TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR THE SABIDO METHODOLOGY FOR SOCIAL MEDIA (TSM4SM): LESSONS LEARNED FROM *GIRLSPLAINED*, AN ENTERTAINMENT-EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Priyanka Rajendram
Girlsplained, Singapore
prajendram@gmail.com

Sabrina Yasmin Rafael
Girlsplained, London, United Kingdom
sabrina.y.rafael@gmail.com

Kriss Barker
Population Media Center, Vermont, USA
krissbarker@populationmedia.org

Amy Henderson Riley
Jefferson College of Population Health, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA
amy.riley@jefferson.edu

Abstract

The Sabido Methodology (TSM) is recognised as a discrete methodology of entertainment-education (EE). EE programmes are intentionally designed to entertain and educate through the weaving in of important health and social messaging into powerful storytelling. Sabido-style dramas are highly effective in promoting social and behaviour change around a myriad of issues and its usefulness has been widely documented in long-running serial dramas on traditional media. There is little documentation, however, of how TSM could be applied to newer media, such as social media (SM). *Girlsplained* was created with the aim of addressing the sexual health of young Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) women in the United Kingdom. Key lessons from the effort can be used to build a proposed framework for adapting TSM to SM, i.e., The Sabido Methodology for Social Media (TSM4SM). We hypothesise 4 key features of TSM4SM should include: 1) the major tenets of TSM in a web-based drama with shorter story arcs; 2) the use of humour as per the *Laugh Model* framework to create a fourth character; 3) the use of transmedia to create a SM feed following the life of the transitional character based on TSM principles; and 4) a target audience of younger people.

Keywords: Sabido, entertainment-education, social media, sexual health, BAME, women, United Kingdom

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Introduction

The Sabido Methodology (TSM)

Social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) is a sub-discipline of health communication and it is the study and application of communication strategies that promote positive health outcomes (Kreps & Maibach, 2008). SBCC is a participatory process for encouraging positive health behaviours through strategic and targeted messaging with the provision of a supportive environment to facilitate thought and action (Briscoe & Aboud, 2012).

Entertainment-education (EE) is an SBCC strategy, defined as "the process of purposely designing and implementing a media message both to entertain and educate in order to increase audience members' knowledge about an educational issue, create favourable attitudes, shift social norms and change the overt behaviour of individuals and communities" (Singhal & Rogers, 2012). Most SBCC programmes now include an EE component (Krenn, 2018). There is a large body of literature that demonstrates EE produces positive results (Barker & Sabido, 2005).

The Sabido Methodology (TSM) is a "discrete methodology" of EE (Poindexter, 2009) and a theoretical model for catalysing positive social change in attitudes and behaviours through commercial television and radio programming (Barker & Sabido, 2005). Originally conceptualized in the 1960's and 1970's by Mexican television producer Miguel Sabido, Sabido-style EE dramas are designed in ways that audiences can become affectively and emotively involved with role models on screen, or via radio airwaves, through *parasocial relationships* (Singhal et. al., 2007). *Parasocial relationships* are perceived interpersonal relationships whereby viewers interact with mass media personalities as if they have a real, reciprocal relationship with them and the mediated personality is talking directly to them (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Theory suggests *parasocial relationships* are one pathway for facilitating a process of vicarious learning of socially desirable behaviours from media role models (Bandura, 1977).

Recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews have demonstrated the advantages of using narratives overall in health interventions (Shen et al, 2015; Shen & Han, 2014). The specific effectiveness of TSM as an EE strategy has been demonstrated repeatedly to address a multitude of public health issues ranging from sexual health to adult literacy (Barker & Sabido, 2005; Nariman, 1993; Singhal et. al., 2004; Singhal & Rogers, 2012). TSM is adaptable to the values and cultures of individual settings where it is applied and is reproducible (Barker & Sabido, 2005).

