

# Between the Lines of Betrayal: An Examination of a Large-Scale Survey on Sex Differences in Infidelity Behaviors, Motivations, and Outcomes

Jessica M. Savoie, Mackenzie Zinck, & Maryanne L. Fisher

Department of Psychology, Saint Mary's University

## ABSTRACT

The *Truth About Deception* website provides information on romantic and sexual relationships. In addition, visitors may complete anonymous, short quizzes. Here we focus on the responses from a quiz on infidelity completed by 94,943 (66.1% women, 33.9% men) individuals. The items pertain to personal experiences with infidelity, motivations for engaging in infidelity, and the outcomes of infidelity. Analyses based on odds ratios showed that women are significantly more likely to say they have had an emotional affair, engaged in infidelity because they were bored with their sex life, took part in cybersex, used online sources to have infidelity, became involved in infidelity when there were problems in the relationship, engaged in an infidelity with someone their spouse knew, and considered leaving their spouse because of their infidelity. In contrast, men were significantly more likely to engage in sexual infidelity and do so more than once. Six additional items dealt with how the spouse 'discovered the truth,' indicating that most individuals (56.8%) confessed independently. We discuss these findings from an evolutionary perspective, focusing on sex differences in infidelity experiences arising from sex-specific dilemmas faced by humans over evolutionary time. To the best of our knowledge, these data represent an untapped source of information whereby evolutionary-based predictions may be tested.

## KEYWORDS

Online, Adultery, Sex Differences, Relationships, Monogamy

## INTRODUCTION

Most cultures promote long-lasting partnerships through marriage (see for a review Scelza et al., 2020). While forming enduring romantic relationships is a universal feature of humans, so too is the risk of a relationship dissolving due to a

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AUTHOR NOTE: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Maryanne L. Fisher, Ph. D., Department of Psychology, Saint Mary's University, 923 Robie St., Halifax, NS B3H 3C3, Canada. Contact: mlfisher@smu.ca; +1-902-491-6275.

partner straying (Scelza et al., 2020). This risk is very apparent, as infidelity is the primary reason people divorce across cultures (Betzig, 1989).

Indeed, infidelity is frequently cited as a primary reason for relationship termination, as it significantly breaches relationship norms and trust (Mark et al., 2011). This act of betrayal toward one's partner can lead to severe emotional turmoil and relational dissatisfaction (Hall & Fincham, 2009), often culminating in the dissolution of the relationship. Despite attempts at forgiveness and reconciliation, the lingering effects of infidelity can be difficult to overcome, leading many couples to part ways (Gordon et al., 2004).

One form of infidelity, emotional infidelity, occurs when one partner forms a strong emotional bond with someone outside of their primary relationship, often sharing personal thoughts, feelings, or experiences they would typically reserve for their primary partner (Glass & Wright, 1985). Emotional infidelity may include behaviors such as spending considerable time with the third party, confiding in them about personal matters, or developing feelings of love or affection for them. Compared to sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity is more nebulous and difficult to define, as some behaviors one person may consider indicative of emotional infidelity may not be considered as such by others (Guitar et al., 2016). However, past research suggests that men and women both engage in emotional infidelity with approximately the same prevalence (Fincham & May, 2017), but also that women tend to be more bothered by their mate's emotional infidelity than men (Sabini & Green, 2004). Women's concerns about a partner's emotional infidelity may be due to the potential threat of resource diversion. From an evolutionary perspective, women have depended on the resources and protection provided by their male partners for the survival of their offspring. Therefore, a partner's emotional infidelity could signal a potential shift of these resources to another woman and her children, thus threatening her and her children's well-being (Buss et al., 1992). Shackelford, LeBlanc, and Drass (2000) also argue that women often value emotional intimacy and connection in relationships and emotional infidelity threatens this bond, causing significant distress.

In contrast, sexual infidelity is quite agreed upon in terms of the behaviors that it entails (Guitar et al., 2016). It involves engaging in sexual activities with someone other than the primary partner without the knowledge or consent of that partner. Sexual infidelity encompasses a range of behaviors, from kissing to sexual intercourse, and may occur either as a one-off event or as part of an ongoing affair (Guitar et al., 2016).

