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### Citation

Pauley, J. (2024). Mate Guarding Against Strong Men Displaying Affiliative and Aggressive Humor. *Biological Sciences Undergraduate Honors Theses* Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/biscuht/98>

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**Mate Guarding Against Strong Men Displaying Affiliative and Aggressive Humor**

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## **Abstract**

Mate retention behaviors serve to discourage partner defection from a current pairbond. Such behaviors are oftentimes more prevalent toward intrasexual rivals exhibiting physical and behavioral cues implicating that rival as an optimal mate. Among these features in men are their upper body strength, a feature diagnostic of heritable fitness, and men's ability to produce humor, a cue to their social competence. This study considered the intersection of these desirable features in shaping men's mate retention behavior toward an intrasexual rival. After learning of a hypothetical interloper exhibiting high or low upper body strength while similarly using humor in an affiliative or aggressive manner toward a hypothetical romantic partner, men indicated their interest in employing mate retention tactics toward the interloper. Although few differences emerged in men's responses, a physically strong rival employing affiliative elicited greater interest in jealousy induction tactics. Results provide initial evidence for how physical features and behavioral repertoires can work in concert to shape men's mate retention tactics.

***Keywords:*** Mate retention; Physical strength; Humor styles; Intrasexual competition

Within a long-term romantic relationship, various adaptive problems emerge surrounding reproduction. Namely, those in long-term partnerships are prone to experience partner defection, or the loss of their mate to an intrasexual rival. For example, women could encounter men who are of higher value than their current long-term mate, which could result in her choosing to engage in a long-term relationship with the newer higher value man (Miner et al., 2009). Because of this adaptive challenge, selection would have favored individuals willing and able to discourage defection from a current mate to ensure their access to reproductive opportunities (Starratt & Shackelford, 2023). Such an adaptation could include greater vigilance toward prospective rivals and ultimately lead individuals to engage in various mate retention behaviors (Buss et al., 2008).

Men's engagement in specific mate guarding behaviors is likely contingent upon their identification of intrasexual rivals who could pose a threat to their inclusive fitness. Likely rivals could include men who are physically strong, given previous research suggesting that women prioritize men's upper body strength in their mate preferences based on the inferred benefits of heritable fitness through these physical features (Kordsmeyer et al., 2018; Lidborg et al., 2022; Puts, 2010). In addition to these physical features, women also prioritize behavioral repertoires in men that implicate them as being socially competent and benevolent. Women infer these abilities through men's sense of humor, which is also a highly prioritized trait oftentimes central to women's overall preferences (Bressler & Balshine, 2006; Brown et al., in press; Feingold, 1988; Wilbur & Campbell, 2011). Indeed, funny men report more sexual partners throughout their lifetime (Greengross & Miller, 2011). Nonetheless, women's interest in humor is largely bounded insofar as the display is contextually appropriate, with women preferring men who use benevolent humor displays in long-term mating contexts. This preference is specifically for an

affiliative humor style that functions to ingratiate the humorist with others with humor displays that do not injure oneself or others (Brown et al., 2022a; DiDonato et al., 2013; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2013). Given this desirability of benevolent humor displays and upper body strength, it would logically follow that women would view men exhibiting both sets of traits as especially desirable. For men in long-term relationships, this expected desirability would likely motivate them to engage in mate retention behaviors to reduce potential threats to their inclusive fitness ostensibly imposed by that rival. This thesis considered the interactive effects of men's upper body strength with humor displays in shaping men's motivation toward mate retention.

### **Men's Strength Influencing Intrasexual Competition**

Men's engagement in intrasexual competition has been considerable throughout evolutionary history. According to parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972), such behavior is unsurprising given reproductive asymmetries that impose greater costs on women (e.g., lactation, gestation) compared to men. This asymmetry would have then fostered greater selectivity toward mates from women, wherein men would be potentiated to engage in more competition with each other to gain access to mates. Some competition manifests through physical aggression (Buss & Shackelford, 1997; Daly & Wilson, 1988). This physical aggression would have created a selection pressure for physically stronger men to have an advantage in this conflict (e.g., Wilson et al., 2009; Sell et al., 2012). Based on this success in intrasexual competition, selection favored women who preferred men with these advantages, oftentimes inferring the high degree of heritable fitness from their physical prowess and estimating their abilities to protect their offspring from interpersonal threats (Brown et al., 2022b; Massar, 2022). Physical traits connoting upper body strength (e.g., musculature) are central to women's interest in upper body

strength, oftentimes manifesting as increased visual attention toward men's upper body (Durkee et al., 2019; Frederick & Haselton, 2007; Sell et al., 2017).

