



The allure of unknown outcomes: Exploring the role of uncertainty in the preference for potential



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We test the role of tolerance for uncertainty in the preference for potential.
- Under high but not low tolerance, potential outperforms achievement.
- This effect is driven by interest and processing.

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ABSTRACT

Influence practitioners often highlight a target's achievements (e.g., "she is the city's top-rated chef"), but recent research reveals that highlighting a target's potential (e.g., "she *could* become the city's top-rated chef") can be more effective. We examine whether the uncertainty inherent in potential is crucial to its appeal by exploring whether the preference for potential depends on individual and situational differences in tolerance for uncertainty. In two studies in two different categories (comedians and restaurants), we measure and manipulate tolerance for uncertainty to show that the preference for potential emerges when tolerance for uncertainty is high, but not low. We further show that the uncertainty surrounding potential fosters greater interest and deeper processing when tolerance for uncertainty is high, which in turn promotes more favorable reactions. Thus, the current research reveals when and why emphasizing potential is more effective than emphasizing achievement, illuminating the key role of uncertainty in driving this effect.

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Are people more drawn to potential or achievement? Consider a person searching for a restaurant online: would she be more attracted to a restaurant advertised as the best in town, or as having *potential* to become the best? Conventional wisdom suggests that the former may be more attractive, because this restaurant has actually achieved a level of success that the second might never achieve. Indeed, influence practitioners frequently promote products, people, or services by heralding past achievements. When promoting politicians, for example, consultants frequently highlight that politician's many accomplishments (e.g., honors, bills passed). Similarly, when promoting movies, advertisers often reference the actors' popularity and previous awards.

Despite the intuitive appeal and seeming ubiquity of achievement-focused strategies, recent research suggests that people can prefer potential to achievement when evaluating others (Tormala, Jia, & Norton, 2012). In one representative experiment, Tormala et al. (2012) found that participants evaluated an artist—and a painting created by that

artist—more favorably when the artist was described as having the potential to win a major award rather than having actually won the same award. Tormala et al. (2012) showed that this preference for potential (versus achievement) can shape attitudes and behaviors in a wide variety of domains, ranging from evaluations of job applicants to salary offers for professional athletes to reactions to restaurant reviews. In related research, Poehlman and Newman (2014) found that people sometimes prefer objectively inferior performances when those performances are associated with future potential. For instance, participants in one study expressed greater liking for an inferior painting when it had been created by a child rather than an adult. Like Tormala et al. (2012), Poehlman and Newman (2014) demonstrated the robustness of this effect in a variety of contexts, including music, books, and movies.

Tormala et al. (2012) hypothesized that the preference for potential occurs because potential by its very nature is imbued with uncertainty, which makes it more cognitively engaging. Achievement, in contrast, is more certain because it pertains to a known outcome. This certainty makes achievement more objectively impressive, but also less interesting. Consistent with this logic, research suggests that uncertainty often stimulates involvement and information processing (e.g., Maheswaran

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& Chaiken, 1991; Tiedens & Linton, 2001; Tormala & Rucker, 2007). First, felt uncertainty can produce a desire for certainty which leads consumers to process available information more deeply. When available information is favorable, this increased processing can generate more favorable evaluations (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1979). Second, thinking about uncertain events can be more interesting and exciting in its own right, leading people to think more about uncertain ideas or events than more certain ones, which again can have positive downstream consequences (e.g., Bar-Anan, Wilson, & Gilbert, 2009; Lee & Qiu, 2009; Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007; Wilson, Centerbar, Kermer, & Gilbert, 2005). For example, uncertain discounts, promotions, and reviews can foster greater interest, excitement, processing, and purchase (Dhar, Gonzalez-Vallejo, & Soman, 1999; Goldsmith & Amir, 2010; Grant & Tybout, 2008; Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010). Similarly, people tend to prefer to watch live rather than tape-delayed events on television due to their inherent, and exciting, indeterminacy (Vosgerau, Wertenbroch, & Carmon, 2006).

