

EFFECTS OF *EAST LOS HIGH*, AN ENTERTAINMENT-EDUCATION WEB SERIES, ON
SEXUAL DECISION-MAKING OF YOUNG LATINO/A COUPLES

ANU SACHDEV

Department of Communication

APPROVED:

Arvind Singhal, Ph.D., Chair

Kenneth C.C. Yang, Ph.D.

Eva Moya, Ph. D.

Charles H. Ambler, Ph.D.

Dean of the Graduate School

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Anu Sachdev

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By

ANU SACHDEV, M. Sc.

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ABSTRACT

Involving multiple actors and critical decisions, the phenomenon of early, unintended pregnancies, single parenthood, and sexually transmitted infections have grave consequences for the life trajectory of a youth. In the U.S., the highest sexual risks are borne by Latino/a youth. Often their life, career, and well-being outcomes are a function of the quality of their sexual decision-making. This study was designed to investigate the process of sexual decision-making among Latino/a couples who were exposed to a web-based narrative called *East Los High* (*ELH*). The program, originally screened on the Hulu web-channel was designed specifically to promote sexual responsibility among Latino/a audiences.

Given a sexual relationship involves two people, it is imperative that sexual decision-making is studied at the level of couples. While the literature on teenage sexuality is vast, sexual decision-making studies and prevention interventions are gendered i.e. males and females have been studied separately. This study took a different path. Fifteen Latino/a unmarried couples between ages 18 to 24 participated in this study. Participant observations and in-depth couple interviews after the participants watched the *ELH* narrative were used to collect data.

The effects of *East Los High*, as was experienced by the viewing couples, were investigated at three decision-making points during the portrayed sexual encounters: pre, during and after sex. Sexual decision-making portrayed in *ELH* was analyzed from the viewpoint of (1) female decision-making and (2) male responsibility. Female agency, women's negotiation skills, and their mental resilience seemed to play a key role in the kind of decisions women made about pre-during, and post sexual encounters. Male responsibility played itself out in terms of orientation toward using protection (or condom use), providing care and support for the partner,

and maintaining healthy and respectful interpersonal communication before, during, and post sexual encounter.

Viewing of *ELH*, especially the viewing of consequences that young protagonists faced on account of their sexual encounters, heightened a sense of vulnerability among couples. Many of them decided to either initiate and/or continue using prevention measures such as condoms and birth control pills. The couples also seemed to gain efficacy in discussing their STI status and getting tested. A major talking and decision point for most couples arose around pregnancy, and the *ELH* narrative helped spark conversations around options that one may consider post conception. The show, however, seem not to engender any change in perception on the issue of abortion, which was viewed as a shared decision.

When asked to generate creative solutions in the context of sexual decision-making, the responses favored being playful in bed, delaying sexual activity, and using tricky turn offs for their partners. These devices were deemed effective in pausing unwanted sexual activity.

In sum, the quality of sexual-decision making among partners is based on communicative behaviors displayed by both partners. The *ELH* narrative helped spark a dialogue among the couples while also developing the sense of self-efficacy among both partners. Both these skills are important in sexual negotiation and decision-making.

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PREFACE

My MA work at UTEP allowed me to explore diverse avenues in communication research. This MA thesis project has helped bring home a research journey on the topic of sex education that I started five years ago as an undergraduate student at the University of Delhi, India.

In 2009, as an undergraduate, I decided to undertake an Information Education Communication (IEC) project on age-appropriate sex education, and used an IEC toolkit to educate young girls and their mothers about sex education. In my graduate school journey at the University of Delhi, my first project was an investigation of a multi-media, sex-education, and entertainment-education intervention “*Jo Bola Wohi Sikander*” (Those Who Talk Are Winners). This intervention, research showed, significantly changed the way men perceived condoms, greatly increasing condom use among the targeted audiences.

After graduate school, I was engaged by the Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Communication Programs (JHUCCP) in New Delhi to write the evaluation report for an adolescent sex education program funded by UNICEF. This program was a school based sex education program that became highly controversial on account of the sensitive nature of the topic. At the same time, I was inducted into undertaking formative research for an upcoming entertainment-education television serial, “*Main Kuch Bhi Kar Sakti Hoon*” (I, A Woman, Can Achieve Anything) that focused on reproductive health and empowerment on women in India. Dr. Arvind Singhal of UTEP’s Department of Communication led this project in India and our meeting in New Delhi helped pave the way for me to enroll for my second MA degree at UTEP in 2012.

