

ASHLEY MADISON®

Lifting the Veil on Infidelity

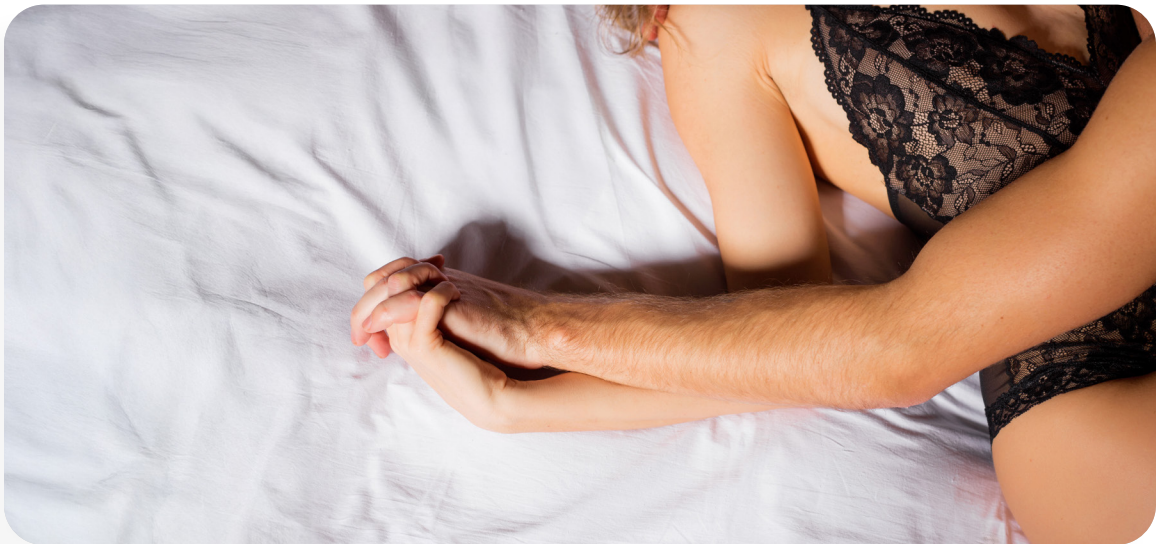
THE SHIFT AWAY FROM SHAME
AND THE FUTURE OF FORGIVENESS



Overview

From public outrage to quiet acceptance, the way we relate to infidelity continues to evolve globally and people are becoming much more forgiving of it than we are led to believe. In a time when we are more connected than ever, yet moving away from traditional relationship structures (fewer than half (46%) of Americans¹ say they identify as fully monogamous), this report explores whether the portrayal of infidelity in mainstream media is evolving at the same rate.

Most people believe that men are the more unfaithful sex, and while there is a difference, the gap is not nearly as large as many would believe. Nineteen percent of American men have been unfaithful compared to 13% of American women.²



“Oftentimes, modern women are the drivers of their own sexual satisfaction, as well as being the gatekeepers of infidelity. They have learned that it is not necessary to settle for unsatisfying sex. They’re less likely to try to please a partner by pretending that they’re happy if they’re not fulfilled. They’re more independent and more able to take care of their own needs, including the need to find alternative partners to fill the sexual gaps in their current relationships.”

Dr. Tammy Nelson

Certified sex and relationship therapist
and author of *Open Monogamy*

A new survey commissioned by [Ashley Madison](#) via YouGov found that overall, 16% of adult Americans said they have been unfaithful. While the number of Americans who admit that they have strayed are low, almost half of the population is willing to forgive them. Forty-seven percent of Americans said they could forgive a partner who was unfaithful to them, while 50% of Americans said they could forgive someone for being unfaithful to someone they know.

However, while the numbers of people who can move past a history of infidelity are surprisingly high, 66% of Ashley Madison member respondents³ believe infidelity is something still frowned upon in their social circle and 62% consider it a taboo subject in society. The outdated portrayal of infidelity—and sexuality as a whole—continues to be a powerful influence keeping the topic taboo.



Reasons For Infidelity

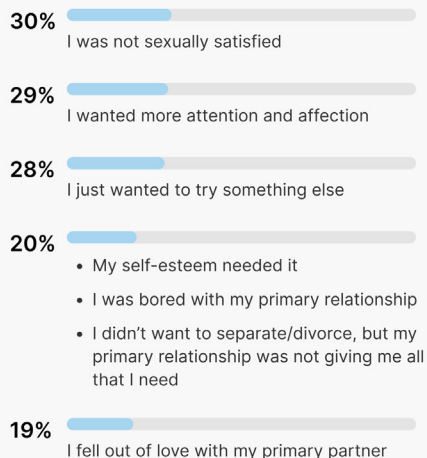
But what are the reasons people decide to stray? The top reason respondents decided to have an affair was that they did not feel sexually satisfied (67% of Ashley Madison member respondents and 30% of respondents from the general US population). A look at the table below shows the top five reasons and their ranking explaining what contributed to respondents' decision to have an affair. Interestingly enough, the least common reason for infidelity among Ashley Madison members was overall no longer feeling in love with their primary partner. These findings suggest that an affair may not threaten a relationship or serve as an exit strategy the way many may believe, but instead act to supplement the needs that cannot otherwise be met.