Drawing from this literature, Tormala et al. (2012) theorized that the uncertainty surrounding potential (versus achievement) might increase processing, which in turn produces more favorable reactions to potential rather than achievement. In their studies, Tormala et al. offered evidence for the second link in this account—that is, increased processing was a driver of the preference for potential. However, while potential was rated as less certain than achievement, Tormala et al. did not offer direct evidence for the first link: that it is the uncertainty inherent in potential that drives greater processing. Thus, a crucial aspect of the process driving the preference for potential remains unclear. If indeed potential exerts its influence through uncertainty, we would expect that both situational and dispositional variation in tolerance for uncertainty would moderate the preference for potential. More specifically, demonstrating that potential is more attractive than achievement particularly when tolerance for uncertainty is high would offer evidence for the allure of uncertainty as a driver of this effect.

The current research

In sum, we propose that if the preference for potential stems from the heightened interest and processing surrounding uncertain targets, it should be especially likely to emerge when consumers have a positive orientation toward uncertainty—that is, when *tolerance for uncertainty* is high. Tolerance for uncertainty encapsulates a diverse range of affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to uncertainty, but in general tolerance reflects comfort with uncertainty, whereas intolerance reflects discomfort. Importantly, this discomfort can stem from the subjective sense that uncertainty feels aversive or upsetting and is something to be avoided, or that uncertainty tends to be associated with negative outcomes or consequences (Basevitz, Pushkar, Dalton, Chaikelson, & Conway, 2008; Dugas et al., 2005; Freeston, Rheume, Letarte, Dugas, & Ladouceur, 1994; Gosselin et al., 2008; Koerner & Dugas, 2006, 2008). As a result, people with low tolerance for uncertainty strive to avoid uncertain events and situations, whereas those with high tolerance are more likely to embrace or even seek out uncertain activities (Berenbaum, Bredemeier, & Thompson, 2008; Buhr & Dugas, 2002; Ladouceur, Gosselin, & Dugas, 2000; Sorrentino & Short, 1986; Szeto & Sorrentino, 2013).

We predicted that if the allure of uncertainty underlies the preference for potential, the effect would only emerge when tolerance for uncertainty is high. Under low tolerance—when people find uncertainty uncomfortable—we predicted that the effect would attenuate or even reverse. Moderation by tolerance for uncertainty would suggest that uncertainty is a key mechanism driving the effect. Indeed, such moderation-of-process designs can provide crucial insight into psychological mechanisms that is unconfounded by the drawbacks of mediation approaches, particularly when measuring a mediator presents difficulties (for an overview of this approach, see Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). In the current research, we suspected that it might be

difficult to observe participants simultaneously rating a target as both better and less certain, whereas it would feel more natural for them to simultaneously report more interest or processing and more favorable reactions. Thus, we took a moderation approach to studying the role of uncertainty, and a mediation approach to studying the role of interest and processing. Importantly, numerous researchers have used moderation approaches to examine process in previous work (e.g., Gable & Harmon-Jones, 2008; Johns, Inzlicht, & Schmader, 2008; Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009; see Sigall & Mills, 1998; Spencer et al., 2005 for other examples).

We present two studies exploring these issues. In each study, participants are presented with a persuasive message—promoting a comedian in Study 1 and a restaurant in Study 2—framed in either potential or achievement terms. We examine the moderating role of uncertainty by measuring tolerance for uncertainty as a dispositional factor in Study 1 and manipulating it as a situational factor in Study 2. We hypothesize that the preference for potential (versus achievement) will emerge only when tolerance for uncertainty is high. Moreover, consistent with our overall account for the role of uncertainty in producing increased interest and processing, we predicted that the effect of tolerance for uncertainty on the preference for potential would be mediated by self-reported information processing and feelings of interest.

Study 1

Study 1 provided an initial test of our hypothesis by measuring individual differences in tolerance for uncertainty. Our central interest was in whether tolerance for uncertainty would produce relative differences in participants' reactions to potential versus achievement. We predicted that the preference for potential would emerge when individuals were high but not low in tolerance for uncertainty.

