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When is Teasing Abuse? A Grounded Theory of Teasing among Mexican American Adolescent Dating Couples

Teens' lived experiences and shared interactions are profoundly informative and often underrepresented. Understanding the nuances of adolescents' lives, including communication and relational exchange, is a complicated and challenging task for researchers. Specifically, adolescents utilize teasing and humor in their daily interactions with peers and dating partners. Although these interactions are often perceived by youth themselves as normative, the intent and content of these interactions can range considerably. For example, while prior research has highlighted teasing as a means for adolescents to socialize, flirt, entertain others, or engage in bonding interactions (Kruger, et al., 2006), adolescents may also use teasing to racially discriminate (Douglass et al., 2016), or to make fun of someone's weight (Eisenberg et al., 2019; 2019; Greenleaf et al., 2014; Taylor, 2011), appearance, or competencies (Agliata et al., 2007). With regard to dating relationships specifically, scholars have raised questions regarding whether certain forms of teasing may be psychologically or emotionally abusive (Eaton & Stephens, 2018; Mulford & Blachman-Demner, 2013; author citation, 2021). Emotional violence towards a dating partner falls within the definition of teen dating violence (TDV) and has been repeatedly documented as the most prevalent type of violence (Jouriles et al., 2009; Taylor & Mumford, 2016), although contexts related to teasing are poorly understood.

According to the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, approximately 8.2% of adolescents nationwide had experienced physical dating violence by someone they were dating or going out with (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). Further, the National Study on Teen Relationships and Intimate Violence found that, of the 37% of adolescents aged 12-18 who had dated in the prior year, more than 60% had been victimized by

psychological abuse (Taylor & Mumford, 2016). Because TDV can be a predictor of many types of developmental and health risk outcomes, including, but not limited to, substance use, sexually transmitted infections, anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Eaton & Stephens, 2018; Ellis et al., 2008; Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Silverman et al., 2001), examining the ways that teens communicate and relate to one another in romantic relationships is a critical step towards the development of interventions that support young couples. Further, teasing is culturally influenced (Eisenberg et al., 2019; Romo & Mireles-Rios, 2016) and adolescents of color are at heightened risk for dating violence (Basile, et al., 2020; Wincentak et al., 2017). Understanding teasing within adolescents' lived cultural contexts is imperative, particularly for adolescents that disproportionately experience harm through systems of oppression.

Teasing in Context

Adolescents use a wide variety of conflict resolution tactics, which often include the use of teasing and humor (Connolly et al., 2018; Giordano et al., 2021; author citation, 2021). Teasing has not been defined consistently across studies, and is commonly used interchangeably with terms including "joking around", "horseplay", and "play fighting" (Fernandez-Gonzalez et al., 2013; Hamby, 2016; Jouriles et al., 2009). Regardless of the terminology used, its measurement assesses provocative comments or aggressive acts that directly relate to the target and are accompanied by markers of verbal or non-verbal playfulness (e.g., stating that they are 'just kidding', smiling or laughing; Connolly et al., 2018; Keltner et al., 2001; Kruger et al., 2006). Adolescent communication research is particularly underdeveloped, however, in describing the motivations and consequences of teasing in young romantic relationships. Researchers and practitioners grapple with the implications of adolescents who are using humor with their partners as a bid for intimacy and bonding during conflict, whereby the use of teasing,

playfulness, and joking is good-natured and aimed at reducing tension (e.g., see Campbell et al., 2008) as opposed to youth who inject emotional or psychological abuse into the relationship under the guise of teasing (Mulford & Blachman-Demner, 2013; Wyngarden et al., 2022). Indeed, some research has identified teasing as a purposefully aggressive conflict tactic (Connolly et al., 2015; Keltner et al., 2001) whereas others have found that it can be intended and received as playful or hurtful depending on the circumstances (Hack et al., 2020; Kruger et al., 2006). It follows that the teaser and the recipient often interpret the teasing quite differently (Kruger et al., 2006). Indeed, research with young adults finds that humor is multi-faceted and its contexts and implications can range from facilitative of successful conflict resolution to dissatisfaction with how conflict is resolved (Campbell et al., 2008).

