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To cite this article: Jana Hackathorn, Jordan Daniels, Brien K. Ashdown & Sean Rife (2017) From fear and guilt: negative perceptions of Ashley Madison users, Psychology & Sexuality, 8:1-2, 41-54, DOI: 10.1080/19419899.2017.1316767

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2017.1316767

Published online: 20 Apr 2017.

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From fear and guilt: negative perceptions of Ashley Madison users

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**ABSTRACT**

A common cultural norm in committed relationships is that of sexual exclusiveness. When this norm is violated, those involved are often perceived negatively. Recently, a website facilitating extradyadic relationships, AshleyMadison.com (AM), was hacked, and the personal information of the members was illegally disseminated. As a result of the large amount of accompanying media coverage, AM users have been negatively perceived and even openly mocked. The current study explored potential predictors for the negative perceptions (i.e. demonisation) of AM users using a large online sample. In a predominantly exploratory study, myriad variables were examined from both outside (e.g. just world belief) and inside the psychosexual (e.g. sociosexuality) literature. The findings indicate that the predictors of jealousy and sexual guilt both positively predict demonisation of AM users, above and beyond the other individual difference variables.

Infidelity, an explicit violation of the widely accepted cultural norm of consensual monogamy (Wiederman & Allgeier, 1996), has the potential for detrimental effects on romantic relationships ranging from divorce to violence (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). Regardless, infidelity, or non-consensual extradyadic affairs, is relatively common with prevalence estimates ranging from one-third of people who admit to marital infidelity to three-fourths of people who admit to dating infidelity (Hall & Fincham, 2009; Wiederman, 1997; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). With prevalence rates this high, there are both a high demand for and large supply of potential infidelity partners. The opportunity for such infidelity has increased in the digital age with the introduction of cyber-cheating (Guadagno & Sagarin, 2010).

Moreover, to further increase the options for individuals who desire extradyadic affairs, various websites have been created (e.g. Yahoo’s Married and Flirting chat room; see Dijkstra, Barelds, & Groothof, 2013). Perhaps the most notorious example is the specific focus of this study: AshleyMadison.com (AM), a website where married individuals can connect with others looking for extramarital communication and possible sexual liaisons (Wysocki & Childers, 2011). This particular website service is primarily advertised and intended to be used as a discrete or secret means of engaging in ‘non-consensual affairs’ while allowing people to remain in their primary relationships. The service may be used for a wide array of extradyadic behaviours, such as supplementing unsatisfying sex lives, exploring sexual fantasies, and managing emotional needs.
It is not surprising, nor novel, that there would be money to be made in facilitating extradyadic sexual behaviour. Conversely, it is also not surprising that some individuals may find this business unappealing and even immoral (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016). In mid-July of 2015, Avid Life Media, Inc. (the parent company of AM) was infiltrated by a group of hackers, called the ‘Impact Team’. This hacker collective obtained the personal data of millions of users and members of AM and then threatened to release the data to the public if the website service was not terminated. In a preliminary move, presumably prior to a full release of the information, the hackers publicly released some of this information online (e.g. passwords, names, and addresses of the members; Grandon, 2015).

As the website’s advertised purpose was to facilitate discretion in infidelity, especially for people in monogamous relationships, exposed members faced consequences that may have involved lawyers, judgement, and international public scrutiny and mockery as a result of the privacy invasion. That is, the user’s exposure violates the expected discretion of online infidelity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2006) and could cause serious interpersonal problems in the users’ primary partnerships, such as divorce (Atwood, 2005). AM users have been widely perceived as hypocrites and bad people, with some individuals finding the situation humorous (Szmigin, 2015). Examples of ridicule and mockery can be seen in various sources, from tweets, to celebrity-bashing headlines, to memes and jokes about girls actually named Ashley Madison. In fact, the public outing of being a member of AM has been referred to in the media as a ‘reputational apocalypse’ (Smith, 2015, p. 1).

However, this negative reaction may not be so surprising. Myriad research shows that when negative events occur, others’ reactions can be outwardly counterintuitive. Instead of reacting with empathy or help, as might be expected or beneficial, some people may react negatively (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Recent studies suggest that when relevant morals are involved in an individual’s behaviour, as would be in the case of deceptive infidelity, negative assumptions or attributions about the traits of the offending individual are often the outcome (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Meindl, Johnson, & Graham, 2016).

