

The Value of Media Studies Approaches for the Evaluation of Entertainment Education: A Case Study of *East Los High*

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Abstract

As entertainment education (EE) becomes an increasingly popular medium for delivering health information, evaluation of EE is key to better understanding how it not only influences audiences but also how it can be better implemented. We suggest that EE evaluation has largely focused on impact while its implementation, specifically through narrative, characters, and genre, has remained unexplored. We propose drawing from theories and methods used in media studies to complement current approaches to understanding and evaluation of EE that can help improve EE for health education. *East Los High* serves as a case study, through which we examine the characters and the narrative demands of the telenovela genre to reveal a disproportional depiction of Latino men and women that ultimately replays familiar Latino stereotypes of criminality and exaggerated sexuality. We discuss the implications this has on the show's ability to do public health work.

Keywords [entertainment education](#), [evaluation](#), [health communication](#), [media](#), [television](#), [textual film analysis](#)

As people increasingly turn to television and entertainment for health information ([Brodie et al., 2001](#)), health communication developers are turning to entertainment education (EE) and other narrative forms of communication for health behavior change ([Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007](#)). EE incorporates health and other educational messages into popular entertainment media with the goal of positively influencing awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and/or behaviors ([Moyer-Gusé, 2008](#)). Prosocial messages embedded in popular television

programs, such as *Friends* and *ER*, have been found to influence viewers' awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors on issues ranging from condom efficacy (Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003) to the use of cancer patient navigators (Marcus, Huang, Beck, & Miller, 2010).

Evaluation of EE narratives is key to better understanding how they not only affect audiences but also how they can be better implemented for more effective health communication. We suggest that the evaluation of EE efforts has largely focused on impact while the implementation, specifically through narratives, characters, and genre, has remained unexplored. In process evaluation, we examine whether program activities have been implemented as intended. Similarly, while producers intend to create EE that promotes certain health attitudes and behaviors, viewers may interpret and respond to the narrative in different, unanticipated ways. We draw from Hall's encoding and decoding theoretical model (Hall, 1980) and textual film analysis used in media studies to illuminate challenges in implementation of EE, which can ultimately affect intended outcomes. The show *East Los High* serves as a case study.

Evaluation of Entertainment Education

Many health communication scholars attribute the beginning of EE to Miguel Sábido, a Latin American artist and intellectual who developed a methodology articulating a theoretical and empirical research-based formula to create soap operas with media messages that initiate socially desirable attitudes and behaviors (Nariman, 1993). Central to Sábido soap operas is that individuals learn behavior by observing role models (Bandura, 1977, 1986), thus demanding three types of characters: those who support the desired behavior (positive role models), those who reject the behavior (negative role models), and those who change from negative to positive behavior (transitional characters) (Singhal & Rogers, 2012). These archetypal characters are present in a melodramatic context in which the moral universes of good and evil are in discord, encouraging the audience to champion forces of good over evil and support the positive behavior (Nariman, 1993).

Given this history, it is unsurprising that the evaluation of EE thus far has focused largely on audience outcomes, particularly changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors after being exposed to a narrative (Gillig, Rosenthal, Murphy, & Folb, 2018; Hether, Huang, Beck, Murphy, & Valente, 2008; Love & Tanjasiri, 2012; Morgan, Movius, & Cody, 2009; Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013). Methods for EE evaluation in the 1980s and 1990s relied primarily on audience surveys, which has since expanded to experimental designs assessing the effects of narrative persuasion mechanisms on viewers and qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, to understand the viewer experience (Singhal & Rogers, 2002; Wang & Singhal, 2016). This research is typically grounded in traditional

health behavior and communication theories, such as social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) and elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), to explain how media can persuade or model socially desirable attitudes and behaviors. More recently, Green and Brock have theorized how the degree of narrative transportation and character involvement can influence audience outcomes (Green & Brock, 2000, 2002). While these theoretical models attempt to explain the impact of media on viewers, they are limited in their ability to critically examine the media text itself.

The narratives and characters used to deliver health information can carry implicit messages affecting how the media text, such as a television show, influences behavioral outcomes. However, thus far, public health scholars have given little attention to the media text. Given this is a major focus in media studies, we propose drawing from media studies to complement current methods of evaluating health narratives. We focus on Hall's model of encoding and decoding, which proposes that the "message" of a media text as inscribed by producers (encoding) is not simply received by the audience, but that viewers are active interpreters of what they watch (decoding), allowing interpretations of the text that may differ from the intended meaning (Dines & Humez, 2003; Hall, 1980). Textual film analysis, which is largely interpretative and qualitative, aims to understand latent meaning of media texts using semiotics, in which signs, including words, visual images, colors, or objects, carry meaning and can be interpreted through multiple lenses, such as race or gender (Bordwell & Thompson, 1993; Dines & Humez, 2003; Larsen, 2012; Van Damme, 2010). Television shows are also a result of production decisions catered toward the producers' goals (Dines & Humez, 2003). For example, in order to make a show successful, and ultimately make a profit, producers may choose a specific genre or cast a specific actor that resonates with its target audience. Exploring the latent meaning of the media text, particularly within the context of its production, can reveal ways in which characters or the narrative may affect the convergence of the text encoding and audience decoding, either promoting or hindering effective health communication. Unanticipated consequences of EE approaches to health education due to character portrayals, narratives, and genre have also been reported in other EE studies (Houghton et al., 2017; Tully & Ekdale, 2014). For example, a zombie-based narrative created to promote emergency preparedness unintentionally promoted a focus on firearms (Houghton et al., 2017). In this context, textual analysis can identify which images, characters, narratives, or how the zombie genre itself may have implicitly promoted the use of firearms. Collectively, these studies call for methods that can explore all aspects of the messages implicit in the medium chosen in EE-based interventions (Houghton et al., 2017).

