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The 'Realness' of Cyber-cheating: Men and women's representations of unfaithful Internet relationships

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Abstract

This paper considers the deviant behaviour of Internet infidelity. Although a plethora of research has been conducted on offline infidelity and jealousy, to date, there has been very little written about Internet infidelity and jealousy associated with cyber-relationships. Given the potential problems that online infidelity might bring to a relationship, this area of research warrants some attention. This study drew from Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) story completion method in order to explore men and women's understandings of Internet infidelity. Two hundred and thirty-four participants wrote a story to a cue relating to Internet infidelity. While not all participants saw this as a real act of betrayal the majority did see this as not only real infidelity, but as also having as serious an impact on the couple as a traditional offline affair. The most important finding here was that emotional infidelity was given as much attention as sexual infidelity was. Moreover, similar gender differences found in studies on offline infidelity emerged in this research. These results present a way forward in our thinking about cyber-affairs.

Keywords: cyber-cheating, Internet infidelity, gender, story-completion task

Introduction

Currently, little is known about whether certain interactions that occur online are perceived by some as a threat to an offline romantic relationship. Shaw (1997) has suggested that "Internet infidelity is, of course, behaviourally different from other kinds of infidelity; however, the contributing factors and results are similar when we consider how it affects the way partners relate" (p.29). She did not, however, qualify how online and offline infidelities are behaviourally different. To investigate this question further, Whitty (2003b) surveyed people about their attitudes towards offline and Internet infidelity. Her study considered acts such as sexual intercourse, cybersex (describing the sexual act while typically masturbating at the same time), hot chatting (a type of erotic talk that moves beyond light-hearted flirting), emotional disclosure, and various types of pornography both online and offline. It is interesting to note, the research revealed that individuals do believe that some interactions that occur online are acts of betrayal. Some of these behaviours, such as cybersex, posed a greater threat than other behaviours, such as downloading pornography. Of further importance, the study found that there are separate components of infidelity that we need to consider, including sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity and pornography. This is consistent with previous research on offline infidelity which has purported that infidelity should not be reduced to simply sexual infidelity, but that mental exclusivity is also an important component of infidelity (Yarab & Rice Allgeier, 1998). However, what is unique to Whitty's (2003b) study is that the factor analysis she performed revealed that online acts of betrayal do not fall into a discrete category of their own. For example, sexual intercourse, hotchatting, and cybersex all combined to make one factor. Therefore, we might conclude from such a study that people hold similar attitudes towards online and offline infidelities.

The findings from Whitty's (2003b) study challenge the notion that acts that occur in cyberspace cannot have a 'real' impact on an individual's life. Perhaps this is because while there

are no physical bodies present online, this in turn does not mean that the action is 'unreal'. Instead, as Whitty (2003a) and Whitty and Carr (2003) have argued, Internet relationships are better understood if we focus on the reconstruction of the body online, which is imperative to the success of many online interpersonal interactions. There are a few more reasons why acts, such as cybersex and hot chatting might be considered as acts of betrayal. For instance, Yarab and Rice Allgeier (1998) claim that when considering sexual fantasies the greater the threat of the sexual fantasy to the relationship, the more likely the fantasy is considered to be unfaithful. It is probable that participants perceived that sexual acts such as cybersex and hot chatting were more of a threat than pornography, since individuals were more likely to meet face to face with their cyber-loves than they are with porn stars. A further explanation might be that whilst many sexual encounters do initiate online, it has been suggested that a large proportion of individuals continue these relationships offline (e.g., Whitty & Gavin, 2001). Hence, it is likely that some individuals see their partners' erotic interactions with another on the Internet as a 'real' threat to their relationship.

This current research is another step forward in trying to understand how people might experience Internet infidelity. Rather than ask participants directly about what they believed were acts of Internet betrayal, this study employed a qualitative method to investigate people's representations of Internet infidelity. Drawing from Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) story completion method, this paper presents data generated in response to a cue relating to Internet infidelity.

