**Marriage Mechanic: A Qualitative Analysis of Participant Feedback
from an Online Relationships Skills Education Program**

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ABSTRACT. As online relationship education programs continue to grow in prevalence, there emerges a need for anonymous feedback that is useful for improving content and processes that program participants experience. Additionally, as micro-content is used to educate others on relationship knowledge and skills, qualitative feedback can help explore the most appropriate means of content delivery. This paper reports on qualitative feedback that was organized and coded using thematic analysis. These themes provide clear input for structuring online content for all relationship education programs, including those structured in abbreviated "micro-content" formats.

Keywords: Online relationship education, online content development

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Improving couple and relationship education (CRE) programs has been an on-going goal of family life educators (Scott, Rhoades, Stanley, Allen, & Markman, 2013). Quantitative and qualitative findings from previous research indicate that online relationship education programming has a healthy impact on relationship factors for participants (Braithwaite & Fincham, 2009; Nowlan, Roddy, & Doss, 2017; Scott et al., 2013). Online delivery is particularly useful for couples who may find traditional face-to-face programming less accessible (e.g., military couples, older adults, lower-income couples, distressed couples, new parents, etc.; Bakhurst, Loew, McGuire, Halford, & Markman, 2017; Kalinka, Fincham, & Hirsch, 2012; Loew et al., 2012; Roddy, Rothman, Cicila, & Doss, 2018). Online CRE also provides unique opportunities to obtain important feedback from participants in confidential settings. Additionally, as leaders in the field of relationship education have proposed the idea of brief and specialized prevention-focused CRE programming (e.g., Bradford, Hawkins, & Acker, 2015), a need for specialized feedback on abbreviated online CRE emerges.

Review of Literature

Throughout the history of CRE programming, an overarching goal has emerged among educators to provide evidence-based programming that reduces risks for unhealthy relationship outcomes (i.e., low satisfaction and/or instability), while enhancing couple resiliency (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003; Markman & Rhoades, 2012). Along with sound theory and research, CRE programs are typically designed based on feedback from program assessments (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2010; Barton, Futris, & Bradley, 2014) with the goal of providing knowledge about healthy relationships and interpersonal skills training (Antle et al., 2013). The format of CRE has also evolved with technology to include instruction beyond the face-to-face classroom, including programs that are exclusively online such as ePREP (n.d.; Braithwaite & Fincham, 2007, 2014) and Van Epps' LoveThinks (LoveThinks LLC, n.d.).

Online education can accommodate many forms, contexts, and unique objectives. For example, elementary education, secondary education, and higher education all have online formats (Nemetz, Eager, & Limpaphayom, 2017). Online education has also been designed for specialized contexts such as public awareness regarding physiological health, sexuality education, parenting education, and romantic relationship education. For example, some programs are designed to inform households about health-maintenance practices such as managing diabetes (Wu et al., 2017). Other health promotion programs use online social media to reach larger audiences (Korda & Itani, 2013). Online programming is also used to educate the public about best practices regarding family planning and fertility (Daniluk & Koert, 2015).

Parenting education has also been developed for online delivery. Multiple studies document the effectiveness of these programs (e.g., Parents Forever; Becher, Cronin, McCann, Olson, Powell, & Marczak, 2015; Bowers, Ogolsky, Hughes, & Kanter, 2014). Russell and colleagues also found that online parenting education meets participant expectations (Russell, Maksut, Lincoln, & Leland, 2016). Efficacy of quality parenting education programs has been found regardless of delivery method as long as it met parents' needs (Bowers et al., 2014; de Graaf, Speetjens, Smit, de Wolff, & Tavecchio, 2008).

Finally, the marked increase in mobile technology use (i.e., American smartphone ownership increased from 35% in 2011 to 77% in 2016; Smith, 2017) is causing online education to make moves to complement this increase. For example, within higher education, more educators are adopting mobile technology (Shin & Kang, 2015). Public education programs are also seeking mobile-friendly platforms (Cheon, Lee, Crooks, & Song, 2012). However, there remains a challenge to provide platforms for this content that are brief, efficient, widely accessible, and user friendly.