Despite the reproductive advantages afforded by strong men, women's preference for stronger men is nonetheless bounded by their awareness of the potential concomitant costs imposed by strength. Features diagnostic of upper body strength are duly attractive and aggressive to perceivers, suggesting a relative ambivalence (Geniole & McCormick, 2013). Women additionally perceive strong men as being more promiscuous and aggressive, which could threaten their inclusive own fitness if a strong man were to engage in physical conflict with them (e.g., Brown et al., 2022c; Sacco et, 2020). This conflict would have historically positioned women to be at a physical disadvantage due to the larger overall physical size of men imposed by sexual dimorphism (Sell et al., 2012). The heightened androgenic activity of men with greater upper body strength is further associated with engagement in more intrasexually competitive behaviors in men, such as competing for resources or reproductive success (Chiu et al., 2020; Eisenegger et al., 2011). Additionally, strong men are more prone toward promiscuous reproductive strategies that may include encouraging partner defection (Gallup et al., 2007). An awareness of both their desirability and aggression could position men to be more prone to mate retention behaviors toward strong men.

### **Humor Styles and Intrasexual Competition**

Men compete to achieve social status in a hierarchical fashion. Historically, men with greater social status yield more influence within group living; this influence would increase their access to resources and mating opportunities (Cheng & Tracy, 2014; Zitek & Tiedens, 2012). In the identification of men with the potential attain status, women oftentimes consider men's intelligence. This intelligence could manifest as a heightened ability to produce humor (e.g.,

Feingold & Mazella, 1993; Howrigan & Macdonald, 2008). In fact, women's preferences are oftentimes based around men's ability to produce humor, with funnier men being more desirable and sexually successful (Brown et al., in press; Wilbur & Campbell, 2011). This preference could be based in an awareness of the potential intelligence that funnier men have, which could increase women's access to resources in a long-term relationship (Miller, 2000). In potential awareness of this preference, men use humor to appear more attractive to potential mates and show greater humor ability when exposed to intrasexual competition and in the presence of an attractive woman (Barel, 2019).

Although humor is broadly considered desirable for a prospective mate, certain humor displays are especially desirable in long-term romantic contexts. Affiliative humor is one desirable humor style for a long-term relationship, given its focus on bolstering others in a non-injurious manner (Martin et al., 2003). Women interested in monogamous long-term mating prefer affiliative humor in mates (e.g., Brown et al., 2022a; DiDonato et al., 2013). Nonetheless, other humor styles exist that may implicate men as suboptimal mates. Aggressive humor involves ingratiation of oneself within a group in a manner that is also injurious to other people. Although this humor style is not desirable in long-term contexts, it could similarly connote a promiscuous intent that women may find desirable for a short-term sexual encounter. An awareness of this intention from an aggressive humorist could foster greater vigilance toward intrasexual rivals.

## **Current Research**

This study considered how the confluence of two selected traits in men foster men's interest in mate retention behavior based on expectations of intrasexual competition. First, I considered upper body strength, given women's interest in men's strength that could similarly

implicate a strong man as intrasexually threatening (Puts, 2010). I predicted that men would engage in more retention behavior toward a strong man. Second, I considered humor style by comparing affiliative and aggressive humor displays, given previous work implicating aggressive humor as more tolerable in a more promiscuous mating context (e.g., Brown et al., 2022a; DiDonato et al., 2013). This led me to predict that men would be more willing to engage in mate retention when a humorist is aggressive. Considering the intersection of these selected traits, and the confluence of intrasexual threat connoted through these features, I predicted that mate retention would be greatest toward strong men employing aggressive humor.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A sample of 211 men from a large public university in Southeastern U.S. completed participated for course credit ( $M_{Age} = 19.36$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ; 80.6% White; 132 single, 79 partnered). No data were excluded, as all participants reported opposite-sex attraction, which would suggest that they view other men as intrasexual rivals. A sensitivity analysis indicated that I was adequately powered to detect small effects (Cohen's  $f = 0.19$ ,  $1-\beta=0.80$ ).

