



Tell me more: Sensation seeking and information seeking in evaluating romantic partners

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Abstract

This study examined whether sensation seekers differ in the quantity and quality of information they seek about potential romantic partners. Young adults ($N = 393$) each evaluated nine written descriptions of potential partners. Partners were described with only attractive characteristics, with only risky characteristics, or with attractive and risky characteristics. Individuals higher in sensation seeking rated the potential partners as more attractive and gave higher likelihood ratings of going on a date and having sex, but lower likelihood ratings of becoming infected with an STD/HIV. Further, after exposure to the written partner descriptions, sensation seekers sought more additional information about the potential partners compared to lower sensation seekers, but were no more likely to specifically request information about partners' risky characteristics.

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1. Introduction

First impressions are of primary importance in initiating and maintaining social relations. Once an impression is formed, it is often difficult to change since the processing of subsequent information is typically biased in the direction of the initial influence (Asch, 1946; Bond, 1987; Ybarra, 2001). First impressions may influence the way in which people select and process additional information about an unfamiliar individual. In the case of selecting a romantic or sexual partner, for instance, an individual who engages in a positively biased search after forming a favorable initial impression might ignore negative or risk information about the potential partner since individuals tend to seek out information that will support a favored or desired alternative (Frey, Schultz-Hardt, & Stahlberg, 1996; Sternberg, 1996; Svenson, 1999). Biased information searches that produce inaccurate assessments of risk may lead to further judgmental errors since they could prevent detection of information that would lead to a more informed decision. In the context of sexual risk and romantic partner decisions, for instance, biased searches could lead to ignorance of important HIV/STD risk romantic information about a partner to whom an individual is attracted. This, then, could contribute to unsafe sex practices and greater risk of disease transmission. Furthermore, to the extent that dispositional differences exist in initial assessments of risk and attractiveness, they may moderate search strategies and decisions regarding potentially risky sexual behavior. The purpose of the current research was to examine the impact of one individual difference variable, sensation seeking, on assessments of the risk and attractiveness of new potential romantic partners, and on the information search strategies used to learn about these partners.

The sensation seeking trait has been defined as the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience (Zuckerman, 1994). Individuals high in sensation seeking crave complex and stimulating experiences, and may take risks to obtain them. High sensation seekers tend to gauge risk as lower than low sensation seekers, even for novel activities (Zuckerman, 1994). Moreover, high sensation seekers anticipate feeling less anxiety in risky situations than 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).

Sensation seeking is positively correlated with more permissive attitudes towards sex, number of partners, and engagement in a broader range of heterosexual activities and is also negatively related to age at first intercourse and to the period of time a potential partner is known before having sex (Hoyle, Fejfar, & Miller, 2000; Seto, Lalumiere, & Quinsey, 1995; Zuckerman, Tushup, & Finner, 1976). Because high sensation seekers have sex with more partners and tend to use condoms inconsistently (Arnold, Fletcher, & Farrow, 2002; Donohew et al., 2000; McCoul & Haslam, 2001; White & Johnson, 1988) they may be at greater risk for acquiring and transmitting STDs.

Zuckerman notes that although sensation seekers seek stimuli that provide unusual or novel sensations, they do not necessarily seek stimulation through cogni-

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