ASHLEY MADISON MEMBERS



GENERAL POPULATION





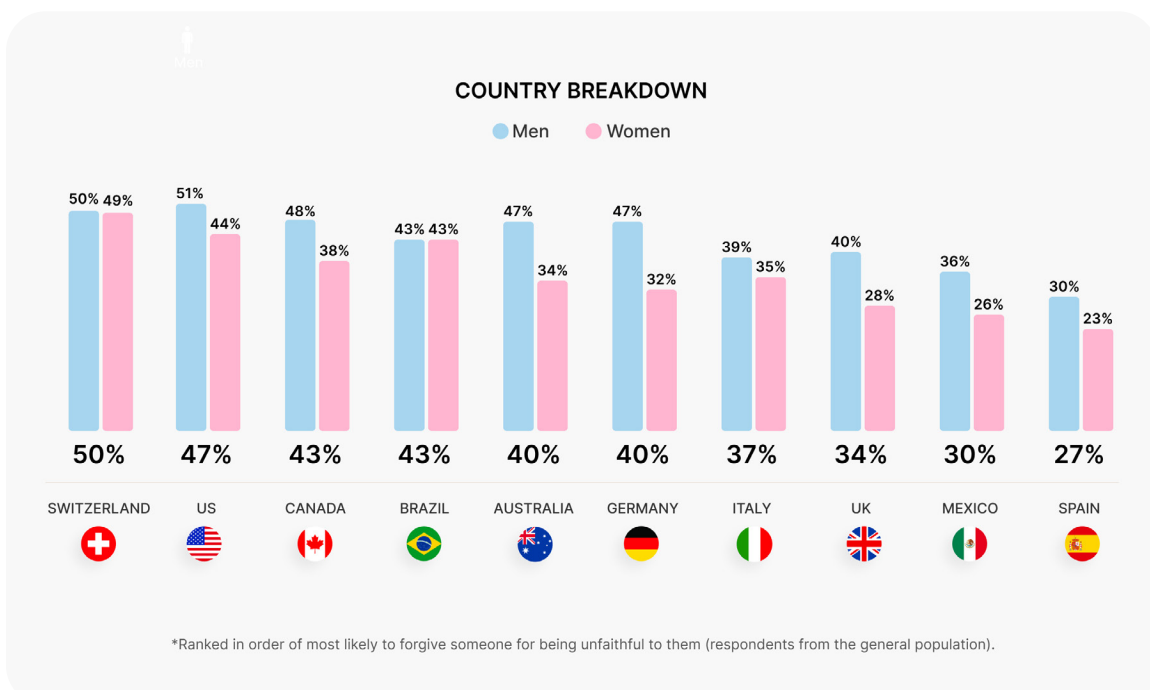
Forgiveness Around the World

Attitudes surrounding infidelity and forgiveness varied based not just by gender among those surveyed, but also by country. The high rates of individuals willing to forgive their significant other for straying could possibly be explained by the fact that they are also more likely not to experience remorse and, therefore guilt, for having done so themselves.⁴ More people understand their own needs and recognize that one partner may not satisfy them for their entire life. This can be particularly true in Western countries. In fact, a 2023 study showed 57% of Gen Z Americans (aged 18-29) are now willing to consider a non-monogamous relationship.⁵

"Some countries have a moral code driven by religion, a cultural prerogative around virginity, and shame around female sexuality. Meanwhile, the US is coming to terms with women as owners of their own sexual and erotic selves. Infidelity may be seen as a sign that women are independently looking for pleasure for themselves and seeking physical and intimate satisfaction. Without the religious bias, and without shaming women for infidelity that is so prevalent in other countries, many Americans understand that in this day and age of advanced technology, it is easier than ever to be tempted to find outside partners."

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Forgiveness: Is there a Gender Gap?

A look at forgiveness based on gender shows that women are somewhat less likely to forgive a partner for infidelity. Forty-four percent of female general US population respondents said they could forgive infidelity from a partner compared to 51% of men. The differences, however, are minimal among Ashley Madison members (75% of women vs. 77% of men) perhaps because both men and women who join have a more pragmatic view of monogamy. Overall, people are more open than expected when it comes to forgiving infidelity in a relationship.

