



You are what you (are willing to) eat: Willingness to try new foods impacts perceptions of sexual unrestrictedness and desirability

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ABSTRACT

Here, we examine the impact of one's willingness to try new foods on others' perceptions of sexual unrestrictedness and desirability as a sexual and romantic partner. Guided by insights from past research, we hypothesized that targets who are willing to try new foods would be perceived as being more desirable sexual and romantic partners (Study 1) and as being less sexually restricted (Studies 2–4) than targets who are unwilling to try new foods. Results supported this hypothesis and further indicated that this pattern is specific to willingness to try new foods, not general willingness to try new things (Study 3). Additionally, results revealed that the relationship between willingness to try new food and inferences of sexual unrestrictedness is driven by perceptions of target's relatively lower levels of sexual disgust sensitivity and not by the belief that the target is in better health or has superior immune function (Study 4). Together, these results suggest that people's willingness to try new foods may impact how they are perceived by prospective dates and mates.

1. Introduction

Imagine that you are on a first date at a restaurant known for its diverse and unusual menu. The date is going well; however, when the waiter arrives to take your order, you find that your date is reluctant to order any of the restaurant's signature exquisite fares, opting instead for a basic, familiar entrée that could be found at any restaurant in any city in the United States. Would you find this to be an attractive quality? Or would your date's reluctance to try new foods be a turn-off, making you perceive your date in a way that puts a damper on your attraction?

Although we may think that a prospective partner's choice of entrées plays little role in our feelings of attraction, a recent survey of 4000 single men and women found that the majority of people find food neophobia, or a fear of trying new foods, a turn-off (IAC, 2012). People report feeling less attracted to those who are unwilling to try new foods than they do to those who are willing to eat them. This raises an important question: Why might a prospective romantic partner's reluctance to try new foods be seen as such an unfavorable trait in the domain of sex and mating? Here, we hypothesize that a willingness to try new foods may provide others with cues to mating-relevant characteristics, such as mating desirability and willingness to engage in short-term, uncommitted, sexual relationships. The results shed light on the

function served by the preference for partners who are adventurous with new foods, yielding important new insight into human mate preferences.

1.1. Food neophobia

Like many social behaviors, reluctance to try new foods is associated with both costs and benefits to one's physical and social wellbeing. With respect to its benefits, researchers have proposed that food neophobia may play a role in protecting organisms from consuming foods that could potentially harm them or make them sick. For example, young children naturally reject unfamiliar foods, particularly in situations where they are unable to receive parental guidance regarding the food's safety, which enables them to avoid potentially harmful foods, such as poisonous plants (Dovey et al., 2008). Food neophobia, particularly for omnivorous organisms such as humans, prevents individuals from capitalizing on all the potential health and social advantages afforded by certain foods (Knaapila et al., 2011). For example, a high reluctance towards trying new foods has been associated with reduced consumption of fruits and vegetables among children (Cooke et al., 2003), which in turn restricts these children's ability to capitalize on the various health benefits provided by these foods, such as increased intake of dietary fibers that have been linked to reduced cardiovascular disease and

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obesity (Slavin & Lloyd, 2012).

The costs and benefits of food neophobia will vary between individuals, environments, and situations based on factors such as an individual's physical state, their genetic makeup, the prevalence of foodborne toxins in one's environment, and the diversity of food available to the individual. For example, in one study, adolescents in low socioeconomic status (SES) environments with poor cultural diversity reported greater food neophobia compared to their higher SES counterparts (Flight et al., 2003). This pattern may be due to lower SES individuals having less disposable income to devote to purchasing foods outside of their typical palate and decreased access to medical services in the event that they inadvertently consume a harmful food when they do try new foods. Accordingly, there is a great deal of variability in the degree to which people exhibit food neophobia. These individual differences in willingness to try new foods can play an important role in guiding eating behaviors. For example, research finds that higher levels of food neophobia are associated with increased picky eating (Elkins & Zickgraf, 2018; Kauer et al., 2015), as well as lower frequency and overall intake and enjoyment of many foods, including vegetables, salads, and fish (Jaeger et al., 2017; Siegrist et al., 2013).

In recent years, researchers have started to examine the relationships between food neophobia and both social and sexual behaviors. For example, work in this vein finds that higher levels of food neophobia, as compared to lower levels, are associated with reduced risk-taking (Alley et al., 2006; Alley & Potter, 2011) and decreased levels of the personality trait openness (Knaapila et al., 2011), a construct that measures one's general tendency to embrace novelty (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Other research shows a relationship between food neophobia and sociosexual orientation (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, & Buss, 2015), a construct which assesses one's sexual restrictedness, or tendency to engage in short-term mating (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). That is, individuals who are more accepting of – and willing to try – novel foods (i.e., those with low levels of food neophobia) report having lower sexual restrictedness and sexual disgust than those who are less willing to try new foods (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, & Buss, 2015). This finding suggests that food neophobia is linked with one's attitudes and behavior in the sexual domain, whereby those who are relatively willing to try new food report being less disgusted by sexual concepts and more likely to engage in short-term mating. Given that this work demonstrates food neophobia is related to important characteristics that shape human cognition and behavior, food neophobia may influence how an individual is perceived by those around them.