Method

Participants and procedure

Ninety-seven participants (75.3% male; age range = 18–61, $M = 29.38$) from a national online pool participated in exchange for monetary payment. All participants read that the goal of the research was to gather feedback about different ads, and that they would view and evaluate an ad promoting a comedian named Helen Hong. The ad was titled “Helen Hong FanPage” and contained the comedian's picture, below which appeared a tagline that contained our manipulation of potential versus achievement (adapted from Tormala et al., 2012). In the *potential* condition, the tagline was: “Critics say she could become the next big thing.” In the *achievement* condition, the tagline was: “Critics say she has become the next big thing.” Thus, the core claim was identical in its praise across conditions, but this praise referenced either potential or achievement. Note that previous research suggests that people perceive these claims to be equally believable (Tormala et al., 2012). Immediately following the ad, we measured participants' global evaluations of the comedian and perceived depth of processing.

Finally, we measured individual differences in tolerance for uncertainty. In order to streamline the study for our online participants, we administered only two items from a longer, previously-validated tolerance for uncertainty scale (Freeston et al., 1994). The items asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: *I must get away from all uncertain situations* and *I can't stand being taken by surprise*. These two items were selected a priori for their face validity; in particular, because they tapped into aversive feelings related to unknown outcomes and the behavioral tendency to avoid uncertainty. Participants reported their answers on 5-point scales (1: *Strongly Disagree*; 5: *Strongly Agree*) and responses were reverse-coded and averaged ($r = .66, p < .001$) such that higher scores represented higher tolerance for uncertainty ($M = 3.35; SD = .96$). Importantly, our manipulation did not affect responses to these items, $t(95) =$

.67, $p = .51$. Also important, a separate survey with 50 new participants conducted following the completion of Study 1 revealed that the two items used in our study correlated highly with the rest of the tolerance for uncertainty scale ($r = .99, p < .001$).

Dependent variables

Evaluations

We measured general evaluations of the comedian using three items (adapted from Tormala et al., 2012): *How likely do you think it is that Helen Hong is a good comedian? How interested are you in seeing Helen Hong perform? If the comedian were performing in your town, how likely would you be to go see her?* Participants responded to the first two questions on 9-point scales (1: *Not Likely At All*; 9: *Very Likely*; 1: *Not At All Interested*; 9: *Very Interested*, respectively) and to the third question on a 7-point scale (1: *Very Unlikely*; 7: *Very Likely*). Responses were standardized and averaged ($\alpha = .86$).

Perceived processing

Next, we assessed perceived processing with two questions (adapted from Mayer & Tormala, 2010; Tormala, Briñol, & Petty, 2006): *How carefully did you think about the information you read about the comedian? How deeply did you think about the comedian?* Responses, provided on 9-point scales (1: *Not Carefully At All*, 9: *Extremely Carefully*; 1: *Not Deeply At All*, 9: *Extremely Deeply*, respectively), were averaged ($r = .67, p < .001$).

Results and discussion

Evaluations

We conducted a hierarchical regression predicting evaluations, in which ad frame (achievement = 0; potential = 1) and tolerance for uncertainty (continuous, mean-centered) were entered as predictors in the first step and their interaction was entered in the second step. This analysis revealed a significant main effect for ad frame, $\beta = .27, t(93) = 2.73, p = .008, \eta_p^2 = .073$, demonstrating an overall preference for potential, but not for tolerance for uncertainty, $\beta = -.13, t(93) = -1.28, p = .204, \eta_p^2 = .017$. Most importantly, these effects were qualified by the predicted interaction (Fig. 1), $\beta = .35, t(93) = 2.33, p = .022, \eta_p^2 = .055$. We observed more favorable evaluations of potential rather than achievement when tolerance for uncertainty was high (analyzed at +1 SD on the tolerance for uncertainty scale), $\beta = .50,$

$t(93) = 3.62, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .123$, but not when it was low (analyzed at -1 SD), $\beta = .05, t(93) = .37, p = .71, \eta_p^2 = .002$.

Perceived processing

Following the same procedure, we examined perceived processing. This analysis revealed a marginal main effect of ad frame, $\beta = .17, t(93) = 1.68, p = .096, \eta_p^2 = .029$, but not tolerance for uncertainty, $\beta = -.15, t(93) = -1.49, p = .14, \eta_p^2 = .023$. Again, however, we observed the predicted interaction (Fig. 2), $\beta = .49, t(93) = 3.28, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .104$. Participants high in tolerance for uncertainty reported deeper processing in the potential condition than in the achievement condition, $\beta = .49, t(93) = 3.58, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .122$. Low tolerance for uncertainty participants showed no difference across conditions, $\beta = -.14, t(93) = -1.03, p = .31, \eta_p^2 = .012$.