While overviews of TSM exist elsewhere (Barker & Sabido, 2005; Singhal et. al, 2003; Wang & Singhal, 2016), the three main tenets and elements of TSM are:

1. **The use of a long-running, serial drama format**: In Sabido-style EE programmes, characters evolve at a gradual and authentic pace in response to problems that are artfully illustrated in the storyline (Sabido, 2011). A realistic social context that mirrors society is depicted in these dramas, creating multiple opportunities to present social issues in various forms (Barker & Sabido, 2005). Through repetition and continuity, the audience has time to develop *parasocial relationships* with the characters and consequently, a loyal and committed fan base is built through continuing attachment and concern for their fates (Barker & Sabido, 2005). A typical Sabido-style serial drama continues for at least 120-180 episodes, ideally over a few years (Barker & Sabido, 2005). Key elements to maintain engagement with audiences during such long running serial dramas include the use of cliffhangers to keep audiences hooked and epilogues to spur discussion (Singhal et. al, 2003).

2. **Rigorous adherence to theories underlying the methodology and research**: TSM is deeply rooted in social science research and is informed by numerous behaviour and communication theories (Sabido, 2011), including Shannon and Weaver's *communication model* (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), Bentley's *dramatic theory* (Bentley, 1967), Jung's *archetypes and stereotypes* (Jung, 1970) Sabido's *tonal theory* (Sabido, 2002), and MacLean's *psycho-neurological theories* (MacLean, 1973). Finally, Bandura's *social learning theory* (Bandura, 1977) outlines how models of behaviour (values) from serial drama characters can be learned and mirrored by audiences (Barker & Sabido, 2005).

   The methodology begins with creating a values grid derived from a moral framework of a specific educational issue based on thorough formative research (Singhal et. al, 2003), which examines the cultural and societal forces that form and affect the audience in a context or community (Barker & Sabido, 2005). The research considers the existing media menu for audiences as well as the infrastructure available for audiences to call on for assistance with changes in their lifestyle and behaviours (Poindexter, 2004).

Simultaneously, a policy analysis informs a moral framework, used to answer the question, "by what authority does one propose to intervene in relevant personal and/or social behaviours?" (Poindexter, 2004). An issues analysis informs positive and negative values which will be personified by characters in the programme (Sabido, 2011; Poindexter, 2004). Finally, TSM requires thorough on-going monitoring and evaluation (Poindexter, 2004).

3. **The appropriate use of positive, negative, and transitional characters as vicarious role models**: Every Sabido-style serial drama has three types of characters, those who: (i) support the educational value (positive role-models); (ii) reject this value (negative role-models) and (iii) are undecided about the educational value but gradually adopt the positive behaviours (transitional characters) (Sabido, 2011; Singhal et. al., 2007). When a positive character models a socially desirable behaviour, the character is rewarded and similarly, if a negative character models a socially undesirable behaviour, that character is punished (Sabido, 2011; Singhal et. al., 2007). The transitional characters observe the consequences faced by the positive and negative role models and progressively move towards the positive end of the continuum (Singhal et. al., 2007). Transitional characters should be representative of the target audience (Sabido, 2011). To motivate changes in behaviour among the target audience, it is imperative that audience members identify and empathise with the transitional characters (Barker & Sabido, 2005).

Social Media (SM) for Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC)

Social media (SM) is increasingly used in every aspect of human endeavour – from marketing and brand promotion, information sharing, and relationship building (Adewuyi & Adefemi, 2016). SM is participatory, socially engaging, and reciprocal, thus providing opportunities not only for information sharing, but also for social networking and interactive engagement (Benetoli et al., 2015). In view of its participatory nature, adaptability, cost-effectiveness and potential for expansive reach of audience through platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter as compared to traditional media (radio, television and so on), public health professionals are enthusiastic about employing SM for SBCC interventions (Adewuyi & Adefemi, 2016).

SM has the capacity to be a mainstay of SBCC in at least three ways by: influencing behaviour change across diverse population groups, irrespective of demographic differences (Kukreja, Sheehan, & Riggins, 2011; Scanfeld et al., 2010); facilitating multi-way interactivity for effective SBCC (Adams, 2010; Taylor, 2012); and providing peer, social and emotional support for behaviour change (O'Dea & Campbell, 2010). Furthermore, advances in technology and improved access to the internet and SM can ensure greater audience reach and engagement to benefit behaviour change (Moorhead et al., 2013). However, best practices for adapting SBCC strategies to SM, such as TSM, are limited.

