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Partners' perceptions and experiences of internet infidelity

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ABSTRACT

This study utilises an online survey (open and closed questions) to examine how those whose partners' have engaged in online affairs define and experience online infidelity. As with offline affairs, respondents were most likely to define sexual (vs. emotional) behaviours as infidelity (e.g. cybersex, exchanging sexual self-images, sharing sexual fantasies online). However, Thematic Analysis of the qualitative data identified how online behaviours and spaces are confusing, and that infidelity is defined more broadly and fluidly in the online context. This potentially explains why participants saw the internet as facilitating affairs. Findings are discussed in relation to existing literature and study limitations.

Key words:

Internet affairs, online infidelity, internet infidelity, perceptions, experiences

1. Introduction

The last decade has seen an increase in the empirical research investigating the different forms of internet infidelity and the effects these online activities have on relationships and families (see systematic reviews by Hertlein & Percy, 2006; Vossler, 2016). While the internet 'provides a unique environment for people to experience and learn about relationships and sexuality' (Whitty, 2008, p. 1837), it also offers increased opportunities for partners to engage in behaviours that may be considered unfaithful in the context of a committed relationship (Henline, Lamke & Howard, 2007). Although exact statistics on the prevalence of internet infidelity are not yet available, some researchers suggest that relationship issues related to problematic online behaviour have correspondingly become much more frequent (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008; Henline et al, 2007).

A good deal of the literature on internet infidelity so far has focussed on the perception and definition of internet infidelity. To examine attitudes towards and perceptions of internet infidelity many studies have employed hypothetical infidelity scenarios (including projective story completion tasks, e.g. Cravens & Whiting, 2015; Whitty 2005) and pre-set lists of behaviours (e.g. Nelson & Salawu, 2017; Hackathorn, 2009). The findings provided by these studies show that, as with offline infidelity, both emotional (e.g. online dating, online flirting) as well as sexual online behaviour (cybersex, exchanging sexual self-images, using online pornography) can be perceived as infidelity by relationship partners (Hertlein & Webster, 2008; Hertlein & Piercy, 2006; Whitty, 2003). However, the perceptions and experiences of the student samples used in many of these studies (e.g. Cravens & Whiting, 2015) are not representative of those in other age groups, and of partners in long-term relationships. Moreover, pre-set lists do not allow respondents to define for themselves what constitutes

internet infidelity, and research utilising hypothetical scenarios can only provide limited insight into how internet infidelity is perceived and defined in real situations. Further, there is considerable individual variability in how internet infidelity is defined – what is seen as acceptable or unacceptable can vary from person to person and situation to situation (Moller & Vossler, 2014; Shaugnessy, Byers & Thornton, 2011; Henline et al., 2007). Thus there are serious questions about the way perceptions and definitions of internet infidelity have been conceptualised and investigated in previous research. The first aim of this study was therefore to contribute to a more valid conceptualisation of this phenomenon by asking people with actual experience of internet infidelity openly about their perceptions/definitions of infidelity online.

Apart from the published literature on perceptions/definitions and on vulnerability factors for internet infidelity (e.g. Cooper, 2000, 2002; Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010; Hertlein & Blumer, 2014), there are a few studies that have focused on how online affairs are experienced, i.e. the actual behaviour and its impact (e.g. Mileham's (2007) ethnographic exploration of online infidelity in Internet chat rooms). Of these few publications, three studies have focussed on the experiences of partners at the receiving end of internet infidelity and provided evidence for the potentially negative effect of online affairs on couple and family relationships (Cavaglioni & Rashty, 2010; Cravens, Leckie & Whiting, 2013; Schneider, Weiss, & Samenow, 2012). However, these studies share several methodological limitations. The comparatively small sample sizes (Schneider et al., 2012) and the selective nature of the samples (e.g. participants recruited through specific websites for 'victims', Cavaglioni & Rashty, 2010) both limit the generalisability of the findings. The studies that collected data from internet websites also lack relevant information about the demographic characteristics of participants

(gender, age, etc.). Finally, research focused on the effects of one specific form of internet infidelity (e.g. Facebook activities, Cravens et al., 2013) might not yield to findings that are representative of other types of online cheating. The second aim of this study was therefore to extend the existing research and employ a broader approach (e.g. covering different types of online infidelity and utilising a substantive sample) to examine actual (versus hypothetical) experiences of internet infidelity in a British context. The UK focus was chosen as it can be assumed that there are differences in how infidelity is conceptualised in different cultures (Gerson, 2011; Scheinkman, 2005).

