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## Aggressive Humor as a Negative Relational Maintenance Behavior during Times of Conflict

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### Abstract

This study explores how aggressive humor is used as a negative relational maintenance behavior during conflicts in romantic relationships. Negative relational maintenance behaviors are questionable interpersonal behaviors romantic partners use to relieve personal tensions about the state of the relationship while still keeping the relationship in existence. Twenty-six participants in committed romantic relationships participated in seven semi-structured group interviews, and transcripts from these group interviews were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. This analysis revealed participants were motivated to use aggressive humor in conflict situations to cover up topics of discussion, elicit a response from their partners, and ease tension. Aggressive humor was enacted through sarcasm, repetition, and mimicking. These findings extend existing research on negative relational maintenance behaviors and provide insight to the “dark side” of maintaining romantic relationships.

### Keywords

Aggressive Humor, Interpersonal Conflict, Negative Maintenance, Relational Maintenance, Group Interviews, Thematic Analysis

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## **Aggressive Humor as a Negative Relational Maintenance Behavior during Times of Conflict**

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Humor is an important part of romantic relationships. It inspires laughter, provides perspective, lightens otherwise troublesome situations, and gives life to relationships. In fact, humor is key to bringing individuals together in the first place, as it plays a critical role in attraction (Bressler & Balshine, 2006). Further, humor helps sustain satisfying intimate relationships (Alberts, Yoshimura, Rabby, & Loschiavo, 2005; Driver & Gottman, 2004; Ziv, 1988). Although humor contributes positively to couples' lighthearted interactions and long-term stability, it also plays a prominent role in more challenging relational circumstances, including conflict situations. Humor used in conflict situations can serve a variety of purposes (Norrick & Spitz, 2008). For instance, humor can be used to alleviate tension in conflict situations (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008; Campbell, Martin, & Ward, 2008), to avoid or resolve the conflict (Norrick & Spitz, 2008), or to veil a more serious remark (Bippus, 2000).

Although the importance of humor in romantic relationships has been well established, using humor becomes complicated when individuals are engaged in conflict. During these heated situations in committed romantic relationships, individuals are faced with maintaining relational bonds while emphasizing their opinions, thoughts, and feelings. Aggressive humor may allow individuals to maintain their relationships during conflict while satisfying personal needs for assertiveness (Goodboy, Myers, & Members of Investigating Communication, 2010; Stafford, 2003). Aggressive humor is a “disintegrative form of humor that serves to diminish morale and to create distance in relational bonds” (Miczo, Averbek, & Mariani, 2009, p. 445). Although aggressive humor typically manifests as ridicule, disparaging comments, teasing, or criticism (Campbell et al., 2008; Miczo et al., 2009), the enactment of this type of humor is much more complex than making a joke at someone's expense. Individuals using aggressive humor may cloak hurtful information to their romantic

partners with humor to avoid the alternative, such as an argument or shouting match. Individuals on the receiving end may experience a variety of emotions when confronted with aggressive humor, ranging from relief, to disgust, to confusion. Given the variability in individuals' motivations for using aggressive humor and the reactions that may result from relational partners, it is necessary to further explore this interpersonal phenomenon.

The purpose of this research is to first understand why individuals use aggressive humor during conflict situations in their romantic relationships. Colloquially, we know disparagement and hurtful teasing is harmful to relationships, and empirical evidence has also associated aggressive humor use with less satisfying relationships (Campbell et al., 2008). Yet, individuals may be motivated to use aggressive humor to make a point to their partner under the guise of humor, among other reasons. Using relational maintenance as a guiding framework, we argue individuals use aggressive humor as a negative behavior to satisfy individual needs while still keeping their romantic relationship "in existence" (Dindia & Canary, 1993, p. 163). The second purpose of this research is to uncover the methods individuals use to communicate aggressive humor with their romantic partners. Although research has broadly identified teasing and ridicule as aggressive humor, we seek to qualitatively understand the enactment of aggressive humor in participants' own words.

This research benefits romantic couples and therapists who advise couples on their conflict management behaviors. Examining the motivations individuals have for using aggressive humor and the techniques they use to communicate this humor can illuminate relationship functioning in tense situations. Conflict can be a common and healthy occurrence in romantic relationships, and uncovering the ways aggressive humor appears in romantic relationships can help individuals foster more satisfying conflict discussions.

## **Literature Review**

Relevant literature is introduced below to provide a rationale for our research questions. First, a background of humor styles, including aggressive humor, is provided. Next, literature about relational maintenance is explained, along with the links between aggressive humor and relational maintenance.

