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**Title: Audience responses to SoulBuddyz: postulations and realities.  
A content analysis of letters in response to the SoulBuddyz Entertainment Education interventions.**

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**Abstract:**

This paper involves a content analysis of feedback to the Entertainment Education (EE) programme SoulBuddyz, in the form of letters received by the Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication (SCIHDC).

The researcher analysed 84 letters received by the SCIHDC in response to Soul City interventions 1 and 2 as of May 2003. Taking into account the letter writers age, gender and background, these letters were analysed in terms of their content with regard to language used, style of address, requests for materials and information, explicitly expressed positive sentiments and correct application of knowledge gleaned from the *SoulBuddyz* programmes.

There is little available literature regarding adolescent response letters to TV programmes, and this paper suggests a practical method for research, as well as the value of the exercise.

## Introduction

The *SoulBuddyz* programme, targeting 8-12 year olds, is a spin-off from the widely known and successful SCIHDC Soul City interventions for the general public. The Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication (SCIHDC) summarises *Soul City* as a “dynamic and innovative multi-media health promotion and social change project... *Soul City* examines many health and development issues, imparting information and impacting on social norms, attitudes and practice. Its impact is aimed at the level of the individual, the community and the socio political environment” (Soul City, 2003).

*SoulBuddyz* is built around the same model as *Soul City*. A review of the main strategy underlying the interventions may prove useful, before approaching the content analysis of feedback letters received.

## Background of the Soul City model and SoulBuddyz

SCIHDC was established in 1992 under the direction of medical doctors Garth Japhet and Sheereen Usdin. They had been working in clinics both in the urban townships and rural areas of South Africa. Japhet later recalled, “In the early 1990’s I worked both in the rural areas of Zulu land and in the townships of Soweto and Alexandra in Johannesburg. Here, I realised that despite my training as a doctor I had no real influence on the basic problems” (Japhet 1999/2001). Japhet and Usdin realised that adult education on basic issues such as childcare, contraception and AIDS could improve people’s lives and, in time, empower people to make better choices; change their attitudes and behaviour and seek to influence their surrounding environment. In time they could also be empowered to affect social change in their communities.

Japhet came to realise the importance of the media as tools in the process of offering adult education on health issues. Together with Usdin he set about getting medical information out to the people through the newspaper columns that he wrote for *The Sowetan*. They saw the need to reach those illiterate people whose only source on information was television and radio. They also realised the benefit of a continued stream of information rather than once-off information interventions. This could ensure the growth of a loyal audience ready for social learning rather than having to start at the audience building stage with each new intervention. They saw that entertainment had to be integrated into the approach to achieve this, but with the prosocial educational content in the driving seat. A period of resistance followed. “The creative people (in television and radio) were not used to having doctors interfering with their work. In South Africa no prior experience existed to learn from, making it a nervous process for everyone involved” (Tufte, 2001: 30). By the time the first *Soul City* television series was created in 1994, the media toolkit of what had become established as the SCIHDC also contained educational material to be distributed through the popular newspapers in the country. The drama in the first television series introduced the fictional township of Soul City, and the primary educational issue addressed was the health of mother and child. The concept of supplementing a prime-time television series with newspaper columns, a subsequent radio series and the release of related educational material, over time, proved a success (Tufte, 2001).

The origins of *Soul City* were based on practice and good ideas rather than theories and research. Over the years, the SCIHDC has compiled a substantial body of research and established a model for their ongoing interventions well within the concept that has become known as Entertainment Education (EE). One of the pioneers of EE was the Mexican television producer Miguel Sabido, who established a theoretical framework for his *telenovelas* or television soap operas from 1975 onwards. Sabido sums up the merits of the soap opera format; “The melodrama in a soap opera represented a confrontation between good versus bad, offering a unique opportunity to promote good behaviours and dissuade

bad behaviours” (1989: 49). Sabido provided positive, negative and transitional role models in his soap operas. These role models were practical applications of Albert Bandura’s social learning theory. Social learning theory postulates that people learn vicariously from watching the actions and experiences of role models. The theory suggests that social learning could be strengthened through verbally coded messages in the form of epilogues reinforcing the prosocial issues that have been integrated into the drama (Singhal and Rogers, 1999).

Sabido also drew on the theories of Paul McLean, Carl Jung, Eric Bentley and Rovigatti. Rovigatti embellished on the linear communication model - indicating that a communication message went from the communicator via message, medium, and receiver - and made this model circular by including a response from the receiver. He also added a second dimension to the model, usually used to describe the path of commercial messages, namely a circuit for an educational message (Singhal and Rodgers, 1999: 62-70).

Bentley’s drama theory categorised drama in six basic genres: drama, comedy, tragicomedy, tragedy, melodrama and farce. Sabido thought the melodrama of the soap opera was best suited to facilitate social learning. The drama should be constructed along the lines of Bandura’s theory to be effective, as described above.

