

## **Words Can Hurt the Ones You Love: Interpersonal Trust as it Relates to Listening Anxiety and Verbal Aggression**

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*The goal of this study was to examine the associations among interpersonal trust, listening anxiety, and verbal aggression in young adult romantic relationships. Listening anxiety is a factor of informational reception apprehension (IRA; Wheelless, Preiss, & Gayle, 1997) derived from the perception of one's inability to effectively process information while listening. Undergraduate students (N = 307) from a Midwestern university completed an online questionnaire. Results revealed that listening anxiety was negatively associated with interpersonal trust and that interpersonal trust was negatively associated with verbal aggression. Further, there was a significant indirect effect of listening anxiety on verbal aggression through interpersonal trust, but only for those currently in a romantic relationship (n = 127). The findings are discussed as they relate to the importance of trust in a relationship and how trust can be perceived differently for those in romantic relationships.*

Verbal aggression is a communicative behavior involving an attack on an individual's self-concept (Infante, 1987). On an individual level, receivers of verbally-aggressive messages can experience hurt feelings (McLaren & Solomon, 2008; Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, & Alexander, 2005), and senders of verbally-aggressive messages can experience negative affect (i.e., fear, sadness, guilt) as a result of regretting their communicative choice to aggress against someone (Aloia & Solomon, 2013). On a relational level, verbal aggression is often accompanied by dissatisfaction (Venable & Martin, 1997) and can weaken relationship stability, potentially resulting in relationship termination (Gottman, 1994). It is therefore imperative to pursue scholarship that examines correlates of verbal aggression in relationships. The current study examines factors associated with verbal aggression in dyadic romantic relationships.

Communication scholars have sought to understand biological (Beatty & McCroskey, 1997) and environmental (Infante, Wall, Leap & Danielson, 1984) correlates of verbal aggression, in

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addition to situational triggers (Wigley, 2010) and argumentative skill deficits (Infante, 1987, 1988; Onyekwere, Rubin, & Infante, 1991). Surprisingly, there are few examples of scholarship that have examined verbal aggression's relationship to the important communicative skill of listening (Worthington, 2005) or listening anxiety (Schrodt & Wheelless, 2001).

The current project was motivated by Schrodt and Wheelless' (2001) investigation of antecedents for verbal aggressiveness and trait argumentativeness (i.e., the ability to form rational arguments to defend one's position). They focused on two factors of informational reception apprehension (IRA; Wheelless, Preiss, & Gayle, 1997) that are relevant to interpersonal interaction: listening anxiety and intellectual inflexibility. IRA represents an individual's limitations for processing, interpreting, and adapting to information in their environment, as well as the subsequent associated apprehension. Listening anxiety is the anticipated fear and frustration of comprehending others' messages, whereas intellectual inflexibility is a general cognitive rigidity when receiving information.

Schrodt and Wheelless (2001) detected a moderate positive relationship between trait argumentativeness and the combination of intellectual inflexibility and listening anxiety, but that combination accounted for a negligible 3% of variance in verbal aggressiveness. When IRA factors were examined individually, they found that participants who reported being more verbally aggressive tended to experience the highest levels of intellectual inflexibility; alas, no statistically significant relationship between listening anxiety and verbal aggressiveness was found. We propose that the lack of relationship between listening anxiety and verbal aggressiveness may be explained by the possibility that listening anxiety is *indirectly* related to verbal aggression. In fact, it is sensible to expect that interpersonal trust (i.e., the perception of being able to count on one's partner to look out for one's interests even when the partner's own interests are at stake; Gottman, 2011) is an intervening variable that can explain how listening anxiety is related to verbal aggression. Interpersonal trust significantly influences whether or not an interpersonal relationship survives and thrives. Trust allows individuals to work together without fear of being harmed. Such cooperation is necessary in any romantic relationship, yet it is often lacking. Without trust, partners tend to react more defensively to the perceived risk of harm (Gottman, 2011).

