

The Role of a Bystander in Targets' Perceptions of Teasing Among Friends: Are You Really Teasing Me?

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Teasing has an inherent potential for ambiguity because of the two opposing goals: to be playful and to be provocative. One means of disambiguation is the presence and reaction of a bystander. Yet, previous studies on teasing have focused on the dyad and less on the influence of a bystander. The present study attempts to examine how the presence and reaction of a bystander can influence targets' perceptions of teasing between close friends. In particular, the current study predicted teasers' and targets' inferred playfulness and provocation teasing goals would impact targets' responses to their partner's messages (perceived funniness, hurt feelings, positive face threats, and negative face threats), and that the magnitude of this association would change depending on the presence or absence of a laughing or nonlaughing bystander. Results showed that the association among goals and targets' perceptions depended on the presence and reaction of a bystander.

Keywords: goals, interpersonal communication, social cognition, relationships

Teasing among friends is common and often linked to relational maintenance (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998). Friends can pursue various goals when teasing one another, and the success of goal achievement influences their relationships (Caughlin, 2010; Palomares, 2014). For example, one may want to point out a target's misbehavior and, at the same time, be playful so as not to damage the relationship. Much work acknowledges the harmful, almost bullying, effects of teasing (e.g., Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Forero, McLellan, Rissel, & Bauman, 1999; Landau, Milich, Harris, & Larson, 2001; Smith et al., 2009). Yet, teasing is different from bullying because teasing is often playful, whereas bullying is always hostile (Mills & Carwile, 2009; Mooney, Creeser, & Blatchford, 1991). Indeed, teasing interactions can have positive effects for friendships, such as mutual entertainment, increasing closeness, problem solving, providing support, and expressing positive affect (Beck et al., 2007; Campos, Keltner, Beck, Gonzaga, & John, 2007; Haugh & Pilet-Shore, 2018; Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001; Kruger, Gordon, & Kuban, 2006; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006; Mooney et al., 1991; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991). Thus, teasing among friends is a meaningful and consequential part of communication.

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The current study focuses on teasing in close friends, given teasing's prominence in relational maintenance, and also assesses the role of bystanders through the conceptual lens of goal understanding theory (GUT; Palomares & Derman, 2019; Palomares & Wingate, 2020).

Goal Understanding Theory

GUT starts with the premise that communication is goal directed (Berger, 2002; Dillard, 2004; Palomares & Wingate, 2020). Goals are hierarchically structured wherein lower-level goals facilitate the achievement of higher-level goals (Dillard, 2004; Palomares, 2014), such as a friend who teases to gain an advantage. Just as goal pursuit is hierarchically structured, so is goal understanding (Wingate & Palomares, 2021). Goal understanding focuses on the processes involved in and surrounding how people draw inferences of others' objectives (Palomares, 2011; Palomares & Derman, 2019). Targets process the messages in terms of goals that are hierarchically represented, which colors their interpretation of those messages. In other words, people infer others' goals and, depending on which goals they infer, different interpretations of any given message are possible (Palomares, 2008). Indeed, inferring certain goals yields a framework for processing and encoding behaviors (Cupach & Metts, 1994), such that goal inferences affect people's recollections of social interaction (Bower, Black, & Turner, 1979) and how they fill in the gaps missing between events (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). GUT also maintains that goal inferences have spillover effects (Palomares & Wingate, 2020), which can influence thoughts, perceptions, and actions beyond an intended meaning. For instance, inferring goals of relationship protection was associated with positive relational outcomes, whereas inferring self-serving goals had the opposite pattern among friends when the primary goal for one friend was to avoid a taboo topic (Palomares & Derman, 2019). Goal inferences are consequential because they can produce outcomes beyond the more immediate effects of facilitating the transfer of meaning between interaction partners.

Playful and Provocative Goal of Teasing

Applying GUT to teasing interactions yields a potentially effective account of how interlocutors manage playful and provocative goals in their teasing of others and in others' teasing of them. Like all communication, teasing is goal directed, which means teasers' goals drive the ways in which they tease. Primary goals of teasing include: instrumental, relational, identity, and arousal management goals (Mills & Babrow, 2003); affectionate and aggressive goals (Honeycutt & Wright, 2017), and prosocial and antisocial goals (Keltner et al., 2001). We adopt the perspectives that teasing serves both goals to provoke and be playful with a target. Indeed, several studies verify the main goals for teasing included both playfulness and provocation (Beck et al., 2007; Shapiro et al., 1991).

