by Nishal Nandigam

experience project

"**Four out of five people** who use this site say that their life has changed for the better" (TedX). This bold claim was stated by Armen Berjikly, the creator of Experience Project (EP)—a website that encourages users to explore and connect to each other through shared experiences. I had not heard of this website before, but the idea that it focused on mutual experiences rather than mutual friends intrigued me. As I researched the website, I noticed that it stressed concepts such as "You are not Alone" and "Discover New People Like You." As an avid Facebook user, I am aware of the fake relationships that can be built through social media. I was curious to see if EP could shatter the chains of popular social media and create genuine and intimate relationships between users. Here is my experience with Experience Project.

THE IDEA BEHIND EP

To begin, I will introduce the idea behind EP, and what led Armen Berjikly to create it:

"Inspired by a friend's diagnosis with [multiple sclerosis], Armen built a positive community chartered on empowering patients through knowledge. Along the way, the forum portion of the site became the most powerful tool of all. It gave voice to a group of people known to

suffer in silence, and the opportunity to be among new friends, those who truly understood each other's challenges. Soon Armen realized that...Everyone has experiences to share" ("About Us"). Because of this realization, EP attempts to present people as they truly are: a product of all their experiences. Comparing this to Facebook, where users are often consumed by the appearance that they can present to the public, EP destroys the concept of a

EP attempts to present people as they truly are: a product of all their experiences

fake profile. As Sherry Turkle explains, "Social media ask us to represent ourselves in simplified ways. And then, faced with an audience, we feel pressure to conform to these simplifications" (Turkle). This conformation simply does not exist in EP. Instead, by interacting with people who have the same experience as you, a deeper understanding can be created and a more powerful interaction can occur. EP attempts to facilitate these emotional moments.

THE AURA OF EP

My initial experience with EP was extremely different than my experiences with more popular social media. As soon as I created my account, I understood that the environment simulated by EP was all about comfortability and inclusion. This made sense, as many users come to EP as a way to cope with depression and emotional hardships. I was immediately greeted with a direct message and friend request from an EP employee, welcoming me to the website and explaining where I could find tutorials. The unique aspect of this welcome message was that I could respond back
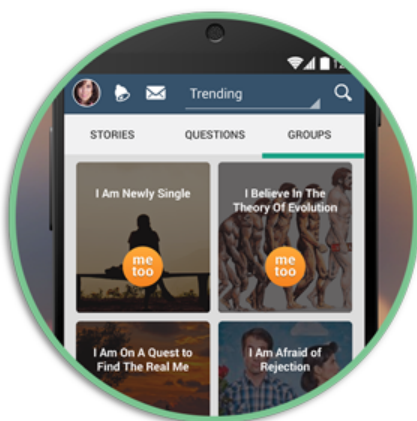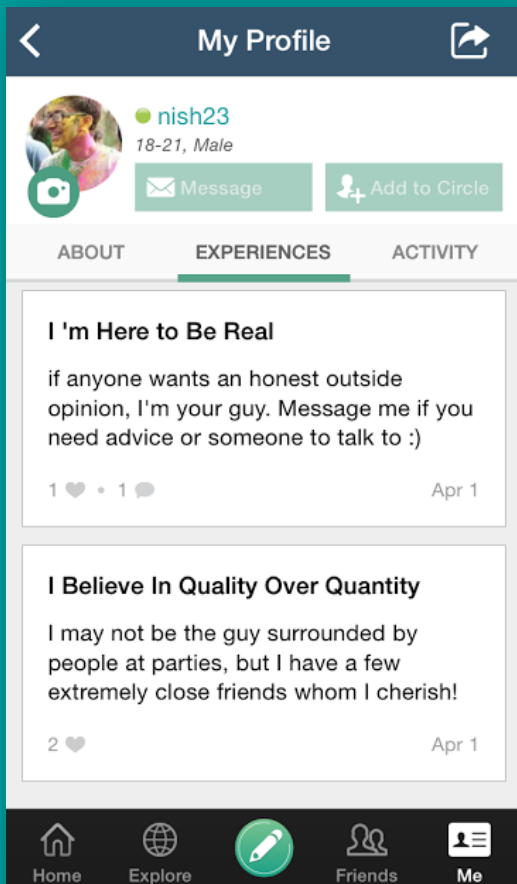

