

ASHLEY MADISON®

Unbound Love: Sex, Fantasy, and Desire

Redefining what it means to have an open approach to relationships



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Background

Sex. We all want it and fantasize about it, but how do we go about making our desires a reality?

It turns out many Americans don't know how to. Ashley Madison, the world's leading married dating site¹, partnered with [Dr. Zhana Vrangalova](#), a renowned sex researcher and professor at New York University, to uncover what Americans are thinking (fantasizing) about when it comes to sex and show how to act on those thoughts – the results are detailed in a new report titled Unbound Love: Sex, Fantasy, and Desire.

By surveying Ashley Madison members and comparing their results with a representative sample of partnered Americans through [YouGov](#), this report comes at an important time [as sexual interests and mores are changing](#) despite the report revealing almost half of coupled-up Americans don't know how, or are maybe hesitant, to express their sexual fantasies and desires with their partner. The reason for this hesitancy may be because two-thirds of Americans (61%) in committed relationships report that they have fantasized about having sex with multiple people – a subject that can be difficult to discuss with your partner, until now.

Summary of Findings

Finding #1: Nearly half of the American partnered population is not satisfied with the sexual aspects of their primary relationship

When it comes to monogamous relationships, almost half of coupled-up Americans report a lack of sexual satisfaction. In fact, 42% of partnered Americans, compared with 77% of Ashley Madison members in committed relationships report not being very satisfied with the sexual aspects of their relationship.

At the same time, 54% of partnered Americans compared with 53% of Ashley Madison members in committed relationships, also report not feeling comfortable sharing their sexual fantasies with their primary partners. According to Dr. Zhana, being able to express sexual desires within a relationship can be life-changing. It improves the quality of our sex lives, helping us feel happier, healthier, and more connected with our partners. Still, it's clear that many people are not expressing their sexual needs and desires in their relationship.

"It is sad yet not surprising that many people cannot express their sexual fantasies openly," says Dr. Zhana. "Even as we slowly open up, our culture continues to stigmatize many sexual desires and fantasies, especially those that don't fit within a narrow societal box of acceptable behavior and

¹ Based on the number of signups to Ashley Madison since 2002

continues to censor information and conversations about sexuality more broadly. Ultimately, this robs people of language and confidence to speak about their sexual fantasies with their partners and makes them feel shame, guilt, and fear."

Finding #2: Two-thirds of Americans (61%) report fantasizing about having sex with multiple people

Most partnered Americans surveyed (88% - 93% of men and 83% of women) reported experiencing one of the tested sexual fantasies to some degree. While the most common fantasy was intimacy, passion, and romance (with 86% of partnered Americans fantasizing to some degree), more than three-quarters of partnered Americans (85% of men and 68% of women) reported having fantasized about something a bit naughtier, such as BDSM, non-monogamy, and multi-partner sex.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of respondents in the survey reported fantasizing to some degree about sexual novelty (new acts, positions, locations, and toys), 61% reported fantasies involving other people (group play, partner swapping, open relationships, or sex with different people), while 43% reported ever having fantasies about power and control like BDSM and [power play](#).

Roughly a quarter (26%) of respondents (30% partnered men vs 22% partnered women) confessed to ever fantasizing about homoerotic or genderbending acts.

Apart from BDSM fantasies, (which were equally common in both genders), partnered men reported virtually all fantasies more often than partnered women (with a gender difference between 10-30% points). However, all sexual fantasies were common among both genders, suggesting that many sexual interests previously considered "controversial" or "uncommon" are in fact quite typical.

Unfortunately, despite the high prevalence of many sexual fantasies, almost half of all respondents (47% of men and 40% of women) didn't feel like they could easily share their sexual fantasies with their partner. And while sex, fantasy, and desire can be an essential part of a happy long-term relationship, it also helps to know that not all fantasies or desires are intended to become a reality. Instead, many people view fantasy as an opportunity to explore what they didn't think they could or wanted to do in real life.

For some, that may mean [choosing monogamy as their ideal](#). A third of partnered Americans (31%) say their ideal relationship type is some sort of openness if they could be assured this wouldn't harm their relationship.

Finding #3: As the stigma around sex continues to dissipate, generational culture is shifting too

A significant finding of the study is that the stigma associated with sex is gradually less prevalent among a younger generation (aged 18-34), who are more likely to ever fantasize about novelty (71% vs 61% among those 35+), power, control, and rough sex (65% vs. 35%), non-monogamy (71% vs 57%), and homoeroticism (42% vs. 20%) than the 35+ age groups.

Additionally, more younger partnered Americans (60%) are comfortable sharing their fantasies with a partner compared with 47% of the 55+ age group. They are also much more likely (44% exc. PNTS) to think that some form of sexual openness would be ideal for their relationship as compared with 22% (exc. PNTS) of the 55+ age group.

Finding #4: Sexual exclusivity creates emotional and physical limitations for some

Compared to partnered Americans as a whole, Ashley Madison* members have higher rates of all types of sexual fantasies (60-90+% vs 42-80+% to some degree among partnered Americans), with the exception of homoeroticism where the numbers were similar. Yet, Ashley Madison members were far less likely (30%) to feel they can share with their primary partners than the average partnered American (54%). Anecdotally, some [Ashley Madison members](#) say that having a secondary partner allows them to explore their sexual desires and that otherwise go unfulfilled in their primary relationship. They are also more than twice as likely to be in relationships where they no longer have sex with their primary partners (15%) compared to the partnered general population (6%). More than three-quarters (77%) of members also report being not very satisfied with the sexual aspects of their primary relationship – nearly twice as many as the partnered general population (42%). Given this “state of affairs,” it should come as no surprise that Ashley Madison members have chosen to outsource some of their needs and look for sexual satisfaction through these extramarital connections. This is often a way to preserve their primary partnership while getting some of their basic human needs met.

"The data shows a growing interest in non-monogamy whether through fantasy or explored in real life," says Isabella Mise, Ashley Madison's Senior Director of Communications. "We hope this report encourages people to see their sexual fantasies as something that can strengthen their relationships in the long run, and if approached correctly, conversations around fantasies don't have to be seen as a threat to their primary relationship."

With nearly [400,000 new monthly signups](#) on Ashley Madison, it's clear that non-monogamy is here to stay.

Approach

This data is based on two surveys:

- Online survey of 1,942 Ashley Madison members from September 20, 2022 to September 27, 2022

- Online survey conducted by YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 802 adults in romantic relationships. Fieldwork was undertaken between 20th and 21st September 2022. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all US adults (aged 18+). More than 1,200 respondents were presented with a screener describing the intimate nature of the survey and offered the opportunity to opt out if the content made them uncomfortable; 13% of the initial sample (11% of men, 15% of women) chose to opt out. The sample here is limited to those who opted to continue with the survey. Results flagged "(exc. PNTS)" are excluding respondents who selected "prefer not to say" for that question.