Teasing is associated with tension between being playful and provocative. Given provocation, face threats are an inherent part of teasing. The provocation goal of teasing can threaten a target's social image when teasers are critical of targets' weaknesses, foibles, or mistakes, thereby damaging targets' face. Generally, a teaser pursues a playfulness goal by employing off-record (versus on-record) markers to induce positive affect as a signal of potential alternative or indirect meanings rather than literal and relatively hurtful meanings (Keltner et al., 2001). In other words, off-record markers in teasing provide cues that increase the likelihood that the meaning behind the teasing is positive. If teasing is conveyed on-record,

however, then the provocative aspects delivered via teasing (with a more literal than figurative meaning) will threaten the target's face (Clark, 1996; Keltner et al., 2001; Shapiro et al., 1991).

Teasers inherently communicate via nonverbal cues to their targets with the tension in their pursuit of playfulness and provocation goals. Thus, according to GUT, targets will interpret those nonverbal cues and integrate them with teasers' verbal behavior to infer these two goals to various extents depending on how much teasers' behavior reveals the two goals (Palomares, 2008). Such goal inferences, following GUT, can have spillover effects for teasing. Indeed, targets often view playful teasing as funny or humorous, which tends to trigger laughter from targets (Baxter, 1992; Keltner et al., 1998). Moreover, a frequent reason why people tease is to make fun of or have fun with others (Beck et al., 2007; Kowalski, 2004; Shapiro et al., 1991). In contrast, inferences of provocative teasing tend to elicit a response from targets that include negative affect, such as hurt and face threats (Keltner et al., 1998, 2001; Kowalski, 2004; Kruger et al., 2006; Shapiro et al., 1991). In general, targets will interpret their inferences of provocation goals as hostility, which facilitates more hurt and face threats but less perceived humor in targets. However, if targets infer playfulness goals more than provocation goals, the pattern will be the opposite.

The Effects of a Bystander in Teasing Interactions

Teasing often involves an audience (Kowalski, 2004). Given the provocation goals involved in teasing, being teased in the presence of a third party could be undesirable to a target. The target's response can differ depending on who the third party is (e.g., another close friend, an acquaintance, a stranger). The present study attempts to test teasing interactions with a stranger as a bystander. As people generally want to maintain a positive social image, when the target thinks that the teaser tries to tease provocatively rather than playfully in front of a bystander, the target could feel embarrassed, ashamed, and uncomfortable (Landau et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the presence of a bystander can increase targets' scrutiny of a teasing friend because the target's social image could be damaged.

Given that teasing is inherently ambiguous (Shapiro et al., 1991), a bystander's reaction to teasing can provide a unique set of diagnostic cues to integrate in the generation of goal inferences (Palomares, 2008). Based on the logic of GUT (Palomares & Wingate, 2020), laughter from a bystander can provide targets with cues for interpreting teasing as either more playful or more provocative. An unknown bystander who laughs at the teasing can signal that the bystander sees the teasing as playful via cues (e.g., exaggerated voice, funny facial expressions; Keltner et al., 2001). Thus, a potentially negative response from targets can be tempered and imbued with positivity via a bystander's laughter. However, the lack of laughter could mean that the bystander did not detect any playful indicators and took the teasing more provocatively, which can seriously damage the target's face (i.e., social image; Smith et al., 2009). In this case, the bystander's unresponsiveness could amplify the target's negative responses (i.e., the strongest hurt feelings and face threats).

H1: (a) As targets infer more provocative goals (relative to playful goals) for a teasing friend, targets perceive teasing as less funny and report more hurt feelings and face threat; this association is (b) stronger in the presence of a laughing bystander compared with no bystander and (c) strongest with a nonlaughing bystander.

Even though targets' goal inferences are likely a strong predictor of targets' reactions, inferences are not isomorphic with a teasing friend's goals. That is, a teaser's intended goals may correlate with a target's inferred goals fairly well, but this is not necessarily the case given how people infer others' goals and their accuracy are not always straightforward (Palomares, 2011). Teasers' goals likely predict their behaviors, which would be strong cues of the extent to which teasing is playful versus provocative; a strong goal to be playful will increase the number of playful off-record markers, which will communicate to targets that the goals are more playful than provocative. Thus, we expect the same general process for a teasing friend's intended goals that we do for targets' goal inferences in the presence of a bystander:

H2: (a) As teasers' goals are more provocative (relative to playful), targets perceive teasing as less funny and report more hurt feelings and face threats; this association is (b) stronger in the presence of a laughing bystander compared with no bystander and (c) strongest with a nonlaughing bystander.

