The influence of type of teasing and outcome on the negative experiences of teasers

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Abstract
We argue that the experience of teasers is conditional on whether their goal was to be affectionate or hurtful and whether or not they succeeded at goal accomplishment. The retrospective accounts of undergraduates verified that failed attempts to affectionately tease reflected more negative emotional consequences than successful affectionate teasing attempts and when hurtful teasing goals were accomplished. The accomplishment of hurtful teasing goals showed no greater negative emotional consequences than unsuccessful attempts to be hurtful but many more negative consequences than successful affectionate teasing. Also, the relationship between the interaction of teasing type and outcome with communication apprehension was mediated by the target’s anger and communication apprehension mediated the relationship between the interaction and teaser regret. The implications of the findings, limitation of the study and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: affectionate teasing, hurtful teasing, communication apprehension, regret
Teasing can have negative consequences for targets including heightened stress (e.g., Kowalski, 2007). The potential distresses in teasing, however, may not be restricted to targets since teasing is a risky social practice (Baxter, 1992) and the negative consequences for the target can also negatively affect teasers (Kowalski, 2007; Kruger, Gordon, & Kuban, 2006). However, factors that influence a teaser’s negative feelings during and after an episode have received limited attention. To fill this void, our study examines how type of teasing and success relate to the consequences of teasing.

**Conceptualizing Teasing**

Teasing is a face threatening act (Kowalski, Howerton, & McKenzie, 2001) through which social information is intentionally used to highlight something relevant to the target of the tease for entertainment purposes (DiCioccio, 2010). There are contrasts in the communication goals of teasing (Dallinger & Prince, 1984) which are reflected in the two types of teasing research identifies. Pro-social (or affectionate) teasing is a form of ‘permitted disrespect’ (Kowalski et al., 2001) through which affectionately poking fun at another’s idiosyncrasies is socially inclusive (Alberts, 1990), and enhances positive feelings and relational quality (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001). Conversely, anti-social (or hurtful) teasing is a disrespectful form of cruelty that can create emotional harm and social rejection (Tragesser & Lippman, 2005). The contrasts in the functions of pro- and anti-social teasing, however, are much clearer than the boundaries between them. Pro-social teasing is humorous, relatively unambiguous, and moderate in identify confrontation (or aggression) while anti-social teasing contains moderate humor and ambiguity and high levels of identity confrontation (or aggression) (Kowalski et al., 2001; c.f. Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991). The absence of clear distinctions between the types of teasing is noteworthy as targets of teasing may not always correctly perceive the teaser’s intentions (Kruger et al., 2006).

**Successful Communication and Misinterpretation in Teasing**

Successful communication describes instances where an intended behavior is accurately interpreted by the receiver (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). Hence, teasing should be most effective when targets correctly interpret the teaser’s intentions (i.e., to be affectionate or hurtful) and respond in ways that align with the teaser’s expectations (e.g., pro-social teasing elicits smiles and relational closeness while anti-social teasing elicits emotional harm and relational distance). Social psychological theory and research suggests that teasers who fulfill their communication goal should experience positive emotions associated with both the process and outcome (see, Brendl & Higgens, 1996). However, the differences in the objectives of and target reactions to the types of teasing may influence the emotional consequences of a teaser’s success or failure.

Although successful affectionate teasing elicits positive emotional and behavioral reactions from the target, unsuccessful affectionate teasing can be perceived as a relational transgression (Baxter, 1992). Because targets often hold negative perception biases of teasers’ intentions even when the provocation was intended to be affectionate (Kruger et al., 2006) the misinterpretation of affectionate teasing as hurtful is not uncommon. Unsuccessful affectionate teasing can produce negative emotions associated with face loss (e.g., humiliation, embarrassment) and negativity toward the teaser (e.g., angry, hostile) (Alberts, Kellar-Guenther, & Corman, 1996). Indeed, Felson’s (1978) face saving theory of aggression posits that after experiencing a face attack, individuals often feel humiliated and angry which can result in aggression toward the person who attacked their image. We believe a target’s misinterpretation of affectionate teasing as malicious and subsequent negative emotional reactions may cause teasers to experience greater communication apprehension during the episode. Communication apprehension is “an individual’s level of fear or anxiety with either real or anticipated communication with another person or person” (McCroskey, 1984, p. 14)
and may occur before or during an episode and result from another person’s real or anticipated negative actions.

