Reaching out to LGBT and Other Youth in Trouble

Human Computer Interaction

Section 0201

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ABSTRACT

Now that teenagers and young adults alike have access to technological devices like smart phones and tablets earlier and earlier in their lives, what better way to use these devices than to save their lives? Focusing on the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning (LGBTQ) community on the issue of coming out and being accepted, teenage suicides have been more prevalent; many of these troubled teens cannot imagine a future for themselves, as bullying becomes too brutal for them to handle\[^3\]. Telephone helplines are the most publicized means of seeking help, but talking voice-to-voice can be overwhelming and anxiety-inducing for teenagers. Text-based communication creates a more accessible setting for the teenager to feel safe enough to open up to the operator. In this project, we propose to develop a smart phone application and a corresponding online application to communicate freely and easily with pre-screened volunteers, as well as registered professionals. Our application will provide an easy way for teenagers and others to get help when needed with direct and instant connection to the people they need to save lives worldwide; a successful implementation of this project could be measured by the amount of positive feedback.
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1. Introduction

“Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.”

– Albert Einstein

Adolescence is a difficult phase for any teenager, and the addition of insecurities regarding one's sexual identity heightens that difficulty. Approaching others to discuss their deep thoughts and emotions can be intimidating for teenagers, especially communicating face-to-face. Bullying in schools across the nation, especially bullying due to a student's perceived sexual identity, has led to numerous suicides. Teenagers are prone to be bullied when they do not fit the social norm in this largely heterosexual society. When bullying becomes too harsh, victimized teenagers feel as if there is not a place for them in this world.

1.1 Anonymity

In times of crisis, the vulnerability one experiences can be debilitating. Although teenagers may have the urge to seek help, they are afraid to approach their friends for fear of being judged, and that their lives will forever change perhaps for the worse due to peer misconception. Research\textsuperscript{[7]} has shown that the Internet, and specifically anonymous chat rooms, allow for
Dissociative Anonymity — Disconnects the conversation from personal background

Invisibility — Alleviates concerns of appearance, how one sounds

Authority Minimization — Eliminates socially-ingrained social status cues

1.2 Seamlessness

This application will aim to prevent suicide in teens by creating an immediately accessible means of text-based, anonymous communication with someone who is licensed to help. Although there have been several attempts to bring chat-room based support to teenagers, our goal is to overcome the barriers that cause teenagers to abandon their search for help. We aspire to create a seamless experience, using an engaging, simplistic interface that allows users to effortlessly, and instantly connect to people who are ready to help. We aim to improve on existing efforts, including It Gets Better and The Trevor Project, by eliminating the initial effort required to seek help that pervades current solutions, such as:

- lengthy and disorienting initial signup processes
- information overload
- lack of around-the-clock support

We will address these issues by designing with the goal of reducing the activation energy required to, and encapsulating bureaucratic and technical aspects of, seeking support. We will connect to existing support services, and provide a volunteer system for people who want to help to become certified Allies to provide support to clients from home or on the go. Ideally, our service would be the first thing teenagers see when they reach out for help with an online search tool.
2. Review of Past Work

There are numerous websites and services available that seek to help teenagers in need, but many of them have issues that we believe severely hamper “customer engagement.”[2]

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Many efforts have been set forth by private, public, and even government resources to help LGBTQ youth with finding and accepting themselves. There are dozens of hot-lines and volunteer resources, but none of them prove to be streamlined enough to be a quick, easy, and reliable source that users can reply on without feeling like their privacy is being compromised.

In her Family Acceptance Project (FAP), Dr. Caitlin Ryan approached parents of young adults whom identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered to record family interactions, specifically looking for either rejecting behavior (e.g. verbal harassment, physical abuse, exclusion) or supportive behavior (e.g. finding positive role
models, or welcoming their child’s LGBTQ friends). She found that, compared to those whose parents supported them, the youths treated with rejection were more likely to be depressed, use illegal drugs, or commit suicide. FAP attempted to correct this by educating families about the effects that their actions can have on their children that identify as part of the LGBTQ community. Observers have noted that there is still much work to be done in promoting acceptance, and that the approach of educating families about LGBTQ issues will not necessarily eradicate rejecting behaviors\[6\].

The White House has a site dedicated to LGBTQ issues, including a blog and links to such resources as It Gets Better and Stop Bullying. It also contains articles about the LGBTQ community and links to news about relevant legislature. While it does contain much important factual information, there is very little on the site itself geared specifically at youths that are looking for ways to come to understand their sexual orientation; it acts better as a source for learning more about the LGBTQ community as a whole. While our project will have links to other relevant sites, its primary focus will be on aiding youths with an immediate need\[12\].

The Point Foundation, similarly, contains great facts and resources like scholarships for LGBTQ students, as well as mentoring projects, but it is highly unlikely that an adolescent in need would consider this as a saving grace in times of need\[10\]. CenterLink also offers a similar service, but more intimidating, possibly from its intruding help center tracking system or poor choice of a hot pink color scheme\[4\]. While there is nothing wrong with these organizations, they both seem to be targeting those who are not in life threatening situations, as well as those who have overcome sexual identity crises and looking to help others.

With the media covering more and more teenage suicides as a result of students being bullied for their sexual orientation, organizations such as It Gets Better and the
Trevor Project have emerged to combat these issues\cite{3}. It Gets Better succeeds in raising money and nationwide awareness of LGBTQ suicides and bullying. Many, from public figures to your average teenager, have uploaded videos with their experiences and positive words to convey to struggling teenagers that it indeed will get better. 

