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Are you into me? Uncertainty and sexual desire in online encounters and established relationships

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ABSTRACT

Do feelings of uncertainty about existing or potential relationships spice up relationships or impair them? Six studies employed complementary methods to examine whether relationship uncertainty affects partners' sexual desirability, and whether expressions of partners' regard influence these effects. In Studies 1–4, participants interacted online with confederates who were either clear or vague about their romantic intentions. Results showed that relationship uncertainty had detrimental effects on confederates' appeal only when they were perceived as uninterested in the participants. Moreover, explicit expressions of romantic interest fostered certainty about confederates' behavioral intentions, thereby enhancing their appeal. Using survey and daily experiences methodologies, Studies 5 and 6 replicated these findings in established relationships, demonstrating that partners' regard predicted lower uncertainty, which, in turn, was associated with greater perceived partner desirability. These findings suggest that inhibiting desire serves as a mechanism aimed at protecting the self from investing in a relationship whose future is uncertain.

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1. Introduction

Reciprocation of attraction plays a key role in the development of romantic relationships (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Finkel & Baumeister, 2010). When people learn that a prospective partner likes or dislikes them, they tend to reciprocate with equivalent liking or disliking (Greitemeyer, 2010; Lehr & Geher, 2006; Whitchurch, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2011). Often, however, people are uncertain about a partner's romantic interest and mixed feelings may arise instead (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). On the one hand, this uncertainty may generate debilitating anxieties (e.g., Buhr & Dugas, 2002; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Gordon, 2003) that motivate either distancing from the source of pain or seeking knowledge that will reduce uncertainty and help create a more predictable social environment (Montoya, Faiella, Lynch, Thomas, & DeLuca, 2015). On the other hand, the arousal generated by unpredictable partners may intensify emotional reactions to their

demeanor (Schachter & Singer, 1962; Zillmann, 1978), making them more pleasantly exciting (Wilson, Centerbar, Kermer, & Gilbert, 2005).

Scholars have long debated whether uncertainty spices up relationships or impairs them (e.g., Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Perel, 2007; Tennov, 1979). Unfortunately, prior research addressing the effect of uncertainty in the realm of relationships has yielded conflicting results and thus failed to resolve this debate (e.g., Montoya et al., 2015; Theiss & Knobloch, 2014; Whitchurch et al., 2011). The inconsistencies in previous findings are difficult to reconcile in part for methodological reasons, most notably the fact that past studies did not include actual interactions between potential partners (e.g., participants viewed Facebook profiles of students at other universities; Whitchurch et al., 2011; Montoya et al., 2015). Hence, these studies entailed no possibility of rejection, which in real-life interactions seems likely to make uncertainty distasteful.

Prior research also has not considered the contextual meaning of uncertainty. For example, reduction of uncertainty following information gathering is more likely to increase attraction to potential partners when it leads to anticipating future rewards of establishing a relationship rather than future costs of, for example,

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being rejected or otherwise hurt by one's partner (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004; Sunnafrank, 1986, 1990). The present research employed complementary methods to investigate whether the effect of relationship uncertainty on partners' sexual desirability depends on its contextual meaning. Specifically, we examined whether uncertainty about partners' behavioral intentions (i.e., partners' inclination to pursue a romantic relationship with oneself) influenced partners' sexual desirability and, further, whether perceptions of partners' positive regard (i.e., partners' positive feelings for oneself) influenced these effects in both fledgling and established relationships.

1.1. The psychological consequences of feeling uncertain

Fledgling relationships tend to be suffused with uncertainty (Afifi & Lucas, 2008; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). When relationships start to emerge, little is known about partners. Because it can be difficult to predict the other person's intentions, most people tend to sift for evidence of acceptance and liking (Afifi & Lucas, 2008; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999; Tennov, 1979). In the absence of cues about a partner's favorable feelings, people may feel vulnerable and unwilling to risk becoming behaviorally or psychologically invested in a potential relationship (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). The desire to alleviate the anxiety inherent in feeling uncertain about partners' intentions may serve a relationship-promoting function by eliciting approach behaviors, either to obtain information or to induce a favorable impression of oneself in the desired partner (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008). However, scholars have argued that the potential reduction in uncertainty that follows successful proximity-seeking efforts may take its toll, given that infatuation thrives on a balance of hope and uncertainty (Pennebaker, 1997; Tennov, 1979). Thus, those people who begin a relationship with elevated uncertainty may end up desiring their partners less as they get to know them and uncertainty diminishes (Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007; Perel, 2007).