Goal Inference Accuracy

Since teasing is common in friendships, when targets are teased by a close friend, they are not always aware of a teaser's goals. Even though teasing involves provocative aspects, a target may not be concerned with the teaser's intended goal because of the underlying friendship. Indeed, teasing frequently occurs in intimate relationships and results in affiliative outcomes (e.g., Baxter, 1992; Eisenberg, 1986). In particular, even playful insults are common among college students and romantic couples (Hopper, Knapp, & Scott, 1981). However, in the presence of an unknown bystander, the third party could misinterpret the teasing, which is risky for targets. Thus, the situation where a target is teased in front of a bystander can motivate the target to be more aware of a teasing friend's goals. Accordingly, the target's inferred goal for a teasing friend is more accurate in the presence of a bystander than in the absence of one:

H3: Targets' inferences of a friend's teasing goals are more accurate in the presence of a bystander than in the absence of a bystander.

Social Goals Among Teasing Friends

Because goals reside in hierarchies, provocation and playfulness goals can facilitate the achievement of higher-level goals when teasing among friends (Palomares, 2014). For instance, teasing goals can serve a be-social goal, an affinity-seeking goal, or a gain-advantage goal. The extent to which playfulness facilitates these hierarchical goal inferences differs from the extent to which provocation promotes them, however. According to GUT, targets will infer these superordinate teasing goals (be-social, seek affinity, or gain advantage) to different extents based on how they infer the two primary teasing goals; and those superordinate goal inferences can yield different spillover effects just as any goal inference can (Palomares & Wingate, 2020). Given that people with social and affinity goals tend to exhibit more agreeableness and liking toward interlocutors (Fitzsimons & Fischbach, 2010; Palomares, 2014; Walther, Van Der Heide, Tong, Carr, & Atkin, 2010; Wentzel, Muenks, McNeish, & Russell, 2018), targets could perceive teasing motivated by those goals as funny and not particularly face threatening or hurtful, but a

bystander matters. A laughing bystander can provide cues that the friend's teasing goals are benign. In contrast, the absence of laughing cues might indicate that the teasing is not social or affinity seeking. Thus:

H4: (a) As teasing friend's social and affinity goals increase, targets perceive the teasing as increasingly funny and report less hurt feelings and face threat; this association is (b) strongest in the presence of a laughing bystander compared with no bystander and with a nonlaughing bystander.

However, one might want to gain advantage over the partner in teasing interactions. People have a tendency to demonstrate their superiority over other people via humor (Gruner, 1978). Making fun of someone's weak points, mistakes, or foibles can emphasize superiority over the target in teasing interactions. Friends teasing with such gain-advantage goals increase the chances targets find the teasing hurtful and face threatening rather than funny, as a function of bystander cues:

H5: (a) As a teasing friend's gain-advantage goals increase, targets perceive the teasing as decreasingly funny and report more hurt feelings and face threat; this association is (b) stronger in the presence of a laughing bystander compared with no bystander and (c) strongest with a nonlaughing bystander.

Method

Participants

Participants (212 dyads; 33 males, 177 females, and two unknown) were undergraduate students at a western public U.S. university who were recruited from an online system that informed them that their involvement required bringing a same-sex close friend, defined as having known each other for at least two months and hanging out together at least once a week.

Design

The experimental design employed three conditions: no-bystander, nonlaughing bystander, and laughing bystander. The study required a research assistant and a confederate. We trained six confederates who were similar in demographics to the participants. When participants arrived, one of the friends was randomly assigned as the teaser and the other as the target, but their roles were informed only to the teasers because we aimed to observe targets' natural responses. Friends were immediately separated wherein they received instructions specific to their roles. Instructions for teasers focused on facilitating their ability to tease their friend. Teasers learned they would play a Where's Waldo game twice. Teasers were told to tease their friend after each round of the games and given the answers for the two games before playing. By knowing the answers, teasers would be guaranteed to win the games and could justifiably proceed to tease. We wanted to have them tease each other naturally as they usually do, rather than giving specific instructions for teasing. We did not provide any examples because those examples could lead them to a specific direction of teasing, which could be linked to some goals more than others. We asked them to tease their friend as naturally and realistically as they could using the win advantage as a basis for it.

Instructions for targets included multiple samples of the game with no information or suggestions about teasing and did not include the answer keys.

The next part consisted of reintroducing the friends and sitting them next to each other in front of computers that guided the remainder of the study. After each round of the two games, they were given 75 seconds to talk about the results of the game. Teasers were supposed to tease their partner during this time. After the two rounds of the games, various questionnaires were given to measure their goals and perceptions of teasing.

Confederates and Bystander Manipulation

Six confederates (2 males [1 White and 1 Indian] and 4 females [2 Asians, 1 White, and 1 Middle Eastern]) were recruited from the same university where the participants were recruited from; all were domestic students. The no-bystander condition proceeded without any deviations from the above description. In the two bystander conditions, a confederate stayed with participants in the same room pretending to be grading other students' papers. For the laughing bystander condition, the confederates were thoroughly trained to provide a consistent moderate level of laughter. Confederates watched videos of sample laughter to have exemplars and a means to practice pitch, tone, and duration (a moderate level of laughter with neutral tone [not overly positive or negative] and minimal overt facial expressions). In the nonlaughing bystander condition, the confederates did not laugh at all and focused on the grading.

