Justifications of Internet Infidelity in Romanian Women with Extra-Dyadic Affairs: A Qualitative Study Proposal

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Abstract: The rapid development of Internet and social networking services in the last decade have augmented the possibilities to engage in activities online that can be classified as infidelity, and introduced new challenges into the practice of couple and sex therapists. Thus, the rise in popularity of the Internet has led to an ever-increasing number of spouses meeting others, outside of their marriage Many of these relationships start off innocently and end after a short period of time. However, an alarming number develop into emotional and/or physical extramarital affairs (Glass, 2000). This phenomenon is referred to as Internet infidelity. We define Internet infidelity as using the Internet to take sexual energy of any sort–thoughts, feelings, and behaviors–outside of a committed sexual relationship in such a way that it damages the relationship. It is further exacerbated when one spouse pretends that this drain of energy will affect neither their partner nor the relationship, as long as it remains undiscovered. Although lustful thoughts and feelings outside of a marriage are not inherently harmful or wrong, acting on these feelings and/or hiding them devitalizes the relationship, compromises integrity, and co-opts the other partner's choices (Shaw, 1997). Due to the higher statistics of male Internet infidelity, the focus of previous studies has been on investigating the justifications for Internet infidelity in this gender group. On the other hand, since Internet marital infidelity is a complex issue (Maheu & Subotnik, 2001), a multifaceted phenomenon that includes both an emotional, a sexual (Abdi et al., 2012, Henline, Howard & Lamke, 2007) and a communicative component (Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007), it really affects every country's culture, people, and even families. To this end, this study aims at analyzing the justifications behind Internet infidelity in women with extra-marital relationships in the form of a qualitative study. This study is conducted through a qualitative research approach and by using the content analysis method. Participants include women referred to the counseling centers in the city of Galați. Purposive sampling will be used and continued until data saturation. Semi-structured interviews will be employed as the primary method of data collection. The data will be analyzed via qualitative content analysis and constant comparative analysis methods. After the examination and division of the basic concepts, a certain number of initial codes will be extracted from interviews. The categories will be created based on the codes following several reviews and summarizations on the basis of similarities. By the nature, these conceptual and abstract themes will be named in several

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categories. According to the literature review, these ones can vary from intrapersonal factors, marital conflicts, and sexual justifications, to anonymity, access, convenience, affordability, escape reasons (Young & Cooper, 2007). An important focus in this study will be on the factors affecting female Internet infidelity and its dimensions. These factors may also include intrapersonal factors, marital conflicts, sexual or communicative justifications. Our findings can help psychologists, family counselors, and planners in the field of the social sciences identify the efficient scopes and purposes.

Keywords: sexual or communicative justifications; intrapersonal factors; marital conflicts

Introduction

Internet marital infidelity is one of the factors threatening family structure and consequently the most fundamental sense, i.e. loss of trust or the sense of belonging. It also raises the fear of rejection among individuals. Moreover, Internet marital infidelity is considered as one of the threating factors affecting performance, stability, and the endurance of marital relationships as well as one of the main justification for divorce and the collapse of marriage (Mark, Janssen & Milhausen, 2011; Shackelford, Besser & Goetz, 2008). The justifications would be some behavioral elements such as improper emotional and sexual needs, opportunism, irresponsibility, and deliberate deception whose acceptance by those somehow involved in this issue is not so straightforward (Guerrero et al., 1998). Studies conducted on the justifications behind divorce suggest that extra-marital Internet affair has been the most important factor affecting the end of marriage (Tuttle & Davis, 2015). In other cases of divorce, research studies also show that one of the driving factors is Internet marital infidelity (Borst, 2015). South & Lloyd (1995) in a study reported that in one-thirds of all divorces in the United States; at least one spouse has been involved in extra-marital Internet affair. As well, 34 percent of men and 19 percent of women in the adult groups in the United States have reported involvement in Internet extra-marital relationships on one stage of their life.

