



Aligning the stars in *East Los High*: How authentic characters and storylines can translate into real-life changes through transmedia edutainment

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ABSTRACT

The present article analyses the creative production processes and audience reception aspects of *East Los High*, an exemplary Hollywood-based edutainment initiative that purposely leveraged transmedia storytelling to address highly salient issues—teen pregnancy and reproductive health—for Latinx youth in the United States. We investigate how *East Los High*'s creative team and subject-matter specialists aligned the transmedia narrative—comprising of an edutainment web series and nine digital extensions—with its social objectives. We do so by drawing on a treasure trove of data sources—personal interviews with the creators, writers, and executive producers of *East Los High*; archival analysis of various project materials; a web-based audience survey of 202 viewers with an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of responses to the open-ended questions. Our analysis suggests that the creative process to develop richly-textured characters and plot lines in *East Los High* was guided by an uncompromising attention to information accuracy and cultural authenticity and accomplished its purpose of being perceived as a programme by, of, and for Latinx Americans.

Keywords: *East Los High*, *transmedia edutainment*, *narrative authenticity*, *character identification*, *audience response*

Aligning the Stars in *East Los High*: How Authentic Characters and Storylines Can Translate into Real-Life Changes through Transmedia Edutainment¹

“East Los High changed my life...I learned a lot of things that my sex-ed class didn't talk to us about such as abortion and other [contraceptive] options. It taught me that I have choices and responsibilities. I know now...that I need to follow my dreams and change my whole life.”

A 14-year old Latina viewer of *East Los High*

In the pantheon of prominent global media interventions, *East Los High*—a Hollywood-based entertainment-education initiative that purposely leveraged transmedia storytelling to address critical challenges for Latinx youth in the United States—would likely find a noticeable place. Originally released in June 2013 on a popular streaming service Hulu, *East Los High*'s 60 episodes were webcast across four seasons every summer, concluding with an hour-long finale special in December 2017. The web series was purposely designed to fulfil the unmet needs of English-speaking Latinx Americans for an authentic cultural representation in the entertainment media (Jenkins, 2015). It covered a wide range of pressing issues, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), teen pregnancy, reproductive rights, dating violence, LGBTQ identity, immigration and voting.

Season 1 of *East Los High* made history as the first original English-language show with an all-Latinx cast, creators and writers (Castro, 2013). In addition, in Season 1, Hulu valiantly supported the producers' vision of not only creating a story world that would attract audience members to engage with the engrossing teen drama, but also extend and enrich their experience through digital transmedia extensions, carefully-curated content on EastLosHigh.com, and affiliated social media platforms (K. E. Mota, personal communication, July 10, 2013). Constituting a compelling mesh of characters and intersecting storylines, *East Los High* was not only a big hit with its audience, it also received wide national and global acclaim from prestigious juries, including the Cannes Lions Award and five Emmy nominations.²

We³ were fortunate to lead a mixed method programme evaluation of *East Los High*, several facets of which have been detailed elsewhere (Sachdev & Singhal, 2015; Wang & Singhal, 2016; Wang, Xu, Saxton & Singhal, 2019). In this article, we provide critical insights on how the project partners—be it the creative team or the research and subject-matter experts⁴—worked together to align the transmedia narrative with its social objectives. We draw upon various data sources, especially centring around *East Los High* Season 1, including personal interviews with the creators, writers, and executive producers; archival analysis of project materials; an audience online survey of 202 viewers, including 110 young Latina women—the primary target audience of the show⁵—and their responses to the open-ended questions. We begin with an overview of *East Los High*, introducing the main characters and plots of the web series and detailing the various digital extensions to illustrate the concept of transmedia edutainment. We then review the steps undertaken to ensure information accuracy and cultural authenticity, honouring the tenet that its story world was a product by, of, and for Latinx Americans. We also analyse the creative process of developing the character arcs to more deeply understand why the audience members found them to be appealing. We end by reflecting on the major lessons learned about creating effective transmedia edutainment interventions—a strategic approach that is bound to proliferate in the converging world of digital and mobile networks.

EAST LOS HIGH: A TRANSMEDIA EDUTAINMENT EXEMPLAR

The term “transmedia edutainment” is a shorthand for entertainment-education through transmedia storytelling (Wang & Singhal, 2016). Entertainment-education or edutainment, is a theory-informed communication strategy that leverages the power of storytelling in various forms of entertainment for health promotion and social change (Singhal, Cody, Rogers & Sabido, 2004; Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Wang & Singhal, 2009). Narratives in entertainment-education programmes are based on formative research, designed with clear objectives, and monitored closely in order to meaningfully engage the target audience and accomplish desired outcomes (Singhal et al., 2004; Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

In the 1970s, Mexican television writer-producer-director Miguel Sabido developed a production framework for entertainment-education serial dramas (commonly referred to as the Sabido methodology), using archetypal characters to model positive, negative, and transitional behaviours and call attention to services required to facilitate positive change. Between 1975 and 1982, Sabido produced seven *telenovelas* that were not only commercial hits but also led to higher enrolment in adult literacy education and adoption of family planning methods, significantly improving the lives of millions (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). This Mexican experience, in the past four decades, has directly or indirectly inspired the creation of thousands of entertainment-education initiatives globally, evolving from predominantly radio and television dramas to other types of entertainment such as music videos, cartoons, and video games (Singhal, 2013a; Singhal, Wang, & Rogers, 2013; Wang & Singhal, 2018; Yue, Wang, & Singhal, 2019).

