Project Backpage: Using text messaging to initiate outreach support for victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation

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Abstract

The use of the Internet and online advertising for solicitation by sex workers has created new challenges for community organizations attempting to reach victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation through traditional outreach strategies. Until recently, prostitution occurred primarily on the street and outreach was typically initiated through direct face-to-face contact. In this paper we describe the design and outcome of a multi-phase community-university collaboration in Edmonton, Canada, to explore the use of SMS text messaging to initiate outreach with individuals advertising on the adult services section of the website Backpage.com. The paper describes the impetus behind the project, the project goals and design, as well as results thus far. We also reflect on the results and present a set of emerging best practices, including the contribution of two-way text-based interaction for establishing trust between outreach organizations and the individuals seeking support. Overall, results from the project provide evidence to show that SMS is a cost-effective and important complementary communication strategy for outreach organizations seeking to initiate outreach to victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Keywords:

Human trafficking; sexual exploitation; outreach communication; text messaging; SMS; mobile phones; Internet; Backpage.com

Introduction

The use of the Internet and online advertising for solicitation by sex workers has created new challenges for community organizations attempting to reach victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation through traditional outreach strategies. Until recently, prostitution occurred primarily on the street and outreach was typically initiated through direct face-to-face contact. While this form of communication remains essential for outreach and support, in a growing number of cases it is now difficult or impossible to make initial contact with this population because these individuals are not active on the street but instead solicit clients through online services provided over the Internet (Castle & Lee, 2008; Cunningham & Kendall, 2011).

To address this challenge, several frontline agencies in Edmonton as well as the Vice department from the Edmonton Police Service (EPS) began to speculate about the possibility of initiating outreach by placing calls to the numbers posted online in the adult services section of websites like Backpage.com. The assumption that many of these numbers belong to mobile phones further led to further speculation about the possibility of using text messages to initiate outreach

Text messaging is an important consideration in this context because it presents certain advantages over voice calls. For example, the typical volume of adult service advertisements posted on Backpage.com for a metropolitan area like Edmonton will include several hundred phone numbers. As such, an outreach campaign based on voice calling demands significant resources that may present a difficulty for organizations with limited staff and financial resources. Moreover, there is the likelihood that individuals would not be receptive to attempts at outreach initiation through voice calls. For

instance, a study conducted in 2012 by the Pew Research Centre on representativeness of public opinion surveys shows a sharp decline in willingness of individuals to participate in phone surveys, suggesting a growing reluctance of people generally to engage in unsolicited calls (The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012). These findings, though not directly related to outreach communications, do point to the likelihood that efforts to initiate outreach with voice calls may be a relatively ineffective strategy.

Text messaging, however, presents an interesting alternative to voice calls. It is the second most commonly used feature on a mobile phone, with 81% of Americans surveyed indicating they use their mobile phone to send and receive text messages. This finding extends to other countries as well, where 'texting' has become a central feature and essential application of the mobile phone (Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association, 2013; Ofcom, 2012).

More formally known as 'Short Message Service' (SMS), text messaging is a feature that has been available on all digital mobile phones for well over a decade. It enables users to send and receive private text messages up to 160 characters in length.[2] Messages are sent to the 10-digit phone number of a mobile phone through the commercial telecommunications network. When a text message is received, the mobile phone will usually emit a sound or vibration to notify the user of a new incoming message. Messages can be exchanged interactively between phone numbers, can be redirected to other phone numbers, and can be saved in the user's phone for later

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[2] Many services and devices can to combine several 160-character messages into a single composite message of greater length. See, for example, https://www.twilio.com/help/faq/sms/does-twilio-support-concatenated-sms-messages-or-messages-over-160-characters

reference.[3] The cost of text messages varies depending on the country and a user's service plan but it is considered comparable to voice calling, and it is often far less expensive than voice calling when users subscribe to bulk messaging plans.

