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In the article, “The Rise of Digital Betrayal: How Technology Is Fueling Infidelity in Modern Relationships (Lux, 2023),” Lux address the rise of online infidelity, whether that be in the forms of sexing or emotional intimacy with people online, and the digital betrayal that is experienced in the relationship. The article goes into depth about what is digital infidelity, the signs of it happening, and coping mechanisms on how to deal with the betrayal. The article also talks about the psychological reasonings on digital infidelity, citing reasons such as “Novelty and Excitement, Anonymity, Validation and Self-esteem, and Emotional Dissatisfaction (Lux, 2023).” While not directly highlighted in the article, a commonality between all these reasons is insecurity and a lack of communication between partners in a relationship. People in relationships may feel that they are in an unsatisfactory relationship for many reasons and use that as a justification for them cheating. The article encompasses this idea by saying that “Digital infidelity is the new face of betrayal, whispering secrets through glowing screens, often unnoticed until it’s too late (Lux, 2023).”

This topic of online cheating is a concept worth examining because it is a phenomenon that is becoming relevant in relationship science. As we live in a world that is extremely digitized, online infidelity should be explored more to identify the root causes of why someone feels compelled to cheat on their partner with someone online. With Lux’s article mentioning reasons leaning more towards insecurity as a reason for why people commit online infidelity, it would be interesting to examine the effects of things such as attachment styles, relationship satisfaction levels, or aspects about technology literacy or levels of technology use, and whether that influences the likelihood of online affairs occurring. It would be interesting to look at the comparisons of offline and online infidelity as there as been a multitude of studies done on the psychology of offline cheating in relationship

While it is still a rising phenomenon in this age, some studies have been conducted with the purpose of understanding the reasons as to why online infidelity is being committed in relationships. In an article written by Aviram and Amichai-Hamburger, the researchers looked at whether “personality-related factors and relationship-related factors” are contributing reasons as to why people cheat with someone online (Aviram & Amichai-Hamburger, 2006). Specifically, the research studied factors of high narcissism and low levels of conscientiousness (for personality-related variables), conflicts between partners specifically based on aspects such as jealousy and sexual incompatibility (for relationship related variables), and whether participants have had experience of being in an online relationship before. The thought-process behind why these factors were looked at was because all of these factors (excluding the factor of experience of being in an online relationship), were cited as reasons for why people committed infidelity in real life (in-person relationships). The overall results of this study were that both personality and relationship related factors played a significant role in developing a high expectation of an internet relationship and committing online infidelity which was expected. However, one interesting aspect that was discovered through the research was that the strongest predictor of online infidelity was whether participants have had an experience of being in an online relationship in the past. So while the hypothesis that personality and relationship related factors influence whether one digitally cheats in their relationship is still supported, the factor of experience of being in an online relationship also plays a big part and is still needed for much further research.

Another article written by Guadagno & Sagarin (2010), also delves into the concept of online infidelity by comparing males and females in their jealousy levels of offline infidelity and whether that could be generalized to online infidelity. An interesting part of this study was that the researchers based their hypothesis of sex differences in regards to jealousy of

infidelity, on the evolutionary perspectives of parental investment in women and parental uncertainty in men. In regards to jealousy of conventional infidelity, men tend to feel more jealous when thinking about their partner having sex with another person, while women tend to feel more jealous when thinking about their partner creating an emotional attachment with another person. The study in this article builds on this information by focusing on whether “people feel as jealous when imagining their partners engaging in cybersex or forming a close emotional bond with an online partner as they would when imagining their partners engaging in a sexual or emotional relationship in an offline context (Guadagno & Sagarin, 2010).” Using a 2x2 factorial design to test this idea, the main findings of this study determined that this sex jealousy across both genders when it comes to infidelity also applies for online infidelity. Both men and women feel jealousy when they imagine their partners either having cybersex or creating an emotional attachment with a person online.

Both of these studies mentioned, looked at different aspects of online infidelity. The first article touches upon the reasons as to why one may commit online infidelity on their partner. The second article observes males and females perceptions of offline and online infidelity and investigates where this perception, mainly looking at jealousy, is consistent in both forms of infidelity. In relation to Lux’s article, the reasons stated as to why people tend to cheat online mirror the factors that were studied in Aviram and Amichai-Hamburger’s survey. However a difference that was mentioned in the results of Aviram and Amichai-Hamburger’s survey was that relationship satisfaction wasn’t as big of a factor as originally predicted. Lux’s article also discusses how gender doesn’t play a big factor in whether people digitally cheat, specifically saying that “...infidelity is not an issue confined to any one gender; it’s a human issue, one that we need to grapple with collectively.” This is partially reflected in the second article written by Guadagno & Sagarin, as they also looked at gender differences on online infidelity but in terms of their perceptions of the idea instead of

how likely they would commit it. Based on the studies that have been conducted so far, a factor that hasn't been widely studied in effect with online infidelity is attachment style. Using attachment style would be an interesting contribution to the existing literature because attachment styles reveal a lot about a partner's needs in a relationship and if a partner feels that they are lacking those needs, it could be a potential reason as to why they feel the need to cheat. Hence a research question that can be further explored is "How does insecure attachment styles influence the likelihood of engaging in online infidelity with gender being the moderator?"

For this experiment, the independent variable would be attachment style, the dependent variable would be engaging in online infidelity, and the moderator variable would be gender. The operational definition of insecure attachment styles would be through the Adult Attachment Scale Questionnaire (AASQ) by Hazan and Shaver (1987), which contains 18 items scored on a 5 point likert scale. The operational definition for engaging in online infidelity would be through flirtatious and sexually explicit behaviors from the participants. For this, an experimental design will be used with male participants who are married, since majority of the past literature have utilized married couples as their participants. Participants will be briefed with a cover story regarding communication patterns in romantic relationships in order for the true nature of the study to not be revealed to them. After selection, participants will first do a pre-survey which consists of demographic questions (name, age, sex, etc), questions from the AASQ, and questions regarding their marriage satisfaction. For this experiment, only participants with insecure attachment styles (anxiety and avoidant) will be observed. After they take the survey, participants will be randomly selected into a control group and treatment group. Each group will have a balanced amount of participants with avoidant and anxiety attachment styles. Participants will then engage in a conversation with an AI chatbot, that is portrayed as talking to a participant of the opposite gender. The control

group will be having a normal talk with the AI, having conversations about the weather, their current jobs, and overall non-romantic conversations. The treatment group will also have a similar conversation with the chatbot at first, but the conversation will gradually get more flirtatious and sexually explicit. Each conversation will last 15 minutes, with the option for participants to stop the conversation at any point during the experiment. After the conversations with the chatbots, all participants will take another debrief survey that asks them how invested they were in the chat and how much they would want or not want to continue it with the conversation, getting a grasp about their overall experience. At the end of the last survey, participants will be notified of the true nature of the study and will be notified that these results will not be disclosed to their partners, and all results will be kept confidential.

References

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