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Received: 13 February 2024 | Revised: 24 June 2024 | Accepted: 26 June 2024

DOI: 10.1111/pere.12567

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Personal RELATIONSHIPS WILEY

Is teasing meant to be mean or nice? Retrospective reports of adolescent social experiences and teasing attitudes

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Abstract

Peer teasing has contradictory conceptualizations, including teasing that is playful, and teasing that is akin to bullying. In addition to individuals potentially having different conceptualizations of teasing, and despite the inherently social nature of teasing, little is known about the social correlates of teasing attitudes. The current study aimed to examine multifaceted teasing attitudes (i.e., aggressive, affectionate, or romantic interest teasing), and to assess how past social experiences (victimization, popularity, social satisfaction/self-concept) relate to teasing attitudes. Young adults ($N = 437$, 17–25 years old, 65% female) reported on multifaceted teasing attitudes on a Teasing Attitudes Scale developed for this study. Participants also reported retrospectively on adolescent social experiences. Findings validated the Teasing Attitudes Scale, showing that young adults have distinct attitudes toward teasing as aggressive, affectionate, and indicating romantic interest. Participants who reported victimization by bullying, lower popularity (girls only), social

Statement of Relevance: Differing attitudes toward and conceptualizations of the same phenomenon can lead to interpersonal and relationship challenges. If one believes teasing to be fun and the other finds teasing mean, there will likely be issues when one teases the other. This study advances our understanding of peer teasing by validating the Teasing Attitudes Scale; a scale assessing multidimensionality of teasing. Further, the study helps us elucidate prior relevant factors that may underpin these attitudes.

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satisfaction, and social self-concept were more likely to view teasing as aggressive. Participants who had been victims of non-bullying aggression viewed teasing as affectionate, and those with high social satisfaction and self-concept viewed teasing as for romantic interest purposes. Implications for understanding the complexities of teasing and its associations with individual attitudes and adolescent social experiences will be discussed.

KEYWORDS

bullying, popularity, social experiences, teasing, victimization, young adults

1 | INTRODUCTION

Though it is often used in common vernacular, teasing is a complex concept with no simple definition. Teasing is sometimes discussed and measured as a form of interpersonal violence, with the target of teasing feeling belittled and distressed (Gregg et al., 2016; Magin et al., 2008). Teasing is often used interchangeably with bullying, or considered as a specific form of bullying (Espelage et al., 2008; Gropper & Froschl, 2000; Magin et al., 2008). Yet, others argue that teasing is distinct from bullying (Keltner et al., 2001). Some view teasing as playful banter that is prosocial, affiliative, and can enhance closeness and cohesion in relationships (Campos et al., 2007; Dynel, 2008; Fine & De Soucey, 2005; Gorman & Jordan, 2015; Smith et al., 2010). Teasing can also be used for bonding and flirting with potential romantic partners, and is related to positive outcomes within romantic partnerships (Beck et al., 2007; Keltner et al., 1998). To further add to this complexity, others suggest there may be both harmful and playful (or negative and positive) forms of teasing (Gregg et al., 2016; Haugh, 2017; Kowalski, 2000; Mills, 2018; Schaefer & Blodgett Salafia, 2014). In fact, it has been suggested that the interpretation of teasing as positive or negative depends on whether one is the perpetrator or the target of the behavior, respectively (Kowalski, 2000).

Complicating efforts to interpret teasing is the role of ambiguity (Mills & Carwile, 2009; Shapiro et al., 1991). In addition to components of aggression and play, teasing involves ambiguity that serves to directly contrast the aggressive and humorous qualities of the interaction (Shapiro et al., 1991). Given such ambiguity, it is unsurprising that teachers report struggling to differentiate between teasing and bullying, which likely has negative consequences for children who are experiencing teasing and/or bullying and may not be receiving the support they need (Harwood & Copfer, 2015). Further complicating youth's ability to correctly interpret teasing is the context in which the teasing takes place. Compared to face-to-face teasing, teasing that occurs online is devoid of physical and social cues that youth use to interpret the events as playful or harmful (Baruch, 2005), meaning that online teasing may be more likely to be misinterpreted (Steer et al., 2020). Taken together, this highlights the complexity of teasing as a construct and behavior, and suggests that individuals may have differing conceptualizations of what teasing means and why it occurs. The current study sought to shed light on the construct of teasing by examining whether young adults hold distinct attitudes toward distinct purposes of teasing. Specifically, we considered aggressive teasing (i.e., teasing done to embarrass or hurt the target's feelings, causing interpersonal harm; Scambler et al., 1998; Shapiro et al., 1991), affectionate teasing (i.e., teasing that serves to increase interpersonal closeness and strengthen interpersonal bonds; Eder et al., 1995; Keltner et al., 1998; Mills & Babrow, 2003), and romantic interest teasing (i.e., teasing to flirt with a romantic interest; Beck et al., 2007; Keltner et al., 1998). Second, we assessed how past social experiences (using retrospective recounting) relate to these differential teasing attitudes. We considered a range of social variables, representing both negative and positive experiences: victimization by bullying, victimization by non-bullying aggression, social satisfaction, social self-concept, and self-perceived popularity.