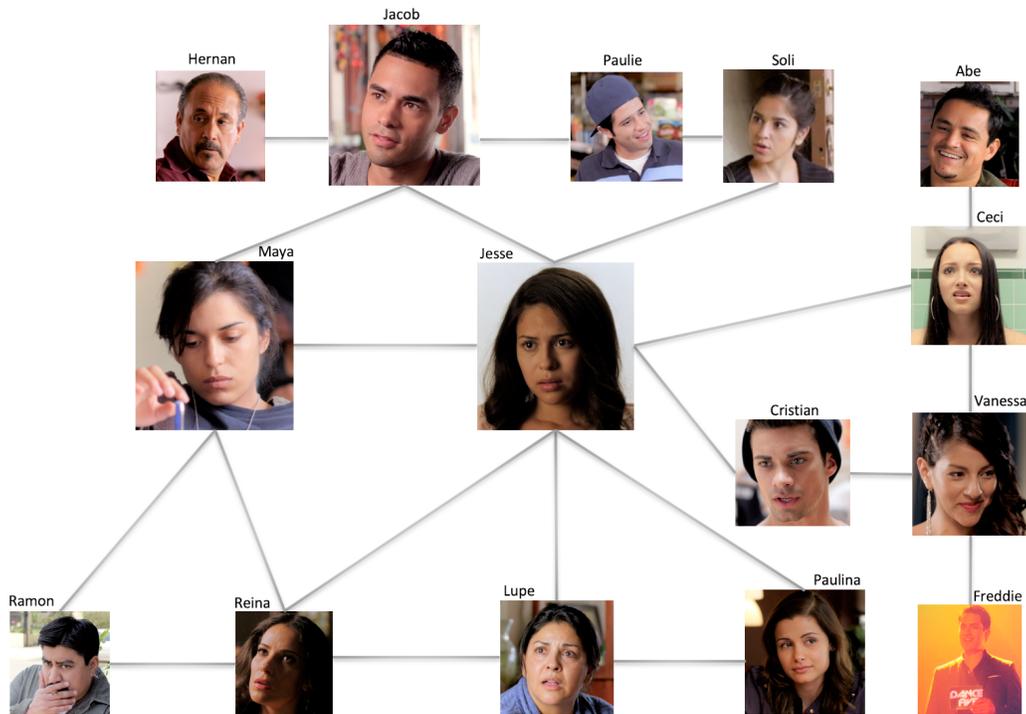
A rising phenomenon in entertainment-education programming is transmedia storytelling, a process where various narrative elements are strategically designed and implemented in a coordinated fashion across different communication platforms over time to create a coherent and compelling entertainment experience (Davidson et al., 2010; Jenkins, 2007; Singhal et al., 2013). Transmedia storytelling would not have been possible without the digitization, miniaturization, and convergence of media technologies and participatory culture among the younger generations (Jenkins, 2006). Although transmedia storytelling has been successfully employed in recent decades to further commercial interests in such programmes as *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Doctor Who* and *Pokémon*, its purposeful implementation as entertainment-education is a relatively new-fangled reality (Singhal et al., 2013).

Transmedia storytelling holds several unique advantages for reaching underprivileged audience members and also bringing people together from otherwise fragmented media markets to participate in the popular culture (Jenkins, 2006, 2007). Unlike most multimedia interventions, first and foremost, transmedia does not simply repeat the same story on different media platforms (Gomez, 2013). Second, transmedia does not create a linear singular story but rather an overarching story world across multiple platforms. Each communication platform carries the story independently, but the interwoven tapestry makes a richer whole, deepening the audience members’ relationship with the characters, the plot lines, and the issues (Davidson et al., 2010). Third, transmedia has multiple entry points and a much lower threshold for audience engagement, because each narrative element is self-contained and can appeal to users who have a preference and consumption habit of a particular modality, e.g. television dramas vs. newspapers vs. short videos (Jenkins, 2007). Taken together, the audience’s experience with transmedia storytelling is more exploratory, sensory, robust and fun.

East Los High is one of the first elaborate and systematically-designed intervention that integrated transmedia storytelling with entertainment-education (Singhal, 2013b). Set in a fictional high school in East Los Angeles (hence the title *East Los High*), its carefully-crafted constellation

of characters created a gritty, edgy, and provocative story world for its audience. Table 1 provides a map of its main characters, their interpersonal relationships, and their key dilemmas/decisions in Season 1.

Table 1. *East Los High* Season 1 Main Characters



Character Name	Actor/Actress	Character Description
Jacob Aguilar	Gabriel Chavarria	Jacob is the only child to his single father Hernan who runs a <i>Taqueria</i> , a Mexican family restaurant. He is a handsome and popular high school senior and star of the football team. Jacob initiates a romantic relationship with Jessie, but respects her until she is ready for sex. However, he soon finds himself falling in love with Jessie’s cousin Maya while they work together at <i>Taqueria</i> . Ready to break up with Jessie, Jacob learns that Jessie is pregnant. Met with expectations from his father and Jessie’s mother, he turns down a full-ride college scholarship to marry Jessie. When Jessie reveals having had unprotected sex with Cristian, he immediately calls off the wedding and reaches for Maya, his true love.
Jessie Martinez	Janine Larina	A nerdy high school junior, Jessie is the only daughter to her single mother Lupe who is ill with breast cancer. A member of the secret “Virgin Club” with her best friend Soli, she enjoys a loving relationship with Jacob, until she is seduced by Cristian and loses her virginity. Once pregnant, Jessie is caught in a web of family expectations and weighed down by her conservative faith. Uncertain about the pregnancy and devastated by her mother’s terminal illness, Jessie clings to Jacob and moves forward to marry him, kicking Maya out of the house. With her aunt Paulina’s encouragement, she musters the courage to reveal the truth to Jacob and ultimately decides to abort the baby.

Maya Martinez	Alicia Marie Sixtos	Maya moves in with her cousin Jessie and aunt Lupe to escape Ramon, her mother's violent boyfriend who raped her. Desperate and hungry, she steals a meal from the <i>Taqueria</i> , where Jacob's father gives her a second chance by offering her a job. As they work at the <i>Taqueria</i> , Maya and Jacob begin to fall in love. Meanwhile, Maya's healthy Mexican recipes revitalize the business. Jacob promises Maya that he would break up with Jessie but that changes when Jessie becomes pregnant with what Jacob believes to be his child. When Jessie kicks Maya out of her home, Maya faces tremendous hardships. She and Jacob finally reconcile when Jacob calls off his wedding with Jessie.
Vanessa De La Cruz	Tracy Perez	Vanessa is a dance diva and senior captain of Bomb Squad, the school's dance team. Popular and flirtatious, she is Jacob's girlfriend until she cheats on him, paving the way for Jacob to fall for Jessie. She plots revenge, conspiring for Cristian to "de-virginize" Jessie. Vanessa trades sex for favours and contracts HIV through unprotected sex with Freddie, a television personality.
Cristian Camacho	Hector David Jr.	Cristian is a sexy and opportunistic dancer who is Vanessa's casual sex partner. To advance his dance career, he schemes with Vanessa to seduce Jessie and impregnates her. Further, he denies responsibility for Jessie's pregnancy.
Freddie Garcia	David Warshol	Freddie hosts <i>Dance Five</i> , the TV dance competition and accepts Vanessa's offer for sex in exchange for granting Bomb Squad an audition for <i>Dance Five</i> . He refuses to wear a condom and be tested when Vanessa notifies him of her HIV positive status.
Ceci Camayo	Danielle Vega	Ceci, a co-captain of the Bomb Squad, is Vanessa's best friend and best enemy. Ceci becomes pregnant after enjoying unprotected sex with Abe, her steady boyfriend. Ceci struggles through life as she progresses from considering abortion, to putting up her child for adoption, to eventually deciding on motherhood. She brings the pregnancy to term and chooses to parent, experiencing the consequences of dropping out of school, moving into a shelter for pregnant teens, losing her boyfriend, and working as a nanny to make ends meet.
Abe	Jessie Garcia	Ceci's steady boyfriend who is much older than her. He didn't pull out during their sexual intercourse leading to Ceci's pregnancy. He deserts Ceci to fend for herself a few months into her pregnancy.
Soli Gomez	Noemí González	Soli is a junior and Jessie's best friend. A spirited and confident teenager, she serves as the editor for <i>The Siren</i> —the school newspaper. Soli works with Paulie to produce <i>Ask Paulie</i> , a light-hearted Q&A segment where Paulie provides safe-sex advice to neophytes. As she falls in love with Paulie, Soli insists on not rushing into sex and the importance of engaging in safe and protected sex. When they have sex for the first time—after Soli has been on the pill for some time, she and Paulie both reach for condoms at the same time. Further, Soli is a member of the Virgin Club and is viewed as a trusted resource and advocate for sexual and reproductive health, including information about emergency contraception.
Paulie Hernandez	Jorge Diaz	Paulie is a senior and Jacob's best friend. A self-proclaimed sex addict, Paulie is a likeable and quirky class clown. Joining the school newspaper, <i>The Siren</i> , on a whim, he hosts <i>Ask Paulie</i> , a humorous segment to answer real questions about sex. His past experience in handling a sexually transmitted infection (STI) informs his show and his insistence on safe-sex practices. In falling in love with his boss, Soli, Paulie increasingly appreciates the value of openly communicating about sexual and reproductive health behaviours.