At UTEP, I was fortunate to take up a variety of research topics that helped me understand the El Paso community better. I carried out research projects on a variety of topics, including on teenage mothers and college graduation, increasing high school graduation among disadvantaged Latino/a populations, health literacy, and liberating interactional structures, among others.

I was pulled between doing a thesis on the topic of liberating structures and/or positive deviance and/or entertainment education. After considerable thought and brainstorming with Dr. Singhal, here we are: A project on entertainment education and sexual decision-making.

I wanted to take up this project for various reasons. My interactions with Latino/a population in El Paso have helped me understand their life better, and my association with teenage mothers has given me a different perspective on decision-making. Being a 24-year-old, the topic and the methodology of this project intrigued me to talk to others of my age. Sexual decision-making, as an issue, has always interested me in its complete seriousness and the fun with which it can be approached.

With this MA thesis project, I have lived a dream—one that has come full circle in my academic journey.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Consider the following snatch of conversation during a sexual encounter from *East Los High*, a web series involving high school senior Ceci and her boyfriend Abraham

Abraham: [moans]

Ceci: Already? Pull out! Pull out! Abe, you got to stop doing that, you dick!

Abraham: My bad. It just felt so goood...

[They both laugh]

Abraham (continues): All right, we'll do it again and I'll pull out this time. Might need a couple minutes, though.

Ceci blushes and pulls the cover on her.



Figure 1: Ceci and Abe Having Unprotected Sex In The Latino/A Web Series, *East Los High*

Why does Ceci say: “Pull out, Pull out”?

Because, the couple were engaging in unprotected sex!

East Los High's tagline is "Sex, Love and Revenge." In the web series, multiple young characters, such as Ceci and Abraham, live out their youthful lives, centering on a high school in East Los Angeles. They take actions, sexual and otherwise, make commitments, and renege on them. Their decisions and actions result in different outcomes. In the case of sexual matters, decisions made by partners, or an individual, yield different consequences, and differing life trajectories.

East Los High is a web series designed to create conversations around matters of youthful aspirations, motivations, and Latino/a sexuality. Its purpose is to tap the power vested in fast-paced narratives in order to show a multitude of youthful encounters, struggles, and resolutions. Its desired outcome: expand the viewers' understandings about sexual decision-making, actions, and resulting consequences.



Figure 2: *East Los High* Online Promotion Banner

In the present chapter, *East Los High* is situated in the context of Latino/a adolescence, sexuality and outcomes. Media-sparked campaigns and entertainment-education (EE) are discussed as interventions to address the problem of adolescent sexuality. A description of *East Los High*, an EE web series is provided to set the stage for upcoming chapters.

Purpose

The youth in the U.S., especially those who are Latino/a, often find themselves in situations of unplanned pregnancy. Latina women have the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the country with 107 pregnancies per 1000 females (15-19 years) (Kost & Henshaw, 2012) and the highest birthrate of any ethnic groups (Martin et al., 2012). The highest teenage pregnancy rates are found in the south and southwest regions of the country. Specifically, the state of Texas reports 65 pregnant teens for every 1000 teens and the city of El Paso reports 80 pregnancies per 1000 females (Department of Health, El Paso, TX, 2012). Additionally, Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) rates for Latino adolescents are approximately two times higher than white non Latino Americans (8.93 and 4.3 per 1000, respectively). And among the Latino/a population, the highest risk of STIs is noted for Latina female adolescents, ages 15-19, as compared to Latino male adolescents of the same age group (8.93 and 1.92 per 1,000, respectively) (CDC, 2011).

Involving multiple actors and critical decisions, the phenomenon of early, unintended pregnancies, single parenthood, and sexually transmitted infections have grave consequences for a youth's life trajectory. Sexual decisions and actions represent highly complex processes, involving multiple causes and effects dispersed over time and between partners. While the literature on teenage sexuality is vast, sexual decision-making studies are instrumentally gendered i.e. males and females have been studied separately. Given a sexual relationship involves two people, it is imperative that sexual decision-making is studied at the level of couples. Sexuality is enacted relationally, the risks are "related" and therefore it is communicative and dynamic at the same time. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the process of sexual decision-making as influenced by a media intervention (specifically, *East Los High*) among Latino/a couples.

To study how an EE program influences change, we focused on the degree of audience involvement with the various components of the narratives. Various conceptual investigations suggest that audience involvement in the narrative is often a function of their identification with the characters, transportation, degree of wishful identification, and parasocial interaction. These processes highlight different components of audience engagement. For example, an audience member can identify with a specific character (identification) or wish to be like a character (wishful identification). An audience member can feel transported into the narrative (transportation) while losing sense of the reality or develop a face-to-face like relationship with a character (parasocial interaction).