Connect around things that actually matter
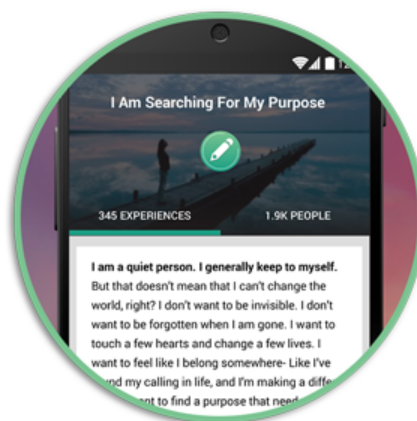
Share life experiences anonymously
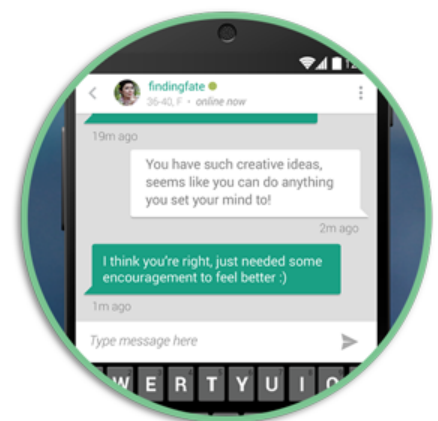
Chat in real time with people who get you

PROFILE FEATURES

In comparison to profile pages of social media such as Facebook, EP shows relatively little information. Only the gender is definitive—even the age is given within a range. Uploading pictures is also not a feature of EP. This is because EP does not want users to focus on how they portray themselves on social media; instead, they want users to focus on the experiences that they share. A reviewer of EP explained that "we do not connect through hometowns or profile pictures but through reliving the pathos that we all feel—cathartic joys, extreme pain and lighthearted in-betweens" (Makarechi). EP believes that you can learn more about a person through the experiences they have went through, rather than the pictures that they upload on their profile.

to the employee. She responded back to me within seconds. The feeling of already connecting to the EP community was invigorating and satisfying. The method of establishing your profile was also adaptable to the user's comfort level. Because of the private nature of the topics discussed on EP, anonymity is certainly prioritized. Users' profile pictures also have the option to be blurred out. From my

EP is all about comfortability and inclusion

experience, most users either blur out their pictures or upload a picture that is not their face—such as a cartoon or object. As we discussed in our "Can you Rape in Cyberspace?" lecture,

harassment is rampant on the internet. To counter this, a reviewer of EP explained that "the promise of anonymity makes a lot of people feel more comfortable about opening up regarding these serious and potentially sensitive issues" (Catone). Thus, EP takes the necessary steps to protect anonymity.