Significantly, text messaging can also address some of the inherent challenges of initiating outreach with voice calls. The brevity and instantaneous appearance of a text message on a mobile handset makes it likely that the person receiving it will open it and view the contents at least once. One marketing study, for instance, claims that 99 per cent of text messages are read by the recipient and, of those, 90 per cent are read within three minutes of their delivery to the handset (Mobile Squared, 2010, p. 8). The 160-character limitation also means that a message must be concise, ensuring that key information is conveyed quickly to the reader. In addition, text messages can be saved on a mobile phone for future reference, making it relatively easy for an individual to return to the information at a later time should they wish to do so.

Taken together, these features suggest that text messaging can play an important role in outreach initiation aimed at victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation, although a review of the literature has not turned up any studies that looked specifically at the use of text messaging in outreach for human trafficking or sexual exploitation. Nonetheless, a number of studies have examined the use of SMS as a tool to support other types of outreach campaigns. For instance, public health campaigns such as smoking cessation, weight loss and diabetes management are some of the areas that have

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[3] Standard phone-to-phone SMS provided over the cellular network is now also integrated with other short messaging systems including Apple's iMessage, Blackberry Messenger, and Twitter. For most users this is a technical matter of minor consideration; however, each method has different implications for privacy and information security for both sender and recipient. The project reported in this paper was based on the standard phone-to-phone SMS method where messages are transmitted over a commercial telecom network rather than the Internet.

benefited the most from using these technologies (Cole-Lewis & Kershaw, 2010). Text messaging has also proven particularly useful in communicating with hard-to-reach audiences, such as sex workers in developing countries (Bradley et al., 2012), or to enhance education on difficult topics such as sexual health among teenagers in Australia (Gold, Lim, Hellard, Hocking, & Keogh, 2010) or in the United States (Levine, 2011; Willoughby, 2013). Some of these studies have shown that mobile phone text messaging has the potential to prompt behaviour change when it is used in conjunction with other tools in outreach campaigns (Fjeldsoe, Marshall, & Miller, 2009).

In this paper we will describe the design and outcome of a multi-phase community-university collaboration to explore the use of SMS text messaging to initiate outreach with individuals advertising on the adult services section of the website Backpage.com for the city of Edmonton in the Canadian province of Alberta. The paper describes the impetus behind the project, the project goals and design, as well as results thus far. We also reflect on the results and present a set of emerging best practices that have been formulated based on our experience. The results of the project provide evidence to show that SMS is a cost-effective and important complementary communication strategy for outreach organizations seeking to initiate outreach to victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

It is important to stress that text messaging is not a substitute for direct, face-to-face communication or, indeed, for follow-up voice calls. Outreach organizations will need to continue to use a variety of communication methods for providing follow-up information and client support services. Instead, text messaging is a complementary strategy,

particularly when it comes to making initial contact with individuals who may be victims of human trafficking or sexual exploitation.

Project Backpage: Overview

Initial conversations for a project exploring text messaging for outreach began in autumn of 2012 with several meetings between the Vice Unit of Edmonton Police Service, the Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation (CEASE), Chrysalis Anti-Human Trafficking Network, and the MARS Lab at the University of Alberta.[4][5] Both CEASE and Chrysalis belong to the Action Coalition on Human Trafficking in Alberta (ACT Alberta) and are among a group of organizations in Alberta providing services for victims of human trafficking that include counselling, victim advocacy, education bursaries, and other empowerment programs (ACT Alberta, 2014; CEASE, 2014; Chrysalis, 2014).