Adolescence, Sexuality and Outcomes

Adolescence is a development stage that begins with puberty and extends into manhood or womanhood: into the 20's (Crouter & Booth, 2006). Characterized by rapid physical growth, reproductive maturity, and psychosocial changes, it can be a highly formative and turbulent period of one's life. It is the period of growing up into a functional and responsible adult. This process of growing up from being a 'boy' to a man, and a 'girl' to a woman is full of complexity. While the definition of adolescence may mean different things to different people, sexual development includes changes in physical, mental and social states.

Adolescence is also marked by sexual experimentation from touching oneself or a partner, to penetrative sex – whether oral, vaginal, or anal. How an adolescent conducts their sexual life i.e. when to have sex, with whom, with or without contraception, has important life-changing consequences for them. These decisions are at the core of sexual exploration and development.

Sexual decisions have consequences that affect the individual, a partner, family members,

and perhaps even the community at large. Conversely, peers, family, society, personal goals and aspirations shape the decisions that an individual or couple makes (Gardner & Steinberg, 2005; Fantasia, 2008). Thus, there exists a strong interdependency among factors that affect sexual decision-making.

The Perils of Adolescence

Adolescence is often marked by high-paced, high-energy activities, and some of them can become a source of struggles and problems. Social problems of adolescence may include addiction, consumption of harmful substances, early/unintended pregnancies, and STIs.

Adolescents (13-24 years) become parents; contract STIs and some drop out of school. In the U.S., less than 2% of adolescents are sexually active at age 12, but by the time they are 19 years, 71% have experienced sex (Finer & Philbin, 2013). On average, most young people have their first sexual encounter at age 17 (CDC, 2013). However, most will marry in their low to mid-20s. Research indicates that among those who are sexually active, 70% females and 56% males report their first sexual encounter with a steady partner whereas, 16% female and 28% males report having sex with someone they just met or with a friend (Martin et al., 2011).

Consequences of sexual activity range from pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, abortions and childbirths (Singh & Darroch, 2003), among others. Each year, almost 750,000 U.S. young women aged 15-19 become pregnant, out of which, two-thirds of all teen pregnancies occur among the older teens (18-19 year-olds) (Kost & Henshaw, 2012). Eighty-two percent of teen pregnancies are unplanned, and teens account for about one-fifth of all unintended pregnancies annually (Finer & Zolna, 2014). However, not all women decide to become mothers. In 2010, 14.6% of all abortions were accounted among adolescents aged 15–19 years and 20-24 year olds obtained 32.9% of all abortions (CDC, 2013).

Sexually Transmitted Disease prevalence estimates suggest that young people between the ages of 15–24 years acquire half of all new STDs and 1 in 4 sexually active adolescent females have a STD, such as chlamydia or human papillomavirus (HPV) (Satterwhite et al., 2013).

Media-Sparked Campaigns and Entertainment Education

A variety of interventions have been implemented to address the problems related to youth sexuality in the U.S. The interventions have ranged from school based sex education programs focusing on abstinence only, to more community-based skill building programs that help form negotiation skills (Kohler, Manhart & Lafferty, 2008). Other types of interventions include comprehensive risk reduction programs that cater to contraception use, involving families and community members of adolescents (Chin et al., 2012). Several interventions employ the use of mass media. Due to their large audience reach, cost effectiveness, and ability to target messages, media programs represent an important tool in the strategy toolkit.

Media campaigns usually represent a planned series of actions intended to influence audience's behavior. A meta-analysis to examine effect of media interventions on health behavior change showed an 8% behavior change among population (Snyder et al., 2004). This eight percent is the average effect size calculated from 48 studies, suggesting that media campaigns have a certain degree of tangible effects on health behavior change. Even though they appear small, they are noteworthy considering the immense audience reach of mass media and the potentiality they present for targeted messaging.

Media campaigns play an important role in presenting important information in an interesting, understandable and personally meaningful way. Media-sparked changes can occur in two ways: first, encouraging changes in perceived social norms; second, by stimulating interpersonal communication (DeJong & Winsten, 1998; Randolph & Viswanath, 2004).

