

## **Developing Connections between Communities and Researchers: MyRelevate as a Mechanism for Adaptive and Accessible Relationship Education**

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### **Background**

Relationship education (RE) has long been viewed as important in times of crises or transition for relationships with examples like pre-marriage counseling or couple's therapy as a stop-gap for divorce. Research has shown however that while these can be effective, that reaching out earlier, and taking an individualized approach to relationship education may prove even more effective in the long-term health and well-being of a person (Sandberg et al., 2013). While efforts were made by the federal government in recent years to incorporate RE at an earlier age for young adults, this educational framework assumes a singular background in terms of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status for recommendations on communication within relationships and failed to meet the needs of many it tried to help (Johnson, 2012). To increase the reach of RE, Hawkins and Ooms (2010) recommend low cost and easily accessible delivery methods, such as internet-based, self-guided programs. Although a few internet-based fixed-intervention RE programs have been developed with young adult couples in mind they are behind paywalls, making RE relevant to *diverse individual* youth in an *adaptive* and *easily accessible* way an unmet challenge.

The prevalence of communication technology use in the everyday lives of individuals cannot be stressed enough: According to the most recent statistics offered by *PEW Internet* (2017), 88% of adults use the Internet, and for those who are 18-29 years old that number jumps to 97%. The available information from PEW on the use of smartphones is similar; 92% of 18-29 year olds also own a smartphone. Research also suggests that absent regular internet access at home via broadband, that individuals who come from low-income households, are non-white, and are younger rely heavily on smartphones to keep connected to the world around them (*PEW Internet*, 2017). Given this information, we believe the targeted use of a mobile health (mHealth) application through smartphones coupled with an interactive website is the best way to reach a diverse audience for RE.

RE has traditionally been implemented in-person through manualized fixed-intervention programs, limiting their accessibility and applicability to diverse audiences. Adaptive interventions are tailored to the needs of individuals through sets of decision rules determined by baseline participant characteristics and responsiveness to the intervention (e.g., Nahum-Shani et al., 2012). Within a social cognitive framework (Bandura, 2001), harnessing the capacity of mHealth applications to collect information and provide tailored and adaptive interventions in real-time may increase the ability of RE to bolster young adults' relationship competencies (e.g., ability to identify their use of unhealthy conflict strategies, assess their level of commitment, effectively discuss the state of the relationship with their partner), thus increasing their resiliency by building personal resources that bolster their odds of establishing stable, healthy relationships within their community.

### **University Engagement**

***Student Population.*** Relevate's primary target for RE is individuals who are considered young adults and/or young professionals, making the university an ideal location for engagement as we build both the website and mobile application to test and expand our audience and adaptation. Past research on mHealth apps notes that college students' propensity to use available health apps was higher with non-white students (Dennis et al., 2012) and that incorporating social and local elements increased the potential to engage and use such apps by all students. We plan to continue our efforts to improve the K-State student body's relationship health through seeking feedback from students on their needs to guide the development of Relevate, including students on the research team, and spreading relationship research through social media campaigns, use of the MyRelevate app, and providing on-campus and community wide RE events.

**Faculty and Staff.** In addition to providing digital access to information, a key component of Relevate is making that research and information accessible. As a result, it is imperative to educate campus scholars on available outlets to share their research and how to make it accessible to the community through non-traditional means (i.e., infographics, blogs, short videos, social media, community talks, interactive community events). Workshops help by Relevate staff (in collaboration with other efforts on campus to improve research communication to the public) will be offered each semester to help faculty learn how to translate their research and become involved in Relevate or other community organizations. While our top priority is RE, direct scholar-community engagement is crucial in getting information to community audiences and fulfilling the land grant mission, thus it is important for researchers in all fields to increase their skills in public scholarship.

### **Community Engagement**

As noted in the background, this all comes back to the importance of community engagement; college students are only a subset of the whole, and even the decision to attend college is shown to improve one's relational outcomes (Bryant et al., 2010). Relevate seeks community partners to ensure that the adaptive technology created suits all young adult and young professional needs, not just those who are college-educated. There are two ways we hope to work with the Manhattan and surrounding Kansas communities. First, we seek to hold events in partnership with local businesses and organizations to bring together the campus and Manhattan communities to share relationship research in engaging and interactive ways and raise awareness of Relevate and what it can offer. Second, we seek partnerships with local organizations to hold focus groups to find out what non-students want from Relevate to ensure that the development and implementation of the technology and offline events meet the growing needs of our community. While we have existing data suggesting what young adults would like to see in an app like MyRelevate, in general, adapting to the needs of the local communities is important to enhancing the impact of Relevate.