At its worst, humor may contribute to escalating conflict that results in physical forms of partner violence (Cornelius et al., 2010; Wyngarden et al., 2022). For example, although the use of humor may be considered a "repair attempt" in communication research (i.e., meant to de-escalate conflict; Gottman, 1999), these bids have been predictive of physical violence perpetration among college students (Cornelius et al., 2010). These findings have not been consistent across age groups, however, in that another study with diverse adolescents (50% Hispanic) using the same scale was unable to replicate this (author citation, 2021). Further, physical violence itself is commonly interpreted as playful although such *post-hoc* appraisals may be attempts to justify staying in an abusive relationship (Jouriles et al., 2009). Given the complex yet limited degree of literature on the intentions and consequences of teasing among adolescents in dating relationships, and the commonality of youth's own dismissal of teasing as 'just kidding/playing around' (Douglass et al., 2016; Keltner et al., 2001; Kruger et al., 2006), it is unclear when teasing may be considered abusive and fall under the definition of dating

violence (Mulford & Blachman-Demner, 2013). Consequently, in an effort to improve survey science and distinguish forms of dating violence from behaviors that are experienced as playful, intimate partner violence questionnaires have been modified to include the qualifier, 'not including horseplay or joking around' when asking participants about items that describe physical (Fernandez-Gonzalez et al., 2013; Hamby, 2016) and/or psychological (Jouriles et al., 2009) acts of violence. This has resulted in an increased set of studies assessing the extent to which intimate partner violence is capturing playful contexts, in attempt to rule out false positives from measurement (Fernandez-Gonzalez et al., 2013; Foshee et al., 2008; Hamby, 2016; Jouriles et al., 2009). Although these studies have yielded interesting descriptive findings, for example that much of the reported dating violence is in the context of teasing/joking around, it remains unclear whether and in what circumstances these episodes are experienced as harmful. In this manner, qualitative research is direly needed to delineate the contexts of teasing and its impact in real time. Further, research to date has largely not taken cultural considerations into account.

Cultural Considerations

Adolescents' race, ethnicity, and gender are fundamental cultural factors that significantly influence how they navigate the world and research that acknowledges the impact of various multicultural aspects can more accurately represent adolescents' lived experiences in context (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, Latino families are more likely than White to engage in weight-based teasing (Eisenberg et al., 2019), including the use of nicknames by parents (e.g., *flaca* or "skinny girl"; Romo & Mireles-Rios, 2015). Further, ethnic/racial teasing is common among adolescents of color, particularly among friends who use stereotypes to tease peers or themselves (Douglass et al., 2016). These and other studies suggest that, while teasing is a

frequent and socially acceptable way to interact with family and close peers, it may be a particularly salient communication strategy utilized by Latinos. Indeed, clinicians working with Latino families may be taught to understand how teasing is commonly used to ease tension around difficult topics and increase positivity (Bermudez & Mancini, 2012). The extent to which Latinx adolescents are positively versus negatively impacted by teasing, however, is understudied with available research largely associating teasing with poor mental health outcomes (Eisenberg et al., 2019; Douglass et al., 2016).

Despite the contextualization of teasing as particularly relevant to Latinx youths, there has been no research to our knowledge on how culture may intersect with teasing in dating contexts. Research on intimate partner violence has, however, found that acceptance of traditional gender stereotypes increases risk for abuse in part by limiting females' ability to communicate disagreement or to act autonomously (Eaton & Stephens, 2018; Villegas et al., 2013). Specifically, within traditional relationship contexts, Mexican origin girls and women have historically been taught to avoid direct conflict in attempts to create harmony (termed *marianismo*; Castillo et al., 2010; Shaffer et al., 2018). The term *machismo* is the counterpart to *marianismo* and describes how Mexican men interact and engage through accepted traditional male roles and attributes (Arciniega et al., 2008). Research has explored both adaptive (e.g., social responsibility, emotional connectedness, and bravery) and maladaptive (e.g., emotional toughness, dominance, and hypermasculinity) characteristics of this cultural construct (Arciniega et al., 2008; Kulis et al., 2010; Llamas et al., 2020; author citation, 2015). Of interest to the present study, adolescent females tend to depart from traditional gender norms to a greater degree (Casique, 2019) and at a faster pace over time (Updegraff et al., 2014) compared to males. It may be that, as girls depart from traditional gender values, teasing may be an avenue by

which females assert their voice to more closely align with greater gender equality which they perceive in the United States (Dotti Sani & Quaranta, 2017).