### **Humor Styles**

Humor is defined as a message containing incongruous elements (Miczo et al., 2009) that may either be playfully enacted (Oring, 1992) or violates expectations (Archakis & Tsakona, 2005). Unification and division are the two primary functions of humor (Lefcourt, 2001), identifying both the positive and negative outcomes that may result when humor is used in romantic relationships. Scholars have studied humor in romantic relationships in a variety of ways, including gender differences in humor preferences (Bressler, Martin, & Balshine, 2006), humor's role in tension diffusion and coping (Barelds & Barelds-Dijkstra, 2010; Bippus, 2000; Cann, Zapata, & Davis, 2011; Martin, 2007), and the relationships among humor, self-esteem, and relational satisfaction (De Koning & Weiss, 2002; Dozois, Martin, & Faulkner, 2013). The positive and negative outcomes of humor are further represented by the four humor styles: self-enhancing, affiliative, self-defeating, and aggressive (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). Self-enhancing humor involves a positive outlook on life and the ability to maintain a lighthearted perspective in difficult situations, whereas affiliative humor is characterized by the desire to improve relationships and decrease anxiety through jokes, banter, and other friendly exchanges (Martin et al., 2003). Individuals engage in self-defeating humor when they disparage themselves to gain approval from others, and those who use aggressive humor use cynicism

to hurt or manipulate others (Martin et al., 2003). These four humor types indicate humor is multidimensional. The ways individuals use and interpret humor in their relationships are based on a variety of conditions, including the topic being discussed, the past history of relational partners, and the emotional tone of the conversation, among other factors. Thus, studying the social construction of humor in relationships—particularly humor styles that could be easily misinterpreted, including aggressive humor—can illuminate the complex ways individuals employ humor in their communication.

Aggressive humor is an intriguing humor style, as the term “aggressive humor” is a paradox within itself. Although aggressive humor is a self-centered method of belittling others, these aggressive messages are delivered humorously (Dozois et al., 2013). The humorous tone employed by the sender makes aggressive humor socially acceptable (Bergen, 1998). Previous studies on aggressive humor, however, have focused on its deleterious effects. Aggressive humor trivializes the conversational goal (Norrick & Spitz, 2008), stalls problem resolution (Campbell et al., 2008), and gives the sender more power in an interaction (Vallade, Booth-Butterfield, & Vela, 2013). These studies indicate aggressive humor may present contradictions for relational partners who both deliver and receive this type of humor. For example, mediums like TV advertisements communicate that aggressive humor like sarcasm or teasing is acceptable behavior in society (Gulas, McKeage, & Weinberger, 2014). Advertisers would not gain public favor if they portrayed direct denigration in their advertisements; therefore, aggressive humor allows for maliciousness to occur in an easier to digest, “softer manner” for the public (Gulas et al., 2014, p. 54). Some scholars argue people continue to use disparaging humor because as society becomes exposed to aggressive humor, individuals also become somewhat tolerant of the discrimination (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). Yet within romantic relationships, individuals who receive aggressive humor messages may have trouble digesting the aggressive undertones and perceive this communication as more hurtful than humorous.

Although the majority of research on aggressive humor has identified negative outcomes, some scholars have indicated value in this humor type. Norrick and Spitz (2010) found aggressive humor aids in building friendships when the receiver of the humor reacts lightheartedly. Further, families who use aggressive humor may do so to facilitate involvement and closeness (Everts, 2003). For example, a sarcastic joke may be construed as aggressive humor to those outside the family unit, but it reflects the culture of the family (Everts, 2003). In organizations, aggressive humor is used as entertainment and socialization (Plester & Sayers, 2007). Although the “brighter side” of aggressive humor has been identified in a variety of contexts, the motivations and possible utility behind aggressive humor use in romantic relationships have been unexplored. The present study will fill these gaps by exploring the role of aggressive humor in maintaining relationships. The relational maintenance framework (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 1991) provides insight to the possible maintenance-related motivations for using aggressive humor.

### **Aggressive Humor and Relational Maintenance**

Relational maintenance describes how romantic partners implement communication strategies to establish a certain level of normalcy, allowing partners to stay together through relationship and situational difficulties (Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Haas & Stafford, 2005). Early research identified five relational maintenance behaviors—positivity, openness, assurances, networks, and tasks—and emphasized ways these behaviors could build positive, sustained relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Relational maintenance behaviors, however, are not always positive; for example, Dindia (1989) identified antisocial maintenance strategies, or those using coercion. Goodboy

et al. (2010) identified several specific “dark side” relational maintenance behaviors, including jealousy induction, avoidance, spying, infidelity, destructive conflict, and allowing control. This scholarship indicates positive connotations associated with “maintenance” should be reexamined to better understand the full range of motivations individuals have to maintain their relationships.

Negative relational maintenance behaviors may allow romantic partners to release internal tension and feel better about the current state of the relationship (Goodboy et al., 2010). In fact, these behaviors “may be one way in which relational partners are able to keep a relationship in existence because by engaging in these behaviors, partners are able to reconcile their individual needs with their desire to remain involved in the relationship” (Goodboy et al., 2010, p. 67). Although past literature has focused on the associations between positive relational maintenance behaviors and outcomes such as commitment and liking (Stafford, 2003), the definition of maintenance hinges on an individual’s ability to keep a relationship “in existence,” a goal that can be achieved through negative relational maintenance behaviors (Dainton & Gross, 2008). These dysfunctional behaviors are inversely related to relational satisfaction (Dainton & Gross, 2008), but they may prevent a relationship from terminating entirely.

