

## Comprehending Susceptibility to Infidelity through Self Esteem: A Review

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### ABSTRACT

This study reviews the effect of self-esteem on susceptibility to infidelity within intimate relationships with particular attention to the role of sociometer theory. Sociometer theory conceptualizes self-esteem as a psychological gauge that reflects perceived social acceptance or rejection, making it a crucial factor in understanding psychological outcomes. Various psychological scales exist that can assess self-esteem and related social perceptions, helping in the comprehension of fluctuations in self-worth that influence resilience. Evidence from prior research suggests that individuals with low self-esteem often experience insecurity, rejection sensitivity, and defensive behaviours such as jealousy and withdrawal, which undermine trust and satisfaction in partnerships. Fragile or ambivalent self-esteem, despite appearing outwardly high, increases dependence on external validation and creates further psychological vulnerability. These patterns suggest that low or unstable self-esteem not only weakens relationship stability but also heightens susceptibility to infidelity, as individuals either anticipate being betrayed or seek affirmation outside the partnership. By synthesizing existing literature on self-esteem, sociometer theory, and infidelity, this study highlights the psychological mechanisms that connect self-worth with fidelity, underscoring the value of fostering secure self-esteem to strengthen interpersonal bonds and reduce infidelity risk.

**Keywords:** *Self-esteem, Infidelity, Intimate Relationships, Sociometer Theory, Rejection Sensitivity, Relationship Satisfaction*

Human connection in the modern world centralizes on fabricating love, trust, and faithfulness in interpersonal relationships. It is inclusive of perception of individuals along with the determination of strength and stability in closest bonds parallelly investigating on fidelity, which is required to nurture the feeling of security and belongingness. In this regard, Maslow has suggested that belongingness is a fundamental psychological need, situated just above physiological and safety needs, and serves as the foundation for higher-order growth, such as esteem and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). The fulfilment of belongingness needs has been shown to predict success and well-being. Baumeister and Leary (1995) emphasized that strong, supportive relationships enhance motivation and performance across domains. Empirical studies further highlight its role in mental health, with higher levels of belongingness linked to lower depression and greater

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Received: January 31, 2026; Revision Received: March 02, 2026; Accepted: March 12, 2026

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academic achievement among students (Allen et al., 2018). Research on young adults demonstrates that belongingness contributes to positive adjustment and resilience, with both males and females benefiting from perceived social inclusion, though females often report higher sensitivity to belongingness (Mellor et al., 2008). This framework underscores that belongingness supports individual mental well-being along with being a critical determinant of stability and success in younger populations.

### **Infidelity**

Belongingness in human development is marked by interpersonal progress across life span. For past generations, it functioned as an evolutionary anchor: humans survived harsh environments by forming tightly knit groups, relying on shared protection, collective labor, and emotional cohesion. Across centuries, belongingness shaped kinship systems, cultural identities, and social norms, becoming a foundational force behind cooperation, learning, and the transmission of values from one generation to the next.

Older generations display enduring positive relationship qualities, reporting higher levels of loyalty, emotional support, and less negative conflict than younger cohorts, which contributes to greater life satisfaction (Birditt et. al, 2012). Such evidence suggests that loyalty shapes youthful expectations and behaviors, simultaneously contributing across the lifespan to psychological stability, satisfaction, and emotional well-being. Contrastingly, modern intimate relationships have grown increasingly complex due to digitalization, globalization, and changing cultural norms. With more choices and fewer rigid expectations, individuals pursue autonomy and self-expression, which creates both opportunities and challenges (Drouin, Miller, & Dibble, 2014). In this context, loyalty becomes vital, offering trust and stability amid constant comparison and external validation. The decline of traditional social constructs promotes independence and self-monitoring, placing responsibility on individuals to sustain commitment. While this independence fosters self-growth, it also makes loyalty essential for psychological security in modern partnerships.