1.1 | Measuring teasing

Despite the complexity and nuance in the meaning of teasing, measurement of teasing is often somewhat simplistic. Common teasing scales (e.g., Teasing Questionnaire; Child-Adolescent Teasing Scale; Perceptions of Teasing Scale; Physical Appearance Related Teasing Scale) assess teasing frequency (Gregg et al., 2016; Jensen & Steele, 2010; Storch et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 1991, 1995; Vessey et al., 2008). Subscales that assess distinct content areas (e.g., physical appearance, competency, family background) are often included (Jensen & Steele, 2010; Schaefer & Blodgett Salafia, 2014; Thompson et al., 1991, 1995; Vessey et al., 2008). Yet, these commonly used scales only address the content of the tease and do not account for or assess the ambiguity in teasing or the notion that teasing can be both harmful and playful. Much of the literature focusing more directly on complexity in teasing interactions uses different methodologies, including experimental methods (Keltner et al., 1998), or qualitative methods such as interviews (Mills, 2018), focus groups (Horowitz et al., 2004), or narrative accounts (Kowalski, 2000).

In a notable exception, Beck et al. (2007) asked college students to report on the impetus for teasing (as perpetrator and target) from 12 reasons (e.g., to bond, to flirt, to annoy), as well as the impact of teasing (from very negative to very positive). However, the 12 teasing reasons were each examined separately and not considered as a scale or subscales. They were also not considered in conjunction with teasing impact. Sherer and Clark (2009) similarly asked middle and high school students to identify why they teased (and were teased) with eight response options (e.g., to make that person laugh), rated as yes or no. Responses were collapsed into four categories: fun, display, annoy, and positive affect. Once again, however, measurement properties were not examined. Thus, there appears to be a gap in the research regarding the measurement of teasing, particularly when considering the complexity inherent in teasing behavior.

DiCioccio (2001, 2008) created the Teasing Communication Scale to explicitly assess variations in teasing communication; specifically, whether individuals tended to demonstrate aggressive or affectionate teasing. This scale was validated, showing stable factor structure, as well as reliability and temporal stability (DiCioccio, 2008). In the current study, we used DiCioccio's Teasing Communication Scale as a basis for our measure of teasing attitudes, making modifications to more broadly assess individuals' perceptions of teasing; why do people tease, rather than why do *you* tease. We also added items assessing teasing based on romantic interest, given the important role of teasing in flirting and romantic relationships (Beck et al., 2007; Keltner et al., 1998). Creating and validating this measure of teasing attitudes is critical to our ability to study and understand how individuals conceptualize teasing.

1.2 | Individual differences in teasing attitudes

In addition to the conceptualization of teasing being complex and multifaceted, we know that individuals perceive and respond to teasing differently (Haugh, 2017; Kowalski, 2004), which corresponds to different interpersonal and psychological consequences. As such, in addition to understanding *how* teasing is conceptualized, it is important to know *why* teasing is conceptualized differently. That is, why does one person see teasing as harmful and belittling, and another person views teasing as affiliative and an opportunity for bonding?

Social information processing (SIP) theory outlines the pattern of cognitive processes that can occur in response to a social situation (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge & Crick, 1990). It includes a focus on how individuals perceive the social behavior of others and how they make attributions and inferences about those behaviors. This may be particularly critical when considering social behaviors that are potentially ambiguous, such as teasing. Additionally critical to SIP theory is the notion that prior experiences contribute to cognitive schemas, which then impact future processing and behavior (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge & Crick, 1990). In line with SIP theory, we consider this feedback loop through which prior social experiences might be used to encode and interpret current social interactions.

Social experiences, particularly considering whether interactions with peers have been negative (e.g., bullying) or positive (e.g., having strong social relationships; high social self-concept), contribute to and interact with cognitive processes, such as rejection sensitivity and fear of negative evaluation (Levy et al., 2001). Those high in rejection sensitivity, fear of negative evaluation, and social anxiety interpret ambiguous situations more negatively, and respond more negatively to being teased (Kowalski, 2004; Nowakowski & Antony, 2013; Zlomke et al., 2016). This may also be the case for those with a difficult temperament, who may struggle to navigate relationships—particularly complex and nuanced relationships (Rudasill et al., 2010). Thus, especially in ambiguous situations, prior social experiences and temperament factors likely shape these cognitive processes, and thus play a role in how individuals perceive the motives of others.

On one hand, an individual who was the frequent target of bullying and aggression might expect future mistreatment from peers (Boulton et al., 2008), and come to view teasing as aggressive and harmful. Nowakowski and Antony (2013) found that individuals high in social anxiety interpreted teasing as more malicious and mean-spirited than those low in social anxiety, and reported more negative affect as a result of teasing. On the other hand, an individual with positive social experiences, high social satisfaction, and high-quality friendships might be more likely to view teasing as fun and playful. Gorman and Jordan (2015) found that teasing within a close relationship was viewed as more positive and better intentioned than teasing in a less close relationship. Similarly, Douglass et al. (2016) found that, though there was ethnic-racial teasing among close friends, 'blatantly' negative messages were dismissed by the targets as being innocuous, because of the positive nature of the friendship. Indeed, there might be developmental links between past negative experiences with peers and future negative attitudes toward peers, perhaps mediated by cognitive biases (e.g., hostile attribution bias; Beck et al., 2007; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Perry et al., 2001). In bullying research, victimization can create a victim schema (Perry et al., 2001); a cognitive frame through which other experiences are interpreted (Bandura, 2001). These pathways—between experiences and social cognitions—may be particularly salient when considering teasing that is ambiguous, where more sophisticated cognitive and social skills might be necessary to parse the meaning of teasing (Mills, 2018).