When individuals mock, disparage, or tease their romantic partner during a conflict situation, or perceive these negative remarks from their partner, they are keeping a relationship “in existence” by using humor to deliver information related to the relationship. The negative emotions that arise from conflict threaten the stability of a relationship, but individuals may choose to work through these emotions because of their desire to remain in the relationship (Goodboy et al., 2010). In times of conflict, aggressive humor may serve multiple purposes: to allow an individual to get a point across, to temper negative comments, and to keep a relationship in existence. This study seeks to better understand aggressive humor by exploring why individuals use aggressive humor during conflicts in romantic relationships, and how this type of humor may be used as a negative relational maintenance behavior. Thus, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ<sub>1</sub>: Why do individuals in committed romantic relationships use aggressive humor in conflict situations?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>: How is aggressive humor in conflict situations used as a negative maintenance behavior?

### **Role of the Researchers**

The first researcher, Whitney Anderson, is an interpretive scholar whose research has examined communication during conflict in relationships. Anderson became interested in aggressive humor after observing it repeatedly in popular culture and in her own and others’ relationships. The second researcher, Nancy DiTunnariello, focuses her research agenda on helping individuals sustain satisfying interpersonal relationships. DiTunnariello has previously used both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis to examine communicative messages within interpersonal relationships, and felt this study would help to shed light on aggressive humor as a relational maintenance strategy. Anderson served as the lead writer for the project and both Anderson and DiTunnariello co-facilitated group interviews and jointly analyzed data.

## Method

A qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured group interviews (Frey & Fontana, 1991) was employed to obtain a closer understanding of participants' perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Group interviews provide valuable information because they allow for added insight when interpreting a social or behavioral event (Frey & Fontana, 1991). The group interview setting helped build trust and familiarity with participants and allowed for a greater number of follow-up questions. Group interviews are appropriate for gathering potentially sensitive relationship information for a variety of reasons. First, they are somewhat smaller than traditional focus groups, leading to a more intimate setting. Second, group interviews help individuals feel comfortable sharing their thoughts candidly while building on the thoughts of others (Lederman, 1990).

Participants were asked to discuss their own use of aggressive humor along with their perception of romantic partners' use, as perception plays a significant role in whether a humorous comment is construed aggressively (Cann et al., 2011; Hall & Sereno, 2010). An inductive thematic analysis was performed to understand themes related to participants' use of aggressive humor in conflict situations. Given the sensitive nature of aggressive humor and the multiple repercussions it can have in romantic relationships, we approached the data with a social constructionist stance. Social constructionism is rooted in the belief that individuals construct their meaning of the world through language (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Gergen, 2009). Examining the data with a social constructionist lens allowed us to appreciate contradictions that emerged between participants during group interviews, as this "messiness" represented their own individual realities and understanding of aggressive humor. Additionally, participants frequently mentioned the competing realities that emerged between them and their partners when they had differing perceptions about the meanings or hurtfulness behind aggressive humor. These competing realities indicate the inherently complicated nature of aggressive humor and provide further justification for studying its consequences within relationships.

## Context and Participants

Participants were recruited from two large lecture communication courses and the graduate student email listserv at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Participants in the lecture courses were invited to sign up for a group interview after hearing us explain the project. Graduate students were invited to send an email indicating their desire to participate to an email address established specifically for this project. Email messages from participants were permanently deleted immediately after we set an interview time. All participants were entered into a drawing to receive a \$50 gift card. Participants were involved in a committed heterosexual romantic relationship for a minimum of three months.

This study recruited a total of 26 participants. Seventeen of the participants were female and nine were male. The group interviews included 17 participants who identified as Caucasian, eight Asian participants, and one African participant. The average age of participants was 24.5 years and the average age of participants' romantic partners was 24.4 years. Participants had been involved with their romantic partners for an average of 33 months, or 2.75 years. Nine participants reported being married to their partner. Four participants reported having children.

## **Data Collection**

We sought approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (HS13088) prior to recruiting participants for participation in group interviews. Participants signed consent forms, and we discussed study procedures in detail prior to beginning interviews. Participants were told not to answer questions they were uncomfortable with, and that they could leave the interview setting at any time. To minimize researcher bias, we did not recruit study participants from our own personal classrooms. All individuals in the study participated on their own accord and were not hand selected in any way.

Seven semi-structured group interviews were completed, ranging in size from two to six participants. Group interviews were conducted in a private room at the university library, and lasted an average of 48 minutes. Participants were first asked several "warm-up" questions to increase their comfort with the interview setting and with one another. Subsequent questions sought to understand the prevalence of conflict in the participants' relationships, and how participants handled conflict with their partners. After these initial questions, participants were asked to talk specifically about their romantic partners' use of humor in conflict situations, how they classified aggressive humor use (teasing, joking, etc.), and how humor use affected conflict. Participants were asked to provide concrete examples of how humor was aggressively used in conflict. Next, the participants were asked about their own use of humor in conflict.