The pressure of constant comparison and external validation has been shown to weaken emotional security and satisfaction. Furthermore, contemporary romantic partnerships often navigate blurred boundaries of what constitutes fidelity, making susceptibility to infidelity a growing concern. Infidelity can be defined as the violation of expectations of exclusivity, whether emotional, physical, or psychological, and is strongly associated with betrayal, insecurity, and distress (Buss, 1997). Susceptibility to infidelity refers to the likelihood of engaging in unfaithful behaviors when faced with dissatisfaction, unmet emotional needs, or insecurity. In this context, psychological factors such as self-esteem play a decisive role in shaping relationship outcomes.

While infidelity is operationalised with a negative comprehension, it provides ample scope to understand the inclusion of fidelity to build the contrast better. Interpersonal relationships provide belongingness, trust, and mutual support, which are essential for resilience and growth (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Fidelity within relationships fosters elevated self-esteem, as loyalty in close bonds shapes emotional security but also individual well-being. This sense of fidelity influences moods, behaviors, and perceptions, reinforcing self-respect, autonomy, and emotional awareness that extend beyond the partner to strengthen the individual's overall self-concept. Infidelity as a leading cause of dissatisfaction and psychological breakdown, is closely tied to insecurities and unmet needs that stem from fragile self-worth (Buss, 1997).

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The comprehension of the dynamics of self-esteem within close relationships is critical for exploring outcomes such as stability, satisfaction, or vulnerability to infidelity. Researchers have linked this vulnerability closely to dynamics of self-esteem, as individuals with low self-esteem often struggle with confidence, communication, and support-seeking, limiting their ability to sustain intimacy and trust in relationships (Harris & Orth, 2019). When worthiness, understood as the sense of recognition and acceptance by others, is undermined through criticism, rejection, or lack of validation, self-esteem is weakened, creating dissatisfaction and emotional fragility in close partnerships (Mruk, 2013). Such insecurities may lead individuals to doubt their partner's affection, underestimate their desirability, and remain hypervigilant to rejection, which in turn undermines relationship satisfaction (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Marigold 2007). As a result, some adopt maladaptive coping strategies, such as withdrawal or seeking validation outside the relationship, thereby increasing susceptibility to infidelity (Ntali & Christakis, 2021). Fragile or ambivalent self-esteem, in which outward confidence masks inner insecurity, has also been associated with defensive or aggressive responses when self-worth feels threatened (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Schriber, 2017). Collectively, these findings suggest that infidelity is a psychological breach but also a behavioural response tied to fluctuations in self-esteem, with low or unstable self-worth heightening vulnerability to unfaithful behaviour.

### Self-Esteem

Self-Esteem is a foundational construct in humankind, representing the core philosophy through which individuals understand their identity, strengths, and weaknesses. As the basis of self-awareness and self-understanding, it serves as an essential foundation for personal development and survival in social contexts. Psychologists have configured extensive theoretical work on the applicative functionality of self-esteem. While some scholars have emphasized self-esteem as a relatively stable trait construct (Rosenberg, 1965), others have understood it as a dynamic quality shaped by environmental interactions and social contexts (Harris & Orth, 2020). However, most of the contemporary work on self-esteem has expanded its functionality through the sociometer theoretical framework, which conceptualizes self-esteem as a psychological gauge of social acceptance and rejection (Leary et al., 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Subsequent analyses have reinforced this perspective, demonstrating that fluctuations in perceived belonging strongly regulate self-esteem and, in turn, psychological behaviours (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000; Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, & van Aken, 2008).