### **Materials and Procedures**

**Target Humor Styles.** Participants read one of two vignettes describing themselves at a bar with their romantic partner. A hypothetical man approaches their partner and begins to flirt using either an affiliative or aggressive humor style. The affiliative style was designed to convey friendliness through joking banter, whereas the aggressive style presents a more assertive approach resulting in the partner's interest (see Table 1). These vignettes were previously normed, demonstrating that participants viewed either vignette as adequately describing the intrasexual rival as either aggressive or friendly (Brown et al., 2022a; DiDonato et al., 2013).



Such research further indicated that women's preference for either humor style was shaped by their consideration of what constitutes an ideal long-term or short-term mate.

**Target Strength.** Accompanying each vignette was an image of the hypothetical interloper. The target was a man from a larger stimulus set of men who varying in upper body strength, which was indexed by composite measures of handgrip and chest press strength (Lukaszewski et al., 2016). Previous research indicates that perceivers are aware of these men's upper body strength and could accurately categorize them as strong and weak. Participants viewed the same unique identity whose head was cropped onto a strong or a weak body (Brown et al., 2022a). Figure 1 provides the target stimuli.

**Manipulation Checks.** Participants evaluated the target using different trait inferences related to the upper body composition and humor style. This would inform us of our manipulation's efficacy. They evaluated the target's perceived strength, aggressiveness, friendliness, and funniness. These traits were evaluated using single-item scales (1 = *Not at All [Adjective]*; 7 = *Very [Adjective]*).

**Mate Retention Inventory.** I assessed the extent to which participants were willing to engage in various mate retention behaviors in reference to the hypothetical interloper. Namely, I used a truncated version of the Mate Retention Inventory-Short Form (see Buss et al., 2008). This scale considered broad behaviors that would be likely to occur in this scenario's bar setting. Items operated along 7-point scales and were represented by a single item per behavior (1 = *Not at All Likely*; 7 = *Very Likely*). Participants considered the extent to which they would seek to conceal their mate, induce jealousy, and display affection.

## Results

### Manipulation Checks

I conducted four 2 (Target Strength: Strong vs. Weak)  $\times$  2 (Target Humor: Affiliative vs. Aggressive) ANOVAs for perceived strength, aggressiveness, friendliness, and funniness.

**Strength.** Participants viewed the strong target as stronger ( $M=4.11$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ) than the weak target ( $M=3.04$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ),  $F(1, 204)=37.68$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.156$ . No difference emerged for Target Humor Style, nor was the interaction significant ( $ps>0.590$ ).

**Aggressiveness.** Participants viewed the strong target as more aggressive ( $M=4.51$ ,  $SD=1.27$ ) than the weak target ( $M=3.96$ ,  $SD=1.41$ ),  $F(1, 206)=9.10$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.042$ . Participants viewed aggressive humor style as more aggressive ( $M=4.44$ ,  $SD=1.41$ ) than affiliative humor style ( $M=4.05$ ,  $SD=1.30$ ),  $F(1, 206)=4.62$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.022$ . The interaction between strength and humor on aggressiveness was not significant ( $ps>0.281$ ).

**Friendliness.** No difference emerged for target strength or target humor style on friendliness, nor was the interaction significant ( $ps>0.122$ ). This analysis suggests that the target was seen as similarly friendly across conditions.

**Funniness.** No difference emerged for target strength or target humor style on funniness, nor was the interaction significant ( $ps>0.261$ ). Taken together, this analysis suggests that participants found the vignettes similarly funny to each other.

### **Mate Retention**

I conducted three 2 (Target Strength: Strong vs. Weak)  $\times$  2 (Target Humor: Affiliative vs. Aggressive) ANOVAs to determine how participants would mate guard when their partner was approached by the target.