### **Verbal Aggression**

Verbal aggression is communication that symbolically hurts, or threatens to hurt, another person (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Infante

and Wigley identified several commonly used forms of verbally-aggressive messages: profanity, threats, and attacks on background, competence, character, and/or physical appearance. Though verbal aggression is capable of producing a variety of negative feelings and consequences, the most devastating outcome of verbally-aggressive behavior is when it results in the use of physical violence as conflict escalates (e.g., Hoffman, 1984; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Straus, 1974). Controlling for experiences of physical violence and socioeconomic status, Vissing, Straus, Gelles, and Harrop (1991) found that boys and girls who receive verbally-aggressive messages from parents are likely to develop psychosocial problems (i.e., interpersonal problems, delinquency, and physical aggression). Further, Kinsfogel and Grych (2004) found beliefs justifying aggressive behavior in relationships were reported more frequently from boys who had observed aggressive conflict behaviors between parents; such beliefs were also related to the boys' use of aggressive behavior toward dating partners.

Infante (1987, 1988) proposed the argumentative skill deficiency model of verbal aggression, wherein individuals who fail to possess necessary argumentative skills (i.e., understanding the position of the other; processing information and constructing arguments; and communicating and supporting your position without attacking the self-concept of your opponent) are more likely to produce verbally-aggressive messages in conflict situations. Indeed, Infante et al. (1989) found that for men and women in violent marriages, perceived partner verbal aggressiveness was higher. Thus, Infante et al. conjectured that when faced with the need to defend their self-concepts, partners' inability to invent effective lines of argument would produce greater amounts of verbal aggressiveness, potentially leading to physically violent episodes. The implications of previous research advance the current study's proposition that deficits in communicative skill, perceived competence, and information processing ability have the potential to produce communication dysfunction such as aggression and even violence.

### **Listening Anxiety as a Factor of Informational Reception Apprehension**

Informational reception apprehension (IRA; Wheelless et al., 1997) has the potential to limit an individual's ability to competently communicate and to cause a host of undesirable outcomes. Based on the concept of receiver apprehension (RA; Wheelless, 1975), IRA more specifically pertains to limitations in processing and applying information that contribute to anticipated and experienced apprehensiveness. Wheelless et al. (1997) designed the Informational Reception Apprehension Test (IRAT) to measure the perceptions of

IRA at two information reception points (i.e., listening and reading) and through one cognitive process (i.e., intellectual inflexibility). Schrodtt and Wheelless (2001) administered the IRAT to examine the IRA factors of intellectual inflexibility and listening anxiety as antecedents of verbal aggressiveness and trait argumentativeness, because those factors are highly relevant to interpersonal interaction. Citing extant literature (e.g., Neer, 1994), Schrodtt and Wheelless argued, “the more differentiated, integrated, permeable, and abstract one’s construct system, the better an individual will be at adapting effective persuasive messages” and thus, presumably, at refraining from aggressiveness and argumentativeness (pp. 57-58). That reasoning may be considered compelling enough to outweigh Schrodtt and Wheelless’ initial findings that did not support a relationship of listening anxiety and verbal aggressiveness. Indeed, a third variable (i.e., interpersonal trust) holds promise for discerning the relationship between listening anxiety and verbal aggression, because both listening anxiety (e.g., Wheelless et al., 1997) and verbal aggression (e.g., Venable & Martin, 1997) have been shown to be associated with relational dynamics regarding vulnerability and satisfaction (components of interpersonal trust).

### **Interpersonal Trust**

Rotter (1967) defined interpersonal trust as “an expectancy held by an individual or a group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon” (p. 651). The idea that trust is a belief of dependency or reliability is commonly observed. For example, many individuals trust that close friends will return books that they borrow and find it difficult to trust that politicians will follow through with their campaign promises. Rotter’s perspective uses a cognitive definition of trust, wherein the promises of another person are *thought* to be believable and is taken to be a definition of generalized trust.

