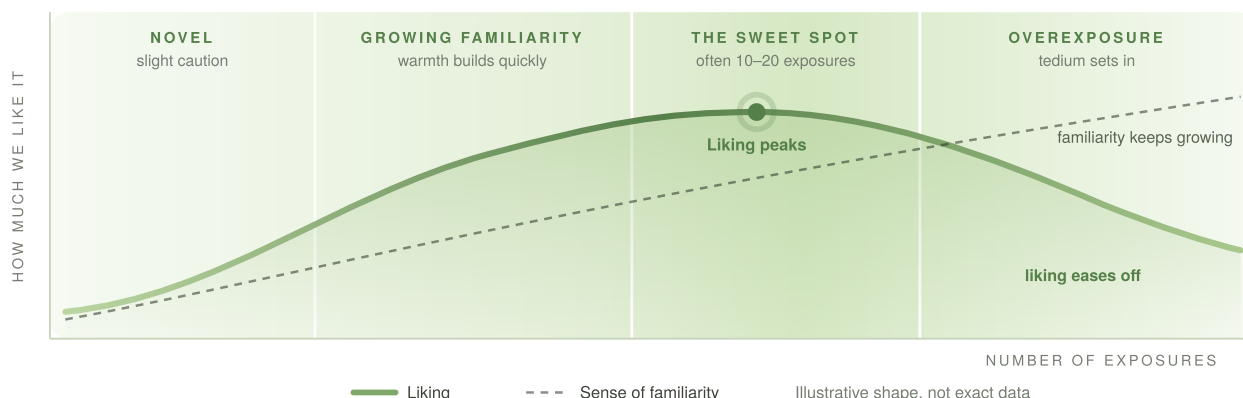


The Mere Exposure Effect

Why the familiar so often feels good

We tend to warm to things simply because we've met them before: a face, a song, a word, a brand. No reward or good experience is needed. Repeated, uneventful exposure is often enough to nudge how we feel, usually without our noticing.



Early exposures matter most. Across hundreds of studies liking follows an inverted U: it rises, levels off, then can decline, while familiarity itself keeps building.

What it is

A preference that grows from repeated exposure alone. Nothing good has to happen; the stimulus just has to become familiar.

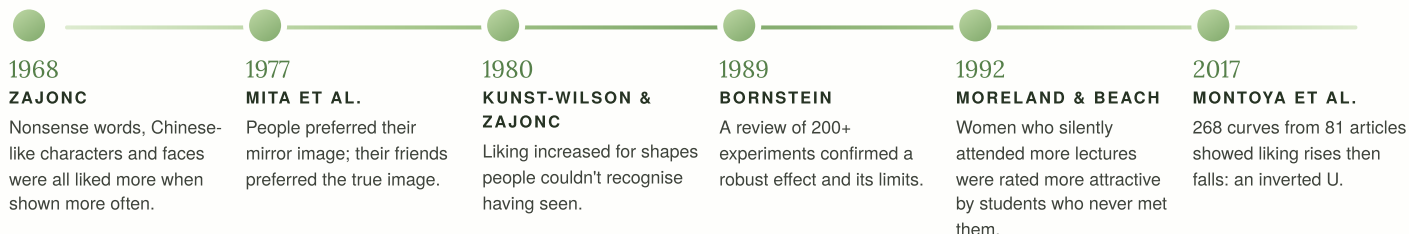
Why it may happen

Familiar things are easier for the brain to process, and that ease can feel pleasant. Each uneventful encounter also signals “this is safe”.

The surprising part

It works even without awareness. People preferred shapes they'd seen too briefly to recognise, and the effect is often strongest this way.

How We Know Key studies, 1968 to today



TENDS TO BE STRONGER WHEN

- Exposures are brief and not consciously noticed
- The stimulus is moderately complex, not simple
- Several different things are shown, mixed together
- There's a delay before liking is measured

WEAKER, OR EVEN REVERSED, WHEN

- We already dislike it; exposure can deepen dislike
- Repetition tips into boredom or overexposure
- The person is a young child
- The stimulus is a drawing or painting (smaller effects)

WHERE IT SHOWS UP

- Friendships with neighbours
- Songs that grow on you
- Brand loyalty
- Preferring your mirror selfie
- Comfort foods & routines
- Familiar political names
- Warming to new colleagues

A clinical note

Familiar isn't the same as good for us. The effect can help explain why old patterns feel oddly comfortable, and why new people, ideas or habits can feel “off” at first. It's worth giving them a few more encounters before deciding.

Reflection Consider how this shows up for you

- 1 What have I grown to like mainly through familiarity?
- 2 Where might “familiar” be passing itself off as “right for me”?
- 3 What person or idea have I dismissed before it had a fair chance?

SOURCES Zajonc, R. B. (1968). Attitudinal effects of mere exposure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9(2, Pt. 2), 1–27. · Mita, T. H., Dermer, M., & Knight, J. (1977). Reversed facial images and the mere-exposure hypothesis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35(8), 597–601. · Kunst-Wilson, W. R., & Zajonc, R. B. (1980). Affective discrimination of stimuli that cannot be recognized. *Science*, 207(4430), 557–558. · Bornstein, R. F. (1989). Exposure and affect: Overview and meta-analysis of research, 1968–1987. *Psychological Bulletin*, 106(2), 265–289. · Moreland, R. L., & Beach, S. R. (1992). Exposure effects in the classroom. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 28(3), 255–276. · Reber, R., Winkielman, P., & Schwarz, N. (1998). Effects of perceptual fluency on affective judgments. *Psychological Science*, 9(1), 45–48. · Montoya, R. M., Horton, R. S., Vevea, J. L., Citkovic, M., & Lauber, E. A. (2017). A re-examination of the mere exposure effect. *Psychological Bulletin*, 143(5), 459–498.