Changing Minds on Girls’ Education Through TV Shows in Africa

Discovery Learning Alliance produced national talk shows under the banner of “Discovery+” in Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria which were broadcast through national TV stations to influence public dialogue and popular culture around education, especially for girls. A study on the effects of these shows indicate that messages from credible sources help viewers readily internalize messages on the value of education, spur the adoption of positive attitudes and practices toward girls’ education, have the potential to make sustainable changes in attitudes toward education, and stir notable positive shifts among viewers, especially among fathers and young women.

What are Discovery+ TV Shows about?

In order to shift attitudes and behaviors towards the value of girls’ education, Discovery Learning Alliance (DLA) in a strategic partnership with the UK Department for International Development (DFID) under their Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) initiative, created Discovery+ TV shows at the national level in Nigeria (Discovery+234), Ghana (Discovery+233), and Kenya (Discovery+254) from 2015 to 2016. Local production teams produced a total of 26 episodes in English for each country, and they were telecast in two seasons spread over a one-year period. The shows used top media personalities as hosts as well as celebrity guests, mini documentaries, interviews with people on the streets, and live musical performances to inspire, connect, entertain, and influence public dialogue and popular culture around the importance of girls’ education and to encourage girls to stay in school.

Study Methodology

To assess contributions of the shows in changing the attitudes and practices towards girls’ education, qualitative data were gathered by using focus group discussions (FGDs) in all three countries. The respondents in the FGDs included young rural and urban women and mothers and fathers with daughters. The out-come indicators were selected to capture changes contributable to the Discovery+ shows. The first round of FGDs were held before the shows aired - organized in the form of a viewer panel - where the participants viewed a pilot and held discussions both before and after they viewed the pilot show. Round two FGDs were held at the end of season two to understand if any changes in attitudes and practices had occurred among the target population. Contribution analysis using narratives was conducted to capture emerging themes from the discussions. By analyzing data for themes from round two and by comparing the results from both rounds, the study examined whether the viewers had been able to understand the key messages of the show and whether the messages had contributed to any changes in their attitudes and practices on education. While external validity, comparison of results across time, and attribution of results to the show are limited, the study offers valuable insights into the power of media messages and provides guidelines for designing successful shows in developing countries to foster public dialogue and spur changes.

Findings

The major findings across the three countries differed only slightly according to cultural norms, and indicated positive changes in attitudes and practices towards girls’ education among the shows’ viewers.

Viewers No Longer Question the Importance of Girls’ Education

Viewing the show appeared to equalize the attitude in the community regarding valuing boys’ and girls’ education. This was indicated by fewer and weaker debates on this issue after watching the shows compared to the debates prior to watching them. Previously, the participants often compared education of boys and girls and treated educating each of them as distinct activities. However, after two seasons of the shows, many study participants treated education as a ticket to success in general, and the gender of the person to be educated did not really seem to play a role in that success. Also, after watching the shows, many connected education to positive outcomes for girls, families, communities and the country as a whole, and they...
perceived that girls’ education specifically could make broader contributions to society.

“When you start at a tender age educating a girl child you are just not educating that child you are educating the whole community”.

The shows also appeared to contribute to positive societal attitudes about women’s empowerment and their aspiration for girls to be empowered as seen in a quote below:

“Before I didn’t like female empowerment. I didn’t like women in power and everything but with the good works that someone like Juliet Ibrahim [show guest] is doing, I think she said that she has a foundation, so with power look at what she is doing. Some-times when I watch that program, how the women are empowered through their education, I say that what if my daughter be comes someone like them in the future.”

Some female respondents realized the importance of girls’ education and decided to return to school and became more resilient when facing adversity.

“The show has helped me know that when am faced with a situation how do I go about solving things like rape, denying a girl child education or female genital mutilation what to do about it and what our rights are.” And, “For me, the program is like a driving force. I went to school, but my husband said he wants me to stay at home and be with the kids. But it got to a time I start-ed watching this program, I was like even without working for a company I can do something with my life”.