Larzelere and Huston (1980), through correlational analysis, found that generalized trust and interpersonal (dyadic) trust are not overlapping and therefore are discrete categories. In this vein, and for the purpose of this study, another definition of trust is more appropriate. Gottman (2011) conceptualized interpersonal trust as being able to count on one’s partner to look out for one’s interests, frequently in situations where the partner’s own interests are at stake. Because the expectation is predicting how a partner *will behave*, Gottman’s conceptualization of interpersonal trust serves as a behavioral definition, emphasizing one partner prioritizing the well-being of the other.

## Theoretical Underpinnings of the Current Study

Gottman's (2011) appropriation of Weiss' (1980) concept of "sentiment override" is a particularly useful theoretical lens through which to contextualize this study. We believe that sentiment override helps to explain the relationship between trust and verbal aggression. In particular, Gottman discovered that happy couples may find themselves in an exchange of aggressive communication (i.e., the nasty-nasty exchange), but they are able to move on from it effectively and unscathed. Unhappy couples, however, find themselves in nasty-nasty exchanges more frequently and get stuck in the "absorbing state," unable to repair it. The resulting negative sentiment override involves feelings of being unloved, unappreciated, and unreciprocated, and it can lead to the deterioration of trust. Gottman argues that this erosion of trust creates an adversarial relationship where self-defense, verbal aggression, and hurt feelings hold sway.

Moreover, the presence of hurt feelings in romantic relationships correlates with perceptions of partners' intentions to inflict harm through the use of verbal aggression (McLaren & Solomon, 2008; Vangelisti et al., 2005). The intent to inflict harm is antithetical to the establishment of trust as Gottman (2011) defines it. In fact, Gottman used a trust metric to reanalyze large amounts of data collected while studying heterosexual married couples and found that when husbands trust wives, there is significantly less physiological arousal during marital conflict, and that wives who trust their husbands report receiving significantly less verbal aggression during conflict. It stands to reason, then, that individuals who struggle with listening anxiety and perceive themselves unable to process information effectively and who do not have much trust in their partner's good intentions are more prone to negative sentiment override. This is likely to inspire higher perceptions of verbal aggression from partners and more willingness to engage in it for self-defense. Interpersonal trust in romantic relationships reduces perceptions of threatening intentions and allows for positive exchanges of communication to occur. Accordingly, anxiety associated with actual or perceived information processing deficits is expected to decrease when interpersonal trust in a romantic relationship increases. Therefore, the following hypothesis was posited:

H1: There is a negative relationship between listening anxiety and interpersonal trust within romantic dyads.

Moreover, higher levels of interpersonal trust in romantic relationships are expected to be associated with decreased needs to self-defend through verbally-aggressive messages. Hence, the next hypothesis was posited:

H2: There is a negative relationship between interpersonal trust and the use of verbal aggression within romantic dyads. Finally, interpersonal trust in romantic relationships is expected to underlie the association between listening anxiety and the use of verbal aggression. Though an individual may experience listening anxiety, higher levels of interpersonal trust are expected to buffer the effects of anxiety and allow for more positive inferences of partner intentions, resulting in a decreased need to self-defend through verbally-aggressive messages. Thus, our final hypothesis was posited:

H3: Listening anxiety will have an indirect effect on the use of verbal aggression through interpersonal trust.

## Method

### Participants

A convenience sample of 362 students enrolled in classes within the Department of Communication Studies at a large Midwestern university was utilized for this study. Forty-seven participants did not complete the survey. As Larzelere and Huston (1980) found levels of dyadic trust to differ significantly through varying types of romantic relationships, participants who reported a relationship status that was either married ( $n = 7$ ) or separated ( $n = 1$ ) were removed. The remaining sample of 307 participants included 121 males and 186 females, ranging in age from 18 to 28, with a mean age of 19.29 ( $SD = 1.46$ ).

One hundred and forty-two participants answered “yes” to whether they were “currently in a romantic relationship”; another 165 responded “no” and were instructed to reflect on a previous relationship. Of those who reported being in a current romantic relationship, 89% ( $n = 127$ ) reported their status to be “dating,” while the other 11% ( $n = 15$ ) reported that they were living with their romantic partner. Length of relationships were reported incrementally and included 0 to 3 months (18%), 3 to 6 months (20%), 6 months to 1 year (17%), 1 to 5 years (42%), and 5 years or more (3%).

