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## 1. Introduction

Ashley Madison is a large website where users from different countries are registered mostly from UK, USA, Canada and so on. Also, there are mostly the middle aged or mostly married people because it is a famous site which help people to find the relationships not only for single people but also for married people too. There are a wide variety of people registered in the site so, there will be a lot of possibilities and many active users. (Pleines, 2024)

Ashley Madison is a dating and social networking website for people who want to cheat their partners with the slogan 'Life is short. Have an affair.' Founded in 2002 by J. Morganstern. It marketed to people who are married or people's looking for affairs. The site name was derived from two well-known female from North America, "Ashley" and "Madison" respectively. (Daum, 2009)

Alongside Ashley Madison, the parent company, Avad Life Media: a Canadian Internet firm founded by Noel Biderman, now known as Ruby Life Inc. This company also runs two other sites "CougarLife.com" and "EstablishedMen.com". (Monica, 2015). Also, this website charged subscription for men, but female can join without paying any cost that means the website is mainly for men as a dating site.



*Figure 1: Picture of Ashley Madison (eastbayexpress, 2023)*

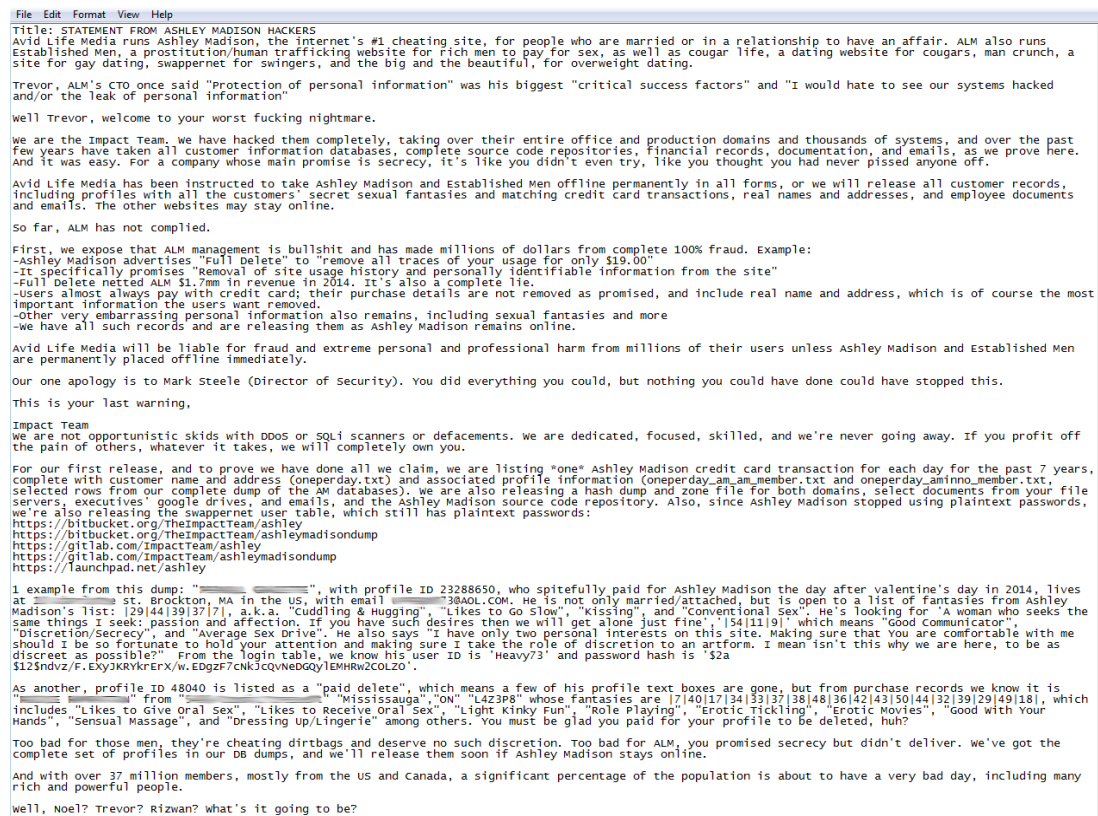
The Ashley Madison data breach back in 2015 remains as a powerful reminder to the risk we face in this digital era. Before 2015, about 30 million people were log into this site and this website earned over \$115 million in 2014. But then, the website data was stolen by the hackers named themselves as “Impact Team”. Hacker released the sensitive information of every user that caused legal fights and serious discussions about social, legal, and professional issues. (Roeper, 2023). After that data breach in 2015, Biderman resigned down as CEO of Avid Life Media.