In addition to examining representations of Internet infidelity, the current study also intended to examine gender differences. This is important to consider given that some theorists have proposed that men and women have different attitudes toward infidelity. Taylor (1986) found that men tend to judge a husband's affair as more justifiable than a wife's affair. Sheppard, Nelson and Andreoli-Mathie (1995) found that male college students were more likely to rate infidelity as more acceptable than women rated infidelity. Paul and Galloway (1994) found in their sample of

undergraduate students, that women (52%) were much more likely than men (30%) to say they would end the relationship if their partner was unfaithful to them. However, such gender differences are not always supported. For instance, it has been established that men and women tend to assess their own extradyadic behaviour as more acceptable than that of their partner (Yarab, Sensibaugh & Rice Allgeier, 1998). Furthermore, researchers have revealed that individuals are more forgiving of extradyadic behaviours committed by members of their own gender compared to individuals of the opposite gender (Yarab, Rice Allgeier, & Sensibaugh, 1999).

In respect to what extradyadic behaviours cause more upset for each gender, women more than men tend to rate extradyadic emotional behaviour as more upsetting than extradyadic sexual behaviour (Harris & Christenfeld, 1996; Shackelford & Buss, 1996). However, it is also noteworthy that both men and women report extradyadic sexual behaviour to be more unacceptable and a greater betrayal than extradyadic emotional behaviour (Shackelford & Buss, 1996). Roscoe, Cavanaugh and Kennedy (1988) also identified gender differences in what participants considered to be violations of infidelity. In their study they asked participants to list what behaviours they believed constituted being unfaithful to a dating partner who is involved in a serious dating relationship. They found that men were more likely to state that a sexual encounter with a different partner was an exemplar of infidelity. In contrast, women were more likely to state that spending time with another and keeping secrets from a partner were acts of infidelity. Again, it should be noted that such gender differences are not always supported, which could possibly be down to the types of methodologies employed and the kinds of questions participants are asked (for example, one might respond differently to how jealous or upset they are compared to whether he/she perceives a particular behaviour to be an exemplar of infidelity).

The aim of this present study is to explore data generated in response to a cue relating to cyber-cheating. This paper questions whether individuals perceive cyber-cheating as having a real

impact on their offline relationships and if so what the effects might be. Furthermore, gender differences are examined and compared to previous research on offline infidelity.

Method

Participants

In total there were 234 participants in the final sample (eight were excluded from the final sample as they did not follow the instructions). One hundred and fifty-five of the participants were women (66%) with a mean age of 24.03 years ($SD = 8.63$) and 79 of the participants were men (34%) with a mean age of 25.00 years ($SD = 8.78$). The ages ranged from 17-57 years with an overall mean age of 24.36 years ($SD = 8.68$).

Materials

Participants were given one of two versions of a story-completion task based on the task devised by Kitzinger and Powell (1995). This type of 'projective test' was chosen for a number of reasons.

Projective techniques are advocated when the researcher suspects the existence of barriers to direct self-report: these might include the 'barrier of awareness' (people's lack of awareness of their own motives and attitudes) and the 'barrier of admissibility' (people's difficulty in admitting certain feelings). Projective techniques, by providing ambiguous stimulus material are supposed to create conditions under which the needs of the perceiver influence what is perceived, and people ascribe their own motivations, feelings and behaviours to other persons in the stimulus material, externalizing their own anxieties, concerns and actions through fantasy responses (Kitzinger and Powell, 1995; p. 348).

Both of these especially apply to cyber-cheating, given that individuals might not be fully aware of their attitudes towards this behaviour and that admission of such feelings or motives might be deemed as socially undesirable. In Kitlinger and Powell's (1995) study participants were asked to write a story to a cue story exercise which stated the following:

Version A: 'John and Claire have been going out for over a year. Then John realizes that Claire is seeing someone else...'

Version B: 'Claire and John have been going out for a year. Then Claire realizes that John is seeing someone else...'