Making a Case for Online Brief-Focused Education

Specific structural constraints, including lack of time, costs, and limited access to child care were listed as some barriers to attending and participating in CRE programming (Burr, Hubler, Gardner, Roberts, & Patterson, 2014). A thorough review found that many CRE programs range from 8-20 hours in length, with some exceeding 42 hours across multiple weekly or intensive weekend sessions (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). Many family life educators have worked to reduce these constraints by providing incentives and removing structural barriers (Skogrand, Reck, Higginbotham, Adler-Baeder, & Dansie, 2010). Research has also shown that not all CRE participants need the same skills, knowledge, or feedback (Bradford, Hawkins, & Acker, 2015). As these constraints and specialized needs have become common challenges with CRE participants, educators have recognized the need to provide inexpensive, brief, accessible, and specialized content to meet participants' needs (Bradford et al., 2015).

Researchers of lifelong-learning online education have found that "small, self-contained units or chunks of learning materials" (Gu et al., 2011, p. 207) provide a degree of flexibility while maximizing participants' attention. These self-contained lessons are examples of micro-content, which has existed in many forms over time: recipes, business cards, even song and artist descriptions (Leene, 2006). Micro-content is loosely defined as a breaking down of larger content into more understandable, narrow, and focused content (Leene) and has been used in marketing literature to explore narrowly focused insights on clients or customers (Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlstrom, & Freundt, 2014). It seems fitting that these same basic insights, used for providing clear, concise data on customers, could be repurposed for providing clear, understandable, and focused content for internet consumers, especially within education contexts. Thus, application of online micro-content to educational areas including lifelong learning (Gu et al., 2011), continuing education (Zhao, Xia, & Zhu, 2010), and (within this paper) couple relationship education is an important direction for researcher-practitioners. Based

on these needs, we propose facilitation of an online relationship education program titled the Marriage Mechanic, which provides free, simple, and short relationship enhancement micro-content that can be conveniently accessed online.

The Marriage Mechanic

The *Marriage Mechanic* is an online program with 18 modules that provide brief (3-10 minutes in duration) narrated instruction on various relationship skills and topics. The program's overall objective is to provide participants with relationship skills training and instruction through short topic-based modules. Topics range from general communication skills to more specialized areas such as negotiating intimacy and discussing finances. Funding for the *Marriage Mechanic* is provided through the Utah Department of Workforce Services. Access to the *Marriage Mechanic* is provided through the strongermarriage.org website, which is also funded through the Utah Department of Workforce Services.

Evaluating Relationship Education Processes v. Content

Most evaluations on relationship education programs focus on outcomes that include improved relationship communication, increased skills (Falconier, 2015), reduced relationship risks, overall improvements in marital quality (Allen, Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2015) and even healthy parenting outcomes (Barden, Carlson, Daire, Finnell, Christopher, & Young, 2015). While outcomes are vital to identifying program efficacy, a family systems approach would evaluate participants' experiences within a relationship education program (von Bertalanffy, 1968).

Understanding participants' experiences while they engage with online programming and obtaining their feedback is vital to program improvement (Weng, Rotabi, McIntosh, High, Pohl, & Herrman, 2015). This feedback is especially salient for online self-study programs that require little to no direct interaction between participants and program administrators/relationship educators (Kalinka et al., 2012). Therefore, the present research focuses on *Marriage Mechanic* feedback regarding participants' own "user" experiences while interacting with the online program and working through educational modules.

The Value of Online Data Collection

One persistent threat to validity in self-report survey research is the influence of social desirability bias (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2016), which is especially common when asking for information in face to face interviews (e.g., Duffy, Smith, Therhanian, & Bremer, 2005). Participants may feel particularly uncomfortable disclosing to an educator or program administrator that they did not find aspects of their program content or format helpful. However, when respondents are asked to provide information online such challenges with honesty and social desirability decrease (Szolnoki & Hoffman, 2013), even when compared to other interview methods including phone surveys (Chang & Krosnick, 2009). Feedback on CRE programs

typically involves an instructor inviting participants to complete paper surveys they receive at the end of the program. This often occurs with the instructor present. Seeking these forms of feedback online reduces the social desirability threat to validity. This also holds true for feedback collected for the *Marriage Mechanic*. Some studies show that online feedback is more detailed and critical than handwritten evaluations are (Venette, Sellnow, & McIntyre, 2010; Barkhi & Williams, 2010).