Rates of sexual infidelity vary. Fincham and May (2017) reported that 2-4% of spouses had engaged in sexual infidelity in the past 12 months. Other researchers provide overall lifetime rates of infidelity in marriages of approximately 20-25% (Laumann et al., 1994; Wiederman, 1997). One of the highest estimates by Greeley (1994) documents that approximately 70% of married individuals in the USA engage in at least one infidelity during their lifetime. There are significant sex differences: compared to women, men are more willing to engage in sexual infidelity (Brock et al., 2003; Buunk & Bakker, 1997), actually engage in it (e.g., Wang, 2018; see Fincham & May, 2017 for a review), and are more bothered when engaged in by a partner (e.g., Sabini & Green, 2004). Buss and Schmitt (1993) suggest that men might more readily gain genetic benefits from having multiple partners (i.e., more children) than women, and hence, are more prone to engaging in sexual infidelity. Simultaneously, concerns

about paternity certainty and the misallocation of time, energy, and resources toward non-putative children lead men to be more distressed about a mate's sexual rather than emotional infidelity.

There are various motivations for engaging in infidelity; as reviewed, men may seek additional opportunities to increase their reproductive success via the number of future offspring (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Women may engage in infidelity to gain access to men's resources (Greiling & Buss, 2000). Further, Selterman et al. (2020) reported the top eight motivations based on a qualitative analysis of adults who said they had been involved in infidelity. These were anger, self-esteem issues, lack of love, low relational commitment, need for variety, feeling neglected, sexual desire, and situations or circumstances. These motivations influence why people took part in infidelity, the duration of the infidelity, their level of emotional investment in the adulterous relationship, their level of sexual enjoyment, and whether their primary relationship ended due to the infidelity.

Importantly, the results of Selterman et al. (2020) indicate that infidelity is rarely only about sex, given that 62.8% felt emotional attachment as part of infidelity. This emotional connection was more common among those who stated that they had experienced neglect, a lack of love, or felt disconnected in their primary relationships. Further, the sexual activity in the infidelity mainly was kissing and cuddling, with about half reporting that they engaged in vaginal intercourse. Infidelity spurred by anger (e.g., seeking revenge on the primary partner), lack of love, or a need for variety tended to result in longer-term interactions. By contrast, those linked to a specific situation (e.g., intoxication) ended faster.

According to Selterman et al. (2020), there were also differences in admission to their primary partner about infidelity. Approximately one-third told their partners directly; women were more likely than men to do so, as were those who felt anger or neglect. People who informed their primary partner directly were more likely to later form a committed relationship with the person with whom they had cheated.

### The Truth About Deception

The *Truth About Deception* website ([www.truthaboutdeception.com](http://www.truthaboutdeception.com)) is an online resource for romantic and sexual relationships. It is publicly accessible such that there are no memberships, age restrictions, or paywalls to limit access. The site's anonymous creators state that they provide "articles and advice on lying, infidelity, and cheating spouses" and claim to be scholars, scientists and working professionals. Along with resources, the website has a section devoted to short surveys. Minimal demographic information is collected on the site; indeed, the only question asked was dichotomous sex.

Here, we focus on a survey directed at those who have engaged in infidelity. The survey is called the *Cheating Spouses Survey* and pertains to "how different men and women are when it comes to infidelity." Users who have engaged in infidelity are asked to share their experiences, while those who have not been involved in infidelity are asked to skip the survey. All the statements in the survey were in a yes or no format and the website is only available in English. Individuals could voluntarily complete the survey or examine the results. We were not able to determine how long

the survey has been available; given the timeframe of other posts on the site, it might be several years (e.g., six based on the age of some comments on the site).

### Current Study

The tallied responses from the *Cheating Spouses Survey* are updated daily on the *Truth About Deception* website and are the focus of the current study. As stated, the only demographic variable available is sex; indeed, the website authors did not add any other variables, including user locations or ages, likely in an effort to promote honest responses.

