



The ick: Disgust sensitivity, narcissism, and perfectionism in mate choice thresholds

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ABSTRACT

The “ick” is a sudden and visceral aversion to a romantic partner, often triggered by behaviors or characteristics that superficially signal incompatibility or low mate quality. This study examined individual differences in disgust sensitivity, narcissism, and other-oriented perfectionism as correlates of the ick, as well as gender differences in ick familiarity and frequency. A pilot analysis of TikTok videos (#theick) identified common ick triggers, informing the main study's behavioral assessments. A sample of single adults ($N = 125$) reported their familiarity with and experiences of the ick and completed measures of disgust sensitivity, narcissism, and perfectionism. Women were more likely than men to be familiar with the term (63 % vs. 39 %) and to have experienced the ick (75 % vs. 57 %), though frequency did not differ by gender. Greater disgust sensitivity was associated with both the likelihood and frequency of experiencing the ick, suggesting that heightened aversion to minor partner cues may shape mate rejection thresholds. Narcissism correlated with the likelihood—but not frequency—of experiencing the ick, indicating that narcissistic people may selectively reject partners based on specific perceived flaws. Perfectionism was associated with both likelihood and frequency, suggesting that people with rigid standards experience the ick more often. Findings suggest that while the ick may help people identify potential mate incompatibilities, it may also lead to overly rigid rejection standards.

1. Introduction

1.1. Disgust sensitivity, narcissism, and perfectionism in mate choice thresholds

The “ick” is a sudden and visceral aversion to a romantic partner, often triggered by behaviors or characteristics that superficially signal incompatibility or low mate quality (Barr, 2021; Urban Dictionary, 2017). This phenomenon has gained prominence in popular culture. For instance, in the reality show *Love Island*, contestants report experiencing the ick in response to overly bright smiles or awkward hand-holding. Sitcoms also depict the ick: in *Friends* (Season 1, Episode 22, 1995), Monica becomes repulsed by her boyfriend upon discovering he is younger than he looks; in *Seinfeld* (Season 8, Episode 3, 1996), Jerry is disgusted by his date's “manly” hands; and in *Sex and the City* (Season 6, Episode 2, 2003), Carrie is revolted by a lover after learning he wrote her a love song. On TikTok, hashtags #theick and #Ick have amassed over a billion views, while Instagram accounts such as @whatgivesyoutheick curate examples like “awkwardly chasing a ping pong ball” or “licking

their finger before turning a page.” These examples illustrate how superficial signals of incompatibility or low mate quality can trigger disproportionate disgust, revealing individual differences related to thresholds in mate choice.

Mate choice involves evaluating a partner's desirable traits, which enhance perceived mate value, against undesirable traits that signal incompatibility or risk (Csajbók & Berkics, 2022; Jonason et al., 2015). Desirable traits typically confer reproductive and relational advantages, including warmth, attractiveness, status, intelligence, passion, stability, and dominance (Csajbók & Berkics, 2022). Conversely, undesirable traits—commonly known as dealbreakers or red flags—pose clear risks to long-term compatibility and relationship success (Jonason et al., 2020). These include anger issues, infidelity, untrustworthiness, poor hygiene, and behaviors indicative of inattentiveness or substance abuse.

While dealbreakers reflect significant relational risks, subtler cues—such as those triggering the ick—may stem from individual sensitivities that influence mate choice thresholds. Mate preferences are also shaped by social influences that reinforce attraction and aversion responses (Westneat et al., 2000). Observing others' romantic

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choices—through modeling or mate-choice copying—can lead people to internalize standards based on peer or cultural norms (Hill & Buss, 2008). These social learning processes, combined with evolved mate preferences, shape individual sensitivities to attraction and aversion, influencing what people find appealing or repulsive in a partner.

The ick may stem from an increased sensitivity to potential risks in mate choice. People are generally more attuned to potential losses than to equivalent gains, making them especially reactive to traits that might indicate incompatibility or relational risk (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Even minor aversions may act as protective mechanisms, leading people to reject unfit partners before investing further. From an evolutionary perspective, error management theory suggests that cognitive biases evolved to minimize the asymmetric costs of mating errors (see Haselton & Galperin, 2013). A false-positive error—accepting an incompatible partner—can drain resources, reduce reproductive success, and carry long-term relational consequences, whereas a false-negative error—rejecting a compatible partner—results in a missed opportunity but poses fewer immediate risks. Given this imbalance, people, particularly women with disproportionate parental investment, may develop heightened aversions to even superficial cues that suggest incompatibility or low mate quality.

