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Online Disclosure Boundaries and Marital Quality Among Facebook Users

Dominique M. Jones-King
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Walden University

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Walden University
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Abstract

Online Disclosure Boundaries and Marital Quality Among Facebook Users

by

Dominique Jones-King

MA, Norfolk State University, 2012

BA, Norfolk State University, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

Current marital and social media research has revealed that married couples are often unsuspecting of the negative marital ramifications associated with impulsive disclosure to Facebook friends, poor disclosure boundaries, and inappropriate online emotional affairs until the affair has been revealed and the emotional detachment has already incited a legal divorce. The purpose of this study was to examine the correlation, if any, between online intimate disclosure with another sex, online disclosure boundaries, and marital quality among Facebook users. The theoretical framework for this study was the social penetration theory. A quantitative, nonexperimental correlational research design was used. A total of 165 online questionnaires were collected via Facebook and the Walden Participant Pool. The findings revealed a statistically significant relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and marital quality. In line with current literature, there was a positive correlation between online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and marital quality. However, the relationship was not strong enough for online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) to be considered a significant contributor to the marital quality of heterosexual married Facebook users. The study findings may lead to positive social change by educating those in the field of psychology, particularly those who specialize in marriage and family therapy, on the importance of conceptualizing spouses' psychological response to the discovery of a Facebook affair as a multilayered, trauma-based clinical issue. Using study findings, counselors may be to develop interventions that help heterosexual married individuals to better navigate sharing of personal details on Facebook, which may improve their marital satisfaction.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Online disclosure of intimate relationship details on Facebook may be a factor in marital dissolution. Rates of marital dissolution are increasing among heterosexual married Facebook users who disclose intimate information with Facebook friends of another sex; research shows that these individuals may lack knowledge of the marital trauma that results from vague online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) or lack thereof (Carter, 2016). The increased citing of Facebook as the culprit to divorce is now garnering the attention of social psychology and couples and marriage researchers. Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017) noted that acts of online intimate disclosure with romantic alternatives via Facebook were the primary reported reason for divorce or legal separation. Non-peer-reviewed research also supports this trend. The DivorceOnline website's 2011 survey, for instance, reported a 13% increase since 2009, placing the divorce filings citing Facebook as the reason for separation at 33% (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017).

Previously, couples were inculcated with a definition of behaviors that constitute infidelity. Recent studies reflect that infidelity's historical linkage to extramarital sex has now been expanded to include off-line and online extramarital acts that are emotional in nature (i.e., intimate disclosure etc.) with someone other than one's legal spouse (Urooj et al., 2015). Existing literature defines emotional online infidelity as the adulterous partner's emotional involvement with their extradyadic partner via the internet (i.e., on social networking sites, dating sites, online chatrooms, etc.) that is seen by at least one spouse as "an unacceptable breach of their marital contract of faithfulness" (Hertlein &

Piercy, 2008, p. 484; see also Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014). However, in this study I focused exclusively on emotional online infidelity in the form of inappropriate intimate disclosure with Facebook friends of another sex using Facebook communication features.

Facebook has several features that can serve as avenues of intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity). These include the status updates feature to share current personal needs, feelings, family issues, marital woes, pictures with picture tagging options, sexual interests, and livestreaming of videos. Facebook also offers more personal communication features such as private messages, private videos, and audio calls through the users account (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Anis-ul-Haque & Anjum, 2015; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013). Facebook offers modern day spouses a convenient virtual community. However, there is no manual on how to navigate the process of building online friendships with users of another sex without divulging information that leads to marital ramifications.

According to researchers, the prevalence of disclosure that results in marital dissolution stems from spouses' incognizance regarding the bruises that their marital quality could sustain from undisciplined interactions with Facebook friends of another sex (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Cravens & Whiting, 2016). Such interactions have been a catalyst in the increase in the number of legal separations and divorces dating to the introduction of Facebook over a decade ago (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). The link between marital discord and Facebook use supported this investigation. In this study, I sought to determine the extent to which both online intimate disclosure with another sex

(online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) predict or show significant correlation with marital quality. I also examined the influence of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) as the mediator in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality in heterosexual married Facebook users.

Providing statistical evidence that enlightens couples on the influences of intimate disclosure with friends of another sex and the value of disclosure boundaries is critical in addressing and resolving the decline in the marital quality of married Facebook users. The findings of this study could provide insight on future interventions needed to minimize the continual incline of divorce filings citing infidelity in the form of extramarital behaviors and relationships via Facebook as the reasoning for filing a fault divorce. This study may promote positive social change by educating heterosexual spouses on the value of jointly implementing disclosure boundaries as a mechanism to merge Facebook into their lifestyle without allowing the use of the site to cause detrimental effects on their psychological well-being and quality of their off-line marriage.

This study can promote positive social change by increasing awareness of marital issues related to poor disclosure boundaries and unspecified online behaviors that has been founded to constitute emotional online infidelity in current social media and marital literature. Additionally, social change is also possible by providing practitioners in the field of psychology, particularly those who specialize in marriage and family therapy, with current research on the prevalence of Facebook intrusion as a clinical issue, its

symptoms and presentation, and how it has been shown to affect the well-being of marriages (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Smith, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013). In this chapter, I provide an overview of the study, including background information, the problem and purpose of the study, research questions (RQs) and hypotheses, the theoretical framework, and the nature of the study. I also define key terms and discuss the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study.

Background

In a 2015 report of Pew Internet Research, Facebook is cited as the most used social networking site accounting for an estimated 72% of U.S. social media users. Facebook out-ranked three additional popular social media platforms by as much as 44%; Instagram accounted for an estimated 28% of U.S. social media users, and Twitter came in at 23% (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016). In current social media studies of marital conflicts, researchers have reported that Facebook is now used as a platform to organize affairs. What may seem like innocent attempts to keep in touch via Facebook often spirals into frequent communication with specific Facebook friends, then subsequent affairs (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016). This became evident in 2011 when the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers revealed that divorce cases citing Facebook use as the culprit has risen to 33%, with one of the primary reported issues being online emotional infidelity in the form of inappropriate messages to Facebook friends of another sex. The

13% increase from 2008 to 2011 was even more alarming (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Cravens et al., 2013).

Extradyadic behaviors with an emotional component (i.e., disclosing deeply intimate information, exchanging pictures, or engaging in frequent private communication via video chats or phone calls via Facebook) carry just as much negative weight as off-line infidelity (i.e., having sexual intercourse; dating or spending time together; and engaging in frequent communication via call, text, and email) on marriages (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2014, 2016; Smith, 2014; Urooj et al., 2015). The results of several marital studies have shown that the features of the Facebook social networking site often facilitates infidelity behaviors such as flirting with the use of emoticon and comments on friends statuses and pictures, disclosure of intimate information, sending private messages, posting an incorrect relationship status, and hot chatting, with one of the most consistently reported online infidelity behaviors being high disclosure of emotionally intimate information (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2014, 2016; Smith, 2014).

Current studies have reported that some couples often struggle with acknowledging specific interactions as extramarital behaviors until they have progressed to the point of divorce. Existing studies focusing on social media use and infidelity are limited, and the presentation of the behaviors is often misleading. In fact, they typically present as forms of disclosure that commonly occur in naturally forming relationships. However, several researchers have challenged this, specifying that the main component in identifying whether an online behavior or relationship constitutes inappropriate online

intimate disclosure (online emotional infidelity) is the level of secrecy maintained throughout the interactions. Examples of such behaviors would be spouses closing out of private chats when their partner walks in the room, deleting direct messages reflecting high disclosure of personal information, deleting records of private video or phone calls via Facebook, or pretending to be working on something else when engaging in Facebook infidelity behaviors (Anis-ul-Haque & Anjum, 2015; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2014, 2016).

Carter (2016) explained that married couples often operate their Facebook account with a vague understanding of effective netiquette use and the assumption that their partner shares their views on what is deemed appropriate and inappropriate communicative behaviors on Facebook (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens et al., 2013). The newly coined term *netiquette* is defined in current literature as social scripts constructed between couples such as spoken and unspoken expectations and rules regarding acceptable and unacceptable online behaviors and activities (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010). For the purposes of utilizing unambiguous language to describe this predictive variable, I referred to netiquette as online intimate disclosure boundaries throughout all subsequent chapters.

Zurbriggen et al. (2016) unveiled the underresearched privacy paradox of Facebook, highlighting that many users join the site and accept known and unknown Facebook friends unconcerned about how their personal and marital privacy may be at risk. Yet, lack of online intimate disclosure boundaries causes them to gradually expand on their intimate disclosure, ultimately violating their own privacy. Expanding on

Zurbriggen et al. (2016) findings, social media studies report that the initiative to implement online intimate disclosure boundaries was often triggered by threatening, intrusive experiences such as the discovery of inappropriate intimate disclosure with another sex. In contrast, the actual process to identify and define online disclosure boundaries is primarily influenced by cultural and societal norms held by both partners in the marriage (Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Zurbriggen et al. 2016). Furthermore, enforcing privacy through the use of online intimate disclosure boundaries has been found to aid the couple in refraining from excessively disclosing intimate information (i.e., marital woes, personal feelings, and personal desires, etc.) that jeopardizes their autonomy in the actions and decisions within their union. These online intimate disclosure boundaries place a barrier between their marriage and the influence of manipulation and negative encouragement from their Facebook friends (Zurbriggen et al. 2016).

Current marital and social networking correlational studies have reported data suggesting that Facebook use can diminish the quality of a marriage by providing communicative features that offer several means to engage in private, boundaryless communication with a plethora of online friends who could serve as potential romantic alternatives. This in turn, deflects time invested in the marriage and diminishes emotional dependence between spouses (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Smith, 2014). Moreover, correlational studies also report that there is a strong correlation between high marital quality and high commitment as both attributes of

marriage are healthy consequences of high relational dependence between spouses (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018).