1.2. Consumption stereotypes

Food choices and eating behavior play a key role in person perception processes. A large body of research on food consumption stereotypes (i.e., evaluations of others based on food choices) finds that factors such as meal size, fat content, and healthiness and type of food impact perceptions of others' interpersonal characteristics, both positively and negatively (for review see Vartanian, 2015; Vartanian et al., 2007). For example, people who eat healthy diets are perceived to have more positive qualities than those who eat unhealthy diets (Gerrits et al., 2009). Further, individuals who consume more natural foods have been found to be perceived by others as being more virtuous (Taylor & Stevenson, 2018). Conversely, vegans and vegetarians are perceived more negatively by omnivorous eaters, and, more specifically, as possessing fewer masculine characteristics (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Ruby & Heine, 2011; Thomas, 2016).

Recent research on food consumption stereotypes has also provided insights into the role that eating behaviors play in influencing human courtship processes. For example, research on opposite-sex couples suggests that food sharing with one's partner is associated with increased perceptions of the couple's intimacy and cooperation (Alley et al., 2013; Kniffin & Wansink, 2012). Further, prospective mates that eat smaller meals and maintain healthy diets that include higher fruit and vegetable

intake are evaluated as being more physically attractive than those who eat larger, more unhealthy meals (Bock & Kanarek, 1995; Kinnunen et al., 2015). Additionally, adolescents and young adults who adhere to dietary restrictions, such as those with severe gluten allergies, are viewed as more complaining and judgmental (Aloni et al., 2019). These individuals report increased problems with developing physical intimacy, as well as greater dating anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, compared to those without dietary restrictions (Hullmann et al., 2012). This research suggests that an individual's eating habits may influence others' perceptions of their attractiveness and desirability as a mate.

Given the important role that food plays in human courtship processes, much of the recent research has shown that food preferences and eating behavior provide cues to mating-relevant characteristics. Furthermore, as food neophobia is related to both an individual's particular eating and sexual behaviors, it may be that people also use information regarding others' willingness to try new foods as a cue to their willingness to engage in unrestricted sexual behaviors. However, little research has examined mating-relevant evaluations of others based on their willingness or reluctance to try new foods, in general.

1.3. Present research

Here, we build on past research demonstrating an important role for food preferences in person perception by examining how one's willingness to try new foods impacts others' perceptions of their desirability and expectations about their sexual restrictedness. Specifically, we hypothesized that targets who are willing to try new foods will be perceived as being more desirable and less sexually restricted than those who are less willing to try new foods. We tested this hypothesis across four studies. First, we sought to examine whether heterosexual men and women would perceive an opposite-sex target who was willing to try new foods as being a more desirable dating and sexual partner than a target who was reluctant to try new foods (Study 1). We predicted that a target who was described as willing to try new foods would be rated as more sexually and romantically desirable than a target who was reluctant.

Next, we assessed whether willingness (vs. reluctance) to try new foods would impact perceptions of targets' sexual restrictedness (Study 2). Research finds an association between willingness to try new foods and having more unrestricted sociosexual orientation, which is a composite variable that includes unrestrictedness in sexual attitudes, desires, and behaviors (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, & Buss, 2015). Accordingly, we predicted that individuals would use an opposite-sex target's willingness or reluctance to try new foods as a cue when making inferences about the target's sexual unrestrictedness. We then sought to extend the results of our first two studies by clarifying whether inferences of a target's sexual unrestrictedness were impacted by a willingness to try new things in general, or willingness to try new foods, specifically (Study 3). Lastly, we examined whether inferences of a target's sexual unrestrictedness that resulted from cues of their willingness (vs. reluctance) to try new foods were mediated by perceptions of the target's reduced sexual disgust (Study 4). We predicted that inferences of a target's sexual unrestrictedness would be specifically impacted by willingness to try new foods, and not a willingness to try new things in general (Study 3), and that this relationship would be mediated by perceptions of the target's reduced sexual disgust (Study 4). Please see supplemental materials for power analyses.

2. Study 1: Inferences of desirability based on target's willingness to try new food

Study 1 was designed as an initial test of our hypothesis that an opposite-sex target who is willing (vs. reluctant) to try new food will be perceived as a more desirable sex and romantic partner.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Sample and procedure

One hundred and ninety-three (116 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.35$, $SD = 1.91$, age range: 17–37) undergraduate students participated in this study, which was conducted as part of a larger project. All students reported a heterosexual sexual orientation. Participants were given nominal course credit as compensation.

This study utilized a one-way between subjects (target's willingness to try new food: willing vs. reluctant) design. Participants came into the research laboratory in small groups ranging from 6 to 10. They were seated at individual computer terminals displaying an informed consent document that relayed the cover story that this study was assessing the relationship between personality and judgments of others. Participants were randomly assigned to read a vignette about an opposite-sex target who was described as being willing ($n = 95$) or reluctant ($n = 98$) to try new food. They then rated the target's desirability as a sexual and romantic partner, responded to standard demographic items, were debriefed, and dismissed.

2.1.2. Vignettes and target ratings

Each student read a vignette about an opposite-sex target that was out at a restaurant and ordering a new entrée. Aside from varying the targets' names and pronouns, the vignettes were identical for both men and women participants. For instance, women read a vignette about a target named "Austin," while men read a vignette about a target named "Jessica." Via Qualtrics survey software, participants were randomly assigned to either the willing or reluctant to try new food target condition. Target's willingness to try new food was manipulated by a description of the target's reaction after encountering an entrée that was described as "kind of strange." To illustrate, the male "willing to try new food" target was described as follows (with modifications for the "reluctant" target in parentheses):

Austin goes out to a new restaurant in Fort Worth that has exotic foods from all around the world. He sees the name of a dish that he has never heard of before as an entrée, and decides to order it. When the food comes, it looks kind of strange, [Austin picks at the food with his fork, smells it, and takes a few tiny bites before sending it back] but it doesn't stop him from digging in with gusto.