Moreover, when others perceive a person as at least partially responsible for his or her situation, the person is often met with increased anger, reduced sympathy, a decreased desire to help, and an increased desire to derogate (Sebby & Johnston, 2012; Sperry & Siegel, 2013; Weiner, 1980). For example, an individual who is involved in an automobile accident after driving recklessly in wintry conditions may be met with more ‘I told you so’ type responses than ‘oh no, that’s terrible’ type responses.

When attributing others’ behaviours to various causes, the inclination following a negative event is to find a dispositional reason (e.g. a personality flaw) as the cause (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Moreover, the perceived intent of a person’s behaviour is one of the most diagnostically useful pieces of information when making dispositional attributions (Mongeau, Hale, & Alles, 1994; Shaver, 1985). For example, research shows that online fraud victims are often blamed because of the perceived controllability of their situation (Cross, 2015). In the case of AM, it is assumed that the members were attempting to engage in, or were actively engaging in, a deceitful and immoral relationship (i.e. infidelity), which leads to negative dispositional conclusions about the site’s members that can range from judgements about the person’s morality to his or her cognitive abilities (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Meindl et al., 2016). When a person’s negative actions are perceived to be intentional or non-innocent, negative perceptions and potential derogation increase (Sebby & Johnston, 2012). This negative reaction is largely argued to be due to some individuals having a need for the world to be fair, and a need to believe that people get what they deserve (Kelley & Michela, 1980).

The need to believe that the world is orderly and intentional, often referred to as the just world hypothesis (Lerner, 1980), serves a psychological function that helps individuals make sense of the environment and establish a sense of control over life (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005; Kelley & Michela, 1980; Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Van Prooijen & Van De Veer, 2010). One way to maintain that belief system is to perceive negatively anyone who threatens that belief system (Felson, 1997;
Kay et al., 2005; Lerner, 1980; Van Prooijen & Van De Veer, 2010). One group who typically has a strong just world belief is those individuals who are politically conservative (Dittmar & Dickinson, 1993). Specifically, conservatives are more likely to make negative trait assumptions about an individual who has engaged in perceived immoral behaviour than are liberals, regardless of the context or motivation of the behaviour (Meindl et al., 2016), but especially when the behaviour breaks traditional social and cultural norms (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Lambert & Raichle, 2000; Skitka & Tetlock, 1993).

Deception also predicts greater negative perceptions of victims. Lying, common yet generally disapproved of behaviour (DePaulo, Kashy, Kirkendol, Wyer, & Epstein, 1996), may be viewed as acceptable under certain circumstance (e.g. to avoid hurting a romantic partner’s feelings; Backbier, Hoogstraten, & Terwogt-Kouwenhoven, 1997; Williams, 2001). Nonetheless, the act of lying is typically associated with negative reactions such as anger (Kaplar & Gordon, 2004). Moreover, if the lie is perceived as controllable and/or intentional, the morality of the liar is called into question, and the liar is perceived negatively (Kaplar & Gordon, 2004). In the case of the AM users, deception is perceived as inherent in the AM user’s actions. Deceitful infidelity, whether emotional, physical, or cyber-based, is focused on the definitional standard that it is a betrayal of social and cultural norms and the expectations in that relationship (Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011; Mattingly, Wilson, Clark, Bequette, & Weidler, 2010; Whitty, 2005; Wilson, Mattingly, Clark, Weidler, & Bequette, 2011).

Because deceitful infidelity is not uncommon (Hall & Fincham, 2009; Wiederman, 1997; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999), is a norm violation (Wiederman & Allgeier, 1996) that involves the perception of immorality and deception (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016), and is an intentional situation that provokes anger (Sabini & Green, 2004), it is a fruitful context in which to examine negative dispositional attributions (Mongeau et al., 1994). Many past studies have examined attributions within romantic relationships, and specifically in the context of deceitful infidelity (Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011). However, the vast majority of those studies have attempted a first-person point of view from the victim of the infidelity towards the transgressor (i.e. the cheater; Hall & Fincham, 2006). Often, if the research does not sample actual victims of deceitful infidelity as participants, participants are asked to imagine being a victim of a cheating partner and then asked to make various attributions (Grunt-Mejer & Campbell, 2016; Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011).

