singer Kate Smith's 18-hour radio marathon. The broadcasts, obviously staged and made credible by "technicians of sentiment", led to the concept of pseudo-Gemeinschaft, the feigning of personal concern for another individual in order to manipulate the individual more effectively (Merton, with Fiske and Curtis, 1946, p.142).

Parasocial interaction is the degree to which an audience individual develops a perceived interpersonal relationship with a media character(s) (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Sood & Rogers, 1996). A parasocial interaction relationship occurs when audience individuals perceive television soap opera characters as real, and react to these characters and situations in a way that involves a blurring of fiction and reality.

Parasocial interaction is a perceived relationship that is not reciprocated: These intimate relationships are "one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible to mutual development" (Horton & Wohl, 1956). A television viewer sees his/her parasocial relationship as one of friendship or intimacy with a remote media persona¹ (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985).

Parasocial interaction is especially likely to occur when television characters use a conversational style and non-verbal gestures that invite interactive responses from viewers (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). Close-up camera shots of television personalities that give the illusion of face-to-face communication with audience members, for example, can promote intimacy with viewers (Nordlund, 1978; Meyrowitz, 1982). More frequent appearances of a television character in a show's broadcast can also enhance parasocial interaction on the part of viewers (Levy,

1979). Many individuals regularly watch their favorite newscaster or soap opera character, thus perpetuating an on-going quasi-interpersonal relationship with these characters. When these characters appear regularly, their behavior becomes predictable and non-threatening to the viewer. This perceived predictability, in turn, makes the characters endearing to the audience individual (Nordlund, 1978; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985).

In the past several decades, various dimensions of parasocial interaction have been identified in entertainment television programs: Short-term and long-term identification with television characters, participating in characters' affairs, knowing the characters, and writing to them (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972; Hedinson, 1991; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Nordlund, 1978). This type of quasi-interpersonal relationship fulfills an individual's needs for friendship, companionship, and interpersonal interaction.

How does the audience individual benefit from parasocial interaction? A television program may have meaning to an individual because it provides the audience member with a role-model to imitate in her/his own real life. Parasocial interaction of an individual with a media person is a means for the individual (1) to establish a relationship with the performer, (2) to legitimize the relationship with the media performer, and (3) to bring about a transfer of certain qualities of the performer to the individual.

The greater the strength of the perceived relationship between a viewer and a media character, the greater the likelihood that the audience member will depend upon the character for validation of his/her feelings and actions. Viewers solve problems or explore meanings in their own lives through the narrative material provided in a soap opera (McAnany & La Pasting, 1994).

Audience individuals who engage in parasocial interaction often let media performers know that they are not only watching the program, but are personally involved with its story. For example, in Iran, viewers who watched episodes of the Japanese television soap opera "Oshin", in which they saw the poverty and starvation that the young Oshin and her peasant family endured, brought food to their local television station to help feed Oshin and her family.²

Both "Simplemente María" and "Oshin" elicited a high degree of parasocial interaction between millions of audience individuals and the main characters in these television series.

Background on "Simplemente María" AND "Oshin"

"Simplemente María"

"Simplemente María" ("Simply Mary") was a black-and-white telenovela (television soap operas) broadcast in Peru five times per week for 21 months from

April, 1969 to January, 1971. Each of the 448 episodes was one hour long. During the period of the soap opera's broadcasts, the central character, an urban immigrant housemaid (María), blossoms from work as a lower-class maid to becoming a wealthy fashion designer who owns a Paris clothing boutique. This rapid climb up the social class structure occurs over a fictitious time-line of four decades.

In the first episode of the telenovela, a naive María was seduced by a wealthy medical student, Roberto, and then bears Roberto's child. She struggles to make a living in the city's harsh environment. María enrolls in an evening literacy class, taught by Maestro Esteban. His mother teaches María how to sew, and she begins work as a seamstress in a local dress shop. After two decades of a platonic relationship with Maestro Esteban, María marries him (Singhal, Obregon, and Rogers, 1996). The telenovela ends when María departs for Paris to manage her fashion empire.