Jung theorised that one of the basic things human kind seeks for is an explanation to our origins and the meaning of life; why we are here, and how we came to be here. We construct stories to provide explanations, myths that we share in the ‘collective unconscious’. Sabido believed that drama derived from myth could help counter confusion as to the basic questions above, and that the television soap opera was a powerful means to purvey drama.

McLean’s triune brain theory postulated that humans process messages in three different parts of the brain, and that these respectively receive cognitive messages, emotive messages and messages appealing to physical urges like sex. This idea links to Sabido’s call for messages to appeal to the audience at different levels. Sabido’s practical deduction for the production of TV soap operas was that: “In order to achieve its educational purpose, an entertainment education program must agitate emotions, create conflict between viewers’ physical urges and the prevailing social norms, and encourage viewers’ intellectual activity to make judgements about moral values” (Singhal and Rogers, 1999: 70).

The Soul City model could be seen as an argument for “ a cyclical communication strategy where a number of inputs are fed into the media vehicle, which then results in a number of outputs” (Tuft 2001: 35). Four steps can be identified in the initial input process. Firstly, strong partners must be found among funders, stakeholders with regards to the prosocial issue being raised and the media. Secondly, formative research into the issue is essential, and must be informed both by experts on the issue, stakeholders and members of the intended audience themselves. Production of the media products follows as the third step. Social marketing, the promotion and marketing of non-profit material employing techniques used by commercial marketers, drives the launch of the programme and is the fourth step in the process.

The desired outputs of the intervention include direct impact on knowledge, attitudes and practice among the target audience in relation to the educational issue, as well as the creation of a supportive environment for social change.

Potential opportunities as a result of the intervention include advocacy relating to the targeted issues on both the community and the national level, reinforcement of the brand name through its repeated and positive use, and the creation of characters and educational packages. Achievement of these goals must be tested through evaluation, or summative research, which informs the creation of the next cycle.

The Soul City interventions to date have centred around six TV series, broadcast in 1994, 1995, 1997, 1999 and 2001. Intervention number six is currently running as of June 2003.

The initiative for *SoulBuddyz* was launched in 1999, although the first *SoulBuddyz* TV series was launched in August 2000. The SCIHDC's main aim in creating *SoulBuddyz* was to target messages specifically to children and adolescents.

While the Soul City series is popular with all ages, its messages were not designed specifically for a very young audience, particularly 8 to 12 -year-olds. *SoulBuddyz* has been developed specifically with this age group in mind because attitudes are often formed during this critical time and yet, in the context of a rapidly transforming society with technological changes as well as social changes, the needs and aspirations of children between the ages of 8-12 years old are often neglected. Emotional and health problems often originate or become embedded in this age group, with social problems such as physical and sexual abuse severely retarding the potential of many children.

Soul City, 2003.

There have, to date, been two *SoulBuddyz* television series, both broadcast on SABC 1, which is the television channel in South Africa with the largest viewing audience. The parent Soul City-series are broadcast on the same station. The episodes of *SoulBuddyz* are each 26 minutes long, and the drama centres on a group of children who meet in a park after school and tackle the daily issues that South African children face. Each episode concludes with an epilogue, in line with the theories of Miguel Sabido. The epilogue sequence is approximately two minutes long. Here 'real' children speak from their own perspective about the issues raised in that episode.

In addition to the television series, SCIHDC promotes the radio component of *SoulBuddyz* as an important contribution to the radio industry in South Africa.

*SoulBuddyz* radio is a groundbreaking project as there is very little radio in South Africa for children of this age (8 to 12 years). The format of the radio is 26 half hour programmes consisting of a ten minute drama with child protagonists, five minutes of documentary information inserts for both adults and children, and 15 minutes of interactive talk (a phone-in show hosted by a young person).

Soul City, 2003.

A life skills booklet for use in schools also accompanies the series. The booklet is written in a module format and each educational lesson is illustrated by a photo comic story. A number of activities internalise key issues, and the booklet provides explanatory information. The booklets are made accessible to all grade 7 learners in South Africa.

A parenting booklet also accompanies each series. Distributed through partner newspapers and through non-governmental organisations, the primary focus in these booklets has so far been improving communication with children and the importance of trying to understand them on their own terms, and not to view them simply as 'small adults'.

*SoulBuddyz* Clubs is a new concept established through the assistance of the SCIHDC at schools and libraries around South Africa. The clubs came about because children started asking how they could "become *SoulBuddyz*". The members of these clubs watch the series together, work with the booklets, learn about their communities and contribute to their communities, in line with the topics raised in the media products.

The SCIHDC describes the evaluation undertaken of the SoulBuddyz interventions as extensive and emphasises the quantitative data obtained:

Each series is independently evaluated. The evaluation of SoulBuddyz 1 indicated that the project reached two out of three children between the ages of 8-13 years and successfully impacted on knowledge, attitudes and practices of those exposed. The project was also positively received by parents and teachers alike. It is clear from the first evaluation that, if sustained, SoulBuddyz has the potential to effect powerful change in a future generation of youth and adults. Full evaluation reports are available on Research and Evaluation page of the Soul City website.

