

Exploration of the Relationship between Self-Esteem, Commitment, and Verbal Aggressiveness in Romantic Dating Relationships

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Using sociometer theory (Leary, 1999), this study investigated the relationships between argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, self and partner's perceived commitment levels, and self-esteem within romantic dating relationships. Survey results (n = 152) indicated that 1) a moderate relationship between one's self-esteem and one's perceived partner's commitment level existed, 2) a positive correlation between one's self-esteem and level of self-commitment existed, 3) self-esteem was negatively correlated with verbal aggressiveness, and 4) self-commitment did not mediate the relationship between self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness. Discussion of these findings and their significance are reviewed.

Keywords: Interpersonal Communication; Relational Communication; Romantic Communication; Self-Esteem; Verbal Aggressiveness

Extant research suggests that an individual's verbal aggressiveness—a personality trait involving one's tendency to attack another's *self concept* (Infante & Wigley, 1986)—may be related to a variety of negative relational outcomes, including social manipulation by the perpetrator (Kaukiainen et al., 1999), marital dissatisfaction

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(Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989), and physical violence (Murphy, Stosny, & Morrel, 2005), in both marital (Infante et al., 1989; Sabourin, Infante, & Rudd, 1993) and dating relationships (Carey & Mongeau, 1996). Others (e.g., Rancer & Avtgis, 2006) have noted that, while verbal aggressiveness may not always cause physical violence, it almost always coexists in relationships marred by such untoward physical behavior. These studies, with others, underscore the detrimental effect that verbal aggressiveness has on individuals and relationships. While this scholarship has informed our knowledge about how verbal aggression functions, additional examination is needed, which identifies relevant aspects of romantic relationships that prompt individuals to communicate with their partners in verbally aggressive ways. Specifically, much relationship literature has examined the relational *outcomes* related to the trait of verbal aggressiveness (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; Sabourin et al., 1993). Yet, more research examining the *impetus* behind the enactment of this communication trait within the relationship is needed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between these traits, their causes, and their effects. It is the first part of this formula that is the focus of the present study.

One such concept is relational commitment. A consistent finding within the literature is the central role commitment plays in relationship functioning (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Very generally, commitment has been found to be related to a variety of psycho-social states, such as trust and dyadic adjustment (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), and behaviors, such as accommodation and a willingness to sacrifice (Rusbult & Buunk; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Yet, to date, much of this research has focused on prorelationship behaviors. Therefore, a need exists both to understand the relationship between commitment and less constructive communication as well as how communicative traits may influence one's commitment. As such, we chose to focus on the impact commitment has on the enactment of verbal aggressiveness. Moreover, because even *perceptions* of commitment levels have a tremendous impact on everyday behavior in relationships (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994; Wieselquist et al., 1999), investigation of these levels may help illuminate why individuals vary in their use of verbal aggressiveness or argumentativeness in a romantic relationship. Defined as an "intent to persist in a relationship, including long-term orientation toward the involvement, as well as feelings of psychological attachment," commitment level has been observed in terms of one's *own* level of commitment, as well as perceptions of a *partner's* commitment (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 360).

To further inform these postulations, sociometer theory provides a framework for this exploratory study. The theory provides both the necessary theoretical grounding for the study while also integrating another potential impetus influencing verbal aggressiveness—self-esteem. Sociometer theory (Leary, 1999; 2003) depicts self-esteem as a self-evaluation made based on the perceived levels of acceptance or rejection from others (i.e., family, friends, partners, etc.). Granted, the vast literature on self-esteem argues that myriad factors contribute to an individual's self-esteem (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; for review: Leary & MacDonald, 2005), and that several benefits and harms of self-esteem levels exist (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003; De Cremer, 2003; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). However, it is also important to note that these

contributing factors and outcomes do not always pertain to the same definition of self-esteem, as the term has been used in numerous ways in the literature (global evaluation of self versus locating self-esteem within a particular context; Srivastava & Beer, 2005). For the purposes of this research, self-esteem is viewed within the domain of romantic relationships and thus, “others” are defined as romantic partners. Given research that demonstrates others’ evaluations affecting self-evaluations (i.e., the sociometer hypothesis) in both (general) social and romantic contexts in particular (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Leary, Terdal, Tambor, & Downs, 1995; Srivastava & Beer, 2005; Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, & Alexander, 2005; Zhang & Stafford, 2008), it is highly likely that individuals might gather self-perceptions based upon messages exchanged between themselves and their partners (e.g., verbal and nonverbal displays of affection).