Research Goals

Providing CRE online creates a unique opportunity to collect immediate, anonymous feedback from program participants about their experiences in the program and their comments on content and process. The purpose of the current research was to collect and analyze qualitative participant feedback about the *Marriage Mechanic* to identify ways to improve the program's structure, delivery, and content.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Following Institutional Review Board approval from the PI's university, participants were recruited via email, online social networks, and through a university course assignment. Incentives in the form of extra-credit were provided to those who were invited to participate through the university course. No other incentives were provided to participants outside classes. Participants granted informed consent by answering yes to the online consent survey and were then routed to a pre-assessment survey.

After completing the pre-test, participants were randomly assigned to one of two treatment groups (n=82) or one control group (n=52) as part of a larger program evaluation study (to be reported elsewhere). The present study is limited to 55 of the treatment group participants who gave qualitative feedback about their experiences immediately after completing the first module on how to "check their perceptions" within their romantic relationship (both treatment groups completed this module and provided feedback as the first phase of the study; the point where treatment groups diverged is inconsequential to the present analysis of module feedback). All treatment group participants typed their responses to the following question in an online form: *If you were to improve this lesson, what are some ways that you would change it?* Because of the online nature of the research, all participants' information was kept confidential throughout data collection and analysis.

Analytic Approach

The aim of this study was to categorize participant responses into specific ways the program could be improved. Therefore, researchers used Braun and Clarke's (2006) systematic approach to thematic analysis. For step one, two primary coders independently reviewed all 55 responses to the feedback prompt to become familiar with the overall sense of the data. For step two, the primary coders independently coded the individual meaning units (MU) within the 55 responses. Some responses were coded with more than one MU.

For step three, the coders independently identified broader themes that emerged from initial codes. Step four included the two primary coders meeting to discuss their independent codes and themes. Next, they synthesized their independent codes and themes into a clearly defined and agreed upon set of themes. A third coder who was not involved in data collection but has a background in qualitative analysis independently audited steps 1 through 5. Their reference coding confirmed the validity of the synthesized thematic categories. The only change based on the independent audit of analysis was moving two comments from the "other" category to a labeled category. As the final step, this paper reports findings from the thematic analysis. Descriptive information about the sample was derived using IBM SPSS (v. 24).

Results

Mean age of participants was 26 years (*SD* = 8.14; range = 19-58). Forty-seven respondents identified as female; eight were male. Forty-nine identified as White/Caucasian, three identified as Hispanic/Latino, two identified as Native American/Alaskan, and one identified as Asian. Two respondents reported having a high school diploma or GED equivalency; 38 respondents reported having some college or an associate degree. All respondents identified as being in heterosexual relationships. Thirty participants were married, 13 reported being in a long-term committed relationship of six months or longer, six reported being in a cohabiting relationship, and six reported being engaged. Most respondents said they had been in their relationship for 3 or fewer years (n = 36); half of the married participants reported a relationship age of six or fewer years. Annual household income was $40,000 or less (n = 29).

Fifty-five typed responses to the question: *If you were to improve this lesson, what are some ways that you would change it?* were coded into the following 9 themes (meaningful unit/MU counts in parentheses to indicate weight of each theme):

1. Good Enough (15)
2. Structural/Technical Improvements Needed (11)
3. Provide More Examples or Explanation (10)
4. Audience Match (7)
5. Make the Lesson More Interactive (4)

6. Consider Both Sides (4)
7. Boring/Too Long (3)
8. Use Open-ended Questions (2)
9. Other (4)

While one theme reflects positive and affirming comments from participants, the remaining eight themes represent critical and directive feedback on ways to improve content of the online material, as well as the delivery process of the content.

Good enough. The first theme, Good Enough, included responses such as "I found it helpful and can't think of any changes at this time" (23-year-old engaged, white female) and "I wouldn't change a thing" (29-year-old, married white female). Ten responses were one-word comments indicating that no changes were needed (e.g., typed responses "no" or "nothing").

