THE NECESSITY OF COUPLE EDUCATION REGARDING THE IMPACT OF ONLINE INFIDELITY ON ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

G.M. LĂZĂRESCU[1]   M. VINTILĂ[2]

Abstract: *The main objective of this study was to investigate behavioural and emotional cues that could predict engaging in unfaithful behaviour online. Starting from the use and gratification theory, this study shows how people satisfy certain personal needs which are not fulfilled in their romantic relationships using social networks. A number of 250 participants, (N = 250) completed the SONTUS scale of time spent on social networks, the TILES scale, which reports the interference of technology in everyday life, and the SMIRB scale for online infidelity. Time spent on social networks and the interference of technology in everyday life predict infidelity in the online environment. It is necessary to educate couples on this subject.*

Key words: *online infidelity, technology interference in daily life, time spent online, couple education, healthy relationships*

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an explosion in the use of technology in the daily lives of families, so that it plays a relatively large part in the social interactions that take place between two or more people. Infidelity represents the engagement in a secret and forbidden relationship that violates the agreement between the partners, namely that the needs of one of the two will be fulfilled by anyone other than the partner with whom they have a significant relationship (Moller & Vossler, 2015). Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard (1998) identified two levels of infidelity: sexual and emotional. Sexual infidelity represents any sexual behavior in which a person participates with someone who is not the initial partner. This behaviour includes sexual attraction, sexual fantasies, flirting, passionate kissing and sex. (Yarab et al, 1998). On the other hand, emotional infidelity is defined as the possibility of falling in love with another person who is not the initial partner and generating an emotional connection to it (Neumann, 2001). Behaviour related to this type of infidelity includes hiding information, lying and spending time with another person of the opposite sex, other than the initial partner (Yarab et al., 1998).

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[1] *West University of Timișoara*, Timișoara, România, gianina.lazarescu97@e-uvt.ro, corresponding author
[2] *West University of Timișoara*, Timișoara, România, mona.vintila@e-uvt.ro

Regarding online infidelity, another level is added to the other levels mentioned above, namely, viewing pornographic material (Adam, 2019; Whitty, 2005). Yarab et al (1998) mention that in the case of online sexual infidelity there is behaviour such as engaging in private discussions about certain sexual fantasies, exchanging photos and masturbation to obtain sexual gratification. At the same time, in the case of online emotional infidelity, behaviour such as self-disclosure, flirting, revealing personal problems and planning an offline meeting appear.

Why are social networks a 'right choice' for those who are unfaithful in the online environment? According to Rubin (2002) and the use and gratification theory, people use media and online socialization to meet their needs and desires, thus concluding that there is a possibility that the couple's partners seek to meet needs in the online environment because they do not have them in their relationship. Thus, social networks facilitate communication with alternative partners, while providing a favorable condition for flirting. This aspect can contribute to engaging in unfaithful online behavior (Drouin, Miller & Dibble, 2015). Even married people, who are in a long-term relationship, engage in deceitful online behaviour by contacting old romantic partners, commenting on other people's posts and images, creating a fake account to talk to other people and hiding messages (Drouin et al, 2015; McDaniel, Drouin & Cravens, 2017). The study by Papp, Danielewicz & Cayemberg (2012) shows how couples who spend plenty of time on Facebook and frequently post their relationship on social networks, posting various pictures or messages related to it, report a low level of love for their partner as well as multiple interpersonal conflicts (Cravens, Leckie &Whiting, 2013).

