

Internet Infidelity: Exploration of Attitudes towards Partners Internet Behaviors

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Article information	Abstract
<p>Article history: Received: 25 Apr 2011 Accepted: 13 July 2011 Available online: 16 Oct 2012</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: Internet Internet infidelity Extramarital internet Relationships Attitudes Internet behaviors</p> <hr/> <p>*Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: zabihzadeh.a@gmail.com</p>	<p>Background: Today, the Internet has become a part of our everyday life and online communications have made it easy for people to develop interpersonal relationships. However, certain problems and difficulties have arisen from this issue. One of these problems, which have been prevalent among couples and families, is extramarital internet relationships or internet infidelity. The present research has been done to study people's attitudes towards this phenomenon.</p> <p>Materials and Methods: A 43-item Internet Infidelity Questionnaire (IIQ) was presented on a website designed for this purpose. 481 Iranian users who were members of Farsi language forums and chat rooms were selected through available community sampling and enrolled in the study. To analyze research data, descriptive statistics and the <i>t</i>-test were used.</p> <p>Results: The results showed that either women or men considered online sexual activities of their partners as traitorous compared with friendly and emotional activities in cyberspace. In addition, women in comparison with men had a more negative attitude towards their partners' internet activity (especially online sexual activities).</p> <p>Conclusion: This study expanded our understanding of the traditional concept of infidelity that had merely limited it to face-to-face sexual and emotional behavior. The results also showed that women had more negative attitudes towards such activities compared to men.</p> <p>Copyright © 2012 Zahedan University of Medical Sciences. All rights reserved.</p>

Introduction

Today, the internet has become part of our everyday lives and online relationships have caused people around the world to freely establish interpersonal relations with each other [1]. The internet is like a permanent party which enables people to come together in this space and communicate with each other, despite the limitations of real life [2]. Although the internet has been able to provide a global environment for its users worldwide to establish better relations, on the other hand, this kind of relationships has increased concern in the recent years [3] and has created specific problems due to expanding online relations [4]. One of the noticeable problems in this area for researchers is extramarital online relationships – in other words, internet infidelity – that involved a lot of couples [5]. The reports indicate that online relationships can cause marital discords, separation and even divorce among couples and families [6]. According to couples who had referred to therapists and counselors because of such relationship problems, these relations were as important as romantic and intimate relationships in the real world [7, 8]. Internet relationship is defined as a sexual and romantic relation that starts via online contact through the internet and continues by electronic communications via email, virtual communities such as chat rooms, interactive games, or news groups [6]. This connection can be made as a sustained relationship with a particular individual or different persons [9]. This relation is considered betrayal when the individual

establishes a secret romantic or sexual relation with an internet partner without his/her partner knowing so, despite having a committed relationship with someone in the real world. Previous studies had classified infidelity into three types of sexual, emotional, and internet. But internet infidelity can involve both components of real betrayal, i.e. sexual and emotional [10, 11]. Cooper believes that there are three main factors that stimulate online sexual desires in individuals and hence lead to internet attractiveness for performing sexual activity [12]. He named them the «triple a engine» which are as follows:

1) Availability: millions of websites are available 24 hours a day, throughout the week. This feature allows people to quickly communicate with other people at anytime and from anywhere to use different services of websites and easily act to find an emotional or sexual partner [2]; 2) Being frugal: since many forums and chat rooms are free, the cost of internet access and internet relations seems more advantageous and more reasonable compared to the cost of relations in the real world [13]; 3) Remaining incognito: the person can take part in online interactions without the fear of being identified by his/her spouse or others and can do what is not real. He/she can play different roles and deny all the facts about himself/herself [2]. Internet infidelity is different from face-to-face betrayal in terms of quality and behavior [14, 15]. But the secrecy and wrongness is common in both

infidelity and its consequences are the same as real betrayal [15].

To date, few studies have been performed about the individuals' attitude in terms of internet behavior and internet infidelity [16]. It seems that no specific study has been done about this concept in Iran yet. Therefore, in order to better understand internet infidelity, users' attitudes toward it should be studied. Since it is not exactly clear that what kind of behavior is considered as infidelity by people, the main question of this research was to know which internet activities of their partners will lead to a more negative attitude, and whether these attitudes will be different toward such activities, regarding to gender, age, marital status or not

Materials and Methods

The present study is a survey conducted on an Iranian sample of 605 internet users selected through available sampling during the first half of 2010. Out of this sample, 124 persons were excluded from the study due to partially filled questionnaires. The final sample for the study consisted of 481 internet users (255 male and 226 female) between the ages of 18 to 65 with a mean age of 8.5 ± 1.27 . The subjects of the study were informedly enrolled in this study, after being presented the research purpose and ensuring that their information would be confidential.