The focus of the initial meetings with the collaborators was to consider how text messaging might be used to initiate outreach with individuals soliciting through the adult services section of the website Backpage.com. Backpage.com is a North America-wide classified advertising website that includes extensive adult sections for all major urban centres on the continent, including Edmonton. Its rise to prominence has come in the wake of a decision in 2010 by another online classified advertising site Craiglist to remove its adult services advertising, which at the time were reportedly earning the company up to $44-million in revenue per year (Miller, 2010). One report indicates that

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[4] The MARS (Mobile Applications for Research Support) Lab is a research unit within the Communications and Technology Program at the University of Alberta specializing in low-cost, high replicability projects using mobile communications technology. Its work is centred on community-university collaboration and building community capacity for using digital technologies.
[5] Edmonton Police Service has assumed an arms-length consultative role in the project but is not directly involved the text messaging campaigns.

Backpage.com makes upwards of $27-million per year as the largest online advertiser of adult services in North America (Feyerick & Steffen, 2010).

'Project Backpage,' as it became known, took the form of exploratory research based on principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) using an action research methodology. The goal of the project was twofold: first, to develop a better understanding of the technical feasibility, administrative requirements, and best practices in the use of SMS as a communication method for providing outreach information; and, second, to build capacity with the community partners to incorporate text messaging into their broader outreach and communication strategies should it prove beneficial in the service of their organizational mandates.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is characterized by 'research that is conducted by, with, or for communities' (Sclove, Scammell, & Holland, 1998). This collaborative method acknowledges the expertise that community members or community organizations can contribute to the project and involves them in the research process from the beginning in order to address a community-identified issue or create a positive change in the community through capacity building that can lead the long-term change through sustainable action (Hills, 2000; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Project Backpage evolved through a cyclical, iterative process, drawing on action research methods to guide its design and development (Roche, 2008; Stringer, 2014). Action research is a method familiar to CBPR practitioners because it aims to not only understand a problem but also to encourage genuine change through the development of planned, actionable outcomes to address the problem (Hearn & Foth, 2005). A typical action research cycle guides a project through an iterative process of: planning, acting,

observing and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). In this case, a planning meeting that established a specific set of learning objectives preceded each cycle of activity. This was followed by a translation of those objectives into a set of technical and administrative requirements for issuing text messages. A message campaign was conducted and the results were presented in a technical report reviewed and discussed by all stakeholders. The review meeting then established the basis for each subsequent phase of the project as it evolved over several iterations.

Having recognized and discussed the possibilities for text messaging to reach victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation, project team focused initially on the technical feasibility of sending text messages to a small sample of phone numbers drawn from the adult services section in Backpage.com. Each subsequent phase involve greater scale and scope of activities as the team gained experience and insight with the project.

Backpage Project Pilot Phase 1

The initial project meeting resulted in the decision to undertake a preliminary test to use the free and open source text messaging platform FrontlineSMS to send a pre-scripted text message to a sample of 25 phone numbers and then monitor responses during the next seven days.[6] Preparation of FrontlineSMS for this purpose was relatively simple, taking the team no more than a few hours to configure and conduct preliminary tests. FrontlineSMS maintains a detailed record of all messages sent and received, providing an excellent archive for research purposes. CEASE and Chrysalis provided the

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[6] A detailed report of the technology and procedures used in Project Backpage is available as a case study report on the FrontlineSMS website. Although we are not affiliated with FrontlineSMS, the project was is regarded as a groundbreaking example of how text messaging can be applied as part of a strategy to address human trafficking. The report is available at http://www.frontlinesms.com/2014/01/29/sexual-exploitation-outreach-with-text-messaging-introducing-project-backpage/

wording for their text messages and these were sent successfully to a sample of phone numbers drawn from the adult services section of Backpage.com for the city of Edmonton.

Backpage Project Pilot Phase 2

At the review meeting in November 2013, the project team decided to proceed with a second pilot phase, this time sending messages to a larger sample of phone numbers (n=48), extending the duration of the test to four weeks, and sending messages at various combinations of day and time. At this meeting, the team also agreed to create a 'Do Not Text' (DNT) list for any recipient who indicated through a text reply or other means that they did not wish to receive messages from the campaign. This second pilot phase introduced another partner, the Chrysalis Anti-Human Trafficking Network into the project. As with the first phase, the team agreed on a policy of not responding to any reply messages from recipients but did archive these messages and reviewed them at the follow-up meeting.