In two studies published in 2018, one sole-authored and one coauthored with Alghamdi, Abbasi reported that low relational dependence arises as spouses become emotionally intimate and dependent upon their virtual connections via Facebook, gradually decreasing the level of commitment and quality of the marriage. Considering these findings, I presumed that the findings of Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017) and several other marital and online infidelity experts provided an accurate depiction of the extent to which marital quality is impacted by inappropriate disclosure and poor disclosure boundaries. Facebook intrusion, physical and emotional infidelity, and increase in romantic jealousy, low marital quality, low commitment levels, marital separation, and divorce are all highlighted in current marital research as the most prevalent consequential effects of high Facebook disclosure in married couples (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Smith, 2014).

This study was needed to expand upon the existing studies by providing statistical research to clarify the extent to which both online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity), and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) predict or show significant correlations with marital quality. Such correlations have not been demonstrated in previous studies utilizing a quantitative research method (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013). This study provides insight on the degree of mediation presented by online disclosure boundaries

(netiquette) in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality. This knowledge also clarifies the significance of the relationships in a manner that has not been presented before in existing correlational literature.

Problem Statement

Many Facebook users who are married lack sufficient knowledge to navigate the platform in a healthy manner. This lack of knowledge also extends to related academic research. Carter (2016) revealed that married couples often lack knowledge of the need to enforce online intimate disclosure boundaries to counteract inappropriate online emotional affairs that stem from impulsively confiding in Facebook friends about personal needs, family issues, marital woes, and sexual interests until the affair has been revealed and the emotional detachment has already incited a legal divorce. In agreement with Carter (2016), current marital and social media research highlight that minimal emphasis has been placed on the use of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) by heterosexual married Facebook users simply because little is known about the term or the benefits of utilizing such. Netiquette is defined as formal, mutually agreed-upon online verbal and nonverbal interaction rules specifying acceptable and unacceptable online behaviors when communicating with another sex outside of the marriage (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Carter, 2016). However, for the purpose of utilizing unambiguous language, in this study I referred to netiquette as online disclosure boundaries.

Helsper and Whitty's (2010) study remains the sole study in the field of marital quality with a focus on the relationship between online disclosure boundaries (netiquette)

and marital quality in internet users. Helsper and Whitty's study was the first to debut in marital and social media literature that examined whether partners within married couples shared similar views on acceptable and unacceptable online behaviors (netiquette). Consequently, their study reported favorable results, indicating that the highest percentage of agreement on netiquette and expectations between partners was found for those activities that are considered online infidelity behaviors to include intimate disclosure with another sex.

To my knowledge, there are no studies that provide statistical research that can be used to pinpoint the true correlations between online disclosure boundaries and marital quality. This was confirmed in several core studies highlighting the potential value of spouses implementing disclosure boundaries during their use of Facebook as Helsper and Whitty's (2010) study was the only reference used (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013). There are few studies that provide numerical data pinpointing the correlation between online intimate disclosure via Facebook and marital quality. It is critical that the forementioned gaps be addressed to provide married heterosexual individuals with the knowledge they need to combat the potential detriment imposed on the quality of their marriages by undisciplined Facebook disclosure.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the correlation, if any, between online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity), online disclosure boundaries (netiquette), and marital quality among Facebook users. This study also

examines the influence of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) as the mediator in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality among heterosexual married Facebook users. Such knowledge may provide psychologists, particularly those who specialize in marriage and family therapy, with statistical research and scholarly study that might optimize clinical interventions addressing online interactions that serve as breeding grounds for extramarital affairs. This study may yield knowledge that informs subsequent development of clinical interventions to facilitate the value of implementing disclosure boundaries as a means to defend the marital quality of couples who utilize Facebook and other social media platforms (Carter, 2016).

I used a quantitative, correlational research method to expand upon existing research by evaluating the significance of the relationships between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity), online disclosure boundaries (netiquette), and marital quality (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016). I also examined the influence of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) as the mediator in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality in heterosexual married Facebook users. This study included two predictive variables, online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette), as well as an outcome variable, marital quality.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

I used the Extradyadic Behavior Inventory (EDB; Luo et al., 2010), the Passive and Active Facebook Use Measure (PAUM; Gerson et al., 2017), and the Happily (N)ever After Survey (Finn et al., 2020) to measure the identified variables. The RQs and hypotheses were as follows:

RQ1: To what degree do the two predictive variables—intimate online disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette)—correlate with the marital quality (the outcome variable) of heterosexual married Facebook users?

RQ2: To what degree do online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) mediate the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality?

H₀1: Netiquette will not demonstrate a positive correlation with marital quality as measured by the PAUM.

H₁1: Netiquette will demonstrate a positive correlation with marital quality as measured by the PAUM.

H₀2: Online emotional infidelity will not demonstrate a negative correlation with marital quality as measured by the EDB.

H₁2: Online emotional infidelity will demonstrate a negative correlation with marital quality as measured by the EDB.

H₀3: Netiquette will not demonstrate a negative correlation with online emotional infidelity as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₁₃: Netiquette will demonstrate a negative correlation with online emotional infidelity as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₀₄: Netiquette will not mediate the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality.

*H*₁₄: Netiquette will mediate the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theoretical framework for this study was the social penetration theory. Psychologists Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor pioneered the social penetration theory in 1973, breaking new ground by focusing on the role of disclosure in the development of interpersonal relationships (Huang, 2016). The social penetration theory conceptualizes self-disclosure as the driving fuel structuring the dynamics of relationships progressing from superficial to more intimate, bonding stages (Cozby, 1973; Huang, 2016; Jiang et al., 2011). In relational research, self-disclosure is highlighted as the chief approach to relationship development. Self-disclosure is defined as any message about the self that involves expressing thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, opinions, and experiences and that a person voluntarily and intentionally communicates to another (Cozby, 1973 Huang, 2016). The terms *verbal accessibility* and *social accessibility* have been used interchangeably with the term *self-disclosure* in interpersonal relationship studies (Cozby, 1973).

Social penetration theory emphasizes the influence of recognition and interpretation of shared information on open verbal communication and nonverbal cues

throughout the process of interpersonal-relationship development (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Taylor (1968) emphasized the importance of understanding the concept of social penetration and interpersonal development as two separate contributing entities of social penetration theory. Social penetration focuses on reciprocal disclosure complimented by interpersonal behaviors between individuals navigating the stages of relationship development (Taylor, 1968). Expansive in nature, the fundamentals of interpersonal development play the role of the catalyst during the bonding stages as it focuses on the amount of interaction (breadth of penetration), the type of information disclosed, the frequency of contact per week, and the degree of intimacy (depth of penetration) during the exchange of information (Taylor, 1968).

The social penetration theory is well known for its use of the onion analogy to depict the organic transition of individuals progressing through the stages of disclosure and interaction. According to Huang (2016), Irwin Altman and Dalmis Taylor regarded the structure of the bonding and interpersonal developmental stages between individuals as identical to a multilayered onion. Similarly, it is the social penetration theory belief that individuals exuviate defensive layers to their inner self as they become more familiar with one another through voluntary, intentional disclosure. Self-disclosure plays the role of propulsion in the four-stage social penetration process of relational growth (Huang, 2016).

An additional facet of the social penetration theory is its emphasis on interpersonal reward/cost factors and how these influence the relational development process. A premise of social penetration theory is that the rate of progression through the

social penetration process is influenced by personality characteristics, situational determinants, and reward and costs factors of past, present, and anticipated future interactions, as determined by both individuals (Cozby, 1973). However, in this study, I focused primarily on the influence of the rewards and costs factors on the rate of development in interpersonal relationships and how these influence disclosure of intimate information, ultimately forming an emotional bond with the receiver. Huang (2016) clarified the structural benefits of the rewards and costs factors by explaining that both individuals' continual assessment of the potential consequences and rewards afforded by their relationship further shapes the foundation that sustains their bond. This affects the level of disclosure and overall relationship through the stages of social penetration.

The social penetration theory aligned with this study's objective to provide an in-depth understanding of how Facebook friendships initially ignited by superficial casual self-disclosure can progress to an emotionally bonded, psychologically dependent adulterous virtual relationship, maintained by disclosure of intimate information. I used the theory to provide insight on how the rewards of the bond encompassing this new emotionally charged extramarital online affair can override the benefits of the bond and commitment to the off-line partner. The aim was to clarify the basis of the decline of marital quality between the adulterous spouse and their off-line partner, who is now considered the injured spouse.

Nature of the Study

With the sole purpose of expanding upon the findings and recommendations of Helsper and Whitty (2010) as discussed in the previous sections, this study realigned its

focus to examine the extent to which both online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) predict or show significant correlation with marital quality. It was the researcher's objective to also examine the influence of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) as the mediator in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality in heterosexual married Facebook users.

After a thorough review of correlational literature and potential statistical methods (see Chapters 2 and 3), I concluded that a quantitative, nonexperimental correlational research method was the best fit to determine the significance between the predictor and outcome variables. Moreover, I determined through an analysis of the behaviors associated with each variable that performing a parametric test, such as a multiple regression analysis followed by a Sobel test, would be most applicable for generating definite results that better clarify the nature of relationships between the variables (see Warner, 2021). The multiple regression analysis analyzed online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 / online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (X_2 / netiquette) as predictor variables to determine their potential correlation with marital quality (Y), the outcome variable. A Sobel test was performed to further analyze the relationship between the variables, as it was anticipated that doing so would provide insight on the extent to which the effect of online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) on marital quality is reduced when online disclosure boundaries (mediator variable) is used.

Eligibility criteria for this study included that all participants must be active Facebook members, at least 18 years of age, and have been legally married or in a committed heterosexual relationship for at least 1 year. It was also required that participants be able to fluently read and comprehend the English language. The targeted participant goal was to obtain 100 participants. Nonprobability sampling techniques such as opportunistic sampling and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants for this study.

