

# Couples' Tone and Communication Use during Everyday Relationship Distress: Links with Dating Aggression

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## INTRODUCTION

- The quality and nature of human relationships is an important factor impacting overall psychological health and well-being (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, and Schilling, 1989).
- Interpersonal conflicts are one of the most prevalent and agitating daily stressors, accounting for more than 80% of variance in daily mood (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, and Schilling, 1989).
- The manner in which we communicate with our romantic partners, including what we say, when we say it, and how we say it could affect the quality of our relationships (Baucom et al., 2012; Simmons, Gordon, and Chambless, 2005).
- Prior research has explored associations between adolescents' fundamental frequency, cortisol output, speech, and self-reported negative emotions during laboratory-based family conflict discussions (Ramos, Spies, Iturralde, Duman, & Margolin, 2012).
- Beyond laboratory-based conflicts, applying ambulatory assessment methodologies to couple conflict could be useful in mapping fluctuating, multimodal, and interconnected dimensions of naturally occurring interpersonal dynamics, as well as testing theoretically-driven questions about couple processes (Timmons, Baucom, Han, Perrone, Chaspari, Narayanan, & Margolin, 2017).
- The purpose of this study is to examine the association between tone (hostile/irritated, serious, silly/playful), communication (negative), and relationship distress (expressed annoyance towards partner) in romantic couples' everyday lives.

## HYPOTHESES

- H01:** Moments of everyday relationship distress will be associated with hostile/irritated and serious tones. Couples will express less annoyance with their partner when using a silly/playful tone.
- H02:** Negative communication types, such as conflict, insulting/criticizing/blaming, and complaining, will be associated with moments of everyday relationship distress.
- H03:** The association with negative tones of hostile/irritated and expressed annoyance between partners will be significantly greater among couples with higher levels of dating aggression.
- H04:** The association with negative communication and expressed annoyance between partners will be significantly greater among couples with higher levels of dating aggression.

## PARTICIPANTS

- 152 young-adults (1 female same-sex and 75 opposite sex couples) were recruited via word of mouth, flyers, and advertisements posted online and in the community ( $M$  age = 22.74;  $SD$  = 2.47;  $M$  months together = 30.04;  $SD$  = 24.58).
- 26.3% Caucasian, 22.4% Hispanic/Latino, 16.4% African American, 11.8% Asian, 0.7% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 17.8% multiracial, and 4.6% other.