Following the vignette, participants responded to two items rating the target's desirability as a sex and romantic partner relative to others on 7-point scales (1: *very bad catch*; 7: *very good catch*). As ratings of targets' desirability as sex and romantic partner were highly correlated ($r = 0.90$, $p \leq .001$), we created a single, mean-composite measure of targets' desirability.

2.2. Data analysis, results, and discussion

To examine whether willingness to try new food affected perceptions of targets' romantic and sexual desirability, we conducted an independent samples *t*-test. Results indicated that the target who was willing to try new food ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.08$) was perceived to be a more desirable sexual and romantic partner than the target who was reluctant to try new food ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.10$), $t(191) = 8.84$, $p \leq .001$, $d = 1.27$.

Consistent with findings showing that people are "turned off" by dates that are picky eaters (IAC, 2012), the current results show opposite-sex targets that were reluctant to try new food were rated as less desirable sexual and romantic partners than those who were described as willing to try new food. These results provide evidence that information about opposite-sex others' willingness to try new food is used when evaluating their desirability as a sexual and romantic partner, lending initial support for our hypothesis.

3. Study 2: Does willingness to try new food provide a cue to unrestricted sexual behavior and overall unrestricted sociosexual orientation?

In Study 1, we found those who are willing to try new foods are perceived to be more desirable sexual and romantic partners than those who are not. In Study 2, we investigated if cues bearing on an individual's willingness (vs. reluctance) to try new foods may be used to infer other mating-relevant behaviors, such as number of sexual partners or openness to experience. Indeed, past research finds desirability to members of the opposite sex is associated with higher sociosexual behavior (i.e., history of short-term sexual experiences) and an overall unrestricted sociosexual orientation (i.e., willingness to engage in short-term, uncommitted, sexual relationships) (Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), indicating that food neophobia may be a cue used to infer sexual unrestrictedness. Based on the results of Study 1 and research finding that willingness to try new food is associated with less sexual restrictedness (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, & Buss, 2015), we predicted that targets who are willing to try new food will be perceived as being more sexually unrestricted than those who were reluctant to try new food. Additionally, because willingness to try new food is associated with higher levels of openness (Knaapila et al., 2011; Nezlek & Forestell, 2019), it could also be the case that willingness to try new foods is a cue used to infer openness. We further sought to examine whether willingness to try new foods provides a cue to openness to experience, predicting that those who are more willing to try new foods will also be perceived as having higher openness than those who are reluctant to try new foods. To minimize random noise and reduce the number of participants required to achieve adequate power, Study 2 and all subsequent studies were conducted using within-subjects designs.

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Sample and procedure

Ninety-five (46 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 20.47$, $SD = 2.72$, age range: 18–37) undergraduate students participated in this study. All students reported a heterosexual sexual orientation. Participants were given nominal course credit as compensation.

This study utilized a one-way, within-subjects (target's willingness to try new food: willing vs. reluctant) design. Participants accessed and completed the study online. The informed consent document relayed the cover story that this study was examining how people are perceived on their social media accounts. They were told they would see OKCupid profiles of opposite-sex individuals and be asked to answer some questions about the people in the profile. All participants then viewed two profiles (one profile described the target as being willing to try new food; one profile described the target as being reluctant to try new food). The presentation of profiles was counterbalanced across participants; see supplemental materials for analyses including counterbalance condition as a factor. While viewing each profile, participants rated the target's openness to experience and sociosexual orientation. On completing the ratings for the first target profile, participants engaged in a distractor task that involved completing word stems for approximately 10 min before viewing the next profile and completing the rating task. Participants then responded to standard demographic items, were debriefed, and dismissed.

3.1.2. Target profiles and measures

The profiles were formatted to look like a dating profile from the website OKCupid. No names or pictures were included. Both profiles featured an alleged college student and contained neutral information about the target's hobbies and interests. See supplemental materials for stimuli. While the information in both profiles was similar, it necessarily differed to fit in with the ruse that participants were rating different individuals. Ratings from a separate sample of participants ($n = 26$) revealed that perceptions regarding the general openness (i.e., "How

open to new experiences is the person in the profile?" 1: *not at all*; 7: *extremely*) of targets in the base profiles (i.e., profiles without information about targets' willingness to try new food) did not differ ($p = .477$).

The text under the "Favorite Food" heading comprised the experimental manipulation. The text for willing to try new food target was: *This is difficult to answer! I know I like a lot of things, but I'm always up for trying something new and different. I'm pretty adventurous when it comes to food.* The text for the reluctant to try new food target was as follows: *I'm pretty picky. I know what I like and I stick with what I know. If I've had it before I'll probably have it again. New or 'exotic' foods aren't really my thing.* This information was reiterated on the last item under the "Six things I could never do without" heading. That is, the willing to try new food target listed "New and exciting foods," while the reluctant to try new food target listed "Food (preferably of the comfort variety)."