Support for this reasoning comes from studies on the emotional consequences of uncertainty. Research has shown that unpredictable events evoke more intense and persistent emotions than predictable events, possibly because the struggle to make sense of unpredictable events keeps the event mentally alive and prolongs the hopeful mood associated with it (at least until the uncertainty is resolved and the event becomes understandable; Wilson & Gilbert, 2008; Tormala, Jia, & Norton, 2012). For example, participants who learned that they had won a prize but were uncertain until the end of the study which specific gift they had won remained in a good mood longer than people who knew which gift they had won (e.g., Kurtz, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2007).

Uncertainty, however, does not always induce pleasure (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). Uncertainty about the nature of events determines the intensity and duration of the emotional reaction to these events, but not its valence, which mainly depends on the event itself (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008). Uncertainty about a positive event amplifies its pleasure as compared with certainty about the event (e.g., Bar-Anan, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2009; Wilson & Gilbert, 2008; Wilson et al., 2005), whereas uncertainty about a negative event prolongs the misery it creates. For example, participants who remained uncertain about whether they had genes of a fatal disorder showed lower overall well-being in the long run than participants who learned that it was either highly likely or highly unlikely they had the genes (Wiggins et al., 1992). The conclusions drawn from this body of research suggest that the contextual meaning of uncertainty (i.e., its valence) affects its psychological consequences. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether these studies apply to intimate relationships for two reasons: First, because the

dependent measure in these studies was overall mood rather than interpersonal attraction, and second, because partners themselves are also active perceivers whose own feelings of attraction depend on the unfolding interactions.

The picture, indeed, is unresolved when it comes to research on uncertainty in the dating arena. Some studies have shown that uncertainty about a partner's interest can add curiosity and excitement, which translates into attraction. In one study, for example, female participants viewed the Facebook profiles of attractive male students who ostensibly had previously seen their profiles and rated how much they liked them. Participants were less attracted to the men who they believed liked them a lot than to men whose liking for them was uncertain (Whitchurch et al., 2011). A subsequent study, using a similar methodology except for separating the emotional aspect of attraction (i.e., participants' liking for the man) from the behavioral aspect (e.g., participants' desire to interact with the man), failed to replicate these findings (Montoya et al., 2015). This study did show that greater desire to approach the other person (i.e., behavioral attraction) was associated with participants' desire to reduce the uncertainty regarding whether this person liked them.

An obvious limitation of these studies is their lack of ecological validity. For one thing, the other person was not really available as a dating partner; thus the unpredictable dating-related event allowed participants to focus on anticipation of being liked by an attractive person because there was no possibility of rejection, as there would be with a live potential dating partner. People might therefore react less positively to uncertainty when actually anticipating interacting with a potential partner, when the possibility of being rejected is salient. Supporting this notion, past studies have indicated that uncertainty corresponded with less attraction during visualization of realistic dating interactions (Gudykunst, Yang, & Nishida, 1985; Kellermann & Reynolds, 1990). However, these studies did not employ real-time interactions. Instead, they used either cross-sectional surveys or scenarios in which participants were asked to imagine themselves in different initial encounters, rendering ambiguous the predictive validity of models derived from them.

Research offers a somewhat clearer view on the consequences of uncertainty in established relationships. Although uncertainty is presumed to decline as relationships progress from initial acquaintance (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), uncertainty may remain salient in long-term relationships (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002; Prisbell, 1999; Turner, 1990), such as when people feel that their partner is insufficiently concerned with the relationship or when they are unsure about their partner's continued commitment (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Murray et al., 2006). Some scholars have theorized that certainty can make relationships monotonous and overly predictable (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Perel, 2007); for example, Berscheid and Ammazalorso (2001) argue that long-term relationships may lose their ability to foster positive emotions because partners no longer can violate each other's expectations in a positive direction. Nevertheless, others have contended that people seek a reliable and stable partner whom they can trust, and when they become uncertain about a relationship's ability to meet these needs, the consequences may be devastating (Fletcher, Simpson, Tomas, & Giles, 1999; Montoya et al., 2015).

Research has corroborated the latter view, indicating that people who experience relationship uncertainty tend to evaluate their long-term partners more negatively (e.g., Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Theiss & Solomon, 2006) and to view their relationships as more turbulent (e.g., Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010; Knobloch & Theiss, 2010). They are also more likely to use negative behaviors to maintain their relationship (e.g., jealousy induction,

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