Referring to the perceptions and attitudes that romantic partners have towards online infidelity, Whitty (2004) mentions that some types of behaviour performed in the virtual environment can be perceived as acts of betrayal so that sexual acts were considered a factor that threatens the well-being of the relationship to a much greater extent than watching pornographic material. Abdi, Nazari & Zabihzadeh (2012) indicate that women, compared to men, have a much more negative attitude towards their partners' online activity (sexual acts are considered to be much more significant than friendly, emotionally charged discussions with partners of the opposite sex). Suliakaite (2009) reports that online infidelity exists on a behavioural continuum, where some acts are considered more unfaithful than others, based on the partner's involvement in them. Partners perceive behaviour that defines infidelity (online, offline) in different ways, which can be classified into three broad categories as follows: ambiguous behaviour (online conversations with others, hugging other than the initial partner; couple members perceive these factors as indicating very little a possible infidelity with the mention that that conversation is on a social network like Facebook and not on a dating application like Tinder), explicit behaviour (sexual acts, oral sex - indicate most infidelity) and deceptive behaviour (lying, hiding information from the relationship - indicate at a moderate level possible infidelity) (Mattingly, Wilson, Clark, Bequette & Weidler, 2010; Wilson, Mattingly, Clark, Weidler & Bequette, 2011).

An edifying factor for understanding the mechanism behind online infidelity is the social networks use. Cravens et al (2013) draw attention to the fact that when we refer to the behaviour that some people engage in social networks, sending private messages

to another person of the opposite sex, commenting on the profile of an attractive user, making friends with former partners may be indicators of online infidelity. Young et al (2000) report that when one of the partners engages in one of the online infidelity forms they neglect the initial partner. Whitty's (2005) study shows that the frequency of using social networks leads to placing attention and energy on the online relationship.

Arikewuyo, Lasisi, Abdulbaqi, Omoloso & Arikewuyo (2020) mention a significant link between social network use and conflicts that arise in romantic relationships, jealousy, infidelity, and the monitoring of romantic partners being mediators of the two variables. At the same time, the more people in a relationship were exposed to interactions with alternative partners through social networks, the more they engaged in following them in the online environment, a type of behaviour that negatively affected their relationship (De Lenne, Wittevronghel, Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2019). Regarding the motivation behind infidelity, the study by Blow and Hartnett (2005) suggests that lack of relationship satisfaction (for women) and sexual satisfaction (for men) can lead to engaging in such behaviour. Reportedly low levels of sexual satisfaction, emotional intimacy, and relationship satisfaction are risk factors that can undermine the quality of the romantic relationship and directly increase the practice of unfaithful behaviour in the online environment (Gonzalez-Rivera, Aquino-Serrano & Perez-Torres, 2020).

Low level of self-esteem due to low levels of body appreciation can also lead to seek online relationships, as people are unsure of their body, of what it can do or is capable of doing. Lack of physical activity as well as unhealthy eating habits lead to the increase of the BMI, and make people insecure and prone to interacting and finding partners online (Swami et al, 2021, Vintilă et al., 2020). In the context in which an image "is clearly a reflection, a representation", (Coman, 2018), issues in the relationship can begin when partners have a certain image of how the relationship should be, of who their partner is, an image that does not match the reality. Another possible cause might be the difficulty of communicating with the real life partner, while communication seems easier in virtual life, in the absence of adequate education of how to properly communicate in a couple, these people find it easier to communicate on social networks than in real life (Goian, 2010). Certain personality structures are also inclined to commit to risky behavior, as is the schizotypal personality, which seeks the risk of the unknown (Swami et al, 2021). Another explanation behind choosing a partner to engage in unfaithful behavior is the type of attachment. Studies by Abdi, Khoshkonesh, Porebrahim & Mohammadi (2012) and McDaniel et al (2017) state that unfaithful partners have an avoidant or anxious attachment rather than a secure one. Ferron, Lussier, Sabourin & Brassard (2016) explain how activation of the attachment system is associated with the desire for emotional and sexual experiences in the online environment, which satisfy the need for love that anxious individuals have.

The use of multiple social platforms can be a cause of distraction in romantic relationships, partners are often absorbed by the online environment, even when they are supposed to spend time together, which negatively affects the growth and development of the couple, leading to many conflicts (Arikewuyo, Efe-Ozad, Dambo, Abdulbaqi & Arikewuyo, 2020). Abbasi (2019) identifies how the perception of an ideal partner or a perfect relationship presented on social networks can lead the couple