Soul City, 2003.

Inspection of the Research and Evaluation section of their website as of June 4, 2003 revealed that although the briefs and research designs of the evaluation of Series 1 was available, the completed evaluation reports and the results were not.

### **Children and letter-writing**

Research shows that 8-12 years old are able to follow a plot in a TV series and distinguish fiction from realistic programming to a large extent (Buckingham 1993). From this, I postulate that children are also be able to receive an educational message from a television programme, and that they show signs of this ability in the letters written as feedback to the programme producers.

Audience letters represent a largely untapped source of feedback for EE interventions (Rogers and Singhal 1999 and 2002). Scholars within the field of Entertainment Education may draw particular benefit from exploring the largely uncharted reservoir of views, experiences and other information contained in the feedback from the audience to different elements of EE interventions. This research material may be seen as largely unsolicited and free of researcher bias. The data also comes cheaply, since target audience members themselves submit them.

There may however be a danger in using letters for evaluation purposes. To a degree, letter writers may not be representative of the average audience member. Letter writers can be viewed as a particular kind of person, likely to have a stronger motivation than the average person for providing feedback. They may be conceived as either very negative, very positive, or functioning from self-interest.

In the feedback written to *SoulBuddyz*, self-interest was mainly expressed through requests for educational material and requests for acting roles in future episodes of the *SoulBuddyz* series, as I show later on in this report. Part of the reason why the data obtained from studying the letters cannot be generalised to the *SoulBuddyz* audience at large, is the stronger motivation needed to send letters as opposed to simply the consumption of a media product. The number of letters received in the case of *SoulBuddyz*, 84, also prohibits drawing conclusions about the characteristics or views of the *SoulBuddyz* audience at large. The letters provide important indications nevertheless, such as genuinely perceived dividends the audience members gained from watching, or complaints on the series, which may be hard to measure by more structured research methods.

Claiming that a researcher could keep an analysis of any material completely free of bias, or that letters are a completely unbiased source, would be naive. However, the material does come cheaply and is not solicited by researchers, hence it may be more free of researcher bias than in a process where the data collection requires direct solicitation or other more

direct contact between subject and researcher. Letter writers themselves dictate what ideas and issues to bring up in their letters, what views to express on the issues and in what form and way to express the views. Many original ideas may come from this feedback. This reserve of feedback remains idle if lying unanalysed in the drawers of media organisations.

The present research utilises this source of information and the study is the first analysis of the feedback from the *SoulBuddyz* target audience members. I use the term feedback in this report to describe my sample, consisting of 100% of the 84 letters received by the SCIHDC in response to the *SoulBuddyz* interventions 1 and 2 as of May 1 2003. A large proportion of the items contained requests for material or information, rather than feedback in the more traditional sense, of comments, suggestions, fan mail and the like. 11% of the letters to SoulBuddyz came in the form of e-mails, the rest were hard-copy paper letters. Five of the e-mails, void of any content beyond the sender's e-mail address, were disregarded for the purpose of content analysis. The feedback related exclusively to the TV series and the related booklets. The radio series was therefore not part of the basis for this study. Informing my research I received: One copy of *SoulBuddyz* episodes 1-6 of the first TV series, message briefs, synopsis of the remaining 46 episodes of *SoulBuddyz* 1 and 2; as well as the life skills booklets and parenting guides that accompanied the two series from the SCIHDC.

## **Methodology**

Several aspects of the letters received provided proved noteworthy in my analysis of the feedback provided. Initially, I decided to utilise a quantitative mode of analysis so that I could provide concise statistics displaying the findings. In my interpretation this quantitative approach meant recognising only what was explicitly written, 'black on white', by the feedback provider, leaving inferences based on theories and past examples out of it. However, a qualitative approach also proved necessary, because little nuance can be provided in statistical form.

The reported benefits from the intervention, if any, to the writers themselves seemed to me to be the most obvious aspect to explore. Beyond directly reported benefits, I searched for indications of raised knowledge about the educational issues, changed attitudes or behavioural practice (KAP) in connection to the issues raised by the series. I approached this very literally; taking the message briefs provided by the SCIHDC and counting direct mention in the letters of the issues in the message briefs. I also counted the connections between the issues and the factual information contained in the message briefs. I explored the notion of whether the feedback writers perceived the intervention as having affected them personally. I was also interested to know how many personal experiences, or 'testimonials', would be contained in the letters.