During the group interview process, Anderson followed the semi-structured interview protocol approved by the Institutional Review Board. DiTunnariello recorded notes on discussion topics during the group interviews including potential ideas visited by multiple participants, themes that had begun to surface and nonverbal communication from the participants that may have been important in analyzing the audio recordings at a later time. We carefully studied notes taken during the group interviews to identify potential themes to understand the social construction of aggressive humor in romantic relationships. We tested these emerging themes by asking participants in the group interviews how they felt about information that was previously provided by other participants. Asking participants to provide their opinions on information gathered from previous participants helped to analyze multiple perspectives and better formulate themes. Further, prompting interaction between and among participants encouraged reticent participants to share their perspectives. Participants frequently commented that they gained a new perspective on their relationship based on a comment from another participant, or had remembered an example of aggressive humor in their relationship after hearing about the experiences of other participants.

This study did not gather perspectives from both romantic partners, as the primary goal of the study was to understand individual perceptions of personal and partner humor use in conflict situations. During interviews, participants were only identified by first names; pseudonyms were assigned in all final transcripts and in the final write-up to ensure anonymity of participants and others mentioned during the interview process. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and recorded interviews yielded 123 pages of typed, single-spaced data.

## **Data Analysis and Credibility**

To answer the two research questions, an inductive thematic analysis of interviews was conducted. A theme is "a pattern found in the information that at the minimum describes and organizes possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii). We took notes throughout the interview process and



debriefed together after each interview to tentatively discuss themes, following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) recommendation to continuously engage in data analysis.

Creswell (2007) discussed several guidelines for qualitative research, including consistent transcription, use of multiple researchers in data analysis, and thick description. We engaged in all three of these practices. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to retain participants' authentic perspective. After all interviews were transcribed, we read each transcript to become familiar with the data. Next, we convened to inductively code the first transcript together and establish initial themes. Then, we both used this preliminary scheme to code the remaining six transcripts. During this open coding process, we took extensive notes (i.e., analytic memos, Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to record our initial impressions and categorize data based on the themes established together. We both engaged in multiple readings of the transcripts to refine our initial impressions of the data categories, sometimes moving data excerpts from one category to another. Axial coding began after open coding, in which categories were again scrutinized to determine how they were linked and related (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

After coding individually, we reconvened to discuss codes for each of the transcripts, paying special attention to new codes and contradictions as these represented negative cases (Creswell, 2007). We discussed any data that did not fit into the initial coding scheme and jointly decided whether these data warranted new categories. This second round of coding aided us in clarifying themes. To meet the standard of thick description, we then identified the quotations that best represented each of the themes and were richest in their description.

## Results

This study used group interviews to identify why individuals in romantic relationships use aggressive humor in romantic relationships and the techniques they used to communicate this type of humor. First, three themes describing the reasons individuals used aggressive humor will be discussed, including "cover up," "elicit a reaction," and "easing tension." Then, the three themes related to individuals' aggressive humor techniques will be discussed. These themes are "sarcasm," "repetition," and "mimicking."

### Aggressive Humor: The "Why"

Participants described a variety of motivations for using aggressive humor in conflict situations, both for themselves and their partners. The most common reasons participants described for implementing aggressive humor included avoiding more serious topics of discussion, eliciting a reaction from their partners, and easing tension. These themes are described below.

**Cover up.** Individuals used aggressive humor to mask an underlying topic. For example, Jada, a football fan, perceived aggressive humor when her husband teased her during a game, saying, "You are so annoying to watch football with. I'm never gonna watch it with you again" (3536-3537). At the time, Jada felt this comment was a cover up for a bigger issue with her husband, namely a problem he had with her competitiveness and obsession with football. She related her feelings about this instance of aggressive humor:

...he's never been a big conflict kind of guy. [...] Or when he was annoyed at things, like there was no bringing it up. [...] I think with him, when something is annoying him, like I was when I was watching the game, he doesn't know how to handle it. So I think he used the humor to try to bring it up in a way

where he thought, “Oh, I don’t think it’s gonna hurt her, ‘cause I’m joking.” (3752; 3754; 3756-3759)

Jada perceived her husband’s use of aggressive humor as his way to cover up his actual (negative) feelings and avoid a conflict with her. The use of this aggressive humor during a football game, an event of high importance to Jada, heightened her anger over the aggressive humor. Her husband’s use of aggressive humor led to the first major conflict of their marriage. When explaining possible reasons why her husband used the humor, Jada mentioned his desire to couch his negative comment in a more positive light through humor. Michelle used aggressive humor to cover her anger when interacting with her boyfriend, similar to Jada’s perception of her husband’s humor use.

...it kind of allows me to not be so mean. Or to, like, retaliate against him, you know? Like if he makes a comment then maybe I’ll use negative humor, and then to me that won’t seem as mean if I just blatantly said something without, you know, having the humor in it. So I think a lot of times he might see, like, me using the negative humor, it’s my way of trying to, like, process, or like step around the conflict, or trying to be nicer about a situation instead of just being blatantly mean. (601-607)

Aggressive humor allowed Michelle to avoid being “too mean” to her boyfriend while still sending a message. Ashley explained her feelings about aggressive humor as a cover up.

...[Aggressive humor is] like a rubber sword. It makes a point without drawing blood...So it makes sense in relationships to try to like cover up, like, conflict or people try to use humor to avoid conflict. But sometimes you don’t avoid it, you hit it straight on. (2222-2226)

Ultimately, aggressive humor was frequently used as a mask, either to cover up a more serious issue or to cover participants’ feelings about an issue. Chester mentioned being hurt by the negative message and his partner’s choice to cover it up through aggressive humor.