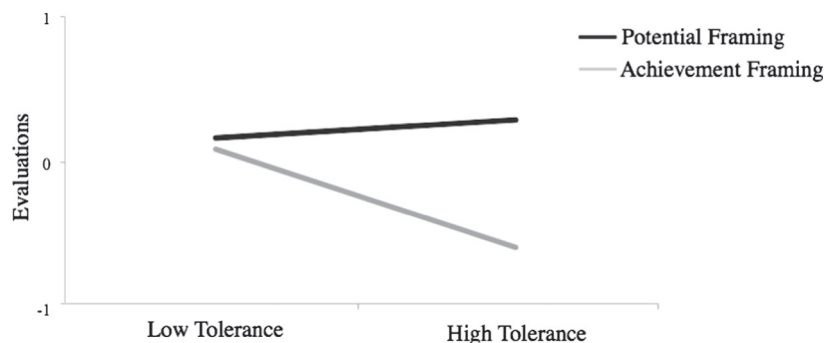
Mediation

Finally, we conducted a test of mediated moderation following the procedure recommended by Hayes (2013). As illustrated in Fig. 3, processing did significantly mediate the interaction between ad frame and tolerance for uncertainty on evaluations (95% CI: .05 to .42).

Study 2

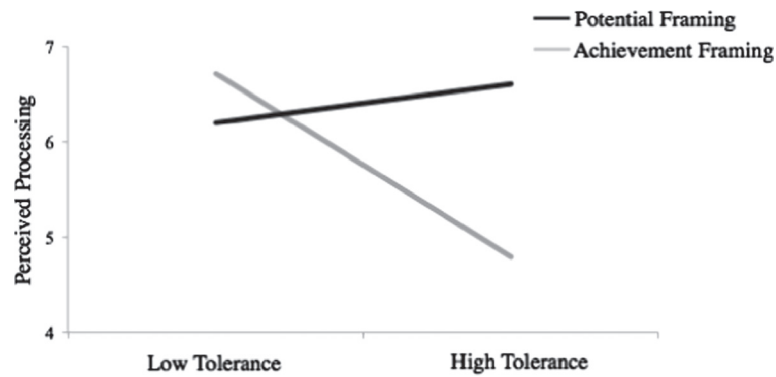
The results of Study 1 were consistent with our hypothesis that the preference for potential emerges only when tolerance for uncertainty is high, and that this effect is mediated by self-reported processing. Study 1 employed an individual difference measure of tolerance for uncertainty. In Study 2, we manipulated tolerance for uncertainty to gauge the robustness of the predicted interaction and directly investigate the causal effect of tolerance for uncertainty. In addition, we tested our account in a different domain: restaurant reviews.

To reiterate, our account holds that the relative preference for potential over achievement is driven by interest and involvement under conditions of high tolerance for uncertainty, which fosters deeper processing. Whereas Study 1 explored the role of self-reported processing, Study 2 directly assessed interest. We hypothesized that under conditions of high tolerance for uncertainty, potential would elicit greater interest than would achievement, which would foster more favorable reactions in the former case than in the latter. Finally, we also assessed incidental affect to show that the effects of tolerance for uncertainty on the preference for potential are driven by increased processing and not changes in affect.



Note. Figure depicts predicted means at ± 1 SD on the tolerance for uncertainty scale. Because the evaluation items used different scales (1–7 and 1–9), the evaluation composite represents standardized scores.

Fig. 1. General evaluations as a function of tolerance for uncertainty and ad frame in Study 1.



Note. Scale ranges from 1 to 9. Figure depicts predicted means at $\pm 1SD$ on the tolerance for uncertainty scale.

Fig. 2. Perceived processing as a function of tolerance for uncertainty and ad frame in Study 1.