Although unsuccessful affectionate teasers may experience communication anxiety during the episode, negative emotions may also follow after the episode. Perpetrators of teasing and other aversive behaviors have reported feelings of regret (Kowalski, 2000). Regret is “a counterfactual emotion that one experiences after realizing or imagining that a better outcome could have been obtained, had one decided differently” (Marcatto & Ferrante, 2008, p. 87). Thus, unsuccessful affectionate teasers may feel regret for unintentionally harming the target (Kowalski, 2007). In contrast, successful affectionate teasers and unsuccessful hurtful teasers should observe less negativity in the target and feel less communication apprehension and regret as a result.

**H1:** Among teasers who tried to be affectionate, those who failed will report that the target felt greater (a) emotional face loss and (b) negative emotions toward them and that they felt greater (c) communication apprehension, and (d) regret than will those who succeeded.

**H2:** Among teasers who failed, affectionate teasers will report that the target felt greater (a) emotional face loss and (b) negative emotions toward them, and they felt greater (c) communication apprehension, and (d) regret than will hurtful teasers.

A different model may apply to hurtful teasers. Although targets of successful hurtful teasing should also experience face loss, and feel negatively toward the teaser (Kowalski, 2000), hurtful teasers’ personal responsibility for producing these negative outcomes should amplify the communication apprehension and regret they experience. Although failing to accomplish their communication goals, unsuccessful hurtful teasers avoid observing and experiencing the negative consequences of their actions and may feel less communication apprehension and regret than do successful hurtful teasing or unsuccessful affection teasers. Thus, we predict the following:

**H3:** Among teasers who tried to be hurtful, those who succeeded will report that the target felt greater (a) emotional face loss and (b) negative emotions toward them, and they felt greater (c) communication apprehension, and (d) regret than will those who failed.

**H4:** Among teasers who succeeded, hurtful teasers will report that the target felt greater (a) emotional face loss and (b) negative emotions toward them, and they felt greater (c) communication apprehension, and (d) regret than will affectionate teasers.

As we noted, the targets of unsuccessful affectionate teasers and successful hurtful teasers should experience both emotional face loss and negative emotions toward the teaser which could make teasers feel communication apprehension. However, negative emotions directed toward the teaser may be the stronger influence on the teaser’s communication apprehension since emotional face loss is directed inward and may cause targets to seek to escape from, rather than aggress against, their attacker. Thus, a target’s direction of his/her negative emotions toward the teaser implies negative consequences which should create the fear and anxiety that defines communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1984). Furthermore, the communication apprehension experienced during a teasing episode should prompt teasers to realize that their actions were problematic and this awareness can elicit negative emotions from teasers after the episode. If so, we predict the following:

**H5:** The relationship between the interaction of teasing type and outcome with the teaser’s communication apprehension will be mediated by the target’s anger toward the teaser.
H6: The relationship between the interaction of teasing type and outcome with teaser’s regret will be mediated by teaser’s communication apprehension.

Method

Procedure

We used a 2 x 2 (type of teasing: hurtful or affectionate by teasing outcome: unsuccessful or successful) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to describe an incident occurring between the age of 18-24 when they initiated one of the four possible teasing episodes in our design (see Appendix A). Participants then answered questions related to the hypotheses.

Participants and Characteristics of Teasing Episodes

The sample included 174 undergraduates (36% males, 64% female) recruited from Communication classes at a private Midwestern University who received credit toward the course research requirement for participation. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (72%) and female (64%) and the average age was 20 (SD = 1). Four teaser-target relationships were reported: 22% peers (classmates and non-intimate others), 14% family, 34% friends, and 30% romantic others (i.e., romantic partners and romantic potential). Although the occurrences of the teasing episodes reported spanned four years (in months, \( M = 5.5, \) \( SD = 9.56 \)), 90% of them occurred within the last year, half of which occurred within the past month (56%). Among these, 17% occurred less than a week before, 12% one week before, 9% two weeks before, 4% occurred three weeks ago, and 14% occurred one month ago.

Measures

Respondents completed closed measures from which we operationalized manipulation checks, covariates and outcome measures. The descriptive statistics and reliability assessments are contained in Table 1. Respondents reported on two 5-point items (1=not at all, 5=a great deal) the extent to which they considered the content and the context of their teasing hurtful and affectionate at the time of the episode. They also indicated the degree to which at the time of the episode they considered the teasing successful and the degree to which they now consider the teasing successful. Because the occurrence of the teasing episodes varied, we controlled for how long ago the event occurred. Due to the variance in teaser-target relationships reported, we created three relational dummy codes that collectively compared romantic involvement with peer, friend or family relationships. The contrasting functions of teasing might be reflected in the different levels of attraction to the target. Therefore, respondents described how socially attracted they were to the target using McCroskey and McCrain’s (1974) 6-item scale and 5-point array (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The willingness to hurt someone as well as the willingness to admit hurting an individual might be confounded with a person’s verbal aggressiveness. Consequently, respondents also completed the 20-item verbal aggressiveness scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986) using a 6-point response scale (1(always false, 6=always true).