Girlsplained

Background

Girlsplained is one of the first documented applications of TSM to SM to influence positive behaviour change. *Girlsplained* is both the name of a community organization (established in 2018) and a sexual health intervention targeting young black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) girls and women aged 16-25 in the United Kingdom (U.K.; Girlsplained, 2020).

Young BAME girls and women are at higher risk of poor sexual and reproductive health including sexually transmitted infection (STI) acquisition, teenage pregnancy, poor maternal health outcomes, and HIV disparities in the U.K. (Hagell, Shah, & Coleman, 2017; Nash et al., 2018). With small grant funding from the MTV Staying Alive Foundation (USD $12,500), *Girlsplained* produced a TSM-style web-based series of the same name in 2019, together with an Instagram feed following the

transitional character. The primary objective of the programme was to improve awareness of the pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) drug, that is used to prevent HIV-negative individuals from becoming infected, among young black and brown girls in the U.K.

Girlsplained was produced by Million Youth Media, the youth arm of Fully Focused Productions, using a majority BAME production crew and an all BAME cast. The series was distributed on YouTube with a transmedia element on Instagram. The series has since been viewed more than 532,000 times, with a large majority viewership coming from young women in the U.K. (Million Youth Media, 2020). Instagram content spanned 10 posts and 27 'stories' and has garnered over 1,000 followers and counting.

Methodology for adapting TSM to SM (YouTube and Instagram)

Girlsplained applied and adapted TSM to SM via the following:

1. **The use of a long-running, serial drama format**: *Girlsplained* used a single episode, web-based video drama format on platforms most utilised by the target audience in the U.K., i.e., YouTube and Instagram (Cape & Rees, 2016). The web series tells the story of three young BAME British women, Lauren, Janelle, and Yaz, as they navigate life, relationships, and sex during university. The script was pretested with young target audience multiple times and feedback ensured that the roles of the characters were well understood as per TSM and that the characters, dialogue, and storyline were culturally accurate.

2. **Rigorous adherence to theories underlying the methodology and research**: *Girlsplained* started with formative research, including a literature review on the state of sexual health and HIV incidence among the BAME population in the U.K.; a policy analysis on how the U.K. approaches sexual health prevention and treatment; an analysis of similar programmes that address sexual health or have strong BAME characters in the U.K.; and focus groups with members of the target audience as well as stakeholders and service providers, including external experts from Population Media Center and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

3. **The appropriate use of positive, negative, and transitional characters as vicarious role models**: *Girlsplained* had all three core TSM characters and focused on the journey of the transitional character, Lauren. Lauren faces obstacles, contemplates her options with influence from the positive and negative characters, and makes decisions. The rewards and consequences of Lauren's decisions are shown, as well as the eventual downfall of the negative character. A humorous fourth character, Sandra, was introduced in the drama to complement the transitional character as a fellow patient at the sexual health clinic. She served to deliver important health information regarding PrEP in a humorous and non-threatening way. She only interacted with the transitional character and was not related to the main storyline. A clip of her interaction with the transitional character while talking about PrEP was also posted on Instagram so that it could be viewed and shared. The team created a plan for the transitional character's contemplation of obstacles, successes and eventually positive action and behaviour change that would evolve and be followed over Instagram, although this was not implemented as planned due to budget constraints.

Lessons Learned

Four main lessons emerged from the process of adapting TSM to SM with *Girlsplained*.

1. **The entertainment factor is (still) key and was achieved with shorter story arcs.**
   The Sabido methodology of EE in long-form dramas works for a number of reasons, primarily among them is its entertainment factor - it must be a thrill for the audience to listen or watch the programme for TSM to work (Barker, 2009). Typical TSM dramas start with multiple

episodes designed to "hook" the audience into a gripping story and entertaining characters. *Girlsplained* illustrates there may indeed be a place for TSM being applied to shorter, multimedia programmes with the entertainment factor being maintained through shorter arcs and across platforms. Real-time interactivity with and among the audience through these platforms also adds to the entertainment value of such a programme.