Establishing the background of the feedback writers also seemed important. Writers from underprivileged homes may be more likely to have directly experienced the challenges addressed in the TV series than those from affluent homes. I surveyed the gender of feedback submitters, the geographical areas they wrote from and their ages. In South Africa, the area where people live is often indicative of their social status. In terms of the motivation for writing the letters, it was also important to establish how many letters were obviously written under adult supervision. This supervision may result in the 'coaching' of the viewpoints expressed, along with possible polishing of the language. Because of the young age of the letter writers of *SoulBuddyz*, an underlying positive sentiment towards the series in the letters was postulated, rather than a critical approach. I decided to examine how many items of feedback expressly stated a positive response towards the series, rather than letting these sentiments remain implicitly understood.

A final point that I studied was the presence or otherwise of parasocial relationships of the audience towards the characters of the series. Parasocial relationships between an audience member and a media personality are described as “giving the illusion of a face-to-face relationship. An audience member forms a relationship with a performer that is perceived as analogous to the interpersonal relationships of people in a primary, face-to-face group” (Horton and Wohl, 1956:34).

Rubens and Perse (1987) divide this phenomenon into three distinct categories: cognitively, affectively and behaviourally oriented parasocial relationships. They describe cognitively orientated parasocial interaction as “the degree to which audience members pay attention to a particular media character and think about the character’s actions” (1987:34). Increased self-efficacy among audience members, an important goal for *SoulBuddyz* may become apparent here.

Affectively orientated parasocial interaction is described as “the degree to which an audience member identifies with a media character, and believes that his/her interests are joined” (1987:34). Behaviourally orientated parasocial interaction is “the degree to which individuals overtly react to media characters, for instance by talking to these characters or conversing with other audience members about them” (1987:34).

The term ‘referential involvement’ is also used in relation to the concept of parasocial interaction, where referential involvement is “the degree to which an individual relates a media message to his/her personal experiences” (Katz, Liebs and Berko 1992:35). I have taken these definitions as the basis for my analysis and looked for concrete signs of parasocial relationships in the form of behaviour or thought practices being relayed through the letters.

The exploration of these areas led to the development of the following research questions:

- 1) To what degree does the feedback indicate that people have benefited from the intervention?
- 2) What background do the feedback correspondents have? Are they from areas where they are likely to have directly experienced the problems addressed in *SoulBuddyz*? What gender and age are they?
- 3) How many writers explicitly use mostly positive terms to describe their sentiments towards *SoulBuddyz*, and how many use negative ones?
- 4) How many comment on personal experiences or their own lives?
- 5) Are there indicators present in the feedback of increased knowledge of, positive attitude towards and practice (KAP) of the educational message?
- 6) How many letters explicitly showed indications of a parasocial relationship being in force with one or more of the characters of *SoulBuddyz*, in line with the given definitions of behavioural, affective or cognitive parasocial relationships, as well as referential involvement?
- 7) How many letters were addressed to *SoulBuddyz*, the SCIHDC, characters of the series and other addressees?
- 8) How many letters comment on the TV series, the characters, or plot?
- 9) How many letters offer suggestions of changes in the story line?

10) How many letter writers are likely to have had adult assistance in the letter creation?

## **Results**

The audience feedback shows some interesting trends in relation to the SCIHDC's stated aims for *SoulBuddyz*. However, because the letter-writers are adolescents, the content of the letters appears more 'shallow' than would be reasonable to expect from an adult audience. Comments made tend to be straightforward and generalised, like: "I love *SoulBuddyz*" or "I enjoyed the program a lot". Scant detail is provided as to why this is so.

Not all letters indicate the age of the writer, where they originated from geographically (the e-mails were such a group). Some names are used for both boys and girls in both African and European culture, and gender was therefore difficult to ascertain. As a consequence of this, some of the letters had to be disregarded for statistical purposes.

Most letters have a practical purpose instead of or beyond making comment on the programme. In some cases, the writer wants *SoulBuddyz*-related material from the SCIHDC like photos, books or road-safety equipment (things that had been mentioned specifically in an episode). A number of letters were a request to act a part in the series (Fig.7).

Applications to audition for a part in the next series were solicited towards the end of series. Some letter writers take their application to the series very seriously, like this young man, who sees it as an opportunity to pay his school fees:

I enjoyed looking at your television series. I am doing grade nine... I am working very hard not to let you down. I am in the final class in this school and the schoolwork is demanding... I provide my results so that you can see how serious I work at school.

This passage may also be seen to express signs of parasocial sentiments, as will be discussed below.

Some letter writers bring up particular personal and social problems. One letter reads:

The reason why I'm writing to you is that I have a huge problem. I'm a girl of fourteen years ... My problem is that my best friend abandoned me for the reason that I don't have a boyfriend. I don't know what to do, because at the moment I'm not ready for such a thing. But they say I'm old enough to get one for myself. Now I'm facing a dilemma

This letter goes to the heart of issues brought up in the series, such as the right of children to stand up to community convention and the right of girls to decide for themselves when to become sexually active. The letter writer may have difficulty relating the general examples of peer pressure resistance given in the series to her unique situation. The best friend mentioned in the letter seemingly pressures her towards conforming to peer group convention by threatening rejection and leaves the letter writer looking for avenues of resistance.