Target Face Loss and Negative Emotion toward the Teaser were measured using items from the PANAS scale (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1986). Respondents indicated the degree (1=very slightly, 5=extremely) to which they perceived that the target experienced emotions resulting from face loss (humiliated, ashamed, embarrassed) and felt negative emotions toward the respondent (anger, resentment, hostility). A confirmatory factor analysis determined that the items formed two distinct scales, \( \chi^2 (5, \ N = 172) = 9.97, \ p < .07; \ CFI = .99, \ RMSEA = .08. \) Teaser Communication Apprehension was measured using the Situational Communication Apprehension scale (Richmond, 1978) which we modified to assess the teaser’s reactions during the episode on a 7-point response scale (extremely inaccurate = 1, extremely accurate = 7).
Teasing and Outcome on the Negative Experiences

Teaser Regret comprised two items using 5-point scales (1=not at all, 5=to a great extent) that measured the degree to which they regretted teasing the target immediately after the episode and they now regret teasing the target.

Results

Preliminary Tests

The statistics reported in the diagonals of Table 1 indicate that the multi-item scales had adequate internal reliability (i.e., all alphas are greater than .76). To assess the effectiveness of our instructions, three manipulation checks were conducted using correlations between teasing type/outcome and self-reported hurtfulness, affection and success. The correlations in Table 1 indicate that our instruction set produced the desired differences (e.g., hurtful teasing was reported as more hurtful and less affectionate than affectionate teasing and respondents reported that their successful teasing was more successful than those who reported unsuccessful teasing episodes).

| Table 1
| Correlation matrix |
|-------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
|                  | M    | SD   | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    | 6    | 7    | 8    | 9    | 10   | 11   | 12   | 13   | 14   | 15   |
| Teaser Type      | .90  | .58  | .30  | -.13 | .10  | -.03 | .15  | .22  | .15  | .23  | .22  | .03  | .00  | .25** | .40*** | .69*** | .10  |
| Teaser Outcome   | .49  | .56  | .15  | -.13 | .33*** | .18  | -.13*** | .05  | .21** | .01  | -.01 | -.05 | .14* | .16*  | .30*** | .04  | .01  |
| Target Facile    | 3.67 | 1.02 | .66  | .25** | .30*** | .29** | .28** | .04  | .11* | .21** | .00  | .36  | .32** | .24**  | .03  | .00  |
| Target Negative  | 1.35 | 1.91 | .94  | .43*** | .33*** | .21** | -.05 | .21** | .22** | .06  | .37** | .30*** | .14**  | .14  | .01  |
| Target Aggression| 4.08 | 2.23 | .55  | .29** | .37** | .17* | .25** | .09  | .15  | .14  | .05  | .34*** | .27**  | .03  | .01  |
| Target Softness  | 2.60 | 1.27 | .36  | .14  | .06  | .17* | .16  | .09  | .15  | .14  | .05  | .34*** | .27**  | .03  | .01  |
| Target Success   | 3.64 | 1.06 | .43  | .10  | .03  | .12  | .01  | .05  | .10  | .07  | .03  | .23**  | .03  | .01  |
| Target Interpersonal | .42  | .88  | .50  | .03  | .05  | .10  | -.34** | .23** | .34*** | .03  |
| Target Attraction | .56  | .36  | .37  | .17** | .22** | .09  | .30**  | .13  | .03  | .01  |
| Target Family    | .33  | .45  | .34  | .13** | .19** | .13  | .13**  | .06  | .04  |
| Target Emotion   | .22  | .41  | .23  | .12** | .22** | .09  | .22**  | .08  |
| Target Faciality | 2.24 | 1.00 | .36  | .17** | .22** | .09  | .22**  | .08  |
| Target Barrass   | 3.55 | 1.06 | .40  | .10  | .01  | .04  |
| Target Successful| 2.82 | 1.25 | .45  | .10  | .01  |

Notes: N = 174 except for correlations involving target atresion (N = 158), target aggression (N = 149) and teasing affection (N = 175). Diagonals contain coefficient alphas for multi-item scales. With the exception of target aggression, the values for scales are the sum of items divided by the number of such items. Target type: H1a = H1b = H5a = H6a,b; Target outcome: Unsuccessful = 0; successful = 1. Pair target: Romantic partner = 0; friend = 0; family = 1; family target: Romantic partner = 0; friend = 0; family = 1; pair target: Romantic partner = 0; friend = 0; family = 1; pair = 0.