2. **A humorous, recurring fourth character, who was unrelated to the storyline and only interacted with the transitional character, was entertaining and educational.**
   Girlsplained's use of a humorous fourth character to deliver health messaging to the transitional character worked for the storyline as well as the audiences who received the necessary information on PrEP. This was achieved with a relatively unknown actress; with additional funding, prominent Instagram influencers could be used to play such a character, with additional engagement over SM thereafter. This will ensure a greater Instagram following and a wider reach to raise awareness about the show and its messages.

3. **Social media followed the life of the transitional character and allowed for authentic audience engagement.**
   Girlsplained created a two-way conversation over SM where audiences were able to interact with one another by stating opinions, replying to comments, asking questions, and expressing shared sentiments, be it on YouTube and/or Instagram. Some users directly sought health information by utilising the comments to ask questions based on personal experiences or learn more about access to reproductive healthcare, while some others sent private messages to the *Girlsplained* team requesting for help or information around their sexual health problems, while referencing the characters and storylines from the show. This form of interaction meant that audiences kept returning to the platform to monitor how their comments were being received and to follow how other people were interacting with the platform. This shows the potential and importance of real-time audience engagement, growth of a fan community with regular interaction, as well as pro-social and pro-health actions inspired by the audiences' parasocial relationships with the characters and the storyline as per TSM.

4. **Focusing on a young target audience was successful.**
   Although *Girsplained* reached a small proportion of an older demographic (Million Youth Media, 2020), the majority of its audience was made up of young people. As per TSM, it is important that the most appropriate platform is used, i.e., popular platforms among the target audience. Since SM platforms like Instagram are seeing a rise in following by older audience members (Tran, 2020), there is potential for this application to target them, although its appeal still lies mostly with younger people.

Towards a Framework for the Sabido Methodology for Social Media (TSM4SM)

TSM has traditionally been used in radio and television programming (Barker, 2009). To date, there has been little evidence of its application to social media (SM), with a handful of recent exceptions (Riley et al., 2021). We will therefore be referring to this application of TSM to SM as the framework for The Sabido methodology for Social Media (TSM4SM).

Based on the lessons learned from *Girlsplained*, we propose the following key features in the creation of a proposed framework for TSM4SM:

1. **TSM4SM programmes should include the major tenets of TSM in a web-based video drama element, but with shorter story arcs that cater to shorter attention spans and learning cycles.**
   EE has gradually evolved to shift towards a single-episode or short story arc approach, with the digital space affording opportunities for supplemental resources allowing viewers to engage beyond EE messages (Wang & Singhal, 2016).

TSM has traditionally maintained that in order for members of the audience and the show's characters to get to know each other, upwards of 50 episodes is required with at least 120 episodes needed for long-term behaviour change (Barker & Sabido, 2005). However, as we adopt more digitalised lifestyles and engage even more on SM, studies have shown that people have more things to focus on but often focus on things for shorter periods of time with narrower spans of collective attention on individual topics (Lorenz-Spreen et. al., 2019).

TSM4SM programmes can adapt accordingly in order to prevent educational messages being lost in a long serial drama. Episodes of the drama can be shown over short videos on freely accessible SM platforms such as YouTube for example, with fewer episodes to engage shorter attention spans. Other adjunct modes of SM can then be used to further sustain audiences' attention in order to drive behaviour change.

2. **TSM4SM programmes should use humour per the Laugh Model framework to create a fourth recurring character in the drama, who is complementary to the transitional character.** If episodes are to be fewer and shorter and in duration, the transitional character would need to go through a journey of facing and contemplating obstacles with the eventual act of taking a pro-social action for positive change within a single episode itself, or just a few episodes, rather than over a long-drawn soap opera with at least 50 episodes.

This poses the risk that there may not be adequate time for the transitional character to become a role model, as audiences might not have enough time to develop parasocial relationships with the transitional character for modelling to take place. We are proposing that one way to mitigate this is to consider adapting and implementing the *Laugh Model* framework (Lister et. al., 2015) to TSM4SM programmes through a fourth recurring character, to deliver the main educational messages in a humorous way, as part of driving relevant pro-social and/or pro-health behaviour change.

The *Laugh Model* framework posits that raising target audiences' awareness and changing their health behaviours through SM channels are contingent on creating overtly entertaining health promotion content through the prioritised use of humour, while connecting individuals to programmes or communities (Lister et. al., 2015).