Backpage Project Pilot Phase 3

The project team met in January 2013 to review the results of the second phase and discuss changes and new activities that to be included in a third pilot phase. For the third phase, the scale of the project was increased to 100 phone numbers each week, with messages sent every three days, over a total campaign period of 8 weeks from March to May 2013.

This third phase also introduced more sophisticated techniques, including automated phone number extraction from the Backpage.com website and an interactive, two-way messaging session between message recipients and a CEASE Victim Support Worker.

Winter Campaign 2014

Following the review meeting for the third pilot phase a number decisions were taken based on lessons learned up to that point. Among those, the team decided to conclude the pilot phase and to formalize the procedures into a working campaign model. The term 'campaign' was chosen because it was also decided at this time that a seasonal approach would provide an optimal balance between demands on resources and the need to provide information to a dynamic population over the course of the year.[7] On the advice of CEASE, the project identified mid-winter and early autumn as optimal times of the year for campaigns based on the view that these were typically slower periods for the sex trade in Edmonton and that sex workers might be most receptive to attempts at initiating outreach during these times.

The winter campaign was scheduled for January-February 2014 and ran over four weeks with messages sent to almost every phone number posted in the adult section of Backpage.com for the Edmonton area. Phone numbers were extracted from the website using a software application, creating a database of over 300 phone numbers each week for the duration of the campaign. The winter campaign also included regular

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[7] There are no published figures available to indicate turnover of sex trade workers in the Edmonton area on a month by month or yearly basis. During the course of the project we extracted regular samples of the phone numbers posted on Backpage.com and intend to analyze this data to look for fluctuations that might indicate changes in the population over time.

participation of a CEASE Victim Support Worker who responded in real-time to incoming reply messages from individuals who received an outreach message from the campaign.

The following pre-scripted text messages were created by CEASE and Chrysalis and are the result of several iterations and redrafting efforts over the initial three pilot phases. These were issued during the winter campaign, as it evident in the CEASE message.

CEASE:

"It's a New Year! Ready for a New You? CEASE offers $ for school & help for tax filing, poverty relief, counseling, victim services and more! Call 780-471-6137"

Chrysalis Network:

"Chrysalis Network offers free 24-7 phone counseling to workers in the adult industry. When you're ready to talk, we're here to listen. Call 1-866-528-7109"

Table 1 provides a summary of Project Backpage for each of the three pilot phases as well as the winter campaign.

Table 1: Project Backpage summary of pilot phases

Campaign Phase	Date	Duration	Message Frequency	Number of recipients per message
Phase 1	November 2012	1 day	once	25

Phase 2	December 2012	4 weeks	Daily and weekly	48
Phase 3	March-May 2013	8 weeks	3 messages/week	100
Winter campaign	January 2014	4 weeks	2 messages/week	300+

FINDINGS

Overall, the pilot phases demonstrated the technical feasibility and cost-effectiveness of initiating outreach by sending text messages to phone numbers drawn from a website like Backpage.com. The free software platform FrontlineSMS proved capable of handling the volume of numbers and was extremely valuable as a research tool because it provided a detailed record of all incoming and outgoing messages. The cost per message for the winter campaign was $0.0075 CAD per message (sent and received) using the online SMS gateway offered by Twilio. Technically speaking, the system is relatively easy to set up and use, requiring some but not extensive training for users. Messages are delivered quickly and reliably, and FrontlineSMS is capable of handling two-way interactions over SMS in a limited but still very effective way. The project was also able to quickly and accurately extract phone numbers from the Backpage.com website using commercially available software. The numbers were imported into FrontlineSMS as a standard CSV file, making it possible to generate an updated database of contacts within minutes.