Higher statistics of Internet infidelity in men has drawn many researchers to investigate the justifications for Internet infidelity and to identify the factors in this gender group. Brand et al. (2007), in an investigation on the prevalence rate of Internet infidelity in men and women, found that if the definition of Internet infidelity is not limited to sexual intercourse (sexting, pornography, chat-rooms, etc.), other cases are also taken into account. Furthermore, the findings of this study may reveal that women are more likely to be separated from their husbands after Internet infidelity and get married with the men involved (the men with whom they had illicit sexual intercourse, as sexting, pornography or chat-room). Researchers

concluded that the studies reporting higher Internet infidelity rates in men had some flaws in providing a broad and acceptable definition of Internet infidelity. Reduction of the difference in the rate of Internet infidelity between men and women is also revealed in other studies provided that the definition of marital Internet infidelity is considered broadly (Barta & Kiene, 2003; Buss et al., 1999). Hence, attention to the issue of female Internet infidelity and its role in posing familial and social problems are of utmost importance.

In addition, the justifications for Internet infidelity in women are different from those in men. There are several reasons behind female cyber-infidelity including lack of a warm and intimate relationship with their husband, women's history of debauchery, feeling of loneliness, individual factors, personality disorders, singlehood life, economic difficulties, diversity-seeking and lack of sexual satisfaction, husband's infidelity, adventure and jealousy, revenge, sexual adjustment, lack of attention and care to the woman by her husband, and further interests expressed by other men (Shackelford, Besser & Goetz, 2008; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Allen et al., 2008), or communicative reasons - ''intended in part to send a message to a former, current, or prospective romantic dyad partner'' (Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007).

Obviously, the justifications for Internet infidelity in men is investigated more than that in women in previous studies, while the major factors cited as the causes of infidelity are based on the results of studies in Western countries. On the other hand, since marital Internet infidelity is a phenomenon that is heavily influenced by the culture of each country, people, and even the family, the results of investigations conducted abroad cannot be fully extended to Romanian families (Moldavian ones, in particular). Given that the process of this study is based on the main research question: "What are the justifications for Internet infidelity in women with extra-marital affairs?", the best research method for this study is a method analyzing the nature of a phenomenon in its natural context along with its structure, process, and the factors affecting its formation. Accordingly, the present study is to analyze the justifications behind Internet infidelity in women with extra-marital affairs in the form of a qualitative study. Although the field of Internet infidelity research is still in its infancy, we believe that there are several issues that should be resolved as this body of knowledge continues to grow. The precious findings of this qualitative research will definitely serve to a better understanding of the theoretical framework of the Internet infidelity, and also a real source of inspiration for our psychometric Online Infidelity Causes Questionnaire, from the first study of the doctoral thesis.

Review of the Literature. Internet Infidelity and Its Justifications in Women's Cases

Underwood and Findlay (2004) suggest that Internet infidelity activities in women are based strongly on emotional intimacy justifications. Furthermore, Underwood and Findlay report that women engaging in Internet infidelity are gaining something not received in their primary relationship from the online relationship. Experiencing a strong emotional connection with one's Internet partner and not having that connection in one's primary relationship might contribute to limited discussions about problems in the primary relationship (Cooper et al., 2000). Cooper's (2002) "triple A" engine identifies three justifications of Internet infidelity that distinguish it, to some degree, from traditional infidelity. These three factors are accessibility, affordability, and anonymity. Accessibility refers to the access an individual has to the Internet. For example, the individual with only minimal access to the Internet will be less likely to engage in infidelity compared to someone with greater access to the Internet. Affordability refers to the cost of engaging in Internet infidelity. For a very small price, computer user can visit many sites and meet multiple potential sexual needs. In addition, people who might feel uncomfortable purchasing sexually charged material in stores could quickly download similar information in the privacy of their own home. Finally, anonymity comes with the ease with which one can establish an identity on the Internet (Cooper, 2002). In person, carrying on an affair means the other person gets to know who you are, can see you, and can potentially judge you. On the Internet, users can backspace, erase, and change what they say to promote a specific identity. For example, Cooper, Scherer, Boies, and Gordon (1999) reported that more than half of the respondents in their survey (61%) admitted to pretend to be a different age either occasionally or often. As Maheu and Subotnik (2001) describe it,

The Internet allows you to control your message, and, at the

same time, prevent the intrusion of reality. Bad breath, dirty

fingernails, or an irritating tendency to interrupt are irrelevant

in e-mail and chat rooms. Lovers are not distracted by

physical attributes, allowing them to listen with their inner

selves—their souls. (p. 27).