To examine perceptions of targets' sexual unrestrictedness, participants completed the 9-item sociosexual orientation inventory (SOI; adapted from Penke & Asendorpf, 2008) following each profile, which was modified to assess perceptions of the target. This measure includes three subscales which assess behavior, attitudes, and desire for short-term, sexual relationships. All items were responded to on 9-point scales. For example, an item from the behavioral subscale is "How many partners do you think this person has had sex with, within the past 12 months?" (1: 0; 9: 20 or more). Composite variables of target's SOI-behavior were created by averaging responses across the 3-items for the target who was willing ($\alpha = 0.86$) and reluctant to try new food ($\alpha = 0.85$), with higher values corresponding to more past, short-term sexual experiences. Additionally, composite variables of overall SOI were created by averaging responses across the 9-items for the target who was willing ($\alpha = 0.87$) and reluctant to try new food ($\alpha = 0.90$), with higher values corresponding to a more unrestricted, or short-term orientated SOI.

Participants rated the targets' openness to experience using Gosling et al. (2003) 2-item subscale. They were prompted to indicate the extent to which they agreed that the target in the profile was: "open to new experiences, complex" and "conventional, uncreative" (1: *disagree strongly*; 7: *agree strongly*). Composite variables of openness to experience ratings were created by averaging responses to these two items for the target who was willing ($\alpha = 0.68$) and reluctant to try new food ($\alpha = 0.66$).

3.2. Data analysis, results, and discussion

Paired samples *t*-tests were used to examine whether willingness to try new food affected perceptions of targets' SOI-behavior, overall SOI, and openness to experience. Results revealed that the target who was willing to try new food ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.64$) was perceived to have had more past short-term sexual behaviors than the target who was reluctant to try new food ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(94) = -2.80$, $p = .006$, $d = 0.29$. Similarly, results revealed that the willing to try new food target ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.33$) was perceived to have a more unrestricted SOI (or a more short-term oriented mating strategy) than the target who was reluctant to try new food ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(94) = -3.29$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.34$. This pattern of results also emerged for trait openness to experience ratings, where the target who was willing to try new food ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.34$) was evaluated to have higher openness to experience than the target who was reluctant to try new food ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(94) = -5.81$, $p \leq .001$, $d = 0.60$. To examine whether the relationship between targets' willingness to try new food and perceptions of their SOI was mediated by changes in perceived openness, we ran an exploratory analysis using the MEMORE SPSS macro (Montoya & Hayes, 2017). Results of this analysis revealed a non-significant indirect effect, indicating that perceptions of openness do not mediate the relationship between targets' willingness to try new foods and perceptions of their SOI, $b = 0.07$, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI [-0.20, 0.30].

Together, the results of Study 2 reveal that a person's willingness to try new foods is used to inform others' expectations about their sexual

restrictedness. Specifically, Study 2 revealed that targets who are willing (vs. reluctant) to try new food are perceived as having had a greater number of past sexual partners. Additionally, the results revealed that a target's willingness to try new food was also used to infer their overall tendency towards short-term, uncommitted, sexual relationships (i.e., their score on the SOI). The target who was said to be willing to try new foods was perceived to have a more unrestricted SOI than the target who was said to be reluctant to try new foods. Given that past correlational research finds willingness to try new foods is associated with an unrestricted SOI (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, & Buss, 2015), the results of the current research suggest that people may be implicitly aware of this relationship and therefore use an individual's willingness to try new foods as a cue to their sexual unrestrictedness.

Additionally, consistent with research showing a positive relationship between trait openness and willingness to try new food (Knaapila et al., 2011; Nezlek & Forestell, 2019), Study 2 revealed that those who are willing to try new foods were perceived to have higher openness than those who are not. However, consistent with the hypothesis that willingness to try new foods provides unique information about a target's sexual strategies beyond what would be inferred based on trait openness, differences in target openness did not mediate the relationship between targets' willingness to try new food and others' perceptions of their SOI. This suggests that target willingness to try new foods may have a unique impact on perceptions of sexual restrictedness that go beyond simply inferring that the food neophilic target must be high in openness.

4. Study 3: Establishing discriminant validity between general openness and openness to new food in evaluations of others' sexual unrestrictedness

Study 3 was designed to conceptually replicate the results of Study 2 and establish discriminant validity by examining how willingness to try new things in general as compared to willingness to try new food, specifically, impacts inferences of targets' sexual unrestrictedness. Participants were shown three different targets: one who was reluctant to new things in general but willing to try new foods, one who was willing to try new things but reluctant to try new foods, and one who provided no information about their willingness to try new things or new foods. Given that the results of Study 2 showed targets' willingness to try new food similarly affected ratings of SOI-behavior and overall SOI, we focused on overall SOI in the current study. As in Study 2, we examined whether perceptions of targets' trait openness to experiences varied as a function of information regarding their willingness to try new food and willingness to try new things in general.

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Sample and procedure

Ninety-five (49 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.31$, $SD = 1.22$, age range: 18–23) undergraduate students participated in this study. All students reported a heterosexual sexual orientation. Participants were given nominal course credit as compensation.

This study utilized a within-subjects (targets' preferences for trying new things: control [i.e., no information provided], reluctant to try new food, high willingness to try new things, vs. high willingness to try new food, reluctant to try new things) design. Participants came into the research laboratory in small groups ranging from 6 to 10. After being seated at individual computer terminals, participants read and signed an informed consent document relaying the cover story that this study was examining how people are perceived on their social media accounts. They were told they would see OKCupid profiles of opposite-sex individuals and be asked to answer some questions about the people in the profile. All participants then viewed three profiles. The presentation of profiles was counterbalanced across participants; see supplemental materials for analyses including counterbalance condition as a factor.