In this current study, the instructions were slightly changed to read:

Version A: Mark and Jennifer have been going out for over a year. Then Mark realises that Jennifer has developed a relationship with someone else over the Internet...

Version B: Jennifer and Mark have been going out for over a year. Then Jennifer realises that Mark has developed a relationship with someone else over the Internet...

The term 'seeing' was substituted for *relationship* as people do not typically refer to any forms of relationships on the Internet as 'seeing' someone. The term *Internet* was explicitly used so that only Internet relationships could be explored. Writing to a cue story using the third person was maintained for a couple of reasons. It has been argued that using the third person allows one to reveal more socially undesirable information than using first-person cues and it allows the individual to distance themselves so as to not warrant or justify their own behaviour and motivations (Crawford, Kippax, Onxy, Gault & Benton, 1992; Whitty, 2002). As Crawford et al. (1992) have stated in respect to utilising the third person, "the subject reflects on herself/himself from the observer, and so is encouraged to describe rather than warrant" (p. 47).

In this study, Version A was completed by 86 women and 41 men, while Version B was completed by 69 women and 38 men.

Procedure

For this study, 3rd-year students who were enrolled in a psychology subject at The University of Western Sydney, Australia, were invited to participate in this study. As pointed out by Kitzinger and Power (1995) university students are particularly appropriate for research of this kind, as they are fairly literate and reasonably fluent writers, who are accustomed to requests to express their ideas in writing. The study was passed by the university ethics committee, students were assured anonymity and were not given credit for participating, nor were they penalised for not participating in the study. Nonetheless 100% of students agreed to participate.

A content analysis was performed on the data. The data were analysed considering whether forming a relationship on the Internet with someone other than one's offline partner is an act of betrayal, and if so why is this believed to be infidelity. Next, the data were examined for how this Internet interaction impacts on the offline relationship. Logistic regression was used to analyse the data, using the Back Wald procedure, which produces a Chi-square statistic. Gender and perpetrator were the predictor variables used in the analysis.

Results

Although Kitzinger and Powell (1995) found that 90% of their sample interpreted their cue story, which was developed in respect to offline infidelity, to be an act of sexual involvement, this was not the case in this current study. Instead, the stories produced for this study painted a more complex picture. While all of the participants understood this to be a dilemma about infidelity, some were divided as to whether the betrayer believed they were committing an act of infidelity, while

others wrote that the partner was not certain that they had been betrayed. Moreover, unlike Kitzinger and Powell's study, when participants interpreted the cue story as a story about sexual involvement, this was not necessary about a sexual relationships, but in many cases was exclusively an emotional involvement.

Of the sample, 51% wrote that the betrayer believed that they had been unfaithful, 27% wrote that the betrayer believed they had not been unfaithful, while 22% either did not represent the betrayer's point of view or were unclear. In contrast, 84% of the sample wrote that the partner felt that they had been betrayed, 9% wrote that they had not, while 7% did not represent their perspective or were unclear.

There were several reasons given in the stories for why the perpetrator or the aggrieved did not consider the Internet interaction as an act of infidelity. These are summarised in the Table 1 below, followed by some quotes to illustrate these themes.

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages for explanations given as to why the scenario was not an act of infidelity

Explanations for why the scenario was not an act of infidelity	Women Jenny unfaithful freq (%)	Men Jenny unfaithful freq (%)	Women Mark Unfaithful freq (%)	Men Mark Unfaithful freq (%)	χ^2
Just friends	10 (11.6%)	3 (7.3%)	6 (8.7%)	1 (2.6%)	not sig
Just flirtatious and fun	9 (10.5%)	1 (2.4%)	5 (7.2%)	4 (10.5%)	not sig
It's a computer – not real	4 (4.7%)	4 (9.8%)	6 (8.7%)	3 (7.9%)	not sig
Don't know the person – never plan to meet	4 (4.7%)	1 (2.4%)	5 (7.2%)	3 (7.9%)	not sig
No physical sex	1 (1.3%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (8.7%)	2 (5.3%)	4.64* Mark > Jenny
Person cheating with is of the same sex	2 (2.3%)	1 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	not sig