María portrays a positive role-model for upward mobility, according to the values of Peruvian society at that time. She epitomized a hardworking, persevering, and socially-mobile young woman. María's character was especially appealing to domestic maids and to rural-urban migrants because they could identify with her desire for dignity and socio-economic success (Singhal, Obregon, and Rogers, 1996). Male audience members identified with Maestro Esteban, the kind-hearted man who is María's teacher, then became her business manager, and later her husband. Singhal, Rogers, and Obregon (1996) quote a focus group respondent in Peru as saying that the men who viewed the telenovela "suffered with Esteban for twenty years" while he maintained a friendship with María, while secretly harboring amorous feelings for her.

"Simplemente María" achieved extremely high average audience television ratings in Peru (85%), in Mexico (56%), and in other Latin American nations (Singhal, Obregon, and Rogers, 1996).³ In Chile, this soap opera was so popular that it sparked a riot among inmates at a national prison when the prison warden refused to let prisoners view the television broadcasts (Singhal, Obregon, and Rogers, 1996).

"Oshin"

Beginning in January, 1983, episodes of the Japanese television program "Oshin" were broadcast twice daily, at 8:15am, and again at 12:45pm, six days per week. A total of 297 episodes were broadcast. Each episode was 15 minutes in length. "Oshin" was one of a series of annual asadora's (morning dramas) broadcast on the NHK General Service (the national public broadcasting television station of Japan), each centering on life in one of Japan's 45 prefectures. "Oshin" helped popularize (1) this annual series, and (2) the morning broadcasting hour. This drama series was (1) the first asadora to be written and produced by women, and (2) the first asadora broadcast for a full year (each of the previous dramas in the NHK series were broadcast for six months).

The storyline of this television soap opera traces the life of Oshin, the daughter of a poor tenant farmer in a village in Yamagata Prefecture, in northern Japan. Oshin eventually becomes the owner of a chain of 17 supermarkets. Oshin's father is unable to provide enough food for Oshin, her five siblings, and her grandmother, and gives the seven year-old Oshin to a timber dealer's family in exchange for a bale of seed rice. The timber dealer's family mistreats Oshin, and she runs away. Another businessman takes Oshin under his wing, and his wife teaches Oshin calligraphy, mathematics, bookkeeping, flower-arranging, and how to conduct the Japanese tea ceremony.

At age fifteen, Oshin moves to Tokyo for training as a hairdresser. She meets her first true love, Kota, but does not marry him because she knows that her best friend, Kayo, is also in love with Kota. When Ryuzo, the son of a wealthy farmer, proposes to Oshin, she accepts and they get married in Tokyo. Ryuzo and Oshin work together to build a fish market; however, their business flounders during the post-World War I depression. Tragedy characterizes the middle years of Oshin's life. She gives birth to a son, but he is later killed in World War II. The 1924 Kanto Earthquake leaves Oshin and Ryuzo homeless, and they are forced to live in Ryuzo's hometown in Saga Prefecture. Oshin is treated miserably by her domineering mother-in-law, so she leaves her husband and returns to Tokyo. Eventually, Oshin reunites with Ryuzo, they have three more children, and together they start another fish store. However, Ryuzo's grief over the World War II death of their first son leads him to commit suicide (NHK International Symposium Proceedings, pp.46-48). As the television series ends, Oshin has built her supermarket chain into a huge financial success, and she is reunited with her first love. The scriptwriter, Ms. Hashida Sugako, based "Oshin" on the real-life story of Mrs. Wada, who founded the Yaohan Supermarket Chain, with stores in Japan, Asia, Los Angeles, and New York.

The audience ratings for "Oshin" were very high in Japan, especially considering the early morning hour of the broadcasts. This soap opera earned ratings of about 40 percent during its first month of broadcasting, which then climbed steadily for the next four months to ratings of 50 to 55 percent, and which then maintained for the remainder of the year-long broadcasts. The 168th of the 297 episodes, in which Oshin's mother dies, earned a record 62.9 percent audience rating. "Oshin" was also broadcast six days a week at 12:45 noon, a time at which it earned ratings of about 15 to 20 percent; half of these viewers are estimated to have also watched "Oshin" at 8:15 am.⁴ This morning drama remains the most popular asadora produced by NHK since it began broadcasting in 1953 (Harvey, 1995).

The percentage of the Japanese population who watched "Oshin"⁵ is as follows:

Farmers	50%
Unemployed	39%

Shop-owners and small businessmen	31%
Housewives	29%
Blue collar workers	23%
White collar workers	15%

Older people were more likely to be viewers; 82 percent of people 60 years of age and over watched "Oshin". In comparison, 57 percent of women and 31 percent of men in their twenties were viewers.