Therefore, with sociometer theory providing the theoretical foundation, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the etiology of verbal aggressiveness within romantic dating relationships by examining the impact of attendant forces: perceptions of partner commitment, self-commitment, and self-esteem. According to social psychologists (e.g., Kassin, 2003), traits are considered habitual patterns of emotion, thought, and behavior that are relatively stable across time and that influence behavior. This definition would suggest that the trait of verbal aggressiveness remains a communication construct because it is so closely connected to the habituated communicative behavior of verbal aggression. As noted by Infante and Rancer (1995), “Communication traits and predispositions have been found to account for significant variance in both observed communication behavior and communication-based perceptions” (p. 328). Therefore, the findings of this study have the potential to contribute to the well-established trait-based theory-building efforts in communication (Infante & Rancer, 1995) by systematically examining precursors to the destructive communicative trait—verbal aggressiveness.

Literature Review

Self-Esteem and Commitment

Developed by social psychologist Mark R. Leary and his colleagues, sociometer theory is defined as an “internal, subjective marker” of an individual’s level of inclusion (Leary, 2003, p. 271). Specifically, Leary (1999) posited that self-esteem is more strongly related to individuals’ beliefs about *others’ evaluations of them* than *their own self-evaluations*. According to sociometer theory, individuals possess an evolutionary drive to belong to social groups and maintain significant interpersonal relationships. It is highly likely that the consequences of not doing so led to the development of a mechanism—the sociometer—that continuously monitors the social environment for cues of acceptance or rejection from others (Leary, 2003).

Relatedly, sociometer theory can also be operationalized in the context of romantic relationships to examine the correlation between self-esteem and perceived partner commitment. That is, individuals are constantly gauging their perceived acceptance or rejection by their loved one. Sociometer theory supports the fact that self-esteem

is most strongly related to individuals' attributes that are believed to be valued by significant others (Leary, 1999). For example, one partner may express how much he/she loves the other. This affectionate expression would increase the other partner's self-esteem. On the other hand, sending messages of dislike or annoyance would result in the lowering of the other partner's self-esteem. For this study, individuals' ideas of their significant others' perceived acceptance and rejection level will be measured by their perceptions of their partners' commitment. In sociometer terms, when individuals perceive their partners' commitment (acceptance) as low, this seeming act of "rejection" should negatively affect reports of self-esteem levels. Alternatively, individuals who perceive high levels of commitment from their partners (and, therefore, perceive higher levels of acceptance) will most likely report higher levels of self-esteem.

Furthermore, people behaving in ways that protect their self-esteem, are also generally behaving in ways that they believe will increase their relational value in others' eyes, heightening chances of greater social acceptance. For example, an individual's verbal aggressiveness, which may function to protect his/her self-esteem and regain/maintain social acceptance, may be a manifestation of sociometer theory. Based upon sociometer theory's assertion that in the specific context of interpersonal relationships, individuals are constantly gauging their perceived acceptance or rejection by others (Leary, 1999), we argue that:

H1: Individual's self-esteem and perceptions of partner's level of commitment will have a positive relationship.

Evidence suggests that individuals with high levels of self-esteem tend to have more positive views of their lives and their relationships than do those with low levels of self-esteem (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979). Moreover, Murray, Derrick, Leder, and Holmes (2008) concluded that individuals low in self-esteem were more likely to prioritize self-protection goals over connectedness goals in their relationship, directing them away from situations that necessitate trust and dependency on partners. Therefore, we contend that one's commitment to his/her relationship is likely to be filtered through a self-esteem-affected lens and posit the following hypothesis:

H2: Individual's self-esteem and self-commitment will be positively correlated.