Few known studies have examined people’s perceptions about individuals who are knowingly and purposefully attempting to commit (or are committing) infidelity. This aspect is what makes the AM situation unique and interesting. Technically, the members of AM may (or may not) be guilty of engaging in deceitful or non-consensual infidelity, but they are the target of others’ potentially negative attributions in a public forum (Smith, 2015). Thus, determining what factors are related to how others perceive the AM users is the focus of the current study. In our attempt to fully examine this situation, we explored myriad variables justified by past literature.

Sociosexuality (SO), which represents an individual’s comfort with sex outside of a committed relationship, is directly correlated with and predictive of relationship variables such as commitment, online sexual activity, and infidelity (Hackathorn & Brantley, 2014; Mattingly et al., 2011; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991; Zheng & Zheng, 2014). Individuals who are higher, or more unrestricted, in their sociosexuality tend to be less committed in their romantic relationships (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), more likely to cheat (Hackathorn & Brantley, 2014; Mattingly et al., 2011), and more likely to engage in online sexual activity (Zheng & Zheng, 2014). Thus, one would expect that this individual difference, relating to increased comfort and decreased perceptions of offence resulting from sexual and infidelity behaviours, might predict less negative perceptions of the AM user.

Additionally, some research suggests that when an actor and observer are similar, the observer’s attribution is less negative (Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Sebby & Johnston, 2012; Shaver, 1970). The Defensive Attribution Hypothesis (Shaver, 1970) states that similar observers minimise their scrutiny because there is a higher likelihood that the observer may be in a similar circumstance in the future (Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Sebby & Johnston, 2012). For example, Sebby and Johnston (2012) found that, contrary to the hypotheses at the time, out-group members were judged more harshly
than in-group members. Thus, according to this hypothesis, individuals with an unrestricted SO might be less likely to demonise people who engage in infidelity, such as AM users, due to increased similarity.

It is important to note that some literature shows that observers who perceived similarity with the actor, as opposed to someone with whom the observer has little in common, see the actor as a bigger threat to their belief in a just world and increase negative attributions and judgements (Correia, Vala, & Aguiar, 2007; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Sebby & Johnston, 2012). However, it is unclear how much of these findings can be extended to relate to SO. One meta-analysis (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) indicates that SO has never actually been examined in regard to judgements of other’s infidelity-related behaviours, and thus, its relationship to attributions of others and others’ behaviours remains unclear. As this research is predominantly exploratory, it is unclear exactly what role SO will play. However, as SO is defined by comfort with uncommitted sex, infidelity, and online sexual activity, we predicted that these individuals would be less likely to demonise the AM users.

Conversely, jealousy and sex guilt have both been negatively connected to non-consensual infidelity and may ultimately be related to one’s negative perceptions of someone who engages in cheating behaviour. Sex guilt is ‘a generalised expectancy for self-mediated punishment for violating or for anticipating violating standards of proper sexual conduct’ (Mosher & Cross, 1971, p. 27). Individuals high in sex guilt tend to avoid sexual topics in conversation (Mosher, 1979) and have fewer sexual experiences overall (Mosher & Cross, 1971). Thus, like restricted SO, individuals that report higher levels of sex guilt might interpret any sexual activity more negatively – especially sexual behaviour that violates commonly accepted social norms, such as infidelity (Mosher & Cross, 1971; Wiederman & Allgeier, 1996).

Romantic jealousy, on the other hand, is an aggregated experience of the emotions of anger, fear, and sadness (Parrott & Smith, 1993) caused by actual or imagined non-consensual infidelity (Guerrero, 2014). With increasing awareness of instances of infidelity (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999) via media coverage, people may be more cognisant of how many people are cheating on their partners, and hence, rates of jealousy could be increasing. It is then plausible that people with greater levels of jealousy will have more negative perceptions of people who are unfaithful, such as AM users.

Another important predictor of how people might perceive an individual who has engaged in infidelity is their beliefs regarding what constitutes infidelity behaviours in the first place (Mattingly et al., 2010). Although there is less variability regarding certain extradyadic sexual behaviours (e.g. oral sex with someone who is not your current romantic partner, and without your current partner’s consent, is viewed as cheating by the vast majority of people), it is still unclear what types of non-physical sexual behaviours (e.g. computer-mediated sexual conversations) represent cheating (Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011; Weis & Felton, 1987). While explicit acts such as cyber-sex and hot-chatting (i.e. erotic talk) have been more readily perceived as acts of infidelity (Whitty, 2005), some also perceive emotional connections or even sexual fantasies about an extradyadic partner as acts of deceitful infidelity (Buss & Haselton, 2005; Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011; Mattingly et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2011).

