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Do you have anything to hide? Infidelity-related behaviors on social media sites and marital satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Social media provides one route to behaviors that may be potentially harmful to romantic relationships, such as communicating with alternative partners, which can sometimes create relationship conflict, breakups, or divorce. Limited empirical evidence exists concerning social media infidelity-related behaviors and marital relationships. This study examined whether married/cohabiting individuals are using social media sites to engage in online infidelity-related behaviors and to what extent this related to relationship satisfaction, ambivalence, and relational attachment characteristics as reported by 338 married/cohabiting individuals from 176 families. Only a small percentage of married/cohabiting couples reported engaging in social media infidelity-related behaviors; however, more engagement in infidelity-related behaviors on social media was significantly related to lower relationship satisfaction, higher relationship ambivalence, and greater attachment avoidance and anxiety in both women and men. Additionally, attachment anxiety and gender interacted with relationship satisfaction in predicting online infidelity-related behaviors when controlling for other variables. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

According to Pew statistics, 65% of American adults use social media, and this has risen substantially over the last decade (Perrin, 2015). Alongside this rapid growth, relationship researchers began investigating how social media is used within relationships, especially romantic relationships. Much of this research has portrayed social networking as a potential threat to existing romantic relationships, as it provides a vehicle for communicating with alternative partners through friend requests, commenting on others' posts or pictures, covert communication, or even engaging in cybersex (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble, Drouin, Aune, & Boller, 2015; Drouin, Miller, & Dibble, 2014; Drouin, Miller, & Dibble, 2015). Accordingly, researchers have shown that social media and/or the conflict and jealousy that arises from social media use is associated with relationship conflict, breakups, and even divorce (Clayton, 2014; Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013; Cravens, Leckie, & Whiting, 2013; Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014; Ridgway & Clayton, 2016; Valenzuela, Halpern, & Katz, 2014).

Although the empirical literature related to social media and relationships has expanded greatly over the past few years, much of this research has been conducted with young adults; research on problematic social networking behaviors within married couples is sparse. Although media sources report that Facebook has been cited in one third of U.S. divorces (Lupkin, 2012), only a limited number of studies have examined problematic online infidelity-related (IR) behaviors (e.g., engaging in cybersex, befriending romantic interests or attractive alternative partners) among couples. The few empirical studies that have examined IR behaviors have focused on accounts of those who found their partners cheating (Cravens et al., 2013) or characteristics of individuals who have sought extra-marital relationships via chat rooms (Dew, Brubaker, & Hays, 2006). Together, these studies suggest that online environments may provide a ripe venue for online IR behaviors. There is also some evidence that technology usage generally can interfere with relationships, potentially causing conflict and lower relationship satisfaction, even among married couples (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Roberts & David, 2016). Moreover, a recent study involving couples showed that a greater amount of social networking use (more specifically, Facebook maintenance behaviors) was related to lower levels of partner love (Northrup & Smith, 2016). In this

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exploratory study, we extended these inquiries to examine whether married/cohabiting individuals are using social networking to engage in online IR behaviors, and to what extent this relates to relationship satisfaction, ambivalence, and relational attachment characteristics. More specifically, our goals were to conceptualize and measure social media IR behaviors among primarily married couples, examine these behaviors as an outcome of relationship satisfaction and ambivalence, and examine whether attachment anxiety moderates the relationship between relationship satisfaction and ambivalence and engagement in social media IR behaviors.

1.1. Social networking usage and romantic relationships

A growing body of research has examined the potential negative effects of social media usage on romantic relationships. In a seminal study on the topic, Clayton et al. (2013) found that Facebook usage predicted negative relationship outcomes (e.g., cheating, breakup, and divorce), but that this association was mediated by Facebook-related conflict and moderated by relationship length. In other words, Facebook usage predicted negative relationship outcomes especially when there was conflict surrounding this usage, but only among those who had been in their relationships for three years or less. Clayton (2014) found similar results with regard to Twitter use: Higher usage was related to negative relationship outcomes, and this association was mediated by Twitter-use conflict. However, in this case, relationship length did not moderate the indirect effect of social media usage on negative relationship outcomes. Regardless of relationship length, those who used Twitter more often were more likely to have Twitter-related conflict, and this predicted negative relationship outcomes. More recently, Ridgway and Clayton (2016) extended this inquiry to yet another social networking venue and found that posting selfies on Instagram was related to Instagram-related conflict, which in turn was related to negative relationship outcomes. This link between social networking usage and negative relationship outcomes was also supported by a recent, national survey (Valenzuela et al., 2014). Valenzuela et al. (2014) found that Facebook penetration rate predicted higher rates of divorce across 43 U.S. states, even after controlling for other potential divorce factors (e.g., income and unemployment). Moreover, social networking use predicted lower marital quality, marital dissatisfaction, and marital trouble (Valenzuela et al., 2014).