To regain the trust of users the site implemented various changes in security portion. The site increased their security by hiring third-party company to keep their data safe. Not only that they also established two step login process for user that kept safe from the hacking too. Also, Ashley Madison earned the "Privacy by Design Certification" from Ryerson University in 2017. (Pleines, 2024) .

Avid Life Media renamed as Ruby Corp. and named Rob Segal as CEO in July 2016. Also, they change their slogan “Life is too short. Have an affair.” To “Find Your moment”. (Freeman, 2016) . In 2017 Rob Segal again resigned from his position and Nobel Biderman resumed his post as CEO and reintroducing the same tagline “Life is too short. Have an affair.” (Morgan, 2017)

## 2. Background of the scandal

In July 2015, the hacker group named as 'Impact Team' hacked this completely. They claimed to have taken all sensitive user info of Ashley Madison and their related site. Also, they Ordered to shut down their sites permanently otherwise they will reveal all user data including names, passwords, addresses, transaction history.



The screenshot shows a text document with a title bar that reads 'File Edit Format View Help'. The text inside is a statement from the Ashley Madison hackers. It begins with 'Title: STATEMENT FROM ASHLEY MADISON HACKERS' and describes the group's actions, including the theft of customer information, source code, financial records, and emails. It mentions that the group has taken over the site and is demanding that Ashley Madison shut down permanently. The statement also includes a list of demands, such as the removal of site usage history and personally identifiable information, and the release of all customer records. The document concludes with a threat to release all user data if the site is not shut down by the deadline.

Figure 2: statement post by impact team: to shut down the service.

But the site refused to shut down. As a result, hackers made good on their promise on August 18, 2015, releasing over 10 gigabytes of confidential user data from 32 million members. Not only that, but Hacker also exposed Ashley Madison for legality scamming by charging \$20 to fully delete button calling it completely lies because after reaching system, hacker was able to see all the deleted user record.

Name	Download	Priority	Bytes	Progress	Status
74ABAA38.txt	✓	Normal	3.10 K of 3.10 K	100%	100%
am_am.dump.gz	✓	Normal	2,790,169 K of 2,790,169 K	100%	100% (w)
am_am.dump.gz.asc	✓	Normal	836 of 836	100%	100%
aminno_member.dump.gz	✓	Normal	3,259,437 K of 3,259,437 K	100%	100% (r)
aminno_member.dump.gz.asc	✓	Normal	836 of 836	100%	100%
aminno_member_email.dump.gz	✓	Normal	459,823 K of 459,823 K	100%	100% (r)
aminno_member_email.dump.gz.asc	✓	Normal	836 of 836	100%	100%
ashleymadison.dump.7z	✓	Normal	37,796 K of 37,796 K	100%	100%
ashleymadison.dump.7z.asc	✓	Normal	836 of 836	100%	100%
CreditCardTransactions.7z	✓	Normal	290,470 K of 290,470 K	100%	100% (r)
CreditCardTransactions.7z.asc	✓	Normal	836 of 836	100%	100%
member_details.dump.gz	✓	Normal	738,017 K of 738,017 K	100%	100% (r)
member_details.dump.gz.asc	✓	Normal	836 of 836	100%	100%
member_login.dump.gz	✓	Normal	2,832,373 K of 2,832,373 K	100%	100% (r)
member_login.dump.gz.asc	✓	Normal	836 of 836	100%	100%
README	✓	Normal	1.18 K of 1.18 K	100%	100%
README.asc	✓	Normal	836 of 836	100%	100%

Figure 3: screenshot of the allegedly leaked Ashley Madison database archive.