**Jealousy Induction.** No main effects emerged ( $ps>0.143$ ). Effects were nonetheless qualified by a Target Strength  $\times$  Target Humor interaction,  $F(1, 206)=8.94$ ,  $p=0.003$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.042$ . Toward affiliative humor use, simple effects tests indicated that participants reported greater

willingness to induce jealousy toward strong target ( $M=2.93$ ,  $SD=2.79$ ) than a weak target ( $M=1.79$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ),  $F(1, 206)=10.11$ ,  $p=0.002$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.047$ . For aggressive humor, no difference emerged for the strong target ( $M=1.88$ ,  $SD=1.26$ ) versus the weak ( $M=2.27$ ,  $SD=1.64$ ),  $F(1, 206)=1.14$ ,  $p=0.286$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.006$ .

**Concealment.** Participants showed more willingness to conceal their partner when the interloper used aggressive humor ( $M=5.56$ ,  $SD=1.71$ ) than affiliative humor ( $M=4.89$ ,  $SD=1.78$ ),  $F(1, 206)=7.75$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.036$ . No difference emerged for target strength, nor was the interaction significant ( $ps>0.679$ ).

**Affection.** Participants showed more willingness to show affection to their partner toward affiliative humor use ( $M=3.72$ ,  $SD=1.65$ ) than aggressive humor use ( $M=3.16$ ,  $SD=1.54$ ),  $F(1, 206)=6.58$ ,  $p<0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2=0.031$ . No difference emerged for target strength, nor was the interaction significant ( $ps>0.909$ ).

## Discussion

Results provided limited support for hypotheses, although some unexpected nuance emerged. First, men were more interested in jealousy induction when the hypothetical rival was physically strong and employing affiliative humor. These results could reflect men's awareness of such men as exhibiting fewer overall costs. Although physically strong men are indeed more attractive to women, this attractiveness coincides with an awareness of these men's aggression and promiscuous intentions (Brown et al., 2022c; Durkee et al., 2019; Frederick & Haselton, 2007; Sell et al., 2017). However, evidence of their benevolent intentions through affiliative humor could have elicited perceptions of these men as satisfying more relevant mating goals for women (DiDonato et al., 2013; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2013), thereby fostering a greater interest in inducing jealousy.

Participants showed greater willingness to conceal their partner towards aggressive humor. This coincides with the antagonistic nature of aggressive humor; participants could have regarded their partner as more threatened by the overt hostility of an aggressive humorist and may have been behavior to protect them from harm. Contrary to predictions, strength did not make a difference when it came to mate concealment. This is surprising, considering that participants rated the stronger target as more aggressive than the weaker target. It is likely that the aggressiveness of the humor interactions caused the participants to feel as though their partner was in potential danger regardless of the target's appearance. Participants were also more likely to show affection when their partner was approached by the affiliative humor style. The use of affiliative humor displays more interest in monogamous relationships, which could motivate men to appear more affectionate toward a partner as means to demonstrate their commitment to the relationship (Starratt & Shackelford, 2023; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2013).

There were fewer interactions between study variables than expected. The lack of interactions could be due to the intentions behind each mate guarding strategy. Previous research shows that men are willing to induce jealousy to elicit a desired response from their mate (Fleischmann et al., 2005). This response can be induced to test the strength of the relationship, increase closeness, and inspire greater commitment from their partner (Buss 2000; Wade & Weinstein, 2011). When a man feels unsure about his relationship or threatened by a rival, he could induce jealousy and interpret the response he receives from his mate to determine the strength of their relationship, regardless of the context of an interloper. Affection and concealment strategies may not necessarily serve to elicit a response to determine the mate's interest and more toward displaying one's own interest in their partner. In this case, a man should

be likely to display interest in their partner no matter who she is approached by, hence the lack of interaction between target strength and humor.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Several limitations emerged in this study that warrant future research. First, the pictures indicating the strength of the target only visualized two body types. Future research would benefit from explicitly manipulating other factors that inform perceptions of men's strength. For example, upper body strength can be heuristically inferred through muscularity specifically, with many mating-related perceptions being further influenced by concomitant body fat from the target (Brown et al., 2022c). Subsequent studies could provide these experimental manipulations.