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The most common explanation given for why the scenario should not be considered an act of infidelity was that the interaction was 'just a friendship', as illustrated in the following extracts:

Jennifer explains to Mark that the relationship is not romantic & that they are only friends. (24FJ)
He did not think he had done anything wrong, after all this girl was only a friend who existed in text. (38FM)

Another explanation was that the interaction was 'merely flirtation or just a bit of fun', as illustrated below:

Jennifer on the other hand thinks she's doing nothing wrong. So what if she flirts a bit with someone who lives far away. (13FJ)

Mark at first brushes it off thinking that its "only the Internet, no harm in having fun." (12MM)

It is interesting to note, there were others who pointed out that this was not infidelity, as the relationship was with an object (computer) in virtual space, rather than with a real human being.

She tried to explain, that he was just a faithful companion and the only feeling she had were not real as this man was just words on a screen.... (55FJ)

When she confronts him about it one night over dinner, he denies everything saying that they were just friends. And that she should not take it so seriously and worry about it because it was not a real relationship, but a net relationship. That net relationships mean nothing because everyone lives in a virtual reality. (6FM)

There were others who emphasised that the interaction could not be considered an act of betrayal as the two had never met, nor did they intend to meet. Moreover, often the stories had the two cyber-lovers interacting from different countries, making it unlikely that they could potentially ever meet.

Jennifer retaliates and says how can I be having an affair, without even meeting this guy. (19FJ)
Mark tells her to calm down, & says that although he chats to her regularly he has never offered to meet her, & she hasn't suggested it either. (65FM)

There was a significant effect of perpetrator gender on the use of the explanation that 'it cannot be infidelity if there is not any physical sex occurring'. Both men and women were more likely to write this when Mark was the betrayer.

"No I'm not cheating. It's not like I'm bonking her anyway. (51FM)

Although Mark believes that because there was no physical contact, he has not cheated, Jen disagrees. (14MM)

However, Mark said that it is not cheating at all. He said he just enjoyed an imaginative relationship which is only made through computers. He said he never met the girl he had been seeing on the net and his point is that he doesn't think it is cheating unless he has a sexual relationship with someone else. (2FM)

Finally, there were three participants who explained that this was not an act of infidelity, but more sexual experimentation, as the cyber-affair was between two people of the same sex.

Finally he asks, "So how serious is it?" Jennifer replies, "Well its just really a bit of fun, you have nothing to worry about!" In fact, she goes on to say, "It's actually a female!!" ARRGHH Shock Horror!! (38FJ)

Although some of the stories (as demonstrated above) focused on explaining away why the online act was not an act of betrayal, many more took it for granted that this was a scenario about infidelity. Quite a number of the stories provided reasons for why this was an act of infidelity, either by admissions of guilt from the perpetrator or as justifications for why the aggrieved felt they had been betrayed. These are summarised in Table 2 below, followed by some quotes to illustrate these themes. It should also be noted that sometimes the perpetrator, the aggrieved or both were uncertain as to whether this was actually a form of cheating and discuss with each other why they think this might be an act of betrayal.

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages for explanations given as to why the scenario was an act of infidelity

Explanations for why the scenario was an act of infidelity	Women Jenny unfaithful	Men Jenny unfaithful	Women Mark Unfaithful	Men Mark Unfaithful	χ^2
	freq (%)	freq (%)	freq (%)	freq (%)	
Can't have a relationship with more than one person	19 (22.1%)	10 (24.3%)	20 (28.3%)	6 (15.8%)	not sig

Emotional infidelity	16 (18.6%)	2 (4.9%)	8 (11.6%)	1 (2.6%)	5.95* women>men
Sexual infidelity	9 (10.5%)	4 (9.8%)	10 (14.5%)	4 (10.5%)	not sig
Secret	4 (4.7%)	4 (9.8%)	8 (11.6%)	0 (0.0%)	not sig