Impact is more difficult to measure, but over the course of the pilot phase and the winter campaign, CEASE and Chrysalis became aware of several confirmed cases where individuals made contact through a phone call or in person seeking further information or support. Those individuals specifically mentioned that they were acting on a text

message that they had received from the project. In one case, an individual had saved the

message in their phone's inbox for a period of time before acting on the information. In

addition, the messaging campaign became the subject of a discussion on an online escort

review board[8], suggesting that a wider community involved in the sex trade was aware of

these outreach organizations and their involvement in this initiative.

The messages sent during the campaign were not intended as two-way

communication from the community but simply to provide a source of outreach

information to individuals who might be seeking support. However, over the course of

the pilot phases we came to expect a certain number of reply messages and that these

could provide insight about the outreach effort and its potential impact. As such, the

team began to take a greater interest in the reply messages, which eventually resulted in a

decision to introduce real-time two-way interaction into the third pilot phase and the

winter campaign.

The following section provides a basic analysis of the reply messages and

highlights two particular exchanges that took place during the winter campaign.

Tone and intent of r**eply messages**

During the winter campaign, we received reply messages from about 14 per cent of

the 565 phone numbers contacted.[9] This response rate was also typical of the previous

pilot phases leading up the winter campaign. The replies were varied, and in an effort to

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[8] An escort review board is an online discussion forum for individuals, both buyers and sellers, involved in the sex trade. Examples include: canadaadultfun.com/forums, cerb.ca, perb.cc

[9] Some reply messages are automatically generated by the telecom operator and inform us that the phone number belongs to a landline and not a mobile phone. These phone numbers are then removed from the database. The 14 per cent noted above does not include replies from landlines, so we assume that these are coming from individuals who received the campaign message on a mobile phone.

better understand the nature of the communication the team decided to classify them

based on manifest thematic analysis of their contents (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Categories

were established along two dimensions, message tone and message intent, leading to the

following schema:

Categories related to message tone*:*

    Positive replies: These messages were distinctly affirming, optimistic or

    approving in nature. e.g. "Thank you its [*sic*] an amazing thing you're doing"

    Negative replies: These messages were distinctly oppositional, aggressive or

    pessimistic in nature. e.g. "don't text me that bull****"

    Neutral replies: These messages lacked any distinctly positive or negative

    characteristics. e.g. "no thanks"

Categories related to message intent*:*

    Conversational replies – e.g. "Yes I want to quite [*sic*] it's hurting me to keep

    doing what I'm doing but I feel stuck"

    Question replies – e.g. "What who is this?"

    When analyzing the messages, the first step was to code every message according

to tone, either positive, negative or neutral. After coding according to tone, all the

messages were reviewed again according to intent, only coding messages that were either

conversational or questions. While all messages were coded according to tone, only a

portion of the messages were coded according to intent. This research is exploratory in

nature and the analysis was intended to be descriptive, capturing a general picture of the incoming messages.

There may have been other potential categories for intent, however, these two were the most common. See Table 2 for details of message analysis.

Table 2: Classification of initial reply messages by tone and intent

	Positive Replies	Negative Replies	Neutral Replies	Conversational Replies	Question Replies
Number of Replies	9	15	81	14	12
Percentage of TOTAL Replies	7.7%	14.2%	77.1%	13.6%	11.6%

While the analysis shows a significant number of negative replies as compared with positive reply messages, neutral replies represent by far the most common type. Neutral messages were typically acknowledgement messages such as: "ok thanks", "got it". But it is worth noting that the majority of conversational and question replies were coded as having a neutral tone.

We recognize the limits of the analysis and do not wish to generalize too much from it; however, we do wish to point out that it generated several important insights that were incorporated into the project as emerging practices. These were introduced at various points during the pilot phases and for the winter campaign as described below.