### **Project Relevance**

The vast majority of romantic relationship information on the internet is not empirically informed, yet scholars in diverse fields have accrued a massive body of knowledge on how to develop and maintain healthy romantic relationships and how to screen for and safely leave unhealthy ones. Hidden behind paywalls and clothed in technical jargon, this knowledge is largely inaccessible to the public. MyRelevate aims to change this by: 1) curating the empirically and theoretically based work of relationship scholars currently available on the internet, 2) providing a platform for relationship scholars to access tools and receive support in translating their expertise into engaging blogs, short articles, infographics, short videos, etc., and 3) using technology to create tailored compilations of information and interventions that align with the relationship goals and sociocultural context of each young adult user, and 4) creating guidelines and templates for scholar-community partnerships to adapt to their community's needs for the promotion of relationship health. In the MyRelevate online portal, users' profile information (e.g., race, age, ethnicity, current economic and educational situation) as well as the information they enter in their relationship tracker (quick sidebar assessments of relationship status, uncertainty, commitment, conflict, closeness, nights spent together per week, number of breakups/separation & reconciliations, physical intimacy, and relationship satisfaction) will be used to customize their Newsfeed of research-based relationship information uploaded by relationship scholars and practitioners. To increase personal agency, users can track progress towards personal relationship-enhancing goals and log (i.e., journal) their experience using strategies gleaned from their Newsfeed for reaching those goals.

### **Collaborative Partners: University**

**Natalie Pennington (PI)**— Dr. Pennington is an assistant professor in Communication Studies in the College of Arts & Sciences with expertise in interpersonal/relational communication and communication technology.

**Amber Vennum (PI)**—Dr. Vennum is an associate professor in Marriage and Family Therapy in the College of Human Ecology with expertise in healthy relationship development during young adulthood and relationship education programs, and is the founder of Relevate.

**Students** – Undergraduate and Graduate students from multiple units contribute to Relevate: Communication Studies, Computer Science (software engineers), Family Studies, and Marriage and Family Therapy.

### **Collaborative Partners: Community**

**Arrow Coffee:** Currently Relevate hosts “Drinks & Thinks” events at Arrow to connect with the community and share research about romantic relationships in a relatable way and in a relaxed environment.

**The Fellow:** A collaborative work environment located in Westloop in Manhattan, The Fellow is a new partner that provides a unique and large space to hold events for the community. Currently lined up is a speed networking event, with future events proposed as well.

**Varsity Donuts:** Varsity has recently agreed to partner with Relevate for various events including community scavenger hunts, relationship game nights, and relationship-building donut decorating parties.

**Targeted partners:** Douglas Communication Recreation Center (Manhattan Parks & Rec), Thread, Acme, Bluestem Bistro, Liquid Art Winery, The Connection, Paramour Coffee, Columbian Theatre (Wamego)

### **Timeline & Accomplishment Benchmarks\***

#### **Summer 2017**

- Launch MyRelevate Website, Host on Campus Workshop for Contributors\*
- Community Scavenger Hunt (committed: Varsity)
- Speed Networking with The Fellow
- Work with software engineers for initial design of mobile app

#### **Fall 2017**

- Community Scavenger Hunt for new students
- Initial Assessment of MyRelevate Website\*
- Pair with COMM 542 for community assessment\*
- Begin building mobile application for MyRelevate

#### **Spring 2018**

- Continue building mobile application for MyRelevate
- Host second workshop for scholars for using website and upcoming app
- Continue community partnerships

#### **Summer 2018**

- Beta test the mobile application in the Manhattan, KS community\*
- Continue community partnerships

#### **Fall 2019**

- Launch MyRelevate mobile application in conjunction with community scavenger hunt\*
- Host third workshop for scholars for using website and upcoming app
- Continue community partnerships

### **Potential Impact**

MyRelevate has brought together faculty and students across three departments (Family & Marriage Therapy, Communication Studies, and Computer Science) with the potential for more engagement on campus and in the community as it grows. The value identified and the need for adaptive relationship education is evident in the existing literature, yet a failure to bridge the gap across disciplines and within communities has prevented any successful attempt thus far. By disseminating crucial research on interpersonal relationships through communication technology and community outreach, MyRelevate would be the first adaptive, individual-focused RE web and mobile application. In pursuit of these goals, the project has clear objectives, clear planned engagement activities and benchmarks, as well as a reasonable and specific timeline that creates the conditions for continued growth and opportunities for funding at a national level (e.g., NIH, NSF).

### **Matching Funds**

The Communication Studies department has agreed to provide up to \$1,000 to assist in the hosting of workshops on campus over the next two years for engaging researchers in a discussion about how to be contributors through MyRelevate.

### **Funds Requested**

We are requesting the full \$10,000 to assist in funding summer work for MyRelevate and accompanying fees associated with the use of our online technology (e.g., web hosting, software, etc).

**\*References are available upon request.**