Analytic Overview

The first four hypotheses imply that the interaction of teasing type and outcome should be related to our dependent variables. To test for the interaction, a series of moderated regression analyses were conducted. The critical test is the degree to which the interaction accounts for a significant increment of variance when entered after the covariates and main effect of teasing type and outcome. H5 and H6 predict mediated relationships that were tested using a bootstrapping procedure for which a 95% CI (confidence interval) for the mediation coefficient that did not include 0 indicated significance (Hayes, 2012). To rule out alternative explanations, when testing H5, the target’s emotional face loss was included as a possible mediator and when testing H6, target’s emotional face loss and negative emotion toward the teaser were used as mediators. All tests were performed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2012).
Hypotheses

Tables 2 and 3 contain the moderated regression results. The predicted interaction of teasing type and outcome accounted for a significant increment of variance in all four variables. Consistent with H1, among teasers who wanted to be affectionate, those who failed reported that the target felt greater emotional face loss and negative emotions toward them and they felt greater communication apprehension and regret than did teasers who succeeded at being affectionate. Moreover, consistent with H2, among unsuccessful teasers, those who tried to be affectionate reported that the target experienced more negative emotion because of face loss, felt more negative emotions toward them, and they felt more regret afterwards than did unsuccessful hurtful teasers. However, unsuccessful affectionate and hurtful teasers did not significantly differ in their communication apprehension during the episode. The results related to hurtful teasing are mixed. None of the comparisons posited in H3 were statistically significant. However, all of the comparisons contained in H4 were statistically significant. As anticipated, successful hurtful teasers reported that the target felt more emotional face loss and negative emotions toward them, they felt greater communication apprehension and regret than did teasers who succeeded at being affectionate.
The results for H5 are in Tables 4 and 5. The CI for the coefficient reflecting the degree to which target’s negative emotion toward the teaser mediated the relationship between the interaction of teasing type and outcome with communication apprehension did not include 0. However, the mediation effect was only significant in three of the four hypothesized conditional relationships. In addition, the results in both tables show that the teaser’s emotional face loss was not a mediator. The results for H6 are in Tables 6 and 7. They show that communication apprehension is a mediator of the relationship between the interaction and regret (i.e., the CIs do not include 0). However, the mediation effect was only significant in two of the hypothesized conditional relationships. Also, neither the teaser’s emotional face loss nor negative emotions was a significant mediator.

### Table 4

**Relationship between Teaser Communication Apprehension with Interaction of Teasing Type and Outcome Mediated by Target Face Loss and Target Negative Emotion toward Teaser**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediator</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>BootLLCI</th>
<th>BootULCI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Target Face Loss</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Negative Emotion Toward Teaser</td>
<td>-17.66</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>-8.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** All regression coefficients are unstandardized. Boot.LLCI = Lower Limit of Bias-Corrected Bootstrap 95% Confidence Interval based on 5,000 samples. Boot.ULCI = Upper Limit of Bias-Corrected Bootstrap 95% Confidence Interval based on 5,000 samples. N = 163.

### Table 5

**Conditional Relationships between Teaser Communication Apprehension with Teasing Type and Outcome Mediated by Target Face Loss and Target Negative Emotion toward Teaser**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Target Face Loss</th>
<th>Target Negative Emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teasing outcome when affectionate teasing</td>
<td>3.73</td>
<td>-9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teasing type when unsuccessful</td>
<td>-1.88</td>
<td>-6.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teasing outcome when hurtful teasing</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teasing type when successful</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>7.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** All regression coefficients are unstandardized. Teasing type: Hurtful=0; affectionate=1. Teasing outcome: Unsuccessful=-1; successful=1. Boot.LLCI = Lower Limit of Bias-Corrected Bootstrap 95% Confidence Interval based on 5,000 samples. Boot.ULCI = Upper Limit of Bias-Corrected Bootstrap 95% Confidence Interval based on 5,000 samples. N = 163.
Discussion

We predicted that type of teasing and outcome would interact to influence teasers’ experiences of negative consequences. Consistent with expectations, the differences in teasers’ reports of target face loss and negative emotions toward them, and their feelings of communication apprehension and regret were most evident in the successful teasing and affectionate teasing conditions. Failed attempts to affectionately tease resulted in greater negativity than successful efforts (H1) and successful hurtful teasing produced more negative consequences than successful affectionate teasing (H4). In both conditions, mediation analyses indicated that teasers’ communication apprehension resulted from the target’s negative emotion toward them (H5) and their regret stemmed from their communication apprehension (H6). In the unsuccessful teasing condition, attempts to be affectionate compared to hurtful produced more negative consequences in all areas except communication apprehension. Interestingly, the communication apprehension teasers experience when their attempts fail is unrelated to the type of teasing in which it occurred.