'The Golden Hour'

Throughout the pilot phases and the winter campaign, it became clear that we could expect the majority of reply messages within one hour of having transmitted the initial

message to the phone numbers. In the winter campaign, for example, 85 per cent of reply

messages met this expectation and 91 per cent were received within two hours of the

initial transmission. This suggests that recipients do view the messages very soon after

receiving them and, moreover, that if the recipient is inclined to respond to the message

that they will do so without delay. We began to refer to this time period as the 'Golden

Hour' and realized that it presented an opportunity to explore two-way interactive text

messaging as an outreach initiation activity.

Do Not Text (DNT) list

If at any time during the campaign a recipient requested to be removed from the

distribution list, either directly (e.g. "Please take my name off your list") or indirectly

(e.g. "f*** off"), the research team placed the recipient's phone number on a 'Do Not

Text' (DNT) folder created on the FrontlineSMS software and did not receive any further

messages sent by the project. Over the course of the project about ten per cent of total

message recipients were added to the DNT list.

Two-way interaction

Analysis of the reply messages from the pilot phases suggested that those

individuals responding with conversation prompts or questions might be receptive to

further interaction by text message. As such, a Victim Support Worker from CEASE

('Colleen') was asked to join the team for both the third pilot phase and the winter

campaign. Her role was to immediately respond by text message to any replies that seemed to invite a response.[10]

During the 'Golden Hour', as expected, we received a number of conversational and question-oriented reply messages. During the third pilot phase, Colleen initiated several brief exchanges and a longer exchange, which resulted in the individual paying a visit to the CEASE office in Edmonton to talk to Colleen in person. Table 3 contains a partial transcript of that exchange. What is notable about this exchange is that the initial reply message was received on March 30, shortly after the CEASE message was sent to a batch of numbers early in the third pilot phase (MsgID #884). However, the first two-way interaction session with a CEASE Victim Support Worker's response takes place almost a month later during the interactive session that had been scheduled for April 26 (MsgID #2039). The Victim Support Worker decided to respond to the message despite it having been received several weeks earlier. Even with the delayed response time, the recipient quickly engaged with the Support Worker, resulting in a positive outcome.

Table 3: Exchange of text messages between Victim Support Worker and Backpage.com contact leading to an appointment

MsgID	Date/Time	Message contents
843	2013-03-30 14:07	CEASE message: Want out? There is hope. Bursaries, counselling, victim advocacy, peer support. Center to End All Sexual Exploitation (CEASE) 780-471-6137. CEASE is a caring community. Our work includes counselling, trauma recovery and emergency poverty relief to help rebuild your life. www.ceasenow.org
884	2013-03-30 16:31	Backpage.com contact: Yes I want to quit it's hurting me to keep doing what I'm doing but I feel stuck help me please
2039	2013-04-26 16:16	CEASE (Colleen): Our apologies for not replying to your last response with our previous message. We have modified the technology to now be able to do so (rather than just sending the initial message out). Let us know if we can still help :) Thanks.
2054	2013-04-26 16:47	Backpage.com contact : Yes please. Would like help.

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[10] Pseudoynms have been used throughout this paper to protect the identity of the participants.

2055	2013-04-26 17:02	CEASE (Colleen): Thanks so much for your reply to our text. How can we help? Would you like to meet with a CEASE employee next week to discuss where you are at and what resources you are interested in?
2060	2013-04-26 17:09	Backpage.com contact: Yes please
2062	2013-04-26 17:17	CEASE (Colleen): Are you available Monday or Tuesday? I will be at CEASE then. My name is [Colleen] and I am a victim advocate. We are located near 118th ave and 92nd street but if you would like to meet elsewhere at a coffee shop or wherever works for you, we could do that as well.
2068	2013-04-26 17:31	Backpage.com contact: I can come to you mon
2071	2013-04-26 17:39	CEASE (Colleen): Sounds good. What time works best for you? I am there starting at 9am until about 4pm or so. Let's set a time and then when you arrive, just call me at […] the address is […].
2072	2013-04-26 17:39	Backpage.com contact: Ok about 1pm works for me
2075	2013-04-26 17:54	CEASE (Colleen): 1pm it is! I look forward to seeing you then. I am off work now for the weekend so you won't be able to reach me through this number, but if you are late on Monday or have to cancel, CEASE has a voicemail that you can leave a message on at any time. 780-471-6137. Have a great weekend and I will see you this Monday at 1pm.
2076	2013-04-26 17:54	Backpage.com contact: Thanks so much [Colleen]! I look forward to meeting you too. ☺
2079	2013-04-26 17:54	CEASE (Colleen): See you at 1 mon ☺