Measures

Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations for the major variables in this study.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Variables.

		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Teasers' goals	Playfulness	5.75	1.03
	Provocation	3.48	1.35
Targets' inferred goals	Playfulness	5.70	1.10
	Provocation	3.05	1.63
	Social goal	4.83	1.37
	Affinity-seeking goal	4.02	1.38
	Gain-advantage goal	2.74	1.02
	Funniness	5.47	1.13
	Hurt feelings	2.27	1.29
	Positive face threat	2.63	1.00
	Negative face threat	1.91	1.08

Teasers' Reports of Teasing Goals

Even though we instructed them to tease their friend, we did not tell them how to tease. How playfully or provocatively they teased their friends was completely up to them. Thus, the instruction "tease

your friend” could elicit numerous different teasing behaviors and different levels of playfulness and provocation. We wanted to measure the extent to which they wanted to be playful and provocative with their teasing messages. Based on a thorough literature review, seven items were created to measure teasers’ goals. The PCA analysis was first conducted to check the components of teasing, and it resulted in two components, as we expected. Three items measured teasers’ playfulness goals, using 7-point Likert scales (7 = very much; $\alpha = .74$), focusing on how playful and amusing teasers wanted to be and how much they tried to have fun with teasing. Four items were generated to measure teasers’ provocation goals, using a similar scale (7 = very much; $\alpha = .72$), focusing on how much they wanted to provoke, taunt, hurt, and boast with teasing. To assess the relative extent to which teasers’ behavior was dominantly motivated by playfulness versus provocation goals, a difference score between two measures was computed, which is consistent with our and other conceptualizations of teasing (Keltner et al., 2001). A measure of teasers’ goals was created by subtracting the playfulness scale from the provocation scale. Since these two variables were the results of subtracting a 7-point Likert scale from the same scale, the values ranged from -6 to 6 . Positive values indicated the relatively higher salience of provocation, whereas negative values meant the relatively higher salience of playfulness.

Targets’ Inference of Teasers’ Goals

Targets were asked to infer their partner’s playfulness goals during their interactions after the puzzle games. As targets were unaware of our instructions to teasers, we indirectly asked about teasing by focusing on the conversations immediately following each round of the games. The items asked how much they think their friend was trying to be playful, amusing, and have fun during the conversation after the game (7 = very much; $\alpha = .74$). A similar measure was used for targets’ inference of provocation goals (7 = very much; $\alpha = .81$). The items measured how much they think their friend was trying to provoke, taunt, hurt, and boast during the interactions after the game. Along with these items, four additional filler items were used to make it difficult for targets to assume that the teasers were instructed to tease them. The filler items asked if the conversations were to avoid silence, to kill some time, to get my opinions, and meant to talk about what we think about the game. Targets’ inference of teasers’ goals was created by subtracting the targets’ inference of provocation goals from the targets’ inference of playfulness goals with the same reason (ranging from -6 to 6). Positive values indicated targets’ inference of the salience of playfulness goals, whereas negative values meant targets’ inference of the salience of provocation goals.

Social, Affinity, and Gaining Advantage Goals

Based on the concepts of the three goals (Palomares, 2014), six questions for social goals ($\alpha = .84$; e.g., “I was trying to be friendly when teasing my friend.”), seven questions for affinity goals ($\alpha = .85$; e.g., “By teasing my friend, I hoped to make him/her like me even more.”), and 11 questions for gaining advantage goals ($\alpha = .81$; e.g., “I teased my friend to make myself feel better.”) were created based on preliminary work using open-ended questions asking about superordinate goals for teasing among friends.

Targets' Perceived Funniness

Four items were used to measure targets' perceived funniness, by adopting a measure from Kruger and colleagues (2006). The perceived funniness items measured how funny, entertaining, lighthearted, and friendly the conversations were. The reliability of the perceived funniness was .69.

Hurt Feelings

Four items were employed to measure targets' hurt, asking how hurtful, emotionally painful, annoying, and kind the conversations that they had after the games were, based on Kruger and colleagues (2006) and Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, and Alexander (2005). Reliability was .82.

Perceived Face Threat

Based on an existing measure (Cupach & Carson, 2002) of the participants' perceived face threat, 10 items of positive face threat (e.g., My partner's actions were rude) and four items of negative face threat (e.g., My partner's actions invaded my privacy) were employed. The reliabilities were .79 for the positive and .76 for the negative face threat.