In this regard, majority of the theoretical comprehension focus on Sociometer Theory which provides an important framework for understanding the link between self-esteem and susceptibility to infidelity (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). The theory conceptualizes self-esteem as an internal psychological gauge, or "sociometer," that monitors the degree to which individuals perceive acceptance or rejection from others (Leary et al., 1995). The feeling of being valued and included, raises self-esteem, whereas criticism, neglect, or rejection leads to decline (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). This framework is particularly relevant to the present study, as it highlights how fluctuations in self-esteem, especially a steep decline caused by psychological insecurities, can increase vulnerability to infidelity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). These scientists further emphasized that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation, and sociometer theory explains how self-esteem regulates behaviour to preserve this interpersonal belongingness. In romantic relationships, Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (2000) found that individuals with low self-esteem often doubt their partner's love and misinterpret signals of regard, thereby undermining attachment security. Similarly, Downey and Feldman (1996) showed that rejection sensitivity, which is a

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construct closely tied to sociometer functioning, leads individuals to become hypervigilant to cues of disapproval in intimate bonds, often fuelling dissatisfaction.

Leary, Cottrell, and Phillips (2001) further clarified that both social acceptance and social dominance feed into the sociometer, shaping self-worth and guiding interpersonal responses. Srivastava and Beer (2005) demonstrated that sociometer processes explain that self-evaluations align with being liked by others. Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, and van Aken (2008) showed across cultures that self-esteem fluctuates daily depending on perceived inclusion in social interactions.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that self-esteem functions as a dynamic social barometer, highly sensitive to cues (Leary et al., 1995; Murray et al., 2000; Downey & Feldman, 1996). Therefore, sociometer theory is an essential framework in this research, as susceptibility to infidelity can be understood as a behavioural outcome of low or unstable self-esteem, where individuals seek external validation to restore value when their sociometer signals rejection (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Denissen et al., 2008).

### ***Rationale***

The study explores the psychological connection between self-esteem and susceptibility to infidelity. Infidelity is closely linked to unmet emotional needs and fragile self-concepts (Buss, 1997) besides being the primary cause of relationship breakdown but also a behaviour closely linked to unmet emotional needs and fragile self-concepts (Buss, 1997). Understanding self-esteem in this context is vital, as individuals with low or unstable self-esteem may feel more vulnerable to rejection, insecurity, and dissatisfaction, leading them to seek affirmation outside their committed partnerships (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007).

This study is undertaken with the purpose of clarifying how different forms of self-esteem, including low, fragile, and ambivalent self-esteem, shape psychological outcomes, particularly the vulnerability to infidelity (Bushman & Baumeister, 1998; Watkins, 2024). By analysing these two constructs together, the research aims to provide insights on secure self-esteem as a protective factor, reducing susceptibility to infidelity, strengthening commitment, and enhancing overall relationship satisfaction (Harris & Orth, 2019; Mruk, 2013).

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Self-esteem has long been recognized as a central construct in psychology, reflecting the individual's evaluation of their own worth and value. It not only influences personal well-being but also governs patterns of social interaction, intimacy, and psychological stability. As such, reviewing self-esteem literature provides a foundation for understanding its role in shaping interpersonal and mental health outcomes.

Self-esteem is broadly defined as the evaluation of one's self-worth, and it plays a central role in shaping both social and emotional functioning (Hepper, 2016). Research indicates that individuals with low self-esteem may experience fewer positive social interactions over time, as they often lack confidence in seeking or maintaining support (Harris & Orth, 2019a). This difficulty in reaching out to others can create emotional distance, not only in romantic partnerships but also across friendships and family relationships (Harris & Orth, 2019b). Thus, self-esteem strongly influences the openness with which individuals share their vulnerabilities, and its impact is visible across all forms of interpersonal relationships (Harris & Orth, 2019c).

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Mruk (2013a) conceptualized self-esteem as comprising two key factors: competence and worthiness. Competence reflects an individual's perceived ability and effectiveness, whereas worthiness reflects the acceptance, recognition, and validation received from others (Mruk, 2013b). When worthiness is compromised through criticism, rejection, or lack of validation, self-esteem weakens, leaving individuals emotionally vulnerable (Mruk, 2013c). By contrast, competence involves taking responsibility for one's role in maintaining relationships and presenting oneself with emotional investment, which remains within an individual's control (Mruk, 2013d).

