

UNCOMFORTABLE Reading Experiences: Eliciting Factors & Ways of Measuring

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Introduction | Background

A significant factor behind the quest for narrative experiences is the potential for inducing pleasurable states, such as flow or absorption. Additional factors, such as plot suspense, identification with story characters or aesthetic appreciation due to formal features, further motivate readers, viewers and listeners to pursue their involvement with a given narrative.

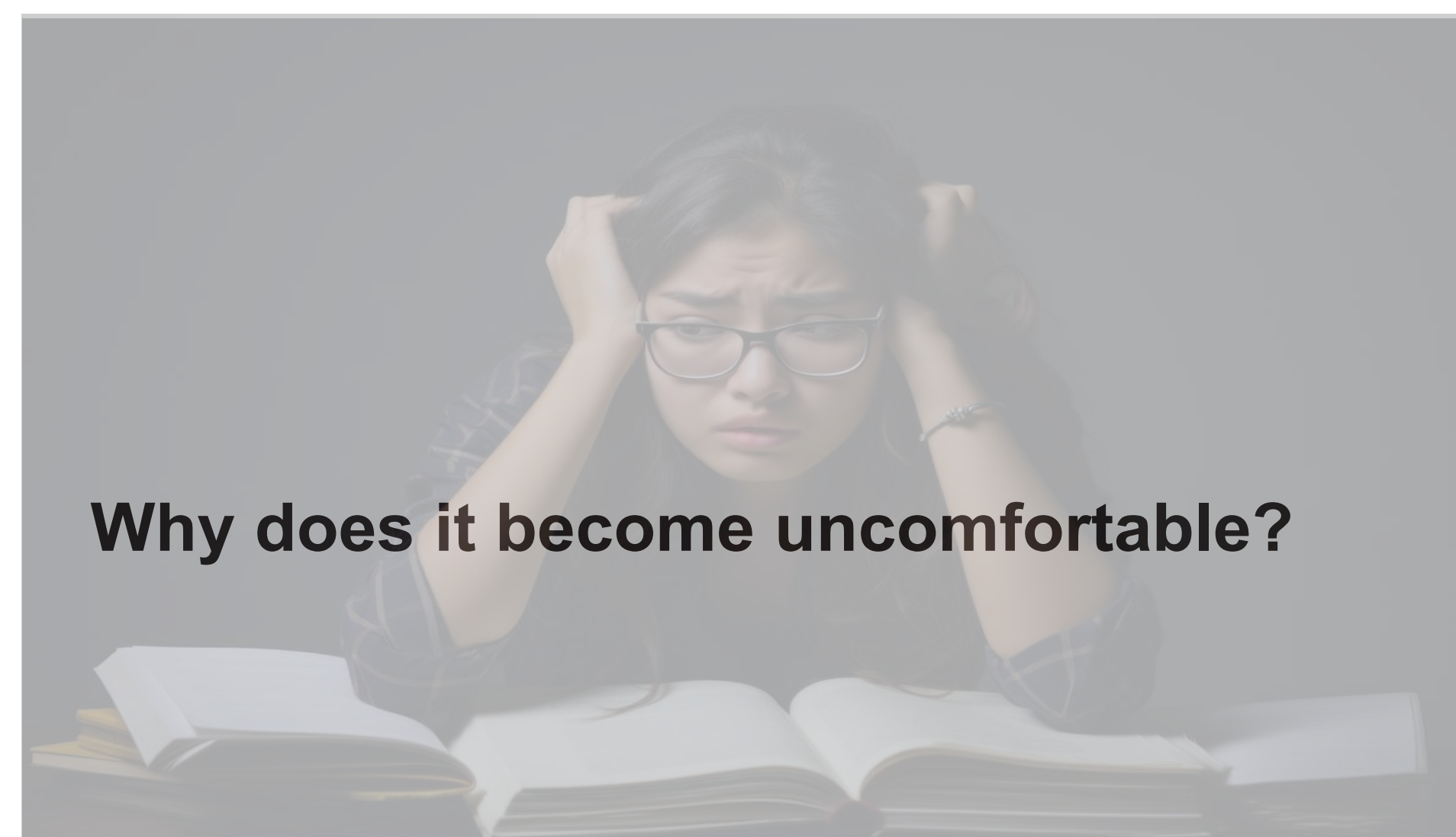
However, some experiences may be demanding or cause audience members to feel outright uncomfortable and uneasy. Emotions linked to uncomfortable reading experiences may include fear, (moral) disgust or outrage. I aim to investigate these lesser-studied forms of narrative encounters in relation to the following three topics:

- When are narratives experienced as uncomfortable? Which (combinations of) text and reader variables can be hypothesized to regularly create or intensify unease?
- Why and when do audience members disengage, i. e. stop reading, watching, or listening? Which features of the narratives contribute to nevertheless sustained attention and engagement despite experienced discomfort?
- How could states of discomfort be (subjectively and objectively) measured during narrative exposure?