Individuals with more conservative views of infidelity tend to perceive a wider array of behaviours as acts of deceitful infidelity than do individuals with more liberal attitudes towards what constitutes cheating (Mattingly et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2011). As a result, more conservative people might perceive AM users more negatively simply for having an account on the website, whether or not the AM users engaged in acts of deceitful physical infidelity. In other words, as some people judge online behaviour as harshly as ‘real-life’ behaviour (Hackathorn & Harvey, 2011; Whitty, 2005), the AM users may be perceived as having engaged in physical infidelity, regardless of their actual behaviour.

One group of individuals that judge physical infidelity as more threatening than emotional infidelity is individuals involved in short-term relationships (Mathes, 2005). These short-term relationships are generally more prevalent amongst younger adults (Aubrey & Smith, 2016). In
comparison with older adults, young adults have also been characterised as lacking experience with long-term relationships, both sexual and emotional (Sabini & Green, 2004), which may cause differences in how younger and older adults perceive infidelity and the individuals committing it. Indeed, college-aged students view a wider range of behaviours, such as sexual activity (Randall & Byers, 2003), fantasising about someone other than their partner (Mattingly et al., 2010), and withholding information from a partner (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988) as infidelity. Perhaps this trend is because infidelity occurs in approximately 60% of young adult relationships (Allen & Baucom, 2006), solidifying the reality of the threat posed by deceitful infidelity. Thus, as novice daters experience and are exposed to frequent infidelity, young adults may judge infidelity behaviours more negatively than do older adults.

The current study

Investigating attributions, as well as the accompanying biases (Janoff-Bulman, Timko, & Carli, 1985), is essential for basic research but also timely in an applied and ecologically valid nature with the AM hack. The current study examined what variables predict how people perceive the exposed users/members of the website, AshleyMadison.com. As information and discussion of the AM hack occurred over the course of many months, the current study offers a great benefit to the existing literature: no scenario must be created or imagined. This event has occurred, and people already have opinions and attributions about the AM users.

The current study examined what individual difference and demographic variables might predict negative perceptions of AM users. Specifically, we measured several variables that should theoretically predict negative perceptions, such as demonisation of the AM cyber-hacking victims. We hypothesised that: belief in a just world, conservatism, and lower acceptability of deception will predict more demonisation of the AM users. Additionally, we expected: conservative views on cheating, high levels of personal jealousy, high levels of sex guilt, and restricted sociosexuality will predict greater demonisation of AM users. Finally, we examined the relationships with demographic variables, such as gender, age, and religiosity. However, it was less clear what role these demographic variables may have, so no explicit hypotheses were made.

Method

Participants

In the fall of 2015, we recruited participants from four different sources. First, undergraduate students were recruited from two universities: one Midwestern regional state university (n = 119; 87.4% female; M_age = 19.36, SD = 2.71) and one Northeastern private liberal arts college (n = 79; 74.7% female; M_age = 18.81, SD = .85). These samples were recruited via SONA, a research recruitment programme used and maintained by the psychology department at each school. Additional participants were recruited online via MTURK (n = 50; 46.0% female; M_age = 40.26, SD = 12.62) and Craigslist (n = 74; 67.6% female; M_age = 35.20, SD = 13.67). All participants (N = 322; 73.4% female) ranged in age from 18 to 78 years old (M_age = 26.11, SD = 12.24). Participants’ reported that ethnicity was Caucasian/White (n = 231; 71.8%), African-American/Black (n = 24; 7.4%), Asian (n = 19; 5.9%), Biracial (n = 12; 3.7%), and Hispanic (n = 8; 2.5%).

Approximately two-thirds of the participants were either single (n = 125; 38.8%), casually dating (n = 32; 9.9%), or dating exclusively (n = 25; 7.7%). The remaining third were either in a committed relationship (n = 43; 13.4%), engaged (n = 4; 1.2%), or married (n = 41; 12.7%). Less than one-quarter of the participants (n = 76; 23.6%) reported ‘cheating’ in a past relationship, whereas almost half (n = 151; 46.9%) reported a partner ‘cheated’ on them in a past relationship. Finally, over two-thirds of the participants (n = 221; 68.6%) reported ‘never’ using a relationship-based website.
Materials and procedure

Data were collected through an online survey that presented the following measures in random order:

Demographics
Participants were asked questions that would allow us to describe our sample (e.g. age, sex). Additionally, participants were asked questions that might predict more severe reactions to AM users such as religiosity (i.e. how religious do you feel you are; higher scores indicate higher religiosity) and conservatism (i.e. higher scores represent more liberalism).