According to the sociometer hypothesis, during interactions with romantic partners, individuals gather perceptions of their partners' commitment levels (or, the partners' degree of acceptance or rejection), which becomes nearly synonymous with their self-esteem (Leary, 1999). That is, if a partner appears highly committed, then the individual should also exhibit high self-esteem. Furthermore, assuming that self-esteem functions as a "sociometer," people will want to exhibit prorelationship behaviors to attain significant others' positive regard. These behaviors lead to greater relationship satisfaction, which has been found to be a predictor of commitment (Rusbult, 1980). These findings suggest that individuals' perception of their partners' commitment to the relationship will have an effect on the relationship between how the individuals feel about themselves and the level of commitment they feel. Therefore, we assume that the perception of partner's commitment will have a moderating effect

on the relationship between self-esteem and one's own commitment. However, because of the tentative nature of these propositions, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: In what ways, if any, will the relationship between self-esteem and self-commitment be moderated by perceptions of a partner's commitment?

Verbal Aggressiveness, Self-Esteem, and Commitment

Although there is evidence to suggest connections between verbal aggressiveness, commitment, and self-esteem (Leary & MacDonald, 2005), an in-depth exploration of all three variables' relationships remains a mystery in communication literature. First, while research is more populated with studies exploring the relationship between verbal aggression and self-esteem, the results of such studies have been mixed and somewhat contradictory. Rancer, Kosberg, and Silvestri (1992), for example, found that the defensive self-enhancement dimension of self-esteem most strongly predicted verbal aggressiveness. Conversely, Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996) found low self-esteem does not cause human aggression; however, their findings were later contradicted in a study conducted by Murphy et al. (2005). Similarly, D'Zurilla, Chang, and Sanna (2003) contradicted Baumeister and colleague's (1996) findings and found evidence that low self-esteem correlated positively with anger and hostility, which can be linked to verbal aggression as it is considered hostile. Therefore, the relationship between self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness is still largely debatable and deserves further study. In regards to sociometer, verbally aggressive communication can be perceived by individuals in the relationship as unaffectionate communication, and thus can contribute to lower self-esteem. To further explicate the relationship between self-esteem and use of verbal aggression, the following research question is proposed:

RQ2: In what ways, if any, does an individual's level of self-esteem predict that individual's level of verbal aggressiveness?

Second, scholars contend that during verbally aggressive communication, individuals attack others' self-concepts with the intent to humiliate, embarrass, depress, or instill other negative feelings in those others. Given that research findings have demonstrated a negative relationship between commitment and destructive confrontation (Roloff & Solomon, 2002), as well as a negative relationship between commitment and communicative acts of abuse (Byers, Shue, & Marshall, 2004), the likelihood of physical violence occurring in a relationship may also be correlated with individuals' commitment to relationships. Further evidence for this assertion was demonstrated in a study by Gaertner and Foshee (1999). The authors found relationship members in dating couples became less likely to use physical violence as their commitment to the relationship increased. The relationship between perceived commitment and verbal aggressiveness could prove interesting as verbally aggressive communication has been found to be a means to physical violence, which has in turn been linked to individuals' commitment levels. Further, due to the role that perceived partner's commitment plays in the sociometer hypothesis, it is important to examine perceived commitment's potential contributions to the

relationship between one's commitment and verbal aggressiveness. Thus, the tenuous connections between these variables in the literature as well as the potential involvement of the sociometer prompt us to pose the following research question:

RQ3: What relationship, if any, will exist between self-commitment of an individual and that same individual's level of verbal aggressiveness, and in what ways, if any, will that relationship be moderated by perceived partner's commitment?