Some letter writers indicate that they use the *SoulBuddyz* booklets in conjunction with the TV series. The suggestions of changes in the EE material in the letters relate both to the booklets and the TV series. Surprisingly few suggestions are contained in the letters; only 1% takes the opportunity to suggest changes to a booklet, and 1% to the TV series. More information on sex, rape, condoms, dating and falling in love is requested for the booklets,

while more information on child abuse is requested for the TV series. One of the letter writers' reports that a friend's father has been in prison for this crime.

Another general trend is that the vast majority of letters are written in English (Fig. 4). Often incoherent syntax and language usage, numerous spelling errors, and grammatical flaws betray the letter writers' shaky grasp of the English language. Some acknowledge this by stating that English is their second language and expressing hope that the receivers understand what is written. None more frankly than this writer: "I don't have (living) parents and I like school. I don't know English, but I hope you understand what I wrote."

The practice of writing in English may have prohibited the more eloquent expressions possible in the mother tongue of the feedback writers. Even though South Africa has 11 official languages, the letters do not reflect this diversity. The letter writers may have perceived the language of *SoulBuddyz* to be English, and therefore wanted to reply using the language in which they thought they were addressed by the series. The main verbal portion of the *SoulBuddyz* series is in English, intertwined with passages of dialogue in other languages where 'natural'. The series is also subtitled in English. This seems like a compromise reached in the face of the SCiHDC's policy of promoting local languages where possible.

Another possible reading of the majority English letters is that the feedback writers do not have the necessary confidence in the status of their own language, and would not expect anyone in another linguistic region of the country to respond if it were used in their correspondence. Perhaps one could also postulate that English is seen as the language of authority, commerce and development. These comments are largely speculative and would require further research with a larger audience sample.

Very few letter writers explicitly state that they believe they have benefited from the series. Those who do, however, attribute real changes in their lives to *SoulBuddyz*, like this letter: "I was so ashamed that my family is poor, but now I'm proud, even though my friends laugh at me and joke about that". One letter writer indicates finding less concrete information than expected from the series. Having become excited about the series, a letter writer writes on behalf of a group that want to join a *SoulBuddyz* Club. Having looked in vain for information in this regard they end the letter with a sigh from the heart: "I watch *SoulBuddyz* every Thursday to find more information but the only thing I find is entertainment."

By far the majority of letters come from under-resourced, former black areas in the urban townships (Fig. 2). 89% of letters fall into this group, while only 7% come from former white areas in towns. Correspondingly perhaps, only 11% of letters (of which half were the void ones) come as e-mails, indicating that only a small percentage of those who watch and write in to *SoulBuddyz* have access to the Internet. It is possible that young people from a lower socio-economic background may become more involved with the series than those from a privileged background, and that is why there are more letter-writers from this stratum. They may be able to make a direct link between their own situations and the action depicted in the series.

However, only 8% of writers explicitly mention their own personal experiences in their letters (Fig. 9). This may mean that they don't think such a mention would be of any benefit to themselves or to the series producers, or they simply want to write asking for material, information or future acting parts. If they did want to describe their personal situation in their letters they may have lacked the competence and confidence in the English language to do so (and not thought of the possibility of writing in their own language) or not trusted the confidentiality of the medium.

Given that few writers describe their personal situation, few express how watching *SoulBuddyz* has affected them, over and above providing TV content. Only one letter (quoted above) is concrete as to how *SoulBuddyz* has helped them with regard to pride and self-esteem. However, two other letters indicate a desire to take action as a result of seeing the series, in the form of joining or establishing *SoulBuddyz* clubs. Spurring an audience to action and social mobilisation is one of the SCIHDC's stated objectives.

The vast majority of letter writers are female (74%) and 83% are older than the upper limit of the target audience age range of 12 years (see figures 5 and 6). The oldest letter writer is 21 years of age. While letter writers tend to be older than the target age bracket of *SoulBuddyz*, they also tend to be behind normal school progression. As a result of Apartheid education practices, many school-goers in previously disadvantaged areas are older than their classroom peers in less deprived areas. School progression is an interesting indicator here because it may also point to the letter writers' social age' or maturity level. They may have many 'street wise' skills and have confronted more than their share of social and emotional challenges, but may still be low on understanding how society at large works, or 'school-taught skills'.

In the feedback letters to *SoulBuddyz*, where an indication to class level could be found, the letter writers over the age of 12 were without exception on class levels that are formally inappropriately low for children of their biological age. The letters that describe personal problems also come from this older group. Poverty is the most common problem described, indicating that lacking ability to pay school fees and having to help feed the family with work of various kinds may be one reason for the progression lag, as described in this letter:

I am 13 years old... I'm having a problem at home. I was staying with my mother, grandmother, grandfather and brothers. It is only you who can help me. I lost my mother on 23-05-02. My mother didn't tell me [who] my father [is]. [The] people I'm staying with don't like me. One day I said to them I wanted to learn again at Masbumbane and they said: Your mother is dead. I don't have the clothes to wear and I don't have a good school at which to learn.