Another avenue of research has focused more specifically on the potential sources of online and/or social-networking-related relationship conflict. For example, 920 married couples in Helsper and Whitty's (2010) study reported that falling in love, engaging in cybersex, flirting, and revealing personal details to other parties were the most agreed-upon online infidelity behaviors. More specific to social networking, Cravens et al. (2013) found the following Facebook-related infidelity behaviors most consistently reported: friending one's ex-partner, private messaging, commenting on attractive user's pictures, and posting an inaccurate relationship status. Additionally, other recent studies examined two potential sources of conflict (i.e., befriending romantic interests and attractive alternatives within Facebook friends lists) and their associations with relationship investment characteristics (Drouin et al., 2014, 2015). Drouin et al. (2014) found that the frequency of friending attractive alternatives during the relationship, but not simply the number of attractive alternatives contained in one's friends list, related to lower levels of relationship commitment. In a follow-up experiment, Drouin et al. (2015) found that Facebook friends lists served as memory primers for sexual and committed relationship alternatives: Those who used Facebook (as opposed to memory) to identify potential relationship partners identified more alternatives, specifically sexual alternatives.

Combined, these studies present empirical evidence that there are multiple avenues through which individuals can communicate with others online in ways that are perceived to be infidelity-related or problematic to relationships. More specifically, the elements of social network communication that are most consistently labeled as problematic include befriending past partners (or alternative partners), flirtation, secrecy, and engaging in deep or sexual conversations with others online. However, although these online behaviors have been identified as potential threats to fidelity and researchers have begun to link these behaviors to aspects of relationship investment, no known research has examined whether engagement in online IR behaviors is related to marital dissatisfaction or ambivalence.

1.2. Infidelity-related online behaviors and relationship outcomes

For decades, researchers have been exploring the role of relationship satisfaction in infidelity. Within cross-sectional studies, the results have been rather consistent: Relationship dissatisfaction is related to a range of IR behaviors, including both emotional and sexual extradyadic interactions (e.g., Drigotas, Safstrom, & Gentilia, 1999; Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988; Shaw, Rhoades, Allen, Stanley, & Markman, 2013; Whisman, Gordon, & Chatav, 2007). Meanwhile, relationship ambivalence, or the experience of both positive and negative sentiment about the same relationship (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998), has been little explored as a correlate of IR behaviors. Relationship ambivalence may develop in response to past relationship conflict or transgressions in the relationship, such as disagreements or acts of betrayal (Birditt, Miller, Fingerma, & Lefkowitz, 2009). These acts of betrayal could include suspicions or confirmations of a partner's infidelity, which has been shown to be predictive of one's own infidelity behaviors (Whisman et al., 2007). In sum, when individuals feel ambivalent about their committed partner for any reason, they may be more likely to engage in infidelity behaviors. Extending these findings to an online environment, we expected that both of these relationship characteristics—dissatisfaction and ambivalence—may be related to engagement in online IR behaviors. More specifically, we expected:

H1. *Those with lower levels of relationship satisfaction and higher levels of ambivalence would engage in more social media IR behaviors.*

Additionally, we wanted to explore attachment orientation as a predictor of engagement in social media IR behaviors. Attachment research was originally based on observations of infants' attachments to their caregivers (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978); however, a number of researchers in the last few decades have suggested that attachment characteristics influence adults' relationship interactions (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003; 2007; Dewall et al., 2011). According to these researchers, those who display secure attachment patterns are comfortable depending on others and having others depend on them, and they typically build close, intimate relationships with romantic partners. Meanwhile, those who display insecure attachment patterns exhibit high levels of attachment avoidance or attachment anxiety (Brennan et al., 1998).

Those with high levels of attachment avoidance often display an air of detachment and need for independence within their romantic relationships. In accordance with this, researchers have shown that those who are high in avoidance keep an emotional distance from their partners, and they are also more likely to engage in casual sex, where physical and emotional intimacy are not necessarily intertwined (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Schmitt, 2005).

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