Given this tendency to prioritize loss avoidance in mate choice, people likely vary in how strictly they apply rejection thresholds. While some may dismiss partners over superficial cues, others might tolerate them and focus on broader indicators of mate quality. These mate choice thresholds—the minimum standards a potential partner must meet before being considered a viable option—act as cognitive filters, shaping decisions about whom to pursue or reject based on traits that signal incompatibility or risk (Csajbók & Berkics, 2022). Other factors, such as mating costs, population density, and sex ratios, further affect rejection thresholds (Bleu et al., 2012). When mating costs are high, thresholds become stricter, leading to greater selectivity. When costs are low, standards relax, allowing for broader mate consideration. Even when a partner has desirable traits, a single attribute falling below this threshold can trigger rejection (Csajbók & Berkics, 2022; Dugatkin, 1998).

Because mate choice depends on minimizing costly errors, emotions that heighten risk perception help enforce these thresholds. Disgust functions as an evolved avoidance mechanism. Originally adapted to protect against disease, it was later coopted to regulate mate selection and social behavior (Tybur et al., 2009; Tybur et al., 2013). Tybur and colleagues' three-domain model—pathogen, sexual, and moral disgust—illustrates its functional specialization: pathogen disgust reduces disease exposure, sexual disgust helps avoid reproductively costly mates, and moral disgust discourages behaviors that undermine social cooperation (Tybur et al., 2009). While disgust typically responds to legitimate threats—such as a partner's signs of infection or poor hygiene—it may also extend to cues that superficially suggest incompatibility or poor mate quality. If so, individual differences in disgust sensitivity and personality traits related to unreasonably high standards for romantic partners may be associated with likelihood of experiencing the ick.

2. Individual differences in the Ick

Disgust sensitivity may shape how people establish and apply rejection thresholds in mate choice. People with higher disgust sensitivity experience stronger aversive responses to traits that signal risks to relationship stability and reproductive success (Jonason et al., 2020; Al-Shawaf et al., 2015). When these cues reliably indicate incompatibility, heightened disgust sensitivity may function adaptively by reducing false-positive errors—helping people avoid investing in unsuitable partners. However, disgust sensitivity may also extend to minor or ambiguous cues with little bearing on incompatibility or mate quality. In such cases, heightened sensitivity could lead to stricter rejection thresholds, increasing the likelihood of dismissing partners based on aversions unrelated to meaningful indicators of mate quality. The extent

to which disgust sensitivity contributes to the ick remains an open question, particularly regarding whether it reflects a functional mate selection strategy or an overly rigid rejection process.

Personality traits associated with elevated partner expectations and heightened sensitivity to a partner's perceived flaws may also contribute to the ick. Grandiose narcissism, characterized by an inflated sense of self-worth and an expectation that romantic partners reflect and affirm one's superior qualities, may intensify aversive reactions to a partner's perceived shortcomings. Narcissistic people are highly motivated to maintain an idealized self-image and often extend these high standards to their partners, expecting them to enhance their own status, attractiveness, and desirability (Foster & Brunell, 2018). As a result, they may be particularly sensitive to cues suggesting that a partner does not meet these standards. Even minor deviations may be perceived as signs of incompatibility or diminished mate value, increasing the likelihood of experiencing the ick.

Similarly, other-oriented perfectionism, defined as holding excessively high standards for others, may contribute to the ick by reinforcing rigid and often unrealistic partner expectations. People high in other-oriented perfectionism evaluate partners against strict, idealized criteria and are less tolerant of minor deviations from these expectations (Hewitt et al., 1991). This low tolerance for imperfection may lead to stronger aversive responses toward partners who fall below perfectionists' standards, increasing susceptibility to the ick.

2.1. Current study

This study examines the ick as a form of romantic aversion and explores how individual differences—disgust sensitivity, narcissism, and other-oriented perfectionism—correlate with susceptibility to it. While the ick may serve an adaptive function by signaling incompatibility, it could also reflect overly rigid rejection thresholds, leading people to dismiss partners based on behaviors or characteristics that superficially signal incompatibility or low mate quality.

To investigate these patterns, we first conducted a pilot study analyzing TikTok videos tagged with #theick to identify common ick triggers, which informed the selection of behaviors assessed in the main study. Participants then reported their familiarity with the ick, whether they had experienced it, and how frequently. They rated their likelihood of experiencing the ick both generally and in response to specific behaviors before completing measures of disgust sensitivity, other-oriented perfectionism, and narcissism.

We tested the following hypotheses:

1. Women will report greater familiarity with the ick, a higher likelihood of experiencing it, and more frequent experiences than men, consistent with research showing that women tend to be more attuned to signals of potential incompatibility or low mate quality.
2. Greater disgust sensitivity will be positively correlated with both the likelihood and frequency of experiencing the ick, as heightened reactivity to aversive stimuli may correspond with stronger responses to perceived incompatibility or low mate quality.
3. Greater narcissism will be positively correlated with the likelihood of experiencing the ick, as people who expect partners to reflect and elevate their own status, attractiveness, or desirability may be more sensitive to cues suggesting a partner does not meet these standards.
4. Greater other-oriented perfectionism will be positively correlated with both the likelihood and frequency of experiencing the ick, as people with rigid and unrealistic partner expectations may be less tolerant of minor imperfections.