The Present Study

"Joking around" is commonly cited as the rationale for dating violence among adolescents, contributing to questions regarding if and when teasing may be considered abusive. Further, teasing is culturally influenced, and for Mexican origin couples, may reflect distinct meanings and contexts. Through observations of videotaped interactions, the present study captures emic contexts and explores the sociocultural values, meaning-making, and communication styles of adolescent couples. The specific aims of this study were to 1.) explore the teasing behaviors/strategies utilized by Mexican American couples in discussion of conflict, 2.) conceptualize their motivations for teasing, and 3.) delineate the resulting consequences of teasing. In exploring these questions, we developed a grounded theory of teasing among adolescent Mexican American couples.

Methods

Sample and Procedures

Study participants were recruited from school and after-school programs in an urban city in a Southwestern United States border state. All participants self-identified as Mexican American and were between 15-17 years old. The regulating Institutional Review Board approved this study; written consent for adolescent participation was gained from parents, and assent was also gained from each adolescent participant. The study included surveys, focus groups, and videotaped interactions. Surveys were completed first, and students interested in participating in other arms of the study were invited to do so. Students were given an incentive of $15 for completing the survey and $15 for the videotaped interaction task. As the present study's

focus, students who were in a current dating relationship were eligible for a videotaped interaction task. The study sample consisted of 34 hetero-dating couples (*M dating length* = 11.71 months). Each couple was given a list of common dating conflict topics (i.e., Partner Checklist; Capaldi et al., 1994; also provided in Spanish) and were each asked to choose two topics to discuss for a total of 14 minutes (7 minutes for each partner). Each partner's top issue was selected, and in cases where the same issue was selected, the second-choice issue of one of the participants was chosen. The most frequently selected topic was "partner being jealous if you talk to other boys/girls". Adolescents were directed to discuss the issue generally rather than to try and solve the issue. This contextual framing allowed adolescents to approach the conflict as they normally would.

Guiding Theories

Qualitative research methods are ideal when exploring the phenomena of participant meaning-making and perception, and discovering relevant data in areas not thoroughly investigated (Saldaña, 2016). Further, Grounded Theory Research (GTR), originally developed in 1967 by researchers Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (Creswell & Poth, 2018), coupled with a social constructivist perspective (Charmaz, 2014), emphasizes diverse social locations, views, and complexities of realities. The advantages of utilizing this methodology are many, including the ability to discover how teasing incidents are initiated, contexts and meanings assigned to teasing, and consequences of teasing with attention to the inextricable social contexts that influence teen behaviors and teasing outcomes. Furthermore, as this research is steeped in gendered cultural norms, utilizing a feminist developmental lens offers rich context (Impett et al., 2006). This perspective acknowledges that while both boys and girls may feel pressure to conform to patriarchal influences, the duress that girls may encounter to put their own feelings

aside, keep the peace at high costs, or strive to please their partners present significant challenges (Impett et al., 2006). Importantly, a feminist lens also recognizes resistance to sex-typed roles (see, for example, Tolman et al., 2016), including perhaps the use of teasing to challenge societally-expected behaviors and attitudes.

Analysis

Here, we defined teasing as provocative comments or aggressive acts which were aimed at a partner and accompanied by a smile, laugh, playful body language, and/or a verbal statement that the teasing was in jest (Kruger et al., 2006). We conducted in-depth coding of videos and transcripts to develop a grounded theory of teasing that not only took into account who initiated the teasing (male/female), but also to define teasing types, levels of severity of teasing incidents, youth's motivations for teasing, and the resulting consequences.

Thirty of the 34 video interviews in the present study contained teasing incidents, resulting in a rich data corpus of 420 minutes. The videotaped interactions were transcribed and imported to a qualitative software program, NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2014, Version 10) to begin the first of three coding cycles. Following Saldaña's (2016) guidelines for qualitative research, couples' teasing interactions were reviewed through several initial readings of the transcriptions, viewings of each couple's sessions, and analytic memo writing. This multi-faceted attention to detail permitted the research team to not only read what was said, but to triangulate the data with transcribed observations regarding tone and inflection used, as well as consideration of visual elements such as posture, non-verbal contact, proximity, gestures, and facial expressions.