This fourth character can therefore act as a peripheral character who is unrelated to the storyline and whose role is to only interact with the transitional character during random, inconsequential moments in the story. This fourth character need not have a pre-established or consistent relationship with the transitional character and their relationship need not be developed during the programme, but a SM presence could help drive important messages beyond the show. The character's effectiveness is complementary to the modelling of the transitional character. This could create an element of surprise that tends to stick in audiences' memories for longer as health and other pro-social educational messages have been shown to be more persuasive when communicated with humour (Hendriks & Janssen, 2018).

3. **TSM4SM programmes should use transmedia storytelling to create a social media feed following the life of the transitional character based on TSM principles** Transmedia storytelling is an innovative media programming methodology where the narrative elements of a story are creatively coordinated across different media platforms, rather than a single medium, to build a story world, engage a broader spectrum of audience, and provide them an enriching experience beyond pure entertainment (Wang & Singhal, 2016; Scolari, 2009).

Programmes that have adopted transmedia storytelling have shown that an interwoven transmedia tapestry made a richer story world, thereby deepening the audience's relationship with the characters, plotlines and issues (Wang & Singhal, 2016). This strategy also offered multiple entry points for audiences who are avid consumers of dramas and digital entertainment, to engage with the narrative through their preferred platform (Wang & Singhal, 2016).

There is little evidence of the application of TSM to transmedia storylines over SM to our knowledge. TSM4SM can therefore explore the application of the major tenets of TSM as described above to the design and implementation of transmedia SM posts over popular platforms like Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. One way to do this is to adapt the elements of a Sabido-style radio drama to SM posts. As radio dramas rely on one form of media (audio medium without visual

media), it is reasonable to use the development of Sabido-style radio dramas as a reference for creating a TSM4SM programme (visual media with no or very little audio media). The audience will therefore bear witness, follow and interact with the characters and their storylines on SM in between episodes of the drama. This possible translation is described further below in Table 1.

TSM could provide intimate glimpses into the personal lives of media personae and characters that increase the audiences' feelings of connectedness to them i.e., the audience develops parasocial relationships with these media personae and characters that can inspire positive behaviour change, similar to that seen in Sabido-style dramas (Bond, 2016). The transitional character's life evolves over many episodes in a Sabido-style soap opera drama. People follow the character's life religiously (Barker & Sabido, 2005). On SM, this could translate to following the translational character's SM posts over various transmedia SM platforms, with greater interaction, shorter feedback cycles and quicker learnings (Bond, 2016).

Table 1: Proposed framework for adapting The Sabido Methodology for Social Media (TSM4SM)