Control Variables

Creativity

Because teasing is often a function of one's creativity (Eliav, Miron-Spektor, & Bear, 2016), we sought to control for such. A 30-item version of Remote Associate Test (RAT) measured participants' creativity (Lee, Huggins, & Therriault, 2014) by providing three different words and asking participants to imagine the fourth word associated with all three given words. For example, if "light-birthday-wax" were provided, the correct fourth word was "candle." Participants were supposed to find and write the appropriate fourth word within 15 seconds for each question. Each question was worth 1 point, yielding a total possible score of 30 points. The average scores were 10.23 and 9.44 for teasers and targets, and the standard deviations were 7.28 and 6.94 for teasers and targets, respectively.

Teasing Motivation

To control for the extent to which participants were motivated to tease each other, we assessed the extent to which each of them wanted or intended to tease via two items: "How much did you want to tease your friend?" and "To what extent did you actually tease your friend?" The correlations between these two items were $r = .34$, $df = 147$, $p < .001$ for teasers, and $r = .73$, $df = 147$, and $p < .001$ for targets.

Manipulation Check

Participants were asked to guess the main purpose of the study with an open-ended question to ensure that the design was not compromised. We reviewed responses for targets to determine if they

remained unaware that teasers were instructed to tease and that the bystander was a confederate. For teasers, we checked if they remained ignorant of the reality of the confederate. As a result, 62 of 211 dyads were deleted for the following reasons: technical problems (Internet browser crashed, and Internet connection lost), participants' failure to follow the instruction, participants' eligibilities (e.g., not friends as our method defined, lack of English proficiency), participants' suspicion of the confederate, and RAs (research assistants') mistakes (e.g., giving wrong instructions, not laughing, and forgetting lines). RA errors were relatively infrequent compared with participant-generated reasons for deletion. Deletions occurred randomly across experimental conditions. Thus, 149 dyads (24 males [16.1%], 124 females [83.2%], and 1 unknown) were included in subsequent analyses. Their ethnicities were Asian (59 teasers and 63 targets, 122 in total; 40.9%), Hispanic (39 teasers and 34 targets, 73 in total; 24.3%), White (34 teasers and 34 targets, 68 in total; 22.8%), Black (0 teasers and 4 targets, 4 in total; 1.3%), others (31; 10.4%), and their average ages were 19.4 (teasers; ranging from 18 to 24) and 19.3 (targets; ranging from 18 to 25).

Results

Control Variables

We controlled for several variables in the analyses. Teasing motivations of both teasers and targets were controlled in all analyses because we were primarily interested in the influence of a bystander and did not want idiosyncrasies for particular dyads or relational partners to account for the results. For analyses involving variables based on teasers' perspectives, teasers' creativity was controlled in an attempt to neutralize differences across the cognitive abilities to tease, as one's creativity is highly correlated with a sense of humor (Eliav et al., 2016). Thus, all the correlational analyses used in the hypotheses testing were partial correlations.

Omnibus Tests

The PROCESS macro v4.0 developed by Hayes (2017) was used to analyze moderated regressions. We attempted to see if the effects of teasers' reports of teasing goals, targets' inferred goals, or social/affinity-seeking/advantage-seeking goals (IVs) on the targets' teasing responses (DVs) are moderated by the bystander conditions (moderator). The results revealed that the effects of teasers' reports of teasing goals and social/affinity-seeking/advantage-seeking goals on targets' responses were not moderated by the bystander conditions. However, the effects of teasers' reports of teasing goals on some of the targets' responses were moderated by the bystander conditions (for hurt feelings, $F(1, 142) = 3.75$, $p = .03$; for positive face, $F(1, 142) = 4.18$, $p = .02$). These indicate that the extent to which the targets' hurt feelings and positive face threat are influenced by the teasers' reports of teasing goals was different depending on whether the bystander laughed or not or whether the bystander was present or not. Because these tests do not speak directly to our Hs, we employed simple slopes analyses to assess continuous by categorical interactions using directional tests for our precise predictions (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007; West, Aiken, & Krull, 1996).

Hypotheses

All the hypotheses except the H3 are twofold: (1) testing the impacts of teasing goals (intended and inferred) on perceptions, and (2) seeing if the perceptions change in the predicted directions across the conditions: no-bystander, nonlaughing bystander, and laughing bystander.

H1 predicted that, as targets infer more provocative goals for a teasing friend, (a) targets perceive teasing as less funny and report more hurt feelings and face threats; this association is (b) stronger in the presence of a laughing bystander compared with no bystander and (c) strongest with a nonlaughing bystander. The results of the partial correlations revealed that all four correlations were statistically significant in all three conditions (see Table 2), as predicted. H1_a was supported.

Table 2. Correlations Between Targets' Inference of Goals and Perceptions.