2.2. Pilot study

On May 12, 2022, we retrieved the first 100 TikTok videos using the hashtag #theick through TikTok's search filter. After excluding 14 videos unrelated to dating, we analyzed the remaining 86. These videos

had high engagement, averaging 3.27 million views ($SD = 3.06$ million), 556,788 likes ($SD = 680,475$), and 7075 comments ($SD = 12,019$). Most videos ($n = 67$; 78 %) discussed icks experienced by women, while 19 (22 %) focused on those experienced by men. Twenty-five videos listed multiple icks, with one to 10 icks per video ($M = 1.99$, $SD = 1.85$), resulting in 157 icks for content analysis (109 from women, 48 from men).

Two authors reviewed and transcribed the TikTok videos, then collaboratively developed preliminary content categories for women's and men's icks. The two authors independently coded each video, allowing multiple categorizations when necessary. Initial coding agreement was high, with Bennet's S statistic—appropriate for multiple categorization—showing substantial agreement ($S_{\text{women}} = 0.80$; $S_{\text{men}} = 0.74$) (Bennett et al., 1954). Authors resolved all coding discrepancies through discussion. See Table 1 for a content analysis of women's and men's icks.

3. Main Study

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

An a priori power analysis, assuming a medium effect size ($r = 0.30$) and using G*Power 17 for a two-tailed test with 0.95 power, determined a sample size of 134 participants. We recruited 164 participants through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. To ensure data integrity and include only single participants, we excluded 25 individuals who were either married ($n = 8$) or in a committed relationship ($n = 17$), 14 participants who did not fully complete the survey, and one participant who completed the survey in less than one minute, resulting in a final sample of 125 participants. Two attention check items were embedded within the survey to verify participant engagement; all 125 participants passed these checks. However, because the final sample size did not meet the threshold established in our pre-registered power analysis, results should be interpreted with caution.

The sample included 74 men (59 %) and 51 women (41 %), ages ranging from 24 to 72 years ($M = 39.20$, $SD = 8.73$). Participants varied by ethnicity, with 71 % identifying as White, 8 % as Black, 7 % as Hispanic, 7 % as Asian, 2 % as biracial, and 2 % as other/not specified. Most participants identified as heterosexual (90 %), followed other/not specified (4 %), and gay (2 %). Most participants reported dating one person (57 %) rather than two (32 %) or 3 people per month (8 %). Most participants also reported going on two (28 %) to three (26 %) dates per month, followed by once per month (17 %) and five or more dates per month (17 %).

3.1.2. Materials

3.1.2.1. Ick frequency and experience items. Participants first indicated, on a yes/no scale, whether they had heard the term “the ick” in a dating context. Next, after reading an operational definition, participants answered whether they had personally experienced it. Those who had experienced the ick reported how frequently it occurred (1 = Almost Never, 5 = Always) and estimated the number of times. They also indicated whether the ick led them to stop dating that person—immediately, later, or not at all—and whether they shared the experience with others, including the person who elicited it, other dating partners, friends, family, and/or coworkers. For participants who disclosed their ick to the person involved, they rated how embarrassing it was to share (1 = Not at all to 5 = Extremely).

3.1.2.2. Ick likelihood items. To assess ick likelihood, participants rated how likely they would be to experience the ick if a date engaged in each hypothetical behavior identified in the pilot study. Using a scale from 1 (Not at all likely) to 5 (Extremely likely), women rated the eight ick

categories reported by women, with examples (e.g., “Their physical appearance: seeing their buttcrack when they bend over”). Similarly, men rated the seven ick categories reported by men, with examples (e.g., “Not very feminine: spits gum in the trash can”). All participants, regardless of gender, also rated their general likelihood of getting the ick when dating someone on the same response scale.

3.1.2.3. Disgust propensity. Participants' general tendency to experience disgust was assessed using the Disgust Propensity subscale of the Revised Disgust Propensity and Sensitivity Scale (Olatunji et al., 2007). Disgust propensity measures the baseline likelihood of feeling disgusted, making it particularly relevant to our investigation. In contrast, the Disgust Sensitivity subscale, which evaluates distress or discomfort with experiencing disgust, was not included, as it focuses on emotional responses to disgust itself. Participants rated eight statements, such as “Disgusting things make my stomach turn,” on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Disagree strongly) to 7 (Agree strongly).