[Aggressive humor] has hidden meanings in it. That’s really super frustrating, and mean. It then comes across as being mean and deliberately hurtful. So, it’s not funny, why are you trying to use humor over something you know is serious? And you’re not being courageous enough to talk about it. That’s hurtful. (4639-4642)

As previously mentioned in both Jada’s and Chester’s situations, it was the combined impact of a hurtful message and the cover up through aggressive humor that was doubly hurtful to participants. Similar to the use of aggressive humor to ease tension, using aggressive humor as a cover up was unsuccessful in avoiding hurt feelings for receivers. Those participants who personally used aggressive humor as a cover up with their partners wanted to tell their partners something without, in Michelle’s words, “being so mean.”

**Elicit a reaction.** Participants felt aggressive humor was often used to garner some sort of reaction to the topic at hand. The majority of participants had been with their partners for a substantial amount of time, had navigated through conflict situations, and were aware of the types of comments that would spark a reaction from their partners. For example, Andrew often used aggressive humor and got a feeling of “satisfaction.” He said, “I do it very

consciously and in a very planned way, to attack her. Sometimes it's related to the family things, like the way her family is, their [lack of] education, sometimes. And sometimes their lifestyle" (564-567). He explained how he wanted her to react so that she understood the topic required further discussion. Another participant, Xander, used aggressive humor to make his wife angry so she would open up to him. He referenced his frustration at his wife's avoidance of confrontation or conflict, and he felt teasing her would provoke her to the point of communicating with him.

...it's bad because either I'm trying to use this kind of negative humor to hurt her...Another way, I've just misjudged the situation. It's bad, too, but just that if I'm trying to use it to solve the problem, to her communicate more with me, then maybe that's the good situation. (4089-4092)

In Xander's case, he struggled with potential positive and negative aspects of aggressive humor. While openly admitting to his desire to hurt his wife with aggressive humor, he also noted his ultimate goal: to elicit a reaction in her to spark communication. Michelle explained how she perceived similar motivation from her boyfriend when he used aggressive humor.

So I think sometimes he uses humor to try to, you know like, push my buttons to see where, like, that line is. That, you know, how far I'm comfortable with this statement or that statement. Or just to get some type of reaction out of me...he tells me that he like, pushes my buttons just because he thinks any emotion is good emotion from me. (190-194)

Participants who used aggressive humor to elicit a reaction illustrated both the strategic and messy aspects of aggressive humor. Aggressive humor can be used to strategically attack someone in a conflict, as mentioned by Andrew, to upset the target and emphasize the need to discuss a certain topic. This example is the opposite of a cover up, as the individual uses aggressive humor to overtly spark discussion instead of dropping veiled hints. Aggressive humor can also appear in messy and contradictory ways, as indicated in Xander's approach. His seemingly good intentions were enacted in a negative way to reach his wife. Michelle, who received negative humor from her boyfriend, recognized his intentions to bring out emotions in her.

**Easing tension.** *Easing tension* occurred when aggressive humor was used with the hopes of eliciting a mood change. Participants used it to change their partners' moods or their own mood. One participant, Andrew, explained how using aggressive humor helped to release negative feelings and positively change his mood. Andrew described aggressive humor as "a weapon to pacify your anger...You use the negative humor and you feel like, calmed down...[Aggressive humor] will make your relationship better in the sense that you will feel relaxed" (707-710). Michelle shared similar sentiments when she explained why she felt her boyfriend used aggressive humor. She stated, "I think it's just his way of trying to, you know, like, find humor in the situation to kind of alleviate the tension of him not understanding and me not being able to explain" (403-405).

In Lori's case, her husband tried to ease tension by telling her to "take her happy pills" when referring to the Prozac prescribed for Lori's post-partum depression. Lori felt her husband may have been trying to "take the edge off" a high-pressure situation with a joke (4594). Though her husband's aggressive humor initially upset Lori, she ultimately felt he made the comments to better the mood.

For participants who reported using aggressive humor to ease tension, this choice was based on a personal need to “let off steam” or release negative feelings about their partner. Aggressive humor allowed them to meet these needs through a humorous tone. Participants on the receiving end of aggressive humor recognized their partners’ attempt to communicate a potentially hurtful message in a softer, more considerate way. Although participants who received aggressive humor from partners were initially hurt, they eventually recognized their partners’ need to ease tension on a personal level or within the relationship and were forgiving of this behavior.

### **Aggressive Humor: The “How”**

Participants were motivated to use aggressive humor to ease tension, cover up a more serious issue, or elicit a reaction in their romantic partners, but these reasons for using aggressive humor were communicated in a variety of ways. The “how” of aggressive humor includes various methods participants would use to communicate aggressive humor as a negative relational maintenance behavior. Sarcasm, repetition, and mimicking were identified as methods to communicate aggressive humor in conflict situations.