	Funniness	Hurt feelings	Positive face threat	Negative face threat
No-bystander (NB)	-.635***	.757***	.810***	.711***
Nonlaughing bystander (NL)	-.803***	.872***	.895***	.716***
Laughing bystander (LB)	-.641***	.684***	.525***	.461**
Simple slopes comparisons	NB<NL*, NL=LB, NB=LB	NB<NL*, NL>LB*, NB=LB	NB=NL, NL>LB***, NB>LB**	NB=NL, NL>LB*, NB>LB*

Note. *one-tailed $p < .05$, **one-tailed $p < .01$, ***one-tailed $p < .001$.

To test H1_b and H1_c, we examined and compared the simple slopes using z-scores for differences in the correlations between the teasers' goals and the targets' perceptions (i.e., perceived funniness, hurt feelings, positive face threat, and negative face threat) across the three bystander conditions (see Table 2). Two of the four correlations in the nonlaughing bystander condition were significantly stronger than those correlations in the no-bystander condition (perceived funniness: $z = -1.69$, one-tailed $p = .046$; hurt feelings: $z = 1.67$, one-tailed $p = .048$). However, two of the correlations in the laughing bystander condition were significantly weaker than those correlations in the no-bystander condition (positive face threat: $z = -2.74$, one-tailed $p = .003$; negative face threat: $z = -1.97$, one-tailed $p = .024$). Three of the four correlations in the nonlaughing bystander condition were stronger than those correlations in the laughing bystander condition (hurt feelings: $z = 2.25$, one-tailed $p = .012$; positive face threat: $z = 3.84$, one-tailed $p < .001$; negative face threat: $z = 1.78$, one-tailed $p = .038$). In other words, the targets seemed to feel the most negative with the nonlaughing bystander as predicted, though not all the differences were statistically significant. Thus, H1_b and H1_c were partially supported.

H2 predicted that, as teasers' goals are more provocative, (a) targets perceive teasing as less funny and report more hurt feelings and face threats; this association is (b) stronger in the presence of a laughing bystander compared with no bystander and (c) strongest with a nonlaughing bystander. The results of the partial correlations revealed that, in the no-bystander condition, there were no significant

correlations at all (see Table 3). However, in the nonlaughing bystander condition, all the correlations were significant. In the laughing bystander condition, three of the four correlations were significant. H2_a was supported in the nonlaughing bystander and partially in the laughing bystander condition, but not in the no-bystander condition.

Table 3. Correlations Between Teasers' Reports of Goals and Targets' Perceptions.

	Funniness	Hurt feelings	Positive face threat	Negative face threat
No-bystander (NB)	-.011	-.052	-.059	.067
Nonlaughing bystander (NL)	-.452**	.460**	.466**	.428**
Laughing bystander (LB)	-.299*	.162	.386*	.287*
Simple slopes comparisons	NB<NL*, NL=LB, NB=LB	NB<NL**, NL=LB, NB=LB	NB<NL**, NL=LB, NB<LB*	NB<NL*, NL=LB, NB=LB

Note. *one-tailed $p < .05$, **one-tailed $p < .01$, ***one-tailed $p < .001$.

In the simple slopes comparisons, although the overall patterns of the results were consistent with the prediction of H2_b and H2_c, the significant difference between the no-bystander and the laughing bystander conditions was observed only for the positive face threat ($z = 2.24$, one-tailed $p = .013$; see Table 3). Thus, H2_b was partially supported. In contrast, all four correlations in the nonlaughing bystander condition were significantly stronger than those in the no-bystander condition (perceived funniness: $z = 2.26$, one-tailed $p = .012$; hurt feelings: $z = 2.61$, one-tailed $p = .005$; positive face threat: $z = 2.68$, one-tailed $p = .004$; negative face threat: $z = 1.85$, one-tailed $p = .032$). However, the correlations in the nonlaughing bystander condition were not significantly stronger than those in the laughing bystander condition. Therefore, H2_c was partially supported.

H3 predicted that targets' inferences of a friend's teasing goals would be more accurate in the two presence-of-a-bystander conditions than in the absence of a bystander condition. To test this, we assessed the simple slopes between the teasers' goals and targets' goal inferences across the two conditions (presence or absence of a bystander). The results of the simple slopes comparisons revealed that there was no difference in goal accuracy between the two conditions. However, when we separated the two bystander conditions, the results were more interesting. More specifically, in the nonlaughing bystander condition, targets' goal accuracy ($r(34) = .602$, one-tailed $p < .001$) was significantly stronger ($z = 2.96$, one-tailed $p = .002$) than in the no-bystander condition ($r(58) = .072$, one-tailed $p = .292$; see Table 4). Also, targets' inferred goals were significantly more accurate ($z = 3.25$, one-tailed $p < .001$) in the nonlaughing bystander condition than in the laughing bystander condition ($r(42) = -.033$, one-tailed $p = .416$). However, there was no significant difference between no-bystander and laughing bystander conditions. Therefore, H3 was supported when we separated the two bystander conditions, whereas not supported when merged.