(McNeil, 2015)

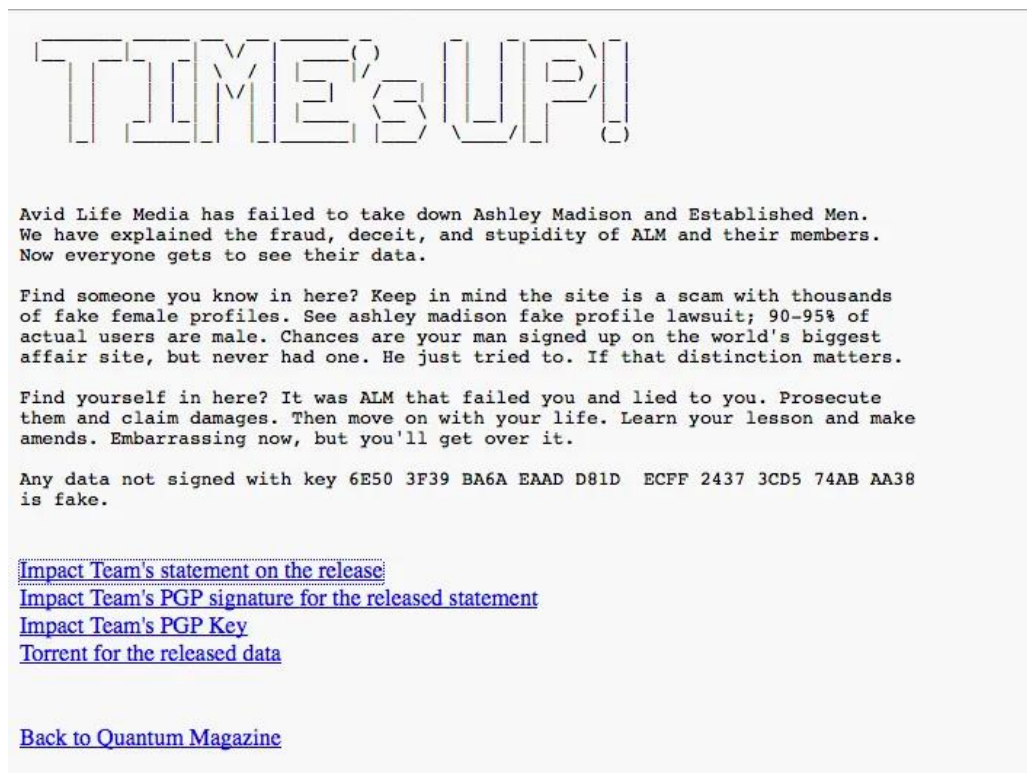


Figure 4: Statement after posting all users data.

On 24 August 2015, Toronto police also announced that there were two cases of suicides that have been linked to the data breach. (CBC News, 2015) Also, Biderman was charged of not deleting the accounts of user who had paid for account removal. However, just like other users, the sensitive data like his private emails that described



the multiple extramarital he had throughout his marriage to his wife, Amanda. On August 28, 2015, he resigned as CEO of Ashley Madison and Avid Life Media. (Facey, 2023). The federal Trade Commission (FTC) investigated this website as some reports proved that used bots to communicate with male users. That resulted as, website faced 24 data breach lawsuits because the sensitive information of about 37 million people was leaked online. This clearly shows that the website was lacking in protecting user's data. (Kravets, 2017)

Despite Avid Life Media's offer of a \$500,000 prize for information leading to the arrest and conviction of those involved, no one has been charged in relation to the incident. (Pearl, 2023 )

Avid Life Media renamed as Ruby Corp. and named Rob Segal as CEO in July 2016. Also, they change their slogan "Life is too short. Have an affair." To "Find Your moment". (Freeman, 2016) . In 2017 Rob Segal again resigned from his position and Nobel Biderman resumed his post as CEO and reintroducing the same tagline "Life is too short. Have an affair." (Morgan, 2017)

### **3. Legal Issues**

Legal issues refer to the matter or situation that involve the regulation, violation of laws or other legal standards. It is an issue or inquiry that the law target or resolved. (SRA, 2021)

Similarly, the legal issues that arise from the Ashley Madison are:

#### **3.1 Class-Action lawsuit**

A class action lawsuit is filed by one or more plaintiffs on behalf of a larger group of people, referred to as the class. All the participants share in any proceeds collected from a class-action lawsuit after paying legal costs, whether in the form of a settlement or a judgment. (Hayes, 2023)