Hernan Aguilar	Rubén Garfias	Jacob's father, a widower and single parent. He runs a <i>Taqueria</i> to support Jacob's education. Kind-hearted, he also hires Maya to work for him after he caught her stealing a meal.
Lupe Martinez	Mónica Guzmán	Jessie's mother who worked multiple jobs to pay the bills and support Jessie's education. Diagnosed with breast cancer, she asks Jacob to promise her that he would take care of Jessie.
Paulina Martinez	Catalina Rodriguez	Lupe and Reina's sister and aunt to Jessie and Maya. An alum of East Los Angeles High School, Paulina graduated from college and works in the fashion industry. She returns to East LA to help Lupe after her breast cancer diagnosis. Paulina spends a lot of time with Maya and Jessie, emphasizing the importance of safe sex in light of both of her sisters (Lupe and Reina) becoming pregnant before age 16. Paulina escorts Maya to a neighbourhood clinic for HIV-testing when Maya reveals that she was raped. Further, in the highly dramatic scene where Jacob and Jessie are to wed, she discloses to Jessie about her own abortion when she was in high school. She delivers an inspirational commencement address about accountability and responsibility to mark the end of Season 1.
Reina Martinez	Jossara Jinaro	Sister to Lupe and Paulina and Maya's mother. She left home early, and as a teenage mom raised Maya with great difficulty while dealing with Ramon, her violent and rogue boyfriend.
Ramon	Richard Azurdia	Reina's boyfriend who is extremely violent and a drug abuser and pusher. When he rapes Maya, she steals his drugs and escapes to East Los Angeles.

Source: EastLosHigh.com and imdb.com; adapted and expanded from Sachdev and Singhal (2015).

What made *East Los High* distinctive was its deliberate and purposeful transmedia edutainment approach to creating plot lines and richly-textured characters. The creators carefully embedded accurate information about safe sex, birth control, family planning, and women's reproductive rights into the major storylines and character arcs, circumspectly linking these issues with actionable resources so audience members could dig deeper, access services, and connect with providers (K. Bedoya, personal communication, April 16, 2019). In its transmedia embodiment, *East Los High* was not just one unfolding web series, rather it encompassed a rich story world with multiple narrative elements strategically rolled out across nine other digital platforms—all anchored through the show's website (see Figure 1):

- (1) Extended scenes to deepen character development and issue engagement;
- (2) *The Siren* school newspaper that gave young people a voice to tell their own stories;
- (3) *Ask Paulie*, a segment that allowed Paulie to answer embarrassing sex questions with humour;
- (4) Ceci's vlogs, a channel through which viewers could follow her teen pregnancy journey of dilemmas, options, and social support;
- (5) Tio Pepe's recipes from Maya for tasty and healthy Mexican cooking;
- (6) Dance tutorials of the high school's Bomb Squad with signature moves as they prepare for the *Dance Five* competition;
- (7) *La Voz* with Xavi to take pride in exploring cultural activities in East Los Angeles;
- (8) Comic strips for visualising trendy yet important social topics with an edge; and
- (9) Public service announcements (PSAs) delivered by *East Los High* lead actors on behalf of partnering organisations such as StayTeen.org to inform and educate audience members about teen pregnancy.



Figure 1. Transmedia Extensions of *East Los High* Season 1

These nine transmedia narrative experiences were further extended through the resource links and widgets on the *East Los High* website (Wang & Singhal, 2016) along with other audience engagement strategies on social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Wang et al., 2019). When Season 1 premiered in June 2013, *East Los High* was consistently one of the most watched Hulu original series and Number One on Hulu Latino with over 1 million monthly viewership (Block, 2013; Castro, 2013; Ramasubramanian, 2016; Terrero, 2014).

STORYTELLING BY, OF AND FOR LATINX AMERICANS

Over three years in development yet shot in a record 67 days, the idea to pursue a transmedia approach in *East Los High* came from Katie Elmore Mota while she served as a Vice President at Population Media Center (PMC), a nonprofit organization founded by William Ryerson⁶ in 1998 and a leader in entertainment-education, dedicated to women's rights and empowerment, population stabilization, and sustainable environment, promoting positive change in over 50 countries (W. Ryerson, personal communication, May 7, 2016). While Mota appreciated the importance of the Sabido methodology that undergirded the design of PMC's radio and television serial dramas in countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, she wondered how it could be adapted in the United States to create sustainable communities for change (K. E. Mota, personal communication, July 10, 2013).⁷ Convinced about the importance of utilizing a transmedia storytelling approach, Mota opened a new office for PMC in Los Angeles and served as an Executive Producer to get *East Los High* underway (K. E. Mota, personal communication, July 10, 2013; Molina-Guzmán, 2016). Subsequently, she co-founded the Hollywood-based company Prajna Productions (now Wise Entertainment) and continues to serve as the programme's Executive Producer through all four seasons and finale special.⁸

PROJECT DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

PMC’s formative research for Season 1 revealed tremendous unmet needs among young Latinx Americans. Despite a steady decline of teen pregnancy and a historical low in teen birth rate at the national level, 56% of Latina teens became pregnant before the age 20 in 2010, a figure higher than all other racial/ethnic groups and almost double the national average (Kost & Henshaw, 2012). Some 86% of Latina teen births occurred among unwed mothers and 65% to high school seniors, leading to high rates of school dropouts (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwanted Pregnancy, 2013). Additionally, STI rates for Latinx adolescents were almost two times higher than white non-Latinx Americans (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). The social objectives for *East Los High*—in the form of three *major* and *minor* themes—were specified to address these concerns (see Table 2).