Table 4. Correlations Between Teasers' Reports of Goals and Targets' Inferred Goals.

	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
No-bystander (NB)	.07	.292
Nonlaughing bystander (NL)	.60	<.001
Laughing bystander (LB)	-.03	.426
Simple slopes comparisons	NB<NL***, NL>LB***, NB=LB	

Note. *one-tailed $p < .05$, **one-tailed $p < .01$, ***one-tailed $p < .001$.

H4 predicted that as teasing friend's social and affinity goals increase, (a) targets perceive the teasing as increasingly funny and report less hurt feelings and face threats; this association is (b) strongest in the presence of a laughing bystander compared with no bystander and with a nonlaughing bystander. We ran partial correlations and simple slopes comparisons for each hypothesis (see Tables 5 and 6). Although we found some significant correlations, the differences of correlations in magnitude were not significant. Thus, H4_a was partially supported, whereas H4_b was not supported.

Table 5. Correlations Between Teasers' Social Goal and Targets' Perceptions.

	Funniness	Hurt feelings	Positive face threat	Negative face threat
No-bystander (NB)	.066	-.353**	-.310**	-.304**
Nonlaughing bystander (NL)	.157	-.177	-.166	-.093
Laughing bystander (LB)	.210	-.169	-.410**	-.223
Simple slopes comparisons	NB=NL, NL=LB, NB=LB	NB=NL, NL=LB, NB=LB	NB=NL, NL=LB, NB=LB	NB=NL, NL=LB, NB=LB

Note. *one-tailed $p < .05$, **one-tailed $p < .01$, ***one-tailed $p < .001$.

Table 6. Correlations Between Teasers' Affinity Goal and Targets' Perceptions.

	Funniness	Hurt feelings	Positive face threat	Negative face threat
No-bystander (NB)	-.017	-.323**	-.270*	-.141
Nonlaughing bystander (NL)	.359*	-.325*	-.391*	-.166
Laughing bystander (LB)	.080	-.133	-.348**	-.167
Simple slopes comparisons	NB<NL*, NL=LB, NB=LB	NB=NL, NL=LB, NB=LB	NB=NL, NL=LB, NB=LB	NB=NL, NL=LB, NB=LB

Note. *one-tailed $p < .05$, **one-tailed $p < .01$, ***one-tailed $p < .001$.

H5 predicted that as a teasing friend's gain-advantage goals increase, (a) targets perceive the teasing as decreasingly funny and report more hurt feelings and face threats; this association is (b) stronger in the presence of a laughing bystander compared with no bystander and (c) strongest with a nonlaughing bystander. The results revealed that there were no significant correlations in all three conditions between teasers' advantage goals and targets' responses. Also, there was no significant difference across the three conditions. Thus, H5_a, H5_b, and H5_c were not supported.

Discussion

The present study assessed the influence of a bystander in teasing interactions. As targets inferred more provocation goals and less playful goals, they perceived less funniness and more hurt feelings and face threats in all conditions. In other words, teasing has outcomes similar to bullying when targets infer the teaser was being provocative and not playful (Palomares & Wingate, 2020). This outcome emerged regardless of a bystander's presence and laughter and in our sample of close friends. Our data speak to the slippery slope between teasing and bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2007) and the reality that friends can send hurtful messages in ways that are potentially detrimental to the friendship (Wei & Jonson-Reid, 2011). That a bystander did not moderate these negative effects of provocative teasing is at odds with the bullying literature, however, because public bullying episodes are usually more severe than private ones (Sticca & Perren, 2013). We are uncertain why the hurt, humor value, and face threats that targets experienced were not susceptible to a bystander's presence/laughter. Perhaps friends got "lost in the game" and did not pay attention to the bystander who was not seated in direct eyesight; this does not account for the laughter condition, however. Regardless, when targets think their friend is teasing primarily for provocative reasons, they are more hurt, find it less amusing, and think it is more face threatening than if they infer their friend is teasing primarily to be playful. This finding highlights the meaningful impact of goal understanding in social interaction, as targets' beliefs about their friend's motives for teasing mattered in all conditions.