### Procedures

An email was sent to all students enrolled in a basic public speaking course and some additional courses in the department. After students read the informed consent statement, they were allowed to agree to participate and enter the online site housing the questionnaire that assessed demographics (e.g., sex, age, relationship status, and relationship length), verbal aggression, listening anxiety, and interpersonal trust in relationships. Upon completion, students

received a “receipt” for participation in order to receive class credit for optional research participation. The Institutional Review Board at the university approved all methods and procedures utilized in this study.

## Measures

**Listening Anxiety.** Participants completed the Informational Reception Apprehension Test for Listening (IRAT-L; Wheelless et al., 1997), which was designed to assess listening anxiety. This measure includes 13 Likert-type items (1-5 scale, with 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*). Sample items from the IRAT-L include: “It is frustrating to listen to people discuss practical problems in philosophical and abstract ways” and “When I listen to complicated information, I often fear that I will misinterpret it.” A high score represents higher levels of listening anxiety. In this study, the IRAT-L had a Cronbach’s alpha of .91 ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = .75$ ).

**Verbal Aggression.** Infante’s (1986) Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (VAS) was utilized to measure participants’ perceived use of verbal aggression. This instrument includes 20 Likert-type items (1-5 scale, with 1 = *almost never true* and 5 = *almost always true*) asking participants to reflect on how they engage in conflict with other people. Sample items from the VAS include: “When people criticize my shortcomings, I take it in good humor and do not try to get back at them” [reverse scored] and “When people do things which are mean or cruel, I attack their character in order to help correct their behavior.” A high score represents frequent use of verbal aggression. In this study, the VAS had a Cronbach’s alpha of .85 ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = .49$ ).

**Interpersonal Trust.** In order to assess interpersonal trust, the Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS; Larzelere & Huston, 1980) was utilized. The instrument includes eight Likert type items (1-7 scale, with 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*), which measure the level of trust one has with a (current or recent) romantic relationship partner. Sample items from the DTS include: “My partner is primarily interested in his (her) own welfare” [reverse scored] and “I feel that my partner can be counted on to help me.” A high score on the DTS demonstrates high levels of interpersonal trust. In this study, the DTS had a Cronbach’s alpha of .89 ( $M = 4.94$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ).

## Results

For the first and second hypotheses, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to assess the hypothesized negative relationships between listening anxiety and interpersonal

trust (H1) and between interpersonal trust and the use of verbal aggression (H2). There was a significant negative correlation between listening anxiety and interpersonal trust ( $r = -.12, p < .05$ ), suggesting that as interpersonal trust decreases, listening anxiety increases. There was also a significant negative correlation between interpersonal trust and the use of verbal aggression ( $r = -.11, p < .05$ ), indicating that as the use of verbal aggression increases, interpersonal trust decreases. Thus, the first two hypotheses were supported.

Hypothesis three (H3) predicted that listening anxiety would have an indirect effect on the use of verbal aggression through interpersonal trust. A bootstrapped mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) was utilized to investigate the indirect effect of listening anxiety on the use of verbal aggression through interpersonal trust. Bootstrapping analyzes the data using randomly generated samples obtained from the original data (in this analysis; 5,000 sets). The distribution of these effects are then used to achieve confidence intervals of 95% to indicate the size of the indirect effect of interpersonal trust. The confidence intervals (not including zero) are then used to determine if the indirect effect is statistically significant. Preacher and Kelley (2011) recommend the use of a standardized effect size that is not sensitive to sample sizes (kappa-squared;  $\kappa^2$ ).  $\kappa^2$  is the proportion of the size of the indirect effect relative to the maximum possible indirect effect. Although Preacher and Kelley (2011) argue that a small effect size does not denote low importance, nor does an important effect size need to be large, they nonetheless compare evaluations of  $\kappa^2$  to Cohen's (1988) guidelines for estimates of size for squared correlation coefficients. Values of .01, .09, and .25, therefore, are labeled as small, medium, and large, respectively. Unstandardized path coefficients are reported for the direct and indirect effects.