The eight themes that provided critical, constructive feedback of the program have been collapsed into the following three broad categories: Content, Structure, and Application (see Figure 1).
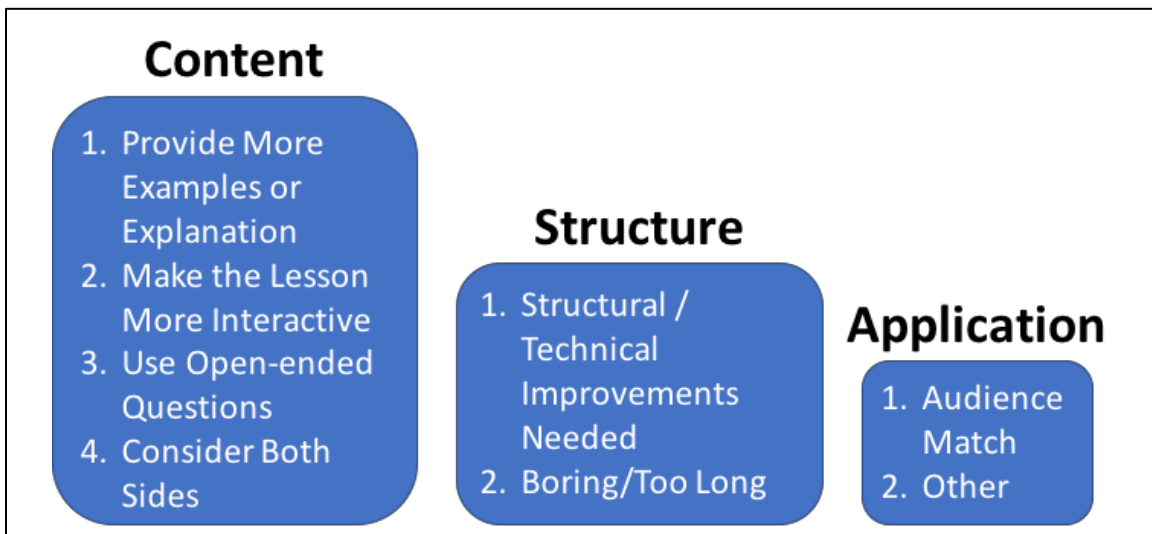

Content

1. Provide More Examples or Explanation
2. Make the Lesson More Interactive
3. Use Open-ended Questions
4. Consider Both Sides

Structure

1. Structural / Technical Improvements Needed
2. Boring/Too Long

Application

1. Audience Match
2. Other

Figure 1. Broad categories of thematic findings from participant feedback about the *Marriage Mechanic*.

Content. Most thematic findings fit within the broad category of Content and were focused on participants' interactions with content of the online educational material. These themes included *provide more examples or explanation*, *be more interactive*, *include open-ended questions*, and *consider both sides* (of relationship examples). For example, a 22-year-old Hispanic female who has been in a dating relationship over 6 months suggested that the program

"Have us write an example of what we would say to our significant other in section 3 in response to a scenario" (be more interactive).

Allowing participants to write their own examples of what they would say might address a comment from another participant, a 21-year-old white female who has been in a dating relationship less than 6 months. She said, "The examples of what to say to a partner also aren't very universally realistic even though the principles are." Other common requests were for "more relatable examples" about problems "couples actually fight about: sex or children." In terms of Consider Both Sides, a 21-year-old cohabitating Native American/Alaskan Native female suggested "looking from both sides, not just kevin [sic]," and a 19-year-old white married female suggested that the example "switch genders of those involved in the lesson."

A 26-year-old white married female shared a comment related to clarity and needing more explanation: "During the lesson, because of how it was worded, I thought of someone other than my husband. I don't know if you were wanting that or not since this survey was specifically supposed to be for someone in a romantic relationship." This demonstrates the potential disconnect between how educators anticipate participants experiencing the online lessons and how participants actually perceive the content.