Colleen informed the team afterward that the individual did in fact show up for the appointment as scheduled. We do not know if this kind of interaction would have occurred if a voice call was attempted as follow up. Whatever the case, it demonstrates that a certain level of trust can be established using text messaging, provided that a trained counsellor or staff member is responding appropriately to incoming reply messages.

Another important aspect to this interaction is that the intent of the communication is to establish trust while encouraging the individual to call or visit the CEASE office. The project team had discussed this prior to the start of the campaign and agreed that it

19

was not desirable to encourage ongoing exchanges using text messages because of the impact it would have on staff resources, particularly if false expectations were created with individuals who might come to believe that the project would offer 24/7 communication (which it does not).

Over the course of the winter campaign, Colleen's role was expanded and she responded to 20 unique phone numbers with 39 individual messages during the Golden Hour following each scheduled message transmission.

At this time Colleen was given more freedom to respond to any incoming reply messages including those with a negative tone. In these cases, Colleen responded with a message that acknowledged the reply and politely informed the individual that we would add their number to the Do Not Text list. What was most interesting about these exchanges is the way in which a brief interaction can result in a marked change of tone from negative to neutral in the follow up reply message. Table 4 contains a transcript of this kind of exchange.

Table 4: Text message exchange between Victim Support Worker and Backpage.com contact resulting in change of tone

MsgID	Date/Time	Message contents
49587	2014-01-30 16:00	CEASE message: It's a New Year! Ready for a New You? CEASE offers $ for school & help for tax filing, poverty relief, counselling, victim services, and more! Call 780-471-6137
49589	2014-01-30 16:03	Backpage.com contact: I am going to lose my s*** if I get another one of these texts.
49590	2014-01-30 16:04	CEASE victim support worker: Lol sorry, the system just randomly pulls #s off Backpage.com. We'll add you to the do not contact list. Stay safe and take care ☺
49593	2014-01-30 16:05	Backpage.com contact: Lol thank you. You too

Had this simple exchange not taken place, the individual would have presumably felt 'spammed' by CEASE and taken away a negative impression of the outreach attempt. However, this example suggests that even a simple two-way interaction, properly conducted, can lead to a marked shift in the tone of the communication and potentially establish some goodwill between an outreach organization and the individuals it is seeking to help.

These two examples reinforce the value of including interactive text messaging in the campaign. In both examples, the CEASE victim support worker was able to establish a positive interaction and build a positive impression of CEASE with the individuals concerned, initiating outreach and building trust within the community. All messages received during interactive text messaging were either neutral or positive, no negatives messages were received in response to an interactive message from a CEASE victim support worker.

DISCUSSION

Given the initial success of the pilot phases and the winter campaign, the team is now planning several next steps. We are examining a more formal protocol for two-way interaction with message recipients. There is an important opportunity and a responsibility to respond to replies coming from recipients, and having a trained counselor on hand for that 'Golden Hour' when messages are being sent out, might be an effective way to further improve likelihood of follow-up contact with victims who may be seeking help.