Table 2. Social Objectives of *East Los High* Season 1

Major Theme 1: Birth Control and Family Planning
Increase consistent use of contraceptives Prevent unplanned/unwanted pregnancies Increase knowledge of emergency contraception Improve partner communication about birth control, reproductive health and sexual activity Educate about dealing with an early pregnancy: prenatal care, the couple and psychological aspects of the pregnancy
Major Theme 2: Safe Sex
Increase consistent use of contraceptives Encourage safe sex for prevention of pregnancy <i>and</i> HIV/STI transmission Prevent HIV in teen population by promoting testing and use of condoms Increase knowledge about testing and treatment of HIV Prevent other STIs by encouraging teens to go to clinics to get tested
Major Theme 3: Abortion Rights
Normalize abortion as an option Increase support for teens making decisions about abortion and pregnancy
Minor Theme 1: Advocacy on Sexual and Reproductive Rights
Depict and amplify sexual and reproductive health issues and why they are important Increase knowledge of organisations working on sexual and reproductive health advocacy issues Promote ways to become an advocate and support sexual and reproductive health initiatives
Minor Theme 2: Sexual and Domestic Violence
Decrease sexual and domestic violence
Minor Theme 3: Gender Equality
Encourage teens to pursue their dreams and/or stay engaged in school Encourage teens to create goals/dreams to prepare for the future

Source: Population Media Center

Formative research emphasised that Latinx not only represented the fastest growing media market in the United States., they also were perfectly-suited for transmedia storytelling. Avid consumers of entertainment fare, especially dramas and movies (Fritz, 2013), Latinx led other racial/ethnic groups in high adoption rates of smartphones for web access, entertainment consumption, and social activities (Fetto, 2014; Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera & Patten, 2013; Lopez & Livingstone, 2010). They were 40% more likely than the general population to watch television or video online or on a smartphone, and three times more likely to check, via social media, what programmes their friends were watching (Razzetti, 2012). Convinced that transmedia storytelling across digital platforms would be integral to engaging Latinx youth, Mota with help from Ryerson recruited Carlos Portugal, and from there put together a Latinx production team who could write a story with all-Latinx characters, creating the conditions for cultivating a digital fan base (K. E. Mota, personal communication, June 4 and July 10, 2013; Molina-Guzmán, 2016; Rivera, 2013).

With Mota leading the charge and PMC raising the production costs for Season 1, a highly accomplished Latinx creative team worked on *East Los High*, including among others Carlos Portugal,⁹ co-creator, head writer, and director; Kathleen Bedoya,¹⁰ co-creator, writer and transmedia producer; and Maurício Mota,¹¹ co-executive producer and co-founder of The Alchemists transmedia storytelling company in Hollywood. Also, various national, state and city-based non-profit partners were brought on board, including Planned Parenthood Federation of America, National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy,¹² Advocates for Youth, National Latina Initiative, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, Girls Inc., California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, Legacy LA, and others.

AUTHENTIC CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS

All members of *East Los High*'s creative team fervently believed in accurately and authentically depicting the experience of Latinx youth in the United States. Working closely with East Los Angeles community leaders, high school students, and subject matter experts, the creative team, closely observed the living realities in Latino neighbourhoods and carried out focus group interviews with several hundred youths (Del Barco, 2013; Molina-Guzmán, 2016). For authenticity, the series was shot on location throughout Los Angeles' east side, mostly in real homes, including an actual local *taqueria*—a Mexican family restaurant, and other existing locations in East LA and Boyle Heights (K. Bedoya, personal communication, October 1, 2019). Furthermore, careful attention was paid to the nuanced and subtle use of religious and cultural motifs, the specific use of Spanish/Spanglish dialogue, as well as ensuring the integrity of the dance moves, Latin music, and food that were portrayed in the show (K. Bedoya, personal communication, October 1, 2019). This authenticity was not lost on our survey respondents who specifically pointed to this uncanny cultural resonance with the show.

A 31-year old Latina viewer noted:

“[There are] many memorable scenes...[First,] when Sparky gives Maya his Saint Jude necklace...My mother introduced the saint to me as San Judas Tadeo and said he was one special saint because he creates miracles when life is at its roughest [as it was for Maya] ... Second...when Lupe told Maya that the one thing, she could leave her daughter with in this life is knowing she taught her how to choose right from

wrong. This scene hit home because I know my parents would have said exactly the same thing.”

A 21-year old Latina talked about the show’s personal resonance with her life:

“East Los High depicted my life...I am a Chicana and have had to deal with a lot of hardships in my life. I love that this show finally showed a Latino side of the story and didn’t sugar-coat anything.”

Further, a 28-year old Latina attested to the show’s authenticity:

“East Los High reflects experiences of youths with whom I’ve worked—[e.g., the] challenges [in] negotiating sexual intimacy and sexuality; the ‘oh shit’ moment of discovering one is pregnant; the social pressure for pregnancy...to fulfil the expected role of motherhood.”

ENGAGEMENT WITH SHOW’S SOCIAL CONTENT

In addition to the strong cultural resonance, we analysed the degree to which viewers engaged with the three *major* and *minor* themes that comprised the social objectives of *East Los High*, and the degree to which they identified with its key characters. Our survey with 202 viewers of *East Los High* Season 1 provided evidence that the audience paid close attention to the dramatic content, felt immersed in the story world, perceived the narrative to be highly realistic, and found themselves deeply engaged both cognitively and emotionally (Wang & Singhal, 2016). To gain further insights, we qualitatively and quantitatively coded viewers’ open-ended responses with respect to what scenes they found to be most memorable, how they related the portrayal of the characters in these scenes to their personal life experiences, and how the characters might have inspired changes in their real life, juxtaposing the responses with the show’s social objectives. In so doing, we especially paid attention to the open-ended comments of the target audience of Latina viewers—23 years old or younger.