The Internet Infidelity Questionnaire (IIQ) is 43-item scale that measures people's attitudes towards their partners' internet behaviors on a 6-grade Likert's scale, scored from 1 (no infidelity) to 6 (highest infidelity). The questionnaire consists of three main components which are: friendly activities, emotional activities, and sexual activities. The factor loading for each of the three components of the study was calculated as 29.11, 21.98, and 14.79, respectively that explained 65.89 of the common variance, at total. Also, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for these three factors were 0.95, 0.89, and 0.90, respectively, and Cronbach's alpha of the total test was 0.91. Each question of the three components considered multiple internet behaviors, such as chatting, romantic and sexual talks in virtual space, and sharing personal information with other internet users in virtual space.

The questionnaire was first translated into Farsi by the authors, then after confirming the correctness of the translation and the simplicity of the items for reading and comprehension by 7 professors of psychology and counseling, the final Farsi questionnaire (including 43 items) for later analysis was placed on a website designed for this purpose. Then the website address was sent to the internet users who were members of the Iranian forums and chat rooms, along with a brief message about the research purpose. After completion of the questionnaire, users' answers were sent to a different internet address. In the present study, participants were asked to imagine what attitude they would have toward his/her action if their partner covertly performed each of the activities contained in the questionnaire. They should show their attitude on a scale of 1 (no infidelity) to 6 (highest

infidelity) scores. Thus, a high score on this scale indicated negative attitudes toward the partner's internet behavior.

To descriptively analyze the data, descriptive statistics indices such as frequency, mean, and standard deviation, and to inferentially analyze the data, the *t*-test were used. Finally, all the data were fed into SPSS-18 software for statistical analysis.

Results

Of the studied individuals, 226 were male and 255 were female; 107 had a diploma degree, 293 a bachelor's degree, and 81 a master's degree or higher. In terms of marital status, 355 were single, 101 were married, and 25 were divorced. The correlation level between the three factors of IIQ questionnaire is shown in table 1. In this study, the correlation between all factors was high.

Table 1. The correlation between the components of the IIQ questionnaire

	Friendly activities	Emotional activities	Sexual activities
Friendly activities	-	0.619**	0.586**
Emotional activities	-	-	0.645**
Sexual activities	-	-	-

** $p < 0.01$

To evaluate users' answers, regarding their demographic information, the *t*-test was used in this study. The means of all three factors of this questionnaire in this research were higher in women than men, and this difference was significant (Table 2). This issue was due to more negative attitudes of women toward internet activities of their partners than men. As shown in previous studies, women consider more extensive areas of internet behaviors as their partner's infidelity compared to men.

Table 2. The *t*-test for a comparison of three Internet infidelity in women and men

Components	Gender	Mean±SD	<i>p</i> -Value
Friendly Activities	Male	4753.2±11039.1	0.046
	Female	7416.2±22078.1	
Emotional Activities	Male	3469.4±28473.1	0.039
	Female	6059.4±13406.1	
Sexual activities	Male	4700.4±17208.1	0.0001
	Female	8286.4±05637.1	

Also, according to the results obtained in this study, the mean of the third factor compared to first and second factors was higher in both men and women. This indicates that the individuals had more negative attitude to internet sexual activities than internet emotional and friendly activities on their partner's behalf (Table 3).

Table 3. The *t*-test for a comparison of the mean of the three factors

Components	Mean±SD	<i>p</i> -Value
Friendly activities	16.1±60.2	0.0001
Emotional activities	2.1±4.47	
Friendly activities	16.1±60.2	
Sexual activities	11.1±64.4	0.031
Emotional activities	20.1±47.4	
Sexual activities	11.1±64.4	

In this study, no significant differences were found between the age, marital status, and education level of the participants and their attitude towards internet infidelity behaviors. But according to the results of this study, men had averagely more internet activity compared to women throughout the week, and this difference was also significant (Table 4).

Table 4. A comparison of the mean weekly time of internet use for women and men

Gender	Mean±SD	p-Value
Male	16.93±12.44	0.028
Female	12.71±9.65	

Discussion

The results of this study indicated significant differences between all three factors of the questionnaire, in both males and females. In this study, women had more negative attitudes toward internet activities of their partners (especially internet sexual activities) compared to men. They also considered more extensive areas of internet behaviors as infidelity, in comparison to men. These findings are consistent with previous studies [14, 18, 19]. The results of this study revealed that the individuals have more negative attitude to internet sexual activities of their partner than online emotional and friendly activities. This is consistent with some of the previous research [19, 20]. The results of this study also showed that, on average, men compared with women had a greater role in internet activity. This result is also consistent with previous studies [3, 5, 19, 21].