2. Method

2.1 Research design

An online survey methodology was adopted for this study as this method protects the anonymity of participants while facilitating open responding when the research topic is sensitive (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The study was approved by the institutional ethics committee and all participants completed an informed consent document.

2.2 Participants

Participants were recruited through the Open University's participant pool (students, alumni and members of the public who have signed up to volunteer to participate in psychological research) and advertising the study on university websites and through national media (newspapers). The quantitative part of the survey was completed by 282 people; 43 of these reported no personal experience of internet infidelity and were excluded from further analyses. Those who responded 'yes' to the question about personal experience of internet infidelity were then asked to "describe your experience with as much detail as possible".

Analysis of this data revealed that 79 people reported that they themselves had engaged in internet infidelity; this data is not included in the current analysis. The remaining sample consisted of 160 people who stated that their partner had engaged in internet infidelity. Seventy percent (N = 112) provided at least some responses to the open-ended questions about their experience of their partners' internet infidelity.

Analysis of the provided demographic data showed that the majority of the sample were white (92%), female (87%), heterosexual (81%) and lived in the UK (87%) and the mean reported age was 41 years old (range 18-73, SD: 12.04). The majority (61%) reported that they were in a committed relationship; the mean relationship length was 12.4 years (range 1-45 years).

2.3 Measures

To elicit participants' own perceptions and definitions of problematic online activities the survey started with an open free-text response ('What online behaviours or activities do you consider to be 'unfaithful' in the context of a committed relationship?'). This was followed by the Online Activity Checklist (OACL), specifically developed for this study. The OACL is a list of 21 online activities and behaviours that might be perceived as problematic by relationship partners. It builds on previous research, especially the list of nominations of 'unfaithful' online behaviours by participants in Henlein et al.'s (2007) study and the internet infidelity questionnaire constructed by Duncan-Morgan and Duncan (2007), and covers a broad range of online activities, from sexual activities online (cybersex) to getting emotionally involved with an online contact and secretly viewing sexual images (see Table 1). Participants were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert Scale for each activity in the list to two questions: 1) how

likely they would see this activity/behaviour as infidelity (1 'Definitely not infidelity' to 5 'Definitely infidelity') and 2) how distressed someone in a committed relationship might be if they found out their partner was doing this (1 'Not at all distressed' to 5 'Extremely distressed').

After the OACL, participants were asked to describe their experience of internet infidelity in a second open-response text box ('You have indicated that you have experienced internet infidelity yourself - Can you please describe your experience with as much detail as possible?'). Lastly participants were asked to provide some demographic information (e.g. sex, age, ethnicity, but no personally identifying information), as well as (in an additional validity check) to rate how important they felt monogamy is for a committed relationship.

2.4 Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis utilised Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis started with carefully reading and discussing the qualitative data from the two open questions (in total 16,787 words were written by participants in the two open text boxes). Subsequently, the second author engaged in a line-by-line coding of the data; codes, tied to sections of data, were then iteratively clustered to create potential sub-themes and major themes. This first-stage analysis was then reviewed by the first author to ensure that the sub-themes and major themes were accurately depicting the data.

3. Results

3.1 *Defining internet infidelity*

As depicted in Table 1, which shows the mean definition and distress scores for the 21 OACL items, there was a high level of agreement among participants that activities that could be classed as cybersex (e.g. contemporaneous, interactive, sexual engagement with another person online) constituted internet Infidelity, as did flirting or making any move to take online sexual contact into the ‘real’ world. Behaviours that indicated emotional involvement with an online other as well as behaviours suggestive of deceit, such as hiding in online contexts the fact one was in a relationship, were also highly likely to be rated as infidelity (albeit with slightly lower ratings than for the ‘cybersex’ activities).

3.2 Distress over online behaviours

Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale how distressed someone in a committed relationship might be if they found out their partner was engaging in the behaviours. In every case but one the distress ratings were higher than the infidelity ratings. This suggests that even if someone is not sure that an online behaviour is infidelity they predict that a person would be distressed if they discovered their partner engaged in this online behaviour.