With regard to the third hypothesis (H3), the direct effect of listening anxiety on verbal aggression was significant ( $B = .08, p < .05$ ). However, listening anxiety failed to have a significant indirect effect on the use of verbal aggression through interpersonal trust ( $B = .01, 95\%$  confidence interval  $-.00, .03$ ). After reviewing the data set, post hoc analyses yielded intriguing differences in the mean scores for interpersonal trust between two nearly equal groups that emerged from the study: participants who responded "yes" ( $n = 142; M = 5.50, SD = 1.02$ ) and participants who responded "no" ( $n = 165; M = 4.45, SD = 1.17$ ) to the question, "Are you currently in a romantic relationship?" An independent samples  $t$ -test confirmed expectations of significant differences between groups,  $t(305) = 8.38, p < .001$ . Consequently, all three hypotheses were retested on the subsample of participants who indicated they were currently involved in a romantic relationship ( $n = 142$ ).

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed again to assess the relationships between listening anxiety and interpersonal trust (H1) and between interpersonal trust and the use of verbal aggression (H2), for only those currently in romantic relationships. Tests revealed negative correlations between listening anxiety and interpersonal trust ( $r = -.18, p < .05$ ) and between interpersonal trust and the use of verbal aggression ( $r = -.30, p < .001$ ). To further examine the differences between those who were currently in romantic relationships and those who were not, Fisher's  $r$  to  $z$  transformation was used to test the differences of magnitude of the correlation coefficients. Those who were currently in romantic relationships ( $r = -.18, p < .05$ ) did not significantly differ from those who were not currently in a romantic relationship ( $r = -.12, p < .05$ ) with regard to the relationship between listening anxiety and interpersonal trust. However, there was a significant difference in strength of association between interpersonal trust and verbal aggression,  $z = -2.59 (p < .01)$  for those who were currently in a romantic relationship ( $r = -.30, p < .001$ ) versus those who were not currently in a romantic relationship ( $r = -.01, ns$ ). Therefore, the association between interpersonal trust and verbal aggression was significantly stronger for individuals in a current romantic relationship than it was for those who were single and asked to reflect back on a previous romantic relationship.

With regard to the third hypothesis (H3), the direct effect of listening anxiety on verbal aggression was significant ( $B = .17, p < .01$ ), as well as the indirect effect of listening anxiety on verbal aggression through interpersonal trust ( $B = .03$ , bootstrap 95% confidence interval .00, .07,  $\kappa^2 = 0.05$ ). This finding suggests that as listening anxiety increases, interpersonal trust decreases, and this decrease in interpersonal trust is associated with greater verbal aggression. In other words, the positive relationship between listening anxiety and verbal aggression can be explained in part by lower levels of interpersonal trust. It should be noted that the value of  $\kappa^2$  indicates that the effect size for this association is small. In sum, H3 was partially supported. This support was garnered with the subsample of participants who were currently involved in romantic relationships.

## Discussion

### Brief Summary of Results

The overarching goal of this study was to offer a response to Schrodtt and Wheelless' (2001) study which concluded that listening anxiety is not directly related to the use of verbal aggression by reexamining the relationship of these variables with the inclusion of a third

variable, interpersonal trust. This goal was accomplished by investigating the relationships between listening anxiety, verbal aggression, and interpersonal trust. The findings of this study support the expectations that listening anxiety is negatively associated with interpersonal trust (H1) and that interpersonal trust is negatively associated with verbal aggression (H2). Further, for couples currently in romantic relationships, listening anxiety was found to have an indirect effect on the use of verbal aggression through interpersonal trust (H3).