Other researchers have suggested that a fourth *A* should be added — the aspect of *approximation* (Ross & Kauth, 2003; Ross, Mansson, Daneback, & Tikkanen, 2005). Approximation means that the Internet provides a possibility of experimentation. This means that people are able to engage in (or fantasize about) sexual behaviors online that they might not normally do and that it is a close enough approximation to the real world to allow them to gain satisfaction from such behavior. Leiblum and Döring (2002) proposed a "triple C engine" that focuses on the interactive component of the Internet including communication, collaboration, and communities. Though most who participate in online sexual activities report that their activities do not have a negative impact on their lives, there are still cases in which these sexual pursuits can affect families and relationships (i.e., Carnes, 2003; Cooper, Morahan-Martin, Mathy, & Maheu, 2002; Schneider, 2000b). Barak and Fisher (2002), in citing the increasing trends in online infidelity, believe that cybersex relations "will become a major factor in deteriorating marital relations and, therefore, a cause of relationship distress and divorce" (p. 270). Schneider (2000a) interviewed 91 women and 3 men who had experienced cybersex in their couple relationships and inquired as to how cybersex affected their marriages and families. Schneider explored the effects of a spouse's online sexual behaviors on the emotions, codependent behaviors, and sexual relationship with their spouse. Results indicated that 22% of the respondents had separated or divorced as a result of the compulsive cybersex. In addition, two thirds of the couples reported that they lost interest in sex with their spouse. Schneider's (2000a) investigation can be critiqued in regard to the sample and conclusions drawn from it. In a sample of 91 women and 3 men, the findings should really only be generalized to women and their experiences or perceptions of the impact of Internet infidelity on their primary relationship rather than both men and women. Furthermore, the study was primarily about the impact of compulsive cybersex use on families, of which Internet infidelity is certainly included, but it was not the only focus. Future research might choose to focus strictly on the impact of Internet infidelity on couples and families, a different phenomenon with potentially different consequences.

Tafoya, and Spitzberg (2007) proposed an alternative approach by which to conceptualize Internet infidelity's justifications. They suggested that Internet infidelity may sometimes constitute a communicative act used as a justification for some type of message to a relational partner, and further, that this communicative infidelity is used strategically to achieve personal and/or relational goals. For example, infidelity may be used as a way to get attention from the partner, to make

the partner jealous, to communicate resentment, or to induce relational distance/termination (Tafoya & Spitzberg, 2007).

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research in the form of a content analysis method. Qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method which is used as a subjective interpretation of the content of the textual data. In this method, initial codes and themes are identified through the process of systematic classification. Content analysis is beyond the actual content extraction from textual data. Through this method, hidden themes and patterns can be revealed from the data content provided by the study participants (Elo et al., 2014). The statistical population includes all women referred to the counseling centers in the city of Galați. In this study, purposive sampling is used for the selection of participants until data saturation. The selection criteria for the participants in this study includes women aged between 20-70 years old, extra-marital relationships, no agreement about open relationships, lasting relationships more than one night, prolonged relationships with another person, and finally no major mental disorders. Prior to the interviews, the participants are evaluated through the short form of MMPI test software to examine their mental health. After the emergence of the first categories, the selection of the next participant is based on the question that how much she can help further clarify the emerging categories. This sampling procedure will be continued until data saturation. Following interviews with participants, data saturation will be reached in practice in this study and the initial categories will be also formed. Thus, a total of several female participants will be interviewed. The main method of data collection in this study is *a semi structured in-depth interview with open-ended questions*. This kind of interview is one of the most common ways of collecting data in qualitative research (Willig, 2013). The interview is also called general interview guide approach. The interview guide is pre-tested by using a pre-fabricated primary interview, some of the questions are rewritten, and other items are added to the interview. In this study, the interviewer first starts the interview with general questions after receiving the demographic data. Some of the key questions to the female participants include the following ones:

What is your definition of Internet extra-marital relationships?

What Internet relationships are considered extra-marital?