I used snowball sampling because researchers have reported success in utilizing Facebook as a recruitment method in survey research on attitudes and behaviors among diverse adult age groups (Pedersen & Kurz, 2017). Researchers further reported that utilizing snowball sampling via Facebook has generated adequate samples in brief periods of time, was cost-effective, and provided an adequate way to locate participants for follow-up research (Pedersen & Kurz, 2017). Participants were recruited through the Godly Marriages, the Church on Sunday, Therapy on Monday, and other relevant Facebook social groups. Those Facebook social groups were used to disseminate the SurveyMonkey link for this study. Similarly, the survey was also dispersed through the Walden Participant Pool, utilizing opportunistic sampling.

I used three published self-report instruments: the EDB, the PAUM, and the Happily (N)ever After Survey as part of the survey instrument. In all, 35 items from the instruments, rated on a 5-point Likert scale, were used. Once the sampling goal was reached, data were transferred from SurveyMonkey and the Walden Participant Pool, inputted, and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) IBM

software. Separate scores were generated for both predictive variables and the outcome variable. A multiple regression analysis was conducted, followed by a Sobel test to analyze the sample data.

Definitions

Emotional online infidelity (online intimate disclosure): The adulterous partner's emotional involvement with their extradyadic partner via the internet (i.e., on social networking sites, dating sites, online chatrooms, etc.) that is seen by at least one spouse as an unacceptable breach of their marital contract of faithfulness (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014).

Emotional online infidelity via Facebook: Extradyadic behaviors with an emotional component such as disclosing deeply intimate information, exchanging pictures, and engaging in frequent private communication via video chats or phone calls via Facebook (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2014, 2016; Smith, 2014; Urooj et al., 2015). This study focused primarily on the intimate disclosure component of online emotional infidelity such as comments on friends statuses and pictures, disclosure of intimate information, the sending of private messages, hot chatting (sending and receiving private messages that are sexual in nature), and disclosure of emotionally intimate information (see Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2014, 2016; Smith, 2014).

Facebook intrusion: An extreme attachment to the affordances of the site. It is characterized by compulsive internet use, Facebook-induced jealousy, ambiguous information presentation with poor filtering, excessive surveillance of a partner's

Facebook page, and online portrayals of intimate relationships (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013; Smith, 2014).

Facebook intrusion is also referred to as *Facebook addiction* in existing literature due to the presentation of symptoms (i.e. salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse) resembling that of a substance addiction (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018).

Injured spouse or nonparticipating spouse: A spouse who has experienced emotional infidelity at the hands of their partners. They are referred to as injured spouses in existing literature due to the level of psychological and emotional trauma experienced upon discovery of their partner's affair. The literature refers to them as the nonparticipating spouse before the discovery of the affair (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens et al., 2013). In this study, I used both terms in the same way. The term *nonparticipating spouse* was used to refer to the spouse who is not engaging in online infidelity behaviors and inappropriate intimate disclosure. In the literature review on the psychological effects associated with the discovery of the affair, I used the term *injured spouse* per the terminology used in the cited studies.

Online disclosure boundaries (netiquette): The spoken and unspoken expectations and rules regarding acceptable and unacceptable online behaviors and activities (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010).

Romantic alternatives: Individuals selected by a romantic partner as a potential alternative mate to their current romantic partner, due to identified romantic interests (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018).

Assumptions

The researcher has identified several assumptions associated with the study. It was assumed that participants for the study would primarily be obtained from the Godly Marriages and Church on Sunday, Therapy on Monday and other relevant Facebook social groups which frequently creates posts that focuses on topics relevant to spouses and marriages. It was assumed that participants would be obtained from the Walden Participant Pool. It was also assumed that participants would be at least 18 years of age. It was assumed that the participants would be active Facebook members. It was assumed that all participants have been legally married or in a committed heterosexual relationship for at least 1 year. It was also assumed that all participants would have the ability to fluently read and comprehend the English language. It was assumed that all participants would consent to participate in the study and provide responses to the survey questions that provide an accurate depiction of their intimate disclosure behaviors via Facebook, the frequency of such disclosure, and the impact that intimate disclosure via Facebook has had on their marital quality. The statistical research derived from this study was essential to the matrimonial culture as heterosexual Facebook members use of disclosure boundaries, engagement in intimate disclosure via Facebook communication features, and their individual influences on the marital quality are significantly under researched areas in marital, infidelity, interpersonal development, and social media research. Moreover, a multiple regression analysis, followed by a Sobel test was used to analyze the data generated from this study. It was assumed that the data generated from this study would satisfy all assumptions of the multiple regression analysis. It was imperative that

all assumptions were met as this influences the accuracy of the interpretation of the results.

Scope and Delimitations

I expanded upon the pioneering study of Helsper and Whitty (2010), in effort to address the scarcity of statistical research focusing on the extent of which both online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) predict or show significant correlation with marital quality. All core correlational studies considered, I concluded that examining the influence of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) as the mediator in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality in heterosexual married Facebook users would further address the need for a broader scope on the significance of relationships between all three variables. However, while my intention was to obtain data that would provide an accurate depiction of the focus at hand, I acknowledge that as an area of delimitation as it is a chance that the participants might be guarded in their responses due to the sensitivity and risks associated with the questions and required responses.

The chosen sampling methods also prevented delimitations. Participants were recruited through the Godly Marriages, the Church on Sunday, Therapy on Monday, and other relevant Facebook social groups utilizing the snowball sampling strategy. The Opportunistic sampling strategy was used by way of the Walden Participant Pool. Pedersen and Kurz (2017) stated that while there has been notable success associated with utilizing internet-based sampling strategies, it also presents with the delimitation of

receiving data that primarily reflects the responses of young to mid-aged adults. They further explained that this issue occurs, especially because some older spouses may not be Facebook savvy enough to utilize the site's communication features to their full capacity. Older spouses also may not utilize Facebook frequently or may not have access to a computer with internet or have internet on their phone which would impede on their ability to identify with the focus of the study (Pendersen & Kurz, 2017). In support of the focus of the study, the results were generalizable to heterosexual Facebook users who are married and have experience with utilizing the Facebook's communication features.

Limitations

Considering the focus of the study, foregrounding married heterosexual Facebook users served as a limitation to this study. As a result, I acknowledge the possibility that the data may not depict the experiences of married homosexual Facebook users. Likewise, this assumption is also relevant to unmarried heterosexual and homosexual couples who do not consider themselves committed or considering marriage.

Recruiting participants via the Godly Marriages, Church on Sunday, Therapy on Monday, and other relevant Facebook social groups presents with limitations as well. The current members of both groups were asked to complete the online survey for the study. However, this presented as a potential limitation for the study because there was a possibility that the units of analysis would be limited to the members of both Facebook social groups. Similarly, utilizing the Walden Participant Pool also presented with the limitation of soliciting the participation of those that requested to participate in the participant pool. This in turn, hindered individuals who were not students of Walden

University or who did not utilize the Facebook social networking site from participating in the study (Pedersen & Kurz, 2017). In accordance with the snowball sampling strategy, to address these concerns, I allowed the participants recruited through the forementioned Facebook social groups, to better disperse the survey link to additional friends through the use of the site's communication features.

Significance

Walking in the footsteps of Helsper and Whitty (2010), this study aimed to broaden existing correlational research focusing on disclosure boundaries and marital quality. It was this study's objective to magnify the scope by examining the influence of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) as the mediator in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality in heterosexual married Facebook users. This research also determined the extent of which both online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) predict or show significant correlation with marital quality. Expounding upon the existing studies from that angle advanced knowledge in specialized areas of correlational marital research focusing on online interpersonal development, disclosure boundaries, marital quality, and social media use.

Significant in its theoretical foundation, this study pioneered the combination of the social penetration theory, with infidelity and social media research to explain the underlying dynamics of how disclosure serves as the power source of progression throughout the stages of the social penetration process via Facebook and potentially other social media platforms. Existing literature reports that this ultimately leads to an

emotional extramarital affair between an adulterous spouse and a romantic alternative.

This study provided insight on implications referenced in current correlational studies of potential strategies to minimize the detriment of spouses disclosing information with an emotional component (i.e. disclosing deeply intimate information, exchanging pictures, frequent private communication via the Facebook video chat or phone calls features) to friends of another sex on social media platforms such as Facebook, with no sense of boundaries, thereby provoking more critical extramarital transgressions (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2014, 2016; Smith, 2014; Urooj et al., 2015).

The statistical research generated from this study served as a tool of advancement, educating the field of psychology, particularly those who specialize in marriage and family therapy, on the importance of conceptualizing both spouses' psychological response to the discovery of a Facebook affair, as a multi-layered trauma-based clinical issue (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens et al., 2013). Current studies recommend that clinicians proceed with intervention in a manner similar to treating clients demonstrating symptoms of a trauma disorder. This implication is backed by current infidelity studies as they report that spouses who have experienced marital trauma in the form of inappropriate online intimate disclosure (emotional online infidelity) often present with emotional and behavioral effects that are almost identical to symptoms of a trauma disorder such as suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, helplessness, victimization, feelings of abandonment, panic attacks, disturbing thoughts and feelings, vivid dreams, responses of mental and physical distress to infidelity related cues, and domestic violence

(Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens et al., 2013). The findings of this study also clarified the nature of Facebook Intrusion, also known as Facebook addiction, as an evolving clinical issue and a prevalent catalyst in marital dissolution (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). Undoubtedly, knowledge gained from this study heightened the perception of the crucial importance of marriage and family therapists staying abreast of the growing digital media communication trends. Thus, supported the implementation of practical interventions that support married couples in mutually establishing online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) to safeguard their overall marital quality (Carter, 2016).

Summary

To recapitulate Chapter 1, the rationale for the selection of the topic and need for the study was provided to introduce the chapter. Researchers from several dimensions of correlational marital and social media studies have collectively put forth their due diligence to rectify the upsurge of divorce cases citing Facebook use as the culprit (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014). Their studies report that the marital quality of heterosexual Facebook users weakens as one or both partners develop emotional intimacy with online friends of another sex that supersedes the primary relationship or marriage. Such behaviors, therefore, fuel online emotional infidelity (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014). This further corroborates the literatures perception of boundaryless intimate disclosure as the “hallmark” of emotional online infidelity. This also validated the relevance of this study’s intention to further research the significance of the

relationships between online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and their correlation with the marital quality (continuous outcome variable) of heterosexual married Facebook users.

