

Infidelity and Social Media: Investigating Differences in Social Media Use among Perpetrators and Victims of Infidelity

Parvati Varma^{1*}

ABSTRACT

Infidelity is a transgression that affects the well-being of both parties as well as the relationship quality makes it important to pay attention to the phenomenon. This study aimed to understand the link between involvement in fidelity, infidelity, and social media. The study comprised 303 participants – offenders of infidelity, offended partners, and individuals who had neither cheated on their partners nor been cheated (fidelity). For this purpose, the Facebook addiction scale was used in the context of social media. One-way ANOVA was conducted to observe the differences across the groups. The results found that perpetrators were more likely to use social media sites as compared to the victims or fidelity group of participants. The implications of the study have been discussed.

Keywords: *Infidelity, Extradyadic Involvement, Cheating*

Romantic relationships are a vital part of an individual's life, and the quality of these relationships with one's partner majorly affects their well-being (Umberson et al., 2006; Johnson et al., 2012). Maintaining a relationship often requires partners to overcome various problems that may be encountered by one or both individuals. Infidelity is one such problem that often proves to be damaging to most couples. The definition of infidelity varies in the literature. Early research in this area considered extramarital sex as the major criterion of infidelity (Thompson, 1983).

The meaning of this term has since then applied to dating couples as well and has broadened beyond sexual intercourse and includes different forms such as emotional infidelity and online infidelity. Defining infidelity has been difficult due to concepts such as polyamorous relationships, wife-swapping, open relationships, and various other consensual non-monogamous relationships (Conley et al., 2017). However, there appears to be consent that behaviors that break the trust regarding what is acceptable or the norm of exclusivity that is assumed to be upheld by partners in a commitment can be categorized as infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Fife et al., 2008). This includes behaviors that happen outside the committed relationship such as going on dates, forming emotional attachments, being sexually intimate etc. (Roscoe et al, 1988).

¹Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Sikkim University, Sikkim, India

*Corresponding Author

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Changing mindsets, the widespread of technology, acceptance of casual sex, and the development of various dating apps draw attention to different types of infidelity instances that have become more noticeable such as booty calls, one-night stands, and friends with benefits, etc (Nair & Padmakumar, 2020; Ven & Beck, 2009). Individuals nowadays have choices to get involved in short/long term affairs, intentional/unintentional ones, serious affairs/casual sex, among many others. The ever-present Internet makes it all the simpler for infidelity to occur. A negative association has been reported between the use of social networking sites and relationship quality (Clayton et al., 2013; Sheldon et al., 2011).

The study aims to evaluate if people's usage of social sites is related to their involvement in infidelity in romantic relationships. On the basis of existing literature, it is hypothesized that transgressors of infidelity would be more likely to use social media.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample consisted of 303 participants from Sikkim, India. The participants belonged to three categories – perpetrators of infidelity, victims of infidelity, and the fidelity group (those who had not cheated themselves or been cheated). The sample of this study was part of a larger sample, that measured various other variables. However, only a small portion was included in this study. The participants were aged 18 to 38 years (overall $M_{age} = 25.20$) out of which 204 were females ($M_{age} = 24.71$) and 99 were males ($M_{age} = 26.22$). The eligibility criteria for being included in the study required individuals to be in a dating relationship for a period of a minimum of six months. The criteria for exclusion were if they were married or divorced. There were three groups of participants – transgressors who had cheated on their partners, victims who had been cheated, and finally, the fidelity group who had never experienced infidelity in any way either as the perpetrator or the receiver. Out of the total participants, 85 were transgressors, 96 were victims of infidelity and 122 were from the fidelity group. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants did not receive any reward or monetary compensation.

Measures

Sociodemographic details – The first part of the survey asked questions about personal information regarding the participant's area of residence, educational qualification, gender, age, etc.

Social Media – The 6-item *Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale* (BFAS), developed by Andearssen et al., (2012) was used in the study which comprises six items. For the purpose of the present study, the term Facebook was replaced with the word “social media sites”. Participants were asked to respond to statements using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very rarely) to 5 (very often). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was found to be $\alpha = .81$ in the present study. An example item is “Spend time thinking about social media or planned use of social media”. The Cronbach's α value was .81.

Relationship-related questions -Few single-item measures were used to ask regarding their relationships such as length of the affair, duration of their committed relationship during the affair, and their continuation of the relationship post-infidelity. Additional questions were asked about their attitude towards infidelity, intention towards infidelity, relationship satisfaction, need fulfillment, etc., however, those variables were not included in the current study.