In contrast, teasers' reports of their teasing goals were not always a good indicator of targets' perceptions. In the absence of a bystander, teasers' intended goals were not correlated with any of the dependent measures. In fact, teasers and targets had different interpretations about the interactions in the absence of a bystander, which has practical implications for how friends interact and navigate their relationships. That is, teasers' self-reported goals did not correspond with targets' (relatively inaccurate) inferences of teasers' goals, perhaps because targets were not particularly motivated to pay close attention to their teasing friend in the absence of a bystander. However, in the presence of a bystander, perhaps stakes get higher and targets' goal inferences correspond with teasers' self-reported goals more because the bystander causes an added desire for targets to be accurate in their goal inferences. This finding is similar to bullying in that targets of public bullying are more concerned with bullies' motives than when bullying occurs privately (Wingate & Palomares, 2021). Overall, teasers' goals are not as good of a predictor of targets' perceptions as targets' goal inferences are. Thus, teasing friends should clearly communicate their playful intentions for teasing if they do not want their friends to feel hurt and maybe even bullied, given relatively inaccurate goal inferences among targets. Indeed, targets' goal understanding tends to be inaccurate for a teasing friend except in the presence of a bystander who risks public embarrassment.

We also found evidence for a bystander's laughter serving as a distractor. There were several results implying a distraction effect. First, we found that targets' internal consistency between their inference of teasing goals and their perceptions significantly dropped when the bystander laughed. Second, goal inference accuracy significantly dropped when the bystander laughed, whereas the goal inference accuracy was significantly higher in the presence of a nonlaughing bystander. Last, the positive impacts of social goal and affinity-seeking goal decreased when a bystander laughed. All these results indicated that the bystander's laughter might play a role as a distractor rather than a playful cue for targets. Future research should consider the distraction effect of a bystander's reaction on targets' perceptions.

In terms of goal inference accuracy, targets' understanding of teasing goals was significantly more accurate in the presence of a nonlaughing bystander than in the absence of a bystander. This indicates that the presence of a third party in teasing interactions not only motivated targets to infer teasing goals with more scrutiny but also enhanced their accuracy in inferring the goals as long as assuming no distractions. However, we would be premature to generalize the distraction effect of a bystander's laughter because the bystander in this study was a stranger to both teasers and targets. As they did not expect that the bystander (a stranger) in the room would pay attention to their interactions, targets might be distracted by the unexpected reaction of the bystander. If the bystander were another close friend, then the laughter could have played a role as a playful cue.

The results of this study support and expand GUT. The results demonstrated that targets' goal inferences were one of the strongest determinants of their interpretation of the teasing messages. This implies that goal inferences and goal understanding mechanisms are a more significant predictor of recipients' reactions than actual goal pursuit. Indeed, the teasers' goal pursuit did not impact targets' goal understanding and perception at all, when there was no bystander. Also, even though people have the capacity to infer teasers' goals and intentions accurately, they do not tend to do so unless they have a particular need (Palomares, 2009). The spectrum of goal understanding in teasing can be broad, ranging from very lighthearted and playful to very malicious and aggressive, almost bully-like. Plus, these processes can occur in various relationships, such as among close friends, romantic relationships, family relationships, acquaintances, and strangers. Although previous studies have dealt with these diverse aspects of goal understanding, none of them considered the impact of third parties. As a seminal study testing the influence of a bystander in teasing interactions, we had to limit other relevant variables to observe the sole impact of a bystander. We chose close friends because teasing is common among close friends. For a more comprehensive take on goal understandings and the effects of bystanders in teasing interactions, future research should expand the spectrum and the context of study.

Limitations

There are several limitations of the present study. First, the teasing was not spontaneous. We had to ask the teasers to tease their partners upon winning a game. However, they might not have wanted to tease their partner. In addition, even though we asked them to tease naturally, no one can guarantee that this occurred. At the same time, targets were not prevented from teasing as well. We aimed to strike a balance between natural interactions and a lab experiment. To mitigate these concerns, we measured teasing motivations from both dyad members and controlled for it when appropriate. To

more fully understand teasing interactions, future research should employ diverse methods and work toward triangulation.

Second, the bystander was a stranger, not a close friend of the participants. Commonly, bystanders are often one of the intimate others or acquaintances in teasing interactions. Teasing interactions will be influenced more by those who are intimate with them than by strangers. For example, if teasers expect that the bystanders would support the teasing, then they are more likely to engage in teasing (Pawluk, 1989). Likewise, those who tease someone provocatively tend to accompany friends who endorse similar values (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Garipey, 1988). However, we could not employ bystanders who are close to them for two reasons. First, because of the limited time, money, and subject pool, recruiting another close friend would have been difficult. Recruiting more than one close friend would have been even more restrictive and also reduce experimental control. Second, we wanted to control the laughter of the bystander. If the bystanders were recruited along with the dyads, there might be no way to control their responses (e.g., facial expressions, tone of voice, pitch, and gestures). Thus, although we were aware of its limitation, we hired confederates and trained them as a bystander to control their responses to teasing. Regardless of these limitations, we find value in our data. Moreover, our current data collection efforts seek to address these limits and expand the contributions for teasing, interpersonal communication, and goal understanding we made herein.

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