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The most frequently stated reason for why this was an act of infidelity was that participants reasoned that one should not have a romantic relationship with more than one person. Sometimes this was because the online relationship was considered to be as real as the offline relationship, or that it had the same effect as being in another face-to-face relationship, or because the individual intended to meet up with the cyber-lover, as demonstrated in the exemplars below:

Jennifer can't live with Mark's betrayal and gives him an ultimatum – she is not prepared to 'share' him with someone else. (54FM)

One of the more interesting results obtained in the analysis was that emotional infidelity was stressed as much as sexual infidelity. Consistent with previous research on offline infidelity, women stressed the problems they had with emotional infidelity more than the men did. Emotional infidelity is perhaps best illustrated in the following extract:

"It is cheating." She said rather calmly.

"No I'm not cheating. It's not like I'm bonking her anyway. You're the one I'm with and like I said I have NO intentions of meeting her." He hopped into bed.

"It's 'emotional' cheating." She said getting annoyed.

"How so?" He asked, amusement showing in his eyes.

"Cheating isn't necessarily physical. That's one side of it ..." He pulled the sheets over him and rolled over.

"Well... I know you have not met her yet that's why, but I'm still a little annoyed, Mark." She sat on the edge of the bed.

"Don't be mad. You're the one I love. So how is it emotional cheating." He sat up.

“You’re keeping stuff from me. Relationships are about trust! How can I trust you if you keep stuff from me about the ‘Internet’ girl?” (51FM)

When participants discussed sexual infidelity, sometimes they referred to cybersex, and on other occasions they wrote about flirting online or hotchatting. Rarely did they refer to these participants having offline sex with their cyber-lovers. Examples of erotic encounters online that were believed to be acts of betrayal are provided below:

He sneaks behind her and sees that his girlfriend is in fact flirting with a man by the name of Buzzy. He screams at her and tells her that their relationship is over. She begs him to stay, but he tells her that all this time he feels like she has been cheating on him and she can never gain his trust again. (50FJ)

Mark’s obsession with the Internet is sure to cause a break-up in the relationship. Jennifer discovered, late one night after Mark had left his computer that he was partaking in “cyber-sex” with a woman by the name of “Buxan Blonde bombshell” Jennifer confronted Mark who admitted that he was having an online relationship with this woman and that she was satisfying his sexual fantasies. This caused a relationship breakdown between Jennifer and Mark. (4FM)

A further explanation given for why this cyber-act must be an act of betrayal is because it was kept a secret. Had the perpetrator been an innocent player he/she would not have concealed their Internet activities from their partner, as shown in the extracts below:

Mark follows this statement with why was he not informed of this relationship, and had to find out for himself. (33MJ)

Stories were also analysed considering the kind of impact the cyber-cheating had on the offline relationship. Sixty-five percent of the stories mentioned that the aggrieved had indeed been hurt or upset by this virtual encounter. As shown in Table 3 below, the Internet infidelity did have a real impact on the aggrieved offline relationship, including in many cases leading to a break up of the relationship.

Table 3: Frequencies and percentages for how the cyber-cheating affected the offline relationship

The impact the infidelity had on the relationships	Women Jenny unfaithful	Men Jenny unfaithful	Women Mark Unfaithful	Men Mark Unfaithful	χ^2

