PREFERENCE TESTING

Meltem Ozcan

1. Introduction

We conducted a preference test using two versions of the homepage of an e-counseling platform, BetterHelp. BetterHelp connects individuals seeking counseling with licensed therapists with a mission to make *professional counseling accessible, affordable, convenient - so anyone who struggles with life's challenges can get help, anytime, anywhere.*

2. Study Design

We utilized a within-subjects-design, i.e. participants were shown both variants. After giving informed consent, participants were asked a number of demographic questions (age, gender identity, employment status, education). They completed a pre-test questionnaire that asked about their preconceptions about online therapy, whether they had utilized online therapy before, and what features they expected the homepage for an online counseling website to have. Then, they were shown one
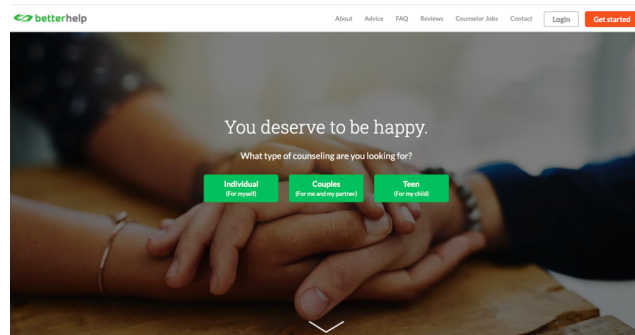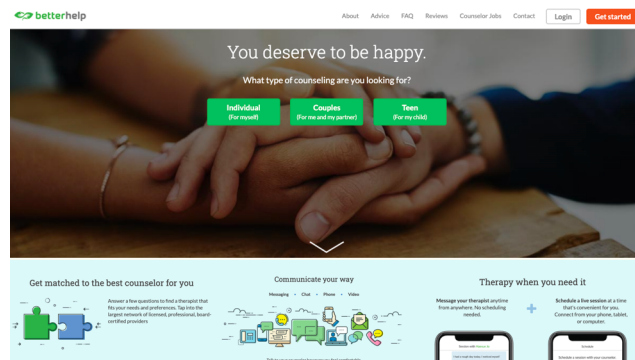

Figure 1: Variant 1.

Figure 2: Variant 2.

of the two variants considered for BetterHelp's homepage and answered questions regarding the usability, appearance and credibility of the page (survey items adapted from SUPR-Q and SUS).

They then saw the other variant for the homepage and answered the same questions. Participants were randomized into see either Variant 1 or Variant 2 first to prevent ordering effects. Figure 1 and Figure 2 illustrate the two variants we used to conduct the preference test. Variant 1 is the original appearance of the BetterHelp homepage. In Variant 2, we moved up information and graphics that were available in the original homepage after scrolling. The goal was to explore whether users might prefer having this information presented immediately.

Participants gave ratings to the following items on 5-point Likert scales for both variants:

1. How easy or difficult to navigate do you think this page would be?

2. How visually appealing or unappealing do you find the page?

3. How credible or untrustworthy do you find the services of BetterHelp from viewing this page?

4. How likely are you to recommend this website to a friend or colleague?

5. I found the page unnecessarily complex.

6. The page gives a clear idea of BetterHelp's services.

7. I would be confident using this website.

The ratings were coded -2 to 2, and were used to create a stand-alone scale for users' liking of the page they viewed. These items together had a Cronbach's alpha of .61, which increased to a more acceptable alpha of .76 when the "I found the page unnecessarily complex" item was removed.

Finally, participants were asked to make a preference between the two variants and share the reasoning for this preference and any feedback. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics.

3. Recruitment

20 participants were recruited through word-of-mouth and by posting on the Coursera discussion forum for the course. Ideally, participants would have been recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk but our recruitment efforts were limited by the lack of funds. Participants recruited via word-of-mouth may be similar in a way that might bias the results, as people tend to become friends with similar people (i.e. birds of a feather flock together). 1 participant's data was removed as task instructions were not followed.

4. Participants

15 of the participants identified as Female, 4 as Male. Figure 3 illustrates the ages of survey participants.

Out of the 19 participants, 3 had doctorate degrees, 4 completed a professional degree, 11 completed a 4 year degree, 1 completed some college and 1 did not respond. 10 participants were employed full time, 6 were students and 3 were unemployed looking for work.
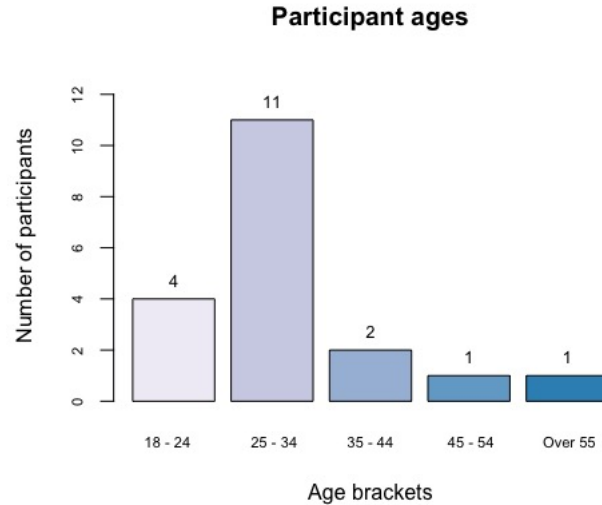
Participant ages

Figure 3: Age breakdown of sample.

4.1 Online therapy use and preconceptions about online therapy

Out of the 19 that responded to this question, only 4 had previously utilized online therapy. Most commonly expected features for an online counseling website were *reviews, payment info, calming color scheme, log-in and sign-up buttons, an About page*, and *information about how online counseling works*. Most commonly cited preconceptions about online therapy services were *convenience, accessibility, confidentiality,* and *concerns about lack of intimacy, trust and security*.

5. Results

9 participants viewed Variant 1 first and 10 participants viewed Variant 2 first.

Two participants made no choice between the two variants, four preferred Variant 1 and 13 preferred Variant 2. A t-test confirmed at .95 confidence level that significantly more participants preferred Variant 2 over Variant 1 (p=0.007). The scores for the six-item scale indicated that the users showed significantly more liking for Variant 2, with a mean of 3.11 for Variant 1 and a mean of 7.20 for Variant 2 (p=.009). There was no significant difference between participants' ratings for the "unnecessarily complex" item removed from the scale.

The four participants who preferred Variant 1 cited a *clean, organized look* and *simplicity* as the reason for this preference. On the other hand, participants who preferred Variant 2 commonly referred to *the process and perks for online therapy being spelled out clearly* as the reason they preferred it over Variant 1. One participant who preferred Variant 2 said "While it may be less visually appealing than the first, it feels a bit more credible and professional," and another participant stated "I like that there is more information at first glance. Somehow feels more trustable".

6. Directions

Our findings indicate that the with additional information regarding the process and modes for online counseling was preferred above the current homepage. Even though some participants found Variant 2 less appealing than Variant 1, Variant 2 was preferred for giving a clearer idea about the services of BetterHelp. The additional information provided seems to have increased the perceived credibility of the page. Our recommendation would be to go forward with Variant 2, and explore a more visually appealing and simpler way of incorporating the information to the homepage.