During the first coding cycle, we identified which partner initiated the teasing, assigned a label to the type of teasing that had occurred (e.g., name calling), as well as assessed the level of

severity of the incident. In order to capture level of severity, we considered both how a partner had delivered the tease, as well as how the tease was interpreted. We defined a "mild" tease as a flirtatious verbal or physical probe whereby the receiving partner responded with laughter; a "moderate" tease reflected mixed intention whereby the receiving partner reacted with seriousness or by not finding it funny; a "severe" tease included derogatory language or physical force (regardless of how the receiver reacted). Coding at this stage of analysis thus included preliminary assessment of words or actions that demonstrated a participant's feelings whether stated directly or inferred by the researcher (i.e., *emotion coding*; Saldaña, 2016). Given our interest in understanding youth's motivations for teasing, we also labeled the contexts (e.g., complaints) and content (e.g., a partner's desire for honesty) associated with each incident as applicable. Finally, to help us to determine how cultural values and belief systems may shape teasing incidents, we were purposeful in labeling teasing as indicative of participant values, attitudes, and beliefs (i.e., *values coding*; Saldaña, 2016). As an example, we drew from the literature on traditional Mexican cultural values and our guiding theories to assign a label of 'acting macho' where machismo was reflected during the teasing interaction. These codes were documented in a thematic codebook that listed a concise definition for each code and referenced typical exemplars of the code to improve coding consistency and accuracy.

The second stage of data analysis extended the analytic work to a more reflective level (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through memo-writing, we conceptualized possible associations between the initial codes to identify broader and more representative themes and temporal orderings (i.e., termed *axial coding*; Saldaña, 2016). We held several meetings and made iterations to the grounded theory model until we came to an agreement on the central themes and how they were related to one another. Our aims reflected those of a constructivist grounded

theory approach whereby the term 'theory' suggests an interpretive story or social model as experienced by participants (Charmaz, 2006). The final grounded theory reflects youth's primary motivations for teasing, the types of teasing utilized, and the consequences of teasing in real time.

Results

Two main motivations for teasing were identified; the first to exert power during the interaction and the other to repair a problem in the relationship. At times both motivations were evident within the same teasing incident, as displayed in the case examples below. Participants teased in several ways to meet these objectives, and the results are organized according to teasing type. Teasing included play fight/banter, meaning physical or verbal communication that poked fun or mocked the other, or teasing about a conflict in a playful manner; name calling, meaning words or phrases used to portray the other in a derogatory way; acting 'macho', meaning actions or phrases that displayed patriarchal attitudes, male bravado, leadership or bravery; or playful complaints, meaning a concern about a challenge or area of conflict in the relationship. The three main complaints articulated by participants included a desired improvement in communication skills, the need to maintain honesty, and the need to sustain loyalty in the partnership. Although there were instances when the use of teasing was received as neutral or humorous, these positive consequences were not as common or salient as negative consequences. Rather, regardless of motivation or teasing type, teasing primarily resulted in hurt feelings, a power struggle, and/or feelings of shame.

As noted, the biological sex initiations and teasing incident severity levels were documented to gain a broader perspective and assist in further contextualizing patterns of sex roles and intentions that preceded the teasing. We found that females initiated 61% of the

teasing, and males 39%. Further, 62% of the interactions were classified as "mild"; 34% as "moderate," and and 4% as "severe".

Teasing Types

Play fighting/banter. Verbal and non-verbal interactions were coded as play fighting/banter when couples teased one another about something conflictual. These were playful yet argumentative communication behaviors, often involving mockery, that aimed to either disempower the other person and/or to repair an aspect of the relationship. The following example illustrates play fighting in the context of both motivations.

Case Example:
(7 Teasing Incidents 3[Mild], 4[Moderate]; 6[Girl], 1[Boy])

Girl: "You make me mad. That's why I hate you. Ooooh, I hate your guts. (Laughs). Tell me, why do you think we disagree a lot if…"
Boy: "No, you hate my guts."
Girl: "Stop, you play too much (smiles)."

This interaction began with a girl blithely stating that she is angry at her partner and "hates his guts" and then she proceeded to ask a sincere question about why they disagree so much. The first statement sets the tone that she is in a position of power, that is, she could 'take or leave' the relationship because she purportedly "hates" him. She had successfully captured her partner's attention and was in a position of control. She then directly asks about repairing the relationship. However, the boy's response was targeted at her locus of power. He withdrew and refused to answer her question about their disagreements. He let her know that he would not oblige her question because she had said something that displeased him, and he withheld the answer that she sought. His method for exerting power was to playfully hold back what was requested. He realized that her attempt to hold power had backfired and hoped to regain his power while avoiding further escalation. As noted, girls perpetrated more teasing incidents in the study overall. Girls seemed to feel safer with teasing and executing milder incidents rather than

overt conflict in their interactions. Teasing can be a tool that provides a camouflaged way for girls to access power in their relationships. In this case, she said *"Stop, you play too much* (smiles)*"* as a plea for him to disregard her first comments and answer her authentic inquiry. Though this was another playful attempt to regain control, the banter left both participants vying for power.