The use of entertainment (storytelling) and education (information) in melodramatic shows is a widespread media strategy for change. These interventions have proved to be successful around the world in preventing risky sexual and health behaviors (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Slater & Rouner, 2002). Entertainment-education is defined as “a theory-based communication strategy for purposefully embedding educational and social issues in the creation, production, processing, and dissemination process of an entertainment program, in order to achieve desired individual, community, institutional, and societal changes among the intended media user populations” (Wang & Singhal, 2009, 272-273). EE works on the principle of social learning (Bandura, 1986, 2009), i.e. learning by modeling and observing. Complex social problems such as safe sex, family planning, and violence against women are portrayed in an engaging form to arouse emotions, engage the audience into the narrative and evoke interpersonal dialogue.

East Los High: Sex, Love, and Revenge

East Los High (from now on *ELH*) utilizes a transmedia storytelling strategy—one that assumes that the gradual dispersal of media through multiple formats can be an effective way of sustaining widespread audience conversations, while inspiring others in seeking and sharing new information (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). *ELH* is a teen drama, which was aired on *Hulu*, a website supporting commercial and popular video streaming, broadcast in the summer of 2013. *East Los High* is the first *Hulu* series with an all Latino/a cast and targeted for American-Latino/a audience (Population Media Center, 2013). *ELH* depicts the lives of Latino/a high school adolescents living in East Los Angeles. The plots open in layers in the 24 episode series where relationships, family, aspirations and struggles mark decisions and consequences that

these adolescents face. In addition, *ELH* includes nine transmedia elements and numerous additional resources that audience can use to seek information and services.

The show centers on a roller coaster plot between cousins Jessie and Maya. The drama feeds on the love triangle between the cousins and Jacob, the hottest boy in the high school (See Table 1 for Character Descriptions). The drama unfolds with characters that feed on and off the triangle and peer influences.

Table 1: Character and Character Description of *East Los High*

Character	Actor/Actress	Character Description
Jacob Aguilar, Central male character	Gabriel Chavarria	The central male character. Jacob is the only son to his father. He is good-looking and very popular senior in school. He gets in relationship with Jessie, the main female character. He has protected sexual encounters with multiple partners. Later, he falls in love with Maya (Jessie's cousin).
Jessie Martinez, Central female character	Janine Larina	Junior in high school, Jessie is the only daughter to her single mother. She is in a relationship with Jacob. She is seduced by Christian Camacho, the dance coach and loses her virginity. She becomes pregnant and finally decides to abort.
Maya Martinez, Jessie's cousin	Alicia Marie Sixtos	Jessie's cousin and a rape victim. Maya arrives newly in Los Angeles and returns to high school. She works at Jacob's father's restaurant business. She and Jacob fall in love toward the end of the series.
Vanessa De La Cruz	Tracy Perez	She is a strong female, senior in high school and leads the dance group, Bomb Squad. She cheats on Jacob and conspires with Christian to have sex with Jessie. She has sexual intercourse with Freddie Garcia, the host of dance show, Dance 5 to get the group in for competition. She later discovers that

		she is HIV positive.
Freddie Garcia		Freddie hosts dance competition show Dance 5 and has unprotected sexual intercourse with Vanessa in his studio. Later, he refuses to have tested and being HIV positive.
Ceci Camayo	Danielle Vega	Ceci is a senior in high school and Vanessa's best friend. Ceci gets pregnant with her older boyfriend, Abraham and finally decides to keep and deliver the baby.
Abraham (Abe)	Unknown	Abe is Ceci's boyfriend. He is older and impregnates Ceci and deserts after impregnating her.
Cristian Camacho	Hector David Jr.	Christian is Vanessa's sex partner and plans a revenge on Jessie for his dance career. He seduces Jessie and then deserts her after she is pregnant.
Paulie Hernandez	Jorge Diaz	Paulie is a senior in high school and Jacob's best friend. He is a joyful boy and a sex addict. He talks about safe sex with humor. He later gets into a relationship with Soli.
Soli Gomez	Noemí González	Soli is a junior in high school and Jessie's best friend. She is a journalist for school newsletter and a virgin. She doesn't agree till later to have sex with Paulie and only after her conditions of using condom and being on the pill have been met.

Sex, drugs, relationships, struggle are some of the characteristics of the show. The key events in the series revolve around the major objectives of the show, concerning sexual and reproductive health, pregnancy and abortion. The story highlights the journey of teenage girls, one who becomes pregnant (Ceci) and decides to keep the baby, one who gets pregnant but decides to abort (Jessie), and one who acquires HIV as a result of having multiple sex partners (Vanessa). On the other side, the male characters are portrayed as responsible and irresponsible.