Key Tenets and Elements of The Sabido Methodology (TSM) (Barker & Sabido, 2005)	Proposed application of The Sabido Methodology for Social Media (TSM4SM)
The use of a long-running, serial drama format	
At least 50 episodes for parasocial relationships and 120 episodes for longer-term behaviour change.	At least 50 posts for parasocial relationships and 120 posts for longer-term behaviour change.
Take the first 10-15 episodes to show who the characters are through their dialogue. Relationships of the characters and their settings must be explained through their dialogue that creates visual imagery.	Take the first 10-15 posts to show who the characters are and what their relationships are like with one another. Relationships of the characters must be explained through visual media and/or captions that are visually appealing and easy to understand through the posts that explain the characters' thought process, where appropriate.
Episodes should be divided into scenes, with each scene having a cliffhanger, and a major cliffhanger at the end of the final scene of each episode.	Every post functions as a 'scene' and is a 'cliffhanger' for the next post or the next web-based episode. Every drama episode will continue to have multiple scenes with each scene having a cliffhanger and a major cliffhanger at the end of the final scene.
Every episode is usually aired a week apart for audiences to think and discuss with peers about the pertinent health and social issues raised in every episode and the decisions made by the characters.	There should be 1-2 daily posts with a mix of content related and unrelated to the storyline (incident, influences, decisions and consequences). Any post related to health and social messaging can happen every 3 days to give audiences time to process the information in real-time and find out more.
Epilogues that give information about health and social service infrastructure should only start after 10-15 episodes, if there is a need for it.	Any form of health and/or social messaging and information on infrastructure should only be started after at least 10-15 posts. Call to action buttons on social media posts can be used to increase ease and accessibility to the important pro-health and pro-social information being discussed to influence behaviour change.
Use a respectable voice or authoritative figure to reinforce positive behaviours and right to change in the epilogues.	Collaborate with or repost content from a respectable voice or authoritative figure, including SM influencers that audiences avidly follow, to reinforce positive behaviours and the right to change.
Rigorous adherence to theories underlying the methodology and research	
Writers and producers observe the behaviour of the audience in various settings in order to create realistic situations in the drama. This is part of the thorough formative assessment and creation of a values grid that precedes the development of the drama.	The writers of the drama episodes should also be writing and developing the posts and their captions on social media based on the values grid, with guidance from social media marketing experts. As part of formative and ongoing monitoring, the team (writers, producers, social media marketing experts) of the TSM4SM programme should constantly engage with service providers and the followers of the show through comments, tagging, reposting content, hashtags etc.
The appropriate use of positive, negative, and transitional characters as vicarious role models	
The incident, positive and negative influences on the transitional character and his/her decision and consequences should evolve at a believable pace over these episodes, with reinforcement of the characters' 'rewards' and punishments' with every decision made.	Posts with visuals and/or captions should be designed in a way to follow an incident, negative and positive influences on the transitional character and his/her decisions and consequences in real-time. 'Rewards' and 'punishments' should continue to be reinforced through the posts.
Ensure people evolve realistically and get older although characters develop faster than in real-time.	Time passes in real-time over social media posts in between the drama episodes. Posts should therefore be reactive to audience participation and current affairs that affect the audiences.
Follow the five "W's" of journalism in signposting any dramatic action (who, what, when, where, and why).	Keep captions short but include thought-provoking questions for the audience to think about until the next post and/or episode.
Target the audiences' emotions through melodrama and mood music, not the intellect. Emotional content lasts longer in the memory than intellectual information.	Posts should include a mix of melodrama and humour (as per the *Laugh Model* framework). Humorous content need not have anything to do with the storyline. The humorous fourth recurring character can be one of the characters posting funny content about health and/or social issues.
Do not use Shakespearean language – characters must have clear dialogue and show, rather than tell, the audience what to do.	Any form of caption or verbal post should be written in the language that is similar to how the audience speaks and thinks and should be kept concise and clear. Decision-making and their consequences for the characters can be shown and not told to the audience through visual posts. Pro-social and pro-health messaging can be shown and told where appropriate with 'call to action' buttons for action-taking.

4. **TSM4SM programmes should target young people and the health and/or social issues pertaining to them.**

The most common SM platforms used by adolescents in developed countries include YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and to a lesser extent, Facebook (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

Young audience members are savvy entertainment consumers and can easily navigate multiple digital platforms, thereby lending promise to the use of transmedia edutainment as a health promotion and education interventional tool for them (Wang & Singhal, 2016). In fact, studies have shown that adolescents who had experienced social interactions with their favourite media personae on SM had stronger parasocial relationships than adolescents who had no such interactions (Bond, 2016). This is an important finding given that teens are more likely to learn from media personae with whom they have parasocial relationships (Bond, 2016) There is therefore potentially more promise in exploring TSM4SM programmes that target young people, the issues that affect them and the behaviour changes that could improve their lives.

Conclusion

Girlsplained shows that TSM has great potential at being applied to SM and other forms of mixed media through shorter story arcs, while maintaining its entertainment factor. We propose that this can be achieved through our proposed TSM4SM framework that considers the Sabido methodology itself, transmedia storytelling, a humorous fourth character who is unrelated to the storyline and only interacts with the transitional character, and a social media feed following the transitional character that is created using the Sabido methodology. While TSM4SM programmes could potentially affect a wide range of audiences, it would likely be most useful at reaching younger audiences who are more social media savvy. Adequate funding is imperative for the success of TSM4SM programmes and should take into account the costs for effective social media marketing. TSM4SM programmes have the potential to be sustainable and cost-effective, while the theories behind how it can bring about behaviour change need to be researched further.

Acknowledgements

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