EXPERIENCES

EP centers around sharing experiences. The process of doing so is quite similar to making a status update on Facebook. The only difference is that you must choose a header for your experience that follows the "I..." syntax. This header can be from the dropdown box provided by EP or you can create your
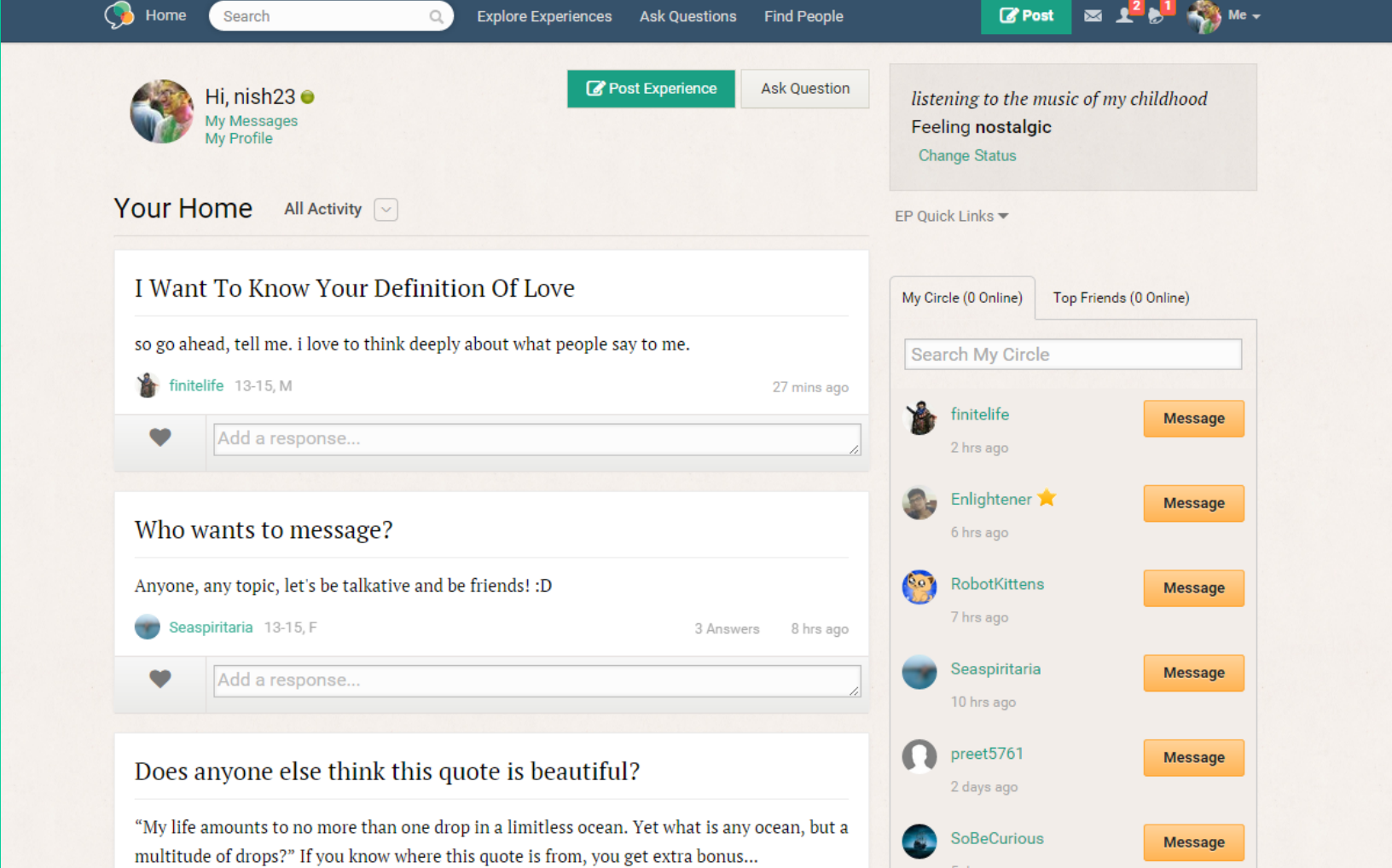
FOCUSED PROFILE

The profile on Experience Project minimalizes the information about users. Instead, it heavily focuses on broadcasting experiences and connecting with friends.