Belief in a just world
The belief in a just world scale (BJW; Dalbert, 1999) consists of two subscales that ask about participants’ agreement with statements on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree). The items (e.g. ‘I believe that people get what they deserve’) on the general subscale showed adequate reliability (α = .77). However, that adequate reliability was found only after the first item in the scale (i.e. ‘I basically believe the world is a just place’) was removed. All future analyses were performed without that item. The personal subscale (α = .86) showed adequate reliability with all original items for that subscale (e.g. ‘I believe that I usually get what I deserve’).

Lie acceptability
The Lie Acceptability Scale (McCornack & Levine, 1990) measures agreement with 10 statements regarding deception (e.g. ‘Lying is immoral’) via 7-point responses (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree; α = .85).

Sociosexuality
The Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991) contains seven items that assess an individual’s comfort with casual sexual relations. Items (e.g. ‘With how many different partners have you had sex?’) are then summed to represent a continuous spectrum where higher scores represent an unrestricted orientation. The most restricted score in our sample was three, and the most unrestricted score was 148 (M = 21.84, SD = 16.40). While in its original form the SOI exhibited low reliability (α = .58), the low coefficient was due primarily to one item (i.e. number of one-night stands, without which the alpha would have increased to .77). This problem is a fairly common trend with this scale, as past studies have shown that the internal consistency of this scale can vary dramatically from sample to sample (see Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Due to the nature of the scale, and because one-night stands are not necessarily conceptually related to the cyber-based infidelity behaviours of AM users, the item was not removed for subsequent analyses. However, per the recommendations of past research, the scale scores were z-standardised (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008).

Perceptions of infidelity
The Perceptions of Dating Infidelity Scale (PDIS; Wilson et al., 2011), via 12 items, measure the degree to which individuals perceive three types of extradyadic behaviours as deceitful infidelity on a 7-point scale (0 = Never Cheating to 6 = Always Cheating): ambiguous (e.g. talking on the phone/internet with someone who is not the partner; α = .90), deceptive (e.g. withholding information from the partner; α = .80), and explicit (e.g. sexual intercourse with someone who is not the partner; α = .95).

Sex guilt
The Revised Mosher Sex Guilt scale (Janda & Bazemore, 2011) consists of 10 items (e.g. ‘Sex relations before marriage should not be recommended’) that participants rate agreement on via
a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Very Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Very Strongly Agree). Higher scores indicate greater sex guilt ($\alpha = .83$).

**Jealousy**

The Self Jealousy Scale (White, 1981) asks participants to rate their jealousy levels on six items (e.g. 'In general, how jealous of a person do you think you are?') using a 7-point Likert-type scale ($1 = \text{Not at all} \text{ to } 7 = \text{Extremely}$). Items are then summed, and higher scores represent higher self-reported jealousy ($\alpha = .90$).

Following these measures, participants were given a brief description of the current Ashley Madison situation. Participants were presented with the following paragraph:

_This last section is directly related to a current event involving a relationship website. Ashley Madison is an online dating website for married people. This website allows individuals to discretely find extramarital partners and relationships. According to CNN, this website was recently hacked. The stolen database of 32 million people who used the online cheating website (i.e. Ashley Madison) has now made its way to the Web. And it’s easily searchable on several websites. The Ashley Madison hack includes customer names, credit card data, physical addresses and sexual preferences. Some users used fake names and email addresses. However, the financial data are legitimate, which makes it very easy to hunt someone down. This information is incredibly revealing, and the danger of being exposed is very real._

Following the description, participants were asked to complete a brief measure of affect (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002) for the purposes of temporarily distracting participants prior to the presentation of the dependent variable. Then, participants received the dependent measure of victim derogation.

