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When risky is attractive: sensation seeking and romantic partner selection

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between sensation seeking and evaluations of risk and attractiveness of potential romantic partners. We presented respondents with a series of computer-generated descriptions of potential romantic partners. The valence of the descriptions varied: some were composed only of positive attributes, some only negative, and others a mixture of positive and negative. Compared to low sensation seekers, high sensation seekers rated potential partners as more attractive, less risky and were more likely to want to date the individual described. However, they rated their likelihood of acquiring an STD infection after unprotected sex with the potential partner as lower than did the low sensation seekers. These differences between high and low sensation seekers were largest when the descriptions of potential partners contained only negative attributes and smallest when they contained only positive attributes. The findings demonstrate the importance of the sensation seeking trait in judgments of sexual risk and attractiveness in a romantic context and have implications for the development of effective health messages.

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1. Introduction

Selecting a romantic partner is rarely a purely rational exercise in which an individual evaluates the pros and cons of potential mates with conscious intent (Buss, 2003). Indeed, it is the interplay

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of attraction and assessment that makes the process of partner selection interesting—how specific aspects of a potential partner are noted and judged or ignored completely. For instance, some evidence suggests that potential “risky cues” such as sexual history are ignored with “attractive” partners (Agocha & Cooper, 1999). Although we know that people tend to seek information that confirms their favored decision after the decision has been made (Frey, Schultz-Hardt, & Stahlberg, 1996; Sternberg, 1996), we know less about the details of how pre-behavior cognition varies between individuals. Specifically, are there aspects of information that serve as cues to inform an individual about whether a romantic partner is “safe” or “risky”? If so, research exploring how individuals evaluate “risky cues” should also consider “attractive cues” to more fully understand the interplay between the two. Although one might expect that attractive personality characteristics invariably contribute to romantic attraction in a potential partner while risky personality characteristics inevitably reduce interest, for some people—such as high sensation seekers—the opposite may occur.

Although prior research has identified the behavioral differences between high and low sensation seekers, less is known about the cognitive precedents of these behaviors. For consciously controlled behaviors such as dating, a person’s cognitions certainly play an important role. In fact, all of the major models of behavioral prediction stress the critical influence of cognitions in determining behavior. According to the Integrative Model (Fishbein, 2001) for example, intention is the strongest predictor of behavior, and intention is a function of attitudes, subjective norms, and self-efficacy. Each of these three components is itself determined by beliefs or cognitions; therefore, cognitions are distal determinants of intentions and behavior. In order to understand a given behavior, then, one must ultimately understand the pre-behavioral cognitions that shape it. The present research investigated whether differences in high and low sensation seekers’ cognitions can help to explain evaluations of potential romantic partners.

The sensation seeking trait has been defined as “the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience” (Zuckerman, 1979, p. 10). Individuals high in sensation seeking crave complex and stimulating experiences and will take risks to obtain them. Sensation seeking has been associated with participation in a range of risky activities including extreme sports, smoking, drug use, driving under the influence of alcohol, participating in risky experiments, and gambling (Zuckerman, 1994). Sensation seeking is higher in men than women, peaks in late adolescence or early 20s and then declines with age, and may also be higher in Whites than in Blacks (Zuckerman, 1994). High sensation seekers tend to gauge risk as lower than do low sensation seekers, even for activities that they have never tried (Zuckerman, 1994). Moreover, high sensation seekers anticipate feeling less anxiety in risky situations than do low sensation seekers (Hovarth & Zuckerman, 1993). These expectations increase the likelihood of high sensation seekers engaging in risky situations given the opportunity to do so (Zuckerman & Kuhlman, 2000).

Although there is clear evidence of the relationship between the sensation seeking personality trait and risk, less is known about how high sensation seekers evaluate specific elements of risk situations. For instance, although we know that high sensation seekers’ preference for novel experiences extends to sexual activities (Zuckerman, Tushup, & Finner, 1976), no data exist that identify attributes that are perceived to be risky to one’s health or perceived to be attractive by high versus low sensation seekers. This is an important area of research because the potential for

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