Many of the letter writers, although biologically older than the target group, describe having been exposed to the educational material in the school situation. They seemingly do not consider their higher biological age as significant, viewing their classmates as their social peers as well. One may speculate that they may also be more likely to assume leadership roles in their peer groups at school than younger children. What we can state as fact is that the older children are predominantly the ones who have taken the step of writing in response to exposure to *the SoulBuddyz* intervention.

Relatively many letters, 12%, were obviously supervised by an adult when written (Fig. 15). One was co-signed by the parent who helped write it. Others came from a grade five class who submitted letters with the exact same wording asking for reflectors to wear on their clothing, after having discussed in class the road safety issue in the life skills booklet that accompanied the first series.

25% of letter writers explicitly mention issues also found in the SCIHDC message briefs that accompany the series. 12% of letters follow up with practical application of the knowledge on the educational issue addressed in the series (Figs. 10 and 12). Nine of the ten letters that constitute this percentage come from the grade five class regarding traffic safety. These percentages are surprisingly low. One might expect that adolescent letter writers, rather than providing comment on the series and characters, would relay information learned from the series. As it turned out, most did neither. The majority of letter writers merely made requests. They wanted *SoulBuddyz* material of various kinds (36%), a role in future TV

episodes (30%), or information on how to start or join a SoulBuddyz group or how to get in touch with actors (8%).

The letters displayed a relatively low degree of parasocial relationships with the media characters on the part of the audience members, and few examples of such relationships (Fig. 11). One letter writer however, may be seen to blur the line between reality and fiction in her identification with the characters:

I would like to have a photo of each and every one of you. The reason why I want to have your photos is that I love you and you are my role models, all of you. You are so kind to people, cheering and caring and the way you help one another. I wish I had a friend like you, because my friends like gossiping about people and not helping one another. Zandi, Avril and Karabo [characters' names]; I wish you were my sisters. Jerome, Siya, Andre and Hamilton [characters' names]; I wish you were my brothers.

Letters previously referred to, where an applicant for a part in the next series provides his grades to show that he works hard at school and does not let the *SoulBuddyz* team down, as well as the letter writer having lost their mother and being behind in school progression, are other examples of affective parasocial identification. In this form of parasocial relationship the audience member sees his or her interests as joined with that of the characters and believes they do the same.

One positive example of cognitive parasocial interaction, where an audience member watches the characters and thinks about their actions, also appeared. In this case the writer even ponders how they themselves might emulate that behaviour: "Writing to you today has been a dream come true. We loved SoulBuddyz a lot and admire you as real role models. You have encouraged us to be responsible and get involved."

In all, 5% of letter writers display signs of parasocial relationships with characters in their letters. Based on the experiences of Singhal and Rogers, who did content analysis on adult originated viewer feedback to the Indian radio soap opera *Hum Log* (Singhal and Rogers 1999), I expected to find a correlation between the addressees of the letters content, and indications of parasocial relationships contained in the letters themselves. For example I expected greetings in letters with parasocial interaction indicators to address characters in the series. However, the addressee of the letter greetings turned out not to be an indicator when looking for parasocial relationships (see figure 1). 53% of greetings were addressed to SoulBuddyz, 5% to Soul City and 42% to others, generally "dear Sir/Madam". The use of this greeting may be a product of formal letter writing taught at school, and the letter writers may have little other experience of letter writing.

## **Conclusion**

The present research shows that feedback letter writers to the *SoulBuddyz* TV series proved to be in the upper target age range. The majority were above the target audience age bracket of 8 to 12 years of age. This may be seen to point to the phenomenon that *SoulBuddyz* interventions cater for adolescents who are in a social group that become exposed to the series, either through school or in their spare time, rather than for young people of specific biological ages. Children younger than 8 years of age may similarly also value the series and gain from exposure to it.

The letter writers come predominantly from historically disadvantaged communities and many lag behind formally appropriate school progression. Girls were strongly over-represented among feedback letter writers. Relatively few letters come in electronic form,

suggesting that the average letter writer may be someone has less access to technology and privilege, and who has life experiences making them more likely to relate directly to the issues raised in the TV series. Even so, the numbers of letters displaying signs of parasocial relationships, offering personal experiences from their lives or of benefiting from the series were limited. However, thoughts relayed in these letter categories were of a profoundly personal nature, discussing major issues or problems in the lives of letter writers.

Letters were most frequently written in English, even when displaying that the writers have a less than firm grasp of the language. This may help to explain why the majority tended not to make comments or suggestions to the series, merely to ask for material from the SCIHDC related to the Entertainment Education intervention, or indeed to feature in future productions of the series.