The participant's partner's behavior could also greatly affect the outcome of this study. In this study, the participant's partner is receptive to both target humor styles. Future studies could incorporate different reactions the partner has and the mate guarding response by the participant. The amount of mate guarding is also dependent upon characteristics of the mate. A partner with higher value and greater physical attractiveness will probably have more poachers interested in her, increasing the chances of her defecting and the implementation of mate guarding by the man (Buss, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

Mate retention serves to reduce the possibility of an intrasexual rival threatening one's pairbond. These behaviors are more frequent toward men ostensibly exhibiting greater mate value. This study explores the role that strength and humor of a partner's potential poacher plays in contributing to male mate guarding responses. Men use different forms of mate guarding depending on the physical and personality traits they observe from the rival.

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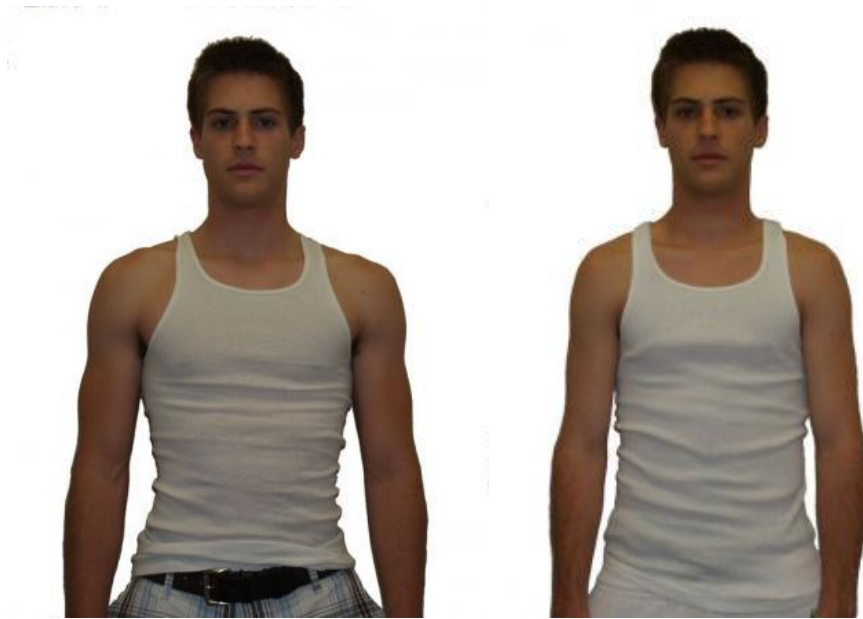
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**Table 1.** Humor style vignettes.

<b>Humor Style</b>	<b>Vignette</b>
Affiliative	<p>You are at a bar with your romantic partner, and she goes off a few feet away to order a drink. You see this stranger approach her and say, “Do you like Justin Bieber?” Your partner turns her head, realizing the stranger is talking to her.</p> <p>“Excuse me?” she asks. “I hear that one out of every three women likes him. I figure if you don’t, then we’ve already got lots in common and if you do, then I can be your new best friend and teach you about good music,” he says, smiling. Your partner laughs and continues a conversation with the stranger.</p>
Aggressive	<p>You are at a bar with your romantic partner, and she goes off a few feet away to order a drink. You see this stranger approach her and say, “See that bartender? He spit in your drink.” Your partner turns her head and realizes the stranger is talking to her.</p>

“Excuse me?” she asks. He says, “Yep, and you’ve been drinking it this whole time. Do you always drink stuff that people spit in? Is that your thing?” He then adds, “I just can’t watch you do it anymore.” He grabs your partner's drink and pours it on the floor and you hear the people next to him laughing. He watches your partner, smiling at her for a moment. “Alright,” he says, “I guess I can buy you a new one.” Your partner is amused by this. She laughs, and the two of them begin a conversation.



*Figure 1.* Strong target (left) and weak target (right)