Structure. The Structure category contained feedback from participants related to their interactions with structural and technical aspects of the program and to the program's length. Two themes that comprised this category were Structural/Technical Improvements and Too Long and Boring. Structural/Technical comments ranged from general formatting of the page (e.g., colors, fonts, progress page numbers, spelling typos) to the structure of the program (e.g., requesting an email with the information after completing the program so they could practice). Several participants had audio difficulties or stated that they would rather read the lesson than listen to it. Three participants explicitly described the program as boring, repetitive, and "dragging on." A fourth simply suggested that the number of pages be reduced.

Application. The Application category contained suggestions and feedback related to perceived fit between content and audience (Audience Match) and the miscellaneous feedback (Other) that had more to do with communication and application of relationship skills in the program. Several participants felt the program did not apply to them or did not fit their experiences, either because of how they saw themselves or how they viewed their relationships. For example, one 26-year-old white married female participant said, "I am not a person who takes things personally or ever feels that someone is doing things just to make me mad. I did not feel that there were questions or options for people like me. I do not feel i could fully answer the questions because most of them did not apply to me. I did try to answer according to what might reflect my situation most [sic]."

A second participant (a 19-year-old white female who has been in a dating relationship fewer than 6 months) said "I don't fight with my boyfriend often and so some parts didn't apply to me." One 24-year-old white married female who felt the lesson did not fit her current

experience based on timing of the relationship suggested the following: "Open it to new couples...this would have been helpful at the start of the relationship." The two comments categorized as Other related to how relationship skills were communicated in the program ("It seems a bit demeaning like your telling a person how to live thier life in a relationship [sic]") and a suggestion to apply educational concepts through mindfulness meditation.

Discussion

In online education, the design of the content and processes of learning modules needs to be shaped by the modules' overall objectives (Cook & Dupras, 2004). Feedback from participants also informs web-based educators by guiding them toward areas of improvement on an experiential level. The thematic analysis for this study provided insights into what participants experience when completing an online relationship education module.

Content. Respondents asked that the module allow for more participant comments. According to Bloom's taxonomy (Huitt, 2011), learning increases as participants are able to take information beyond basic recall (Knowledge). If participants can summarize, describe, and apply the information to unique contexts, their level of learning increases (Huitt). Thus, when participants are able to "…write an example of what we would say to our significant other…" by answering more open-ended questions, their higher-levels of learning increase.

When respondents ask for the chance to provide more comments, they are also showing the educator that context matters to their desire to apply things on a personal level. For example, a 22-year old white female in a relationship of fewer than six months said, "…a comment section on the questions would be nice to clarify the situation." When participants are permitted to give more context, they can take what was learned to higher levels of application.

Consistent with a systemic perspective, participants also suggested there is more than one side to stories provided in the modules. By considering relational contexts such as both partners' perspectives, roles, and rules for behavior in hypothetical scenarios, participants in the module can gain better relational insights (Jackson, 1965). Another key consideration when exploring perspectives and roles is the impact of gender ideology on stories and processes taught within the modules (Davis & Greenstein, 2009). Romantic partners have diverse views regarding their own and one another's gender scripts. Considering these scripts can provide a more effective process for teaching and giving examples (Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2011). Overall, there emerged a need to provide a diversity of examples when teaching relationship content so that the material is relevant for a variety of couples. However, this must be balanced with the competing need for shorter lessons, which participants expressed. These two points of feedback may appear contradictory but this is not the case when designing online micro-content. Relationship education programs can be shorter and more self-contained with more examples provided through prompted content (i.e., display/skip logic based on previous selections) or additional and optional micro-content.

Continuing with the Marriage Mechanic model, there are various methods for approaching relationship issues. The goal of this micro-content is to provide a range of tools and examples that are "universally realistic" for diverse family and couple circumstances. This approach could also create space within micro-content for couples to create unique examples and experiences and apply them to the content being taught.

Structure. The feedback on making fonts and color schemes more consistent is of particular help when designing future online rubrics. When participants find web content more visually appealing they are more likely to view content as more credible (Robins & Holmes, 2008). When building web-based CRE content, aesthetics play a key role in establishing trust with participants and reducing risks of problems (Doty, Doty, & Dworkin, 2011).