With respect to *major theme #1—birth control and family planning*—there were a total of 139 comments. Some 43 comments were about prevention of unplanned/unwanted pregnancies; 39 about consistent use of contraceptives; 29 about partner communication on birth control, reproductive health, and sexual activity; 19 about dealing with various aspects of early pregnancy and prenatal care; and 9 about emergency contraception. With respect to *major theme #2—safe sex*—there were a total of 77 comments. Some 24 comments were about prevention of pregnancy and HIV/STI transmission; 23 about consistent use of contraceptives; 14 about HIV prevention through promoting testing and use of condoms; 11 about knowledge of HIV testing and treatment; and 5 about getting tested for other STIs at health clinics. With respect to *major theme #3—abortion rights*—there were a total of 30 comments. Some 16 comments were about support for teens making decisions about abortion and pregnancy and 14 about normalizing abortion as an option for pregnant teens. When it came to minor themes, there were 10 comments regarding *minor theme #1—advocating on sexual and reproductive rights*; 6 comments regarding *minor theme #2—sexual and domestic violence*; and 19 comments regarding *minor theme #3—gender equality*. The open-ended audience responses (above) provided by our viewers are evidence that the *East Los High*’s creative team did a commendable job of aligning the various components of the transmedia

narrative with its social objectives, allowing the viewers, as was intended, to discern the show's major and minor themes.

IDENTIFICATION WITH COMPLEX CHARACTERS

To appeal to the Latinx youth growing up in the United States, creators of *East Los High* designed complex authentic characters that embodied both merits and flaws. No one was perfect—they all faced challenges, made mistakes, and learned life lessons through these struggles and dilemmas. In this sense, *East Los High* differed from the Sabido methodology of designing clearly-defined positive, negative, and transitional characters, and was more analogous to Stan Lee's idea of creating complex, naturalistic characters who could be superheroes but still embody common human flaws—being full of vanity, ill-tempered, and brash.¹³ When the depicted characters are complex and flawed—as was the case with *East Los High*, it becomes easier for the audience members to find themselves in the plot, put themselves in their shoes, look at the world through their eyes, and share their feelings as the characters do (Cohen, 2001; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010, 2015).

Table 3 summarises the average viewer scores of their identification with the 15 key characters of *East Los High*. Overall, participants felt they knew Jacob, Maya, Jessie, Ceci, Vanessa and Paulina the most. The characters they liked the most were Jacob, Maya, Ceci, Paulina, Soli and Paulie. The characters they liked the least were Ramon, Freddie and Abe.

Table 3. Mean scores of audience identification with characters in *East Los High* Season 1

How much do	you feel like you know...		you like ...	
1 = a great deal, 5 = not much				
Characters	Total Sample	Target Audience	Total Sample	Target Audience
Jacob	1.43	1.40	1.31	1.22
Maya	1.45	1.53	1.51	1.52
Jessie	1.57	1.48	2.28	2.21
Vanessa	1.91	1.91	2.73	2.62
Cristian	2.63	2.55	2.92	2.60
Freddie	3.24	3.13	3.40	3.25
Ceci	1.72	1.70	1.55	1.51
Abe	3.14	3.19	3.72	3.55
Soli	2.16	2.01	1.94	1.97
Paulie	2.35	2.15	1.90	1.93
Hernan	2.81	2.68	2.64	2.67
Lupe	2.37	2.24	2.28	2.13
Paulina	2.04	1.85	1.67	1.55
Reina	2.72	2.63	2.69	2.57
Ramon	3.09	2.98	3.76	3.63

ENGAGEMENT WITH FOUR KEY CHARACTERS

Building on the viewers' identification scores for the 15 key *East Los High* characters, we carried out a detailed analysis of the four key characters that the audience members reported knowing and/or liking the most in Season 1—Jacob, Ceci, Paulie and Paulina. These four key characters effectively engaged the young audience members on a variety of health and social dimensions through the web series and its transmedia extensions.



Figure 2. Jacob and Jessie agree on a “study date” (upper left) and openly discuss virginity and waiting on sex (upper right) and Jacob’s PSA as a transmedia extension (lower left and right)

Engagement with Jacob

Figure 2 is a collage of selected images of the character, Jacob, who had the highest audience ratings of character identification. Jacob was crowned prom king in Season 1 and maintained this popular, sexy, and athletic persona. More importantly, he represented a positive counterfoil to the stereotypes of Latino men who are commonly portrayed as violent and irresponsible. He demonstrated that a young Latino man can be respectful and responsible—something his father emphasised in his upbringing. For example, in an intimate scene with Jessie when they were making out on a “study date”, Jacob senses Jessie’s hesitation and nervousness, asking, “Jessie, are you a virgin?” When Jessie says, “I just need more time,” Jacob instead of pressuring her into having sex, humorously notes “tomorrow?” (Figure 2).

A 20-year old Latina viewer noted: “[My most memorable scene was] *when Jacob respected Jessie's decision to wait till she was ready to have sex. It's very hard to be comfortable telling someone you're a virgin, when everyone around you is sexually active.*” Another 17-year old Latina viewer emphasised: “*Now I know it's safe to talk to your sexual partner about sex before doing it.*”

All our survey respondents (over 99.5%) agreed that it was important to be able to speak openly about sex with the partner, and they overwhelmingly sided with Jacob, even when things went south between him and Jessie. One noted: “*I remember how mad I was when Jessie wouldn't tell Jacob that she got pregnant from unprotected sex with Cristian.*” Another said: “*Jacob gave up everything including a full-ride university scholarship for Jessie and the baby. He was going to marry her even though he was already in love with Maya. He was just an overall great character!*”

Jacob's personality, easy-going attitude, and actions made him an apt ambassador for teen pregnancy prevention. Appropriately, the producers of *East Los High* leveraged his popularity by featuring him in the PSA where Jacob shares pregnancy statistics and links them to the various prevention options (Figure 2). About three in five survey respondents (59% of total sample and 61% of target audience) were curious enough to actually check out the PSAs.



Figure 3. Ceci finds out she is pregnant (upper left), explores options for a pregnant teen such as putting the baby for adoption (upper right), shares her journey via vlogs (lower left), and stands up for herself and her baby by purchasing the car seat (lower right).

Engagement with Ceci

Figure 3 is a collage of selected images of Ceci who undergoes a dramatic transformation in *East Los High*. As someone who rises from the ghetto to co-lead the Bomb Squad dance team and becomes prom queen (after Vanessa's crown was revoked), Ceci starts off as a "mean girl" bullying Jessie and Soli at the dance team tryouts. As the story unfolds, Ceci engenders sympathy as she experiences the highest highs and the lowest lows. Her world turns upside down when she finds out that she is pregnant, and her situation is exacerbated when she is abandoned by Abe, her boyfriend who never treats her with respect or care. Many young Latina viewers went on this rollercoaster journey with Ceci as she tries to figure out what to do as a pregnant teen. After considering terminating her pregnancy and putting up the baby for adoption (Figure 3), she eventually decides to keep the baby herself.