Viewers Internalize Connection between Education and Passion for Learning and Success

The viewers in general internalized the connection between education, passion for learning, and success since they appeared to be using the content of the Discovery+ program as they made decisions about their own lives, their daughters’ lives, and their families. The viewers’ responses showed that they now think about education more and girls’ education differently. More importantly, they recognized that they should behave differently in the future than they did in the past. Especially, it appeared that the Discovery+ messages about girls’ education stuck as were reflected in many viewers’ responses, and they also saw the connection between education, passion, and talent across all three countries as seen in quotes here. But, there were also few responses that alluded to some unintended outcomes. Some viewers gathered from the shows that one can succeed even without education if you have passion. Also, while some stories were intended to highlight the consequences of low education levels in northern Nigeria, some viewers in southern Nigeria interpreted them as perpetuating negative stereotypes of northern Nigerians.

“Will say that first of all there is the need for one to discover their talent and then have a passion for it and you need education. Also, need hard work and perseverance, it’s good to persevere, don’t be in a hurry. You have to start small and then with time and with your hard work, you are to become big. That’s one of the things that I want to say I learnt from the show.” And, “Bola Bello [show guest] said education is not just going to school, he said you should be good in whatever you are doing, you should put effort in doing it properly, not just going to the classroom to learn that. If it ends there, we all can just go to school”. And, “It [the shows] motivates me to do more in life and it also encourages me when I’m discouraged that okay look at Waje [show guest] there was no money to pay for her tuition fee but she still managed to succeed through this situation why can’t I do so after all she doesn’t have two heads but one so why can’t I so you will just realize that it is just determination.”

Positive Changes in Family Relationships Occur

Many of the viewers mentioned how watching the program influenced their behavior toward family members and their family relationships. Parents most frequently referred to how Discovery+ shows changed how they interacted with their daughters and sons.

This type of response emerged across all three countries, particularly among the fathers, on how Discovery+ shows specifically changed their attitudes and behavior towards education and girls’ education and their relationships with their daughters as well as with their wives. Many fathers reported that they had begun to support their wives who wanted to go back to school and helped their wives be role models for their daughters:

“When your daughter grows she might just emulate her mother. I heard it is important to consider the environment she grows in, what your daughter will do when she grows up. I tell my wife the things we do ourselves as a family will mold how our daughter will grow up.”

Many fathers also reported spending more time with their daughters and talking more about their futures.

“For me I got my daughter while in high school so my mother took her and stays upcountry with her. Before watching the program, I never used to care about my daughter. I rarely went up-country to visit her but after viewing the program I changed my view and now I visit her regularly as she might grow up thinking that her grandfather is her father. The relationship between a father and a daughter is very important.”
Parents also received parenting tips from the shows on how to improve their relationship with their children.

“I’m the kind of person that nags a lot, I have two children and I do spank them a lot. Watching this program, it changes me(spanking them), I learn I can talk to them, and I can only use a rod to just caution them.”

Some mothers also mentioned how the show changed how they treated their daughters.

“The program really helped me, before I used to shout at her because she can’t even wash plate or anything but now she is able to do something a bit. After the program, I now try to tell her that you have to do these things, one day you will get married like me. I try to encourage her so that she can go to school. The program helped me with the courage of talking to her.”

**Celebrities Help in Changing Attitudes**

The inclusion of local celebrity guests and the ability of the hosts to tease out their compelling personal stories appeared to have contributed to viewers’ attitude and behavior change. Celebrity guest stories that focused on returning to school after personal misfortunes or unexpected pregnancies or rapes and ways they overcame adversity by working hard and following their passions were effective.

“Aisha [guest] gave birth when she was still in school. Right now if you give birth when you are still in school you can imagine the insults. If you try to talk to the teacher, they tell you ‘Go breast feed your baby. Why are you still here?’ She went through some-thing almost similar and it did not hinder her from being a journalist. She persevered until she got somewhere. Now she is a prominent TV presenter.” And, “Personally I had the mentality to change my life but I could not because of age and children and because of Victoria [guest] story I said I will support myself and from her story I went to back to school and one day I will on this show telling my story.”

The guests’ stories also seemed to resonate with viewers on what it meant to be an educated woman in today’s African communities and that contributed to describing women based on their intellect rather than beauty.

“Education is most important in someone life because according to Ireti [Guest] she said that you cannot be beautiful without education. She said that womanhood goes beyond a pretty face and you know the prettier you are, the harder for you to make an impact because if you feel that you are just pretty and you will use your beauty to pass every door. Those days are gone. These days, even in beauty pageant, it is beauty and brains, you don’t just come out and say I’m beautiful. You have to educate, and you have to discover yourself.”