East Los High: A Case Study

Lasting four seasons, *East Los High* (2013-2017), is a prime example of one of the latest major efforts in EE. Celebrated for the ways it challenges the hegemony of Hollywood through both its production and content, the teen soap opera has earned attention and praise for its all Latino cast and crew and its authentic depiction of Latino youth living in east Los Angeles (Sachdev, 2014). As a public health intervention, *East Los High* uses principles of EE and transmedia storytelling to reach, engage, and ultimately influence young Latino/a American knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors as a response to persisting challenges in teen pregnancy and adolescent reproductive health (Wang & Singhal, 2016). An evaluation of the first season demonstrated wide audience reach, strong viewer engagement, and a positive cognitive, emotional, and social impact on reproductive health education (Wang & Singhal, 2016).

Population Media Center (PMC) is a Vermont nonprofit organization that uses the Sábido methodology to develop EE around the world (PMC, 2018b). PMC produced the first season of *East Los High*, but subsequent seasons were produced by Wise Entertainment on PMC's behalf (PMC, 2018a) and took on a wider range of social issues, including bullying, undocumented immigrants, and voting. Although Sábido soap operas use the same conventions of soap operas, Sábido soap operas employ a specific approach involving role modeling based on theories of communication and behavior change (Nariman, 1993), which is central to explaining production decisions behind *East Los High*.

Given the mission of PMC, the conceptualization of *East Los High* emerged from formative research on the persistently high rates of teen pregnancy among Latina women in the United States (PMC, 2014). Guided by Hall's encoding and decoding model, we conducted textual film analysis to examine Seasons 1 (24 episodes) and 2 (12 episodes) of *East Los High* to deconstruct production decisions made to enact the demands of the Sábido soap opera and promote positive social and health behaviors (encoding), and how viewers may consequently interpret the text (decoding). In media studies, textual film analysis with one coder is acceptable, acknowledging that each reading of a text is only one possible reading from one critic's perspective (Dines & Humez, 2003). However, we can determine "likely interpretations" of the text by drawing from (1) other texts (i.e., multiple episodes, seasons), (2) genre of the text, (3) intertexts (publicly circulated texts explicitly linked to the text, including online posts, reviews, or news articles) about the text, and (4) the wider public context (McKee, 2003). One coder (GK) qualitatively coded all episodes of Seasons 1 and 2 for ways in which characters, visual imagery, and dialogue enacted the narrative demands of the telenovela genre as required by the Sábido approach. Patterns quickly emerged around the construction of race and how this differed by gender, prompting closer examination of how character dynamics (i.e., romantic relationships, friendships), visual imagery (i.e., costume, physical appearance), as well as mise en scène (i.e., lighting, music) reinforced gender differences. These patterns were then contextualized within the literature around

Latino media representation, the telenovela genre, and the Sábido methodology as well as news articles written about *East Los High* and promotion videos from show producers. Together, this literature can reveal producers' intentions and vision for the show, genre conventions that determine the narrative and characters, and how character portrayals ultimately fit into the history of Latino media representation. Results were discussed among coauthors to describe how observed patterns revealed a complicated and disproportionate representation of race and gender that consequently marginalizes Latino men from the conversation around reproductive health.

Narrative Demands of the Telenovela

Historically, the soap opera or telenovela was developed as a woman's form, designed to influence women's behaviors as consumers and address female desire (Gledhill, 1992). Thus, the telenovela is an appropriate genre for *East Los High's* target audience of Latina women. One of the golden rules of telenovelas is upholding moral order requiring mythopoetic archetypes of the victim, protector, fool, and the villain (Lorand, 2002). In the Sábido approach, the moral order is upheld by the constant struggle between good and evil waged by characters who accept the proposed social behavior representing the forces of good against those who reject the social behavior representing the forces of evil (Nariman, 1993). However, *East Los High* repeatedly grafts the moral right and wrong onto gender revealing challenges in equitable representation of gender when meeting the narrative demands of the telenovela genre.