3.1.2.4. Other-oriented perfectionism. Participants' perfectionistic expectations for others were measured using the Other-Oriented Perfectionism subscale of the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt et al., 1991). This subscale assesses the extent to which individuals impose high standards on those close to them, making it particularly relevant to our focus on traits that may heighten aversive reactions in romantic contexts. Participants rated five statements, such as “I have high expectations for the people who are important to me,” on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Disagree Strongly) to 7 (Agree Strongly).

3.1.2.5. Narcissism. We measured grandiose narcissism, characterized by an inflated sense of self-importance, dominance, and attention-seeking, using the 16-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Ames et al., 2006). Participants completed 16 forced-choice items, selecting the statement they agreed with most from pairs contrasting narcissistic and non-narcissistic options (e.g., “I like to be the center of attention” vs. “I like to blend into the crowd”). Scores were calculated as the proportion of narcissistic statements chosen, providing an index of grandiose narcissistic tendencies. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alphas for each measure.¹

3.1.3. Procedure

Singles who reported dating completed an online “Dating Experiences Survey” on Amazon's MTurk. They were first asked if they had encountered the term “the ick” in a dating context. On the next page, participants read a definition of “the ick” and indicated whether they had experienced it personally. If so, they provided further details, including frequency, approximate number of occurrences, whether experiencing the ick led them to stop dating that partner, and if they disclosed the experience to anyone.

Participants then rated their likelihood of experiencing the ick in response to specific behaviors, completed a general likelihood rating for experiencing the ick, and responded to measures of disgust sensitivity, other-oriented perfectionism, and narcissism in random order. Finally, they completed demographic questions and were debriefed.

4. Results and discussion

Approximately half of participants (49 %) were familiar with the term “the ick.” When provided with a definition, 64 % confirmed having experienced the ick within a dating context, though the frequency

¹ All measures, power analyses, hypotheses, and planned data analyses were pre-registered via the Center for Open Science. Based on content analysis findings that gender-incongruent behaviors frequently elicited the ick, an exploratory gender role beliefs scale was also pre-registered for exploratory purposes.

Table 1
Content analysis of women's and men's icks.

Women's Icks			Men's Icks		
Content Categories	Example	Frequency	Content Categories	Example	Frequency
Gender Incongruent (overly feminine)	"When he laid his head on my shoulder"	44 (40 %)	Overly Trendy	"Into Astrology"	14 (29 %)
Publicly Embarrassing	"Shazaaming a song while he was in a nightclub"	31 (28 %)	Publicly Embarrassing	"Girls tripping"	10 (21 %)
Annoying Speech	"Saying 'wow, without me?' whenever I would do anything"	24 (22 %)	Annoying Speech	"Used weird slang"	10 (21 %)
Fashion Faux Pas	"He wore jorts (jean shorts)"	15 (14 %)	Physical Appearance	"Her feet didn't reach the floor"	7 (15 %)
Misogynistic	"He loudly shushed another girl"	15 (14 %)	Gender Incongruent (overly masculine)	"When she spits her gum in the trash like a guy"	6 (13 %)
Other (not specified)	"The sound of his feet slapping the floor"	10 (9 %)	Overly focused on social media	"Cringy captions on her Instagram pictures"	5 (10 %)
Overly focused on social media	"He posted polls to his Instagram story"	9 (8 %)	Other (unspecified)	"Talking about girls she just met as 'best friends'"	5 (10 %)
Physical Appearance	"Seeing their buttcrack when bending over"	7 (6 %)	Vanity	"Too into make-up, fake tanner"	4 (8 %)
Too trendy	"Trying too hard to fit in"	5 (5 %)			

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 % because videos may contain multiple icks and thus may be categorized in multiple categories.

Table 2
Women's Estimated Marginal Means, Standard Errors, and Confidence Intervals for Likelihood of Experiencing the Ick in Response to Specific Cues.

Partner Cue	M	SE	95 % CI (Lower)	95 % CI (Upper)
Physical appearance	2.48	0.24	2.01	2.95
Fashion faux pas	1.69	0.19	1.33	2.06
Overly digital	2.86	0.25	2.38	3.34
Overly feminine	2.45	0.24	1.98	2.92
Misogynistic	4.10	0.20	3.71	4.49
Annoying speech	4.10	0.21	3.68	4.53
Publicly embarrassing	2.52	0.29	1.92	3.12
Overly trendy	2.72	0.26	2.19	3.26
Other	2.90	0.34	2.20	3.59

Note. M = Mean; SE = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval.

varied: most reported feeling the ick rarely (46 %) or occasionally (44 %). On average, participants reported experiencing the ick 9.71 times (SD = 33.67), which dropped to 5.94 (SD = 5.03) when excluding one outlier with 300 reported instances.