East Los High creators produced a series of seven vlogs in Season 1 (<http://eastloshigh.com/category/video/cecis-vlog/>), in coordination with Ceci's unfolding storyline (i.e., episode 13, 16, 18, 19, 22, 23, and 24), to strategically release new content as a transmedia extension. Ceci starts video blogging from the women's shelter when she is three-months pregnant and talks about the changes in her look and appetite, the importance of prenatal nutrition and social support, getting supplemental foods from the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programme, and the available services at Planned Parenthood (Figure 3). All of this content was packed in just 2.5 minutes.

Remarkably, Ceci's vlogs were the most watched transmedia content during *East Los High* Season 1. About three quarters of our survey respondents (72% of the total sample and 75% of the target audience) followed her vlogs. Together, they covered a wide range of challenges that are faced by pregnant Latina teens—from physiological discomfort and economic hardship to cultural stereotype and social stigma. They allowed the young audience to dive deeper into Ceci's world,

look at her situation from different perspectives, and learn from the new possibilities she discovered and the choices she made. A 16-year old Latina viewer pointed out her most memorable part of the show was when “Ceci went to see what her options were... keeping the baby, putting up the baby for adoption, and/[or] aborting it.” There was strong resonance among viewers with Ceci’s experience. A Latina viewer noted: “I was also a teen mother. I had my daughter when I was a 17-year old senior in high school...I like how I can relate to the whole show.” Another Latina echoed the sentiment: “Ceci’s story was most relatable to my life being that I was a teenage mother. It taught me to be more open with my children about sex, the good and the bad.” And, yet another pointed to how Ceci’s character grew on her: “My absolute favourite thing was the progression of Ceci’s character. I know that’s not a specific line or scene. But I totally grew to love her!!! I didn’t expect her to become my favourite character. So, I like how that part of the show surprised me.”

A watershed moment in the vlogs was when Ceci broke away from her unrealistic expectations of Abe, the baby’s father, realizing she needed to be independent of him, and thus purchases the car seat for her baby on her own (Figure 3). That image of a strong woman who rises to take charge of her life made an impression with the audience, becoming one of the most liked posts on *East Los High*’s Facebook page. And when a 21-year old Latina viewer recalled her most memorable moment as this one, she spoke for many others: “Ceci buying the car seat herself... she figured out that she had to do things on her own, that she couldn’t count on Abe to provide for her. That showed a lot of growing up and maturing on Ceci’s part. It showed a teen mom taking charge of her life and that of her future child.” Another 21-year old Latina viewer identified her most memorable moment as being “when Ceci told Vanessa that girls need to make sure they take care of themselves and not leave it up to the guy.” Another viewer said, “I am a teenage mother and I volunteer in helping women who face unplanned pregnancies.... I also hope that people who saw *East Los High* may have corrected lots of common misconceptions of our lifestyle, like how we ‘sleep around’ or ‘just get pregnant for the welfare checks’.”

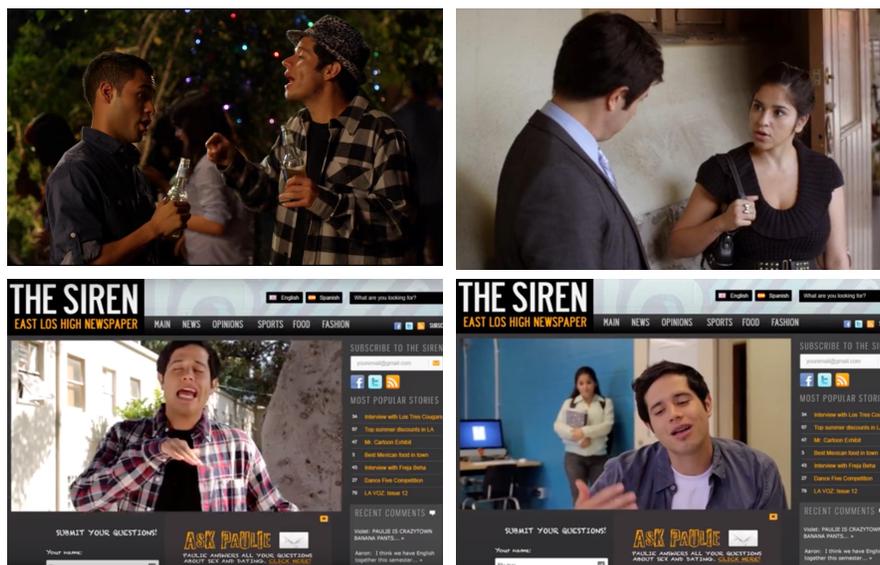


Figure 4. Paulie reveals to Jacob at a party why he uses condoms without exception (upper left), being on board with Soli to play “absolutely safe” with condoms (for him) and birth control pills (for Soli) when engaging in sex (upper right), and sharing resources and solutions through *Ask Paulie* on transmedia (lower left and right)

Engagement with Paulie

Figure 4 is a collage of selected images of Paulie who was one of the most loved characters by our viewers. As a 21-year old Latina viewer eloquently noted: “*Paulie I love. He is hilarious... Paulie is definitely my favourite character. He knows how to add humour to the show, which is needed with the serious issues addressed.*” In reality, Paulie was very human—with flaws and warts. At a party, Paulie having boasted about his “sexaholicism,” revealed to Jacob that he previously contracted gonorrhoea from unprotected sex and that’s why he became so obsessed with using condoms. His punch line with Jacob—“a pack of ten, ten bucks. Not having to scream every time you piss? Priceless!” (Figure 4) —hit home for many young Latinx viewers. This 21-year old Latina pointed out this scene as being her most memorable one: “*Paulie’s line about it’s great to pee without hurting.*”

Moreover, our survey results suggest that although 91% of the *East Los High* target audience were aware of STI testing services, 69% had never been tested. After watching the show, virtually everyone was willing to get tested (96%) and recommend it to others (99%). Also, the romantic relationship between Paulie and Soli was largely developed on transmedia. While Soli represented a strong and driven Latina who aspired to become a journalist and ran the school newspaper, *The Siren*, Paulie earned admiration from over two-thirds of our survey respondents (68% of the total sample and 69% of the target audience) with his witty one-liners and *Ask Paulie* video segment where he collects highly embarrassing questions about sex and sexuality from his peers and provide creative and credible solutions.