We used these naturally occurring data to investigate sex differences in infidelity-related behaviors and motivations. Consequently, due to the focus on motivation, one may argue that the current study is an extension of Selterman et al. (2019; 2021). The findings from Selterman et al. (2019; 2021) relied on 495 people who were recruited through a university and the social media platform Reddit. We explored how well their results align with a larger sample from the Internet and who independently found this website on infidelity.

### Predictions

We examined the list of questions provided in the survey and created six predictions pertaining to sex differences in infidelity behavior using the evolutionary psychological literature. We formed our predictions *a priori* to capturing the data but note that we fit our predictions around the questions that were asked.

**Prediction 1.** More women than men will have emotional affairs. Previously, Barta and Kiene (2005) found that women were more emotionally motivated to be involved in an infidelity than were men. Selterman et al. (2021) reported that women were also more likely than men to say that their affair was not sexual. Women may also engage in emotional infidelity more than sexual infidelity to avoid dissolving their primary relationship. For example, Guitar et al. (2016) documented women believed sexual infidelity would lead to the end of a relationship more than emotional infidelity.

**Prediction 2.** Men, more than women, will have taken part in a one-night stand, have more than one affair (i.e., “cheated on their spouse more than once”), and engage in infidelity because they are bored with their sex life. Men generally have a greater desire for sexual variety, take less time to consent to sex, and tend to seek more short-term mates than do women (Schmitt & ISDP, 2003). Men, more than women, report that their infidelity is motivated by sexual desire and preference for variety (Selterman et al., 2019). Further, men are more likely to engage in an infidelity and be sexually active in an affair, than women, while the perceived cost of an infidelity is generally greater for women (Apostolou & Panayiotou, 2019; Selterman et al., 2021). The sex difference is also apparent in attitude; Labrecque and Whisman (2017) found men were more likely to report they found infidelity while married to not always be wrong, but only wrong in some circumstances.

**Prediction 3.** Men, more than women, will have engaged in infidelity to “get even” with their spouse. There is only indirect support for this prediction. Barta and Kiene (2005) investigated motivations for infidelity and report men are more motivated

by feelings of dissatisfaction and neglect in their relationships than women (but see for contrasting results Selterman et al., 2019). Another line of indirect evidence comes from the results on revenge porn, which is the non-consensual posting of sexual intimacies, presumably by a former partner. Posting such material is differently motivated for men and women; for men, it tends to focus on control, dominance, and anger, while for women, it is more often about justification that their partner was not faithful or incorrectly advertised themselves (Hearn & Hall, 2018). Thus, based on this evidence, we formed a directional hypothesis that men more than women would be motivated to “get even” using infidelity.

**Prediction 4.** Women, more than men, will say that they used online sources to find a partner for infidelity and engaged in cybersex (i.e., conversing in a sexual manner with someone other than their spouse). Women have sex-specific motivations for switching to the Internet for infidelity, such as improved safety, lowered perceived risk, greater secrecy, reduced risk of discovery, and anonymity (Ferree, 2003). When infidelity via the Internet is broadly considered to include sexting and cyberchat, sex differences diminish (see Roman, 2020 for a review). Further, while men are online more than women, women are over-represented in those who engage in online sex that may be considered addictive (Ferree, 2013). Women’s online sexual behavior is generally oriented toward interactivity, such as chatrooms, with a focus on establishing relationships. Contrariwise, men’s behavior is more solitary and often visual in nature, rather than interactive (Ferree, 2013).

**Prediction 5.** Men, more than women, will state that they engaged in an infidelity with someone their spouse knows. Bleske-Rechek and Buss (2001) found that men were more likely than women to report potential sex as a reason for initiating opposite-sex friendship. Thus, becoming friends with one’s spouses’ friends would open a door to future sexual relationships.

**Prediction 6.** Women, more than men, will report that they engaged in infidelity because of problems in their relationships. In addition, women will be more likely to have considered leaving their spouse because of the affair. Brand et al. (2007) found that women reported a stronger tendency to end relationships after infidelity than men. They also documented that women were more likely to engage in infidelity because they wanted a new long-term partner or because they were experiencing problems with their current relationship. Further, Greiling and Buss (2000) suggest that women participate in infidelity to find a more desirable mate before losing the security of their current mate.