MOBILE APP

EP also features a mobile experience titled "MeToo." I actively used the iOS app to post experiences and ask questions. I found this to be convenient when I experienced something and immediately felt like sharing it to the public. The messaging tools were also handy in maintaining communication with those who wished to connect with me.
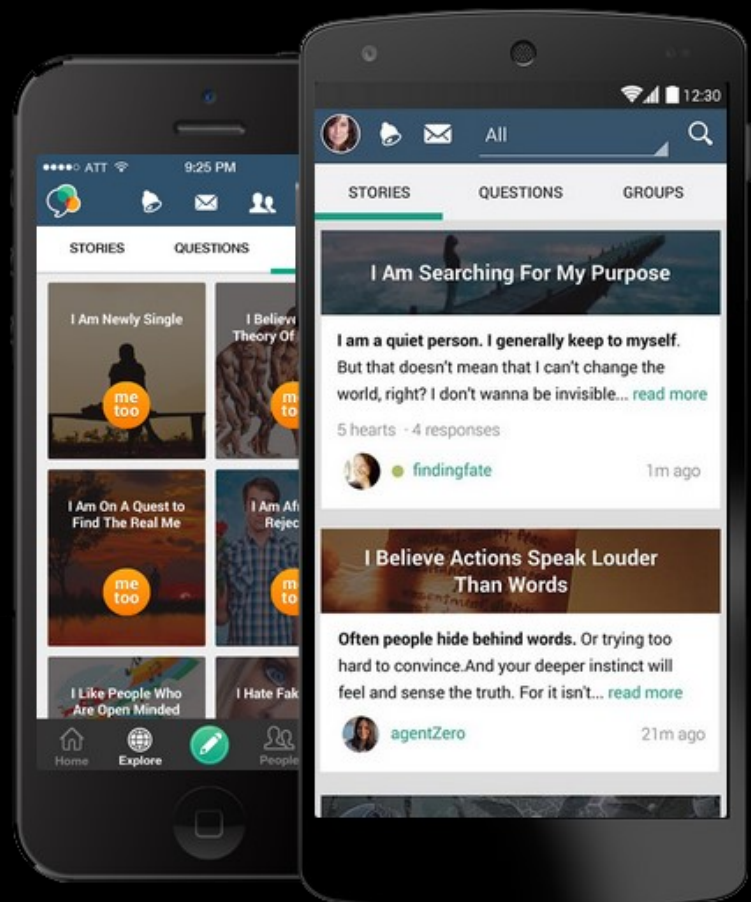
your own. For example, a user could title an experience, "I get easily scared during horror movies." If you create your own, this title gets added to a database in which other users can also
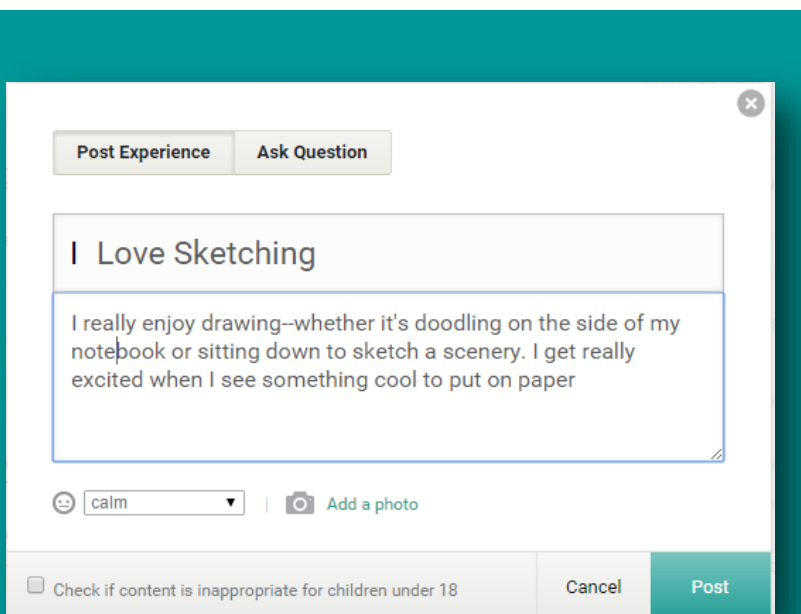
It is hard for your experience to get many views

choose the same title if they share your experience. You then write details about your experience, choose a mood to accompany it, and post the experience. Other users can browse the experiences and "heart" or respond to it. This was a very simple and efficient process, however I found it difficult to truly share a meaningful experience with someone else. Because every experience is featured on a public page, it is hard for your experience to get

An example of posting an experience

many views. Therefore, my experiences did not receive many hearts or comments from other users. This was disappointing for me—and it would be especially disappointing for a user who was looking for someone to share their sorrows with. This aspect should be alarming for EP because it is used as a coping mechanism for many people with depression or looking for emotional support. Being ignored and isolated is something that these people do not need to experience.