Of course, when it came to a budding romance, people reported being more wary of a person's past transgressions. Thirty-nine percent of female and 38% of male member respondents said they would exercise caution if they were starting a new romantic or sexual relationship with someone with a history of infidelity.⁶ The difference in a person's willingness to forgive an existing partner versus sizing up red flags with someone you just met can be explained by the amount of investment with an existing partner.



When it came to friendships, 52% of female member respondents and 57% of male member respondents said they were unaffected by an individual's history of infidelity. Only 8% of female members and 5% of male members said they would not trust someone with a history of infidelity and would avoid any close association with them. Social norms dictate that people who struggle with conforming to monogamous relationships are essentially untrustworthy and lacking integrity of character in other aspects of their life but this data signals that the tide is turning with how they are being perceived by partners and peer groups today.

While more people are willing to forgive infidelity than most may assume, the majority of people surveyed still believe the rest of society is likely to see it as taboo. Seventy-one percent of female member respondents and 66% of male member respondents believe that the topic of infidelity is something that is frowned upon in their own social circle, and 67% of female members and 62% of male members consider it a taboo subject in society as a whole. This suggests that individuals who are open to forgiving others for infidelity are further along than the perceived opinion of society on the matter.

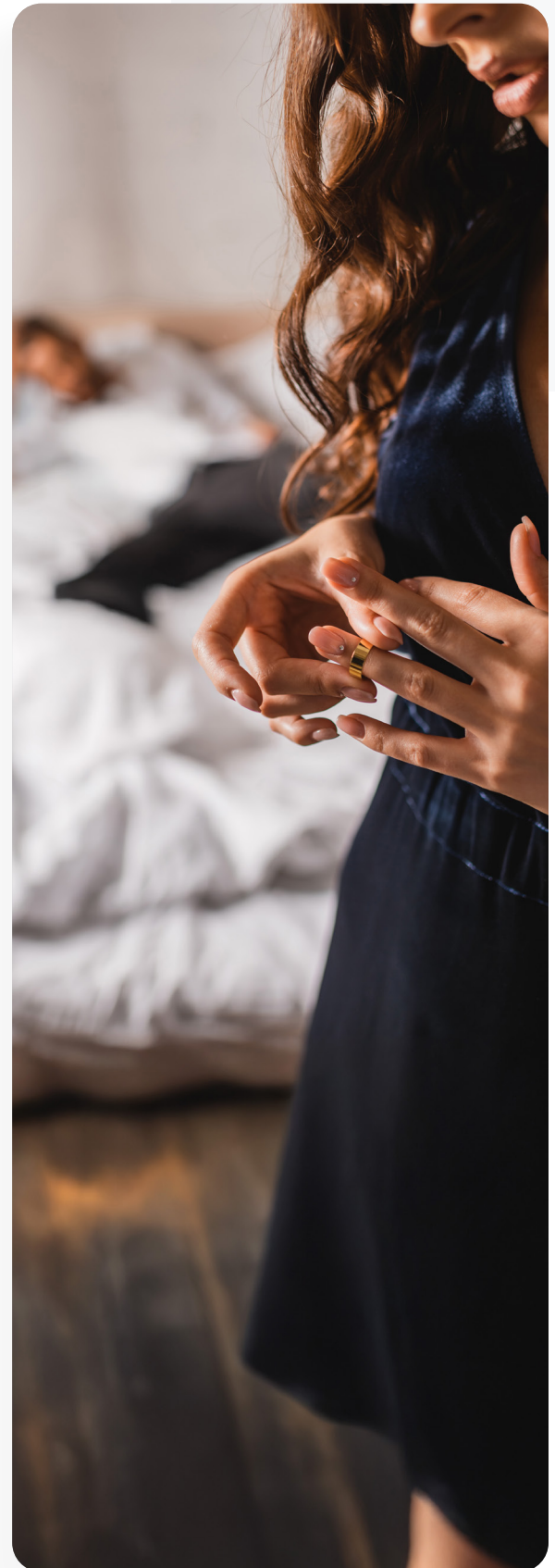
The Influence of Pop Culture

While sex, and particularly infidelity, is a constant theme in pop culture, it's often used to drive drama and scandal and doesn't always accurately reflect individuals' beliefs. When asked how they felt about depictions of infidelity in pop culture, 22% of Americans surveyed say celebrities who cheat on their partner are condemned too harshly (28% of male respondents compared to 17% of female respondents) and when asked whether male and female celebrities are judged differently, 34% say female celebrities are judged more harshly.⁷ Forty-seven percent of Americans agree that celebrities generally depict infidelity as hurting their relationships. It's not surprising then, as mentioned above, that its pop culture portrayal is perceived to perpetuate the taboo nature of the topic. In reality, according to a previous Ashley Madison member survey about the benefits of cheating, 63% of its members said infidelity had a positive overall effect on their lives, specifically their sex lives.⁸

