

Last year, at the age of 41, Monica Lewinsky broke her public silence and voluntarily stepped into the limelight by writing an [article](#) in Vanity Fair. A few months ago she presented a [TED Talk](#) speaking out against the commercialisation of shame in the digital age. Every time we click on a salacious gossip story, she says, we are creating demand for more stories, and we are also ignoring the shame and hurt of the human being behind the titillating headlines.

Monica Lewinsky admits she considered suicide as a way to escape the nightmare of public humiliation. She reflects on the impact of the scandal on her parents and friends, her employment prospects and her dreams of marriage and a family. “Not a day goes by that I’m not reminded of my mistake and I regret that mistake deeply” she says. She has paid a great price for her shame.

The story of Monica Lewinsky demonstrates an extreme example of “slut-shaming” - attacking someone’s character on the basis of sexual activity, whether real, perceived or imagined. She has been called many names including whore, tart, bimbo, narcissistic loony-toon, and perhaps most hurtfully of all ‘that woman’. The reasons for such vitriol directed towards a young woman caught in a sexual indiscretion with a powerful married man are complex, based on myriad historical, religious, social, cultural and moral factors. Diverse [hypotheses](#) have been offered for slut-shaming - that we shame others to make ourselves feel better about ourselves - that we try to devalue the worth of sexual competitors - or that we are punishing people who deviate from social norms.

Slut shaming is most often directed at women and perpetuates the sexual double standard (whereby women are judged more harshly than men for the same behaviour). However, there is [evidence](#) that the types of sexual behaviours we judge negatively are changing. Furthermore, our assumptions about social norms may not be completely up to date. A recent [study](#) of US college students found a kind of reverse double standard whereby participants judged males more harshly than females for sexually adventurous behaviour. Participants also had negative attitudes towards people who slut-shamed others.

The (mostly) positive [reaction](#) to Monica Lewinsky’s return to the public eye demonstrates the extent to which attitudes have changed. Or have they?

Disclosure

Slut-shaming and the case of Monica Lewinsky

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