Table 1: *Ratings on the Online Activity Checklist (OACL)*

Online activities	Infidelity		Distress	
	M	SD	M	SD
<i>‘Someone in a committed relationship....</i>				
<i>A. ...getting involved in sexual activities online’:</i>				
1. Witnessing in real time another person engaging in sexual acts and vice versa (e.g. via Skype)	4.47	.99	4.66	.76
2. Masturbating while chatting online with another person about sexual fantasies	4.70	.77	4.80	.58
3. Chatting explicitly about sexual fantasies e.g. that they want to engage in together	4.75	.71	4.83	.53

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4. Flirting with someone in an internet chat room	4.05	1.05	4.27	.81
<i>B. ...using the internet to exchange images with someone else':</i>				
5. Sharing sexual images of themselves (such as photographs of their genitalia or video clips of them taking off their clothes) with another person	4.74	.67	4.84	.57
6. Sharing with someone else pornographic images or video links	4.09	1.20	4.41	.92
7. Posting pictures of themselves looking sexy on social media or a chat-room forum	3.67	1.25	4.04	1.17
<i>C. ...getting emotionally involved with another person online':</i>				
8. Chatting/writing intimately with someone they met online about important emotional topics	3.91	1.16	4.13	1.00
9. Chatting/writing intimately with an old friend about important emotional topics	3.12	1.37	3.28	1.25
<i>D. ...hiding the fact that they are in a relationship online':</i>				
10. Being active online (e.g. in chat rooms, Secondlife) without ever revealing that they are in a committed relationship	3.89	1.21	3.89	1.14
11. Keeping the status 'single' on Facebook	3.69	1.26	3.90	1.11
<i>E. ...using social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) to meet up with other people':</i>				
12. Connecting with old sexual partners or old girl/boy friends	3.41	1.3	3.92	1.17
13. Linking up with random strangers	3.51	1.34	4.02	1.19
<i>F. ...spending a lot of their time with activities online':</i>				
14. Spending all their free time chatting to other people in chat rooms	3.00	1.27	3.76	1.11
15. Spending a lot of time on social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)	2.21	1.16	2.92	1.23
16. Engaging in an online world (e.g. on Secondlife) or online games in their freetime	2.04	1.07	2.76	1.23
<i>G. ...planning to and meeting online contacts in the 'real world':</i>				
17. Making plans to meet in the 'real world' someone they met through an internet chat room	4.09	1.14	4.36	.97
18. Talking and flirting face-to-face with someone they met through an internet chat room	4.46	.76	4.57	.77
<i>H. ...using the internet to secretly view sexual images':</i>				
19. Masturbating while looking at pornography	2.77	1.52	3.16	1.55
20. Looking at pornography without masturbating	2.44	1.43	2.75	1.58
21. Looking at websites with sex toys or lingerie (e.g. Victoria's Secret)	1.77	1.13	2.06	1.33

3.3 Qualitative analysis of free-text items

In the following section, data extracts are identified with the participant's numerical ID as well as in the participant's age and sex, such that ID#1, F-23 indicates that the extract comes from participant 1 who is a female aged 23. The analysis presented here focuses on two themes which extend empirical understanding of the unique aspects of internet as compared to face-to-face infidelity, in particular that participants perceived the online space to potentiate or encourage infidelity, in part because online behaviours and spaces create confusion about what 'counts' as infidelity.

3.4.1 Internet creates opportunity

I have a deep mistrust in the internet, and feel it massively facilitates infidelity. (ID#4, F-33)

In the data extract from Participant ID#4 above, the participant claims that the internet facilitates infidelity. Participants described contact that was text-based, audio-only and audio-visual; they also named a wide range of communication mediums including phone-based texting, internet-based audio and video services (e.g. Skype), email (e.g. yahoo, Hotmail, MSN), instant message and image sharing services (e.g. Twitter, Kik, WhatsApp, SnapChat), online social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Bebo) online local listings services (e.g. Craigslist), game, gaming or virtual world sites (Pictionary, World of Warcraft, Everquest, Uthervers, Second Life) as well as a host of dating sites, infidelity sites (e.g. Ashley Madison and Illicit Encounters) and pornography/escort sites. Participants additionally described a wide variety of ways in which partners intentionally sought out opportunities to be unfaithful, including the use of internet websites to access prostitutes to meet with face-to-face, using webcams to engage in simultaneous/real-time sexual engagement with another (sometimes for

payment), using sex chat rooms to have sexual conversations or flirt with others, creating accounts on dating sites or 'infidelity sites', using sex phone lines, engaging in phone sex, sexting, and sharing sexual self-images. The study data suggests that for anyone who intends to 'stray' there are manifold ways in which a relationship boundary may be crossed online. As one participant wrote, *"You end up with paranoia, because internet is such a vast place"* (ID#80, F-28).