While viewing each profile, participants rated the target's openness to experience and SOI using the measures in the previous study. On completing the ratings for the first target profile, participants completed a distractor task that involved completing word stems for approximately 10 min before viewing each subsequent profile and completing the rating task. After completing the ratings of the third target profile, participants responded to standard demographic items, were debriefed, and dismissed.

4.1.2. Target profiles

The format of the profiles was similar to those used in Study 2 and can be found in the supplemental materials. The control profile provided absolutely no information about willingness to try new food or new things in general. For the other two profiles, the text under the "Favorites" heading comprised the experimental manipulation. The high willingness to try new food, reluctant to try new things profile was as follows:

When it comes to books, music, and TV I'm rather selective about what I like. The list is pretty short, but you should just assume I probably won't like new things. I have my favorite genres, and I don't really stray from them. However, I do make an exception to this when it comes to food. I'm pretty adventurous when it comes to food. I don't know what I'll like unless I've tried it, so I'm always willing to give something new and tasty a shot. The more "exotic" the food the more I want to experience it.

The text under the "Favorites" heading for the reluctant to try new food, high willingness to try new things target read:

When it comes to books, music, and TV I'm open to checking out just about anything. The list is too long to put all of my favorites here so just assume I either like it already or am at least willing to give it an honest try. However, my one exception to trying new things is when it comes to food. I'm pretty picky when it comes to food. I know what I like, and I stick with what I know. If I've had it before I'll probably have it again, but new or "exotic" foods aren't really my thing.

As in the previous study, information about food preferences was reiterated on the last item under the "Six things I could never do without" heading. That is, the willing to try new food target listed "New/exciting foods," while the reluctant to try new food target listed "Food (preferably of the comfort variety)." No such information was provided in the control target profile.

4.2. Data analysis, results, and discussion

Prior to analyses, mean composites of inferences of targets' SOI (control: $\alpha = 0.88$; high willingness to try new food, reluctant to try new things: $\alpha = 0.86$; reluctant to try new food, high willingness to try new things: $\alpha = 0.88$) and openness (control: $\alpha = 0.57$; high willingness to try new food, reluctant to try new things: $\alpha = 0.45$; reluctant to try new food, high willingness to try new things: $\alpha = 0.43$) were computed.

A one-way repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant effect of target profile on perceptions of SOI, $F(2, 188) = 4.27, p = .015, \eta^2 = 0.02$. To examine differences between the profiles, comparisons were conducted using Bonferroni adjustments for multiple comparisons. The high willingness to try new food, reluctant to try new things target ($M = 4.88, SD = 1.22$) was evaluated as having a more unrestricted SOI than the reluctant to try new food, high willingness to try new things ($M = 4.50, SD = 1.22$) and control ($M = 4.45, SD = 1.41$) targets ($ps \leq .034$). No differences in perceived SOI were found between the control and reluctant to try new food, high willingness to try new things targets ($p = 1.000$). Results provided no evidence of a significant difference between target profiles for perceptions of openness to experience ($p = .168$).

Replicating the pattern of results observed in Study 2, these results suggest that a person's willingness to try new foods may impact others'

inferences of their SOI, where those who are willing to try new foods being perceived as more sexually unrestricted than those who are not. Moreover, these results serve to provide discriminant validity for this effect, showing that inferences of sexual unrestrictedness arise from information about willingness to try new foods, specifically, and not general willingness to try new things, such as books, music or television shows. Results additionally demonstrated that, when information regarding targets' general willingness to try new things is manipulated across targets, perceptions of trait openness did not differ. This finding serves to support the speculation raised in Study 2 that willingness to try new food—and not general willingness to try new things—provides a cue to one's sexual unrestrictedness that goes beyond inferring that willing to try new food target is simply high in openness.

5. Study 4: Beliefs mediating inferences of sexual unrestrictedness from willingness to try new foods

The goal of Study 4 was to better understand the beliefs that mediate the relationship between targets' willingness to try new foods and others' inferences of their sexual unrestrictedness. In particular, we sought to examine whether the differences in perceived sexual restrictedness of the food neophobic versus neophilic targets emerged in response to changes in beliefs about the targets': sexual disgust, pathogen disgust, trait openness, physical robustness, and health. Given that past research shows that food neophobia is associated with lower levels of sexual disgust as well as a more unrestricted SOI (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, & Buss, 2015), we expected that inferences of target's SOI that arise from cues of their willingness (vs. reluctance) to try new food are mediated by perceptions of reduced sexual disgust. In line with the exploratory mediation analysis reported in Study 2, we did not expect inferences of targets' trait openness to mediate the relationship between targets' willingness to try new food and perceptions of their SOI. Moreover, although pathogen disgust is related to food neophobia (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, & Buss, 2015), it is not related to SOI (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, & Buss, 2015; O'Shea et al., 2019). As such, while we did expect that the target who was willing to try new food would be perceived to have lower pathogen disgust than the target who was reluctant to try new food, we did not expect pathogen disgust to mediate the relationship between targets' willingness (vs. reluctance) to try new foods and inferences of targets' SOI. Based on the food-neophilia-as-mating-display hypothesis (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, & Buss, 2015), which predicts food neophilia (i.e., willingness to try new foods) may serve as a cue to health and vitality, we additionally included measures to assess perceptions of targets' health and physical robustness (i.e., strength). Inferences of physical robustness may arise due to the relationship between strength and health. That is, muscle strength is related to both self-perceived health (Hansen et al., 2013) and is a predictor of health outcomes (García-Hermoso et al., 2018). If food neophilia serves as a mating display of health and vitality, we would expect targets that are more willing to try new foods would be perceived as having better immune function and being stronger than those that are reluctant to try new foods.