When considering popularity, findings are less clear. Popularity is associated with both positive and negative social outcomes (Dijkstra et al., 2009; Henneberger et al., 2013; Kornienko & Santos, 2013). Shapiro et al. (1991) found that popular children were more likely to be the perpetrators and unpopular children the targets of (mostly aggressive) teasing. As perpetrators view teasing as more positive and targets view teasing as negative (Kowalski, 2000), perhaps higher popularity is associated with positive and playful teasing. Supporting this notion, prosocial teasing is directed more frequently at high status compared to low status peers (in a study of university fraternity members; Keltner et al., 1998). However, Keltner et al. (1998) also found that low status fraternity members teased in more prosocial ways (particularly when targeting high status individuals), whereas high status members teased in less prosocial ways (regardless of target). Thus, links between popularity and teasing attitudes are unclear. It is also possible that popularity may be linked to romantic teasing. Popularity is related to dating in adolescence (Houser et al., 2015; Kreager et al., 2016), and teasing often occurs for the purposes of flirting and to indicate romantic interest (Beck et al., 2007; Sherer & Clark, 2009). Thus, perhaps those high in popularity view teasing as being used for romantic purposes, given their prior experiences using teasing to flirt and gain attention from potential romantic partners.

1.3 | Gender differences

Past research has found gender differences in teasing, such that women find teasing more negative and aversive than men (Keltner et al., 1998; Kowalski, 2000). Further, there are well-documented gender differences in victimization, popularity, and the links between them. For instance, girls use more relational than physical aggression (though boys and girls use relational aggression at similar rates; Card et al., 2008; Casper et al., 2020). Relational aggression may be somewhat similar to aggressive teasing, given that it is often verbal, and sometimes involves ambiguity and covertness (e.g., spreading rumors; backhanded compliments). Further, recent work highlighting aggression between high status youth has suggested the possibility that this type of aggression may be more salient for adolescent females than males (Andrews, 2023; Closson et al., 2017; Dyches & Mayeux, 2012). Intrasexual competition that occurs between (particularly attractive) females may motivate aggression between them (Leenaars et al., 2008). As such, it has been suggested that high status females target sexual rivals to reduce those rivals' ability to compete for mates (Vaillancourt & Krems, 2018). Again, this type of competition may emerge as aggressive forms of teasing.

1.4 | Current study

The first aim of this study was to validate a new measure of teasing attitudes, specifically to determine whether individuals differentially conceptualized teasing as aggressive, affectionate, or based on romantic interest. The second aim was to identify whether teasing attitudes were related to past social experiences. We included both negative (victimization by bullying and non-bullying aggression) and positive (social satisfaction, social self-concept, popularity) indicators of prior social experiences. We expected that individuals who struggled socially in their adolescence (were targets of bullying and aggression) would consider teasing to be aggressive (Hypothesis 1; H1), whereas individuals who had strong social relationships (reported high social satisfaction and social self-concept) would consider teasing to be affectionate (H2). It was unclear from extant literature whether those who reported being popular in their adolescence would view teasing as aggressive or affectionate, but we also considered that these youth might view teasing as used to demonstrate romantic interest. We also explored gender differences in teasing attitudes, given the gender differences found in teasing experiences (Keltner et al., 1998; Kowalski, 2000; Land, 2003). Though hypotheses are somewhat limited due to scarce prior literature, we expected that girls who experienced non-bullying victimization (H3) and reported high popularity (H4) might be particularly likely to conceive of teasing as aggressive. Aims were addressed with a sample of university students (17–25 years).

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participants

Students at a university in southern Ontario, Canada participated in an online survey regarding current and past social experiences. An online survey was used to increase access and reduce barriers to participation. Participants were recruited by posting information flyers with a link to the survey physically around the university campus, as well as posting the flyer to various university social media accounts and via email in various university departments and/or via large introductory classes. Participants were also recruited through the university's participant pool. Following an initial round of data collection (approximately 3 months; January 2022), the survey was reopened to specifically target males, given low rates of male participation in the first round of data collection. In this reopening (approximately 3 months; January 2023), it was stated in the survey and via the university participant pool that we were specifically seeking non-females (though females could still participate). Inclusion criteria were that participants be between 17–25 years and a post-secondary student (full- or part-time). All participants who accessed the survey during the two openings were included; no data were excluded.

Participants ($N = 437$) were 17–25 years old ($M = 19.48$ years; 65% female). Participants self-reported their ethnic/racial background as White (75%), South Asian (7%), Black (6%), Southeast Asian (5%), Middle Eastern (5%), East Asian (3%), Latino (3%), or Indigenous (1%) (participants could select as many options as they wanted). Additionally, 18% identified as a member of a visible minority. Approximately 14% were not born in Canada, and 13% primarily spoke a language other than English at home. Most participants felt that their family's financial status was “about the same” as the average Canadian (47%), with others reporting that their family was a lot less rich (4%), less rich (18%), more rich (24%), or a lot more rich (3%).