While there were clear accounts in the data of what might be termed intentional infidelity, participant's accounts of their partner's involvement in internet infidelity also suggested that for many the affair did not begin with a deliberate act to seek sexual contact with another outside the relationship. For example, participants described affairs growing out of initially casual contacts with people met on social media sites e.g. Facebook, or through websites and forums joined for other purposes, or through engagement in online gaming, including in one case Pictionary. An example of this is the description from participant ID#236, F-56: *"My marriage wasn't going well. My now ex-husband reconnected with a girlfriend he had in his teenage years on the Friends Reunited website. I found this out when he left me for her."* In this (and other) descriptions, the infidelity story appears to have been begun by the ease of making contact with prior or new partners through the internet when a person either has a passing whim or is feeling vulnerable or *"down"* (ID#269, M-49).

In these narratives the internet is framed as making infidelity more likely even for those not actively seeking extra-dyadic involvement because it creates more opportunities for happenstance online contact. Thus participant ID#266 (F-31) described her partner beginning an affair almost by accident: *"When I questioned him about it he said he was confused*

because he was happy with our life and relationship. So basically a bit of online flirting turned more serious without him meaning for it is what I believe.” The notion of an ‘accidental affair’ is potentially questionable (this participant’s relationship ended and her ex-partner is now married to the person he flirted with online) but there is a clear sense in the data of many instances in which the internet made possible unfaithful behaviour that might not otherwise have been possible. This notion of the internet as creating a vulnerability to infidelity is captured by one participant:

I wonder where he would have gone with meeting his needs if there were no social media opportunities, I don't think the social media world created his infidelity, it must have always been there, the need to sexually pursue and be unfaithful, maybe without the opportunities offered these days, he would have kept a lid on it. (ID#111, F-48)

3.4.2 Internet creates confusion

Participants’ perception that the internet potentiates infidelity is potentially supported by the finding that online behaviours, spaces and identities are confusing for couples. The study findings suggest three ways in which internet Infidelity is confusing for those impacted by it. First, internet infidelity appears to create confusion is in terms of what is seen as ‘real’ infidelity. It is apparent in some of the data extracts above that couples can disagree about whether certain online behaviours do or do not constitute infidelity. For example participant ID#137 quoted above wrote about her and her partner’s arguments about this:

His reasoning is that's it's ok as he is never going to meet these people...that it's just fantasy. However it affected his real relationship as he never has time to spend as a

couple, and I'm constantly worried about him actually meeting up one day with someone online. He believes it is not being unfaithful as it's online and I believe it is. We are currently trying to understand each other and find a solution but I always worry about what is happening behind my back...the same as if he cheated with someone in the 'real world'.

The use of the word 'real' in the above data extract is significant; the word 'real' comes up repeatedly in the extracts to bolster claims that online behaviours do or do not constitute infidelity. This is illustrated in the two extracts below:

He admitted he knew it was basically cheating but insisted he would never actually be intimate with another in 'real life.' (ID#58, F-29)

Using a web cam to do that [engage in interactive sexual behaviour with online partner] it's also disgusting and it's no better than having a 'real' women in your own bed using your own hairbrush. (ID#80, F-28)

While in the first extract, the partner distinguishes his online behaviour from cheating in 'real life' in the second, the participant argues that her partner engaging sexually with another woman through a web cam is as bad as him bringing that woman into their couple bed, and allowing the woman to use her own hairbrush. The underlying question about whether virtual behaviours need to be treated as 'real' appears to be a key part of the confusion and distress that can be generated by internet behaviours that are classified as infidelity.

The second way that the internet creates confusion is in the way it blurs public and private/couple space, for example by allowing sexual interaction with a stranger to take place in the home shared with the partner, or communication with a secret lover to occur while a person is sitting next to their committed partner. As one participant said, seeing her partner *“frequently checking their phone”*:

makes me feel like my peace has been stolen in my own home. All activity is done quietly with no way of knowing what's been said or done even though it's right under my nose. (ID#170, F-46)

Other participants commented on how a partner’s online engagement, because it takes place in the couple home, directly interfered with their relationship. One person wrote angrily about how their partner would stay up *“until 3am talking to someone in a different time zone,”* but could not find *“the time to spend with your partner, at home with you all evening”* (ID#137, F-29). The sense is that there is something particularly unsettling about internet infidelity because it often occurs in what is supposed to be a protected couple/family space.