Figure 5. Paulina accompanying Maya to get tested for STI at a local health clinic (upper left and right), sharing her decision and opinion about abortion with Jessie (lower left), and giving an inspiring commencement speech at the end of Season 1 (lower right)

Engagement with Paulina

Figure 5 is a collage of selected images of Paulina who served as an extraordinarily compassionate and mature role model for teens in *East Los High* Season 1. Among all the thoughtful adult characters who spoke to the struggles of single parenting, lack of healthcare, and sexual abuse, *Tia* (aunt) Paulina brought hope and wisdom to her nieces Jessie and Maya and did so as a loving and successful Latina woman—generous with both her money and advice. The audience didn’t miss it either. As a 20-year old Latina viewer noted: “*I believe that every scene with Paulina was*

memorable—she was the mentor that a lot of young men and women do not have in life.” Another 19-year old Latina emphasised the importance of Paulina’s presence in difficult situations: *“When Maya was taken to the clinic by her aunt to test for pregnancy and STDs, this scene made me think that there might be a family member that might help me out if I got raped or pregnant.”*

As difficult as it was, Paulina convinced Maya to accompany her to the local health clinic to get tested (Figure 5). A majority of our survey respondents (70% of total sample and 71% of target audience) reported eagerly watching these extended scenes on transmedia—the conversations between Paulina, Maya, and the counsellor at the health clinic while they waited on the test results. Half of the target audience reported learning at least one of the 10 facts about correct condom use that they did not know (e.g., *“If it doesn’t roll down easily it means it is on the wrong side”*; *“They need to pinch the tip to get rid of the bubbles before putting it on”* and *“They need to leave half an inch at the tip for cum.”*). Remarkably, 98% of the target audience said they would use condoms correctly following that. This leveraging of transmedia extensions to further audience engagement and involvement with the characters they cared about, and with the issues they dealt with in the show, was found to be more advantageous than traditional forms of storytelling in our lab experiment (Wang & Singhal, 2016).

Also, Paulina did not shy away from addressing sensitive and taboo topics like abortion (Figure 5). For a 46-year old viewer, one of the most emotional and powerful moments was at the church when Jessie and Jacob were about to wed: *“The talk Jessie had with her aunt Paulina was wonderful because it allowed her to let go of the stigma of having an abortion. When she said, ‘Good girls don’t have abortions’ and her aunt said, ‘Yes, we do,’ as a Catholic Latina, it was such a relief!”* Through characters like Paulina, *East Los High* writers could weave in sensitive information on sexual and reproductive rights, cover the various options available for pregnant teens, including risks and resources, and bring attention to legal regulations and reproductive rights so that Latinx youth could make informed decisions while maintaining their privacy and dignity. Paulina also modelled the important role of education as a teen pregnancy prevention factor among Latinx youth (Diaz, 2010). As a Latina viewer noted: *“I have seen the girls who get pregnant during high school and have trouble graduating from high school...Being a Latina I want to defeat the odds of teen pregnancies and dropping out of high school or college. East Los High is inspiring me to continue my education and go after my dreams.”* Another 22-year old Latina viewer described her most memorable moment when, *“Paulina gives the commencement address during the high school ceremony. It was inspiring to see a Latina that came up from a troublesome neighbourhood and has made her dream come true.”*

REAL-LIFE CHANGES IN THE VIEWERS’ MINDS AND HEARTS

The survey responses and social media posts provided evidence that *East Los High* had nothing less than a transformative impact on many of its viewers, including an increase in their knowledge, understanding, and empathy of a loved one’s experience with teen pregnancy; a positive shift in their attitudes and behavioural intentions with respect to taking preventive steps to evade difficult situations such as, for instance, Ceci and Jessie who become pregnant or Vanessa who contracts HIV; a boost in their cognitions associated with self-esteem and self-respect; an enhancement in their decision-making capabilities, for example, choosing which contraceptive method might be best suited for them; and the practice of actual behaviours, for instance, standing up for themselves and getting out of unhealthy relationships.

Here we highlight these revelations and life-changing actions in the viewers' own words. As a 21-year old Latina viewer noted: "[East Los High] *made me think more about my sex life... and question whether I was being careful enough. It also made me think what would happen if I was in Ceci or Jessie's position. What would happen if I was in Vanessa's position? It put things in perspective for me.*" Another noted: "[The programme] *opened my eyes...to really looking into using some type of contraception.*" And, another emphasised: "*I'm a teen who had sex at a young age. Before I didn't know about all the birth control options I had, [but] watching East Los High has helped me out a lot!*" Male viewers also benefited from *East Los High*—as a 19-year old Latino man noted: "*East Los High has changed my life... [I know] to never even try to have sex without a condom with any girl.*"

The knowledge acquired from the gritty characters and plot lines in *East Los High* also enabled viewers to emulate their role models and initiate conversations with their family. As a 23-year old Latina viewer said, "[The programme] *helped me be more informed for when the time comes to speak to my younger cousins about protection.*" A 31-year old non-Latina viewer decided that she would talk with her "*younger female relatives (teen daughter, nieces, child) about sex.*" She added, "*my husband and I will talk openly about sex with our daughters when the time comes.*"

The ultimate goal of a transmedia edutainment like *East Los High* is to facilitate behaviour change in the real world—at the individual, family and community levels. However, such change cannot happen overnight. It was heartening to hear about the specific actions that some *East Los High* viewers took as a result of what they learned from the show. As a 17-year old Latina noted: "*It was exactly how it used to be with my ex-boyfriend.... all he wanted was sex. I broke up with him after I watched the show because I realized what he wanted.*" Another teenage Latina said: "*[About] a guy who I had dated and was sexually active with...The story with Ceci helped me realize that if anything were to happen, he would not take responsibility, it gave me the courage to end it.*"

East Los High also deeply resonated with several viewers who were not in the primary target audience—Latina women under the age of 23. A 15-year-old non-Latina female viewer noted: "*Ceci reminds me of my best friend so much, and I don't want anything like that to happen to her. This show really made me help my friends out in hard situations.*" A 20-year old non-Latina female viewer talked about what *East Los High* has enabled her to do: "*A lot of my friends don't have much knowledge about contraception or pregnancy, and I help them out a lot. East Los High gave me some valuable resources and information.*" Another 19-year old non-Latina viewer emphasised: "*Although I am not of Latinx descent... I have many friends who are, and it just opened my eyes to the struggles and difficult circumstances... It has made me want to learn more about the Hispanic culture and community and extend my own personal goals to become a family and marriage counsellor to not only girls of my own race, but to those of the Hispanic community as well.*" At the end of Season 1, a 53-year old Latino male viewer poignantly reported: "*I'm a father and was able to discuss life experiences with my teenage daughter. I saw a lot of valuable information regarding sex and different life lessons shown. I wish there was a second season!*"