In what year of your marriage, did you get involved in this Internet affair?

In your opinion, what factors are effective in extra-marital Internet affairs?

How did you manage your marital differences?

What did you think about such Internet relationships before engaging in them?

What are the effective roles of individuals, events, or even institutions and organizations in the society in the prevalence of marital Internet infidelity?

What are your major stresses in your life?

What were your attractions and your spouse's to each other at the beginning of your marriage? The process collecting and analyzing data in order to investigate the justifications for Internet infidelity includes several steps: 1. The researcher gets familiar with the data, 2. the initial codes of the data are produced, 3. a search is done for mining the themes through a review of different codes extracted in previous steps, 4. a review is conducted for the themes and their re-comparisons with the data to ensure their accuracy, 5. themes are defined and named, and 6. the final report is prepared.

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, any reflections and notes related to the data are written down by the researcher and used for the next interviews. The method of data analysis is under the form of constant comparative analysis which is a way to increase the reliability and validity of the data. All statements and expressions of the participants are transcribed verbatim and completely, content analysis is performed on them, and then they are coded. Therefore, the researcher may be completely overwhelmed with data to gain a new understanding or insight. At first, the data analysis will start with repeated reading of texts for immersion in them and finding a quick overview. Then, the texts are read verbatim in order to extract the codes. This is a continuous process of extracting the codes to name them.

After extracting the concepts and codes from important sentences and paragraphs, these ones are grouped into categories based on the similarities and differences, and finally the categories are combined into a quantitative number of the main category based on the relationships between them. To facilitate the main steps of the study, the qualitative research software of MAXQDA Plus 2010 v10.4.16.1 Multilingual is used. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the research, several methods are used during the study. In this study, four criteria for the reliability of the study will be

employed including: acceptance, transferability, consistency, and verifiability (Silverman, 2013). One of the best ways to build credibility is long-term involvement in research. In this study, the researcher will be involved as a consultant in this field for a long time. Participant checking is also used to verify the accuracy of the extracted data and codes or modify them. To this end, after coding each interview, it will be given back to the female participants to ensure the integrity of the codes and their interpretations, and correct the codes that do not represent their views. External checking is also employed. To this end, parts of the interview transcriptions along with assigned codes and created categories are submitted to some observers to review the process of analysis and leave their comments regarding their accuracy. To determine the proportionality, the research findings are also shared with non-participant individuals, and they confirm their goodness of fit. Sampling techniques with maximum diversity which contribute to the fitness or transferability of the findings to others are also used in this study. For the verifiability and accountability of the research, the researcher accurately records and reports the research steps and processes for follow-up investigations. This study will be approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Alexandru Ioan Cuza, Iași. Prior to the investigation, the approval of the relevant authorities has to be obtained.

Results

After the examination and separation of the basic concepts, a number of initial codes is collected from the interviews. The categories are created based on the codes and repeated reviews and summarizations and according to the similarities. With more reviews and comparisons of categories, their internal meanings in the form of primary themes are identified. By nature, these themes are named conceptual and abstract. Accordingly, these themes bring about the justifications behind Internet infidelity. We expect these categories include: intrapersonal factors, marital

conflicts, sexual reasons, lack of a warm and intimate relationship with their husband, women's history of debauchery, feeling of loneliness, individual factors, personality disorders, singlehood life, economic difficulties, diversity-seeking and lack of sexual satisfaction, husband's infidelity, adventure and jealousy, revenge, sexual adjustment, lack of attention and care to the woman by her husband, and further interests expressed by other men (Shackelford, Besser & Goetz, 2008; Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Allen et al., 2008), or communicative reasons.