Ashley Madison faced a class-action lawsuit worth \$576 million after user data from the infidelity dating service was leaked to the dark web. Here, Canadian law firms representing all Canadians affected by the Ashley Madison data breach whose personal data was leaked. The lawsuit implies damages for the breach, in which hackers stole usernames, email and other personal information. Many users paid to have their data erased but find still exposed. Similarly, one person named in the lawsuit is Eliot Shore who joined this website after losing his wife but never met anyone from this site. (BBC, 2015)

#### **3.2 Violation of Data Protection Act**

The Data Protection Act (DPA) is intended to protect individuals and establish regulation for how data about persons can be used by businesses, organizations, or the government. (experian, 2024)

The hacking team known as "The Impact Team" effortlessly leaked Ashley Madison's user information, indicating that the website lacked data security. Not only that, but there was no email verification required to establish a profile, which means that people frequently create fake profiles on those sites. Additionally, Hacker also revealed Ashley Madison for legally scamming by charging \$19 to entirely delete button, calling it a fraud. This clearly shows that Ashley Madison clearly violating the user's data. (Chideya, 2015)

#### **3.3 Data Breach Liability**

Ashley Madison faced legal complications for the illegal access and release of users' personal information. The site was unable to protect information so that the data related to each member and a huge amount of internal corporate data was leaked such as email address, address,

transaction history and so on. This caused serious questions about the company's compliance with data protection laws and its duties to protect user information. (The Guardian, 2024)

### **3.4 Deceptive Practice Claims**

Ashley Madison advertised a dating website is 100% secure and anonymous. But it was found that fake profile was created as a female user by the staff of that site to communicate with the male user. Not only that, users who paid around \$19 for the “Full Delete” that promised to remove the user data but discovered it was still exposed that may have legal claims against Ashley Madison for misleading business practices. This clearly shows that the disparity between the promised services and actual outcome lead to claims of fraud or scam. (Schifferle, 2016)

Ashley Madison paid \$1.66 million penalty to settle the investigation conducted by the U.S federal Trade Commission (FTC) and several U.S. for weak data security and misleading practices. (Bartz, 2021)

### **3.5 Using Fake Female Bot Account**

After the data breach in 2015, the data clearly showed that many of the women's profile on the Ashley Madison were fake. Initially, the data showed that thousands of the female profile were fake, but they didn't have any proof. Later, some news revealed that almost 90-95% female profile were fake this news didn't have proof either.

So, Annalee Newitz a journalist examined the leak data of Ashley Madison database. The report showed that around 12000 were real women using this site and Ashley Madison created over 70000 fake profile to communicate with male users and impressed them showing large number of female available. (Newitz, 2015)

## **4. Social Issues**

Social Issues can be defined as the behavior circumstances that negatively effect the society people and consequently demand for a solution. So, the social problems affect almost huge number of people living in the society. (Stewart, 2024)

Ashley Madison data breach resulted different social issues that is described below:

### **4.1 Stigmatization on Privacy**

The data breach of Ashley Madison impacts a significant violation of user's privacy. The breach involved the unauthorized access and release of user privacy information like email, names, addresses. People well trusted the privacy policies but as the data leak of every user there was a serious breach of privacy.

### **4.2 Trust In Online Platform**

Before data breach, Ashley Madison first promised that the site is too much secret and users can have secret affairs without knowing to their spouse knowing and promised that user will have an affair within 3 months of joining. (University of New Maxico, 2023) . But the breach and data published in 2015 damages the trust in online platforms and their capabilities of protecting user data. So, this type of thing affects the user and their willingness to use similar platforms.

### **4.3 Constant Lying**

Ashley Madison also has a social issue with constant lying to the registered users. This website charged about \$19 pound for the user who want to delete their account permanently as showing delete button. Many users also paid money for this function believing that their information would stay private but after the hack showed that the company was not honest like charging money to delete account but didn't keep the data private. (Chideya, 2015).