Progressing forward, this chapter also briefly examined the current literature as it relates to the topic of the study. The problem statement, gaps in the literature, and purpose of the study were thoroughly reviewed and addressed as they relate to the intent of the study. Furthermore, a brief description of the predictive and outcome variables were introduced, along with a brief description of the measurements for each variable.

Additionally, in this chapter, I reviewed the operational definitions of terms used throughout the course study that would otherwise have multiple meanings if read outside of the review of the literature. The RQs and hypotheses were reviewed to include a brief explanation of their relation to the gaps identified in the literature. Furthermore, this chapter introduced the theoretical framework of the study and its linkage to the RQs and approach of the study. The assumptions and scope and delimitations of the study were analyzed as they relate to the meaningfulness and scope of the study. The significance of the study and social change implications were thoroughly reviewed as they relate to the intention of the study.

In Chapter 2, I discuss current marital, infidelity, and social media correlational literature. This literature explains the relationships between online intimate disclosure (emotional online infidelity), online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and marital quality. Chapter 2 also provides insight on underlying contributing influences and

consequential psychological repercussions as identified in the literature. The framework of the study, social penetration theory, is also reviewed in greater detail.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Research shows an increase in divorce rates of heterosexual married couples who use Facebook. Researchers have speculated that the marital difficulties stem from a lack of knowledge of the negative marital ramifications that result from ambiguous social media netiquette (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016). In a 2011 report, the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers reported that the number of divorce cases citing Facebook use as the culprit had risen from 20% to 33% within 3 years. Their report also highlighted acts of emotional infidelity and inappropriate messages to friends of another sex as two of the primary reported issues (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Cravens et al., 2013). In a 2015 report of Pew Internet Research, Facebook ranked as the most used social networking site as 72% of U.S. social media users reported using Facebook, 31% reported using Pinterest, 28% for Instagram, 25% for LinkedIn, and 23% for Twitter (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016).

Presently, social media and marriage and family researchers are exploring the increased citing of Facebook as the culprit to divorce. The studies of Carter (2016), Cravens et al. (2013), and Cravens and Whiting (2016) have expressed concern for the underlying marital consequences causally linked to the increased use of Facebook in

heterosexual married couples. Notably, the phenomenal popularity of Facebook has yielded little attention to the antecedent role that Facebook use plays in the simplification of emotional online infidelity and its role in the decline of marital quality in married Facebook users (Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013). There is an even higher level of deprivation in marital studies providing numerical evidence on the role of netiquette during Facebook interactions (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016).

Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017), Abbasi and Alghamdi (2018), Carter (2016), and Cravens et al. (2013) all disclosed that married couples are often ignorant of the need to enforce netiquette to counteract emotional online affairs stemming from intimate interactions with Facebook friends until the affair has been revealed and the emotional detachment has already provoked actions of marital dissolution. Current marital studies have called attention to the minimal emphasis placed on the use of netiquette by married couples who utilize Facebook features to communicate with another sex. Moreover, such studies acknowledge that the existence of this issue is largely correlated to lack of awareness about the marital benefits of online social interaction rules (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens et al., 2013). Marital researchers have defined netiquette in marriage as formal, mutually agreed upon, online, verbal and nonverbal interaction rules specifying acceptable and unacceptable online behaviors when communicating with another sex, outside of the union (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010). Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017). Carter (2016) called

attention to the use of netiquette as unexplored lifeblood for married couples who utilize social networking sites.

Hence, the purpose of this study was to examine the influence of netiquette on the marital quality of heterosexual Facebook users. However, emotional online infidelity via Facebook use was examined with the purpose of providing an in-depth understanding of the need for married couples to enforce netiquette as a form of vigilance while utilizing Facebook. Due to the broad nature of emotional online infidelity, I primarily examined high disclosure of personal, emotionally charged information such as personal needs, family issues, marital woes, pictures, sexual interests, and feelings with Facebook friends. The ultimate purpose of this study was to provide practitioners in the field of psychology, particularly those who specialize in marriage and family therapy, with evidence that can be used to optimize clinical interventions addressing online interactions via Facebook and possibly other social media sites. These sites can facilitate emotional extramarital affairs; thus, it is important to implement netiquette as a means to defend marital quality (Carter, 2016).

Literature Search Strategy

The literature review search strategy consisted of an electronic search for peer-reviewed articles on Google Scholar and Walden University's psychology databases, to include Psych Articles and PsycINFO. In addition, a search of the internet utilizing search terms fundamental to the topic of emotional online infidelity and netiquette use on Facebook resulted in numerous relevant articles from *Psychology Today* and other secondary resources of benefit to this study. The key search terms were *netiquette*, *online*

interaction rules, rules for interpersonal communication, communication boundaries, micro-cheating, Facebook privacy, emotional online infidelity, Facebook infidelity, emotional extramarital affairs, emotional affairs, social media infidelity, online infidelity, emotional cheating, extradyadic behaviors, extradyadic flirtation, emotional confiding, cyber infidelity, marital quality, marital satisfaction, and relationship quality.

The literature review includes information early research focusing on online infidelity via chatrooms and pornography sites to current marital research focusing on emotional online infidelity and netiquette use via Facebook and social networking sites. The literature review spans the years of 2005 to 2020. The historical foundation of online infidelity research was included to provide a scope of how the focus has shifted from primarily cybersex behaviors to presently focusing on emotional online infidelity and how platforms for such behaviors have evolved. The database search presented extensive research focusing on emotional online infidelity in heterosexual marriages. However, research specifically focusing on emotional online infidelity via Facebook use in heterosexual married couples, the effects of emotional online infidelity via Facebook use on marital quality, and netiquette use on Facebook or social networking sites, was significantly less available.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical framework for this study was the social penetration theory. Psychologists Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor pioneered the social penetration theory in 1973, breaking new ground for research focusing on the role of disclosure in the development of interpersonal relationships (Huang, 2016). The social penetration theory

conceptualizes self-disclosure as the driving fuel structuring the dynamics of relationships progressing from superficial to more intimate, bonding stages (Huang, 2016; Jiang et al., 2011; Cozby, 1973). Emphasized as the key concept of relationship development, self-disclosure is defined in relational studies as any message about the self, expressing thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, opinions, and experiences that a person voluntarily and intentionally communicates to another (Cozby, 1973; Huang, 2016). The terms *verbal accessibility* and *social accessibility* have been used interchangeably with the term *self-disclosure* in interpersonal relationship studies.

Social penetration theory emphasizes the influence of recognition and interpretation of information shared on open verbal communication and nonverbal cues throughout the process of interpersonal-relationship development (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Taylor (1968) emphasized the importance of understanding the concept of social penetration and interpersonal development as two separate contributing entities of social penetration theory. Social penetration focuses on reciprocal disclosure complimented by interpersonal behaviors between individuals navigating the stages of relationship development (Taylor, 1968). Expansive in nature, the fundamentals of interpersonal development plays the role of the catalyst during the bonding stages as it focuses on amount of interaction (breadth of penetration), type of information disclosed, frequency of contact per week, and degree of intimacy (depth of penetration) during exchange of information (Taylor, 1968).

Cozby (1973) and, later, Huang (2016) expounded on Taylor's (1968) work. In their respective studies, they explained self-disclosure as a multidimensional construct,

consisting of five basic dimensions: depth, honesty, intent, valence, and amount.

According to their studies, depth (depth of penetration) is defined as the degree of intimacy of the disclosed information. The honesty dimension focuses on the accuracy of the information disclosed. Intent refers to the individual's purpose for statements of disclosure. Valence focuses on the negative and positive nature of the statements of disclosure. Lastly, amount (breadth of penetration) is defined as the frequency of communication or duration of time spent disclosing information.

The social penetration theory is well known for its use of the onion analogy to depict the organic transition of individuals progressing through the stages of disclosure and interaction. According to Huang (2016), Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor regarded the structure of the bonding and interpersonal developmental stages between individuals as identical to a multilayered onion. Similar to the paring of an onion, it is the social penetration theory belief that individuals exuviate defensive layers to their inner self as they become more familiar with one another through voluntary, intentional disclosure. As viewed through the lens of the social penetration theory, self-disclosure plays the role of propulsion in the four stage, social penetration process of relational growth (Huang, 2016).

The social penetration process consists of the following stages: orientation, exploratory affective exchange, full affective exchange, and stable exchange (Huang, 2016). The orientation stage is described as the stage during which individuals seeking to develop a bond, engage in superficial exchange, commonly consisting of job, hometown, interests, favorite sports teams, trending topics etc. (Huang, 2016; Jiang et al., 2011).

From there, relationships arrive at the exploratory affective exchange stage, during which the dyad begins to view each other as acquaintances as they engage in more cordial, casual communication (Huang, 2016). Thirdly, the full affective exchange stage consists of two individuals who identify each other as close friends and have reached a point of heightened familiarity in their relationship (Huang, 2016). It is at this stage that the superficial exchange begins its transition into more emotional dialogue. Interchange at this level consists of more private, intimate information that reveals more of the central fields of the person. The aura of the relationship at this point, presents with feelings of dependability and openness as both parties are more willing to reveal their inner thoughts and interests due to their history of safe exchange. However, Huang (2016) further explained that there is still a sense of hesitancy in their dialogue, as both are reasonably cautious in the extent to which they disclose. The final level of the Social Penetration process is the stable exchange stage. According to Huang (2016), at this stage, individuals who were once very circumspect in their statements to one another, are now conversing on a level that demonstrates the degree of intimacy that their bond has caused their disclosure to progress to. Research focusing on the social penetration process noted that disclosure at this point reflects deeper familiarity as it is common for pairs at this stage to be able to easily interpret the others feelings and calculate how specific statements may provoke probable behaviors, feelings, and emotions in that person as well (Huang, 2016).