## METHODS

*The Truth About Deception* website contains a multitude of surveys assessing romantic relationships and sexual behavior. For the sake of this study, we analyzed the aggregated data of the infidelity quiz provided by the website (see Appendix for survey questions). At the time of our investigation (January, 2022), there were  $N = 94,943$  responses (66.10% women, 33.90% men) to this quiz. While the site and surveys were available for free to the public until June 2023, while revising this article, the site became unavailable without notice and we do not know if it will return online. It is listed here, though, as a cached site:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20230606193100/https://www.truthaboutdeception.com>. Also, one reviewer of this article accessed the quiz approximately 14 months after the data were collected, and approximately 400 more surveys had been completed.

## RESULTS

Data were analyzed using RStudio (version 1.3.959; R Core Team, 2020: [DescTools] package), with median-unbiased odds ratios calculated to determine the influence of respondents' sex on their survey results. As seen in Table 1, variable support was found for our predictions, and women were more likely to engage in most of the surveyed behaviors (10 of the 12) than men. The website also revealed various ways spouses found out about the respondents' infidelity; as mentioned, these were included for interest only.

**Table 1.** Online Survey Responses Assessing Respondents' Infidelity from the Website "Truth About Deception"

	Proportion respondents		OR	95 CI	Z
	Women (n = 62,768)	Men (n = 32,165)			
Survey respondents' self-disclosures					
Men predicted to disclose more than women					
Had a one-night stand	0.53	0.72	2.27	[2.20, 2.33]	55.41
Cheated on my spouse more than once	0.53	0.67	1.76	[1.71, 1.81]	39.53
Cheated because I was bored with my sex life	0.35	0.26	0.66	[0.64, 0.68]	27.00
Cheated to "get even" with a spouse	0.30	0.15	0.41	[0.40, 0.43]	49.68
Cheated with someone who spouse knows	0.44	0.22	0.37	[0.36, 0.38]	63.73
Women predicted to disclose more than men					
Had an emotional affair	0.91	0.77	2.94	[2.84, 3.07]	56.38
Used an online service to cheat on my spouse	0.26	0.21	1.31	[1.26, 1.35]	16.19
Have engaged in cybersex, chatting sexually with someone other than my spouse	0.40	0.31	1.51	[1.47, 1.56]	28.39

## Infidelity Behaviors, Motivations, and Outcomes

Cheated because of relationship problems	0.74	0.48	3.01	[2.93, 3.10]	76.67
Considered leaving my spouse because of an affair or sexual encounter	0.50	0.20	4.01	[3.89, 4.14]	86.20
No predicted sex differences					
Thought spouse suspected them of cheating	0.40	0.22	2.41	[2.33, 2.48]	55.60
Spouse discovered the infidelity	0.48	0.39	1.43	[1.39, 1.47]	25.81

*Note:* OR denotes median-unbiased odds ratios, 95CI denotes upper and lower ranges of 95% confidence intervals, Z denotes z-scores

Women were almost threefold more likely than men to say that they had committed emotional infidelity (95% CI = [2.84, 3.07]). Further, women commonly reported using the Internet as a vehicle to commit infidelity; they were 31% more likely to engage in “cybersex” (95% CI = [1.26, 1.35]) and 51% more likely to use online services (95% CI = [1.47, 1.56]) to participate in infidelity when compared to men. Relationship issues reportedly drove women to be more involved in infidelity than men (OR = 3.01, 95% CI = [2.93, 3.10]), although these women were more likely to consider leaving their spouses due to infidelity (OR = 4.01, 95% CI = [3.89, 4.14]). Spousal acquaintances were also more likely to be targeted by women to have an affair with than men (OR = 0.37, 95% CI = [0.36, 0.38]). Further, women frequently presumed that their affairs were suspected by their spouses (OR = 2.41, 95% CI = [2.33, 2.48]) or that they later became aware of infidelity (OR = 1.43, 95% CI = [1.39, 1.47]).