Name calling. This type of teasing included words or phrases used to portray a person in a derogatory way while smiling or laughing prior to, or just after, the tease. Couples in this study often engaged in name calling to exert power. Frequently, recipients responded with either hurt feelings, a strong sense of shame and vulnerability, or retaliation with an attempt to reciprocally evoke shame in the initiator.

Case Example:
(5 Teasing Incidents 2[Mild], 3[Moderate]; 3[Girl], 2[Boy])

Girl: "I don't know, you're annoying (smiling)."
Boy: (Quiet laugh) "Are you seri-? (pauses) Yeah, I kinda am."
Girl: "But I guess that's okay. Kind of. Not really."

In this incident, a girl wanted to tell her partner that he was 'annoying' to her. It was clear in the interview that the boy felt hurt and embarrassed, as evidenced by facial expressions of embarrassment and quickly lowering his eyes to the table. To slow or halt the discussion, he chose to agree with her. His posture shrank, and he looked ashamed as both partners conceded to the idea that she was sufficient and he was deficient. This interaction was an example of how powerful language can be for teens during teasing. They may minimize hurtful comments outwardly that would be considered inappropriate for most adults. It appeared to be a painful moment as both partners exhibited difficulty in separating "annoying" behavior from the value of the individual as a whole. Consequently, the boy internalized the message that there was something 'broken' about him, rather than discussing a possible adjustment in his behavior.

Acting 'macho'. Several interactions evidenced both adaptive and maladaptive machismo, or male privilege. In the following interaction, a boy jockeyed for power by attempting to control decision-making and insisting on submissiveness from his partner (maladaptive):

Case Examples:
(14 Teasing Incidents 4[Mild], 9[Moderate] 1[Severe]; 3[Girl], 11[Boy])

Girl: (Boy tries to mark her face with a pen) "No."
Boy: "Just one time."
Girl: "No!"
Boy: "One time and I swear I'll-"
Girl: "No!"
Boy: "And I swear I'll be done."
Girl: "That's not even your pen."
Boy: "And I'm going to keep bothering you the whole time."
Girl: "That's not even your pen."
Boy: "And I'm going to keep bothering you with it."
Girl: "Stop it, we have to discuss- the thing."
Boy: "First you gotta take this pen. Just a little bit of it…"
Girl: "No (takes pen away from him)."
Boy: "Then do it yourself."
Girl: (Moves pen over her own face)
Boy: "Like, what was that?" (Makes fun of moving the pen over her face, makes a hand movement)

In this example the boy asserted dominance and assumed the decision-making role. During the interaction, the girl tried to distract him by teasing *"it's not even your pen."* She used facial expressions of submission and charm; she enlarged her eyes as a young child might, batted her eyelashes, puckered her lips, and looked at the floor yieldingly. These were attempts to defuse his insistence on doing something that she did not want. However, his request for her deference increased as he physically tried to mark her face with the pen:

Girl: (Boy brushes against her lip) "Oh, okay…"
Boy: "I didn't mean to hit your lip; I just meant your nose…"
Girl: (Makes sniffling noises)
Boy: "I flipped it up, now I got to flick it down."
Girl: "No! (Tries to hit his hand away)
Boy: "Alright, alright, calm down (makes a movement like puffing up his chest)

I'm down."
Girl: (Crouches down because she thinks he is going to tickle her)
Boy: "Hey, you wipe that smile off your face. I'm kidding."
Girl: (Laughs)
Boy: "See, I can't be an ass to you."

The boy continued to cross boundaries and ignore the requests of his partner to stop what he was doing. He used posturing of his body to seem stronger and more prominent to gain control of the situation. Further, he ends the interaction with manipulation in that he denies his capacity to "*be an ass"*, thereby creating confusion about how to interpret his joking.

Adaptive machismo was also present during some of the interactions. Male participants expressed a sense of accountability, a desire to be recognized as providers, and showed concern for providing financial stability within the relationship. For example, in the following case, a boy articulated his struggle with wanting to pay for things they needed while also acknowledging that his partner should be able to pay for something if she wanted to.