An additional facet of the social penetration theory is its emphasis on interpersonal reward/cost factors and how it influences the relational development

process. It is the social penetration theory belief that the rate of progression through the social penetration process is influenced by personality characteristics, situational determinants, and reward and costs factors of the past, present, and anticipated future interactions, as determined by both individuals (Cozby, 1973). However, in this section, I focused primarily on the influence of the rewards and costs factors on the rate of development in interpersonal relationships. I also highlighted how such influences high disclosure of intimate information, ultimately forming an emotional bond with the receiver.

Huang (2016) clarified the structural benefits of the rewards and costs factors. Huang (2016) explained that both individuals' continual assessment of the potential consequences and rewards afforded by their relationship, further shapes the foundation that sustains their bond; thus, affecting the level of disclosure and overall relationship through the stages of social penetration. In support of Huang (2016), Kashian et al., (2017) further explained that according to the social penetration theory, people demonstrate less inhibited self-disclosure towards those that they feel can reciprocate an ideal level of relational benefits such as social resources i.e. emotional and informational support, companionship, or tangible benefits. On the other hand, the personal feelings towards the character of the receiver and the potential of the relationship also serves as a motivator for reciprocating disclosure because doing so is also extended as a reward to the receiver. It is also the social penetration theory's belief that engaging in reciprocal disclosure not only communicates one's interest in nurturing the relationship but also that one values and trusts the receiver as well as their contribution of knowledge and support

(Kashian et al., 2017). The study of Kashian et al., (2017) confirmed Huang's (2016) clarification of social penetration theory's belief as their study further explained that the reward of reciprocal disclosure facilitates a safe haven for high disclosure of intimate information, and supports emotional closeness and bonding.

Research focusing on reciprocal disclosure as the catalyst to intimate disclosure in interpersonal relationships surfaced as early as 1959 (Cozby, 1973). However, relational studies identifying the social penetration theory as their framework debuted in 1973 (Huang, 2016). Pioneering relational research grounded in social penetration theory reflects previous application in studies focusing on the elicitation properties of disclosure on reciprocal disclosure, the effects of self-disclosure on interpersonal development, and the influence of the rewards and costs evaluation of both individuals on levels of reciprocal disclosure (Taylor, 1968; Cozby, 1973). However, a shift in the focus of later studies expressed a new combined interest in the psychological and relational influences of disclosure. At this point, the focus of social science research shifted from interpersonal involvement to the role of individual differences and personality traits on the social penetration process, the correlation between relationship satisfaction and levels of disclosure, and classifications of online self-disclosure facilitated by characteristics of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) (Jiang et al., 2011; Kashian et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2019). By and large, the existing disclosure studies affirmed that feelings towards the receiving individual influences levels of disclosure, and that high disclosure does, in fact, elicit higher disclosure from the receiver than lower disclosure, thus, validating

disclosure as a reciprocal reward facilitating reciprocal high intimate disclosure (Taylor, 1968; Cozby, 1973; Jiang et al., 2011; Kashian et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2019).

Since the introduction of the internet as an interpersonal medium, current social science research focusing on online disclosure via Computer Mediated Formats (CMF), has expanded its focus from comparing off-line disclosure to online disclosure and their effects on relationship quality and examining whether the social penetration process is applicable to CMF outlets, to investigating probable psychological factors facilitating online intimate disclosure and interpersonal relationships via a broader range of computer mediated formats, with most emphasizing cybersex mediums and the Facebook social networking site (Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Jiang et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2019).

Based on the results of the literature search, it has been concluded that there are no studies grounded in social penetration theory, focusing on the influence of netiquette (disclosure boundaries) on marital quality in heterosexual Facebook users or similar to it. The literature search also revealed a lack of studies grounded in social penetration theory, focusing on emotional infidelity in the form of high disclosure of intimate information as an underlying mechanism to poor marital quality in heterosexual Facebook users. This conclusion is supported by Jiang et al., (2011) as their study explains that majority of the existing literature focusing on online self-disclosure and relational outcomes, mainly examines its influence on relationship satisfaction and facets of computer mediated communication that facilitates or inhibits different levels of disclosure. They expanded on that confirmation by also explaining that even in the studies that highlight self-disclosure

as the primary impetus for bonding and intimate disclosure, the correlation between the social penetration process and online emotional or sexual infidelity in married couples via social networking sites, underlying mechanisms of online disclosure (i.e. intention, expectation etc.) influencing the social penetration process in extramarital and romantic relationships, and differences in depth of online disclosure and its influence on marital outcomes all remain significantly under-researched areas (Jiang et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2019).

The prevalence of divorce citing's highlighting the use of Facebook communication features as the gateway for online extramarital behaviors has led to online disclosure gaining the nickname of the new "relational phenomenon" in current literature as little is known about how its dynamics breed online emotional infidelity (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Cravens et al., 2013; Lee et al., 2019). The Social Penetration Theory correlated with this study's objective to provide an in-depth understanding of how Facebook friendships initially ignited by superficial casual self-disclosure, progresses to an emotionally bonded, psychologically dependent adulterous virtual relationship, maintained by high disclosure of intimate information. It also provided insight of how the rewards of the bond encompassing this new emotionally charged extramarital online affair, has overridden the benefits of the bond and commitment to the off-line partner; therefore, clarifying the basis of the decline of marital quality between the adulterous spouse and their off-line partner who is now considered the injured spouse.

Disclosure research dating back to its brainstorming years, collectively reference social penetration theory as a theoretical tool that can be utilized to explain how

voluntary and intentional disclosure catalyzes the bonding process in interpersonal relationships throughout the stages of the social penetration process (Huang, 2016; Jiang et al., 2011; and Taylor, 1968). The scope of social penetration theory provides a lens for the field of psychology, particularly those who specialize in marriage and family therapy, to better understand why it is vital to implement netiquette (disclosure boundaries) into daily habits of utilizing Facebook communication features to interact with Facebook friends of another sex. Utilizing empirical research to expound on this provided the statistical evidence needed to explicate the seriousness of implementing netiquette to refrain from placing marriages in a vulnerable state.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The RQs of this study were structured to speak to the gap in literature focusing on disclosure and relational processes, further building upon the existing theory. The RQs and hypotheses were as follows:

RQ1: To what degree do the two predictive variables—intimate online disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette)—correlate with the marital quality (the outcome variable) of heterosexual married Facebook users?

RQ2: To what degree do online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) mediate the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality?

*H*₀₁: Netiquette will not demonstrate a positive correlation with marital quality as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₁₁: Netiquette will demonstrate a positive correlation with marital quality as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₀₂: Online emotional infidelity will not demonstrate a negative correlation with marital quality as measured by the EDB.

*H*₁₂: Online emotional infidelity will demonstrate a negative correlation with marital quality as measured by the EDB.

*H*₀₃: Netiquette will not demonstrate a negative correlation with online emotional infidelity as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₁₃: Netiquette will demonstrate a negative correlation with online emotional infidelity as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₀₄: Netiquette will not mediate the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality.

*H*₁₄: Netiquette will mediate the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

According to the 2015 report of Pew Internet Research, Facebook ranks as the most used social networking site. 72% of U.S. social media users reported using Facebook, 31% reported using Pinterest, 28% for Instagram, 25% for LinkedIn, and 23% for Twitter (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016). The highly publicized commonness and versatility of Facebook use has provoked a stronger interest in the correlation between the use of Facebook's communicative features and its influence on overall interpersonal processes

in both casual friendships and romantic relationships. However, its phenomenal popularity has yielded little attention to the antecedent role that Facebook use plays in the facilitation of emotional online infidelity and its role in the decline of marital quality in married Facebook users (Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013).

In a 2011 report, the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers reported that the number of divorce cases citing Facebook use as the culprit has rose from 20% to 33%, with one of the primary reported issues being inappropriate messages to friends of another sex (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Cravens et al., 2013). The free excitement coupled with effortless accessibility offered by the Facebook site is often promoted in the media without publication of the threats that underlie married users' uninhibited disclosure via the site's communication features.

In this section I provided insightful information, clarifying the definition of emotional online infidelity and its behavioral presentation during the use of Facebook communication features. I provided insight on how those extramarital behaviors decrease marital quality in married heterosexual Facebook users. In this section I also provided revelation on Netiquette (disclosure boundaries) during interactions with Facebook friends of another sex, and how it influences the maintenance of marital quality. I concluded this section with relevant information regarding previous related studies.

Emotional Online Infidelity

Emotional online infidelity refers to the adulterous partner's emotional involvement with their extradyadic partner via the internet (i.e. on social networking sites, dating sites, online chatrooms etc.) that is seen by at least one spouse as an

unacceptable breach of their marital contract of faithfulness (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014). The newness of the term has made its denotation and flexibility rather vague; however, new literature has been diligent in their attempt to clarify all behaviors and interactions that fall under its umbrella. Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017) and Cravens and Whiting (2016) further dissected the definition of emotional online infidelity as they explained that emotional online infidelity consists of any form of extramarital interaction or behavior occurring via the internet that is perceived to have the potential to form inappropriate emotional connections or present as a form of disrespect to the primary spouse, therefore violating the commitment within the marriage. Moreover, similar to an off-line emotional affair, this definition can also be expanded to multiple extradyadic partners as the accessibility afforded by the internet has made it even more possible for an adulterous spouse to engage in several emotional online extramarital affairs at one time (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017).

In terms of clarifying its connotation, current marital studies focusing on spousal use of social networking sites highlight that the main component in identifying whether an online behavior or relationship constitutes online emotional infidelity is the level of secrecy maintained throughout the interactions. Examples of such behaviors would be spouses closing out of private chats when their partner walks in the room, deleting direct messages reflecting high disclosure of intimate information, deleting records of private video or phone calls via Facebook, or pretending to be working on something else when engaging in Facebook infidelity behaviors (Anis-ul-Haque & Anjum, 2015; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2014, 2016). Cravens et al. (2013) expanded on the views of the

group, further highlighting additional alarming signs of emotional online infidelity presenting in the form of psychological and behavioral shifts in the adulterous spouse such as disturbances in sleep patterns, inability to maintain personal responsibilities due to preoccupation with Facebook use, mood lability, personality changes, loss of interest in sex with the primary spouse, excessive lying, and declining investment in the marriage.