Method

Participants and procedure

Four hundred seventy-four participants (45.6% male; age range = 18–75, $M = 32.48$) from a national online pool participated in exchange for monetary payment. Participants were randomly assigned to conditions in a 2 (Tolerance for Uncertainty: High vs. Low) \times 2 (Message Frame: Potential vs. Achievement) between-participants design. All participants read that the study was composed of two unrelated surveys. In the first survey, participants described the outcome of an uncertain experience in their lives. Participants next completed a second survey, which they were told was part of a wider information mapping project examining how participants' judgments mapped onto those of other participants. Participants then read a restaurant review and reported their reactions to both the restaurant and the review itself.

Independent variables

Tolerance for uncertainty

In the first survey, participants received the tolerance for uncertainty manipulation. We focused this manipulation on the belief that uncertain events tend to work out well versus poorly, which is an established contributor to tolerance for uncertainty (e.g., Gosselin et al., 2008). Briefly, in the *high (low) tolerance* condition, participants wrote about a time in their life in which something was uncertain but worked out well (poorly). See Appendix A for the full instructions. In a pre-test, 100 participants from the same population completed this task and answered the question: *In general, when things are uncertain, do they tend to work*

out poorly or well? (1: *Very Poorly*; 7: *Very Well*). Confirming the effectiveness of our manipulation, participants reported that uncertainty tended to work out better in the high ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.17$) rather than low ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.13$) tolerance condition, $t(98) = 4.00$, $p < .001$.

Message frame

In an ostensibly unrelated study, participants next read a brief restaurant review adapted from Tormala et al. (2012). This review endorsed a restaurant called *Restaurant Bianco*, providing a favorable assessment of the chef and restaurant that was framed in potential or achievement terms. For example, in the achievement (potential) condition, participants read: "After visiting Bianco on a recent Saturday evening, it became clear to me that it has become (could become) a top dining fixture in the area." For the full materials, see Appendix B.

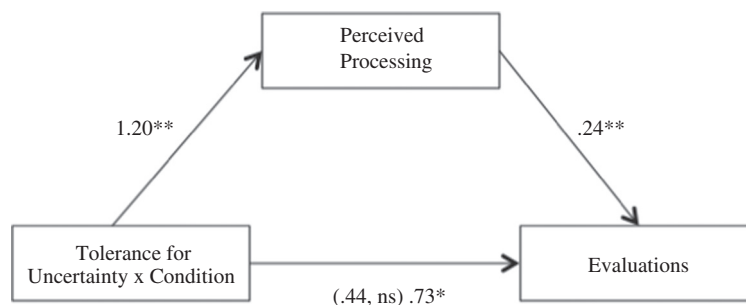
Dependent variables

Desire to try the restaurant

Following the review, participants indicated on a 5-point scale how much they would like to try Restaurant Bianco (1: *Not At All*; 5: *A Great Deal*).

Interest

Next, we assessed interest using two items: *How interested were you in the review that you received? How interested would you be in receiving more information about Restaurant Bianco?* Participants responded to the first item on a 7-point scale (1: *Extremely Uninterested*; 7: *Extremely Interested*), and the second item on a 5-point scale (1: *Not At All*; 5:



Note. The path coefficients are unstandardized betas (see Hayes, 2013). Values in parentheses indicate the effect of the interaction on the dependent variable after controlling for the mediator. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Fig. 3. Mediated moderation model for Study 1.

Extremely Interested). Responses were standardized and averaged ($r = .60, p < .001$).

Affect

Finally, we administered the short form of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Mackinnon et al., 1999). Participants indicated the extent to which they currently felt five negative and five positive emotions on 5-point scales (1: *Very Slightly or Not At All*; 5: *Extremely*). The positive ($\alpha = .86$) and negative ($\alpha = .88$) items were averaged to create subscales of positive and negative affect.