Low self-esteem has also been shown to trigger defensive strategies such as withdrawal, jealousy, or avoidance (Hepper, 2016). Conversely, hypersensitive self-esteem can result in aggressive or defensive responses when self-worth feels threatened—a pattern Baumeister and Bushman (1998) termed “threatened egotism.” These dynamics indicate that both low and unstable high self-esteem contribute to psychological instability (Hepper, 2016; Baumeister & Bushman, 1998).

Furthermore, Fulmer (2023) emphasized that high self-esteem supports psychological stability, whereas low self-esteem is associated with dissatisfaction and a stronger desire for new partners or environments. This pattern highlights how low self-esteem distorts self-perception and creates doubts about one's value in a relationship, leading to increased vulnerability and external validation-seeking (Fulmer, 2023).

Finally, Watkins (2024) introduced the concept of self-ambivalence, where individuals hold conflicting self-views and lack self-concept clarity. This ambivalence makes it difficult for individuals to judge partners and situations accurately, contributing to dissatisfaction and insecurity (Watkins, 2024). Such confusion increases emotional vulnerability, as individuals with ambivalent self-esteem are more likely to seek reassurance outside their relationship, linking low self-esteem to instability and maladaptive psychology behaviours (Watkins, 2024).

Susceptibility to infidelity refers to the fear or anticipation within an intimate relationship that one may be predisposed or vulnerable to a partner's unfaithfulness, particularly when emotional needs remain unmet, insecurities are heightened, and self-esteem is low. Situating this within the broader context of psychology allows for an exploration of how individual factors, such as self-esteem, interact with vulnerability to infidelity.

Infidelity is widely recognized as a complex phenomenon involving the violation of exclusivity expectations in romantic partnerships. Research consistently links certain personality traits to higher susceptibility to infidelity, particularly low conscientiousness, high narcissism, and high psychoticism (Buss, 2011). These traits reflect impulsivity, self-centeredness, and disregard for relationships commitments, which make individuals more likely to seek connections outside of their primary relationship. In addition to personality, relationship contexts—such as sexual dissatisfaction and frequent jealousy complaints by the partner—have also been found to increase the risk of infidelity, suggesting that both individual dispositions and dynamics play important roles (Shackelford, Besser, & Goetz, 2008).

The impact of infidelity extends far beyond the act itself, often undermining the emotional and mental health of both partners. Betrayed individuals, in particular, experience heightened vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem (Cano & O'Leary, 2000; Shrout

& Weigel, 2018; Wenger & Frisco, 2020). These negative consequences highlight the profound betrayal that occurs when exclusivity norms are broken. According to Drigotas (1999), infidelity occurs when one partner perceives that the other has violated established relationship norms through engagement with a third person, sparking jealousy, rivalry, and feelings of inadequacy. Similarly, Blow and Hartnett (2005) defined infidelity as both a sexual and emotional act that breaches the implicit or explicit trust on which a relationship is founded. Such definitions emphasize that infidelity is not a fixed construct but is often interpreted based on subjective rules and interpersonal expectations (Adam, 2019).

An important dimension of susceptibility to infidelity is self-esteem regulation. Zeigler-Hill, Fulton, and McLemore (2012) found that men with fragile self-esteem—high explicit but low implicit self-regard—reported lower use of mate-retention strategies and anticipated a greater likelihood of engaging in infidelity, suggesting that unstable self-worth undermines long-term interpersonal investment. Complementing this, Zeigler-Hill (2011) showed that men with unstable high self-esteem tended to overinflate their closeness and satisfaction with partners, likely as a compensatory mechanism to mask insecurity. Similarly, the qualitative study *Being the Infidelity Partner* by Ntali and Christakis (2021) revealed that individuals involved in extradyadic relationships frequently reported feelings of rejection, ambivalence, and loss of self-worth, reinforcing the idea that ego fragility and the search for external validation are central to unfaithful behaviour.