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Sample and procedure

One hundred and thirty-three (69 women; $M_{\text{age}} = 18.96, SD = 1.95$, age range: 18–34) undergraduate students participated in this study. All students reported a heterosexual sexual orientation. Participants were given nominal course credit as compensation.

The design, cover story, and materials of this study were identical to Study 2, with two exceptions. First, participants came into the laboratory and completed this study in-person at individual computer terminals. As in Studies 2 and 3, the presentation of profiles was counterbalanced between participants; see supplemental materials for analyses including counterbalance condition as a factor. Second, in

addition to completing measures assessing targets' openness and SOI, participants responded to the additional measures included as potential mediators. After completing all measures for both profiles, participants were debriefed and dismissed.

5.1.2. Measures included as potential mediators

To measure perceived strength of the target, participants responded to a 1-item measure assessing how much the target could bench press. Given that upper body strength, and therefore, amount one can bench press, differs between men and women, the wording of the items and the scale points differed based on whether the target was an alleged man or women. The item was worded as follows [modifications for female target in brackets]: "The average untrained male [female] can bench press 140 [80] pounds. How much weight do you think the person in the profile can bench press?" This item was responded to on a 7-point scale, where the midpoint (4) was the average specified in the item and the subsequent scale points decreased or increased by units of 10. As reflected in analyses below, only 131 participants provided a response for this variable (i.e., data was missing from 2 participants).

Two items were included to assess perceived immune function of the target. The first of these items measured perceptions of sickness frequency and was worded as follows: "The average person gets sick around 5 times across a 2-year time span. How many times do you think the person in the profile gets sick across a 2-year time span?" This item was responded to on a 7-point scale (1: 2 or less times; 4: 5 times; 7: 8 or more times). Only 131 participants provided a response for this variable (i.e., data was missing from 2 participants). The other item assessed overall perceived health of the target and was worded as follows: "Compared to the average person, how healthy do you think the person in the profile is?" This item was also responded to on a 7-point scale (1: much less healthy; 4: average health; 7: much more healthy).

Participants also responded to two 7-item measures assessing perceptions of the targets' sexual and pathogen disgust sensitivity (Tybur et al., 2009). Participants were instructed to indicate how disgusting they believe the person in the profile would find sexual (e.g., performing oral sex, watching a pornographic video, having anal sex with someone of the opposite sex) and pathogen (e.g., seeing some mold on old leftovers in the fridge, stepping on dog poop, standing close to a person who has body odor) concepts. All items were responded to on 7-point scales (1: not disgusting at all; 7: extremely disgusting).

5.2. Data analysis, results, and discussion

Prior to analyses, composite variables of SOI (willing: $\alpha = 0.88$; reluctant: $\alpha = 0.90$), sexual disgust (willing: $\alpha = 0.84$; reluctant: $\alpha = 0.88$), pathogen disgust (willing: $\alpha = 0.84$; reluctant: $\alpha = 0.86$), and openness to experience (willing: $\alpha = 0.57$; reluctant: $\alpha = 0.50$) were computed.

We first conducted paired samples *t*-tests to examine whether willingness to try new food affected perceptions of targets' SOI, sexual disgust, pathogen disgust, openness to experience, strength, sickness

Table 1
Study 4 descriptive statistics.

	Willing to try new food	Reluctant to try new food
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
SOI**	4.95 (1.23)	4.55 (1.43)
Sexual disgust**	3.46 (1.14)	3.73 (1.31)
Pathogen disgust*	4.61 (1.02)	4.76 (1.04)
Openness***	5.10 (1.15)	3.33 (1.34)
Strength	3.80 (1.41)	3.53 (1.38)
Sickness frequency	3.72 (1.54)	3.74 (1.44)
Health	3.92 (1.01)	3.92 (1.00)

*** $p \leq .001$.

** $p \leq .01$.

* $p \leq .05$.

frequency, and health. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics. For SOI, results revealed that the willing to try new food target was perceived to have a more unrestricted SOI (or a more short-term oriented mating strategy) than the target who was reluctant to try new food, $t(132) = 2.88, p = .005, d = 0.25$. Results further revealed the target who was willing to try new food was perceived to have both lower sexual ($t[132] = -2.51, p = .013, d = 0.22$) and pathogen ($t[132] = -2.08, p = .040, d = 0.17$) disgust sensitivity than the target who was reluctant. And, as was found in Study 2, the target who was willing to try new food was perceived to have higher openness to experience than the reluctant target, $t(132) = 12.33, p \leq .001, d = 1.07$. While the target who was willing to try new food was perceived to be stronger (i.e., able to bench press more weight) than the target who was reluctant, this analysis did not reach traditional levels of significance, $t(130) = 1.89, p = .061$. No significant differences between target profiles emerged for the sickness frequency and health variables, $t(130) = -0.16, p = .870$, and $t(132) = 0.07, p = .944$.