Results and discussion

Desire to try the restaurant

We submitted the desire-to-try measure to a 2 (Tolerance for Uncertainty: High vs. Low) \times 2 (Message Frame: Potential vs. Achievement) ANOVA. There were no main effects ($F_s < 1$; both $\eta_p^2 < .001$), but we observed the predicted interaction, $F(1, 470) = 5.89, p = .016, \eta_p^2 = .012$ (see Table 1). Conceptually replicating Study 1, the potential (versus achievement) framing produced a marginally greater desire to try the restaurant under high tolerance for uncertainty conditions, $F(1, 470) = 3.50, p = .062, \eta_p^2 = .007$. Under low tolerance for uncertainty conditions, there was a non-significant tendency for this effect to reverse, $F(1, 470) = 2.44, p = .12, \eta_p^2 = .005$.

Interest

We submitted the interest measure to the same analysis. Again, there were no main effects ($F_s < 1$; both $\eta_p^2 < .002$), but there was a significant interaction, $F(1, 470) = 11.31, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .023$ (see Table 1). Under high tolerance for uncertainty conditions, potential rather than achievement tended to induce greater interest, $F(1, 470) = 3.40, p = .066, \eta_p^2 = .007$, and this effect significantly reversed under low tolerance for uncertainty conditions, $F(1, 470) = 8.49, p = .004, \eta_p^2 = .018$.

Mediation

A test of mediated moderation (using the same procedure as in Study 1) revealed that interest mediated the interaction on desire-to-try (95% CI: .18 to .70; Fig. 4).

Table 1
Dependent measures as a function of tolerance for uncertainty and message frame in Study 2.

| Dependent measure | High tolerance for uncertainty | | Low tolerance for uncertainty | |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| | Message Frame | | Potential | Achievement |
| | Potential | Achievement | | |
| Desire to try | | | | |
| <i>M</i> | 3.99 | 3.74 | 3.71 | 3.92 |
| <i>SD</i> | .98 | 1.10 | 1.09 | 1.00 |
| Interest | | | | |
| <i>M</i> | .12 | -.09 | -.22 | .11 |
| <i>SD</i> | .81 | .96 | .89 | .89 |

Note. Because the items measuring interest used different scales (1–5 and 1–7), the interest composite represents standardized scores.

Affect

Finally, analysis of the PANAS revealed no effects on either subscale, $F_s(1, 470) < 2.14, p_s > .14$, all $\eta_p^2 < .005$. Moreover, controlling for both subscales, the interactions on desire-to-try and interest remained significant, $F(1, 468) = 5.26, p = .022, \eta_p^2 = .011$; $F(1, 468) = 11.25, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .023$; respectively. Potential (versus achievement) framing elicited greater interest and desire-to-try under high tolerance conditions, $F(1, 468) = 4.09, p = .044, \eta_p^2 = .009$; $F(1, 468) = 3.80, p = .052, \eta_p^2 = .008$; respectively. Under low tolerance conditions, the effect on desire-to-try was nonsignificant, $F(1, 468) = 1.69, p = .20, \eta_p^2 = .004$, and the effect on interest continued to reverse, $F(1, 468) = 7.43, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .016$. Finally, controlling for affect, we observed the same mediation (95% CI: .18 to .65).

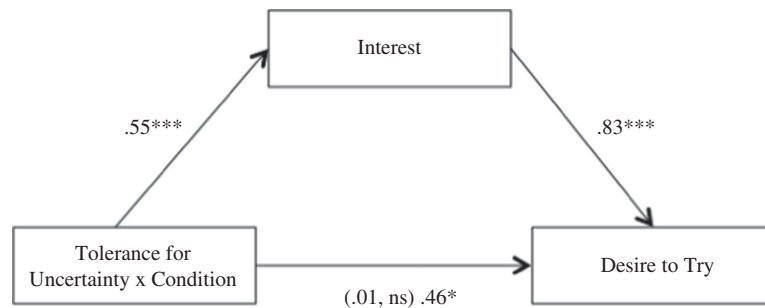
General discussion

Influence practitioners frequently seek to persuade others by highlighting a target's achievements. Together with Tormala et al. (2012) and Pöhlman and Newman (2014), the present research suggests that highlighting a target's potential can be a more effective strategy. Also important, our results provide novel evidence for the role of uncertainty in driving the preference for potential: Potential outperforms achievement—as a motivator of interest and processing, and as a persuasive device—in situations and among individuals high but not low in tolerance for uncertainty. Our analysis of the uncertainty mechanism was indirect, relying on a moderation rather than mediation approach to test it (see Spencer et al., 2005), but the pattern of results was consistent with the notion that uncertainty is a critical determinant of the preference for potential. Although our effects were relatively small in size, they assumed the predicted pattern in each study despite important variations in our operationalizations of the key constructs. Thus, we can be confident about the robustness of the observed effects and the contribution they make to our understanding of when and why the preference for potential occurs.