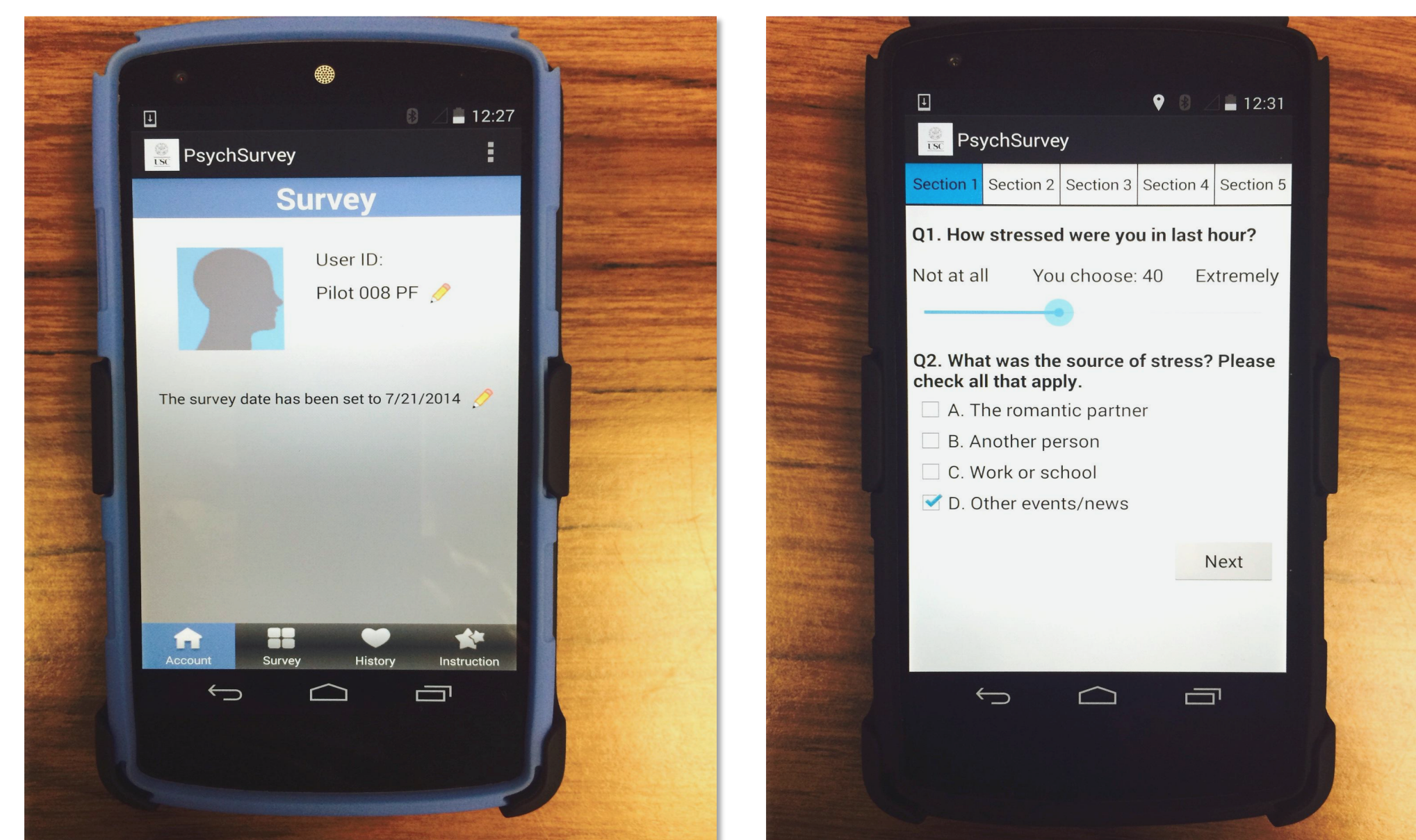
## METHODS

### Procedures:

- Couples responding to the advertisements were screened for eligibility.
- At the visit, partners separately completed questionnaires assessing dating aggression.
- On the day of home data collection, couples came to the laboratory at 10:00am and were each given a smartphone.
- Couples were instructed to go about their daily lives, spend at least five hours together, and fill out a brief survey on the phone every hour.

### Measurements and Instruments:

- Smartphone Nexus-5s collected 3-minute audio files every 12 minutes from 10:00 am until bedtime.
- Participants were unaware of when they were being recorded but could mute the microphone at any time.
- They also completed short surveys assessing their moods and feelings toward their partners every hour.
- Feelings of everyday relationship distress were measured by assessing annoyance towards his or her partner on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 100 (extremely annoyed).
- Participants also filled out a one-time questionnaire in the lab assessing aggression in their current dating relationship within the last year (How Dating Partners Treat Each Other Scale; HDPTEO; Bennett, Guran, Ramos & Margolin, 2011).



The smartphones used to collect the audio samples and take hourly phone surveys about relationship distress

### Data Processing:

- We listened to the audio recordings, manually transcribed them, and coded for tone and communication type during a 3-hour period in which conflict was reported by the partners.
- Examples of tone types:
  - Hostile/Irritated, Serious, Silly/Playful, and High Energy
- Examples of Negative communication types:
  - Insulting/Criticizing/Blaming, Complaining, Badger/Bait, Distracted, Defending, Dismissing/Invalidating, and Conflict