Since the research method is of content analysis type and there is no graphical model, only one conceptual model can be presented for the justifications as follows in Figure 1.
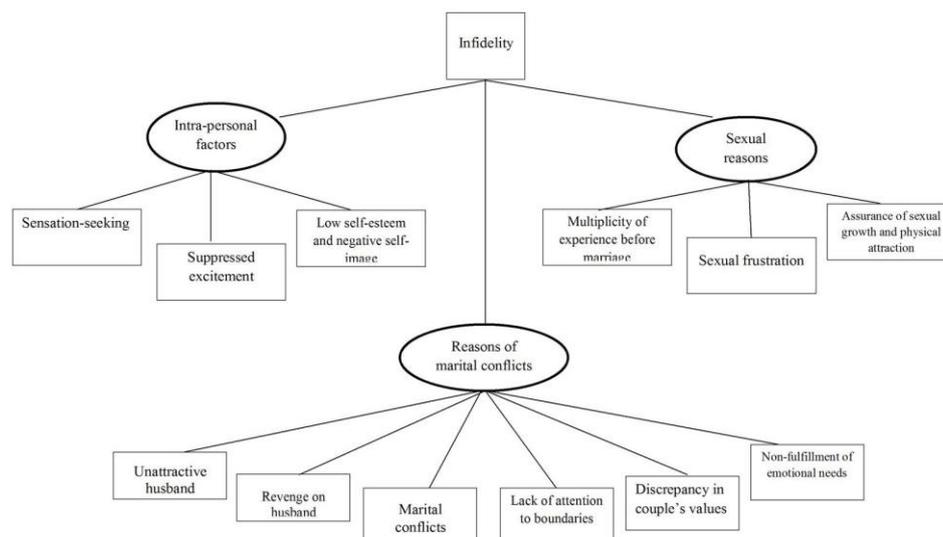

Figure 1. The Conceptual Model of Marital Internet Infidelity

Intrapersonal Factors

In this category, concepts emanating from individual characteristics such as personality traits or genetics of individuals may be provided. These factors can be classified into a series of subcategories: of sensation-seeking, low self-esteem and negative self-image, and suppressed excitement.

Sensation-Seeking

A sense of weariness and frustration with marital life due to Romanian mental characteristics is one of the issues that could be mentioned by the participants. It is possible for boredom to be accompanied by some experiences for some of the participants and a sense of curiosity among others. Women's experiences are related to psychological characteristics before marriage. It is also very important for the researcher to take into account the lack of experience of the female participants, due to the fact that throughout the literature, other participants had developed a strong sense of curiosity.

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Low Self-Esteem and Negative Self-Image

From the factors associated with individual characteristics, there are low self-esteem and negative self-image.

Suppressed Excitement

We expect that the interviewees mention themselves as mentally emotional people.

Marital Conflicts

Marital conflicts refer to the interactions and reactions between a woman and her husband. This category is composed of unfulfilled emotional needs, instability and difference in couple's values, lack of attention to boundaries, marital discord, revenge on the husband, and unattractive husband.

Non-Fulfillment of Emotional Needs

One of the most important expressions of the interviewees may become the non-fulfillment of emotional needs by their husbands. We expect our Moldavian female participants to state that:

"*We do not ever talk with each other*."

"*My wife was cheerful with others outside the house, but gloomy for me at home*."

"*Generally, I had forgotten myself in life with its own feelings and needs*."

Women's need of attention and care from their husbands is also mentioned in the literature as one of the most important emotional needs.

Discrepancy in Needs and Goals

The women in this study may maintain that their husbands do not have a good understanding of their need fulfillment. One of the basic demands of women is their husbands' honesty. In some cases, these demands are expressed in economic needs. In addition, discrepancy in goals as well as in mutual understanding by husbands is likely to be cited by women.

Lack of Attention to Boundaries

Failure to comply with privacy and settled boundaries in marital life may be another factor that could be seen in women as well as their spouses. In some cases, crossing the red line by a woman can be a similar reaction to the lack of boundaries in

relationships by his husband. Moreover, non-adherence to these boundaries may change and reduce susceptibility to these boundaries over time.

Marital Discord

Participants may express that they faced with a variety of differences in their marital life. These differences include permissions to others for intervention in marital life, husband's addiction, and discrepancy in couple's roles.

Revenge on the Husband

Husbands' annoying behaviors and reactions such as lack of affection, relationships with other women or talks about the relationships are considered as the factors that encourage women to react or take revenge on their husbands.

Unattractive Husband

Unattractive husband can be one of the factors affecting marital conflicts. Lack of attraction could be present from the beginning of the marriage or after marriage due to changes in couple's appearance.