**Demonisation**

The Demonisation Scale (Van Prooijen & Van De Veer, 2010) measures demonising (i.e. perceptions of individuals as malicious beings) by assessing participants’ agreement to five items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ($1 = \text{strongly disagree}, 7 = \text{strongly agree}$). The items were revised from their original format, which originally refers to an ‘offender’, to specifically point to the target of interest (e.g. ‘this crime was caused entirely by the Ashley Madison user’s evilness’). This scale showed adequate reliability in the current study ($\alpha = .86$). Additionally, participants were presented these items in regard to the owner and hacker (randomly presented), but these measures are outside the purview of the research question being asked here.

**Results**

The current study attempted to examine what individual difference variables might predict negative perceptions (i.e. demonisation) of AM users. Specifically, we expected that high belief in a just world, greater conservatism, lower acceptability of deception, more conservative views on cheating, high jealousy, greater sex guilt, and more restricted sociosexuality would predict greater demonisation of AM users. To analyse these relationships, all of the potential predictors or covariates were included in the analysis. See Table 1 for the correlation coefficients for each predictor variable with the dependent variable of user demonisation. The overall results indicate that many of the expected predictors were correlated with the outcome variable: conservatism, lie acceptability, conservative attitudes towards deceptive and ambiguous infidelity, jealousy, sex guilt, and sociosexuality were all significantly correlated. Additionally, demographic variables of age, sex, and religiosity were also correlated with demonisation.

To examine which of these factors predict increased demonisation, all of the hypothesised predictors were entered into a hierarchical regression analysis (regardless of whether they were significantly correlated). In the first step, we entered the demographic variables of age, sex, and religiosity to control for the shared variance of those predictors. In the second step, we entered the remaining predictors.
Table 1. Intercorrelations between potential predictors and demonisation of Ashley Madison users.

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<td>1. User Demonisation</td>
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<td>.04</td>
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<td>− .16**</td>
<td>− .12*</td>
<td>− .07</td>
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<td>− .18**</td>
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<td>17.26</td>
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<td>2. PDIS: Deceptive</td>
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<td>.35**</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td>− .07</td>
<td>− .22**</td>
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<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.53</td>
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<td>3. PDIS: Ambiguous</td>
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<td>.28**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>− .14*</td>
<td>− .15**</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<td>.02</td>
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<td>4. PDIS: Explicit</td>
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<td>− .03</td>
<td>− .15*</td>
<td>− .07</td>
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<td>5. Jealousy</td>
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<td>.18**</td>
<td>− .12*</td>
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<td>6. Sex Guilt</td>
<td>− .29**</td>
<td>− .31**</td>
<td>− .06</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>− .04</td>
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<td>− .48**</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>32.10</td>
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<td>7. Sociosexuality</td>
<td>− .11*</td>
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<td>.02</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>− .34**</td>
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<td>8. Lie Acceptability</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Personal: just world</td>
<td>− .46**</td>
<td>− .09</td>
<td>− .07</td>
<td>− .02</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>28.44</td>
<td>5.91</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. General: just world</td>
<td>− .07</td>
<td>− .16**</td>
<td>− .27**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>17.22</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Age</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>− .28**</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>− .08</td>
<td>26.22</td>
<td>12.33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Sex</td>
<td>− .02</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Conservatism</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>− .48**</td>
<td>6.16</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Religiosity</td>
<td>−</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sex was coded 0 males and 1 females.

bConservatism was coded such that higher scores represent more liberal attitudes.

cHigher values indicate higher self-reported religiosity.

*p < .05; **p < .01; Variable names significantly correlated with dependent variable are bolded.
The overall model in the first step was significant, $F(3, 297) = 14.06, p < .001, R^2 = .12$, Adjusted $R^2 = .12$. Specifically, age negatively predicted and religiosity positively predicted demonisation of AM users. The second step added significantly to the model, $F(13, 287) = 5.84, p < .001, R^2 = .21$, Adjusted $R^2 = .17, \Delta F = 3.07, p < .001$. The results indicated that age was still a significant negative predictor, but the relationship between religiosity and demonisation was no longer significant. Additionally, self-reported jealousy and sex guilt both positively predicted demonisation of AM users. There were no other significant predictors. Table 2 below shows the full results of the hierarchical regression analysis.