## RESULTS

### Everyday Relationship Distress and Tones

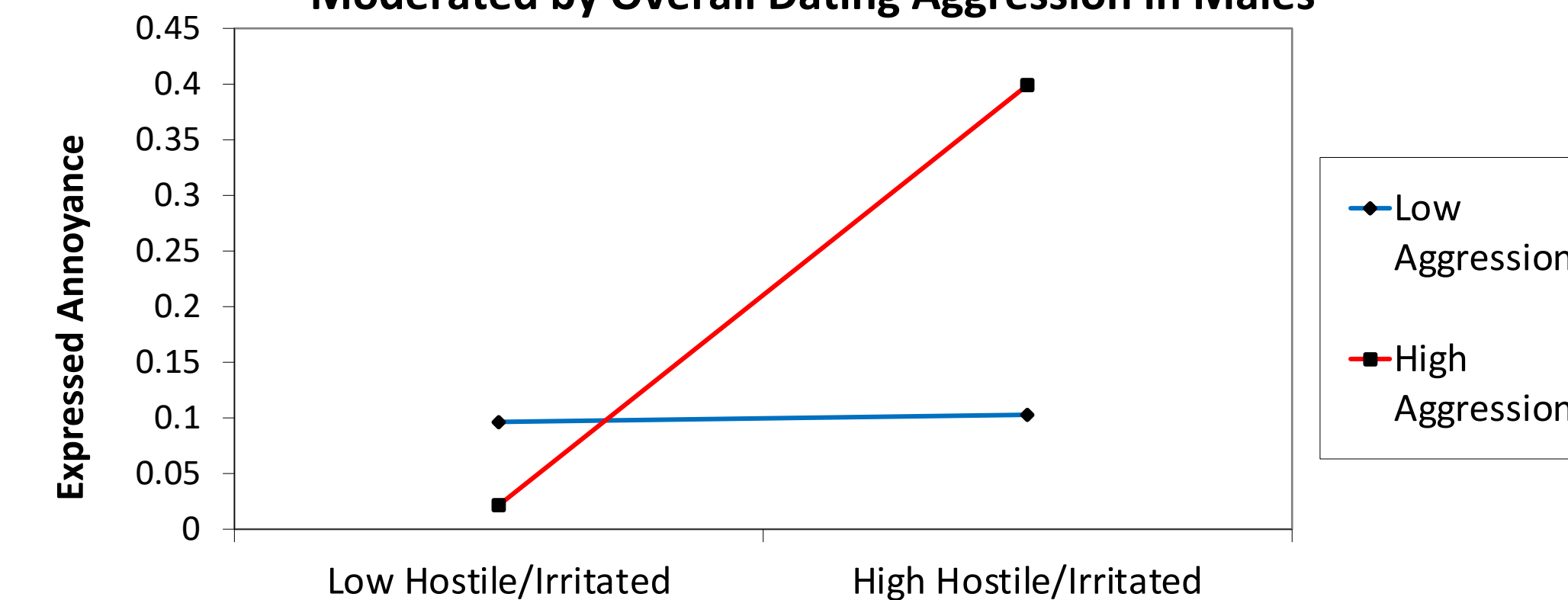
Outcomes	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b/SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Female Hostile/Irritated	0.315	0.132	2.386	<b>0.020</b>
Male Hostile/Irritated	0.303	0.129	2.349	<b>0.022</b>
Female Serious	0.175	0.221	0.792	0.431
Male Serious	0.514	0.183	2.809	<b>0.007</b>
Female Silly/Playful	0.026	0.067	0.388	0.701
Male Silly/Playful	0.023	0.064	0.359	0.724
Female High Energy	-0.122	0.158	-0.772	0.445
Male High Energy	0.853	0.232	3.677	<b>0.000</b>

### Everyday Relationship Distress and Negative Communication Types

Outcomes	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b/SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Female Insult/Critic/Blame	0.598	0.186	3.215	<b>0.002</b>
Male Insult/Critic/Blame	0.426	0.146	2.918	<b>0.005</b>
Female Complaining	0.324	0.155	2.090	<b>0.041</b>
Male Complaining	0.247	0.155	1.593	0.116
Female Badger/Bait	2.184	0.719	3.037	<b>0.003</b>
Male Badger/Bait	2.360	1.311	1.800	0.076
Female Conflict	0.547	0.150	3.647	<b>0.001</b>
Male Conflict	0.085	0.157	0.541	0.590