The main function of these videos is to talk about the future, but these teenagers are dealing with issues now, and they dont know how to combat the bullying and harsh treatment they receive on a day-to-day basis. Stop Bullying is a website for parents, teachers, and students, but as far as providing help, it lists 911 and the suicide prevention hot-line\cite{8}.

![Figure 2.1: The help listed at StopBullying.gov](image)

Although these are important and valuable resources to have, teenagers may not be willing to take the risk of calling them.
The Trevor Project, on the other hand, is providing more in the sense of reaching out and trying to get help for these teenagers\textsuperscript{[11]}. The way in which they do so seems very structured and government run, so these teenagers may not want to go through with all of the formalities of the site since it may be too much of a step for them at first. They embedded an uplifting video about their philosophies and then list three main services for these teenagers: Trevor Chat (an online text messaging service), Trevor Space (a social network), and Ask Trevor (a question and answer forum)\textsuperscript{[11]}. One issue with Trevor Chat is that users cannot access it on their smart phones. Another issue is that if they realise you are suicidal, they defer you to their telephone-based suicide prevention hot-line. These rules and restrictions may scare off teenagers, as they are most likely wary to seek help from people they don’t know.

2.1 Interface

One of the main issues that plagues many of these websites, is that their interfaces are not intuitive. We assume that our users are taking a big step when they decide to reach out for help, and our mission is to make this an effortless, engaging experience.
Conciseness

Conciseness refers to the eliminating extraneous information and focusing on the task at hand, which in this case, is providing immediate support to teenagers reaching out. Many of these existing services offer phone numbers and chat services (Fig. 2.3) but none of the existing services make immediately speaking to someone the main focus.

Figure 2.3: Navigation bar for the It Gets Better Project

Progressive-Disclosure

Many of the existing sites overload the user with unnecessary information, and ask users to perform administrative tasks such as difficult and unappealing signup processes. (Fig. 2.4) We want to center the user in the present moment, and save the paperwork for later, by allowing volunteers to trigger the appearance of forms, if and when necessary.

Figure 2.4: Faced with an unwieldy sign up process, many teenagers may not want to continue to the chat service.
3. Target Users

The primary demographic for this application is youth between the ages of 12-24 questioning their sexuality or being bullied for identifying with a particular sexual identity. The application should be appealing to middle and high school students, as well as students in college. A teen or young adult at this fragile period in their life could greatly benefit from someone to talk to who is not directly involved in their life. Teenagers are often inhibited by fear of rejection, and the dis-inhibition that anonymous chat provides, combined with a clear user interface that directs users to immediately begin expressing their concerns to a dedicated listener, makes our proposal a pointed, innovative approach for providing support. Our secondary demographic is volunteers who are looking to help youth and peers that are dealing with similar issues that they themselves have overcome, leaving them with the feeling that they done a good deed.
4. Scenario Walkthrough

Simon attends a mixed-gender, public high school and is constantly getting bullied by his peers. He has gone to the guidance counselor and the Principals Office several times for the taunting and for him getting into fights. Some peers call him names such as queer and homo even though he does not identify with any particular sexuality. He wants to talk to his parents but he isn’t even comfortable figuring out his own sexuality let alone explaining that to his parents. He lives in a conservative household and fears rejection or being reprimanded for bringing up the topic. His guidance counselor has reached out to talk him to teach his methods on keeping calm and telling people when he feels endangered, but it has not stopped his inner turmoil or the bullying in general.

Simon searches the term bullying and comes across some sites such as It Gets Better and The Trevor Project, but they keep referring him to phone numbers. He is too afraid to call someone because he doesn’t want his parents overhearing the conversation. Then he finds a link for a smart phone application. He downloads the app onto his iPhone and opens it. A simple chat-box appears and informs him that someone is available to chat with. Wary at first, but knowing that maybe this could be a way to reach out, he starts slowly by saying hi, the Ally responds with, hi, how are you. Simon goes on to say, not so well, I’ve been getting made fun of in school. The conversation flows from there as he gets what he needs to off of his chest without holding back. He is able to freely talk about him questioning his sexuality without being afraid of his parents finding out, and gets the feeling that someone out there is actually listening to him. After he is done conversing, the Ally asks if he wants to create a user-name so he can access this same Ally again in the future. Simon agrees
and is able to contact them again when he needs someone to talk to.
Bibliography


.1 Original Proposal

Reaching out to LGBT and Other Youth in Trouble

Teenagers and young adults alike have been obtaining technological devices earlier and earlier in their lives. What better way to use these devices than to save their lives. Focusing on the LGBTQ community on the issue of coming out and being accepted, teenage suicides have been occurring more and more frequently as they cannot imagine a future for themselves as bullying becomes too brutal for them to handle\(^3\). Helplines are offered but talking voice-to-voice is sometimes too overwhelming and anxiety-inducing for teenagers to handle, but texting distances the teenager from the helpline operator enough for the teenager to feel safe and to open up to the operator. In this project, I propose to develop an online application and/or an iPhone/Android application to communicate freely and easily to operators that would otherwise be on the hotlines. A chat-environment would be available and a smart, GPS enabled help button would be an option if a user wanted direct emergency contact (either physical or vocal) from the company if they felt endangered by someone or if they felt like a danger to themselves. My application will provide an easy way for teenagers and others to communicate with trained professionals, and get help when needed with direct and instant connection to the people they need to save lives worldwide.

.2 Reasons for Changes

In the process of brainstorming and refining our original proposal, we decided to focus on LGBTQ-identifying teenagers and the specific issues during adolescence such as bullying and rejection from their family and peers.