While our in-depth analysis here focuses on Season 1, *East Los High* went on for three additional seasons and a finale special and continued to provide expert information and valuable resources through its web series on Hulu and its transmedia extensions on EastLosHigh.com. Subsequent to Season 1, the programme engaged its fans in tackling difficult topics such as *Hi-V—on living and dating with HIV* hosted by Vanessa (<http://eastloshigh.com/category/video/hi-v/>), *Out with Jocelyn and Daysi* as these characters navigated complicated social dynamics and eventually accepted their LGBTQ identities (<http://eastloshigh.com/category/video/out-with-jocelyn-daysi/>), *On the Couch* with Camila as she sat in the therapy sessions to overcome her childhood trauma of being sexually molested by her father

(<http://eastloshigh.com/category/video/on-the-couch-with-camila/>), and *Eddie and Sofia Get Loud* as these characters advocated for undocumented immigrants and called for social justice for the dreamers during the 2016 United States presidential election campaigns (<http://eastloshigh.com/category/video/eddie-sofia-get-loud/>).

CONCLUSION

East Los High was an exemplary transmedia edutainment initiative created of, by, and for Latinx youth growing up in United States. It provided a counterfoil to the usual stereotypical representation of Latinx as gardeners, maids or drug pushers. The programme's characters and their story arcs were designed with deep attention to capture the situational, linguistic, cultural, and faith-based aspects of Latino relationships—inter and cross-generational. The web series elicited a high level of narrative engagement which was further enhanced by the nine transmedia extensions, allowing for deeper character identification and audience involvement with the reproductive health topics that were addressed. Remarkably, many of our viewers reported real-life changes as a result of watching *East Los High*, in engaging with its characters and gritty plot lines, in being immersed in its authentic story world of transmedia extensions, and through interpersonal dialogues with members of their personal network.

In the slate of notable global media interventions, the profundity of the *East Los High* transmedia edutainment experience cannot be overstated. Our analysis demonstrates the potentiality of what carefully-designed transmedia edutainment can make possible—through collaboration, partnerships, and service provision—in an increasingly fragmented, digitised, and choice-laden media scape. This potentiality is echoed loudly in the sentiments of three of our *East Los High* audience members, whom we cite in conclusion:

A 16-year old Latina viewer noted: “*I enjoyed [East Los High] and wish I had seen it when I was a kid. Because the reality is that students don't learn about these things in school. Even if they sit through a class like I did in health, we were all too embarrassed to pay attention! This is a great way to communicate information!*”

A 33-year old non-Latinx viewer said:

“*I was instantly hooked [to East Los High] and signed up for Hulu Plus to watch all episodes. It served as an ‘escape’ during a very difficult time in my life. More than anything, I appreciate the heart behind the show. There's so much power in media and it's wonderful if that can be used as a positive influence.*”

And, finally a 16-year old Latina viewer who said: “*East Los High* is giving people the hope, motivation, and faith that wonderful things can happen no matter where one comes from... It gives us Latinos a voice. Well done!”

Indeed, well done, *East Los High*.

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Endnotes

¹ We thank the Population Media Center (PMC), South Burlington, Vermont for funding this research evaluation, and various members of the *East Los High* production team—especially Katie Elmore Mota, Mauricio Mota (Wise Entertainment) and Kathleen Bedoya—for their extensive cooperation. We are grateful to Kathleen Bedoya for reviewing a draft of this manuscript for accuracy, and for her prompt and invaluable inputs in its finalisation.

² This included an Emmy nomination for “Outstanding Digital Daytime Drama Series” in 2016.

³ Wang and Singhal co-led an independent research evaluation of *East Los High*.

⁴ In the spirit of Bouman (2002) who refers to them as “peacocks and turtles” in entertainment-education

⁵ See sample characteristics in Table 1 of Wang and Singhal (2016).

⁶ William N. Ryerson is Founder and President of Population Media Center (PMC), an organization that strives to improve well-being of people worldwide through mass entertainment media (www.populationmedia.org). For the past two decades, PMC’s entertainment programming has promoted social and cultural change and has helped 500 million people in more than 50 countries. Ryerson also serves as Chair of Population Institute in Washington, DC (<http://www.populationinstitute.org/>), which works in partnership with PMC. Ryerson has a 48-year history of working in the field of reproductive health, including three decades of experience in use of social change communications in various cultural settings worldwide.

⁷ In completing an online MA programme in 2010 at The New School for Social Research in New York City, Katie carried out a thesis project titled: *Transmedia storytelling and the Sabido methodology for entertainment-education: How to reach and engage with your audience in highly saturated and fragmented media markets*. Simply put, her thesis project was operationalised as *East Los High*.

⁸ For more on Katie Elmore Mota, her commitment to diversity, inclusion and storytelling, see <https://time.com/4457972/diversity-in-hollywood-wise-entertainment/>

⁹ Carlos Portugal is a Latino writer, producer and director, and winner of an Emmy Award for his documentary *Frida Kahlo: Portrait of an Artist*. Portugal co-wrote and directed the award-winning movie *East Side Story*.

¹⁰ Kathleen Bedoya is a Latina writer, producer, and programming executive who has worked with networks such as Hulu, HBO, FOX, Telemundo, MTV, creating ground-breaking content for Latino audiences in the U.S. and Latin America, including drama serials, sitcoms, and reality shows. By Season 3 of *East Los High*, Kathleen became executive producer.

¹¹ Mauricio Mota is co-founder and co-president of Wise Entertainment in partnership with his wife, Katie Elmore Mota. Growing up in Brazil, and as the grandson of Nelson Rodrigues (referred to as the “Brazilian Shakespeare,” he co-developed—at age 15—a storytelling board game that was widely adopted in thousands of Brazilian schools. Later, Mota became a serial entrepreneur pioneering in multi-platform content by designing and creating products for TV channels, movie studios, and global advertisers. His most recent project is *School of Series*, a TV series/IP development lab in Brazil that trains 800 writers, producers and content developers a year.

¹² Renamed as Power to Decide.

¹³ In the Sabido methodology, the creation of an entertainment-education narrative starts with a moral grid that guides the development of protagonists who consistently demonstrate the desirable qualities, values, and behaviours and antagonists who consistently demonstrate the undesirable qualities, values, and behaviours (Singhal et al., 2013). These characters are derived from Carl Jung’s notion of archetypes. In additions to protagonists and antagonists (positive and negative role models), Sabido introduced the notion of transitional characters who mirror the lived realities of the target audiences and transition from being negative to positive through the story arc, learning from the negative consequences faced by antagonists and rewards experienced by protagonists (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).