Tall Dark Stranger: How Uncertainty Can Make Someone More Attractive

Virginia Keith, Katy Hurst, Juan Pena, Chava Ureelk, Kiel VanNess, Elizabeth Hord, and Chris Buchholz
Roanoke College - Salem, VA

Abstract

Previous research on the pleasures of uncertainty has found that people find ambiguous situations exciting and pleasurable when all the possible outcomes are positive. This explains why wrapped presents, mystery novels, and blind dates are exciting to people. There are certain personality traits such as need for cognition that may increase the pleasures of uncertainty for some people. Studies in Study 1 were told that the researchers were interested in Facebook and dating. Participants with a high need for cognition rated possible dating partners higher in general attraction under uncertain circumstances. In Study 2, participants were told that the researchers were studying the effectiveness of dating websites. It was found that those with a high preference for complexity and need for cognition were more interested in hooking up and being friends. However, there was an inconsistency between self-reports of interest with others. When participants had to choose between certain and uncertain matches, Study 2 was a within-subjects design to better mirror a real life online dating situation and provide better results.

Introduction

People in general strive towards having structured and predictable lives. Uncertainty can be seen as a threat to our secure environment motivating people to reduce uncertainty (Keller, Siegrist, Earl, & Gutsche, 2011). However, research indicates that intolerance for uncertainty correlates with neuroticism and anxiety disorders (Birrell, Meares, Willamson, & Freeston, 2011). Preference for a predictable environment can be adaptive but arguably, it is also a very boring way to live one’s life. Some level of unpredictability can provide excitement.

Uncertainty comes in many forms. Lack of information can make situations and stimuli more ambiguous and unpredictable (Knobloch-Westrick & Keplinger, 2008). Complex stimuli can also increase uncertainty. Complex stimuli are harder and take longer to understand fully and can therefore be seen as a way of increasing uncertainty (North & Hargreaves, 1995).

Many studies have been conducted to observe the relationship between a preference for uncertainty/complexity and liking for various kinds of stimuli. Also in many studies, there appears to be an inverted U-shape relationship between preference for complexity and liking. For example, North and Hargreaves (1995) used music segments ranging in complexity and found that the moderately complex music segments were rated the highest in liking whereas low and highly complex segments were rated significantly lower in liking. Knobloch-Westrick and Keplinger (2008) also found an inverted U-shape relationship between the complexity of murder fiction stories and liking. In other words, participants enjoyed stories with a moderate level of uncertainty because they created the most suspense and excitement without becoming confused.

A preference for uncertainty seems to have a strong effect on how people decide what stimuli to choose to entertain themselves. However, does preference for complexity/uncertainty have an effect on social interaction and relationships? Whitchurch, Wilson, and Gilbert (2001) conducted an experiment with female participants to study the effect of uncertainty on attraction by using Facebook to construct three situations that ranged from certain to uncertain. Results showed that the participants in the uncertain condition were more attracted to men displayed on Facebook than either the high certainty and control conditions.

This study conducted a partial replication of the Whitchurch, Wilson, and Gilbert (2011) experiment. The main difference was the inclusion of various measures for the preference for complexity and uncertainty.

Hypothesis

H1: We predicted that those with a high need for cognition or tolerance for uncertainty would be more attracted to possible dating partners in the uncertain condition.

References