Case Example:
(9 Teasing Incidents 4[Mild], 5[Moderate]; 4[Girl], 5[Boy])
Boy: "I'm jus' saying it makes you feel weird. I mean there is nothing wrong with it. You can do it. It jus' makes me feel weird. She shouldn't be buying me this. (Looks at her, smiling) Ohmygod. Shut up, don't say anything!"
Girl: (Laughs) "Whatever."

Playful complaints. Many teasing incidents evidenced relationship concerns or complaints and were motivated by attempts to repair the relationship. The couples that engaged in this method of teasing used joking-type quips that criticized the communication skills of a partner, or bid for improved honesty or loyalty. The following example regards a perceived lack of communication.

Case Example:
(9 Teasing Incidents 2[Mild], 6[Moderate], 1[Severe]; 7[Girl], 2[Boy])
Boy: "…You don't like to talk to me, you like to hang up all the time."
Girl: "Why should I? You don't listen to me."
Boy: "You always talk, you run your mouth too much (smiles)."

Girl: "You do too!"
Boy: "No, I don't."

Participants complained that it was hard when their partner didn't say what they really meant. One boy expressed that teasing was a confusing way to communicate, "*You're a teaser, so I mean, it's alright,"* he laughed, *"you say stuff you don't really mean."* As he spoke these words with laughter, he simultaneously shook his head in disagreement, sending a mixed message to the recipient.

Others playfully complained about a lack of honesty in the relationship. They relayed anger and betrayal they experienced from dishonesty by attempting to diffuse the tension in a joking manner.

Case Example:
(9 Teasing Incidents 8[Mild], 1[Moderate]; 0[Girl], 9[Boy])

Boy: "Okay, okay, looks like you are lying right here (smiling)."
Girl: "I'm not."
Boy: "I don't like being lied to…you know. (Makes an animated hand motion for her to continue talking) Keep going. You have to tell me something. Keep going. You can be honest here…(laughs) tell me whatever you feel…I dunno."

During another interview, a girl spoke out about the dishonesty of her partner, *"Mmhmm. You lied to me…you used to go party, and you wouldn't tell me…Ohhh! Like I didn't know* (slaps him on the chest). *Can I slap you for that right now?* (starts wrestling/hugging him) *So, explain to me what did I do that you didn't like?"* These examples point out that their partner had lied to them and still offered playful physical touch and dialogue to encourage their partner to be more honest with them.

Finally, youth used playful teasing to express that they felt insecure or jealous about other potential relationship partners. Several couples demonstrated their desire for increased loyalty masked with a waggish tone:

Case Example:

(6 Teasing Incidents 6[Mild]; 4[Girl], 2[Boy])

Girl: "Oh, you're being jealous…"

Boy: "Oh well, you know, it's because you make some comments about him and I was just curious about how you said he was 'hot,' and all this other stuff."

Girl: "I was just messing with you."

Teasing Consequences

Hurt feelings. When adolescents used teasing in their interactions, one of the resulting consequences was hurt feelings. It was difficult for recipients to experience their partner calling them names, engaging in a power struggle, and hearing the complaints put forth. For some, there was a sense of despair that accompanied a realization that 'this isn't working out,' particularly when their partner was minimizing what they were saying by teasing about it. Though operationalized in a joking manner, this type of consequence demonstrated wounding:

Case Example:
(11 Teasing Incidents 5[Mild], 6[Moderate]; 9[Girl], 2[Boy])

Boy: "I think it's funny how people come into this room for this video and they-"

Both: " -end up breaking up" (spoken simultaneously, laughs)

Boy: "I know. They leave."

Girl: (Sad expression) "Looks like it will be our turn."

Power struggle. A power struggle between partners was another consequence of teasing. Participants used gestures, expressions, posturing, or physical touches that implied one's holding of personal power, demonstrated by resistance during the disagreement.

Case Example:
(8 Teasing Incidents 3[Mild], 5[Moderate]; 5[Girl], 3[Boy])

Boy: "It's different."

Girl: "No."

Boy: "It's different."

Girl: "No, (playfully slaps his leg) let me talk! It's not different!"

Boy: "Then what is it?"

Girl: "Oh, I- (talking over one another)"

Boy: "I'm trying to talk, so shut up!

Girl: "You shut up."