"Oshin" was more than four times as popular with teenagers as the soap opera with the previous highest ratings. Oshin's grandson, the character to whom Oshin recounts her life-story, is the stereotypical modern young man with whom many Japanese teenagers could relate. So "Oshin" appealed to Japanese viewers who were (1) older, both female and male, and (2) teenagers. These are unusual audience characteristics of television viewers, especially for those who regularly watch soap operas.

The qualities that mad the character Oshin so popular in Japan and in other nations (Singhal & Udornpim, 1997) are similar to the qualities that made María so appealing to viewers of "Simplemente María" in Latin America. Both women were role-models for perseverance, tolerance, sacrifice, and family-mindedness. In cultures where these characteristics are highly valued, audience individuals are more likely to establish parasocial relationships with television soap opera actors/characters who portray these qualities. This attraction of viewers to the characters of Oshin and María explain the high audience ratings of the two soap operas.

"Oshin" was broadcast at the height of the economic boom in Japan, and this timing may be one explanation for its audience popularity. The older generation in Japan wanted their children and grandchildren to understand what it was like to be poor. Other reasons for "Oshin's" popularity are (1) the highly sentimental nature of the soap opera, which elicited strong emotional reactions from its viewers,⁶ and (2) important historical events like the Kanto Earthquake of 1924, the Depression, and World War II, which were treated in the soap opera's story. Oshin goes through six major ups-and-downs during the 76 years of her life depicted in the television series, covering the Meiji, Taisho, and Showa Eras.

An underlying element in the popularity of "Oshin" was "kuchikomi" (word-of-mouth); many viewers talked with others about the episodes (Table 1). Viewers followed the storyline by reading plot outlines in newspapers and in the weekly TV guide, and discussed what Oshin might do next. For avid fans, a guidebook containing the complete plot of "Oshin" became available in March, 1983, three-months into the broadcasts.

Examples of Parasocial Interaction with "Oshin" and "Shimplemente María"

Striking examples of audience effects were reported for "Oshin" and for "Simplemente María." Names and expressions from these television soap operas entered the vernacular of audience individuals. For example, in Thailand, the word "Oshin" came to mean "perseverance" or "hardship" (Ito, 1990, p.450). The name "María" became a generic name used by many Latin American viewers of "Simplemente María" for their maid.

Audience Effects of "Simplemente María"

The most outstanding example of parasocial interaction among viewers of "Simplemente María" occurred about halfway through the series, when María married her literacy teacher, Maestro Esteban. A crowd of about 10,000 people, dressed appropriately for the event, arrived for the wedding at a small church in Lima where the scene was being filmed for broadcast the following day. The people who attended the wedding treated the marriage as if it were real; they brought gifts and flowers for María and Esteban, and they organized a reception line of the two soap opera actors so they could congratulate the "newlyweds". Newspaper accounts of the event reported that several people fainted from emotion, and many people cried (Singhal, Obregon & Rogers, 1996).

Audience individuals also confused fiction and reality when they sent letters to their favorite soap opera character(s). Instead of addressing the letters to the television studio where "Simplemente María" was filmed, viewers in Peru and in other parts of Latin America, sent their letters to Yataco's Barber Shop in Lima, whose storefront accidentally appeared in one of the outdoor scenes of the soap opera. Eventually PANTEL, the network producer of "Simplemente María", included the address of Yataco's Barber Shop in the show's credits (Singhal, Obregon, & Rogers, 1996).

Audience Effects of "Oshin"

Data from 1984 national sample of the Japanese audience (Makita, 1991) show that "Oshin" caused strong effects, in contrast to the general finding of rather limited effects from most past mass media effects research (Table 1). Parasocial interaction was one reason for the unusually strong effects of "Oshin". Examples of parasocial interaction with "Oshin" by its viewers are:

1. During 1983-1984, when the television series was being broadcast in Japan, many families ate "radish-rice" ("daikon-meshi") so that they could experience personally the poverty of Oshin's family (who could not afford to eat rice, so they had to mix it with ground radishes).