Experiencing the ick may influence participants' dating decisions; 42 % chose to stop dating the person at a later point, while 26 % ended the relationship immediately. However, 32 % continued dating despite experiencing the ick. Most participants (92 %) disclosed their experience to someone else, most often to friends (80 %), family members (50 %), or coworkers (39 %). Fewer shared the ick directly with the person involved (28 %) or a different dating partner (25 %), with embarrassment ratings for disclosing it to a partner averaging 2.86 (SD = 1.32) on a 5-point scale.

4.1. Gender differences

We analyzed gender differences in familiarity, experience, and likelihood of experiencing the ick. Mann-Whitney *U* tests for independent samples were used to assess gender differences in ick familiarity and experience. Women were significantly more likely than men to have prior knowledge of the term "the ick" before reading its definition, $\chi^2(1, N = 125) = 2.58, p < .01, r = 0.23$, such that 63 % of women were familiar with the term versus only 39 % of men. Women also reported significantly higher past experience rates, $\chi^2(1, N = 125) = 2.19, p < .05, r = 0.20$. Specifically, 75 % of women reported having experienced an ick; versus 57 % of men who reported having experienced an ick.

No significant gender differences emerged in general frequency of experiencing the ick. In response to a likert item, how frequently have you experienced the ick, women (M = 2.55, SD = 0.76) and men (M = 2.50, SD = 0.60) did not differ, $t(76) = -0.37, p = .57, d = 0.13$. Similarly, when asked to approximate how many times they'd

experienced the ick, both men (M = 5.88, SD = 4.83) and women (M = 6.00, SD = 5.31) did not differ, $t(75) = -0.11, p = .92, d = 0.08$.

We conducted one-way, repeated-measures ANOVAs separately for women and men to examine likelihood of getting the ick in response to specific partner cues. Results showed the likelihood of experiencing the ick significantly varied as a function of partner cues for both genders, $F_{\text{women}}(7,336) = 23.39, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.33$; $F_{\text{men}}(6,72) = 6.05, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.08$. See Tables 2 and 3 and Figs. 1 and 2. When participants rated their general likelihood of experiencing the ick, no significant difference emerged between men and women, $t(121) = -0.27, p = .79, d = 0.05$, indicating that while specific triggers vary by gender, overall susceptibility to the ick did not differ across genders.

4.2. Individual difference correlates

Disgust sensitivity was positively correlated with the likelihood of experiencing the ick but not with its frequency (see Table 4). This suggests that individuals higher in disgust sensitivity may be more susceptible to specific aversive triggers without necessarily encountering the ick more often overall. Grandiose narcissism showed a positive correlation with the likelihood of experiencing the ick but was unrelated to its frequency. This indicates that while narcissistic individuals may react strongly to perceived flaws, these reactions appear selective rather than consistent. Other-oriented perfectionism was positively correlated with both the likelihood and frequency of experiencing the ick. Individuals with rigid expectations for others may be more prone to noticing and reacting to minor partner imperfections, making the ick a more frequent occurrence in their dating experiences.

Further analyses revealed disgust sensitivity, other-oriented perfectionism, and grandiose narcissism correlated with different ick-eliciting cues in women (see Table 5) and men (see Table 6). For example, among

Table 3
Men's Estimated Marginal Means, Standard Errors, and Confidence Intervals for Likelihood of Experiencing the Ick in Response to Specific Cues.

Partner Cue	M	SE	95 % CI (Lower)	95 % CI (Upper)
Physical appearance	3.15	0.19	2.78	3.52
Publicly embarrassing	1.85	0.16	1.53	2.17
Vanity	3.06	0.20	2.67	3.45
Overly trendy	2.72	0.18	2.37	3.07
Overly focused on digital communication	2.57	0.19	2.20	2.94
Annoying/rude speech	2.91	0.19	2.53	3.29
Not very feminine	2.72	0.18	2.37	3.07
Other	2.30	0.25	1.82	2.78

Note. M = Mean; SE = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval.