2.2 | Procedure

Participants who accessed the online survey were asked to read a consent form and agree to participate in the survey portion of the research. The survey took approximately 30 min to complete and included measures assessing peer experiences both currently and in the past, as well as demographic information. Participants were offered a chance to enter to win one of two $100 gift cards, or to receive a .5 course credit (for participants who had signed up through the university's participant pool) at the end of the survey. The study was approved by the participating university's Research Ethics Board.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Teasing Attitudes Scale (TAS)

Participants reported their general attitudes around teasing using a 13-item teasing scale created for this study (modified from DiCioccio, 2001, 2008, which measured individual reasons for teasing; see Table S1 for a full comparison of all items). Based on preliminary analyses, two items were removed that were determined to not differentiate between subscales. The resulting measure included 11 items: four items assessing aggressive teasing (e.g., "Students tease others to hurt their feelings"), four items assessing affectionate teasing (e.g., "Students tease others to be light-hearted and playful"), and three items assessing teasing based on romantic interest (e.g., "Students tease others to show that they have a crush on them"), all measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. Based on results from a series of factor analyses (see below), items for aggressive, affectionate, and romantic interest teasing were averaged to create three subscales (αs = .89, .88, and .92, respectively).

2.3.2 | Victimization

Participants were asked to report retrospectively on how often they were the victim of bullying (aggressive behavior by someone with more power than them) and non-bullying aggression (aggressive behavior by someone with equal or less power than them) during their adolescence, following the format used by Volk et al. (2021). There were eight items for victimization experienced by a more powerful peer and eight items for victimization experienced by someone with equal or less power, with items measuring relational, overt, coercive, and cyber victimization (see DeVoe & Bauer, 2010). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 = *never* to 4 = *very often*. Items were averaged within each subscale to create scores for victimization by bullying ($\alpha = .89$) and victimization by non-bullying aggression ($\alpha = .89$).

2.3.3 | Social satisfaction

Participants reported retrospectively on how satisfied they were with their social experiences during their adolescence, using items adapted from the Loneliness and Social Dissatisfaction Questionnaire (Asher & Wheeler, 1985; as used in Ferguson & Ryan, 2019). The scale included seven items (e.g., "I had some really good friends in school"; three reverse coded items, e.g., "I was lonely at school") and was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = *not at all true* to 4 = *very true*. Items were averaged to create a total social satisfaction score ($\alpha = .82$).

2.3.4 | Social self-concept

Social self-concept was measured with three items (adapted from Lord et al., 1994; as used in Ferguson & Ryan, 2019), modified to capture social self-concept during adolescence. Items were "How good were you at making friends?" "How would you rate your social skills?" and "How good were you at developing close friendships?" rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from

0 = *not good at all* to 4 = *very good*. Items were averaged to create a total social self-concept score ($\alpha = .86$).

2.3.5 | Popularity

Self-perceived popularity was assessed by asking participants how popular they were among their classmates (Putarek & Keresteš, 2016), adapted to ask separately about self-perceived popularity during early adolescence (aged 11–13) and late adolescence (aged 14–18). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 = *not popular at all* to 4 = *very popular*, and were averaged to create a total self-perceived popularity score ($r = .47$, $p < .001$).

2.4 | Data analysis

To address the first aim to test the factor structure of the new TAS, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) using M*plus* 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017), using maximum likelihood estimation. One-, two-, and three-factor models were compared to one another. The one-factor model included all items loading on the same factor; the two-factor model included the aggressive items loading on one factor, and the affectionate and romantic interest items loading on the second factor (to represent generally positive attitudes); and the three-factor model included aggressive, affectionate, and romantic interest items loading separately on three factors. The following model fit statistics were examined in accordance with current methodological recommendations (Bandalos & Finney, 2019): the *p*-value of the χ^2 statistics, comparative fit index (CFI; values >0.90 indicate acceptable fit, values >0.95 indicate good fit), root mean square errors of approximation (RMSEA; values <0.08 indicate acceptable fit, values <0.05 indicate good fit), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; values <0.08 indicate good fit), and the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and Bayesian information criterion (BIC) with lower numbers indicating better fit.

To address the second aim—examining associations between past social experiences and teasing attitudes-a series of structural equation models were conducted in M*plus* 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). We examined several indicators of past social experiences including: (a) victimization by bullying, (b) victimization by non-bullying aggression, (c) popularity, (d) social satisfaction, and (e) social self-concept. In each model, paths were specified from the predictor to each of the three latent teasing attitude factors (aggressive, affectionate, and romantic interest). Given potential gender differences in teasing attitudes, interaction terms between predictor and gender were included in each model (note that a multigroup model could not be run as this would result in too complex of a model given the sample size). Where interactions with gender were not significant, they were removed from the final models for parsimony. Gender and ethnicity were included as covariates in all models.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Factor analysis for the TAS

Model fit statistics for the CFAs are presented in Table 1. Comparing the models based on these indicators of model fit indicated that, as expected, the three-factor model best fits the data (see

Table 1 for model comparisons and Figure 1 for factor loadings). Support for the three-factor model suggests that participants endorsed three distinct functions for teasing: aggressive teasing, affectionate teasing, and teasing to express romantic interest.