### **4.4 Negative impact on people mental health**

The data breach revealed the user's sensitive information like name, email, address, and transaction details. The aftermath impact was huge toward people mental issues, even the life of the family member was affected. When the private data were release to the public, users faced the issues like stress, fear, and humiliation. Not only that, but people also even suffered from a total mental health. Additionally, Toronto police said that there were two unconfirmed suicides linked to the breach. (CBC News, 2015)

#### **4.5 Impact on People's Marriages and Emotional Pain**

Aashley Madison another big social issue was negatively impact on the families of the users. Due to the leakage of user sensitive data, the entire society experienced the negative impacts of adultery on marriage that leads to an increased divorce rates and conflicts within families over many years. Also, Noel Biderman steeped down form him position due to embarrassing leak of his emails and improper business practices. This can be taken as the example how famous peoples can also lead to the emotional pain toward their society respectively. (ConsiderIT, 2024)

## **5. Ethical Issues**

Ethical issues are described as situations in which an ethical conflict occurs and must be resolved. In other words, it is a situation in which a higher standard is questioned. It occurs when a specific action, activity, or event violates society ethical principles. Individuals and businesses can become caught in these types of conflicts if any of their actions violate ethical standards. (Conrad, 2024)

### **5.1 Ethical Considerations of Consent and Privacy**

In ethics, consent refers to the moral concepts and considerations that takes the act of granting permission for something to happen or accepting someone's authority. This is a complex topic in ethics and laws. (King, 2023) . The breach shows how important it is for individual to understand what they are getting into when they submit sensitive information online like Ashley Madison. User lack in aware of the risk of giving their information, particularly when the data is leaked.

### **5.2 Ethical obligations in Data Security and lack of responsibilities**

When any businesses information gets hacked, just like the Avid Life Media, it raised the question about the company's ethical responsibilities and investment in effective data protection ways. This incident clearly showed the privacy concerns or whether they prioritize profits over the privacy of the user. This violates the trust that member place in that site.

Before, the data breach, the site was warned by the hackers to stop running the website, but Ashley Madison kept their site running which caused them the biggest data breach. So, this issues clearly determined that the company is lacking responsibilities and accountability respectively.

### **5.3 Unethical decision making.**

Similarly, in the case of the Ashley Madison data breach, it was determined that the company placed business interests and financial growth over the protection of user's data. The theory of **"Utilitarianism"** can be used to examine the ethical value of the site response to the breach because it is a moral theory that support activities that increase happiness while arguing against action that cause harm or bring about unhappiness. (TARDI, 2023). So, this theory examines the harm caused to the user's privacy as well as the consequences for the site reputation. This approach also considers whether the scandal reduced harm and increases overall happiness for everyone involved.

#### **5.4 Fraud on Trust of Users**

Ashley Madison data breach also affected the Social Contract Theory in clear sense. This theory states that the people live together in society under an agreement that creates ethical and political rules of behavior. (McCombs School of Business, 2024)

In the context of Ashley Madison users fully believed the site and keep their sensitive data in accordance with the implied social theory but the breach violated both the trust and the agreements harming the legality of the site and its registered users. This clearly shows that it against the trust and ethical responsibilities by Ashley Madison for their user's.

#### **5.5 Ethical Breaches and Deontological Dilemmas**

Ashley Madison was also against “Deontological Theory” which says that it is an ethical theory that holds the actions are either good or bad based on the clear set of principles. (The Ethics Centre, 2016). Ashley Madison misled about the deleting user data which also broke the promises and trust. Also, activities in the creation of bots, false advertising and trust issues created the serious ethical concerns about honest, integrity and respect for individual choice. These types of behaviors contradict Deontology theory.

## **6. Professional Issue**

The principles that guide an individual or group's behavior in a business environment are known as professional ethics. Professional ethics offer principles on how an individual should behave with other person and organizations in such an environment. (Immigration Advisers Authority, 2024)

The Ashley Madison data hack caused serious worries about the site's compliance with professional issues and data protection law. During the scandal, the website broke the following professional ethics:

### **6.1 Corporate Accountability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

This Corporate Accountability refers using more direct or enforceable methods to influence how the companies behave. On the other hand, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an independent business model that enables a company socially responsible. It not just to make profits but also to benefits to society and the surrounding too. (Fernando, 2024)

But the breach shows problems with Avid Life Media accountability and social responsibility. This site didn't do enough to protect user data or deal with the aftermath of the breach, that raises the question about their moral duties toward the user's. This can be also one social issues regarding Ashley Madison.