Sexual Reasons

Factors related to the sexual needs of women are usually placed in this category. These factors are grouped into several sub-categories of curiosity for sexual experiences, sexual experiences before marriage, and sexual frustration.

Curiosity for Sexual Experiences

Some women can mention the examination of their sexual growth and getting ensured of the ability to have complete sexual intercourse as the main justifications behind their marital Internet infidelity.

Sexual Experiences before Marriage

Having sexual relationships and its continuation, willingly or unintentionally, after marriage is emphasized as one of the sub-categories of sexual reasons.

Sexual Frustration

Lack of sexual need fulfillment or complaints about sexual relationships with husband may be the other factors associated with extra-marital Internet affairs.

Discussions

To help people involved in extra-marital Internet relationships, there is a need to have a good understanding of the features, capabilities, and needs of couples because the occurrence of this traumatic event in life encounters couples with a major crisis. Therefore, the aim of this study is to better understand the factors contributing to infidelity in women. After coding and categorization, the content analysis of the interviews indicates that the justifications behind marital Internet infidelity can be grouped into several categories of intrapersonal factors (sensation-seeking, low self-esteem and negative self-image, and suppressed excitement), marital conflicts (unfulfilled emotional needs, instability and difference in couple's values, lack of attention to boundaries, marital discord, revenge on the husband, and unattractive husband), and sexual reasons (curiosity for sexual experiences, sexual experiences before marriage, and sexual frustration).

In line with this study, many other previous studies have also noted the importance of individual factors and motivations to have extra-marital Internet affairs (Shackelford, Besser & Goetz, 2008, Allen et al., 2008, Whisman, Gordon & Chatav, 2015). Atwood & Seifer (1997), in their study in the area of individual differences, found attitudes and beliefs of people about love, confidence-building, and problems regarding intimacy as the most important factors affecting the occurrence of extra-marital Internet relationships.

Other investigations have also suggested that some of the extra-marital Internet affairs originate from marital life frustration. In this regard, sensation-seeking as a reaction against frustration is considered as one of the most important factors in predicting Internet infidelity (Yeniceri & Kökdemir, 2006). It seems that the personality traits of sensation-seeking people are associated with the risk of sexual behaviors which are new, diverse, and impulsive. Accordingly, such individuals have more sexual partners and are inclined to high-risk sexual behaviors and permissive attitudes towards sex (Zuckerman, 2007). The spirit of adventure in some women along with non-responsiveness and in some cases their suppression by their husbands have been mentioned in other studies (Young et al., 2000). On the other hand, in order to maintain and strengthen their self-esteem and self-image, women involved in Internet infidelity are trying to demonstrate through their behavior that their self-esteem is high and there is no problem in this regard. These groups of people are seeking relationships outside the family system to prove themselves (Wiggins & Lederer, 1984).

Given that the present study is meant to be a qualitative one and it is not possible to find the contribution of each factor affecting the occurrence of Internet infidelity, it is recommended to employ quantitative methods in future studies and examine the proportion of each factor by itself. In addition, the development of educational-therapeutical packages along with our research to deal with the obstacles and causes damaging marital relationships is suggested to improve couples' relationships. Given the current situation in the Romanian society, the causes of infidelity in men needs are to be addressed in another qualitative research. Romanian society considers a special sanctity for family due to its rich culture, conduct and traditions and knows marital Internet infidelity as a detrimental and incorrect action especially if it is committed by women. Marital Internet infidelity due to external or personal reasons almost always brings about destructive consequences to the couples and subjects the entire family and even society to problems. Since marital Internet infidelity is a phenomenon strongly affected by culture, ethnicity, and even family in each country, the findings of international studies could not be completely generalized to Romanian families. As a whole, there is no study investigating all these factors and variables. In previous studies, all these factors and their effects on women were not examined but there were studies in which the variables were examined individually.

Ethical Approval

Before conducting the interviews, all the female participants of the study are informed that they are included in a research project for a PhD thesis and they are also assured regarding their anonymity. Following a full explanation of confidentiality regulations between the researcher and the interviewee, they will give their consents to participate in this research project and their identities will not be mentioned until the end of the investigation.

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