In following the conventions of the telenovela, men in *East Los High* are often vilified, whereas women represent innocence and virtue. For example, a major arc of Season 2 follows Ceci (Danielle Vega) struggling in an abusive relationship with her partner Pedro (René Alvarado). Pedro is initially depicted as a loving, doting boyfriend, but behind this façade is regular domestic violence at home. The juxtaposition of the abusive and loving image of Pedro creates suspense and propels the season forward. In this narrative, Ceci represents the mythopoetic archetype of the victim, trapped in the cycle of rationalizing the physical and psychological abuse. Given the centrality of role modeling to Sábido soap operas, the show must depict how Latinas experience and ultimately overcome situations like domestic abuse and teen pregnancy. Ceci's experience thus performs an educational role as she navigates the resources available to domestic violence victims through which the audience can learn how to overcome similar challenges. However, by presenting these scenarios for women, male characters become disproportionately associated with the discourse of violence that is routine in the history of Latin media representation.

Consequences for the Construction of *Latinidad*

The grafting of the moral right and wrong onto gender due to the narrative demands of the *Sábido* soap opera has consequences on the construction of *latinidad*. While the representation of Latinos has shifted over time in film and television, the underlying tropes of *latinidad* as alien, threatening, and unassimilable “Other” often remain intact and continue to shape public perceptions of the Latino population (Noriega, 2000; Ruiz, 2015). While there are earnest efforts to complicate *latinidad* in *East Los High*, especially among its female characters, the show occasionally relies on old stereotypes portraying Latinos as threatening and criminal (Ruiz, 2015) or exotic and provocative (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005).

Given the centrality of role modeling in the *Sábido* approach, *East Los High* goes to great lengths to diversify its cast and challenge traditional depictions of Latina women with female characters representing a wide spectrum of gender identity, body size, socioeconomic status, and careers. For example, Ceci (Danielle Vega) is a teen mother and high school drop-out, while Aunt Paulina (Catalina Rodriguez) is a successful fashion executive living in New York City.

However, this complex depiction of Latinas contrasts the show’s depiction of men, who are disproportionately associated with a discourse of violence. Episode 1 of Season 1 opens with Maya (Alicia Sixtos) frantically gathering her belongings. As she heads for the door, a grimacing, older man appears from the shadows and grabs Maya from behind, who the audience discovers is the season’s villain Ramón (Richard Azurdia). This scene sets the tone for a major arc of Season 1 following Ramón’s manhunt for Maya and the secret behind their relationship, intertwined with drug lords, violence, and rape. Ramón’s violent character, predominantly Spanish speech, and darker skin tone exemplifies an exaggerated Latino masculinity, or machismo, that is a common trope found in the history of Latino media images.

Cristian (Hector David Jr.), another major male character of Season 1, is a light skinned, handsome professional dancer. Although Cristian’s visuals drastically contrast those of Ramón, Cristian also perpetrates violence by seducing girls for his own interests and social status. Cristian displays characteristics of the “male Latin lover,” depicting an exotic, provocative, sexually frivolous Latino/a (Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005). For a favor, Cristian seduces the virgin Jessie (Janine Larina) as a part of Vanessa’s (Tracy Perez) plot to seek revenge. When Jessie reveals that she is pregnant, Cristian refuses to take responsibility and endures no consequences. Moreover, in the first season’s opening credits, the two main male characters, Jacob (Gabriel Chavarria) and Cristian, appear undressed. Although potentially appealing in capturing the gaze of young Latinas, male bodies are consequently presented with exaggerated sexuality.

Implications for Public Health

As a *Sábido* soap opera, *East Los High* does significant work to reach Latina women through the careful selection of genre, characters, and narrative, but does so at the expense of replaying an old, uncomplicated view of Latino men confined to a discourse of violence or exaggerated sexuality. These representations may consequently marginalize men from the conversation around reproductive health by consistently identifying men as barriers or unimportant to the social and health behaviors promoted by the show. Although women's bodies are an essential part of the reproductive health discourse, the quality of sexual decision making among partners is dependent on communicative behaviors displayed by both partners (Sachdev, 2014). Thus, a more comprehensive strategy to address adolescent reproductive health would be inclusive of the issues and pressures experienced by all genders. Moreover, the disproportionate portrayal of gender may influence women's expectations of men and their roles in sexual decision making, prompting critical examination of the execution of the *Sábido* soap opera to promote positive sexual health behaviors. To our knowledge, the challenges in developing characters that model socially desirable behaviors without relying on racial and ethnic or gender stereotypes exposes a challenge in EE that has not yet been discussed in the current scholarship.

Conclusion

Although this case study only scratches the surface, it reveals the challenges of using the *Sábido* approach in EE for reproductive health education and demonstrates the potential hidden costs, such as reinforcing stereotypes of race, gender, and sexuality, which can have unintended consequences on viewer impact. Although the *Sábido* methodology may provide a useful framework for entertainment promoting behavior change, it does not provide clear guidelines about the careful construction of gender and race. How to optimize the use of EE narratives is still being understood. We find Hall's encoding and decoding model to be useful in orienting researchers about how audiences may interpret the messaging in EE content differently than intended, which can affect desired behavioral outcomes. Textual film analysis can help practitioners critically examine content to identify media representations that may be hindering health communication and thus illuminate challenges in implementation and inform opportunities for improvement of EE.

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