A parallel mediational analysis using the MEMORE SPSS macro (Montoya & Hayes, 2017) was conducted to examine whether the relationship between targets' willingness to try new food and perceptions of their SOI was mediated by changes in perceived sexual disgust sensitivity (as predicted) or, alternatively, by pathogen disgust sensitivity, trait openness, strength, sickness frequency, and/or health. Running a parallel mediation analysis allowed us to test the proposed mediating effect of sexual disgust sensitivity while controlling for the other mediators (and vice versa). Consistent with our predictions, results revealed a significant indirect effect of targets' willingness to try new food on perceptions of their SOI via perceptions of sexual disgust sensitivity, $b = 0.25, SE = 0.10, 95\% CI [0.04, 0.45]$. That is, the reluctant to try new food target was perceived as having higher sexual disgust sensitivity than the willing to try new food target, $b = -0.27, SE = 0.11, t = -2.41, p = .018$. This difference in perceived sexual disgust sensitivity, in turn, predicted differences in perceived SOI, $b = -0.95, SE = 0.08, t = -12.57, p \leq .001$. No significant indirect effects of targets' willingness to try new food on SOI via pathogen disgust sensitivity ($b = -0.02, SE = 0.02, 95\% CI [-0.07, 0.01]$), openness ($b = 0.17, SE = 0.09, 95\% CI [-0.004, 0.34]$), strength ($b = 0.03, SE = 0.03, 95\% CI [-0.01, 0.09]$), sickness frequency ($b = -0.001, SE = 0.01, 95\% CI [-0.03, 0.03]$), or health ($b = 0.001, SE = 0.02, 95\% CI [-0.05, 0.05]$) emerged. Moreover, while the total effect of target profile on perceptions of SOI was significant, $b = 0.38, SE = 0.14, t = 2.68, p = .008$, the direct effect controlling for all other variables was not ($p = .708$), providing further evidence that perceived sexual disgust sensitivity mediated the relationship between willingness to try new food and perceptions of SOI.

By showing that targets who are willing to try new food are perceived to have a more unrestricted SOI than those who are reluctant, the results of Study 4 replicated the results of Studies 2–3. Study 4 additionally revealed that targets' willingness to try new foods provides a cue to their sexual and pathogen disgust sensitivity. The current results, however, did not support the food-neophilia-as-mating-display hypothesis proposed by Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, and Buss (2015). That is, inferences of targets' strength,² sickness frequency, and health did not significantly differ based on whether the target was willing or reluctant to try new food, nor did these variables serve as mediators for the relationship between targets' willingness to try new food and evaluations of their sexual unrestrictedness.

Study 4 also revealed that the relationship between willingness to try new food and perceptions of sexual unrestrictedness was driven by differences in perceptions of sexual disgust, with those who are more willing to try new foods being perceived as having lower sexual disgust

² It bears noting, here, that the item used to measure strength (i.e., perceptions of the amount of weight one can bench press) may not have accurately captured perceptions of strength. As such, future research on this topic may benefit from using more valid measures of strength.

than those who are reluctant, which, in turn, predicted perceptions of sexual unrestrictedness. As expected, although perceptions of pathogen disgust sensitivity and openness each differed based on target's willingness to try new foods, these variables did not mediate the relationship between targets' willingness to try new foods and inferences of their sexual unrestrictedness.

6. General discussion

Across four studies, we find evidence that one's willingness to try new foods provides cues to one's desirability and sexual unrestrictedness. Specifically, targets who are more willing to try new foods are perceived to be more desirable and sexually unrestricted than those who are reluctant to try new foods. One's willingness to try new foods also provides a cue to one's openness to experience. Importantly, however, we find that targets who are open to new experiences, but not open to trying new foods, are perceived as being more sexually restricted than those who are not open to new experiences, but are open to trying new foods. This indicates that willingness to try new foods, specifically, and not willingness to try new things, more generally, is used as a cue to infer target's sexual unrestrictedness. Further, we find that the relationship between willingness to try new foods and perceptions of sexual unrestrictedness is driven by perceptions of sexual disgust, with targets who are willing to try new foods being perceived as having less sexual disgust than those who are reluctant to try new foods, and in turn, less restricted sexual behavior. We do not find differences in perceptions of physical strength, health, or sickness frequency between those who are willing (vs. reluctant) to try new foods, nor do these associations predict perceptions of sexual unrestrictedness. Overall, these results indicate that people use one's willingness to try new foods as a cue to their sexual unrestrictedness, which may influence mate choice decisions.

The current results are consistent with findings that people are "turned off" by dates that are picky eaters (IAC, 2012) and with results from previous correlational research which finds that food neophobia is associated with higher levels of sexual disgust and more restricted sexual orientations (Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, & Buss, 2015). Here, we extend these findings by demonstrating that people appear to be aware of these associations, using willingness to try new foods as a cue to infer information about opposite-sex target's desirability, sexual restrictedness, and sexual disgust; however, future research will be needed understand why, when, and in whom associations exist between food neophobia and sexual strategies or the perception of sexual strategies.