**Sarcasm.** Sarcasm was used as a vehicle to offend or belittle, masked behind lightheartedness. This type of aggressive humor was particularly hurtful because participants felt their partners were using humor to thinly veil comments that attacked their self-worth. Participants felt angry and frustrated that their partners would attempt to bring up a serious topic in a sarcastic way. Participants who reported personally using sarcasm with their partners openly recognized their desire to hurt the partner, albeit in a less hurtful way than yelling, overt ridicule, or direct confrontation. Michelle discussed an instance of sarcasm from her boyfriend:

...One time we were talking about, um, like if we had kids or something, how, um, him and his parents would have to be the ones to teach our child how to be like, active. Or, you know, or to get, like an athlete disposition, to like learn to catch a ball, learn to, you know, play basketball [because] he was the basketball star, and his parents are still really fit. And my parents...you know, they’re overweight, and not active at all...So I did not appreciate that. (152-158; 161-162)

Michelle’s example represents the complexities of aggressive humor. During a discussion about the future, aggressive humor is used to demean both Michelle and her parents, but is delivered in a humorous way because her boyfriend’s intention was to provide what he felt was best for his future children. According to participants, sarcasm can also be bi-directional, with one partner initiating the aggressive humor and the other reciprocating. Teresa provided an example of this bi-directionality.

One thing I think that Ben does, that he thinks is funny, and I do not, is when, being a grad student we have different hours. And he’ll call me at eleven and he’ll say, “Oh, are you up yet?” (sarcastic inflection) And I, and he thinks he’s being funny and it’s so, I feel like it’s disrespectful. So, I kind of come back to him, and I kind of like, “Yeah, I’m up. I’m up but I’m eating Bon-Bons and watching television.” (sarcastic inflection)...Then I get mad, and I’m not sure if mine is humorous. Mine is more sarcastic-mean. I feel like that’s mean, when he does that to me. (4409-4415)

This example demonstrates the ability of sarcasm to initiate a cycle of aggressive humor within an interaction. Teresa was provoked to communicate sarcastically in response to Ben's own sarcasm. Conversely, Chris was surprised when his wife interjected aggressive humor during a conflict situation.

...It started getting heated because she wanted to, needed some money to get some clothes because she was... pregnant at the time... And then we were talking and talking and then I said, "No, no, no, honey... We have to really cut back on this."...She said, "Well then, fine, why don't you just go buy whatever you want. Because all you care about is what you want and not what I want."...But, she kind of said it in almost this humorous way...It was like, "ouch." (4529-4534; 4536-4538)

In many of the examples provided by participants, sarcasm was used to introduce sensitive topics in a way that seemed less threatening because "humor" was involved. Participants perceived sarcasm as particularly dangerous within their relationships because when they used it, or received it from their partners, there was little question about true intentions. Participants saw sarcasm as a way to communicate information about the relationship in a particularly demeaning, disrespectful, or hurtful way. Even though "humor" was involved, sarcasm heightened existing conflicts or served as the starting point for new conflicts.

**Repetition.** In addition to sarcasm, repetition was another method used to express aggressive humor. Repetition occurred when the same word or phrase was echoed, resulting in annoyance from the partner on the receiving end. Although the comment may have initially been humorous, it turned to aggressive humor after being repeated over and over again. Essentially, the joke was "taken too far." According to Chelsea, this form of aggressive humor made her uncomfortable, and changed the dynamic of her interaction with her boyfriend. "It's just he keeps doing it, and I just kinda feel like I wanna leave, you know. Like not sit there anymore so he can just like, get the hint that I'm done" (318-319). Bryce provided a specific example of his girlfriend using repetition. "I'm a real stickler for rules, and she'll like, make fun of me for it. Like if I, like, break a rule, she'll just like, bring it up over and over. Like, 'Oh, you went two miles over the speed limit! Ohhhh!' Like, yeah, just things like that" (291-294).

For Mia, repetitive humor was a significant issue in her relationship with her boyfriend. She described his repetitive teasing as "obnoxious," and felt she needed to defend herself during these instances. The recurring nature of the humor made it much more than humor—it became something that Mia was very sensitive to in their relationship.

He like, my boyfriend, likes to tease me like crazy. Sometimes in arguments, he'll like, say stuff about me being so klutzy that he's afraid that I'm gonna walk out into a street and the bus is gonna hit me...He's just...always teasing me...I feel like I have to defend myself to that too. (200-203)

The repetitive nature of humor was what made it aggressive for participants. If the joke had been told one time, participants may have perceived it as humorous, but the repetition turned the humorous comment into an aggressive one. Participants often felt annoyed and belittled at partners' repeated use of a certain humorous phrase or comment. Repeated humor caused participants to question themselves and their relationships, generating an uncomfortable sense of uncertainty.

**Mimicking.** While repetition involved recurring topics or phrases delivered in a humorous way, mimicking occurred when one partner mirrored the exact terminology or wording initially interjected by the other partner. Mimicking was used to mock or belittle a romantic partner, often in an effort to make them hear what they were saying from their partner's perspective. Michelle used mimicking to make a point with her boyfriend.