members to negatively evaluate their partner or relationship. Regarding the use of dating applications, for those who are not alone, this can have a negative influence on their existing relationship, because this behaviour in the long-term can lead to sexual infidelity (Weiser et al, 2018). Alexopoulos, Timmermans & McNallie (2020) point out that people who have found their partner through a dating application (e.g. Tinder) may still be looking for someone, even though they are in an assumed relationship. In general, those who use a dating app, while in a relationship, are looking for casual sex and satisfying curiosity about the current dating market (Timmermans, De Caluwe & Alexopoulos, 2018). Clayton (2014) and Weiser et al. (2018) indicate that using applications such as Twitter, Facebook, Tinder and performing these activities during the time that partners should spend together, can have detrimental effects on romantic relationships (infidelity, separation, divorce). Also, with the increasing use of technology, there is a redefinition of the rules in a relationship, cybersex being a salient factor in the couple's decision to divorce (Hertlein, 2012). Nelson and Salawu (2017) show that social media addiction among couples increases with disclosure to someone other than the initial partner. The hypotheses underlying this paper are:

H1. Time spent on social networks positively predicts online infidelity.

H2. The interference of technology in everyday life positively predicts infidelity in the online environment.

2. Methodology

The study design is a non-experimental, correlational, and comparative one. In addition to observing differences between different categories of subjects, this correlational design provides a framework for measuring predictive relationships between variables, such as online infidelity, time spent online, and interference of technology in everyday life.

2.1. Participants

The study had 250 participants: 205 females (82%) and 45 males (18%), aged between 18 and 65 years (M = 27.47). 90 (36%) participants said they were married and 160 (64%) said they were in a relationship. 140 (56%) had higher education, 75 (30%) secondary education, and 35 (14%) postgraduate studies. 108 (43.20%) had been in a relationship over five years, 34 (13.60%) had a relationship lasting between 3-5 years, 56 (22.40%) had a relationship lasting between 1 -3 years, 18 (7.20%) had a relationship lasting between 6 months - 1 year and 34 (13.60)% had a relationship that lasted less than six months. 168 (67.20%) are from urban areas and 82 (32.80%) from rural areas.

2.2. Research tools

Online infidelity. The Social Media Infidelity-Related Behaviour (SMIRB) scale (McDaniel et al, 2017), which contains seven statements, was used to measure this concept. The study by McDaniel et al (2017) reports a good internal consistency of the

scale (Alpha Cronbach = .90, for women and .85, for men). In the present research, the scale's internal consistency was also good (Alpha Cronbach = .90)

Technology interference in daily life. The Technology Interference in Life Examples Scale (TILES; McDaniel and Coyne, 2016) was used to evaluate this aspect. Good internal scale consistency (Alpha Cronbach = .87) is reported in the current study as well as in the original one (Alpha Cronbach = .85; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016).

Time spent on social networks. Participants completed the Social Networking Time Use Scale (SONTUS; Olufadi, 2016). This tool presents 29 items. The scale has good psychometric properties, the internal consistency being .92 (Alpha Cronbach = .92) and varying for subscales from .82 to .91 (Olufadi, 2016). The scale had good internal consistency (Alpha Cronbach = .93) in this study.

2.3. Procedure

The data were collected through a questionnaire using Google Forms. Before the participants filled in this form, they were assured of the confidentiality, the anonymity of the data. The time that the subjects allocated to complete the questionnaire was about 20-25 minutes. The research was disseminated exclusively online.

3. Results

The primary data collection, from the online environment were introduced in the SPSS program. Thus, the Statistical Package for Social Science was chosen because it offers the possibility to assess varied types of data about a wide range of topics (Coman & Netedu, 2011, p.130), including online infidelity. The central tendency indicators are reported according to the table below (See Table 1.)

Central tendency indicators for study variables   Table 1

Variable	M	SD
Online infidelity (SMIRB)	2.26	1.22
Technology interference in daily life (TILES)	2.92	1.74
Time spent on social networks (SONTUS)	12.57	3.88

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation

Hypothesis 1 suggests that time spent on social networks positively predicts infidelity in the online environment. The assumptions necessary to run a parametric statistical analysis were verified, and a significant positive correlation between the previously mentioned variables was reported (r = .263, p <.01). Therefore, simple linear regression was used, the results obtained (See Table 2) being reported as follows: time spent on social networks significantly and positively predicts infidelity in the online environment

(β = .263, p = .000), this variable explaining 6, 6% of the variant of infidelity in the online environment. The ANOVA test was statistically significant, so that: F (1,248) = 18,466, p <.01. Hypothesis 1 is statistically supported.