2. Yuko Tanaka, the actress who played the role of Oshin as a poverty-stricken young woman, says that many Japanese viewers sent rice and other food to her Tokyo home. One viewer sent a letter to Ms. Tanaka offering to feed her anytime; the viewer enclosed her address and a map to her home (Tanaka, 1991, p.19).

3. A Grand Champion Japanese sumo wrestler was nicknamed "Oshin" because, like Oshin, it took him many years of hard work to become the champion.

4. A restaurant in Japan called itself the "Oshin Barbeque". The table mats, napkins, and other accoutrements in the restaurant were emblazoned with the name Oshin. A variety of "Oshin" products, for example, Oshin dolls, sake, and rice crackers, and an "Oshin notebook" were purchased by fans of the series in Japan and in other nations (Mowlana and Rad, 1992).

"Oshin" has been very popular outside of Japan. In many of the 45 nations in which it was broadcast (Table 2), it set ratings records.⁷ Fans of "Oshin" from Taiwan travel on tourist excursions to Yamagata prefecture in the northern part of Japan, in order to visit the place where Oshin spent her childhood. The Tokyo homes of the television characters who performed in "Oshin" also became tourist attractions.

Real-Life Consequences of Parasocial Interaction

What do an exiled priest in Latin American and a radio broadcaster sentenced to death in Iran have in common? Parasocial interaction with television soap operas.

The marriage of María to Maestro Esteban took place in a Lima, Peru, in 1970. The priest of the church, Father Teodoro Piscinelli, was reluctant to perform the television marriage ceremony for religious reasons. The television network producing "Simplemente María" offered to repair the Church's leaky roof, thus persuading the priest to conduct the televised marriage.

News of the 10,000 people attending the soap opera marriage became a world media event. These headlines reached the Vatican, where Church authorities were not pleased by the priest's actions. Father Piscinelli was reassigned to a remote village church in a jungle area.

In Iran, a radio broadcaster was arrested, by order of the Ayatollah Khoemini, for airing a talk show program in which Iranian women were asked to respond to the question "which woman do you most admire?" Most respondents gave the name of a culturally appropriate female figure, such as the daughter of Mohammed. However, one woman who identified strongly with Oshin (and who evidently did not distinguish between Oshin as real or fictional), said "Oshin". The broadcaster was imprisoned and sentenced to death, but the sentence was commuted when Khoemini died.

Entertainment-Education

The entertainment-education strategy is defined as the intentional incorporation of educational content in such entertainment messages as radio and television soap operas, popular music, film, street theater, and comic books (Rogers and Shefner, 1994). This strategy has been utilized in the developing countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, in order to address such educational issues as HIV/AIDS prevention, family planning, sexual responsibility among youth, and gender equality.

Background of Entertainment-Education

Entertainment-education dates back to the earliest days of story-telling. "Simplemente María" was an important milestone in the formulation of the entertainment-education strategy (Figure 1). In the soap opera, María learned how to read, and how to sew (using a Singer sewing machine) and eventually became a famous fashion designer. Many viewers of "Simplemente María", especially young women who, like María, worked as housemaids, emulated the behavior of María by enrolling in adult literacy classes, learning how to sew, and purchasing a Singer sewing machine.

Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory explains how individuals learn new behaviors through identification, defined as the degree to which an individual patterns his or her behavior by emulating the behavior of an individual who s/he perceives as a role-model. Several variables determine whether or not a soap opera character will be perceived by an audience individual as a role-model: (1) whether or not the character gains the attention of the viewer; (2) whether or not the character is perceived as attractive by the viewer; (3) whether or not the behavior of the character is perceived by the audience individual as useful for future reference in a similar situation; and (4) whether or not the character is rewarded or punished for a particular behavior (Nariman, 1993).

According to Bandura (1977), people can learn a new behavior by watching role-models in a television program. This learned behavior can be reinforced by portraying positive role-models who are rewarded for desired (pro-social) behaviors, and negative role-models who are punished for anti-social behaviors. The good and bad behaviors, and their rewards and punishments, are designed by the scriptwriters.

In the early 1970s, Miguel Sabido, a Mexican television scriptwriter and director, analyzed "Simplemente María" on a frame-by-frame basis, and created an entertainment-education strategy for conveying educational messages to television audiences in Mexico. If viewers were moved by María to learn to read, write, and sew, Sabido felt they could be encouraged by positive role-models to develop other pro-social skills. In 1976-1977, Sabido created "Ven

Connmigo", a telenovela that promoted enrollment in adult literacy classes. "Ven Connmigo" achieved 33 percent audience ratings, comparable with other popular television shows. A 63 percent increase occurred in the national enrollment in adult literacy classes during the broadcast period, compared to only 7 percent prior to the broadcast, and 2 percent in the year after the broadcasts (Nariman, 1993).