It is noteworthy that Study 2 did not reveal a main effect of the potential versus achievement manipulation on the interest or desire-to-try measures. Although we can only speculate, we assume this occurred because there was no pure control group in the design. That is, all participants were assigned to either a high tolerance for uncertainty condition, which did produce the preference for potential, or a low tolerance condition, which tended to reverse it. On balance, these opposing effects cancelled out. If we had run conditions in which we manipulated the message frame but not tolerance for uncertainty, we suspect that a main effect of potential versus achievement would have emerged, as it did in Study 1 where we measured but did not manipulate tolerance for uncertainty.

Also noteworthy, our results for low tolerance for uncertainty varied a bit by study. In particular, there was greater tendency toward a preference for achievement under low tolerance for uncertainty in Study 2 than in Study 1. We surmise that this variation might be due to the manipulation in Study 2 producing a more potent aversion to uncertainty—by specifically linking it to negative outcomes—than is typically experienced by individuals who are dispositionally intolerant of uncertainty. If true, the results of our studies may reflect different points on a continuum, whereby moderate intolerance for uncertainty attenuates the preference for potential but strong intolerance or specific associations between uncertainty and negative outcomes can produce a preference for achievement. Theoretically, it also is possible that the domain in which the studies were set (i.e., comedy versus food) or the specific operationalization of potential versus achievement framing might have played some role in shaping the effect observed under low tolerance for uncertainty. Future research exploring these possibilities would be useful.

Based on the current studies, it is clear that tolerance for uncertainty shapes the interest and processing people direct toward potential



Note. The path coefficients are unstandardized betas (see Hayes, 2013). Values in parentheses indicate the effect of the interaction on the dependent variable after controlling for the mediator. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Fig. 4. Mediated moderation model for Study 2.

versus achievement, which in turn contributes to the preference for potential. Nevertheless, it remains possible that other mechanisms also play a role. For example, one could argue that potential partly attracts interest because it offers the excitement of discovering the “hot new thing” or being “in the know” and, thus, gaining social status. Theoretically, these factors could contribute to the preference for potential, and might be more potent under high tolerance for uncertainty. Although plausible, we submit that the preference for potential can emerge even without this input. For instance, Tormala et al. (2012) found that the preference for potential did not extend to cases in which achievement clearly exceeded potential (e.g., potential to win one award did not outperform actually winning four awards). If the preference for potential were driven by a desire to gain social status by discovering the “hot new thing,” it is unclear why it would not emerge (or even be amplified) in this context. For now, we simply note that multiple mechanisms for the preference for potential are possible and should be examined in future studies.

These caveats notwithstanding, our results have theoretical implications for understanding the relationship between psychological certainty and information processing. First, consider the effect of uncertainty on processing. As described earlier, past research indicates that people engage in greater processing when they feel uncertain as opposed to certain (e.g., Tiedens & Linton, 2001). Yet accounts differ as to why. From some perspectives, the effect is driven by individuals’ need to build certainty. That is, when people feel uncertain they process more carefully to restore certainty (e.g., Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). Other perspectives suggest that the effect is driven by enjoyment of uncertainty—for instance, finding it curious or exciting to think about uncertain things (e.g., Loewenstein, 1994; Wilson et al., 2005).

Although each account could contribute to the preference for potential, they lead to different predictions regarding the role of tolerance for uncertainty. The need to reduce uncertainty, for example, might suggest that the preference for potential would emerge when tolerance for uncertainty is low, because under these conditions uncertainty would seem to be in greatest need of being reduced. Enjoyment of uncertainty, on the other hand, might suggest that the preference for potential would emerge when tolerance is high, because it is in this light that uncertainty would be approached and perceived as interesting. Our findings are more consistent with the “enjoyment of uncertainty” account. Thus, the current research, and the study of potential more generally, builds on an important literature exploring the relationship between uncertainty and processing. Ultimately, there could be multiple mechanisms through which uncertainty promotes processing and our studies represent a potentially useful step in charting these processes.