### Table 2. Hierarchical regression predicting demonisation of Ashley Madison users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>95% CI for B (Lower)</th>
<th>95% CI for B (Upper)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Δ$R^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step One</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-2.34</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex*</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.34</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>0.078</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step Two</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-2.52</td>
<td>.012</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex*</td>
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<td>.98</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>0.078</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.53</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>-.89</td>
<td>.372</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservatism</td>
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<td>.16</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>.096</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociosexuality</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.855</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDIS: Deceptive</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>.285</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDIS: Ambiguous</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>.252</td>
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<td>PDIS: Explicit</td>
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<td>.31</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.60</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.984</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jealousy</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sex Guilt</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>.017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lie Acceptability</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.575</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal: Just World</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.292</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General: Just World</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.486</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significant predictors are bolded.

*Sex was coded 0 male and 1 female.

Discussion

Our analyses indicate some interesting and surprising findings. First, belief in a just world was not a significant correlate with demonisation. Furthermore, when added to the hierarchical regression, neither personal nor general belief in a just world was a significant predictor of demonisation. It should be noted, though, that personal belief in a just world was trending in the predicted (i.e. positive) direction. Despite our initial expectation that this construct would significantly predict demonisation of the AM users, our finding is not entirely surprising as belief in a just world has had mixed impact as a predictor in past research (Chapturapanich & Chaiwutikornwanich, 2015; Lambert & Raichle, 2000). One aspect of the just world hypothesis that has been previously understudied is variables that are associated with fluctuation in just world beliefs. Corey, Troisi, and Nicksa (2015) assessed how belief in a just world fluctuated over time in comparison with ‘threshold’ injustices (e.g. less traumatising injustices) versus ‘severe’ injustices (e.g. death of one’s child). Experiencing threshold injustices was related to lower belief in a just world, whereas major injustices were related to increased belief in a just world, potentially because participants utilised these beliefs as a coping mechanism for these severe cases of injustice. The important conclusion Corey and colleagues (2015) made was that different levels of perceived injustice differentially interact with belief in a just world. In the current study, the circumstance surrounding the AM users may have been perceived as a ‘threshold’ injustice, rather than a more severe injustice; thus, participants may not have perceived the behaviour as severe enough to impact or be impacted by their belief in a just world. This conclusion is bolstered by evidence that the number of female AM users was so small (Reisinger, 2015) that the website failed to facilitate much physical contact.
Second, jealousy was a significant positive predictor of demonisation. As slightly over half of the current sample reported having been cheated on by a romantic partner, it is plausible that participants’ own experiences with this type of infidelity, and the jealousy that followed, were cued. Examining the correlations in our sample between jealousy and previous experience with cheating indicates that jealousy was significantly correlated with both being cheated on and cheating in a prior relationship. However, jealousy was a predictor of demonisation, but not cheating history. This finding suggests that it is an individual difference level of reaction to cheating that predicts demonisation, and not personal experiences with infidelity. Future research may want to examine this notion.

Third, as expected, sex guilt also positively predicted the demonisation of AM users. Sex guilt is directly related to how individuals react when exposed to sexual content, with higher sex guilt predicting more negative reactions (Mosher, 1979; Abramson, Mosher, Abramson, & Wotchowski, 1977). Thus, it seems that sex guilt negatively relates to comfort with one’s own sexual behaviour as well as the sexual activity of others. Additionally, as more recent research suggests (Hackathorn, Ashdown, & Rife, 2015), sex guilt predicts certain sexual behaviours, attitudes, and satisfaction; however, it is not often included as a variable in such research. Future research may want to continue to examine the potential of sex guilt as it pertains to perceptions of the AshleyMadison.com users as well as other sex-related research.

Finally, age negatively predicted the demonisation of AM users, meaning that younger participants were more likely to demonise the users than were older participants. This may be due to the fact that younger people are more likely to cheat on their partners (Treas & Giesen, 2000), making them more concerned about being cheated on. Coupled with the portrayal of infidelity in popular television, higher rates of cheating in young-adult relationships could lead to younger people being more concerned with their partner’s fidelity, and hence more likely to demonise the AM users. However, this pattern may also simply be related to a lack of maturity and experience in dealing with relationship-related conflict. As age is a subject variable, it is hard to discern exactly what is driving this particular relationship. Future research should attempt to further disentangle this relationship.