3.2 | Descriptive statistics

To assess the possibility of bias based on common method variance, we conducted a Harman's single-factor test with all items included. Results indicated that 23.06% of total variance was accounted for by a single factor, which is well below the recommended threshold of 50%. All study variables had relatively normal distributions (skewness <2; kurtosis <7; see Table 2 for descriptive statistics for all variables). For descriptive statistics, items were averaged to create subscales for aggressive, affectionate, and romantic interest teasing. *T*-tests were performed to assess gender differences. Results indicated that females endorsed aggressive teasing attitudes more than males, and males endorsed affectionate and romantic interest teasing attitudes more than females. Males also reported higher retrospective popularity than females. No other gender differences were found. Bivariate correlations indicated that affectionate teasing was negatively related to aggressive teasing and positively related to romantic interest teasing (see Table 3). Aggressive teasing was associated with more victimization by bullying and lower popularity

TABLE 1 Fit statistics for one-, two-, and three-factor models of teasing attitudes.

	χ^2 (*df*)	*p*	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR	AIC	BIC
One-factor model	2018.61 (44)	<.001	.34	.33	.30	12790.42	12923.67
Two-factor model	483.22 (43)	<.001	.85	.16	.08	11257.03	11394.32
Three-factor model	100.25 (41)	<.001	.98	.06	.03	10878.07	11023.43

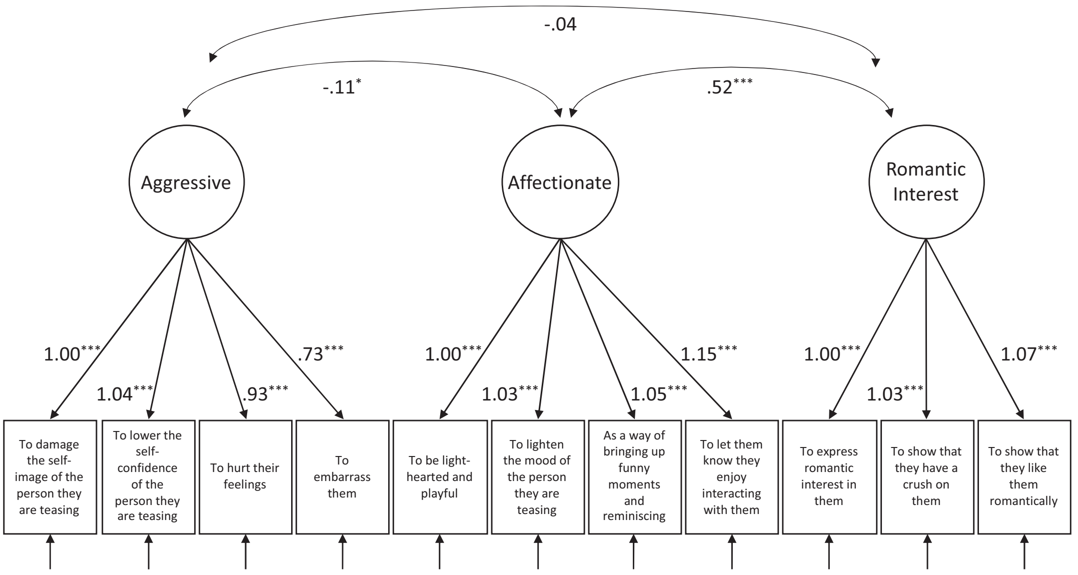
-.04
-.11*
.52***
Aggressive
Affectionate
Romantic Interest
1.00***
1.04***
.93***
.73***
1.00***
1.03***
1.05***
1.15***
1.00***
1.03***
1.07***
To damage the self-image of the person they are teasing
To lower the self-confidence of the person they are teasing
To hurt their feelings
To embarrass them
To be light-hearted and playful
To lighten the mood of the person they are teasing
As a way of bringing up funny moments and reminiscing
To let them know they enjoy interacting with them
To express romantic interest in them
To show that they have a crush on them
To show that they like them romantically

FIGURE 1 Three-factor model of teasing attitudes.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics.

	Total			Females		Males	
	M	SD	Min-max	*M*	SD	*M*	SD
Aggressive Teasing	2.37	.95	.00–4.00	2.45**	.94	2.20**	.94
Affectionate Teasing	2.26	.88	.00–4.00	2.11***	.93	2.57***	.74
Romantic Interest Teasing	2.16	1.00	.00–4.00	1.98***	1.02	2.54***	.80
Victimization by Bullying	1.00	.82	.00–4.00	.98	.83	1.00	.83
Victimization by Non-Bullying Aggression	.72	.74	.00–4.00	.72	.73	.65	.77
Popularity	2.05	.91	.00–4.00	1.93***	.92	2.30***	.85
Social Satisfaction	2.51	.93	.00–4.00	2.49	.95	2.57	.86
Social Self-Concept	2.49	.94	.00–4.00	2.47	.95	2.53	.91

**Means within the same row differ significantly at $p < .01$.

***Means within the same row differ significantly at $p < .001$.

TABLE 3 Correlations between study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Aggressive Teasing	–							
2. Affectionate Teasing	−.16**	–						
3. Romantic Interest Teasing	−.04	.63***	–					
4. Victimization by Bullying	.12*	.04	.01	–				
5. Victimization by Non-Bullying Aggression	.08	.07	.02	.73***	–			
6. Popularity	−.14**	.08	.15**	−.08	−.07	–		
7. Social Satisfaction	−.12*	.14**	.10*	−.12*	−.14**	.26***	–	
8. Social Self-Concept	−.04	.06	.05	−.09	−.10*	.33***	.70***	–

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

and social satisfaction. Affectionate and romantic interest teasing were related to higher social satisfaction and popularity (romantic interest only). The two forms of victimization were positively related, and both were negatively correlated with social satisfaction and social self-concept (victimization by non-bullying aggression only). Finally, popularity, social satisfaction, and social self-concept were all positively related to one another.