**Limited Use of Social Media**

The viewers’ use of social media was found to be rare among rural communities although urban communities tend to use it more for communication among their peers. Among social media, YouTube was the only mentioned platform, but many noted that they “don’t enjoy it on YouTube [because] it’s very short...they will just take two minutes and they are off.” Some urban viewers were aware that parts of the show also appeared on Instagram, and there were only few mentions of Facebook and Twitter. The viewers used the social media plat-forms to watch what they missed and to share with their friends and coworkers. When people share YouTube clips with their friends and coworkers it can have a profound effect, especially when some of the topics discussed on the show are often missing from regular mass media. Also, word of mouth dissemination of messages lacked the power of visuals to make changes. There was no mention among the study participants of using social media, phone, or letters to interact with the guests and hosts and to provide quick feedback on the shows although the hosts provided their contact information. Such interaction and feedback could help hosts understand viewers’ perspectives in real time in order to design subsequent shows and to keep the audience motivated.

**Conclusions**

The **Discovery+** shows appeared to have contributed to viewers developing positive attitudes and intended practices about education, specifically on girls’ education. Most viewers illustrated thoughtful reflections on how the content of the programs changed their practices, notably among fathers and rural young women.

The discussions around the value of education in the communities or what it means to be an educated woman in Africa suggests that it is an opportune time for **Discovery+** to truly affect how education is discussed in these countries.

The responses reflecting personal practices where a participant had actually taken the advice or enacted the behavior gleaned from **Discovery+** shows is currently not many. But, the viewers certainly appeared to be strongly contemplating making changes based on watching the shows. This is indeed an important step to behavior change.
In all, the Discovery+ shows seemed to inspire, entertain, connect, and inform the viewers from many demographic types due to the carefully chosen content suited to local contexts, which was produced and hosted by local teams alongside local celebrities. The hosts’ abilities, especially that of the female hosts, to portray their experiences realistically connected well with the viewers, and eventually parents saw them as role models for their daughters.

**Recommendations**

**Increase the outreach of the shows**

Given the positive outcomes of the show with a broad audience, more outreach of the shows could help improve girls’ education in these countries. But, the viewership of the show still seemed to be limited due to logistical challenges and language barriers. Televising on TV channels that are generally watched by the target audience and at appropriate time slots that do not clash with sports and very popular shows, and use of local dialects and languages can help with outreach. Also, call-in sessions where audience members could ask celebrity guests questions, episodes with follow-up interviews, conducting fund-raising to help the people who appeared in the mini documentaries, and alternating hosts for the shows with celebrities, couples or youth can improve shows’ popularity and outreach.

**Monitor for unintended consequences**

Discovery+ needs to carefully monitor for any unintended negative messages taken from the show and address them by retooling the shows, if needed. There were some indications that the show’s primary focus on guests’ talents and passions and secondary focus on guests’ education could potentially limit viewers’ interest in formal education as seen in this quote: “Education is the key to success in our society but some of the guests like Mbusi who is not well educated also became successful. So, success doesn't depend on your education or something but success is deeply rooted on your outlook on life and how motivated you are. So you might not be that educated but that doesn’t mean you can’t succeed as you can always go back to school when you have money to pay fees”. Also, Discovery+ should balance the choice of celebrities and their stories on the shows to avoid any stereotyping of communities from different regions and ethnicities.

**Ensure sustainability of the show’s contribution**

There was evidence linking attitude and behavior changes, either through contemplation or actual, to viewing the shows indicating resonance of messages with the viewers. The long-term sustainability of the changes, however, are not yet known. But, continuation of the show may serve as a constant motivator to the viewers and can remind them about the value of education, and it would be best if key messages are reinforced often to sustain the positive attitudes toward girls’ education. An outcome such as fathers making it a regular practice to ask their daughters the simple question of what they want to be when they grow up can have long lasting effects. Also, Discovery+ may consider ways to integrate call-to-action messages into future episodes to get viewers to take steps beyond contemplating the positive messages about education they are seeing and hearing and put them to action for lasting effects.

**Realize and utilize the power of social media**

Discovery+ needs to develop a social media strategy that incentivizes viewers to actually follow the show’s social media accounts by having the celebrities take over the Discovery+ social media accounts on the day of their interviews to gather more followers and interactions, for instance. Social media takeovers work by having the celebrities, who typically have high numbers of followers, tell their followers that they will be posting on the Discovery+ accounts for the day or week and this tactic has proven to be an effective strategy for many successful shows.

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