Moreover, sociometer theory directs us to the notion that, within romantic relationships, individuals' self-esteem is related to their partners' perception of them, and, further, individuals' own commitment to their relationship will be influenced by those perceptions and their own self-esteem. Thus, if self-esteem predicts verbally aggressive communication, as speculated in RQ2, it is important to look at the role that self-commitment may play in this relationship. Based upon previously cited literature, we argue that the relationship between self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness may be contingent upon individuals' own level of commitment. Therefore, we speculate that self-commitment mediates the relationship between self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness and posit the following research question to reflect that question:

RQ4: In what ways, if any, will the relationship between self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness be mediated by self-commitment?

Method

Participants and Procedures

To qualify for the study, the participants needed to be 19 years of age or older and currently in a dating relationship that has lasted for 1 month or longer (mean length = 17.8 months). Participants ($n = 152$, mean age = 20.92, range = 19 to 29) were solicited from various undergraduate introductory communication courses and Greek organizations from a Midwestern university. The sample was composed of 76 females and 76 males who were primarily European American ($n = 137$). Class standings of the individuals involved were comprised of 6 freshmen (3.9%), 63 sophomores (41.4%), 41 juniors (27.0%), and 38 seniors (25.0%).

After being provided with information about the general purpose of the study as well as instructions for completing the surveys, participants answered the six-page paper and pencil questionnaire that addressed a variety of aspects related to communication within their dating relationships. In addition to the variables addressed in the present study, participants were asked to provide information regarding the use of relational violence and their perceptions of relational alternatives. Participants took approximately 20 minutes to complete the survey.

Instruments and Reliabilities

Verbal aggressiveness was measured using Infante and Wigley's (1986) Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (VAS). This scale contained 20 items measured on a 5-point Likert

scale, with responses ranging from *almost never* (1) to *almost always* (5). Sample items included “When people do things which are mean or cruel, I attack their character to help correct their behavior,” and “When people simply will not budge on a matter of importance I lose my temper and say rather strong things to them.” Higher scores reflect higher levels of verbal aggressiveness ($M = 2.41$, $SD = .64$, range = 1 to 4.05). Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was .90.

Additionally, self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg’s (1979) Self-Esteem Scale (RSE). This scale contains 10 items, with responses ranging from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (5) on a 5-point Likert scale. Sample items included, “I feel useless at times,” and “All in all, I’m inclined to feel that I’m a failure.” Higher scores reflect higher levels of self-esteem ($M = 4.25$, $SD = .58$). Cronbach’s alpha in the present study was .87.

Finally, commitment was measured using a revised version (Duncan & Ross, 1998) of Rusbult’s (1980) scales. Commitment was broken down into the individual’s commitment (e.g., “I am extremely attached to my partner”) and the individuals’ reports of the partner’s commitment (e.g., “My partner is extremely committed to our relationship”) levels with responses ranging from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (5). Item responses were recoded so that higher scores reflected higher levels of commitment. Cronbach’s alphas were .90 for self-commitment ($M = 4.06$, $SD = .98$, 5 items) and .87 for perceived partner commitment ($M = 4.15$, $SD = .92$, 4 items).

Variables

The dependent variable in this study was trait verbal aggressiveness. Participant self-esteem, self commitment, and perceived partner commitment (i.e., one’s own commitment and one’s perception of the partner’s commitment) were independent variables. Additionally, self-commitment was explored as a mediating variable and the moderating effect of perceived partner’s commitment was also examined.

Data Analysis

The data for hypotheses one and two were analyzed using one-tailed correlations. Additionally, regression was used to analyze RQ 1–4.

Results

To investigate the relationship between self-esteem and commitment levels, the first hypothesis suggested that a positive correlation would exist between self-esteem (as a sociometer) and individuals’ perception of their partners’ levels of commitment to the relationship. The results supported this hypothesis, indicating that the relationship between self-esteem and perceived partner commitment was positively correlated, $r(152) = .14$ ($p < .05$). Thus, as our perceptions of our partner’s commitment to the relationship increases, our self-esteem levels also increase. Further, the proposed relationship between self-esteem and one’s own commitment to the relationship also proved to be significant, supporting the second hypothesis,

$r(152) = .14$ ($p < .05$). Therefore, as one's self-esteem increases, one's commitment to the relationship also increases, yielding a positive correlation between these variables. Although these relationships are small, these results fall in line with the foundation of sociometer theory, which suggests one's self-esteem and relational evaluations should be positively related.