3.3 | Predicting individual variation in teasing attitudes based on past experiences

Results indicated that victimization by bullying was positively related to aggressive teasing attitudes ($p = .02$), but not related to affectionate or romantic interest teasing attitudes ($ps > .32$) (see Table 4 for all results). In contrast, victimization by non-bullying aggression was positively related to affectionate attitudes ($p = .04$), but not aggressive or romantic interest attitudes

TABLE 4 Results for models with each predictor variable.

	Aggressive ***b* (*β*)**	**Affectionate** ***b* (*β*)**	**Romantic interest** ***b* (*β*)**	**Aggressive** **R^2**	**Affectionate** **R^2**	**Romantic interest** **R^2**
Model A: Victimization by bullying	.14* (.12)	.05 (.05)	.02 (.02)	.04	.06	.08
Model B: Victimization by non-bullying aggression	.12 (.09)	.12* (.11)	.06 (.05)	.03	.07	.08
Model C: Popularity	−.25*** (−.21)	.06 (.06)	.08 (.08)	.27	.14	.09
Gender	−.90** (−.39)	.67** (.36)	.60* (.30)			
Popularity X Gender Interaction	.32** (.34)	−.12 (−.16)	−.03 (−.03)			
Model D: Social satisfaction	−.23** (−.17)	.08 (.07)	.16* (.13)	.05	.06	.09
Model E: Social self-concept	−.13** (−.18)	.01 (.02)	.08* (.11)	.05	.06	.09

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

($ps > .10$). Thus, those who had been bullied in their youth viewed teasing as aggressive, whereas those who had been victimized by peers of equal or less power than themselves viewed teasing as affectionate.

As mentioned above, we tested for gender moderation but the interaction terms were non-significant for all models except for one: the model for popularity. We probed this interaction by examining the model separately for males and females. We found that popularity was negatively related to aggressive teasing attitudes for females ($b = -.25$, $p < .001$) but not significant for males ($b = .07$, $p = .52$). No other significant associations were found between popularity and teasing attitudes. Finally, both social satisfaction and social self-concept were negatively related to aggressive teasing attitudes ($ps < .001$) and positively related to romantic interest teasing attitudes ($ps < .03$). That is, those who reported being satisfied with their social experiences in their youth and indicated that they had strong social skills viewed teasing as less based on aggressive motives and more based on romantic interest.

4 | DISCUSSION

A common theme across studies of peer teasing is the complexity of this interaction and the need for more clarity in this construct. Toward that end, the current study sought to address a key measurement gap in the field by validating a measure of teasing attitudes (modified from DiCioccio, 2001, 2008). Guided by social information processing theory (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Dodge & Crick, 1990), we examined how prior social experiences may be related to teasing attitudes. The results of the study highlight the multifaceted nature of teasing, with interpretations related to individuals' prior social experiences and social cognitions. From the lens of emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000, 2007), findings point to the potentially positive role of teasing for romantic interest purposes, particularly considering this developmental stage. We will discuss further implications of this study, as well as the need for more research in workplace and other social settings.

4.1 | Teasing attitudes and prior social experiences

Our findings showed that young adults have distinct attitudes toward teasing as being conceptualized three ways: playful (affectionate), harmful (aggressive), and as an indication of romantic interest. This array of teasing attitudes reflects the paradoxical nature of teasing along a continuum from positive to negative. That is, teasing can function to increase interpersonal closeness or to cause interpersonal harm. Other studies have found similar teasing functions using different methodologies (Beck et al., 2007; DiCioccio, 2001, 2008; Keltner et al., 1998; Sherer & Clark, 2009). Yet, the field lacked a comprehensive measure to assess these paradoxical functions. Accordingly, a principal contribution of this study was the creation and validation of our measure: the *Teasing Attitudes Scale*. Modified from an existing measure of teasing as a communication style (DiCioccio, 2001, 2008), the current measure assesses distinct attitudes toward why teasing might occur. Valid and reliable measures that capture the complexity of peer teasing are essential to the field, with implications for research, practice, and policy.

The fact that individuals differed in their conceptualizations of teasing suggests a need to understand *why* individuals perceive teasing differently, as these perceptions likely influence their engagement in and responses to teasing. Misunderstandings could arise when one person teases affectionately while the recipient perceives it as aggressive (Bosacki et al., 2012; Buglass et al., 2021), or vice versa. Accordingly, we examined several predictors of teasing attitudes (though note that these were assessed retrospectively and measured concurrently) and found that past experiences with victimization were linked to teasing attitudes. Individuals who reported being bullied interpreted teasing as more aggressive, perhaps due to the negative connotations from their past experiences (Boulton et al., 2008). That is, if someone has a history of being treated negatively by peers, they might come to interpret ambiguous teasing interactions similarly negatively.