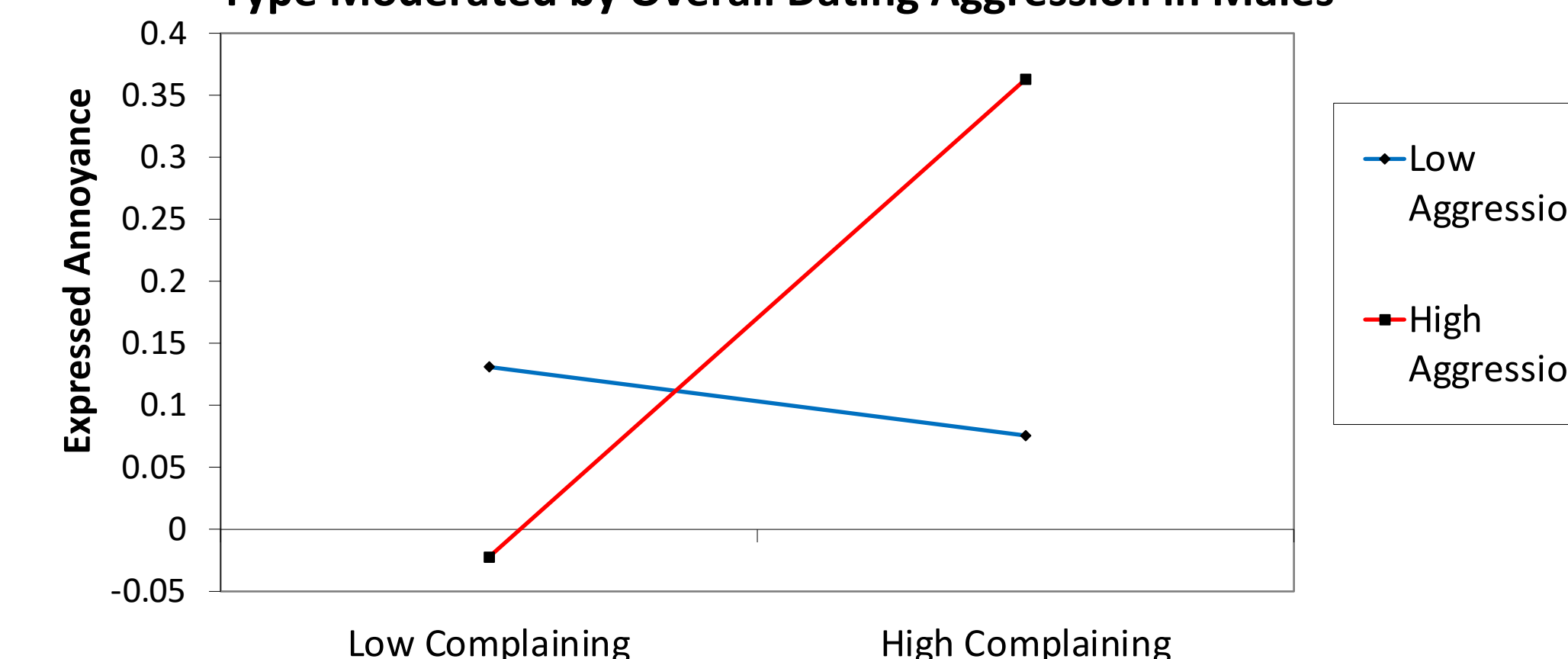
- Regression analyses showed that for males, dating aggression moderated the association between using a hostile/irritated tone and hourly feelings of annoyance ( $b = 1.160, p = 0.000$ ).

### Expressed Annoyance between Partners and Hostile/Irritated Tone Moderated by Overall Dating Aggression in Males



- Regression analyses showed that for males, dating aggression moderated the association between using a complaining negative communication type and hourly feelings of annoyance ( $b = 1.450, p = 0.000$ ).

### Expressed Annoyance between Partners and Complaining Communication Type Moderated by Overall Dating Aggression in Males



## DISCUSSION



- Our findings show that for both females and males, moments of everyday relationship distress were associated with a hostile/irritated tone.
- Males showed an association between moments of everyday relationship distress with serious and high energy tones.
- There was no association with using a silly/playful tone and expressing less annoyance for both females and males.
- Both females and males showed an association between moments of everyday relationship distress and using the insulting/criticizing/blaming communication type.
- Only females relied on complaining, badger/bait, and conflict, when expressing annoyance towards their partner.
- Males with high levels of dating aggression used a hostile/irritated tone when expressing annoyance to their partner.
- There was a significant association with complaining and expressed annoyance in males with high levels of dating aggression.
- Our findings are unique in that couples' behavior was captured in real-life settings, rather than in the laboratory, providing a more accurate picture of relationship communication patterns.
- Future research should collect longer audio samples across a longer time frame to gather more information about couples' tone, communication use, and dating aggression behaviors.
- These data could provide information that will aid in the design of interventions to improve couples' functioning, including Just-in-time-Adaptive Interventions (JITAI) that aim to help couples in real time through mobile devices.

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