The results for the hurtful teasing condition, however, were unexpected. Although success and failure was associated with the negative experiences of affectionate teasers (H1), goal achievement was unrelated to the experiences of hurtful teasers (H3). This may reflect differences in how individuals engage in affectionate and hurtful teasing. When seeking to be affectionate, individuals include verbal or nonverbal cues that indicate that their teasing is playful and not hurtful (Keltner et al., 1998). It is possible that when affectionate teasers fail, the discounting cues were not clear or the target missed them. Hence, when failing, the teasing was incorrectly perceived as hurtful and negative consequences occurred. When seeking to hurt someone, however, the teasing message does not include discounting cues and thus, one’s failure may result from not being sufficiently insulting. In such cases, both failed and successful antisocial teasing produce negative consequences that only differ slightly in magnitude.

Our research informs the teasing literature. Prior research noted that teasers sometimes feel regretful and our findings provide three new insights into how this occurs. First, regret is not a universal experience but is contingent on the type of teasing and whether the teaser was successful or not. Second, regret can occur in circumstances in which teasers have been successful or have failed. Third, regret is associated with the emotional reactions of the target and the teaser’s communication apprehension. When affectionate teasers are unsuccessful or hurtful teasers are successful, their targets become angry which leads to communication apprehension and then to regret.
We also note limitations to our study. Our undergraduate sample was primarily female and Caucasian, limiting the ability to generalize the results to other populations. Although we controlled for the elapsed time since the teasing episode, recollection biases may exist. While we took precautions to prevent social desirability bias, respondents’ reports of regret may have been influenced by social desirability pressure. Finally, our exclusive focus on teasers makes it impossible to determine if the target accounts were consistent with the teasers.

We believe that our findings have important implications for future research. As a result of apprehension and regret experienced during a teasing episode, individuals may develop situational communication apprehension that causes them to avoid teasing, withdraw from interactions once teasing begins, and appear nervous, less fluent or dominating during teasing episodes (see McCroskey, 1984). Their situational communication apprehension might also affect the relationships of teasers. To the extent that affectionate teasing can improve relationships, apprehension resulting from failure could cause individuals to avoid a relationally enhancing behavior. On the other hand, apprehension arising from successfully hurting someone might prevent a relationally damaging behavior from reoccurring.

Second, researchers should explore how expectations influence how teasers emotionally respond to success or failure. Individuals sometimes engage in affiliative humor (e.g., Miczo, 2004; Miczo, Averbeck, Mariani, 2009) which is similar to affectionate teasing. Research has found that individuals who engage in affiliative humor report less anxiety and have fewer concerns with arousal management that do those expressing antisocial humor (Miczo et al., 2009). If so, affectionate teasers may form expectations that their teasing will elicit a positive response from the target and they have little need to manage arousal. When the target unexpectedly responds in a negative manner, teasers are unprepared to manage the arousal associated with their communication apprehension which should enhance feelings of regret. On the other hand, hurtful teasers who expect target anger may be better prepared to manage the arousal arising from the apprehension they experience which could mitigate against feeling regretful.

Finally, researchers should investigate the degree to which teasing failure causes individuals to adjust their communication so as to be successful. Individuals who regret sending messages often try to understand what caused their behavior and alter their language in the future so as to better achieve their goal (Myer, 2011). However, this pattern may not apply to teasers who want to be hurtful. For them, success or failure was unrelated to their communication apprehension and they may not experience situational apprehension in the future. Consequently, their actions may stay much the same.
Appendix A:
Instructions

Successful Affectionate Teasing: “Reflect upon a time when you successfully teased someone with the intent of being affectionate (i.e. the target perceived your teasing as affectionate or playful).”

Successful Hurtful Teasing: “Reflect upon a time when you successfully teased someone with the intent of being hurtful (i.e. the target perceived your teasing was emotionally harmful).”

Unsuccessful Affectionate Teasing: “Reflect upon a time when you were unsuccessful in teasing someone with the intent of being affectionate (i.e. the target did not perceive your teasing as affectionate or playful).”

Unsuccessful Hurtful Teasing: “Reflect upon a time when you were unsuccessful in teasing someone with the intent of being hurtful (i.e. the target perceived was not emotionally harmed by your teasing).”
References