I'm in a long-distance relationship too, so sometimes he'll send me a picture, like, "Oh, I look good today!...And so I'll respond...sometimes, you know, kinda re-state what he said. "Oh yeah, you look really good!" You know, kinda like in a more, like, negative manner, just kinda like mocking him in a sense. (501-508)

Michelle frequently mentioned her low self-esteem, so hearing these comments from her boyfriend activated feelings of envy and low self-worth. Repeating his own words allowed Michelle to express distaste over her boyfriend's arrogance and mock him without becoming overly vulnerable. Chester related in an example in which his wife used mimicking to undercut one of his accomplishments:

One example I can think of is, when a professor wrote a letter to me and said, "You're a valuable asset in our department." So, I went home and was like, "Wow, he called me a valuable asset to the department." Then she would make fun of me and say, "Hey, Mr. Valuable Asset, you know we need this," and say something. I'm like, why are you doing that? "Well, you're a valuable asset!" She'll make fun of that, so. But that was irritating. (4456-4464)

Similar to Michelle's example, Chester's wife used mimicking to stifle something he was proud of. Mimicking allowed participants to express unhappiness with the occurrence, or unhappiness with a deeper issue. By mimicking their partners, individuals were aware that there was a deeper issue that needed to be addressed for the relationship to move forward.

The three themes described above provide insight into aggressive humor as a negative relational maintenance behavior. Sarcasm, repetition, and mimicking were all meant to communicate something specific, and often something negative—those who used aggressive humor admitted it, and those who received aggressive humor recognized it. Yet, at the same time, humor was thought to temper negative comments. This was often an incorrect assumption, as receivers reported feeling upset and angry at their partners' use of aggressive humor because they could see through the humor to the real message. Sometimes it was necessary to use this type of humor to send a not-so-subtle message, and other times participants were annoyed receivers who recognized why their partners chose to use this type of humor. Ultimately, participants perceived aggressive humor as a tool to appease their needs in romantic relationships without posing a severe threat to the relationship.

Participants described the delivery methods of repetition and mimicking as distinctive ways to communicate aggressive humor; however, sarcasm was often evident in the examples of repetition and mimicking. Sarcasm was frequently "layered" on top of repetition and mimicking. For example, participants indicated their partners used a sarcastic tone when repeating the same words or phrases, or participants themselves mimicked their partners sarcastically. In this way, sarcasm was identified as the most pervasive type of aggressive humor used in conflict situations due to its presence in isolation (i.e., through tone of voice) or in conjunction with repetition and mimicking.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons why individuals use aggressive humor in conflict situations with romantic partners and how aggressive humor is enacted as a negative relational maintenance behavior. The negative impact of aggressive humor on relationships has received substantial attention, with scholars noting, “Aggressive humor is displayed without regard for its potential negative impact on others, ultimately alienating these individuals and seriously impairing social and interpersonal relationships” (Kuiper, Grimshaw, Leite, & Kirsh, 2004, p. 141). Many examples of aggressive humor provided by participants support Kuiper et al.’s (2004) assertion of the selfishness of this humor type, yet participants often emphasized their desire to soften negative relational comments to their partners through aggressive humor. In this sense, participants had altruistic intentions in using aggressive humor, as they made a conscious choice to employ humor while delivering potentially hurtful information. Targets of aggressive humor, too, recognized their partners’ positive intentions, even though they were personally hurt by the use of aggressive humor. Individuals may have very different perceptions about the efficacy of certain forms of humor in conflict situations, or even the statements that constitute humor (Bippus, Young, & Dunbar, 2011), and aggressive humor can continue to cause confusion and anger due to differing perceptions (Hall & Sereno, 2010).

The motivations and methods for communicating aggressive humor provide new insight into the role of this type of humor in maintaining romantic relationships. Two reasons for using aggressive humor in conflict situations included covering up a more serious issue and easing tension. These motivations are consistent with previous research reporting the ability of humor to cloak a serious comment (Bippus, 2000) and the importance of humor in tension release (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008; Campbell et al., 2008). Participants may have eased their own tension or covered up a topic in the moment, but aggressive humor was not a sustainable way to stave off tension or discussion about a given topic in the long-term.

When desiring to elicit a reaction, participants reported purposely needling their partners to start a discussion or to see where the boundaries were in their relationship. Humor in general is often used to test boundaries (Hay, 2000), and aggressive humor pushes boundaries to an even greater extent than positive humor types. Participants and their partners used aggressive humor to incite a response and stimulate conversation, thereby bridging an emotional gap. For example, Andrew used aggressive humor to make his wife understand a topic needed further discussion. When participants did not feel their partners were prepared to talk about a topic, aggressive humor was used to provoke the partner just enough to trigger communication.

While participants like Andrew and Xander used aggressive humor to provoke their partners to discuss a conflict, participants like Michelle perceived the desire to elicit a reaction as something her partner did “for fun.” Consistent use of aggressive humor, like Michelle’s example of her partner using aggressive humor for fun, can become part of the relationship culture (Everts, 2003). If partners consistently use aggressive humor as a way to get a reaction, they begin to accept it as part of the relationship. The act of using negative humor “just because” could be a strategic choice to gain a position of power in the situation (Bippus et al., 2011; Vallade et al., 2013).