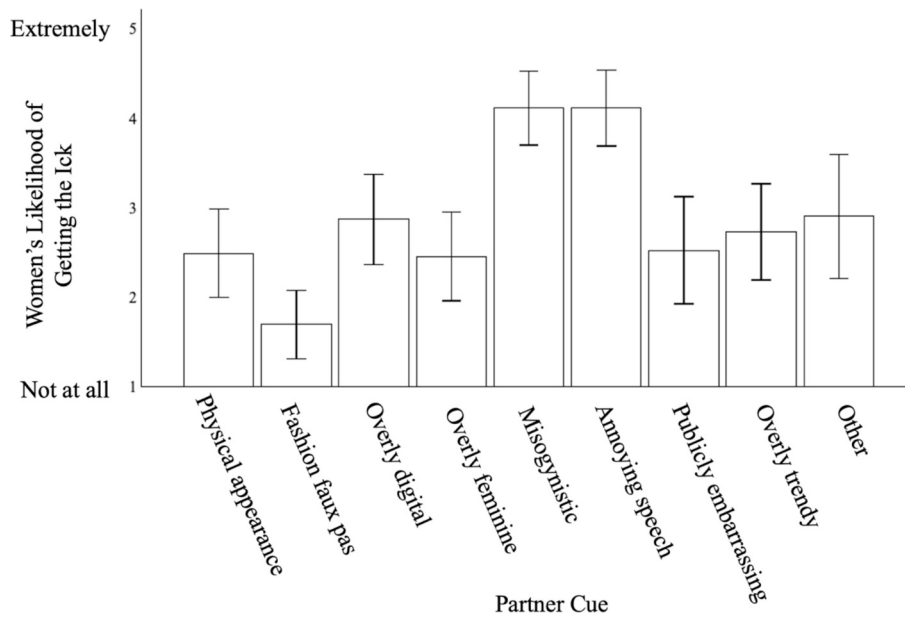


Fig. 1. Women's likelihood of experiencing the ick as a function of partner cue.

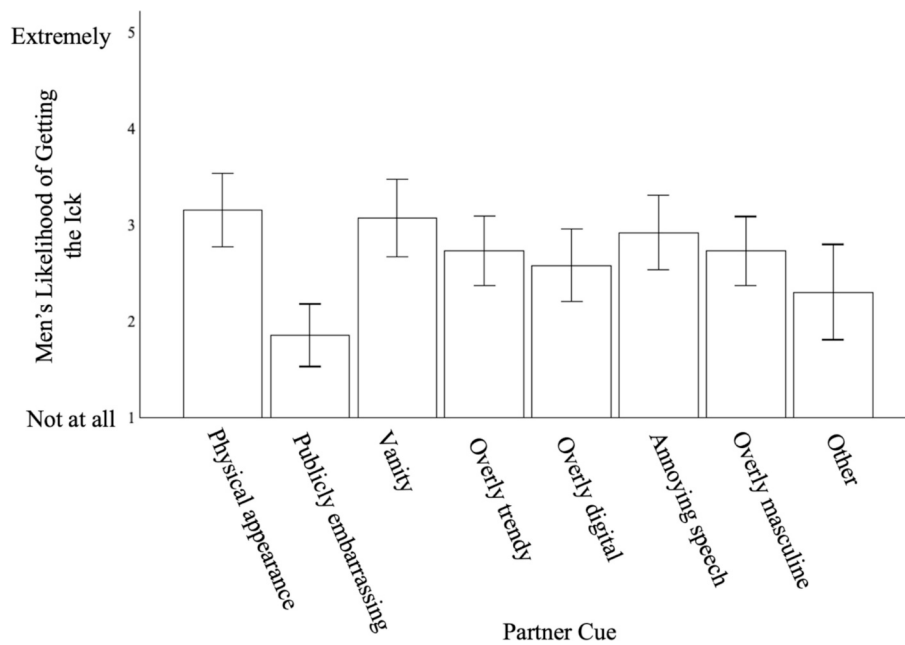


Fig. 2. Men's likelihood of experiencing the ick as a function of partner cue.

women, perfectionism and narcissism were positively correlated with both physical appearance and public embarrassment. Among men, disgust sensitivity was correlated with a partner's annoying speech and overly trendy behavior.

4.3. General Discussion

We examined the ick as a form of romantic aversion and investigated how individual differences in disgust sensitivity, grandiose narcissism, and other-oriented perfectionism relate to the likelihood and frequency of experiencing it. Additionally, we assessed gender differences in ick familiarity, likelihood, and frequency. Findings indicate that disgust sensitivity, narcissism, and perfectionism are each associated with heightened aversive responses to romantic partners, suggesting that the

ick may reflect individual differences in rejection thresholds.

Supporting the first hypothesis, women reported greater familiarity with and more frequent experiences of the ick than men. These findings align with research suggesting that women, due to greater parental investment, tend to be more attuned to potential mate incompatibilities and relational risk (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Women's heightened sensitivity to relational risks may lead to lower tolerance for behaviors or characteristics that superficially signal incompatibility or low mate quality, even if these cues lack substantial long-term predictive value for mate choice.

Consistent with the second hypothesis, greater disgust sensitivity was positively correlated with both the likelihood and frequency of experiencing the ick. Disgust serves as an evolved avoidance mechanism, originally protecting against pathogen exposure but later

Table 4
Correlation matrix for ick knowledge, experience, frequency, likelihood, and individual difference measures.