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Procedure

Before commencing the study, ethical clearance was taken from the university's Institutional Review Board. Initially, information regarding the research was spread through social media sites, word of mouth, and posts in groups. On showing interest in voluntary participation, the participants were contacted and briefed about the purpose of the study and research in detail and their role in it. A few questions were asked informally to find out if they fulfilled the criteria for inclusion in the study. To make participants comfortable and allow them to answer freely, an option to fill up these questions online through Google Forms as well as offline using pen and paper questionnaires was provided to them. In addition to this, they were also informed of their rights as a participant to leave any questions or stop filling up the survey if they did not wish to continue. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants for data collection and use of the same for research purposes.

Data Analysis

For analyzing the data, SPSS-23 was used. ANOVA was conducted to determine if there were significant differences in social media use across the three groups.

RESULTS

The results of ANOVA along with descriptive statistics are given in Table 1. The results reveal that there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of social media use among the different groups of participants $F(2, 300) = 5.943, p = .003$. Results also found that the mean value of social media use was significantly different between perpetrators (17.71) and victims (15.55) and perpetrators (17.71) and fidelity (15.34) group. While no significant difference was found between the victims and the fidelity group.

Table 1 Differences in social media use in perpetrators, victims, and fidelity group

Emotion	Infidelity	N	Mean	SD	F	P
	Perpetrator	85	17.71	5.57	5.43	.003
	Victim	96	15.55	4.82		
	Fidelity	122	15.34	5.14		

Note. N= 303.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate if the social media use of individuals would be significantly different for the role of individuals in their infidelity experience. It was hypothesized that people who had cheated used social media sites more. The results show this to be true. Therefore, the hypothesis was accepted.

Some characteristics of people who engage in infidelity have been linked to sociosexual orientation and trying out varied experiences (Weiser et al., 2018). In previous studies, openness has also been found to share a positive relationship with infidelity (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2008). Jain and Sahni (2017) in their study also reported the desire for exploring as one of the reasons for infidelity involvement by people in relationships. Social media sites provide people with the prospect of coming in contact with different people and also an opportunity to explore. This possibly could be a reason why people who indulge in infidelity use social media more.

An additional factor could also be that when an individual willingly decides to involve in extradyadic relationships, they may do it for personal reasons or because something lacks in

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their relationships, and may be tempted to fulfill those needs from an external source (Lewandowski & Ackerman, 2006). It is possible thus that individuals who are involved in infidelity due to deficits in their primary relationship may also turn to social media as a solution.

An earlier qualitative investigation by Scheeren and Apellániz (2018), had reported participants accepted involvement in infidelity as a means to escape from their ongoing problems. In a similar manner, turning to the Internet becomes an easy medium to escape from unfulfilling relationships (Young, 1999). This could be one probable reason why infidelity perpetrators use social media. The results of the study therefore, are an initial step in understanding that it not just using technology that could provide a way for infidelity but also the other way around, and depending on whether an individual is loyal or disloyal to their partners may also influence their relationship with it.

Implications

The internet is such a vast place for all things good and bad. While the use of social media and mindless scrolling and excessive Internet while in the same room has been identified slowly as being damaging to relationships and leading to infidelity behaviors, it may also be the other way around where those involved in infidelity may be using social sites extensively either for seeking opportunities or getting away from their dissatisfaction in their primary relationships. Studies such as this, that look into the association between infidelity and social media use may be helpful when couples seek support. Counselors would be able to break the tedious cycle of dissatisfied cheating individuals using social sites for seeking alternatives and support from external sources and feeling further unhappy in their primary relationships. Therefore, infidelity, a phenomenon that brings devastating consequences for all the parties involved can be prevented and remedied. It would also aid counselors in developing a neutral standpoint instead of being clouded by moral judgments and offering help and effective solution to both offenders and the offended.

Limitations and Future Directions

An important limitation could be that the data was collected during the COVID pandemic which limited the participants' participation and also increased their technology usage. The data was collected only from people involved in heterogenous relationships with one partner. People who are in homogenous relationships may go through these experiences differently. This can be further studied.

CONCLUSION

We often overlook the connection between an individual's relationship and their technology usage pattern. Studies such as these draw attention to understanding the association. Social media is currently so predominant in an individual's life in influencing their well-being. Therefore, individuals already engaged in infidelity may find it more empowering and such results have to be understood so that counselors can provide aid and support without judgment.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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