Participants communicated aggressive humor as a negative relational maintenance behavior through sarcasm, repetition, and mimicking. There were contradictions between some of the motivations to use aggressive humor and the enactment of aggressive humor as a negative relational maintenance behavior. For example, the desire to ease tension or cover up a more serious issue is likely not achieved through sarcasm, repetition, or mimicking, but these methods certainly do elicit a reaction. This study did not seek alignment between

motivations and methods, which is a direction for future research, but instead sought to understand participants' own perceptions of their personal use of aggressive humor, along with their partners' use. Interestingly, participants were more likely to perceive positive intentions for themselves and their partners, but the methods used to communicate aggressive humor were quite negative.

Sarcasm was frequently reported by participants, both as a method they personally used and as something they received from their partners. Sarcasm is viewed as a form of irony (Gibbs, 2000). In previous research, irony has been linked with verbal aggressiveness with a focus on indirect aggression within interpersonal relationships (Averbeck & Hample, 2008). Sarcasm within romantic relationships constitutes indirect aggression since couples have a desire to maintain the relationship. Repetition and mimicking are other ways to display indirect aggression, as individuals can make a point through saying the same comment frequently or imitating partners' own words in a disparaging tone. Mimicking, in particular, is an interesting example of aggressive humor because it represents senders' willingness to denigrate other people to make a point or get a laugh (Hall, 2013). Yet, those participants who mimicked their partners seemed to use this tool to mask an underlying vulnerability.

Our findings indicate that the definition of aggressive humor may need to be expanded to include an element of relational functioning. The literature explains how aggressive humor is typically meant to create distance in relationships (Miczo et al., 2009); however, in instances like eliciting a reaction and easing tension, an individual's goal is not to create distance, but to coax conversation from their relational partners. In the same vein, previous research explains how aggressive humor may belittle the goal of the conversation (Norrick & Spitz, 2008), and that a humorous tone employed during the delivery of aggressive humor makes for a more socially acceptable situation (Bergen, 1998). For participants in this study, the use of aggressive humor was sometimes meant to broach topics in a more socially acceptable way. Thus, instead of trivializing the goal, partners are actually approaching conflict and taking the first step to manage it. The use of aggressive humor to discuss conflict situations brings the negative situation to light and acts as a way for partners to work on relational bonds, not to create distance.

The results of this study indicate aggressive humor is a possible addition to the negative relational maintenance behaviors utilized by Goodboy et al. (2010), including jealousy induction, avoidance, spying, infidelity, destructive conflict, and allowing control. Aggressive humor shares many of the same characteristics of these negative relational maintenance behaviors: it often leads to tension between partners as they negotiate the meaning of the aggressive humor, it is used when the relationship is threatened (i.e., during conflict), and it is a maladaptive interpersonal behavior (Goodboy et al., 2010). Further study is needed on aggressive humor as a negative relational maintenance behavior because it is highly situational. The context of the interaction, tone of voice, and the partner's previous use of aggressive humor all play a role in whether the humor is received positively, ambivalently, or negatively (Cann et al., 2011; Hall & Sereno, 2010). For instance, the efficacy of humor in a conflict situation is contingent upon a variety of factors, including the power relationship between the partners, the seriousness of the conflict, and the reaction of the target (Norrick & Spitz, 2008; Vallade et al., 2013).

### **Limitations**

Although this study provides new insight into the motivations and methods used to communicate aggressive humor in romantic relationships, it is not without limitations. First, only the perception of one partner was gathered. Although we were interested in gaining an



in-depth understanding of one partner's perception of aggressive humor use for this study, having one perspective limits the generalizability of our findings because the other partner in the relationship may construct his or her understanding of aggressive humor in an entirely different way. Despite this limitation, we are confident our findings are a positive first step in understanding the complexity of aggressive humor from one partner's perspective. Future research should consider examining the perceptions of aggressive humor from both partners in a romantic relationship to gain a holistic understanding of the similarities and differences in perception. Second, we did not study relationships longitudinally to identify the role aggressive humor may play in the continuation or termination of romantic relationships. Studies have identified the relationship between aggressive humor and lower levels of relational satisfaction (Campbell et al., 2008; Goodboy et al., 2010); however, future research should first confirm previous findings on aggressive humor and relational satisfaction, and second, identify whether individuals are willing to stay in an unsatisfying relationship with frequent instances of aggressive humor simply to keep it "in existence." The results in this study suggest this is the case, but further studies are needed to identify long-term relational outcomes.

### Conclusion

Overall, this study sought to understand participants' perceptions related to their personal uses and their partners' uses of aggressive humor. Participants explained how they and their partners used negative humor in times of conflict to ease tension, cover up issues, and elicit a reaction. In order to complete these tasks, participants reported they and their partners utilized sarcasm, repetition, and mimicking. While these forms of humor constitute aggressive humor (Averbeck & Hample, 2008), participants did not perceive these conversations to signify the end of their relationships. The aggressive humor strategies functioned as negative relational maintenance strategies as the conversations that evolved resulted in keeping the relationship intact (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dindia & Canary, 1993). There are contradictions inherent in aggressive humor, establishing this humor type as a true paradox: it is perceived negatively by those receiving aggressive humor, but can also aid in successfully maintaining relationships. How partners navigate conflict through the use of aggressive humor continues to add to the body of research explaining the paradox that exists.

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