As expected, low social self-concept and social satisfaction were also related to perceiving teasing as aggressive. Though the current study used retrospective reports, we expected that there might be developmental pathways through which negative peer experiences create cognitive schemas which prompt individuals to interpret ambiguous social experiences as negative (Beck et al., 2007; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Nowakowski & Antony, 2013). That is, having had prior experiences with peers that were not particularly positive or fulfilling might then link to expecting negative experiences in the future, including (for instance) attributing hostile intent to teasing interactions. Our finding that one's self-evaluations are related to their interpretation of social experiences provides support for the theoretical processes proposed by Crick and Dodge's (1994) model. Expecting teasing experiences to be harmful can create a negative feedback loop wherein youth act in accordance with their expectation for harm, which increases the likelihood they *will* experience harm and thereby perpetuate that maladaptive schema. Consequently, an important avenue for promoting positive adjustment may be to further explore such cognitive biases and identify ways to modify maladaptive social schemas through exposure to new positive experiences or reframing negative experiences (Cruwys et al., 2014).

Contrary to hypotheses, we found that females—but not males—who were *less* popular reported teasing as aggressive. The general finding that unpopularity is linked to aggressive teasing attitudes may make sense given existing evidence that unpopular youth are frequent targets of teasing and therefore may see the act as more harmful than popular perpetrators do (Shapiro et al., 1991). However, we had expected that, for girls in particular, popularity might be linked with aggressive teasing attitudes, as (specifically relational) aggression may be used between high-status girls to jockey for position and inflict costs on intrasexual rivals (Vaillancourt & Krems, 2018). Perhaps high-status girls have the social sophistication to differentiate the aggression occurring among them from harmful teasing. That is, perhaps relational aggression among high-status girls is not confused with teasing, as these girls have the sophisticated social skills required to recognize and use aggression strategically, rather than confuse it with teasing. Future research is needed to further explore these potential explanations, as well as to better understand why low popularity was only linked to aggressive teasing attitudes for females and not males.

Those who reported being victimized by non-bullying aggression perceived teasing as more affectionate. This observation calls for a deeper understanding of the context of victimization by perpetrators equally or less powerful than them. In Dane et al. (Dane et al., 2022), it was found that non-bullying aggression (labeled as adversarial aggression) was not related to sadistic aggression functions (whereas bullying was), but was related to competitive and reactive functions. Thus, being victimized by non-bullying aggression may represent a complex experience that carries with it more ambiguous aspects. It is important to consider the relationship between perpetrators and victims of non-bullying aggression, specifically the power differential between participants (Andrews, 2023). It is possible that those victimized by non-bullies are more often friends with their perpetrators. Such conflictual yet close relationships might include teasing that sometimes feels playful and sometimes feels more aggressive. Or, perhaps simply having the experience of being victimized by a friend (someone who assumedly also treats you with kindness) muddies the waters between affectionate and aggressive interactions in relationships; thus leading to mixed interpretations. Youth who are frequent victims of non-bullying victimization may come to expect somewhat negative interactions within close relationships (see Andrews et al., 2021), and therefore view teasing as a means of building close relationships (see also Douglass et al., 2016). A relative power equality may encourage more reciprocal, back-and-forth teasing that is, therefore, perceived more positively (as opposed to one individual being the sole target of teasing) (see Andrews & Dawes, 2024). Indeed, 'banter,' which is often considered to enhance social cohesion, bonding, and closeness (Alexander et al., 2012; Fine & De Soucey, 2005) (and may, thus, be more akin to playful than harmful teasing), involves the expectation of reciprocation (Buglass et al., 2021; Dynel, 2008). Fine and De Soucey (2005) discuss a 'group joking culture' and highlight that this type of banter itself serves as the basis for future interaction (e.g., inside jokes that can be referred to over time to enhance social connection). More work is needed to further understand victimization by non-bullying aggression and these links to teasing experiences and attitudes, as well as further understanding specific ways in which affectionate teasing or 'banter' may differ from aggressive teasing (e.g., the reciprocal nature).

Contrary to hypotheses, social self-concept and social satisfaction were not significantly related to affectionate teasing attitudes. Results did indicate that high social self-concept and high social satisfaction was linked to teasing for romantic interest. We had expected popularity to relate to romantic interest teasing, based on associations between popularity and adolescent romantic relationships (Houser et al., 2015; Kreager et al., 2016). Though some researchers acknowledge that teasing can occur to 'flirt' or indicate romantic interest (Beck et al., 2007; Sherer & Clark, 2009), teasing for romantic purposes is not a main focus in the literature on youth teasing. Perhaps romantic teasing emerges as increasingly important for young adults who may be particularly focused on romantic relationships (Gómez-López et al., 2019; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Indeed, Arnett talks about exploration and change with regard to love and relationships as a core feature of the emerging adult period (Arnett, 2000, 2007). Participants in this study who reported positive social self-concept and social satisfaction in adolescence likely have positive relationships in their young adulthood, including in romantic relationships (Gómez-López et al., 2019; Simpson et al., 2007). As such, they may be particularly interested in teasing as a form of flirting or indicating romantic interest. Further developmental work is needed to better understand patterns of romantic teasing over time.

4.2 | Limitations and future directions

This study has some limitations. The first is the reliance on self-report. Particularly for social variables like victimization and popularity, there may be bias introduced when relying on young adults' self-reports. Although this approach offers valuable insights into how individuals perceive their social experiences, it may not provide a fully accurate representation. Additionally, these perceptions may have evolved over time, potentially affecting their retrospective accuracy. Future research could benefit from incorporating other informants (e.g., peers) and gathering information from adolescents, rather than relying solely on retrospective data.

