

# Transmedia storytelling can be an effective health intervention

September 23 2016, by Bert Gambini

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"East Los High," a pioneering transmedia edutainment program purposely designed to address issues of reproductive and sexual health among teens, is demonstrating the power and potential of leveraging entertainment media for health promotion and social change.

Using analytics tracking, a viewer survey and a laboratory experiment, Helen Wang, PhD, an associate professor in the Department of Communication in the University at Buffalo College of Arts and Sciences, and her co-author Arvind Singhal, PhD, professor of communication and director of the Social Justice Initiative at the University of Texas at El Paso, studied the audience reach, engagement, and impact of the Emmy-nominated program's first season.

The results, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, suggest the program's sexual and reproductive messaging had a strong cognitive, emotional and social influence on its target audience of young Latinos.

Nine months of tracking more than 215,000 visits to the "East Los High" website suggested great enthusiasm for the show, but that site also served as a portal to additional information about health and social services. Survey results, meantime, suggested viewers found the narrative compelling, but also educational and transformative.

"Using this edutainment strategy can present healthier alternatives by role-modeling through characters and story lines," says Wang. "It can stimulate conversations about taboo topics and facilitate behavioral

change – which is very difficult to accomplish otherwise."

"East Los High," now in its fourth season, follows the lives of students at a fictional East Los Angeles high school.

It isn't the first popular program to discuss adolescent sexual and reproductive health, but its producers say it is the first culturally sensitive, English-language program that is deliberately designed as a health intervention for Latino youths growing up in the U.S. by embedding accurate health messages and complex social issues into its programming.

"The most important part of this intervention is the quality of programming. First and foremost, it has to be compelling so that you don't feel like you're being preached at," says Wang.

In addition, the show's transmedia format presents various interconnected stories across multiple platforms. Where multimedia repeats a common narrative across platforms, transmedia has narrative content unique to certain mediums. Satellite characters and other program elements teased within the main drama are later developed and released as transmedia extensions. That's what makes "East Los High," innovative, according to Wang.

These multiple entry points, which can include news stories, video blogs, comic strips and social media, transport the curious from one platform to another, satisfying the audience demand for more information by providing a rich dramatic tapestry that deepens the relationship between viewers and the show's characters.

Wang says she and her co-author wanted to capture the audience experience from different perspectives. They wanted to determine if transmedia storytelling could more effectively lead to successful health-

related outcomes when compared to a traditional multimedia, printed or news approach, Wang says.

The researchers used different experimental conditions to present identical health information as nondramatic text, dramatic text, multimedia and transmedia.

Their analyses suggest promising results for the potential of transmedia storytelling.

"A lot of people would ask, 'Are you serious? This is entertainment. Can it really bring about meaningful changes?' But I have been in this field for over a decade and I've learned that writers and producers can accomplish the goal of meaningfully engaging the audience, and challenging them to consider the options and alternatives that can lead to a healthier lifestyle," says Wang.

Given the intensity, diversity, and growth of [entertainment media](#) consumption in our society, Wang believes that transmedia storytelling will become a more mainstream communication strategy and intervention format to combat critical issues of [public health](#) and social justice.

**More information:** Hua Wang et al. : Transmedia Edutainment to Promote the Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young Latina/o Americans, *American Journal of Public Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2016.303072](#)

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