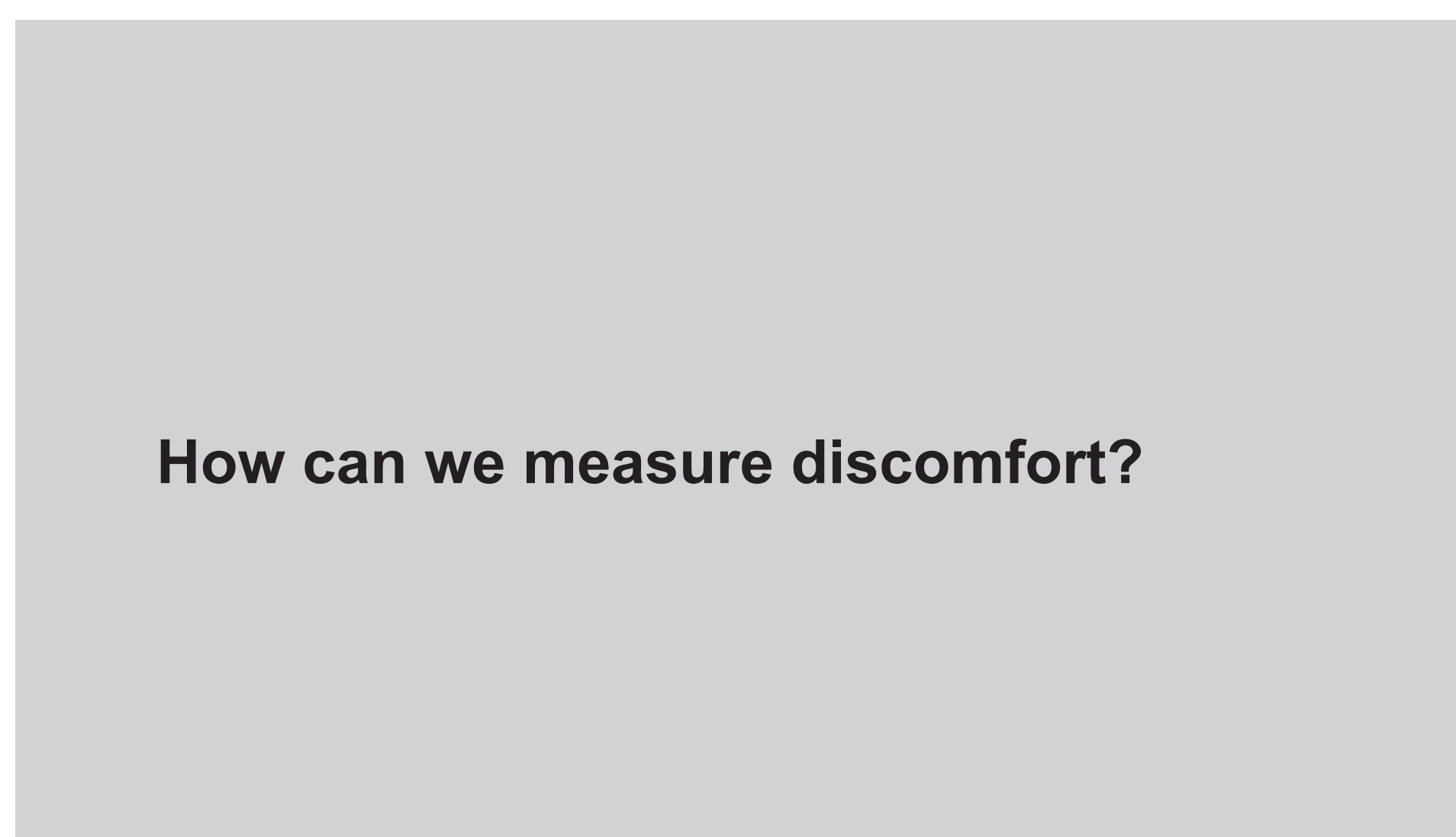
Hypotheses

- **Subject Matter:** Topics that are deemed taboo, a moral transgression, and/or are typically affected by a “social flinch” (e.g. abuse) will more regularly elicit unease.
- **Style & Presentation:** Narrative techniques which create closeness (in contrast to distancing devices) would create severer discomfort if used in conjunction with the unease-eliciting topics.
- **Personal (Un)Involvement:** Both deeply personal topics or those that are perceived as revealing something new and shocking are prone to elicit stronger responses, i. e. increase unease.