"Pop culture influences all of us, young and old. Stereotypes of women and men in relationships are portraying the same old roles and even though we are in a contemporary society of more flexible types of monogamy, on social media not much has changed. There is an expectation that men cheat because they are male, and women cheat because they are not committed sexually or emotionally to their partner. Although many Americans feel that staying with a partner after an affair is not only possible, but may be a wake-up call for the relationship, the media and pop culture still portrays infidelity with a somewhat outdated, polarized viewpoint. Many couples have waited longer to get married, have more mature ideas about commitment, and seek therapy more often for their problems. It's more likely they will discuss a betrayal first, and possibly work through it, instead of just seeing an affair as the absolute end of the relationship. That's not to say that some affairs can be what I call a 'can opener' or a reason to get out of an unhappy relationship, but not all affairs lead to breakups."

Dr. Tammy Nelson

Certified sex and relationship therapist
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A Shift in Shame

The high percentage of people saying they are willing to forgive others for infidelity optimistically points to a shift toward more awareness and compassion toward the challenges of modern monogamy. In a previous Ashley Madison study, a staggering 92% of women admitted to facing worse and more frequent criticism than men for stepping out of their marriage.⁹ What once was an opportunity to shame others, particularly women, and negatively affect them for life, is now becoming a much more understandable behavior causing people to look more deeply at why.

Astonishingly in the most recent survey, female Ashley Madison members who participated in the current survey report feeling less shame for their infidelity than men (42% versus 48%), but they are also less likely to forgive a partner for straying. Since the majority of women are in heterosexual relationships, the news of a male partner's infidelity may feel like a deeper betrayal knowing they will not face the consequences of infidelity to the same degree that a woman would in society. In addition to this, women are often left with the burden of emotional and household labor while their sexuality and needs are less recognized and even decline as a result. If men tend to not be held to the same standard as women in relationships, it could explain why women are less likely to forgive infidelity even though they feel less shame for their own.

"As the primary caretaker, the primary parent and a working partner, women shouldering the burden of being the householding partner are exhausted and can be quick to judge if their spouse isn't helpful. They may find romantic partnerships less satisfying when their mate refuses to divide responsibilities evenly. Resentment makes for a cool bedroom, and if on top of ignoring the house and kids, a partner has an affair, feelings of abandonment in the at home partner can lead to helplessness about the relationship and eventually divorce. If a spouse is not a good companion, and is not contributing sexually either, it can be a lose/lose proposition."

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Final Takeaways

As we can conclude from this data, greater acceptance towards infidelity is occurring not only with Ashley Madison members, but among the general population as well. This can be seen as individuals moving away from society's imposition of strict monogamy principles as the be all and end all and therefore becoming more understanding and forgiving of disclosed non-monogamous behavior in themselves and in others.

It's also obvious from the data that women in particular are internalizing less shame around their own non-monogamous behavior if it ultimately means getting their own needs met. They are consequently deconstructing traditional gender roles to reclaim and proudly live their sexuality.

Additionally, an increasing portion of the population recognizes the scrutiny celebrities face with their own infidelity as being too harsh. This broader attitude shift shows that when examining infidelity from a place of compassion and curiosity rather than judgment and condemnation, there is a greater chance of humanizing it which will in turn improve how we relate to each other when it comes to monogamy compliance and non-traditional relationship structures in general moving forward.



Sources

1. The survey was carried out online by YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 13,060 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16th and 29th May 2024. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all US, ES, IT, DE, CH, UK, AU, MX, CA, BR adults (aged 18+).
2. The survey was carried out online by YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 12,186 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 13th and 27th August 2024. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all US, ES, IT, DE, CH, UK, AU, MX, CA, BR adults (aged 18+).
3. Based on an Ashley Madison survey of 2,892 members between August 15-22, 2024.
4. "No Remorse: Sexual Infidelity Is Not Clearly Linked with Relationship Satisfaction or Well-Being in Ashley Madison Users" April 3, 2023.
5. The survey was carried out online by YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 17,096 adults in ten countries, among whom 3,393 were aged 18-29. Fieldwork was undertaken between 11th - 25th July 2023. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all US, ES, IT, DE, CH, UK, AU, MX, CA, BR adults (aged 18+).
6. Based on an Ashley Madison survey of 2,892 members between August 15-22, 2024.
7. The survey was carried out online by YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,090 US adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 5th - 6th December 2023. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all US adults (aged 18+).
8. Based on an Ashley Madison survey of 1,230 members between July 7, 2019 and July 17, 2019.
9. Based on an Ashley Madison survey of 2,066 female members between July 25, 2019 and September 12, 2019.