During the project we were constantly aware of the importance of establishing trust between the outreach organization and the individuals it is seeking to help by providing them with reliable and helpful information. As part of that consideration, we feel it is important to respect requests to be removed from the database by adding those phone numbers to our Do Not Text list. On the other hand, we are looking at the possibility of expanding the campaign to include an opt-in component for health and safety advice as part of a regular series of outgoing messages in order to provide individuals with important information while establishing trust with the outreach organizations.

We also realized that messaging does not need to be a continuous year-round activity, which can place a drain on resources for the organizations involved and annoy recipients with constant stream of messages. Instead, the team considered the times of year they felt campaigns would be most effective. As a result of that discussion, and based on an assessment made by a CEASE victim support worker familiar with the population, it was determined that 2-3 campaigns scheduled at key points in the year (spring, summer, fall) provide an optimal balance between reaching the population when it was most receptive while not over stretching the resources of the outreach organizations involved.

Two-way messaging proved to be a valuable means to provide social support to individuals in the sex trade. Social support itself can be broken down into four aspects of supportive behaviors: emotional support (empathy, trust and caring), instrumental support (practical aid, service and assistance), informational support (advice, suggestion and information) and appraisal support (constructive feedback, encouragement and affirmation) (Heaney & Israel, 2002). Interactions that occurred during Project

Backpage illustrated all four aspects of supportive behaviors. While some individuals may not be willing to make a phone call, others may be willing to engage in a two-way exchange of text messages as a first step toward seeking support. Organizations involved in sexual exploitation outreach and victim support need to consider carefully how text messaging can serve this role while respecting its inherent limitations.

The key to the success of this initiative going forward will be to establish a sustainable model by which campaigns can be planned and carried out with the participation of all key stakeholders. The winter campaign was conducted successfully with the assistance of three graduate students from the University of Alberta, so one possibility is to incorporate future campaigns into a community service learning program operated through the university. Given the seasonal nature of the campaigns, this would lend itself well to fall and winter teaching terms at the university.

Going forward, the project also will be looking for ways to integrate the text messaging component into a more extensive communication strategy that draws on principles and practices from the field of social marketing (Lefebvre, 2011). Among other things, this will include an effort to better understand the profile of the individuals that the outreach organizations wish to reach in order to further refine the content of the messages, as well as cross-promoting the text message campaigns through other media including the possibility of advertising placed on Backpage.com prior to the commencement of the text messaging campaign. Other ideas under consideration include the following:

- Expand the scope of the messages to include other information relevant to the audience, such as harm reduction techniques. For example: health tips, information on new clinics taking patients, news about educational bursaries, financial tips, legal assistance, personal empowerment, tax services, local events, and so on;

- Promote the use of Backpage Project through other communications channels such as word-of-mouth, handouts and social media. Cross-promotion may encourage trust- building and credibility within the community;

- Develop a social media presence through Twitter, Facebook, and other sites that raises awareness about Backpage Project and includes messages from partnering organizations;

- Create a website that explains the mission of Backpage Project and its partners. It could include a contact email, as well as the phone number associated with the project, so audience members can double check the source of the text message if needed. This could potentially alleviate the uncertainty from the community as to the identify of the sender of the text messages and assure them of confidentiality in the event they respond to them;

Overall, a key objective is to raise awareness of the campaign and, by doing so, to create a better understanding of services and support provided by organizations like CEASE and Chrysalis.

Summary

Until recently outreach and support for victims of human trafficking has taken place through face-to-face contact. The growth of online solicitation has made this form of outreach initiation more difficult but presents an opportunity to send support information using text messages to phone numbers posted with online advertisements for adult services. Project Backpage is an exploratory community-university collaboration to test the feasibility of using text messages for outreach initiation. Our pilot studies have demonstrated not only the technical feasibility of this approach but have shown that it can be a cost-effective method of outreach communication.

Moreover, preliminary results from the two-way interaction component introduced in Project Backpage suggest that if text messaging is integrated into a multi-faceted outreach strategy, it can play an important role in making initial contact and building trust between victims of human trafficking and outreach organizations.

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