Sex differences also emerged when examining the reasons for infidelity. Men were roughly half as likely as women to engage in infidelity due to dissatisfaction with their sex life (95% CI = [0.64, 0.68]) and to use infidelity as a means of “relational vengeance” (95% CI = [0.40, 0.43]). However, men did report an elevated drive for sexual variety. Compared to women, men were 2.27 times more likely to have a one-night stand (95% CI = [2.20, 2.33]) and 1.76 times more likely to cheat on their spouse multiple times (95% CI = [1.71, 1.81]).

### Discovery of Infidelity

The survey also included six items a person could answer if their spouse ‘discovered the truth’ about their infidelity (see Table 2). We included these items for interest and completeness, but there were no demographic data for these items, which prohibited us from examining potential sex differences. At the time of collection, most (56.80%) people confessed on their own, 21.40% reported that their spouse investigated themselves and found out, 8.30% confessed when accused, 8.00% of the time it was an accidental discovery, 4.50% reported that a third party informed their spouse, and 1.00% had an unspecified reason.

**Table 2.** “How Did Your Spouse Discover the Truth?” from the Website “Truth About Deception”

Statement	Value (%)
Spouse investigated	21.40
I confessed when accused	8.30
I confessed on own	56.8
A third party told my spouse	4.5
Accidental discovery	8.00
Other	1.00

*Note:* Values were captured January 11, 2022

### DISCUSSION

We examined sex differences in infidelity using data from the publicly accessible website *The Truth About Deception*. Our results indicate that women who engage in infidelity are more likely to have an emotional affair, engage in cybersex or use an online platform, have an affair with someone their spouse knows, be bored with their sex life, be experiencing problems in their primary relationship, and are more likely to consider leaving the relationship after the infidelity. In contrast, men are more likely to have a one-night stand and more than one affair. Of course, we must remember that the data were obtained from individuals who came across the website and opted to voluntarily complete a survey on their experiences with infidelity. Therefore, these findings must be seen with representing only those who found the site and were somehow motivated to answer the questions.

With this important caveat, many of these findings align with those obtained in past research. Selterman and associates (2021) reported that emotionality is an important component of infidelity for many individuals. This point seems particularly poignant for women. In their work, women tended toward longer affairs and engaged with those they had known previously, whereas men took part in infidelity more with women they knew casually. Here, we found that women were more likely than men to have an emotional affair, involve someone that their partner knows, and consider leaving the primary relationship after the affair. Collectively, the current results are generally congruent with those of the previous studies.

However, while four of our predictions were supported by the results, two were not. First, we predicted that men would be more likely to engage in infidelity because they were bored with their sex lives and more likely to seek variety with multiple partners (Schmitt & ISDP, 2003). However, the findings showed an opposite trend.



There are at least two possible explanations for this unexpected finding. Without additional context, women could consider “being bored” to be a lack of emotional connection to their partner. If so, this finding aligns with Barta and Kiene (2005), who reported that women are more emotionally motivated to engage in infidelity. Another possibility is that women simply experience more boredom in their primary relationships, which motivates them to have affairs. Roman (2020, p. 101) documented that women engage in infidelity because of weariness and frustration with marital life and seek alternative partners out of curiosity or boredom. This interpretation is also indirectly congruent with Selterman and colleagues (2019) who found women were more likely than men to report that they were motivated due to feelings of neglect.

Second, we predicted that men, more than women, would have an affair with someone that their spouse knew. Again, the results reveal the opposite pattern. This result may be based on safety in that women may engage in infidelity with someone who is familiar, thereby decreasing the risk of harm. While Labrecque and Whisman (2017) find no sex difference in those involved in infidelity (i.e., most frequently a close personal friend (53.5%) or neighbor, coworker, or long-term acquaintance (29.4%)), men were 1.75 times more likely to report infidelity with a casual date. Further research is needed to understand who women select as a partner outside of their primary relationship and whether concerns about safety are a significant motivation.