Although there was a substantial amount of feedback regarding structure, including font style and colors, lesson progress, and correcting spelling errors, these types of online modules also need to comply with standards that make the lessons accessible to people with a wide range of abilities (ADA, 2007). Within the context of couple relations there are many partners who face unique challenges including visual and hearing impairment. Designers of online relationship education programs have a unique opportunity and responsibility to make relationship education accessible, useful, and comfortable for these couples. Diversity in functional abilities combined with diversity within relationship experiences may mean there is no "one-size-fits-all" (Rose & Meyer, 2002) CRE program. Research on Triple P, an international evidence-based parenting program, shows that modality of program is less important for curriculum efficacy than is providing education in a format that meets participants' needs (de Graaf et al., 2008). This means that minimal invasiveness, accessible formatting, flexible design, and relevant content – all of which are within the capacity of the *Marriage Mechanic* – are likely to be critical to program recruitment and success.

Limitations and Future Directions

Common to internet-based surveys and to survey research in general, sampling is an inherent challenge and limitation. It is common for survey research to have sampling limitations such are self-selection bias, limited and possibly inaccurate demographic information, and flawed responses (e.g., socially desirable statements, not representative of respondents' identities, not representative of respondents' actual opinions) (Wright, 2005). This study shares these limitations, which limit external validity and applicability of our findings. Some have argued that while online surveys reduce the risk of social desirability in responding, it is impossible to completely eliminate this risk. Therefore, research findings must be be interpreted with cautious generalizability. It is also possible that only certain types of people were open and willing to participate in the *Marriage Mechanic*, and that an even more selective group was willing to continue their involvement by providing constructive feedback. These factors also limit generalizability of the study's results to a narrow population.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents also identified as white, female, and heterosexual. Since our sampling procedures were not systematic we cannot claim this is the actual demographic group that accessed the online *Marriage Mechanic* program. The fact that so many more women than men responded to the feedback questions could reflect actual differences in relationship help-seeking, but could also reflect gender differences in the level of stigma associated with help-seeking behaviors, or the nature of our recruitment invitation. While it is common for women to be disproportionately more involved in self-help and relationship improvement activities than men are (McLean & Kapell, 2015), this also leads to a major limitation to generalizability. The fact that all participants in this study identified as heterosexual, which does not match general population demographics, also limits applicability of this study as well. Future administration and research with the *Marriage Mechanic* should use recruitment strategies likely to yield a more representative sample, including couples who are racially/ethnically diverse as well as lesbian, gay, and transgender couples.

Lastly, diversity of content offered by *Marriage Mechanic* may have not addressed the relational needs of some couples. The process of identifying content to add to the *Marriage Mechanic* was carried out using a group brainstorming method. Two principal investigators met with a group of six undergraduate students to identify common and concrete issues couples face that could be reasonably covered in a 3- to 10- minute online lesson. Inherent biases of those participating in the brainstorming process likely affected identification and selection of topics. This contributes to the study's general limitations because content was not driven by an online needs assessment. Moreover, the inclusion of content "not-thought-of" may have been more important than other factors in attracting a more diverse sample and being more accessible to people seeking online help or information.

When using micro-content there is a clear opportunity to pair a fine-grained educational delivery system with existing methods of micro-level data collection and analysis (Heatherington, Friedlander, & Greenberg, 2005). Measuring and exploring moment to moment experiences within these online modules can facilitate more effective discovery of ways to teach couples and families who choose to access online relationship education. Looking to the future as technical sophistication of the *Marriage Mechanic* evolves, there is potential to go beyond simple online delivery to fully embrace content, interactive, and multisystemic capabilities of mobile technology, and to "extend the boundaries of traditional pedagogies toward [couple-centered] educational practices" (Ally & Tsinakos, 2014, p. 12).

The *Marriage Mechanic* is a collection of micro-content designed to provide couples with confidential, convenient, and accessible relationship tools along with knowledge they can select and complete at their own pace. This study provided valuable feedback from participants for improving the program's form and function in terms of content, structure, and application. However, the *Marriage Mechanic* also demonstrates a general platform through which various educational topics can be delivered, ranging from parenting education to family resource management. The program could potentially be adapted to clinical settings as a supplemental tool for therapists who want clients to learn simple concepts, skills, or principles.

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