More broadly, studies converge on the conclusion that self-esteem regulates emotional stability and fidelity. Individuals with low or ambivalent self-esteem often experience dissatisfaction, defensiveness, and a heightened reliance on external validation, which increases the risk of extradyadic involvement (Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006). In contrast, stable self-esteem functions as a protective factor, fostering openness, trust, and long-term commitment (Harris & Orth, 2019). This dynamic highlights that infidelity is not merely a product of opportunity or temptation but often reflects deep-seated struggles with self-worth and emotional security.

### *Analytical Comprehension*

The present review explores the psychological connection between self-esteem and susceptibility to infidelity, focusing on how fluctuations in self-worth contribute to vulnerability within intimate partnerships. Susceptibility to infidelity can therefore be understood as a relational vulnerability emerging when individuals experience insecurity, low self-worth, or dissatisfaction, which may increase the likelihood of seeking affirmation outside a committed bond.

Evidence consistently highlights the central role of self-esteem in this context. Harris and Orth (2020) demonstrated through a meta-analysis that low self-esteem predicts difficulties in social support and relationship maintenance, underscoring how fragile self-worth undermines intimacy and trust. Mruk (2013) conceptualized self-esteem as a balance between competence, defined as ability and responsibility, and worthiness, defined as recognition and acceptance from others. When worthiness is compromised by criticism or rejection, self-esteem declines, leading to heightened emotional fragility. Hepper (2016) further emphasized that low self-esteem fosters defensive reactions such as jealousy and withdrawal, whereas hypersensitive self-esteem produces aggressive or defensive responses, a process Bushman and Baumeister (1998) described as “threatened egotism.” Collectively, this literature demonstrates that both low and unstable self-esteem increase psychological vulnerability.

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The review of research on infidelity further reinforces this association. Downey and Feldman (1996) showed that individuals high in rejection sensitivity remain hypervigilant to disapproval cues, undermining intimacy and stability. Marigold, Holmes, and Ross (2007) reported that individuals with low self-esteem often underestimate their partner's affection and regard, reducing relationship satisfaction. Ntali and Christakis (2021) highlighted that such insecurities may promote maladaptive coping, including withdrawal or the pursuit of external validation, which increases susceptibility to infidelity. Watkins (2024) introduced the concept of self-ambivalence, showing that conflicting self-views foster confusion, dissatisfaction, and vulnerability in evaluating relationships. Together, these findings suggest that fragile or unstable self-esteem is closely tied to emotional insecurity and the predisposition to infidelity.

A central framework within this literature is sociometer theory, which conceptualizes self-esteem as a psychological gauge of social acceptance or rejection (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). This theory emphasizes that self-esteem fluctuates with interpersonal cues, rising with acceptance and declining with rejection (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation, with self-esteem functioning as the mechanism that monitors belongingness. Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (2000) applied this concept to intimate relationships, reporting that individuals with low self-esteem consistently doubted their partner's love despite reassurance. Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, and van Aken (2008) provided cross-cultural evidence that self-esteem rises and falls daily with perceived social inclusion, while Srivastava and Beer (2005) confirmed that sociometer processes regulate the alignment between self-evaluations and being liked by others. These findings demonstrate that sociometer-based scales are effective in capturing the fluctuations in self-esteem that influence psychological outcomes.

Nevertheless, limitations remain. The meaning of infidelity is not universal but shaped by cultural interpretations. In some contexts, infidelity is strictly defined as physical involvement with another partner, while in others, emotional intimacy or digital communication may also be perceived as a breach of exclusivity (Drouin, Miller, & Dibble, 2014). Such cultural variability complicates the generalizability of findings and highlights the need for more inclusive approaches. Furthermore, much of the reviewed literature is based on Western populations, raising concerns of cultural bias and overgeneralization. The reliance on self-report measures also risks inflating associations due to social desirability effects.