QUESTIONS

EP also has a question component, where users can release questions to the public. The question process is as easy as posting an experience. You simply write out your question and categorize it with a label (ex. Community, Politics, Food, Music, etc.). Because of the addition of filtering the questions with a category, I believe this allowed for more users to view the posted question. I found that when I posted a question, I would receive an average of three responses. This was a lot more interactive than my posting of experiences. The responses I received were far different than comments typically posted on social media such as Facebook and YouTube. The responses on EP were genuine and heartfelt. For example, when I asked "Does anyone have sleep paralysis?" I received many comments relating their
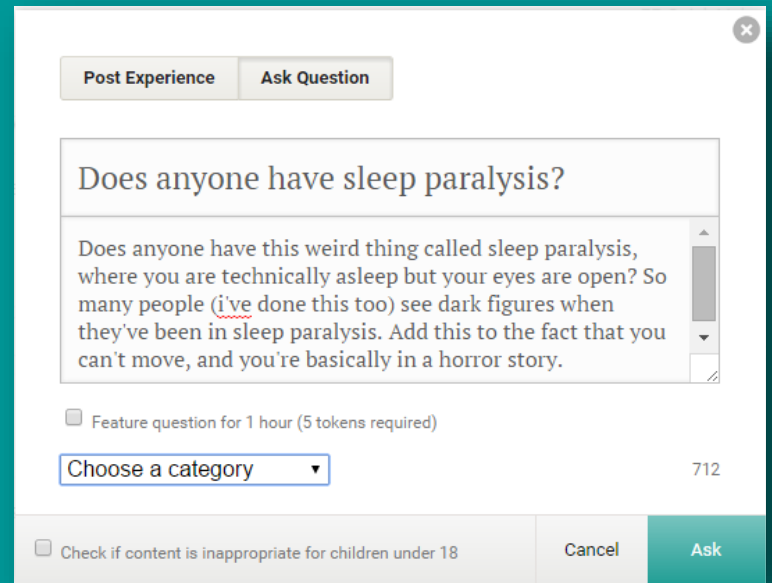
experiences to sleep paralysis and even concerned comments from those who had never heard of sleep paralysis. As I discovered that questions received more feedback than experiences, I began to imbed my experiences within my questions. Through the responses to my questions, I began to experience
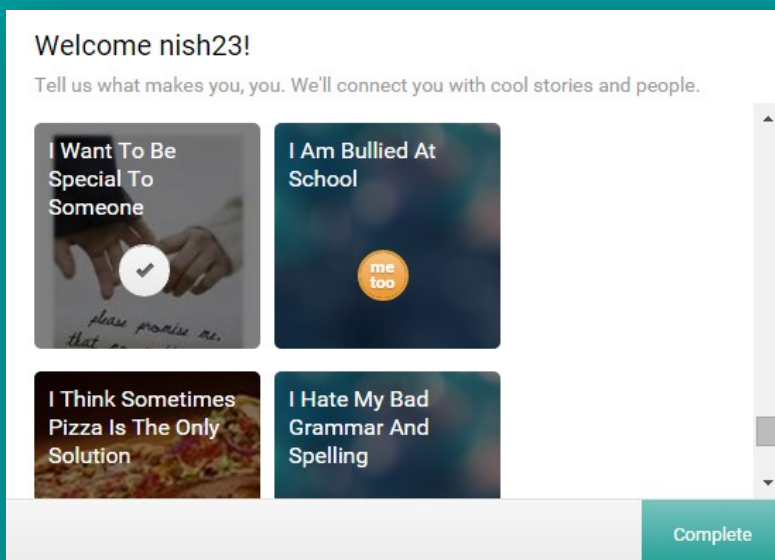
The responses on EP were genuine and heartfelt

the connections that EP had intended. I bonded with people over shared experiences and offered information for those who had not experienced what I had. I believe that if the same category feature in questions was applied to experiences, the experience would receive the same amount of user-to-user interaction.
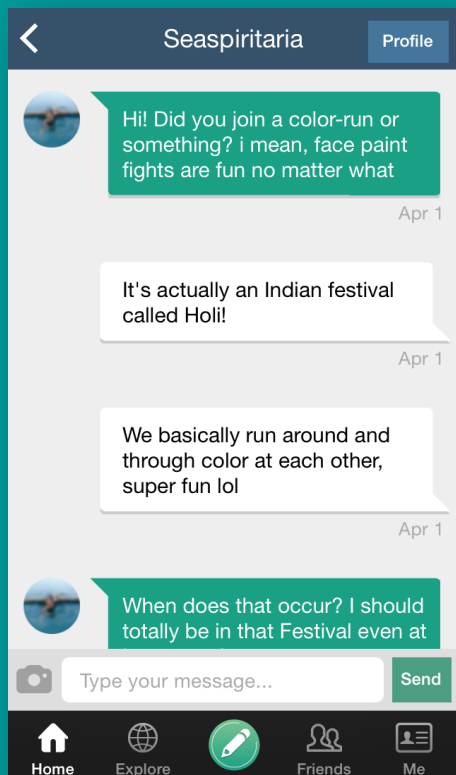
FRIENDS AND MESSAGING