	freq (%)	freq (%)	freq (%)	freq (%)	
Aggrieved feels hurt/depressed/upset/anger	56 (65.1%)	20 (48.8%)	56 (81.2%)	20 (52.6%)	10.49** women > men
Break up	42 (48.8%)	17 (41.5%)	36 (52.2%)	12 (31.6%)	3.87* women > men
Loss of trust	34 (39.5%)	8 (19.5%)	44 (64.0%)	12 (31.6%)	13.91*** women > men 9.17** Mark>Jenny
Revenge	13 (15.1%)	3 (13.7%)	11 (15.9%)	7 (18.4%)	not sig
Betrayer feels hurt/depressed/upset/anger	16 (18.4%)	5 (12.2%)	7 (10.1%)	3 (7.9%)	not sig
Less time together	13 (15.1%)	2 (4.9%)	12 (17.4%)	3 (7.9%)	4.19* women > men
Shock	11 (12.8%)	5 (12.2%)	5 (7.2%)	3 (7.9%)	not sig
Sexually inadequate	7 (8.1%)	1 (2.4%)	1 (1.4%)	2 (5.3%)	not sig
Self-esteem	4 (4.7%)	0 (0%)	1 (1.4%)	3 (7.9%)	not sig

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

The most frequently reported impact on the offline relationship was that the aggrieved felt upset by the incident. Women were significantly more likely than men to write about the aggrieved being upset. Sometimes the aggrieved expressed deep hurt, while others were considerably angry about the betrayal, as demonstrated below:

Mark is shocked, upset & hurt. He feels betrayed by Jennifer that she does not view him as being important enough to confide in him. Marks' hurt quickly turns to anger. He becomes defensive to cover his hurt. He doesn't understand why he feels this way. (22FJ)

Mark is not happy with Jen. He says "Not happy Jen." (11MJ)

Of the sample, 46% wrote that the offline couple broke up as a consequence of this Internet affair. In some cases, the offline relationship was already on rocky grounds and the Internet affair was sought out because of the dissatisfaction with the relationship, and in other instances it was simply the cyber-affair which was the cause of the break-up. Women wrote about the couple breaking up more than the men did in their stories.

Next day, Jenni told him everything about the affair. She thought that coming clean will be the best option but she was wrong. Mark just ask her to leave the house and never coming back. She couldn't do anything and unable to say anything she packs her bags and left. (3FJ)

She breaks up with him, giving him no explanation, stalks him until he develops signs of paranoia then marries his best friend, who is a doctor and earns easily \$500,000 p.a. at minimum, and looks like a god. (24FM)

Of the sample, 42% wrote that the cyber-cheating lead to a loss of trust in the offline relationship. Women wrote this more than men and individuals wrote this more when Mark was the perpetrator.

From that day forth she began to question who was on the phone, who he stays out for drinks with, and who the girls are who he works with, Jennifer tried to guess his email password and checked his voicemail messages. Eventually it was mistrust, the belief of deceit and the obsession that ended the relationship. (43FM)

There were some interesting and often rather cruel ways that the aggrieved sought revenge. On occasion this involved logging on to pretend to be their partner in order to destroy the cyber-relationship, sometimes this involved getting even by having their own affairs, while others wrote about psychologically or physically harming their partner or the cyber-lover.

Jennifer then decides to play a little game... through a little bit of deception and assumed identity, she manages to assume the identity of Mark's lover when he is chatting and assumes the identity of Mark when his lover is online. Jennifer then convinces them to meet each other, assuming they both love each other Mark and his Internet lover agree... When Jennifer met the Internet lover she bludgeoned her to death with a keyboard, shoved a mouse up her arse and then replaced her head with a monitor. Transporting her body to the meeting with Mark was next. Mark walks in to find the defaced body, due to his shock Jennifer was able to capture him. Keeping him as a human punching bag, whenever she returned home after a bad day she would kick the shit out of him. She would never forget or allow herself to be betrayed, and Mark had no choice but to remember what he had done. (38MM)