One way to better understand the potential function, or the why, of the relationships between food neophobia and sexual strategies is to explore how individual differences impact these relationships. One's general openness to experience is one individual difference factor that is negatively related to both sexual restrictedness (Jonason et al., 2011) and disgust (Druschel & Sherman, 1999), and, in the current study, perceptions of openness were positively related to one's willingness to try new foods. Because openness to experience has a large impact on how one experiences the world, we investigated if openness to experience could be used as a cue to infer one's sexual behavior. In Study 3, we specifically examined perceptions of targets' sexual unrestrictedness that were either generally open to new things (but not open to trying new foods) or that were open to trying new foods (but not open to trying new things). Results of this study do not support the possibility that general openness is driving the associations between willingness to try new foods and perceptions of unrestricted sexual strategies. That is, in the current research, willingness to try new foods, specifically, is used as a cue to infer one's openness; however, general openness is not used as a cue to infer one's sexual unrestrictedness. Beyond openness, the associations between food neophobia, sexual restrictedness, and other personality factors, such as extraversion and agreeableness, should be explored in future research. It is likely that willingness to try new food provides a cue to other important characteristics that influence desirability in the mating domain.

Another factor that may influence these relationships is the extent to which people are considering an opposite-sex target as a potential long-term, as opposed to short-term, mate. Indeed, one's own mating motivations likely influence how desirable one finds targets that are willing to try new foods (who are inferred to be engaging in more short-term mating). As the current research was conducted using a college-aged sample who may be more predisposed towards short-term mating than the general public, these results should be replicated in a larger, more representative population before conclusions about generalizability of these effects to long-term mating contexts can be drawn. Further, while we were not adequately powered to test whether the impact of food neophobia on perceptions of desirability, sexual unrestrictedness, or sexual disgust differs based on the sex of the perceiver, the costs and benefits of pursuing short-term sexual relationships differ between men and women. As such, the extent to which men and women might signal their sexual unrestrictedness via willingness to try new food should be expected to differ. Generally, men stand to gain more from pursuing short-term sexual strategies than do women, as men have far less obligate parental investment in any potential offspring than do women (Trivers, 1972). Indeed, Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, and Buss (2015) found the relationship between food neophobia and sexual unrestrictedness to be present in men, but absent in women (although further analysis revealed no differences between men and women in the relationships between food neophobia and sexual unrestrictedness). While these results do not suggest robust sex differences in associations between food neophobia and sexual strategies, they do highlight the possibility that such differences may exist.

Building on theories that immune function is an important, but difficult to directly observe, factor in mate choice (e.g. Hamilton & Zuk, 1982; Thornhill & Gangestad, 1993), the food-neophilia-as-mating-display hypothesis proposed by Al-Shawaf, Lewis, Alley, and Buss (2015) suggests that people may use food neophilia as a mating display to signal their immunological robustness. The current results do not provide support for this hypothesis. If food neophobia is used as a mating display of immunological robustness, we would expect those who are more willing to try new foods to be perceived as having better health and as getting sick less often than those who are unwilling to try new foods. While we have not ruled out the possibility that willingness to try new foods is an honest signal of immune function, the current results indicate that people do not use willingness to try new foods as a cue to target's physical strength, health, or how frequently they get sick. To fully explore the merit of the food-neophilia-as-mating-display hypothesis, researchers should investigate if those who are more willing to try new foods have a better functioning immune system than those who are unwilling to try new foods. Some colloquial support for this association can be found in the notion that those who have a compromised immune system (for example, those that are currently sick) may be less willing to try new foods. While recent research finds that those who perceive themselves to be more vulnerable to disease report higher food neophobia (Santisi et al., 2021), to the best of our knowledge no research has examined whether a relationship exists between biomarkers of immune function and food neophobia.

While the current research has many strengths and provides insights into directions for much future research, it also has a few limitations that should be considered. In the current research, we showed that people use explicit indications of one's willingness to try new foods as a cue to one's sexual unrestrictedness and sexual disgust, however it is unclear if more implicit cues would elicit the same effect. Future research should investigate if people infer sexual unrestrictedness of others based on more subtle cues, such as conversations about one's diet and food preferences. Additionally, as these data were collected on college-aged students, results should be replicated in a larger and more diverse population.

While we did not collect any behavioral measures of real-world eating behaviors, based on the results of the current research, we hypothesize that people would use a potential romantic partner's choice of

entrée on a date as a cue to their sexual unrestrictedness and sexual disgust. Further, we also hypothesize that people may use their own choice of entrée on a date to signal their sexual unrestrictedness and sexual disgust. If the latter hypothesis is supported, it may be the case that people order more exotic or novel foods in situations where they want to be seen as more desirable or sexually unrestricted and order more familiar foods in situations where they want to be seen as less desirable or sexually unrestricted. Additionally, while we investigated how opposite-sex others perceived those who were willing or unwilling to try new foods, willingness to try new foods might also be a cue used by those of the same sex to infer the sexual unrestrictedness of same-sex rivals. Future research would benefit from collecting data concerning real-world eating behaviors in both mating and intrasexual competition contexts.

6.1. Conclusions

The current research reveals that the foods we eat may play an important role in impression formation. In particular, it found that targets who are willing to try new foods are perceived as being more desirable and are expected to be less sexually restricted than targets who are unwilling to try new foods. These results suggest that people may be implicitly aware of the association between willingness to try new foods and sexual unrestrictedness, and that they may use that information in impression formation.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Hannah K. Bradshaw: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Summer Mengelkoch:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Matthew Espinosa:** Writing – review & editing. **Alex Darrell:** Conceptualization, Methodology. **Sarah E. Hill:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

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