Evoking or feeling shame. Some participants used teasing in a manner that evoked shame. In these circumstances, words or phrases were aimed to position their partner in a submissive state, inducing a sense of susceptibility and compliance. In some cases, partners accepted what was said about them without contestation; in others, retaliatory remarks were issued.

Case Example:
(9 Teasing Incidents 2[Mild], 6[Moderate], 1[Severe]; 7[Girl], 2[Boy])

Girl: "I wouldn't even have this attitude if you wouldn't try to- like be so mean and shit. If you would change your attitude and stop thinking so wrong of me, I wouldn't have this attitude towards you. And if you wouldn't be so stupid and finally grow up- and be (stumbles on words and laughs) grown up and act grown- instead of acting like a toddler then you would be okay."
Boy: "You just made that up, you can't even say it."
Girl: "Hmmmmm. You have issues."
Boy: "I know I do. I do not actually."
Girl: "Yes, you do actually (smiles)."
Boy: "Ummmm, no I don't. You have issues."

Discussion

In this study, we developed a grounded theory of teasing among Mexican American dating couples during observed discussions of conflictual relationship topics. We contribute to the existing literature by identifying youth's motivations for teasing, types of teasing, and the consequences of teasing in real time. Teasing episodes seemed motivated by youth's attempts to exert power during the interaction and/or to repair the relationship. Teasing types included play fighting and banter, name calling, acting 'macho', and playful relationship complaints. Most teasing was mild to moderately severe in nature, although various types of teasing resulted in similar outcomes: hurt feelings, power struggles, and feelings of shame. These nuanced findings contribute to our understanding of how teasing is used by Mexican American adolescents including in ways that may reflect emotional dating violence.

By examining our findings through a feminist developmental lens, we can contextualize teasing with attention to the structural inequality experienced by women and girls in both the United States and Mexico (Eaton & Stephens, 2018). Of importance, while our findings are influenced by and interpreted using existing literature which highlights the continued salience of traditional gender roles in Hispanic culture (Killoren et al., 2022; Lilly et al, 2023; Llamas et al., 2020; Malhotra et al., 2015), we are also careful to note that it is often difficult to distinguish endorsement of these cross-culturally as hypermasculinity also shapes American gender beliefs (Eaton & Stephens. 2018). Girls may use teasing as a way to gain a sense of power while navigating not only larger oppressive structures that disadvantage girls and women, but also to navigate the traditional dynamics of their partnered relationship which denies them equal relational power (Giordano et al., 2021; author citation, 2019). That girls initiated teasing incidents to a greater degree in the present study may help to eludicate some of the situational contexts by which females resist male power. That is, they may attempt to equalize the 'playing field', while also experiencing pressure to keep their partners happy, reflective of instilled cultural values (i.e., *marianismo*; Castillo et al., 2010). This resistance to traditional power dynamics is also evidenced through acculturation processes, as Mexican American females acculturate to more egalitarian norms at a faster pace compared to boys (Updegraff et al., 2012). This dissonance may result in female-initiated teasing episodes. Similar to items on the CADRI's "Escalating Strategies subscale," negative forms of teasing (e.g., name calling, saying things to make someone angry in teasing manner) may escalate in situations outside the lab to physical violence perpetration that include higher rates perpetrated by girls (Messinger et al., 2011). Although these processes appeared linear in our observations (i.e., teasing preceded the

outcomes discussed), future research should also explore how hurt feelings, shame, and power struggles may incite further teasing and argument (i.e., a circular pathway).

Much research has pointed to the importance of communication skills for youth involved in dating relationships. These first relationships are a forum through which to practice communicating wants and needs, and our study mirrors prior research that investigates how conflict commonly regarded a perceived lack of loyalty (i.e., cheating) and honesty of dating partners (Giordano et al., 2021; author citation, 2014). Whereby adults may use teasing in an attempt to "cool down" from emotionally aroused states of anger or irritation, adolescents' use of teasing in these contexts seemed to reflect indirect bids for new behaviors as well as the overt realization that improved communication was required to effectively resolve conflict. Messinger and colleagues (2011) also found that young dating couples who experienced violence in their relationships were more likely than those who did not, to employ a wide range of conflict strategies. Our study identified that in a majority of the observations, youth used teasing to exert power to control and/or in an attempt to correct and repair the relationship. Further, the most common outcomes of teasing were negative, despite some literature finding that teasing in close interpersonal contexts can contribute to bonding and reflect a special kind of intimacy (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008; Campbell et al., 2008). The kinds of demeaning comments evidenced in this study may negatively impact youth's mental health and exasperbate existing relationship challenges; shame, in particular, can contribute to poor self-evaluation (Sullivan et al., 2020). Although positive outcomes of teasing were only minimally observed in the present study, future research should continue to explore this topic with attention to additional contexts (e.g., non-conflictual discussions) and by asking youth about their own perceptions of teasing incidents.