	Mean (SD)	Alpha	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Ick familiarity	0.48 (0.50)	–	–	0.25**	0.28**	0.03	0.21*	–0.01	0.13	0.04	–0.06	0.15
2. Ick experience	0.63 (0.48)	–	–	–	N/A	N/A	0.24*	0.23	0.23	0.25**	0.01	0.07
3. Freq. rating	2.51 (0.70)	–	–	–	–	0.41**	0.42**	0.47**	0.02	0.12	0.26**	0.09
4. Approx. frequency	9.71 (33.67)	–	–	–	–	–	0.35**	0.32	0.20	0.20	0.22	0.18
5. General likelihood	2.51 (0.94)	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.53**	0.58**	0.27**	0.14	0.26**
6. Women's likelihood	2.91 (0.80)	0.70	–	–	–	–	–	–	N/A	0.23	0.45**	0.43**
7. Men's likelihood ²	2.85 (0.82)	0.72	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.29*	0.10	0.08
8. Disgust propensity	4.51 (1.26)	0.88	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.33**	0.06
9. Other-oriented perfectionism	4.52 (1.24)	0.73	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.42**
10. Grandiose narcissism	0.29 (0.30)	0.91	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

Note: ¹N/A refers to correlations that were unable to be calculated because participants did not complete both measures. Ick knowledge and experience are binary variables, so their correlations are point biserial.

* $p < .01$
** $p < .001$.

Table 5
Correlation matrix for disgust propensity, other-oriented perfectionism, grandiose narcissism, and women's likelihood of experiencing ick via specific cues.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. Disgust Propensity	–	0.33**	0.06	0.07	–0.07	0.03	0.25	0.11	0.27	0.28	0.06	0.13
2. Other-Oriented Perfectionism	–	–	0.42**	0.49**	0.35*	0.03	0.27	0.23	0.32*	0.38**	0.07	0.09
3. Grandiose Narcissism	–	–	–	0.34*	0.21	0.17	0.20	0.17	0.18	0.41**	0.28*	–0.13
Ick Eliciting Cues for Women ^a												
4. Physical appearance	–	–	–	–	0.43**	0.19	0.36*	0.12	0.29*	0.24	0.26	–0.11
5. Fashion faux pas	–	–	–	–	–	0.24	0.15	–0.06	0.11	0.13	0.12	–0.25
6. Overly digital	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.47**	0.18	0.23	0.04	0.35*	–0.11
7. Overly feminine	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.10	0.37**	0.32*	0.44**	–0.18
8. Misogynistic behavior	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.53**	0.24	0.08	–0.21
9. Annoying speech	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.36*	0.21	–0.12
10. Public embarrassment	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.34*	–0.09
11. Overly trendy	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.20
12. Other	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

^a * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 6
Correlation matrix for disgust propensity, other-oriented perfectionism, grandiose narcissism, and men's likelihood of experiencing ick via specific cues.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Disgust Propensity	–	0.33**	0.06	0.13	0.02	0.21	0.15	0.32**	0.24*	0.16	0.43**
2. Other-Oriented	–	–	0.42**	0.19	0.10	–0.06	0.00	0.09	0.14	–0.01	0.11
3. Grandiose Narcissism	–	–	–	0.26*	0.24*	–0.18	–0.03	0.06	0.07	–0.06	0.02
Ick Eliciting Cues for Men											
4. Physical appearance	–	–	–	–	0.07**	0.31**	0.21	0.25*	0.07	0.00	–0.19
5. Publicly embarrassment	–	–	–	–	–	0.21	0.17	0.24*	0.42**	0.27*	–0.29*
6. Vanity	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.57**	0.43**	0.56**	0.21	0.15
7. Overly trendy	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.60	0.22	0.30**	0.40**
8. Overly digital	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.32**	0.18	0.32*
9. Annoying speech	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.12*
10. Overly masculine	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
11. Other ^a	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

^a * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

extending to regulate mate selection and social behavior (Jonason et al., 2015; Tybur et al., 2009). In the context of romantic aversion, heightened disgust sensitivity may lead to stronger rejection responses to minor cues that superficially signal incompatibility or low mate quality. These findings align with prior research demonstrating that people with high disgust sensitivity tend to impose stricter mate selection criteria, potentially filtering out partners based on immediate visceral reactions rather than substantive relational concerns (Al-Shawaf et al., 2015; Jonason et al., 2015).

The third hypothesis, that greater narcissism would be positively correlated with the likelihood of experiencing the ick, was also supported. Narcissistic individuals, particularly those with grandiose traits, maintain rigid expectations for their romantic partners and seek partners who reflect and elevate their own status, attractiveness, and desirability (see Foster & Brunell, 2018). Consequently, even minor

deviations from these idealized standards—such as awkward mannerisms or social ineptitude—may be perceived as disproportionately aversive, triggering the ick. However, narcissism was associated with the likelihood but not the frequency of experiencing the ick, suggesting that narcissistic people may selectively react to specific cues rather than consistently experiencing the ick across relationships.