A third way in which internet infidelity appears to be confusing for partners is because the internet facilitates the creation of alternate identities which makes it hard to know who the partner really is. There were many examples in the data of partners who had falsified aspects of their identity in order to engage in internet infidelity, such as someone listing themselves as ‘single’ on an online dating website (ID#30, F-22) or a person who was parenting children with their partner presenting themselves as a single parent in online contexts (ID#139, F-47). In addition to making it easy to change factual details about oneself, participants suggested

that the internet also made it easy for partners to present better, more confident versions of themselves. As one participant wrote:

My ex-husband is inherently a very shy man, but online he is able to act much more confidently and attract the attention of other women. I strongly believe he would [not] have had so many affairs without the internet. (ID#4, F-33)

For some participants the disinhibitory aspect of the internet appeared to allow their partner to engage in behaviour that was disturbingly at odds with their non-virtual persona, such that one participant “found out my partner who was very genuine, gentle and caring, had a whole other online persona” with different forms of sexual contact with online others including under-age girls (ID#36, F, no age provided). Overall the differences between who the partner was in their home life versus online seemed to be both confusing and deeply distressing: “I discovered a whole different life on the computer that he had been living, after he left me for another woman” (ID#96, F-43). Participant ID#143 (F-59) wrote that discovering her husband of 20 plus years had had an online affair meant that she felt she did not know him at all: “It is beyond torturous to see and accept that the man you loved and married and trusted just cannot be found even though you see his body every day.”

4. Discussion

This study has provided data on the perceptions and experiences of those whose partners have engaged in internet infidelity. With much prior literature in the area focussed on young adult college populations and utilising hypothetical scenarios (e.g. Cravens & Whiting, 2015; Nelson & Salawu, 2017), the aim of this study was to extend the current research by

providing a substantive sample (N=160) of mature adults with long histories of being in a relationship (mean relationship length over 12 years) and actual personal experience of the phenomenon under study.

In the quantitative data, the mostly female (87%) participants were more likely to define sexual behaviours as infidelity than behaviours indicative of emotional engagement, in contradiction to a long tradition of evolutionary psychology research on jealousy which argues that while men are more concerned by sexual infidelity, women tend to be more worried by emotional infidelity (Hackathorn, 2009; though see Carpenter, 2012, for an opposing argument). Furthermore, and in line with prior research (Henlein et al., 2007), the quantitative ratings of distress potentially caused by problematic internet activities suggest that online activities (such as their partner 'spending all their free time chatting to other people in chat rooms,' OACL item 14) can evoke distress even if someone is not sure that the behaviour constitutes infidelity.

The rich qualitative data from participants who actually experienced infidelity (rather than responding to hypothetical scenarios) suggests that participants typically provided multi-faceted definitions of internet infidelity that included not only both sexual and emotional infidelity, but also the idea that infidelity is defined by secrecy, deceit and betrayal. As such, the study accords with the findings of Moller and Vossler (2014) that for those who experience it, infidelity is defined more broadly and fluidly (e.g. a range of definitions of infidelity can be seen as equally valid) than prior studies with pre-set lists of infidelity behaviour have suggested. The analysis also suggests that definitions are influenced by the

experience and perspective of the definer (in this study all participants being partners of someone who, by their report, engaged in an online affair).

Furthermore, the findings in the theme 'Internet creates confusion' suggests that the internet can create considerable confusion between relationship partner about what 'counts' as infidelity (with couples often disagreeing about whether certain online behaviours do/do not constitute infidelity). The suggestion emerging from the qualitative data that online behaviours, spaces and identities are confusing, and consequently destabilising to the couple relationship, because they make it harder to label online behaviours as infidelity, provides a potential rationale for why the participants saw the internet as potentiating infidelity. This perception is important because while to date there is a lack of research on the prevalence and frequency of internet infidelity in the population, a number of researchers have suggested that online affairs may be increasingly common (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008; Henline et al., 2007).

Some of the study findings on the experience of internet infidelity confirm prior research. For example, this study further confirms that the experience of online infidelity is as distressing and potentially damaging or relationship-ending as face-to-face infidelity (Jain & Sen, 2018). Other study findings however were contrary to prior research, such as the current finding that emotional infidelity was not rated as more distressing for partners than sexual infidelity behaviours (Buss et al., 1999; Henlein et al., 2007).