Research question 1 asked if the relationship between self-esteem and self-commitment would be moderated by individuals' perceptions of their partners' commitment level. In other words, to what degree do individuals' perception of their partners' commitment to the relationship strengthen (or weaken) the relationship between how individuals feel about themselves and the level of commitment they feel toward their partners? As stated in hypothesis 2, the results revealed a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and one's level of commitment. Additionally, perceived partner's commitment demonstrated a strong correlation with self-commitment $F(2, 149) = 89.35$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .55$, Adj. $R^2 = .54$. A significant interaction between the variables revealed the relationship between self-esteem and self-commitment levels were strongest among participants who were high in perceived partner's commitment $F(3, 148) = 62.00$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .56$, Adj. $R^2 = .55$. In other words, when partners were perceived to be highly committed to the relationship, individuals' own feelings of self-esteem and self-commitment were bolstered.

Research question 2 revealed that an inverse relationship existed between self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness ($r[152] = -.16$; $p < .05$). Therefore, as one's self-esteem decreased, the predisposition toward verbal aggressiveness increased. Further, a regression analysis revealed self-esteem to be a predictor of one's reported trait verbal aggressiveness $F(1, 150) = 3.72$, $p = .05$, $R^2 = .02$, Adj. $R^2 = .02$.

The third research question inquired about the relationship between self-commitment and verbal aggressiveness. Specifically, researchers questioned if a relationship existed between self-commitment and verbal aggressiveness and if that relationship would be moderated by perceived partner's commitment. Hierarchical multiple regression revealed that one's self-commitment and perceived partner's commitment were not significant predictors of verbal aggressiveness $F(2, 149) = 1.59$, $p = .21$, $R^2 = .02$, Adj. $R^2 = .01$. Additionally, the interaction between self-commitment and perceived partner's commitment was not significant $F(3, 148) = 1.84$, $p = .14$, $R^2 = .04$, Adj. $R^2 = .02$. Therefore, perceived partner commitment was not found to be a moderating variable (see Table 1).

Although perceived partner's commitment did not prove to be a moderator, we wanted to further examine the role of one's self-commitment. Specifically, we questioned whether self-commitment would function as a mediating variable in this relationship, meaning that the relationship between self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness was contingent upon one's level of self-commitment. To test this relationship, a linear regression was run between the variables. Based on the requirements for simple mediation (Judd & Kenny, 1981), self-commitment was not a significant mediator between self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness. Self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness were significantly correlated ($r[152] = -.16$; $p < .05$); however, self-commitment was

Table 1 Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Testing the Relationship Between Individual's Self-Commitment and Self-Esteem and Partner's Perceived Commitment

	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1			
Self-esteem	.04		
Partner's Perceived Commitment	.73	.55	.55*
Step 2			
Self-esteem \times Partner's Perceived Commitment	1.04	.56	.01*
<i>N</i>	152		

Note. β indicates standardized regression coefficient; R^2 , multiple correlation squared; and ΔR^2 , change in the squared multiple correlation.

* $p < .05$.

not significantly related to self-esteem ($r [151] = .14$; $p = .07$) nor verbal aggressiveness ($r [151] = .13$; $p = .11$).

Discussion

This exploratory study primarily investigated the relationship between self-esteem, commitment, and the communication trait, verbal aggression. Although modest, the findings indicated that individuals' self-esteem levels were not only related to their *own* levels of commitment to a relationship, but also to their perceptions of their *partners'* commitment to the relationship. Further, the results revealed that self-esteem accounted for a small portion of the variance when explaining one's tendency to be verbally aggressive.