Coefficients for SONTUS constant   Table 2

Variable	Unstandardized coefficients		β	t
	B	SE B		
SONTUS	.026	.006	.263**	4.297

Note: **p <.01; SONTUS = time spent on social networks; R2 adjusted = .066

Hypothesis 2 mentions that the interference of technology in everyday life positively predicts infidelity in social media (when one increases, the other increases too). There is a direct association between the two. Following the verification and confirmation of the assumptions necessary for running a statistical analysis of parametric type, it was possible to observe a positive, significant correlation between variables (r = .499, p <.01). Following simple linear regression, the results obtained (see Table 3) were reported as follows: technology interference in everyday life explains 24.6% of the variance of participants' intention to engage in unfaithful behaviors and predicts significant and positive (β = .499, p = .000). ANOVA analysis was also significant: F (1,248) = 82,392, p <.01. Hypothesis 2 is statistically supported.

Coefficients for TILES constant   Table 3

Variable	Unstandardized coefficients		β	t
	B	SE B		
TILES	.108	.012	.499**	9.077

Note: **p <.01; TILES = Technology interference in daily life; R2 adjusted = .246

4. Discussion

This research aimed to identify variables that predict to greater extent infidelity in the online environment, as well as to compare some of them to see how they are reflected in the choice of people to engage in unfaithful behaviors in the online environment. The first hypothesis brings into question time spent on social networks as a predictor for engaging in unfaithful online behaviors (the longer a person stays in the virtual environment, the more likely it is to form an online relationship with someone other than the initial partner). Vishwakarma (2017) mentions that excess time spent on social networks leads to a lack of communication between partners, emotional distancing, inability to spend time with each other because they are busy with the online environment, and then to engagement in unfaithful behaviour. The second hypothesis

indicates the interference of technology in everyday life as a significant and positive predictor of online infidelity (the more partners use social networks when they should do certain activities and spend quality time together, the higher the predisposition of at least one of the partners to engage in unfaithful behavior in the online environment. A possible explanation in this regard is the study of Clayton (2014) who theorizes that if a person who is in a romantic relationship is very active on social networks, this activity occupying even the time they should give to the initial partner (eg send messages to others on Twitter, make some videos, send pictures, etc.), the use of social networks could lead to conflicts within the relationship, this aspect later leading to infidelity, separation or divorce.

5. Theoretical and practical implications, limitations

As practical implications, when scheduling psychotherapy couples who have experienced infidelity in the online environment, the therapist should work on assessing, setting rules and limits, processing emotions related to this behavior, as well as on the definition of the type of behavior that is considered by partners to be unfaithful (Cravens &Whiting, 2014). Another practical implication concerns the investigation of appropriate interventions for such situations. Regarding the theoretical implications concluded from the results obtained in this study, we can use different theoretical frameworks, predictive models to highlight different facets and consequences of online infidelity. One of the limitations of the study was the lack of tools to measure the tendency of participants to give socially desirable answers or answers that do not reflect reality as it is, but a projected reality of the relationship in which those people are (answers that reflect a relationship with a partner much better than it is).

6. Conclusions

This study indicates the existence of several predictors of online infidelity, an aspect that must be further investigated to find a model that explains and predicts as accurately as possible this variable. It is imperative that the predisposition of individuals to engage in unfaithful behaviour in the online environment be further analyzed, considering all the aspects necessary to understand the reasoning of people who resort to such behaviour how they can be prevented and what is the best way to intervene on them. Modern society is constantly evolving, people engaging in all kinds of behaviour that until now had been very little studied, online infidelity being one of them. Given that in the last year we have been connected more online to the people around us, than offline, we must find the solution through which evolution and access to technology do not alter the relationships we are engaged in, making us distant and cold with others.

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