This study's hypotheses were originally tested on a sample composed of people currently in a romantic relationship as well as those who, if currently not in a romantic relationship, were instructed to think about a past relationship when completing the questionnaire. The posited relationship between listening anxiety and interpersonal trust was supported, suggesting that as listening anxiety increases, interpersonal trust decreases. Gottman's (2011) perspective on interpersonal trust helped to predict this relationship. He asserted that when a partner has negative sentiment override, the predisposition to perceive all messages as negative (a cognitive barrier similar to information reception apprehension, IRA; Weiss, 1980), a downward spiral begins; perceived negativity begets more negativity. In other words, getting caught up in negative message cycles damages the individual's sense of trust. It is also possible that an experience of trust violation (e.g., infidelity), which would decrease one's sense of interpersonal trust, might foster an increase in listening anxiety. In addition, interpersonal trust was found to be negatively associated with verbal aggression. Past research led to this prediction as well (e.g., Infante et al., 1989). The perceived need to defend one's self-concept is an example of self-protection. Thus, verbal aggression is shown to have an association with perceiving one's romantic partner as threatening, or having lower levels of interpersonal trust in him or her.

Although the first two hypotheses were supported, the lack of support for the third hypothesis (i.e., listening anxiety would have an indirect effect on the use of verbal aggression through interpersonal trust) led us to take a closer look at our data. Post hoc analyses of the total sample revealed that individuals who were currently involved in a romantic relationship reported significantly higher interpersonal trust than individuals not in a current romantic relationship. This difference prompted further examination of this subset of data. When the first hypothesis was tested again, it received slightly stronger support, indicating that listening anxiety continues to have a small negative association with interpersonal trust. However, when the second hypothesis was retested with the data subset, post hoc analysis revealed a significant change in the size of the association between interpersonal trust and the use of verbal

aggression. The results indicated that the negative association between trust and verbal aggression is significantly larger for individuals who reported being currently involved in a romantic relationship as compared to those who were merely reflecting back on a previous romantic relationship. Post hoc analysis of the third hypothesis also revealed that there is, in fact, a small indirect effect of listening anxiety on the use of verbal aggression through interpersonal trust, indicating that individuals currently in a romantic relationship experience less verbal aggression when there is greater interpersonal trust and a decrease in listening anxiety. Likewise, individuals currently involved in a romantic relationship experience greater use of verbal aggression when there is less interpersonal trust and greater listening anxiety.

These findings support the overall goal of this study but introduce some additional issues worthy of discussion. For example, our findings suggest that individuals currently involved in romantic relationships have a greater sense of trust in their partners than individuals who are not currently in a relationship and, therefore, are only able to reflect on a past partner. In their study, Larzelere and Huston (1980) found that ex-dating partners had lower dyadic trust scores than casual dating and cohabiting individuals. Intuitively, this makes sense. There could be many explanations for this, but one reason may be simply that individuals who reflect back to a past relationship to answer survey questions are primed to view that relationship as having failed. Several reasons for relational failure may be related to low, lacking, or even blatant violations of trust (e.g., low dependability, selfishness, and cheating). Gobin and Freyd (2014) found that individuals who experience higher levels of betrayal trauma in romantic relationships report lower levels of general and relational trust than individuals who do not experience betrayal. Although not all current relationships are absent of trust violations, this would at least explain how one group is more prone to perceptions of decreased trust than the other. Finally, the indirect effect of listening anxiety on the use of verbal aggression through interpersonal trust suggests that a decrease in trust exacerbates any existing problems with anxiety. Additionally, heightened anxiety could intensify perceptions of low or lacking trust.

Our current findings reinforce the literature (Infante et al., 1989) that proposes verbal aggression is one such example of self-defense when listening anxiety increases and trust decreases. If we accept this association, mutual attunement to the thoughts and emotions of relational partners, which is characteristic of interpersonal trust (Gottman, 2011), has the potential to buffer listening anxiety and discourage the use of verbally-aggressive messages in favor of more effective communication.