Overall, the findings warrant continued study on the validity of sociometer theory, particularly in a romantic relationship setting. Specifically, the study supports the importance of conceptualizing perceptions of self-esteem that may influence relational communication, as opposed to being a stable element of the personality. The theory needs to be applied across situations before concrete conclusions are drawn; however, the results suggest that one's outside evaluations do, indeed, play a major role in one's relational communication. Communication scholars are uniquely positioned to use sociometer theory to continue to investigate how individuals' perceptions, interactions, and subsequent evaluations of those interactions constitute their self-esteem levels (Leary, 2003). Furthermore, a sociometer approach to existing research involving self-esteem may illuminate previously enigmatic relationships between self-esteem and other key variables.

Important opportunities for future research flow from these findings. For example, we need to better understand the relationship between verbal aggressiveness (the trait) and verbal aggression (the behavior). In other words, when and under what conditions does a person enact behaviorally the trait of verbal aggressiveness? As noted by Wigley (2008), individuals may restrain their aggressive tendencies, "even when they feel like 'lashing out!'" (p. 340). On the other hand, there may

be other times when they may not restrain themselves. So, a question for future researchers to consider is, why some times and not others? Said another way, when is verbal aggression manifested during a communicative exchange involving individuals high in trait verbal aggressiveness? Further, future research should examine partner's verbal aggressiveness as a moderator in the relationship between an individual's self-commitment and verbal aggressiveness. Individuals' commitment and verbal aggressiveness may be influenced by their perceptions of their partners' verbal aggressiveness.

Last, practical implications—particularly for those interested in helping others constructively communicate—could be drawn from these findings as well. For example, our results suggested a small, but significant, inverse relationship between self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness. Or, said more positively, individuals with higher levels of self-esteem were less likely to possess the trait of verbal aggressiveness. Our findings support those of D'Zurilla et al. (2003) who found that low self-esteem correlated positively with anger and hostility. Moreover, self-esteem was found to predict verbal aggressiveness in this study. Therefore, our findings suggest that a mental health professional treating a highly verbally aggressive individual might want to consider granting equal time and effort to treating both the individual's verbal aggressiveness *and* the individual's self-esteem, as both may be contributing to the negative communication behaviors displayed in the individual's interpersonal relationships (see Wigley, 2008, for further ideas about verbal aggression interventions).

Despite this study's benefits to communication research and practice, limitations should be noted. First, because the self-esteem and verbal aggressiveness scales were not modified to mirror the nature of the participant's relationship, a more global assessment of the variables was obtained. Thus, the findings' applicability to more specific relationship-based behavior is not known. Second, the sample for this study consisted of college students at a large, Midwestern university, including some members of Greek organizations. This sampling strategy limits the generalizability of the study's findings due to the sample's unique composition. Last, this study obtained responses from only one partner in the relationship dyad. Obtaining both partners' responses may have enhanced this study's understanding of the relationship's role with self-esteem, commitment, and verbal aggressiveness in addition to understanding the role of assimilation in these relationships. Future research ought to examine both partners in the relationship dyad as well as the interaction of the aforementioned variables within more random samples that represent the population. Conducting an analysis of variance across a wider range of ages might lead to a more complete understanding of the ways these variables are interrelated. Also, the cross-sectional design and individual unit of analysis constrains our understanding of how communication patterns are enacted in relationships over time and how self-esteem may fluctuate, influencing dyadic relational dynamics. Finding ways to capture the fluid, dynamic nature of communication over time is essential to deepening our understanding of how individuals construct and maintain relationships.

In conclusion, this investigation provides another step toward further clarifying how one's own self-esteem and communication traits are related to key relational

issues, such as commitment (one's own and one's perception of partner's). These findings may facilitate researchers, as well as relationship counselors, to not only better understand individuals' likelihood of engaging in aggressive communication, but also to assist individuals in constructively communicating in an effort to create stronger, healthier unions.

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