Now consider the effect of processing on uncertainty. Prior research suggests that the more people process (or perceive that they have processed), the more certain they feel about their attitudes (for reviews, see

Barden & Tormala, 2014; Rucker, Tormala, Petty, & Briñol, 2014). Furthermore, the more certain people feel, the more resistant they are to persuasion and the more their attitudes direct behavior (Tormala & Rucker, 2007). Given that potential appears to spark greater interest and processing than achievement, attitudes based on claims of potential might be held with more certainty and be more resistant to change than otherwise similar attitudes based on claims of achievement. Ironically, then, despite the fact that targets with potential to achieve success are mathematically less likely to succeed than those who have achieved that same success, people might be more likely to form stable attitudes in the former case than in the latter. In raising this possibility, the current research builds on other recent evidence highlighting the power of uncertainty in persuasive messaging (e.g., Karmarkar & Tormala, 2010). From a practical perspective, strategically incorporating uncertainty into message design seems to have potential to boost both immediate and delayed message impact. Further research exploring this possibility could expand our understanding of the complex role of uncertainty in persuasion processes and outcomes.

Finally, our studies demonstrate that the preference for potential (under high tolerance for uncertainty) can occur in subjective domains of at least moderate interest to most individuals; for example, when people think about restaurants and comedians (see also Pehlman & Newman, 2014). These kinds of domains may facilitate the effect by making uncertainty more bearable or even interesting. In other domains, in which targets vary along more objective, less exciting criteria—such as battery life, processing speed, or fuel economy—uncertainty may be less likely to provoke the interest and processing that underlies the preference for potential. Future research exploring other domains could further delineate possible boundary conditions on the preference for potential.

Appendix A. Tolerance for uncertainty manipulation (Study 2)

High tolerance for uncertainty condition

In this survey, we would like you to think back to a specific situation or event in your life. In particular, we would like you to think of a time in which something in your life was uncertain, and everything worked out well. This could be something big or small, but please think back to a situation or event in which there was a great deal of uncertainty about what would happen, and in the end everything worked out well (e.g., something nice happened, you felt good about the outcome, etc.). For instance, it could be a present someone gave you—for example, maybe you weren’t sure what the present would be, but you really liked it when you saw what the present was. Or it could be applying for a job or school—for example, maybe you were uncertain about what would happen but in the end you got the job you wanted (or got into the school that you wanted).

Below, please describe the experience in as much detail as possible. In addition, please describe what thoughts come to your mind as you think about this experience, and how you feel about this experience:

Low tolerance for uncertainty condition

In this survey, we would like you to think back to a specific situation or event in your life. In particular, we would like you to think of a time in which something in your life was uncertain, and everything worked out poorly. This could be something big or small, but please think back to a situation or event in which there was a great deal of uncertainty about what would happen, and in the end it did turn out badly (e.g., something unpleasant happened, you felt let down about the outcome, etc.). For instance, it could be a present someone gave you—for example, maybe you weren't sure what the present would be and you really disliked it when you saw what the present was. Or it could be applying for a job or school—for example, maybe you were uncertain about what would happen and in the end you did not get the job you wanted (or did not get into the school that you wanted).

Below, please describe the experience in as much detail as possible. In addition, please describe what thoughts come to your mind as you think about this experience, and how you feel about this experience:

Appendix B. Message frame manipulation (Study 2; manipulated words in parentheses)

Restaurant Bianco by Chef Delacroix

John Delacroix is a chef of great achievement (potential). He recently opened Restaurant Bianco, a bistro style restaurant serving a fusion of traditional Italian and modern Californian cuisine. After visiting Bianco on a recent Saturday evening, it became clear to me that it has become (could become) a top dining fixture in the area. Critics have already noted that Chef Delacroix himself is the next big thing (could become the next big thing) and, after sampling his culinary artistry myself, I agree that his new restaurant is a shining achievement (has shining potential).

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