Second, we measured teasing attitudes, but not teasing behavior. Future research is needed to directly assess teasing experiences that represent aggressive, affectionate, and romantic interest teasing, to (1) understand whether teasing attitudes are related to teasing experiences themselves, and (2) understand the associations between other critical social experiences (e.g., victimization, bullying) and involvement in these various types of teasing interactions (see Andrews & Dawes, 2024). Additional research is also needed to validate the Teasing Attitudes Scale across different contexts and developmental periods. That is, in addition to school (post-secondary) contexts, it would be worthwhile to assess teasing in the workplace, in social clubs and other teams, as well as within friend and family groups. For instance, Alexander et al. (2012) discuss the complexity of banter and bullying within professional kitchens, highlighting the ambiguity of such workplace experiences. Directly understanding teasing attitudes and their associations with involvement in harmful and playful teasing in other contexts would provide useful information to support positive and decrease negative workplace social experiences. Similarly, validating the Teasing Attitudes Scale among children and adolescents is crucial; perhaps using creative, mixed-methods designs to more directly address the impact of young peoples' social experiences on their attitudes and behaviors. Further, the measure of teasing attitudes does not stipulate whether teasing is occurring offline or online. It is possible that students may have different attitudes toward—stemming from different experiences with—teasing that occurs via technology (e.g., Steer et al., 2020). Comparing and contrasting youth's experiences across these contexts will be an important step for future research.

The cross-sectional design is also a limitation. Though we would suggest that prior social experiences (even those recalled concurrently) should impact later attitudes, the study design prevents us from establishing causality. Finally, our sample was predominantly White, female young adults, which limits the generalizability of our findings. Though the sample is generally reflective of the surrounding area (13% visible minority population, according to Canadian census data, compared to 18% self-identified in our sample), sample size constraints prevented an examination of differences based on specific ethnic/racial background. Future research should include a more diverse sample to better understand the universality of these phenomena. This may be particularly important, given that teasing based on identity factors (e.g., race, gender, religion) may be particularly harmful and elicit particularly emotional responses (Aronson et al., 2007; Kowalski, 2000; though not always, see Douglass et al., 2016). Indeed, when young adults were asked to report on a past experience of harmful (aggressive) and playful (affectionate) teasing, just over one quarter (26%) of the harmful instances and 0% of the playful instances included identity-based content (i.e., sexuality, ethnicity, culture/religion) (Andrews & Dawes, 2024).

4.3 | Implications and conclusions

Despite these limitations, our findings have important implications for our growing understanding of teasing as a nuanced and complex construct (see Bosacki et al., 2012; Buglass et al., 2021). Findings validate that individuals can have distinct and somewhat contradictory attitudes toward teasing. Although teasing can be viewed as a fun, bonding social experience, it can also be seen as aggressive and painful. Researchers should consider that teasing may mean very different things to different people (or mean multiple things to the same person). Indeed, some include 'teasing' as an item to measure bullying; yet our results suggest that teasing is not solely synonymous with a harmful social interaction.

Our study also suggests that prior social experiences may shape individuals' attitudes toward teasing. Using several indicators of past social experience, results highlight interesting patterns by which these past experiences relate to differential attitudes toward teasing. Having a negative view of teasing may be problematic for youth and young adults in particular. According to emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000; Holmes, 2000), young people in this developmental stage are in a time of transition that includes the need to form new relationships with new groups of people. Navigating complex social interactions with new peers (e.g., within their chosen working profession), particularly considering ambiguous social interactions that may occur, is likely challenging. Prior cognitive schemas that shape individuals' interpretation of current ambiguous scenarios may play a role in the success of those new and changing relationships. For instance, misinterpretation of teasing in the workplace can create a hostile job environment (e.g., Alexander et al., 2012) that has significant implications not only for individual workers, but for the larger community. Further, given the potentially positive role of playful teasing in romantic relationships, youth who struggle to see teasing as playful may have a harder time viewing their romantic partner's attempts to foster relationship closeness via teasing in a positive light. This has implications for one's satisfaction with intimate partners, which is subsequently linked to mental health as well as overall health and wellbeing (e.g., Proulx et al., 2007). Altogether, one's attitude toward teasing—this ubiquitous social experience that occurs across contexts—has the potential to impact all areas of life (e.g., career, friendships, romantic relationships), in particularly salient ways for individuals in the emerging adult developmental period. Future research should continue to explore how teasing attitudes relate to adolescents' and young adults' actual teasing experiences and their experiences in social relationships across multiple contexts. Further, it would be worth exploring whether—and how—teasing attitudes change.

In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of the complexities of teasing and its associations with individual attitudes and social experiences. By considering individual differences and contextual factors, such as past victimization experiences, social status, and gender, researchers can gain a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying teasing. This knowledge can inform the development of interventions and support systems aimed at mitigating the potential negative effects of teasing and promoting positive social interactions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Andrews, N. C. Z., Pakkal, O., & Dawes, M. (2024). Is teasing meant to be mean or nice? Retrospective reports of adolescent social experiences and teasing attitudes. *Personal Relationships*, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12567