The attitudes expressed in the letters towards the *SoulBuddyz* series were positive, but the majority of letters expressed no comments explicitly at all (Fig. 8). 12 % of letters were obviously written under adult supervision, all but one of which came from pupils in one single school class. A further indication that a number of letters may have been written under the auspices of school is that all but one of the letters came in written form (with predominant use of English, the formal language of instruction in most schools). Only 1% of letters were in the form of a drawing (Fig. 14). The low number of drawings and other forms of expression may have been expected given the actual age range of the letter writers, but was lower than anticipated when looking from the point of view of the age of the target audience of *SoulBuddyz*. Some older letter writers applied for future roles in the series, and also commented on the series. A good portion of the applications displayed creativity in displaying talent from drawing, via rap lyrics to poems.

The present research points to the importance of taking letters from the adolescent audience seriously enough to answer them, which SCIHDC has done. Most letters contained simple requests, a few contained calls for advice and comfort in regards to serious aspects of life. 2% of letters were from letter writers who had also written previously (Fig. 13). They expressed satisfaction with the response of the SCIHDC to their previous letter. What the writers did not do was go deeper than simple requests in their second letter.

Up to now the SCIHDC has not catalogued viewer response letters based on their content or kept a record of their numbers. I hope the categories used in this project may be useful for further reference in that regard. The present research shows that it is a big step for young letter writers to provide details of their own situation and to ask questions about things of an intimate nature that they want to know. This suggests that telephone hotlines and other more personalised and private channels may be better suited to cater for such questions, rather than soliciting written response. Most letter writers had practical requests and wanted prompt replies. Letter writers also went to some lengths to conform to real or perceived norms, possibly in order to obtain such a reply, mainly by writing in English instead of their first language. This age group also proved not to send drawings and the like, but write what they may have hoped would be perceived as 'proper' or 'adult' letters.

Previous research into the area of adolescent response letters to TV programs proved hard to come by. The opinions of young people and adolescents in this format have not been regarded as important as adult opinion in letters up to now, and still may not be in some quarters. The feedback to the *SoulBuddyz* series contained valuable direct and indirect tips from audience members. Most organisations behind interventions or series may indeed benefit from tapping this cost effective resource.

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**STATISTICAL FINDINGS OF THE CONTENT ANALYSIS**

**ADDRESSEES OF LETTER GREETINGS**

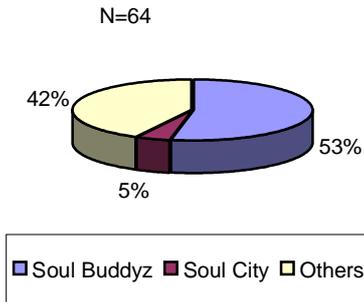


Figure 1: Greetings in letters. 'Others' category usually dear Sir/Madam.

**GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS**

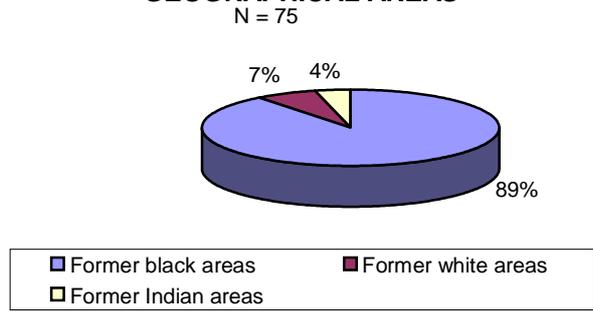


Figure 2: Geographical areas of residence of letter writers and origin of letters.

**LETTER FORMATS**

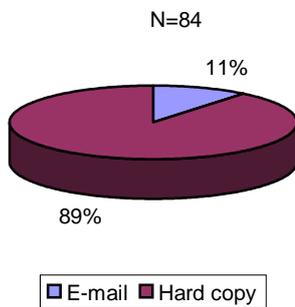


Figure 3: Letter formats.

**LANGUAGES USED**

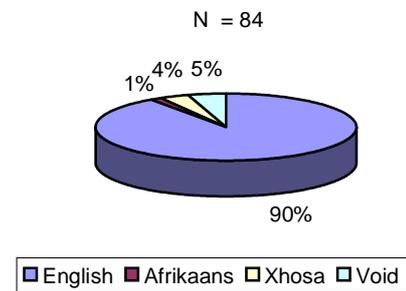


Figure 4: Languages of letters

**GENDER**

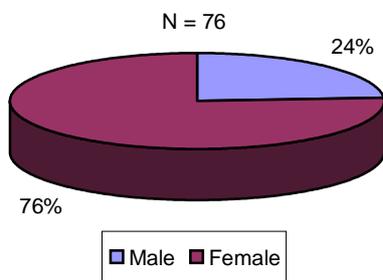


Figure 5: Gender of letter writers.