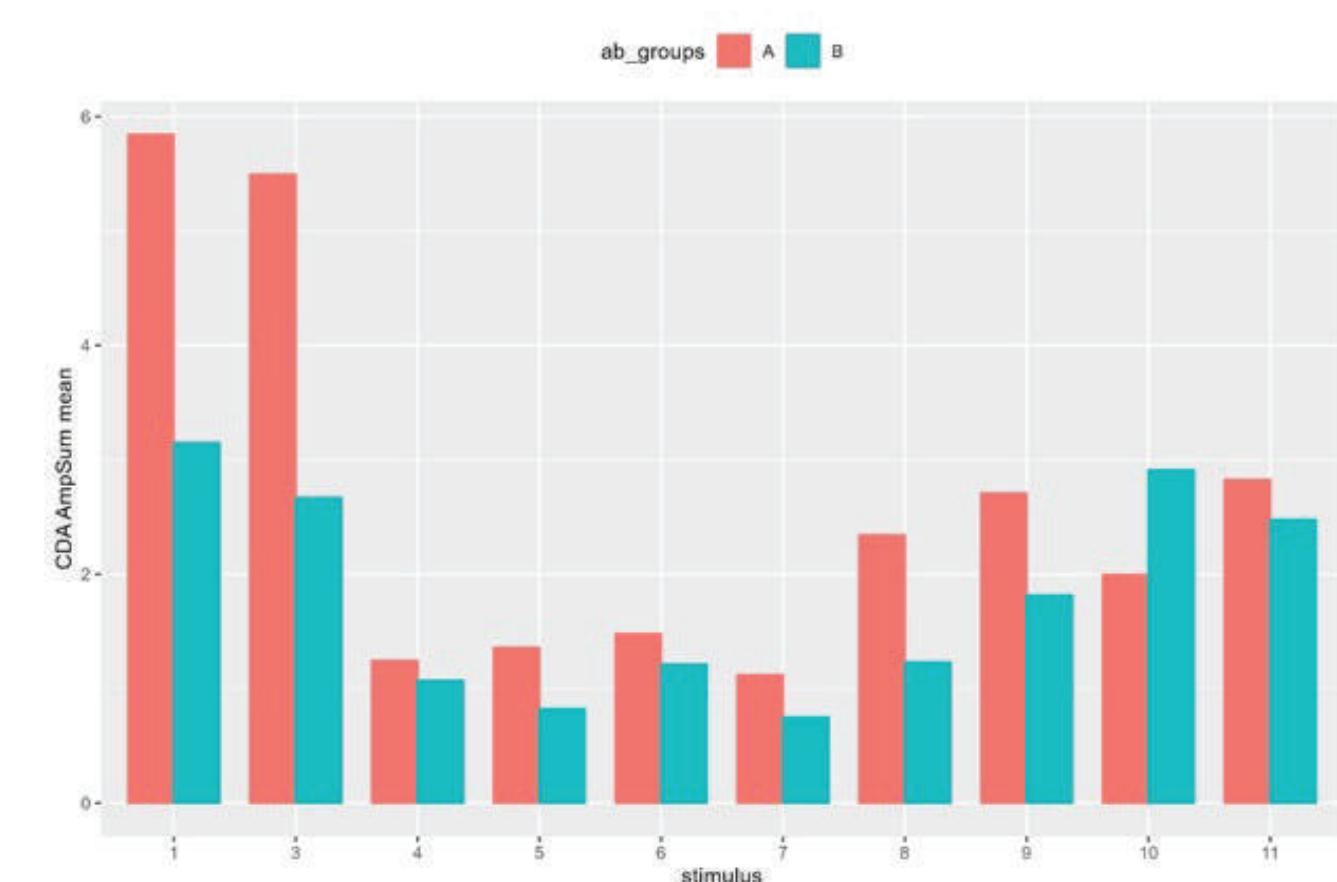


Hypotheses

- **Personal Relevance & Preferences:** Self-Selection; Topic Interest; non-hedonic motives as drivers to engage with narratives
- **Personal Psychology of Audience Members:** High Need for Closure; high in Experience-Seeking [1]
- **Style & Presentation:** Moments of potential discomfort (through subject matter, style or presentation) are accompanied by strategies that make the audience want to prolong the experience, such as suspense or distancing mechanisms (e.g. figurative language).



Weight distribution and posture changes can be detected using simple, cheap pressure sensors mounted under the chair. [2]



An example analysis of SCR peaks (y) over different textual stimuli (x) for two differently primed groups from a pre-study

Subjective Experience

- **Interviews** with a focus on retrospective or potential reading experiences that have or could elicit uncomfortableness
- **Self-report questionnaires** post-reading with a focus on emotions connected to uncomfortable reading experiences

Behavioural Correlates

- **Sensor chair:** While reading, ‘wiggling’ motions and bodily movement can be picked up and motion profiles for potentially unsettling vs. neutral/relaxed stimuli can be compared
- **Video analysis:** Unconscious gestures which expose mental states of discomfort (e.g. nervous foot tapping, hair touching, lip biting) can be recorded

FACS: Facial expressions could reveal signs of fear and disgust

Physiological Correlates

- **Facial blood flow changes**[3]: This objective measurement could help to determine emotional states (even through webcam), e.g. fear or disgust
- **Skin conductance response:** SCR peak detection could help to determine which passages are especially disturbing, and analysis of the tonic component could reveal differences between neutral and potentially disturbing narratives

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References

[1] Those scoring high on experience-seeking (measured as part of the Brief Sensation-Seeking Scale; BSSS) seek out varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences, including those that are potentially stressful. [2] Cheng et al. (2013) Smart Chair: What Can Simple Pressure Sensors under the Chairs' Legs Tell Us about User Activity? [3] I was introduced to this technique by Si Jia Wu at the last IGEL meeting, since then she has co-published papers using this technology.