The Nature of Emotional Online Infidelity Via Facebook Use

Research reflects that the existing marital literature focusing on the relational influence of social media use has not yet reached a point of saturation at which a clear definition of what constitutes Facebook infidelity has been made available. However, when analyzing emotional online infidelity via Facebook in comparison to off-line emotional infidelity, it is important to acknowledge that extradyadic behaviors with an emotional component facilitated through the features of Facebook (i.e. disclosing deeply intimate information, exchanging pictures, frequent private communication via video chats or phone calls via Facebook) carry just as much negative weight as off-line infidelity (i.e. sexual intercourse, dating or spending time together, and frequent communication via call, text, and email) on marriages (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2014, 2016; Smith, 2014; Urooj et al., 2015). Without professional knowledge or personal experience of Facebook communication features, reading such may lead one to suspect that marriages affected by its use were already susceptible to marital dissolution. However, according to Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017), correlational research reflects that simply maintaining an active Facebook profile is significantly linked to disruptive marital consequences such as reduced marital quality

and divorce. Current studies report that even the most superficial interactions are linked to isolation, increased occurrences of conflict, decreased marital cohesion, spousal distrust, and jealous and suspicious behaviors in committed relationships.

The forementioned reports alone are alarming as it is obvious that it is not the site itself; it is more so the possibilities that are made readily available through its use. Facebook offers several features that serve as avenues of emotional online infidelity such as the status updates feature to share current personal needs, feelings, family issues, marital woes, pictures with picture tagging options, sexual interests, the use of emoticon to communicate flirtatious or sexual connotations, and livestreaming of videos. Facebook also offers more personal communication features such as private messaging, private videos, and audio calls through the users account (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Anis-ul-Haque & Anjum, 2015; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013). Unbeknownst to many married Facebook users, the extent of their individual participation could possibly expose either spouse to receive or manifest online extramarital behaviors. Unintentionally, either spouse could engage in flirtatious behaviors or high disclosure of intimate details, which often leads to emotional bonding with Facebook friends of another sex (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017). On the other hand, recent studies have also highlighted posting an incorrect relationship status and engaging in hot chatting with a Facebook friend of another sex as two of the main indicators of intentional extramarital behaviors preceding involvement in a full-blown affair (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2014, 2016; Smith, 2014). Although studies report that, for Facebook users, online emotional affairs are a greater

concern than sexual affairs because of the nature of the social networking site. However, it would be careless to ignore the fact that it is absolutely possible to engage in online sexual behaviors via the private video, private messaging, and audio call features offered through the Facebook site. Acknowledgement of this, directs relevance to the fact that as the emotional bond progresses between a spouse and their Facebook friend of another sex, this can easily lead to both an online or off-line sexual affair (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017).

The study of Cravens and Whiting (2014) highlighted that, even in the acknowledgment of the possibilities associated of all the above, we have yet to reach the entire depth of online emotional infidelity facilitated through the use of Facebook. Their study brought attention to the fact that Facebook is a cost-free virtual community, designed to encourage expressive communication with a broad range of virtual friends via various technology sources (i.e. mobile phone, computer, smart watch, smart fridge etc.). Cravens et al. (2013) supported their reports by adding that, this in turn, also allows adulterous spouses to refrain from attracting suspicion or generating any consequences while engaging in extramarital behaviors in their workplace or in the home, even while their partner is in the same room. If the adulterous spouse does not befriend the injured spouse on Facebook, inform them of their profile name, or give them the password to their account, the online extramarital behaviors can easily be kept top secret. Moreover, Facebook does not place limitations on the number of active accounts per user. This gives adulterous spouses the liberty to exercise their creativity in executing a plan to keep their emotional affairs undetectable, using multiple profiles or fake accounts (Cravens &

Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013). So again, if the adulterous spouse does not befriend the injured spouse on all Facebook accounts, or provide them with information, giving them access to all accounts and profiles, the chances of the injured spouse finding out about the adulterous spouse's multiple lifestyles are very low.

Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017) discussed the Cooper (1998) triple "A" engine model as their reasoning for why Facebook has become the main testing grounds for the marital quality of heterosexual couples. Their study explains that the triple "A" engine identified accessibility, affordability, and anonymity as the primary characteristics of online emotional infidelity that have collectively contributed to Facebook's growing reputation for being one of the most cited social networking sites in legal divorce documents (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Cravens et al., 2013). As explained by Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017), all three characteristics are relevant to Facebook use. The site is readily accessible and provides quick and easy access to its communication features. Also, there is no cost associated with maintaining an active profile, making engaging in emotional infidelity via Facebook communication features highly affordable. Anonymity is also relevant due to the convenience afforded by Facebook communication features. Adulterous spouses are able to easily and quickly alter their self-presentation or alternate multiple identities that they chose to display on their profile and during private messaging with their primary spouse, online partner(s), children, family, and friends. Cravens and Whiting (2014) expanded on this, emphasizing the relevance of the accommodation and approximation characteristics of Hertlein and Stevenson (2010) 7 "As" model to further assess and explain the reasoning for the extramarital behaviors with a relational frame.

Cravens and Whiting (2014) referenced accommodation and approximation as motivational factors highly influenced by the adulterous spouse's perception of their marital satisfaction and the overall quality of the marriage. Hertlein and Stevenson (2010) 7 "As" model states that the adulterous spouse may initiate or engage in the Facebook affair to relieve their feelings of being emotionally restrained in their marriage (accommodation) or to satisfy their unfulfilled desires of emotional intimacy, and may be unable to communicate these unfulfilled needs to their spouse (approximation).

Social Penetration Process via Facebook

Contrary to off-line interactions, the initiation of the social penetration process via Facebook has an incredibly unique presentation. Off-line, acquaintances usually progress through the stages of the social penetration process, initiating friendship through similar interests, careers, hobbies, mutual friends, beneficial networking possibilities, or emotional support. However, on Facebook, the orientation stage of the social penetration process is initiated between users with a friend request (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). Facebook offers security settings that restrict personal information such as career, hobbies, interests etc. from unfriended users. That said, instead of initiating friendships due to similar interests or backgrounds, users often send, receive, and accept friend requests based on their interests in the person's appearance or their perception of what future interactions may be like based on the presentation of the profile picture or profile wall. Consequently, the nature of the Facebook site has minimized the importance of personal boundaries, redefining the term friend to consist of not only close friends, but also acquaintances, colleagues, old classmates, ex-romantic partners, unfamiliar people,

and alternative romantic partners. The accessibility of its features standardizes open communication with familiar and unfamiliar people of all age ranges and personal and professional backgrounds (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017).

Existing literature reflects that, on Facebook, the exploratory affective and full affective exchange stages of the social penetration process progresses significantly faster and often coincide due to the fact that once the friend request is accepted, both users have access to intimate information that would have otherwise been guarded in off-line relationships until a level of trust was established (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Huang, 2016). Largely influenced by the amount of time spent on the site, Facebook friends navigate from superficial to intimate interactions, often quickly reaching the full affective exchange stage before ever meeting in person. Hence, significantly different from the presentation of the full affective exchange stage in off-line friendships, the transition from superficial exchange to emotional dialogue is almost instant upon the initial acceptance (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Huang, 2016). Usually in off-line relationships, friendships usually progress to this stage after months of frequent communication and an established history of safe exchange (Huang, 2016). However, the nature of the site gives users immediate access to all central fields of their virtual friends, as disclosed on the site. The gradual familiarity usually established throughout the process, providing both friends with comfort in speaking on or questioning personal experiences is almost non-existent in Facebook friendships. In many instances, familiarity is coupled with the acceptance of the friend request as existing literature shows that, that decision serves as a mutual agreement of social connectedness between Facebook users, acknowledging one

another as virtual friends. In the same token, it serves as a virtual agreement giving one another liberty to question, comment, provide their opinion, or express support on personal experiences, intimate disclosure, shared pictures, and live videos. Depending on the restrictions put in place, this also gives them access to private communication which would typically occur in a later stage of the social penetration process in off-line friendships, building up to the stage of stable exchange (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Huang, 2016).

Absence of Nonverbal Attributes in Facebook Interactions

Existing literature has called attention to the absence of verbal and non-verbal social cues during interactions between Facebook friends as the mainspring causing premature arrival at the stable exchange stage. Current literature has spotlighted the differences between face to face communication (FTF) and computer mediated communication (CMC) as research states that online interactions have shown to generate a higher frequency and depth of intimate questions earlier in the relationship than off-line dyads (Kashian et al., 2017). The study of Kashian et al. (2017) proposed that the feelings of familiarity between the two are heightened through the use of interactive (i.e. asking questions; providing support and opinions; expressing similar interests, desires, experiences), active (direct inquiring about the Facebook friend) and passive (unobtrusive observation of targets such as searching the history of posts, pictures, Facebook friends) information seeking strategies. The absence of nonverbal and verbal social cues coupled with the identified information seeking strategies, jointly influence the acceleration of the stable exchange stage as paralinguistics, body language, interpersonal gaze, gestures,

mirroring, etc. are not present to communicate emotions, discomfort, interest or lack thereof (Kashian et al., 2017). That said, as the dyad continues to navigate the most intimate stages of the social penetration process, the information seeking strategies and absence of nonverbal and verbal social cues form a mixture, facilitating more frequent and higher disclosure of intimate information. This in turn, leads to increased bonding, intense emotional intimacy, and romantic feelings between the adulterous spouse and the Facebook friend of another sex (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017).

Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock, (2011) provided insight on the underlying mechanisms that influence the sender and receiver effects on the social penetration process between the adulterous spouse and the Facebook friend/romantic alternative. Existing literature explains that while engaging in reciprocal disclosure, the adulterous spouse and the Facebook friend both engage in impression management, opting to disclose whatever intimate desires, marital and familial woes, pictures, live videos etc. that will most likely generate an ideal response (Jiang et al., 2011). However, on the receiving end, both are restricted to utilizing their perception of the sender to interpret the relationship message. This then allows for them to decipher the intentions of the sender to better interpret the message that the sender is trying to convey (content message). Due to the fact that there are limited options to assist in recognizing contradicting clues outside of word choice, this in itself, serves as the primary underlying mechanism accelerating progression through the final stages of the social penetration process (Jiang et al., 2011). Hence, giving power to the absence of non-verbal attributes (i.e. facial expressions, shifts in voice tone, gestures), limited cognitive resources (i.e. having one person feel superior,

intimidated, or less mature or intelligent than the other), and temporal constraints (i.e. interactions over time), to support the dyad in forming conveniently auspicious impressions of one another that are far more chancy and inaccurate than impressions formed during face to face interactions (Jiang et al., 2011).

Existing literature states that reciprocal overinterpretation of online social contextual cues have shown to lead to online emotional affairs between married Facebook users and their Facebook friends of another sex (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). Current studies have shown that interactions via Facebook communication features can become increasingly uninhibited based on their perception of the status of their relationship and the prospective rewards and costs of their involvement (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). Moreover, their perception of their bond serves as a direct influence on the exchange of provocative communication and heightened disclosure of personal secrets, current experiences, intimate desires, sexual fantasies, marital issues, pictures, or videos that would otherwise be exclusive to the off-line spouse (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017).

Netiquette Use

Netiquette is defined as the spoken and unspoken expectations and rules regarding acceptable and unacceptable online behaviors and activities (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010). Helsper and Whitty (2010) further highlighted that the term netiquette is often used interchangeably with the term social scripts, constructed between couples. Carter (2016) explained that married couples often operate their Facebook account with a vague understanding of effective netiquette

and the assumption that their partner shares their views on what is deemed appropriate and inappropriate communicative behaviors on Facebook (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens et al., 2013).

The studies of Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017), Carter (2016), and Helsper and Whitty (2010) reported that for couples who have defined and enforced netiquette regarding online entertainment and potentially inappropriate behaviors (i.e., posting pictures, disclosure of intimate information, posting live videos during personal experiences), were able to do so within the context of their intimate relationship. Expanding on the aforementioned studies, Cravens et al. (2013) and Zurbriggen et al., (2016) added that the definition and enforcement of netiquette regarding emotional online extradyadic behaviors were primarily triggered by threatening, intrusive experiences but grounded by cultural and societal norms held by both partners in the marriage. Consequently, existing literature reports low success rates in last minute attempts to define and enforce netiquette due to both spouses reported unawareness of how their individual differences in cultural beliefs, self-esteem, and mental health issues affect what they identify as appropriate and inappropriate information to share on Facebook (Zurbriggen et al. 2016).

Rationale for Netiquette

More in depth marital research on the function of netiquette is long overdue as divorce courts continue to serve as the primary source of raw data on marital dissolution stemming from boundaryless communication with another sex via Facebook (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Smith,

2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016). Similar to the triple “A” engine model and 7 “As” model referenced earlier in the text, Zurbriggen et al. (2016) highlighted connectivity, social feedback, and accessibility as a few of the primary privacy advantages of Facebook use that research has shown to entice users. However, it is suspected that these very same features cloud their judgement of appropriate emotional disclosure (Zurbriggen et al. 2016). As described in their study, connectivity focuses on the user’s virtual connection to hundreds of virtual friends at once. Social feedback refers to the ability to give and receive a high level of emotional attention and support to several different users of another sex, in a short period of time via Facebook communication features. Lastly, accessibility refers to the mobile platforms and the functions of the Facebook communication features, providing its users with the ability to communicate constantly, with other Facebook users of another sex.

This is where the privacy paradox of Facebook use comes into play because studies report that many Facebook users have concerns regarding potential threats to their individual privacy and marital well-being resulting from Facebook use (Zurbriggen et al. 2016). However, virtual advantages, absence of social cues and impression management, and lack of netiquette use impacts their discernment, causing them to gradually expand on their personal disclosure, ultimately violating their own privacy (Zurbriggen et al. 2016). Current research reflects that while connectivity, social feedback, and accessibility draws users to Facebook, the level of threat that those attributes impose on the privacy and intimacy of marriages, elicits feelings of betrayal and loss of trust due to over-

disclosure (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016).

Affordances of Netiquette Use

Enforcing privacy through the use of netiquette, aides the couple in refraining from disclosing intimate information (i.e. marital woes, personal feelings, and personal desires etc.) that jeopardizes their autonomy in the actions and decisions within their union. Hence, placing a barrier between their marriage and the influence of manipulation and negative encouragement from their Facebook friends (Zurbriggen et al., 2016). Zurbriggen et al. (2016) pointed out the underlying dynamics of the term “privacy” as they explained that the maintenance of privacy by married Facebook users should be conceptualized as a dialectical process of boundary regulation, during which sources of information flow and social media connection with others is identified, analyzed, and restricted based on both spouses’ perception of potential threats. To supplement this, their study also emphasized the importance of acknowledging the communication privacy management theory (CPM) as a potential barrier to marital discord resulting from excessive online disclosure and utilizing its concept to better understand the effectiveness of netiquette during interactions with Facebook friends of another sex. According to Zurbriggen et al. (2016), CMP focuses primarily on privacy disclosure, providing guidance in determining when and what to disclose, how to enforce boundaries to prevent unwanted disclosure, and how to address and cope with a spouse’s breach of disclosure boundaries. CMP consists of 5 principles, privacy ownership, privacy control, privacy

rules, co-ownership, and privacy turbulence. Zurbriggen et al. (2016), defined each principle as the following:

- Privacy ownership: the belief that people own their personal information in the same way that they own their personal belongings.
- Privacy control: the belief that people have the right to control access to their personal information.
- Privacy rules: the belief that people develop and implement boundaries and restrictions to support discernment of whether disclosing specific personal information is appropriate, and when it is appropriate to do so.
- Co-ownership: the belief that when personal information is shared, ownership and protection of that information must be coordinated with the other owner of the information (i.e. partner, spouse etc.). It is also CPM belief that his additional co-owner has the right to place restrictions on information being shared and should, therefore, be involved in the decision to disclose such information.
- Privacy turbulence: the belief that discord and dissolution occurs between partners when unauthorized others are given access to personal information regarding the marriage, familial issues, etc. accidentally or through a co-owner's breach of confidentiality.

To prevent privacy turbulence in the form of marital conflict and dissolution, spouses or co-owners must mutually discuss, agree upon, and implement netiquette (disclosure boundaries). It is also important that they thoroughly identify the depth of the

information that is allowed to be disclosed, and who the information can be disclosed to. Both co-owner spouses must also layout ownership rights, such as whether either spouse can make independent decisions about disclosing specific information and whether it is expected for either co-owner spouse to check in with the other before disclosing the information (Zurbriggen et al., 2016). Breach of confidentiality, serving as a form of privacy turbulence in marriages, presents major consequences for poor netiquette on social media.

The findings of Zurbriggen et al. (2016) are supported by existing literature on spousal use of netiquette as research states that both spouses must define, agree upon, and jointly implement their rules and expectations for their use of Facebook in order to effectively protect their union (Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Zurbriggen et al., 2016). The use of netiquette has the potential to become a healthy habit with multi-layered benefits for married Facebook users. Adopting netiquette to eliminate negative Facebook contributing factors fosters a level of privacy in off-line marriages that facilitates healthy bonding, psychological dependence, commitment, and trust.

Marital Quality

Çağ and Yıldırım (2018) best described marriage as a complex relationship structure that is nurtured by the consistent emotional, mental, physical, and sexual engagement of two committed parties. Marital quality is significantly grounded in commitment, and heavily protective of the overall stability and longevity of the romantic relationship (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018). As stated by Çağ and Yıldırım, (2018), the maintenance of marital quality requires partners to:

- Accept the strengths and flaws of one another
- Mutually dignify each other's positive attributes and personality
- Reciprocate open, honest, and supportive disclosure
- Show affection and compassion to one another
- Mutually prioritize one another's emotional needs
- Offer social support and embrace one another's social interest
- Respect and embrace one other's cultural beliefs
- Negotiate all differences

Studies show that marital quality rates are higher in couples who engage in and perform well in meeting those needs (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018). On the other hand, studies also reflect that couples who have not performed well in meeting those areas of need, experience low levels of marital satisfaction that significantly impact the quality of the marriage (Çağ & Yıldırım, 2018).

The quality of a marriage is inter-dependent upon the couple's commitment, psychological attachment to one another, and determination to work through troubled times, i.e. experiences of emotional online infidelity (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018). Referenced as a multi-dimensional relationship skill, research states that commitment is characterized by persistence to work through difficult periods within the course of a marriage, psychological dependence upon one's spouse, and mutual dedication to meeting one another's evolving needs, as well as all things needed to ensure the well-being of the marriage (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018). Current studies reflects that there is strong correlation between high marital quality and high commitment as both

attributes of marriage are healthy consequences of high relational dependence between spouses (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018).

In pursuit to gain an in depth understanding of the broadness of marital quality, it is important to understand the high emphasis that marital literature places on commitment as a product of psychological and emotional dependence (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018). In other words, studies have reported high levels of commitment in married couples who are pleased with their spouse and feel that their spouse's existence in their lives is a healthy additive to their overall being. Moreover, high marital quality also boosts commitment between spouses who feel that they have mutually made satisfying investments into their marriage (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018).

Consequently, it is when spouses feel that their needs can be better met elsewhere that commitment and marital quality diminishes, causing their attention to drift to more favorable romantic alternatives via Facebook. In support of the reports of Abbasi (2018) and Abbasi and Alghamdi (2018), Carter (2016) highlighted the often mis-interpreted tell-tale signs that disengagement has occurred and emotional dependence is being formed with an individual outside of the marriage. Carter (2016) reported that the signs can include a lack of verbal and relational intimacy with one's own spouse, increased critical and harsh dialogue exchanged between spouses, emotional depression, lack of physical presence in the family, expression of feelings that their off-line spouse is incapable of meeting their needs, unwillingness to reconcile with their spouse, and desire to abandon the marriage.