**AGES OF LETTER WRITERS**

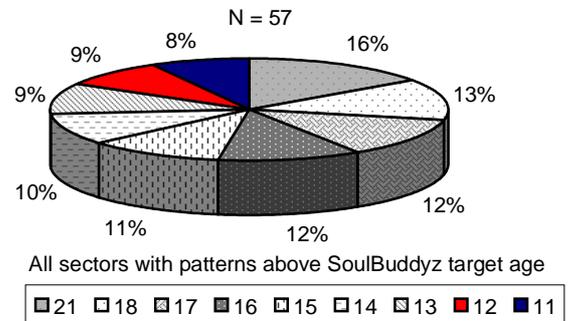


Figure 6: Ages of letter writers

**MATERIAL & INFORMATION REQUESTS**

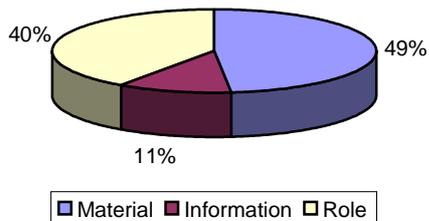


Figure 7: Proportions of letters containing requests for material, information or to audition for part.

**EXPLICITLY EXPRESSED POSITIVE SENTIMENTS**

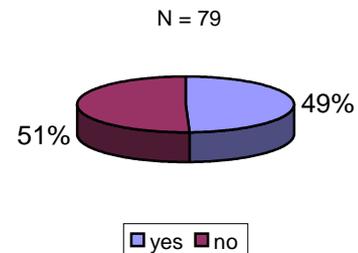


Figure 8: Proportion of letters explicitly using positively loaded words to describe SoulBuddyz.

**PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN LETTERS**

N = 79

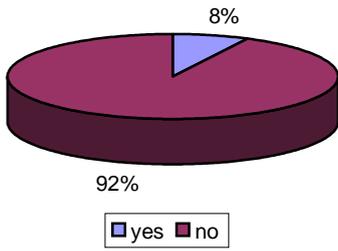


Figure 9: Proportion of letters relating personal experiences of the writers.

**MENTION OF ISSUES FROM MESSAGE BRIEFS**

N = 79

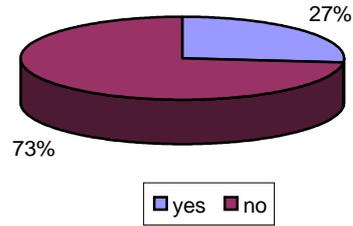


Figure 10: Proportion of letters that contain mention of issues also highlighted in the message briefs.

**SIGNS OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

N = 79

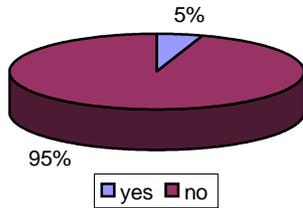


Figure 11: Proportion of letters where signs of parasocial relationships are evident.

**CORRECT APPLICATION OF KNOWLEDGE**

N = 79

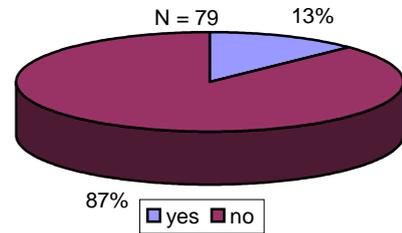


Figure 12: Proportion of letters containing correct application of knowledge contained in the lifeskills-booklets.

**FIRST TIME LETTER WRITERS**

N = 79

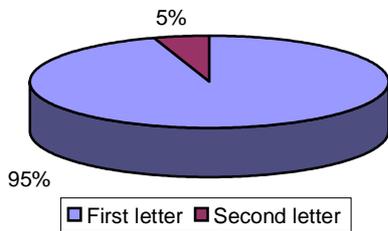


Figure 13: Proportion of letters written by first-time writers to the SCIHDC.

**FORMAT OF LETTER CONTENT**

N = 79

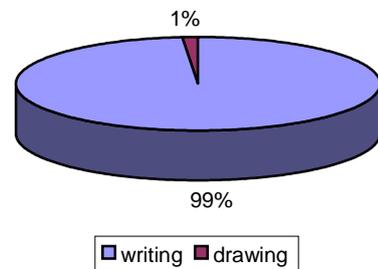


Figure 14: Almost all letters had written text as the main component.

**ADULT ASSISTANCE**

N = 79

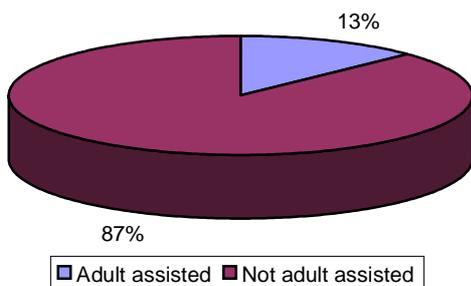


Figure 15: Letters with clear indications of adult assistance in writing