The qualitative analysis also pointed to new findings that are specific for infidelity online (compared to offline infidelity). For example, the findings suggest that many couple partners

struggle to know clearly whether online behaviours are 'real' infidelity, or virtual and thus not really infidelity. Secondly, the finding that the ubiquity of wireless devices means that online affairs happen in the couple space/home, echoing the specific privacy issues of 'cyberspace betrayal' discussed by Gerson (2011), suggests that online interactions potentially undermine the very notion that a defined couple/home/private territory exists. This can leave partners with a profound feeling of uneasiness as the privacy of their own home seems open to violation. Thirdly, the data suggests that the facility with which individuals engaging online can disguise aspects of their identities or relationship status, as well as the potential offered online to explore new behaviours/aspects of the self, creates confusion about the 'real' identities of the 'cheating' partner. The destabilisation of the partner identity can profoundly challenge the couple history and identity for the partner at the receiving end and aggravate their feelings of betrayal and loss; was the person who did these things online (as P143 said) the partner of 20 plus years or a stranger? As individuals struggle to find reasonable answers to these kind questions they may find it difficult to find closure and move on.

4.1 Limitations of the current study

One limitation of the study is the sample, which was majority female, white, heterosexual, with a mean age of 41, and thus not representative of the wider population. For example, for this group monogamy was important, with 93% saying it was 'important' or 'very important'. The British National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles survey found that in 2012 the number of men who responded that 'non-exclusivity in marriage' was 'always wrong' was 63% for men while for women it was 70% (Mercer et al. 2013); the sample of this study is thus negatively biased towards infidelity. In addition, the sample seems not representative of sub-populations with more relaxed attitudes towards monogamy such as younger adults or

sexual minorities who have potentially different attitudes towards monogamy and hence infidelity (Moors, Rubin, Matsick, Ziegler & Conley 2014). For example, a recent US study based on close to 9,000 young single adults found evidence for increasing acceptance of consensual non-monogamy in this population (Hauptert, Gesselman, Moors, Fisher & Garcia, 2016).

A second potential limitation concerns the questionnaire, the Online Activity Checklist, utilised in this study, which was new and whose psychometric properties and thus reliability and validity have not been statistically examined.

4.2 Clinical implications

There is evidence that issues arising from the use of digital technology, including internet infidelity, have become a common problem in relationship counselling and therapy practice (e.g. Cravens & Whiting, 2015; McArthur & Twist, 2017). Based on findings of this study, internet infidelity seems harder to define for relationship partners and can therefore be more confusing and unsettling for those impacted than face-to-face infidelity. These findings point to the need for practitioners to consider the specific aspects of this form of infidelity and adapt their therapeutic work accordingly when faced with clients presenting with this problem. For example, clinical assessment could routinely include questions about the (problematic) use of digital technologies and internet, and clinicians can help their clients to explore their perceptions and understandings of 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' online activities and establish relevant boundaries for their relationships. As a method to facilitate these boundary negotiations Cravens and Whiting (2015) suggest practitioners could encourage each partner to separately produce a list of online activities they feel are problematic and compare it to their partner's list.

4.3 Implications for future research

Despite the 'warnings' of a rise of problematic online behaviours, there is still no reliable data available on the prevalence of internet infidelity in the general public, and in different age and gender/sexual orientation groups. In order to examine the frequency, forms and impact of internet infidelity in the general public population-representative surveys are needed to fill this gap. In addition, future research should also investigate specific population groups, for example young people or different sexual orientation groups, with their potentially different understandings and practices around digital technology, relationships and online infidelity.

Another area that needs further research are the perspective and experiences of those who actively engage in online affairs. While most research so far has focussed on the experience of the partner at the receiving end (Shani & Swasti, 2018), Mileham (2007) was able to show that for some people online cheating seems to offer a safe way to live a form of 'electronic polygamy' while maintaining their monogamous primary relationships and not feeling they were betraying anyone ('It's not cheating ...it is all in your head', p.20). Future research could deepen the understanding of the motivations and mind-sets of partners who engage in internet infidelity.

Finally, while online affairs are now common problems in couple counselling and therapy practice, there is still a lack of systematic evaluation of internet infidelity treatment programs. The little published research focused on the treatment of internet infidelity is mainly concerned with US therapists' perceptions and experiences of their work with this issue. Jain and San (2018) call for 'researchers and therapists to work collaboratively to devise

the best treatment models for internet infidelity' (p. 40). There is a clear need to investigate how best to support therapeutically individuals and couples experiencing issues arising from internet infidelity.

5. Concluding remarks

Despite almost three decades of research in this field, this is the first study with a considerable sample size that directly focusses on the perceptions and experiences of those who have experienced online infidelity in 'real life' (vs. those who responded to hypothetical infidelity scenarios). Enabled by a mix-method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative data, the study findings provide a rich and complex picture of the unique aspects of internet as compared to face-to-face infidelity.

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