Other effects on the offline relationship included: the perpetrator feeling upset by the affair and the impact it had on their partner, the cyber-affair meant that there was less time spent with their offline partner, the aggrieved was shocked when they learnt of the affair, the aggrieved felt sexually

inadequate after learning that their partner would prefer to have virtual sex with a stranger rather than themselves, and the aggrieved felt a loss of self-esteem after learning about the affair. Women wrote more than men did that the cyber-affair lead to less time spent with the aggrieved.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that when individuals are presented with a hypothetical scenario of cyber-cheating they do, in the main, consider this to be a real form of betrayal that can have just as serious an impact on a relationship as offline betrayal. Similar to Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) study, and other studies on offline infidelity (e.g., Feldman & Cauffman, 1999) the participants wrote that the aggrieved expressed upset and anger over the affair. Also, akin to Kitzinger and Powell's study were the revenge stories that were elicited. As with the previous researchers' work, the participants here wrote of seeking revenge by having their own affairs or by hurting, even murdering the perpetrator or the lover. Moreover, trust was broken as a consequence of the affair. However, what is perhaps the most significant indication that this was a real affair was the amount of participants who wrote that the couple broke up as a result of the affair.

Although the results from this study suggest that cyber-cheating can have a real impact on a relationship, it also needs to be recognised that some of the participants were not convinced that forming a virtual relationship is a real form of betrayal. Those who were not convinced stressed that the virtual relationship was not a threat as it was only fun and flirtatious and that the relationship could only be understood as a friendship. Some participants even went as far as saying that this is a relationship with an object rather than a person, while others wrote that if there was no intention of face to face contact then it can't be real betrayal. Perhaps this can be explained by Yarab and Rice Allgeier's (1998) research, which has found the greater the threat of a sexual fantasy the more likely the fantasy is considered to be an act of betrayal. If the relationship is depersonalised as not being

with a real person or if the person never intends to encounter this individual face-to-face then this could be perceived as a harmless sexual fantasy.

An important finding was the equal weighting given to emotional and sexual betrayal. Unlike previous studies on offline infidelity (e.g., Shackelford and Buss, 1996) and in contrast to Whitty's (2003b) study on Internet infidelity, the participants in this study did not consider sexual infidelity as having a more serious impact than emotional infidelity. Such a result suggests that cyber-affairs could create problems for an offline relationship for very different reasons than an offline affair might. This result has some important therapeutic implications and warrants more attention in future studies.

As with previous work on offline infidelity gender differences emerged in this study. Similar to past studies on offline betrayal (e.g., Cramer, Manning-Ryan, Johnson, Barbo, 2000; Shackelford & Buss, 1996), women in this study focused more on emotional betrayal more than the men did. Kitzinger and Powell (1995) also found that women emphasised the emotional components of the relationships and betrayal more than the men did. These researchers purported that women used emotion words in their stories more than men did. This result was also obtained in this current study where women were more likely than men were to write that the aggrieved had been hurt or upset by the cyber-affair.

In keeping with previous work on offline infidelity, the men and women in this study understood the impact the affair had on the couple differently. Past research has found that women are more likely to end a relationship or at least initiate the divorce if their partner is unfaithful (Amato & Previti, 2003; Paul & Galloway, 1994). Similarly, in the present study, women were more likely than the men were to write that the couple broke up as a consequence of the affair. Women were also more likely than men to discuss issues of trust being broken and this was also more the case when Jenny was the aggrieved in the scenario. This is possibly because, as Kitzinger and

Powell (1995) contend, women are more likely than men are to think and talk about the emotional aspects of a relationship and the emotional consequences of infidelity. It is also not surprising that the women in this study were more likely to emphasise the time and distancing from the relationship the infidelity caused. As with previous studies on offline infidelity, women are more likely to react negatively to potential loss of partner time and attention (Wiederman & Rice Allgeier, 1993).

To conclude, this study found that cyber-affairs could potentially create as serious an impact on a relationship as offline affairs. Moreover, men and women react similarly to cyber-affairs as they do to offline affairs. However, an important new finding revealed in this study is the equal importance given to emotional and sexual infidelity when we consider cyber-affairs. While it is difficult to confidently conclude that this is what actually occurs when couples are subject to cyber-affairs (as this study only considered a hypothetical situation), the results here do have some important therapeutic implications. Moreover, they highlight an urgent need to continue research into the area of cyber-cheating.

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