## Implications of Results

Practical implications that emerge from the current study's findings echo the efforts of those researchers (e.g., Gottman, 2011; Johnson, 2008) who endeavor to gain a better understanding of behavior that is seemingly hardwired from infancy. Listening anxiety is perhaps one trait that receives little attention in the psychologist's office yet may need to take a center stage when aggressive behaviors are present. Gottman's (2011) work on trust indicates that attunement to one's partner is a learnable skill that may be taught not only in the office of a counseling professional but also in the classroom under the auspices of mindfulness (or interpersonal communication) seminars. Interestingly, Gottman's concept of attunement asserts that trust can be developed by teaching partners to *listen* to one another and to show attention and empathy to the needs and desires of the other. If listening is a part of developing trust and trust can influence positive communication behaviors, then it is imperative that scholars and practitioners work together to create opportunities in the public sphere for educating individuals. The current concern for dating violence among adolescents and college-aged students warrants further research of interpersonal trust as it relates to anxiety and aggression. Teaching young couples to develop interpersonal trust may reduce the potential for not only verbally aggressive but also physically violent reactions in response to anxiety inducing messages.

## Limitations of Study

With the prevalent nature of verbal aggression in youth and emerging adulthood, the current findings may be generalizable to the population of college undergraduates in dating relationships (Harned, 2001; Muñoz-Rivas, Graña, O'Leary, & González, 2007). However, the current sample of university undergraduates lessens the likelihood that findings are generalizable to the broader population. It is entirely possible that people in more established relationships or those who are middle- and/or older-aged conceptualize trust differently, thus allowing it to function differently than for their younger counterparts. Another limitation of the current study is that the data is cross-sectional. Although intuitively it makes sense that listening anxiety is associated with verbal aggression through trust, we cannot make causal assumptions about the order of the relationships between interpersonal trust and listening anxiety.

## Future Directions

There seems to be an arguable connection between interpersonal trust, listening anxiety, and verbal aggression. Future studies could help flesh out this association to further determine trust's potential role in the reduction of verbally-aggressive behavior. In addition, future research is needed to better understand the causes of verbally-aggressive communication. Anxiety is on the rise in our contemporary culture. As of 2013, it was reported that anxiety disorders affect approximately 15% of adults; that is more than depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia combined (CDC, 2013). Thus, it would not be unreasonable to assume that if anxiety disorders are prevalent and growing, then trait listening anxiety may also be more problematic in the future. Since it was the goal of this study to respond to the assertion that listening anxiety and the use of verbal aggression are not directly related (see Schrodtt & Wheeless, 2001), we presumed that a direct relationship would not be found between the two variables. However, the results from the current study suggest that there is a significant positive association between listening anxiety and the use of verbal aggression. Thus, future research may profitably explore further the relationship between listening anxiety and the use of verbal aggression.

Finally, future research could strive for better understanding of the relationship between family communication patterns (e.g., see Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002) and informational reception apprehension (IRA). Ledbetter and Schrodtt (2008) found conversation orientation, a family communication pattern reflecting a tendency to openly welcome discussion of diverse topics between family members no matter how controversial, to be negatively associated with listening anxiety and intellectual inflexibility. Future study of these concepts needs to address the issue of causality and identify the directionality between family communication patterns, informational reception apprehension, and verbally-aggressive communication. Longitudinal and experimental study designs are needed to ascertain whether directionality can be established. If causality can be established, it is possible that family planning and family counseling could help to intervene along these lines, before young adults turn to the use of destructive communication behaviors, such as verbal aggression, to cope with their inability to process information without anxiety.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of interpersonal trust and its role in explaining the relationship between listening anxiety and the use of verbal aggression in romantic relationships. It should be a goal of

communication scholars to continue to strive to understand the associations between these variables. Anxieties and aggression need not lead to failed romance or the loss of love. All people should have the opportunity to enjoy the comfort of strong loving bonds with romantic partners, so that the conflicts which occur can be overcome. Interpersonal trust ought to be seen as learnable, repairable, and fundamental to relational successes and satisfaction. Positive and effective communication in romantic relationships may depend on the ability of scholars and counseling practitioners to recognize and promote the important role of achieving trust between partners.

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