In support of the fourth hypothesis, greater other-oriented perfectionism was positively correlated with both the likelihood and frequency of experiencing the ick. People high in other-oriented perfectionism impose excessively high standards on others and demonstrate low tolerance for perceived flaws (Hewitt et al., 1991). These individuals may view minor partner imperfections as meaningful relational shortcomings, reinforcing aversive reactions that lead to the ick. Unlike narcissism, which was associated with selective ick responses, perfectionism was related to both increased likelihood and greater frequency

of experiencing the ick, suggesting that perfectionistic individuals may be particularly prone to rejecting partners across various cues.

4.4. Limitations and future directions

The current study does not determine whether heightened ick responses are adaptive for mate choice. While gender differences exist and individual differences correlate with stronger aversive reactions in romantic contexts, it remains unclear whether these responses improve long-term relationship outcomes or create overly rigid rejection thresholds. Some ick responses may serve a functional role by flagging subtle cues of dealbreaker traits, such as misogyny—rated above the scale midpoint for likely to elicit the ick in women. However, many appear to reflect aversions to superficial or socially reinforced cues with little bearing on compatibility or mate quality. Future research should examine whether heightened ick responses help people avoid poor mate choices or contribute to a rejection mindset, where repeated aversions may lead to increasing selectivity and disengagement from viable partners. This aligns with research on online dating, which suggests that overexposure to potential partners raises rejection thresholds and decreases dating success over time (Pronk & Denissen, 2020). Longitudinal studies should assess whether heightened ick responses—particularly among those high in disgust sensitivity, narcissism, or perfectionism—predict better long-term relationships or greater difficulty forming and maintaining them.

From an evolutionary perspective, the ick may function as a rapid rejection mechanism, allowing people to disengage from partners who display traits associated with relational risk. Error management theory (Haselton & Galperin, 2013) suggests that cognitive biases favoring rejection over acceptance evolved to minimize the costs of poor mate choices. Consistent with this, some ick responses may reflect early detection of traits linked to incompatibility and low mate quality (Jonason et al., 2015). These findings suggest that people may sometimes experience the ick in response to subtle cues of dealbreakers rather than purely superficial incompatibilities. Future research should examine whether heightened ick responses—particularly among those high in disgust sensitivity, narcissism, or perfectionism—are associated with relationship stability, satisfaction, and reproductive success.

However, most ick-eliciting cues identified in the pilot study align with the core definition of the ick—aversions to behaviors that superficially signal incompatibility or low mate quality rather than clear relational risks. This was particularly true for men's reported icks, while women's responses included both socially reinforced aversions and more substantive rejection cues. While some icks may serve as subtle indicators of incompatibility, others—such as “awkwardly chasing a ping pong ball” or “posting Instagram polls”—have no clear bearing on long-term relationship success. This variation suggests that ick responses differ in relevance to mate choice, with some perhaps serving as functional rejection mechanisms and others reflecting socially shaped aversions with little adaptive significance. Future experimental studies manipulating disgust sensitivity or exposure to ick-related social content could clarify whether ick responses are rigid or socially malleable.

Social media platforms, particularly TikTok, may have amplified rejection tendencies by reinforcing aversion to behaviors that might otherwise be inconsequential in a romantic context. Mate-choice copying—the tendency to adopt others' mate preferences—has been hypothesized to reduce cognitive effort in evaluating potential partners by relying on social learning (Westneat et al., 2000). Publicly sharing ick experiences could normalize hyper-selectivity, encouraging people to internalize socially constructed aversions that have little bearing on actual compatibility or mate quality.

Finally, while some effect sizes in the current study were small, they align with prior research on mate choice, where individual differences exert modest but meaningful influences on rejection thresholds. Given the complexity of mate choice, even small effects can shape long-term patterns of attraction and avoidance.

5. Conclusion

We examined the ick as a form of romantic aversion and identified disgust sensitivity, narcissism, and perfectionism as correlates of heightened rejection responses. Women reported greater familiarity with and more frequent experiences of the ick than men, aligning with prior research suggesting gender differences in mate selection criteria. While some ick responses may signal subtle cues of incompatibility, many appear to reflect aversions to behaviors with little bearing on long-term relationship success. Whether heightened ick responses help people avoid poor mate choices or contribute to overly rigid rejection thresholds remains an open question. Future research should assess how the ick influences relationship stability and satisfaction over time and clarify the extent to which social and cultural influences shape rejection thresholds in mate choice.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Brian Collisson: Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Eliana Saunders:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Chloe Yin:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the final editing stage of this work, the first author used OpenAI's ChatGPT to improve structure and flow. After using AI, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

All data and materials are publicly available via the Center for Open Science (Collisson, 2022). All hypotheses, materials, sample size, and data analysis plan were pre-registered via the Center for Open Science. https://osf.io/sxgew/?view_only=a866787aed914d0ca85c8e820a1988f7

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