### **6.2 Code of conduct violation**

Ashley Madison was populating almost in all big countries, but the data breach made a big impact to the site, and it broke the code of conduct violation. One of the most popular celebrity Sean Hannity highlighted concerns for promoting extramarital affairs raising the moral questions about the site impact on relationships and social values. Also, the hacking incident was an illegal action in breaking the platform security that raises the serious violation of professional ethics and integrity. Additionally, the site unable to protect the user sensitive information and the data was exposed that highlight the necessary for the company to implement strong security features to preserve employee morality and protect user privacy. (Auburn University, 2023)

### **6.3 Fraudulent Misrepresentation**

Ashley Madison advertised incorrect or misleading data regarding their site. The site themselves didn't talk about that the most profiles was fake regarding to female profile was just to attract the male which was biggest fraud because most male users were interacting with



fake accounts. Also, Avid Life Media promised users that the site could permanently delete the info of the users from their servers for \$20 but they didn't delete it. (S., 2015). This clearly showed that the site lying to the user to make benefits themselves and causing harms to the users.

#### **6.4 Violation of Data Right Policies:**

The Federal Government created the Consumer Data Right (CDR) to give consumers the rights to access their own data i.e. CDR data stored by the organization. (commonwealth Bank of Australia, 2023)

As compared to Ashley Madison, the data breach was a major violation of data protection policies. User trusted this site and uploaded their sensitive data like personal details and transaction details, but the site lacked in security and data was stolen by the hackers (Thomsen, 2015) which clearly shows that the site should have strong data protection policies and compliance to regulations depending upon the region.

#### **6.5 Leadership Instability**

In the context of Ashley Madison, Leadership Instability is one of the crucial profession issues and is evident through the frequent changes in the CEOs and top executives. After the data breach, on August 28, 2015, CEO Noel Biderman resigned from the site. (Facey, 2023). Also, Avid Life Media was renamed as Ruby Crop along with the appointment of Rob Segal as CEO and changed the slogan to "Find Your moment". (Freeman, 2016). But again in 2017, Rob Segal resigned from the firm and Noel Biderman again reintroduced as the CEO also resuming the slogan to the original tagline. (Morgan, 2017). This clearly shows that the site was lack of stability in leadership structure, disruptions in operations and difficulties maintaining employee morale and stakeholder's trust.

## 7. Personal Reflection

The Ashley Madison data breach caused harm by revealing the private details of over 30 million users in 2015, by the hacker “Impact Team”. Also, this breach also revealed about the website deceptive practices like a “Full Delete” option that didn’t remove their data. This This led to legal, social, ethical, and professional issues where Lawsuits were filled, data protection rules were broken, and so on. In my view, this happened due to the lack of security measures adopted by the site. Several measures could be applied by the company to prevented from the scandal. If I were the CEO Ashley Madison of then I surely implemented precaution for both User and company perspective.

I will mention a few things in company perspective that could have prevented the scandal:

- Implementing robust encryption to protect the sensitive information like password, personal details, and transaction details.
- Hiring third-party security experts to check for problems and weaknesses in the system.
- Make clear and transparent policies that shows how user’s data is collected, protected which helps them to make informed decisions about the privacy and security on the site.
- Employee should provide comprehensive training and awareness program that educate them about cybersecurity best practices, phishing schemes and so on.
- Implement multi-factor authentication to offer an extra level of security for user accounts and minimizing the danger of illegal issues.

Not only that the company and its user must take measures to avoid data leaks and I will also conclude some precautions for users:

- Use strong and unique password for online site or user can use password manager which generate the secure password.
- User should also enable two factor authentication which add an extra layer of security.
- Be aware of phishing Attempts like unwanted emails or messages which can ask user for their personal or transaction information.
- Regularly monitor your account for any unusual activity or unauthorizes access.
- User should also stay informed about cybersecurity best practices and any updates or changes to the security measures.

This above point includes that user precautions while sharing their personal details online not only for Ashley Madison but also for other site. Also, if the site and user were aware for this sort of securities that I surely say that the hacking incident wouldn't take place.

In conclusion, the Ashley Madison hack shows how crucial it for online site to protect user privacy and cybersecurity. So, the company should first adopt the robust security measures, being honest with users and following strict privacy rules, companies can avoid the breaches and keep user data safe. So, it shows that the trust and honesty play the important role for any running website.

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