An example of posting a question

I found it difficult to become friends with many users on EP. EP implements a system where you can add whoever you want to your circle—this allows you to get updates when they post an experience or question. But much like Twitter's follower system, this is a one-sided relationship. When only one user adds another to their circle, the user is

INITIALLY CHOOSING EXPERIENCES

The very first thing you do as a member of EP is choose what experiences you have had. EP suggests several experiences that are popular among its members. This is comforting to the user because many of the experiences are deeply sentimental and self-aware. Thus, the user begins to reflect upon their aspirations, qualities, and desires, and realizes that many of the other people on EP have the same characteristics as they do. I found this productive in realizing who I was as a person.

Seaspiritaria | Profile

Hi! Did you join a color-run or something? i mean, face paint fights are fun no matter what

Apr 1

It's actually an Indian festival called Holi!

Apr 1

We basically run around and through color at each other, super fun lol

Apr 1

When does that occur? I should totally be in that Festival even at

Type your message... | Send

Home | Explore | Friends | Me

CONVERSING

My most interactive and enjoyable conversation was with Seaspiritaria, who had approached me with questions about my profile picture. I had chosen to upload a picture of me celebrating Holi—an Indian festival where you throw colored powder at each other—as my profile picture. Seaspiritaria asked me what I was doing in my picture, and I explained Holi to her. She shared how she knew of a similar festival that had happened in the Phillipines, where she lived. Through our shared experience, we established a meaningful relationship and a delightful conversation.

considered a "fan" of the added user. When both users add each other to their circles, then they are considered "friends." There is a positive and negative to this system. Because you are not aggressively pushed into either accepting or denying a relationship with another user, it maximizes the comfortability of the user in deciding who they interact with. On the other hand, it makes it hard for users looking for friends—but having to settle with being a fan. Messaging also works in a similar fashion. A user can directly

It's hard for users looking for friends.

message another user, but the other user has to accept the message first. This adds to the safe environment that EP is trying to create. I found my experience with messaging beneficial

and satisfying. I received personal messages from users who had seen my profile picture or who had wanted to talk to me directly concerning a question I had asked. These were always enjoyable experiences in which I established a bond, and occasionally friend status, with another user.

DOES IT WORK?

Does Experience Project truly allow users to develop a meaningful relationship through shared experiences? Yes , I would agree that it does—just not in the way that it intends. While EP has cultivated the appropriate environment to have meaningful moments, the architecture of posting experiences seriously debilitates this. By clumping every experience into one area, users aren't able to search for topics in which they

share experiences. Thus, in order to find the appropriate experience, users must sift through the excess of unrelatable experiences. Although, this does not mean there isn't a way to find shared experiences. Through the use of questions and direct messages I was able to locate the community that I was looking for. There was a plethora of

EP allows users to develop a meaningful relationship— just not in the way it intends

people who could provide deeper understanding, I just had to choose an alternate method to find them. This is something I would implore EP to work on. Especially when EP's audience is people looking for genuine experiences, being ignored can be extremely demoralizing. If they can correct the method in which they categorize experiences, I believe it would create an even larger opportunity to benefit users seeking a more powerful understanding.

WORKS CITED

"About Us." Experience Project - Personal Stories about Any Life Experience. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Apr. 2015.

This source is from the about page on Experience Project, so it is credible.

Catone, Josh. "Experience Project Embraces Anonymous Socializing." ReadWrite. Wearable World Inc., 21 Nov. 2007. Web. 21 Apr. 2015.

This source is from a reputable tech news website. On their about page they claim how they are "widely read" and "respectable."

Makarechi, Kia. "Deep Dark Secrets on World Wide Web." Daily Bruin. N.p., 8 Oct. 2007. Web. 21 Apr. 2015.

This is from the daily newspaper of the University of California, Los Angeles. The association with a university adds to its credibility.

Tedx Talks. "When Change is not a Choice: Armen Berjikly at TEDxYerevan." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 17 Jan. 2013. Web. 21 Apr. 2015.

This is a Ted Talk given by the creator of EP. It is directly from him, so it must be credible.

Turkle, Sherry. Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

*All images found on Experience Project