Comprehended together, this review indicates a consistent link between self-esteem and susceptibility to infidelity. Across multiple analyses, low, fragile, or ambivalent self-esteem emerges as a risk factor for psychological dissatisfaction and insecurity, while sociometer theory provides a coherent framework for understanding how fluctuations in perceived acceptance regulate self-worth and influence fidelity within intimate relationships.

### **CONCLUSION**

This review set out to explore the psychological connection between self-esteem and susceptibility to infidelity within intimate relationships. The aim was to examine how different forms of self-esteem low, high, fragile, and ambivalent contribute to psychological outcomes, particularly the vulnerability to infidelity. Grounded in the abstract focus, the review integrated evidence on sociometer theory, rejection sensitivity, and relationship satisfaction, emphasizing that self-esteem operates as a central mechanism in shaping psychological security or instability.

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The sociometer framework (Leary et al., 1995; Leary & Baumeister, 2000) proved particularly valuable, conceptualizing self-esteem as a psychological gauge that monitors acceptance and rejection. This lens highlights how fluctuations in perceived belonging directly influence an individual's feelings of worth and thereby their behaviours. Evidence from Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (2000) and Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, and van Aken (2008) demonstrated that self-esteem rises and falls with signals of inclusion or exclusion, while Srivastava and Beer (2005) reinforced the alignment between self-evaluations and interpersonal regard. These findings confirm that the sociometer perspective provides a coherent explanation for why individuals with low or unstable self-esteem may feel more vulnerable to betrayal and, in turn, become more susceptible to infidelity.

The review also considered the different dimensions of self-esteem. Low self-esteem has been associated with insecurity, hypervigilance to rejection, withdrawal, and jealousy, all of which undermine intimacy (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Marigold, Holmes, & Ross, 2007). Fragile or ambivalent self-esteem, despite appearing outwardly confident, fosters defensiveness and aggression when threatened, described as “threatened egotism” by Bushman and Baumeister (1998). In contrast, stable high self-esteem appears protective, as it supports openness, resilience, and long-term commitment. Mruk's (2013) two-factor model further adds nuance by distinguishing between competence, the sense of ability and responsibility, and worthiness, the validation received from others. Both factors must remain in balance, as deficiencies in worthiness or competence create emotional vulnerability that may increase susceptibility to infidelity.

At the same time, the literature presents cultural and methodological limitations. Infidelity is not a universally defined concept, with variations across societies regarding whether it refers only to physical involvement, or whether emotional intimacy and digital communication also constitute betrayal (Drouin, Miller, & Dibble, 2014). Much of the research also remains Western-centric, raising concerns of cultural overgeneralization. Over-reliance on self-report measures further risks social desirability effects, suggesting the need for more robust, multi-method approaches.

The overall judgment from this review is that self-esteem is neither inherently positive nor negative, but rather its stability and balance determine psychological outcomes. Low and fragile self-esteem undermine trust and satisfaction, increasing susceptibility to infidelity, whereas stable, secure self-esteem functions as a protective factor that fosters intimacy, resilience, and fidelity.

Future research must prioritize longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches to better understand the variability in how self-esteem interacts with cultural definitions of infidelity. Sociometer-based measures could provide more precise assessments of moment-to-moment fluctuations in self-esteem, offering richer insights into psychological processes. Importantly, the findings underscore that individuals who invest in building secure self-esteem through self-awareness, emotional regulation, and healthy validation processes can strengthen the quality of their intimate relationships. By focusing on self-worth as both an individual and psychological construct, future work may help reduce susceptibility to infidelity and promote stronger, more resilient partnerships.

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### ***Acknowledgment***

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

***How to cite this article:*** Chakraborty, D., Singh, M. & Jagtiani, Y. (2026). Comprehending Susceptibility to Infidelity through Self Esteem: A Review. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 11(1), 130-139. DIP: 18.02.015/20261101, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1101015