The most noteworthy limitation of the current study was that we were unable to determine the reliability of the data. However, there are no foreseeable incentives for participants to lie, as the survey is entirely anonymous, voluntary and without any reward. It is also not possible to rule out answers by bots (although unlikely) or repeated responses from the same participants. Another issue is that minimal demographic information was collected; for instance, we do not know the age, ethnicity, or nationality of respondents. We expect the large sample size of community respondents make the data highly generalizable, but it would be informative to distinguish how demographics or relationship qualities impact on the motivations and outcomes of infidelity. Given that the sample is biased in favor of women (two-thirds of the total sample), our findings are likely more representative of their experiences compared to the smaller sample of men. Some of the items are also vague; for example, the boredom item can be interpreted in multiple ways.

A strength of the current study is that it relies on data provided by people without a clear incentive. We expect that most people arrived at the website because of searches about infidelity and then chose to participate because they were intrinsically motivated to be involved. Based on the number of people who willingly invested their time in completing a brief survey, we can conclude with confidence that the public is interested in information that may help them with their emotional states surrounding infidelity and relationship outcomes. However, we are unable to ascertain what leads to this intrinsic motivation or whether the data would be different among those who opted not to participate. Perhaps those who completed the survey were still reeling from the aftereffects of their infidelity-related behavior; maybe they felt guilt and were seeking ideas to improve their relationship. Feeling guilty after infidelity is common and may lead to notable distress due to the harm inflicted on their partner by violating the norms of the relationship (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). Or, it is possible that they feel empowered and seek validation to end or continue their existing

relationships. Although empowerment has been less studied than guilt, some individuals experience this feeling. It may stem from reclaiming agency in the relationship after feeling powerless or trapped or from the general excitement and thrill of breaking societal norms and expectations around monogamy (Jackman, 2015). In contrast, maybe those who did not complete the survey felt less guilt after their infidelity or did not seek any sort of validation for their behavior.

In the future, it may continue to be highly beneficial to create surveys that are short, focused on specific hypotheses, and easily draw the attention of the public, but also complete enough to ascertain motivation. Moreover, given that the data were limited to English-speaking respondents, it may be beneficial to replicate this research in other languages and cultures to examine potential differences in infidelity-related behaviors and motivations (Buss et al., 1992). Second, as our demographic information was restricted to sex, further investigation may benefit from considering additional demographic variables, such as age, relationship status, and education level (Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). In addition, as outlined, future studies could explore the emotional consequences of infidelity, such as guilt or empowerment (Jackman, 2015; Leeker & Carlozzi, 2014). It would also be interesting to investigate the relationship dynamics that predispose individuals to infidelity and how these might interact with individual characteristics (Selterman et al., 2019; 2021). Last, the data were self-reported and anonymous. It might be advantageous for future researchers to employ more objective measures or corroborative reports to enhance the validity of the findings (Shackelford et al., 2000).

### CONCLUSION

We analyzed a short quiz completed by those who had engaged in infidelity, which was posted on the *Truth About Deception* website. The findings indicate sex differences with respect to personal experiences with infidelity, motivations for engaging in infidelity, and outcomes of infidelity. We also reported that most individuals (56.8%) confessed independently to the infidelity. To the best of our knowledge, these data represent an untapped source of data to test evolutionary-based predictions. Future researchers may benefit from incorporating these naturally occurring sources of data, given that there are large samples of participants who are motivated to complete surveys that have intrinsic meaning.

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## APPENDIX

### Infidelity Survey Questions from the Website “Truth About Deception”

I have had an emotional affair

I have had a one-night stand

I have used an online service to cheat on my spouse

I have engaged in cybersex- chatting sexually with someone other than my spouse

I cheated with someone my spouse knows

I cheated because I was bored with my sex life

I was unfaithful because of problems in my relationship

I considered leaving my spouse because of an affair or sexual encounter

I have cheated in order to get even with my spouse

I cheated on my spouse more than once

At the time, I think my spouse suspected me of cheating

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*Note:* respondents answered the survey as a yes when in agreement with the statement, no when not