Implications

Many youth in our study overtly stated that they desired improved communication in their relationship. Given that our study participants were aged 15-17 and already had to confront complex relational topics and conflict dynamics in their relationships, socioemotional learning programs inclusive of communication should be targeted to elementary and middle-school aged youth as well as via teen dating violence preventative interventions to middle- and high-school aged youth. These programs should include teasing, and using similar vignettes to this study, reflect accurate portrayals of how teasing is utilized to gain power in a relationship as well as to broach difficult topics. Adolescents should explore how teasing often results in shame and hurt feelings and practice alternative positive conflict resolution strategies. For example, adolescents can practice de-escalation during times of relational conflict with the use of verbal reasoning responses such as "I discussed the issue calmly," or "I told him how upset I was feeling," or "I agreed that he was partly right" (Messinger, 2011). Young couples need culturally informed support to find means to communicate in healthy ways.

Including discussion of gendered power dynamics may be important to efficacious programming for Mexican origin youths (Malhotra et al., 2015). Traditional gender norms are commonly transmitted to youth via the family (Killoren et al., 2022; Lilly et al., 2023), although it is important to note that these may be adopted to various degrees by individual youth (Llamas et al., 2020), may be resisted (Shaffer et al., 2018), and may reflect adaptive and/or maladaptive characteristics. For example, measurement of *marianismo* includes subscales that independently measure subordination to others (e.g., "not speak out against men") and self-silencing (e.g., "not express her needs to her partner"), both relevant to the present study, alongside characteristics that have been found to be beneficial to girls such as being a family pillar (e.g., "a source of strength for her family"; Castillo et al., 2010; Piña-Watson et al., 2016). Similarly, adaptive

forms of *machismo* have been associated with emotional connectedness, perspective-taking, and constructive forms of communication (Arciniega et al., 2008; Pardo et al., 2012; author citation, 2016). Capitalizing on cultural strengths can offer a holistic framework for staging conversations with Mexican origin youth about dating health, and also serve to promote inclusivity for queer youth (Patrón, 2021).

Limitations

This study responds to the need for research pertaining to the complexity of conflict with specific attention to the developmental and cultural contexts of teasing. However, future research should assess how often conflict occurs and how specific types of teasing may contribute to the escalation of conflict that leads to physical violence. Adolescents' use of teasing in this study often reflected what may be considered emotional or threatening violence (i.e., name calling, attempts to exert power) as well as a lack of communication skills (i.e., difficulty addressing conflict). Further, this study is not necessarily generalizable to other youth populations as we sampled a specific demographic living in a Southwest border state. It is also not generalizable to queer youths since this study focused on the experiences of heterosexual dating couples. We encourage further research on the ways in which queer and gender non-conforming Mexican origin youth navigate conflict and may utilize teasing in their dating relationships, particularly given that these youths often face pressures to engage in heterosexual relationships and to conform to sex-typed gender roles (Patrón, 2021). We recommend using both qualitative (e.g., focus groups, Letendre & Williams, 2014) and quantitative (large-scale surveys) methods in future studies in order to develop a deeper understanding of the contexts in which teasing occurs from the perspective of youth themselves, as well as how pervasive this issue and its consequences are experienced across diverse youth.

Conclusion

Observations of adolescent couples yielded rich data concerning their experiences with conflict. Teasing was a common communication tactic, and given that hurt feelings and shame resulted, we recommend that programming be inclusive of communication as a central component of both socioemotional and dating violence prevention efforts. Our findings have yielded a number of fruitful areas for research, including the extent to which teasing is developmentally and culturally normative for Mexican American dating couples and inclusive of additional cultural considerations (e.g. acculturation, shifting gender roles). Given that a sense of humor is generally considered positive for mental and relational health, youth may be taught how to utilize teasing to benefit rather than harm their relationship quality.

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Figure 1

Adolescent Teasing: Motivations, Types, and Consequences