The audience success of "Ven Connmigo" led to the creation by Sabido of "Acompañame", a second entertainment-education soap opera that promoted family planning in Mexico. During the year that "Acompañame" was broadcast, half a million new family planning adopters came to family planning clinics in Mexico, in part due to the soap opera. Thus Sabido developed a formula for entertainment-education soap operas (Nariman, 1993).

Parasocial Interaction in Entertainment-Education Television Soap Operas

Audience members become participants in entertainment-education soap operas due to parasocial interaction with television characters, and their interpersonal interaction with peers. Entertainment-education programs intentionally seek to increase the amount of interpersonal communication among audience individuals about a particular topic, for example, family planning or HIV/AIDS prevention. The intended audience members are more likely to change their behavior when their peers talk with them about the behavior change (Rogers and others, 1997).

McGuire's (1989) hierarchy-of-effects guides many research designs for assessing the effects of entertainment-education interventions. McGuire's model assumes that audience behavior change results from prior exposure to a communication message, such as an entertainment-education television soap opera. An audience individual's progress from exposure through various stages to overt behavior change is presumed to be linear. Yet there is no stated explanation in McGuire's theory for how exposure leads to changes in knowledge, attitudes, and overt behavior.

What is the mechanism through which entertainment-education causes behavior change on the part of audience individuals? The key factor that explains an individual's overt behavior change is validation of the change, achieved by an individual through discussion with other individuals. Validation of the message by peers often results from the involving nature of entertainment-education. Such involvement occurs in part through identification by an audience individual with the media character delivering the message.

Entertainment-education can also increase the individual's sense of self-efficacy, the degree to which the individual believes s/he can control his/her

future. The character in an entertainment-education soap opera can role-model self-efficacy. In "Simplemente María", for example, María, is logical, and shows her viewers that learning to read and to sew are useful skills. Messages that are related to her skill-building are internalized through an audience individual's cognitive process. María also portrays a character who is in control of her own life. Messages that concern her sense of self-worth and self-confidence are processed by the viewer at an emotional level. Thus María advanced in self-efficacy, and encouraged her viewers to do likewise. Her spectacular socio-economic success is due to her own efforts, not to luck (such as by winning a national lottery).

Oshin also displays self-efficacy during her life and career as depicted in "Oshin". For instance, she loses her successful business in the Kanto Earthquake, but then, after considerable struggle, regains financial success. Thus the storyline of "Oshin" conveys the lesson of perseverance and self-efficacy.

Conclusions

Neither "Simplemente María" nor "Oshin" were intentionally designed to be entertainment-education television soap operas. However, two factors contributed to the effective communication of educational messages to viewers of these programs: (1) the degree to which viewers were involved in parasocial interaction with the television characters, and (2) the perception by viewers of these soap opera characters as positive role-models for self-efficacy and other values for success.

In the cross-over from fiction to reality, viewers imitate what they learn from their favorite media character. The parasocial relationship between the viewer and his/her favorite media character facilitates the adoption/imitation of a particular behavior portrayed by that character. Parasocial interaction is one explanation for the process of behavior change through emulation of admired characters in entertainment-education programs.

Emotional communication has been relatively understudied in past communication research, presumably because (1) it is not perceived as rational, and (2) may not have lasting effects on behavior change. But emotional communication resulting from exposure to an entertainment-education television soap opera may be key to behavior change. Audience individuals who are deeply involved in an entertainment-education programs will retain the educational message over time. For example, 21 percent of Japanese farmers who were "dedicated/absorbed" viewers of "Oshin" stated that "What they learned from this drama will be useful for the rest of their lives," versus 14 percent of the total population that viewed "Oshin", but who were not "dedicated/absorbed" viewers (Makita, 1991).

Scholars need to better understand how audience individuals are involved with media characters in entertainment-education soap operas like "Simplemente María" and "Oshin". We suggest that the concept of parasocial interaction may be a useful intellectual tool for understanding certain media effects.

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