We were surprised to see that some of the variables did not predict demonisation of AM users, such as sociosexuality and perceptions of infidelity behaviours, while these variables were correlated with demonisation, as expected, that relationship disappeared in the regression analysis. This finding suggests that their variance overlapped with other variables in the model, such as sex guilt and jealousy. This finding might indicate that people with higher sociosexuality – such as those individuals who are more comfortable with sex outside of a committed relationship – do not extend those beliefs to infidelity, especially when jealousy and sex guilt are already accounted for by the model. Additionally, recent research cautions individuals about making the assumptions that being comfortable with sex outside of a committed relationship is synonymous with being comfortable with deceitful infidelity (Hackathorn & Brantley, 2014). In other words, although the two factors are correlated, they may not be causally related. Individuals with unrestricted sociosexuality are not doomed to cheat, nor do they automatically approve of engaging in deceitful sexual behaviours.

The present findings should also be evaluated in light of concerns about the broader relationship between technology and society (e.g. Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Putnam, 2001). Do people perceive these behaviours as essential to the technology itself, or do they perceive it to be a simple extension of predilections that would exist and impact relationships even if advanced communications technologies were not present? That is, do websites such as AM facilitate or create behaviour inimical to healthy relationships? Future research should evaluate these questions.

Despite our important findings, the current study does have some limitations. For example, we used a slightly modified measure of demonisation as a proxy for negative perceptions of the AM user. This scale may have been problematic merely because the measure uses extreme wording as many of the items refer to evil and malice (Van Prooijen & Van De Veer, 2010). Perhaps, if participants do not perceive deceitful infidelity as a severe injustice but instead only perceive it as a threshold injustice,
the terminology used may have been too extreme. However, considering the topic, it seems reasonable to conclude that the attributes used in the scale were perceived by the participants as relevant.

Additionally, we used a wide variety of exploratory connections among psychological constructs. We believe that exploratory analyses serve an indispensable – and often under-valued – role in the scientific process (Gelman, 2004) and view the present research as an important step towards a testable theoretical framework of negative perceptions of others. However, we are also aware and understand that our position on this argument is not shared by everyone.

Finally, one potential limitation in the current study was the lack of complete randomisation and counterbalancing of the measures. That is, all of the individual difference variables were randomly ordered. Then, participants read about the AshleyMadison.com hack and were asked about demonisation. Asking participants about their jealousy or conservatism early in the study may have altered the way they would have responded on the dependent measure. That is, for example, if you report that you are a highly jealous person, you would likely report higher demonisation in order to be consistent with your jealousy. Although this notion is a possibility, we feel it does not nullify our results. The dependent answers would be consistent with participants' attitudes and perceptions of the self. Arguably, this idea is better than presenting the demonisation measure first and then allowing participants to hide or alter their individual difference variables to justify their perceptions. Additionally, as there were so many measures (randomly presented) prior to the dependent variable, we feel most of the priming effects were probably buffered out or hindered.

The current findings underlie the importance of context when exploring judgements of and reactions to other’s behaviours. These findings also suggest that not all infidelity is created equal, and that people will respond to deceitful infidelity (or possible deceitful infidelity) per contextual, cultural, and trait factors. In an applied note, professionals who work with couples facing the consequences of such infidelity (e.g. family and relationship counsellors, educators, members of the clergy, family lawyers and judges), as well as the researchers who work in the social cognition, psychosexual, or even victim-blaming areas, should keep the importance of context and individual differences in mind. Simply, how individuals perceive infidelity and those who attempt to engage in infidelity could be an important factor to consider for future research, as well as effective counselling.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

**Jana Hackathorn, PhD** is currently an Assistant Professor (of five years), and the Experimental Psychology Graduate Programme Coordinator at Murray State University in Murray, KY. She is a social psychologist but predominantly studies the ‘darker’ side of relationships, such as infidelity, and the role of sexuality in relationship factors.

**Jordan Daniels, MS** is currently a Master’s graduate of Murray State University. She is a social psychologist but predominantly studies interpersonal bias and perceptions. However, her specific research interests are in weight bias.

**Brien K. Ashdown, PhD** is currently an Assistant Professor (of five years) at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, NY. He is a developmental psychologist and his research interests are also vast. He predominantly studies bias across cultures, but is also interested in the role of religiosity and sex guilt in sex related factors (e.g. sexual satisfaction).

**Sean Rife, PhD** is also currently an Assistant Professor (of two years) at Murray State University. He is a social psychologist and predominantly studies computer mediated social networking and relationship processes. Specifically, he studies help-seeking via social networking media.
References