Perhaps one of the reasons why men accept internet behaviors more than women is that they have a greater role in such activities. This is because, as previous studies had also indicated, individuals involved in internet activities have a more open view to such activities [3]. However, since few studies have been performed in this regard, future studies should identify and investigate further the causes of men's roles in internet activities because they have more open views to internet activities in comparison to women. In addition, there was no significant difference found between the age, marital status, and education level of the participants with their attitudes toward internet behaviors. Alge reached to the same conclusion during his study on the attitudes of Lithuanian people towards this phenomenon [20]. Although some studies suggested that young people had more negative attitudes toward internet activities compared to aged individuals [19], other studies believed that young people had more open views to such activities because they had grown up with the internet [11]. Therefore, a study of viewpoint differences among people of all ages toward such behaviors is expected from future investigations.

The findings of this study should be interpreted according to its limitations. Since married samples were better indicators for evaluating the attitude toward infidelity of partners and the majority of participants in this study were single, the obtained results cannot be generalized to the entire married society, because the

basis of questionnaire completion by single individuals was solely based on "imagination" of a partner for the participant. Thus, future researches are expected to use more married samples in order to generalize the results. However, the results of our study showed that there was not a significant difference between a person's age and marital status with attitudes toward internet infidelity; nonetheless, due to the lack of adequate research evidence in this field, more studies must be conducted in future. On the other hand, in the present study, the people's reactions towards their own experiences of betrayal were not studied. Therefore, future researches are expected to do more research in this field. Future researches are also expected to deeply study the relationship between technology and infidelity because of increasing media and virtual interpersonal relations in the new age. In addition, due to the increasing spread of internet accessibility in the Iranian society, the performance of internet qualitative researches to investigate the causes of some couples trends toward such relationships, and also the study of interpersonal and intrapersonal variables related to internet infidelity seem essential in order to provide the required information through the media, newspapers, therapists, and counselors. Generally speaking, the results of this study have expanded our understanding of the traditional concept of infidelity (that simply restricted it to face-to-face sexual and emotional behavior), and showed that women have more negative attitudes toward such activities compared to men. The results of this study can be considered as one of the interesting elements in pre-marriage counseling programs for those couples who deal with the internet, one or both.

The results of this study and previous studies have expanded our understanding of the traditional concept of infidelity that simply restricted it to face-to-face sexual and emotional behavior. Since some people are involved in it due to their lack of awareness of the damaging effects of such relationships on real life relationships, evaluating individuals' attitudes toward such internet activity seems essential. Several studies were conducted in different societies and cultures to investigate people attitudes in this field. One can conclude from these results that the majority of people believe that having an internet relationship with someone outside of the marital relationship is as important as the actual relations and is considered infidelity; this result is also consistent with previous studies [8, 22]. We also found that some internet activities, although not inherently sexual or emotional, are considered infidelity by some people (like secretly sending pictures or personal information).

Previous studies have shown that many of these behaviors may be considered trivial and insignificant by the individual, but when the attitudes of the opposite sex toward these behaviors were evaluated, they were considered as infidelity. Thus, one of the reasons that some people are so engaged in such relations could be that their behaviors were not considered as betrayal, in their opinion [8, 11].

Therefore, according to the results of this study, one can realize the importance of study of the criteria and

obligations of the couples according to their internet interactions and activities before marital relation, for one of the partners in a marital relationship may have a pessimistic attitude towards some of the internet activities while the other side is involved in such activities without knowing about this issue.

Another point to be noted in this study is that the electronic questionnaire fundamentally has no difference with traditional (non-electronic) questionnaires, except that it should be done with electronic equipment. Meanwhile, this questionnaire also has some advantages and disadvantages. Speed, breadth, simplicity, low cost, editing, and optimal data processing are advantages of the electronic questionnaire compared with traditional printing methods. Also, due to the special nature of the internet, the participants are more prone to self-disclosure and honesty answering the questions, because of the "anonymity" factor. However, the lack of access to the internet for some groups of potential respondents or their

low literacy or computer skills could be considered as disadvantages of electronic surveys [17].

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Authors' Contributions

All authors had equal role in design, work, statistical analysis and manuscript writing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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