The Influence of Marital Disengagement on Marital Quality

A characteristic of poor marital quality, marital disengagement is defined in current research as a gradual loss of love and feelings of apathy towards one's spouse. It is also characterized by an emotional estrangement between spouses resulting from lack of emotional intimacy, and inadequate conflict resolution in the marriage (Abbasi, 2018). According to Abbasi (2018), unions impacted by proliferated disengagement are often called an "empty shell", or "stable-unsatisfactory marriages" in current literature. Existing relational studies focusing on stable-unsatisfactory marriages and social media use, state that the emergence of marital disengagement in married Facebook users primarily stems from lack of netiquette use, inadequate conflict resolution, lack of emotional intimacy, a controlling spouse, jealousy, and surveillance behaviors (Abbasi, 2018). Leonhardt et al. (2020) study highlighted the sense of power discrepancy that new research has shown to occur in marriages suffering from low marital quality, poor commitment, and emotional estrangement. Their study explained that spouses of such marriages often feel that their level of influence over their spouse has been diminished by the current power that their spouse's virtual connections and maladaptive practices (i.e., emotional online infidelity behaviors via Facebook) now have over them.

Current correlational research suggests that married spouses who reported low marital quality and low commitment reported a higher level of interest in engaging in emotional online infidelity behaviors and connecting with potential relationship alternatives via Facebook (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018). Current studies show that there is, in fact, a negative relationship between marital quality and interest in

romantic alternatives (Abbasi, 2018). These findings imply that low marital quality and high marital disengagement may contribute to married Facebook users' decision to engage in emotional infidelity behaviors via Facebook communication features, thus creating a cycle, further damaging the emotional bond, commitment, psychological dependence, and marital quality of heterosexual married Facebook users.

Facebook's Influence on Marital Quality

The negative emotional, relational, mental, and spiritual impact of exchanging emotional and sexual content with the extradyadic partner is underestimated (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017). Empirical studies have reported a positive correlation between Facebook use and characteristics of troubled marriages and a negative correlation between Facebook use and marital quality (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018). The statistical reasoning behind this is that current research has found that Facebook use is heavily associated with frequent marital conflicts, excessive and compulsive Facebook use, physical and emotional infidelity, increase in jealousy and surveillance behaviors, retaliatory behaviors, spousal distrust, marital dissatisfaction, low commitment levels, and marital dissolution in married Facebook users (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018).

One of the most reported disturbances related to Facebook use is the fact that it deflects time and emotional investments away from the off-line relationship, often leading to a higher level of psychological and emotional dependence on interactions with Facebook friends of another sex, than the primary spouse, thus constituting Facebook infidelity.

The functions of Facebook's communication features are cited in existing social media and relational literature as facilitators of online infidelity behaviors such as flirting,

online emotional intimacy, and online sexual behaviors in the form of hot chatting, private messaging inappropriate pictures and videos, and the use of the Facebook audio call function to privately discuss emotional and sexual needs. However, recent studies state that the most consistently reported Facebook emotional extramarital behavior leading to poor marital quality, is emotional disclosure (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018).

Positive Correlation Between Facebook Intrusion and Poor Marital Quality

Facebook Intrusion, a term used interchangeably with the term Facebook addiction, has been the subject of a thriving diversity of studies. In contrast, studies assessing the relationship between Facebook intrusion and marital quality are significantly lacking at present (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018, 2017). Frequently cited as a rising mental health concern, relational studies have defined Facebook intrusion or Facebook addiction as the excessive and compulsive use of and extreme attachment to Facebook that interferes with daily functioning and maintenance of personal and professional responsibilities, areas of social involvement, and romantic and familial off-line relationships (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Błachnio et al., 2019).

Facebook intrusion is often referenced as Facebook addiction due to its psychological and physical presentation closely resembling that of a substance addiction as it is associated with symptoms of tolerance, withdrawal, mood modifying experiences, conflict, and relapse (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Błachnio et al., 2019). Abbasi (2018) expanded on the symptoms of addiction often seen in Facebook intrusion as he stated that dependent Facebook users also suffer from rumination, deficient self-regulation, mood lability, cognitive pre-occupation, isolation from social interests outside

of Facebook, concealment of the addictive behaviors (i.e., logging onto Facebook while in the bathroom or hiding in closets, etc.), escapism, and manipulative and provocative behaviors.

According to Błachnio et al. (2019), the manifestation of Facebook intrusion presents in three phrases: withdrawal, relapse and reinstatement, and euphoria. The onset of phrase 1, withdrawal, typically occurs because of an abrupt termination or decrease in access to the site or one's profile. Phrase 2, relapse and reinstatement consists of individual failure to control impulses causing one to revert back to former habits of excessive use of Facebook communication features. This phrase also presents with experiences of distress, therefore hindering their ability to reduce the frequency and extent of their use. Lastly, phrase 3, euphoria, presents with feelings of happiness and enthusiasm resulting from their sense of connectedness with Facebook friends and features (Błachnio et al., 2019).

Hertlein and Piercy (2012) emphasized the importance of differentiating between symptoms and responses to the phases of Facebook intrusions to determine to the root of its manifestation. This helps determine if the spouse's symptoms and response to the phrases of Facebook intrusion are pathological, thereby indirectly impacting the marital quality of their off-line relationship, or whether the symptoms and phasal responses are simply the result of infatuation and penchant for romantic alternatives, thus serving as a direct impact to their marital quality (Hertlein & Piercy, 2012). They further explained that the best way to decipher between the two is to identify whether the spouse's time is spent interacting with various people, Facebook marketplace, Facebook games, etc. or if

the spouse is spending an excessive amount of time interacting with a specific or select Facebook friends of another sex. That said, if it is found to be various Facebook friends, games etc. then it is more appropriate to conclude that the symptoms of Facebook intrusion negatively impacting the marriage are a manifestation of an underlying mental disorder. On the other hand, if it is found that the spouse is spending an excessive amount of time interacting with a specific or select Facebook friends of another sex, then it would be appropriate to consider this an emotional affair (Hertlein & Piercy, 2012). With multiple attempts to minimize their attachment and excessive use, Facebook addiction cycling through these phrases represent a critical point in their dependence at which the psychological symptoms associated with Facebook intrusion worsens, leading to comorbid symptoms of anxiety or depression etc. as the Facebook user struggles to cope with the symptoms and repercussions of their addiction, as well as the environmental backlash of one's online extramarital behaviors (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018). In support of the focus of this study, moving forward, all references to Facebook intrusion will focus on Facebook intrusion resulting from emotional infidelity and its effects on marital quality.

Linkage Between Emotional Online Infidelity and Marital Quality

The quality of a marriage weakens as one or both partners develop an emotional connection and level of intimacy with their extradyadic partner that supersedes the primary relationship or marriage; hence, officially constituting an emotional online affair. Existing research states that emotional online infidelity consists of any form of extramarital interactions or behaviors occurring via the internet that is perceived to have

the potential to form inappropriate emotional connections or present as a form of disrespect to the primary spouse, therefore violating the trust and commitment within the marriage (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Mao & Raguram, 2009). Although morally seen as an act of character assassination, marital research has conducted due diligence in providing insight on the reasoning for spouses engaging in such behaviors, despite of the potential consequences.

According to Cravens and Whiting (2014) and Mao and Raguram (2009) research has foregrounded emotional online infidelity as a probable marital trauma resulting from an underlying problem present in the marriage long before the spouse's decision to engage in inappropriate behaviors via Facebook. Schade and Sandberg (2012) explained emotional infidelity from a marital trauma perspective, as he stated that emotional infidelity results from the absence of support during crisis points, high stress experiences, or periods during which high levels of emotional and physical affection are needed. They further explained that emotional infidelity can be experienced as a marital trauma due to how it impacts both spouse's individual marital satisfaction, their opinion of their spouse, and the quality of the marriage, placing both spouses in a vulnerable position. That said, engagement in emotional online infidelity is not an overnight decision as it is provoked by underlying feelings of confinement to an idle marriage, boredom, sexual dissatisfaction, and poor communication. It is the precursor to low marital satisfaction and poor marital quality, resulting from the adulterous spouses veiled feelings of helplessness in their inability to express their deepest intimacy needs and desires in a

manner that grabs their spouse's attention and ignites positive change in the marriage (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Mao & Raguram, 2009).

Facebook communication features offer adulterous spouses the platform to pursue romantic alternatives that are equipped to meet their emotional intimacy needs in ways that their off-line partner is not. According to Huang (2016), the emotional support received from the extradyadic partner is perceived as an advantage with layers of benefits. Engaging in online emotional infidelity with a virtual extradyadic partner gives them the liberty to fill the voids stemming from the shortcomings of their off-line spouse and keep the assets tied to remaining in the marriage. Research states that online extradyadic partners provide a level of companionship and emotional support that makes the adulterous spouse feel heard, cared for, supported, and valued. They provide knowledge, financial, and informational support such as recommendations, sound advice, and even tangible resources during times when the adulterous spouse has expressed feelings of distress with solving personal or professional problems and financial burdens (Huang, 2016).

The quick dynamics of the online social penetration process causes the bond, and intimate feelings between the duo to escalate quickly because of the accelerated level of dependence formed between the two. The high reciprocal disclosure between the adulterous spouse and the extradyadic partner commonly consists of them improving one another's self-confidence and esteem, supporting one another in coping with mental health issues and life stressors, and motivating and supporting one another to pursue personal and professional goals (Huang, 2016; Kashian et al., 2017). The truth of the

matter is that these could be areas of major support that could be absent in the marriage. The perceived value of engaging in the online affair is therefore placed higher than the perceived threats associated with the discovery of the infidelity.

As the duo continues to engage in reciprocal disclosure, they begin to also become psychologically dependent upon one another, further fueling their emotional and mental bond and intimate feelings. Current studies report that disclosure of positive and negative experiences to a trusted individual improves physical and mental health (Huang, 2016). Moreover, the benefits of disclosure are broad as it not only improves the psychological well-being of the individual, but it also generates fortuitous receipt of emotional, mental, or informational support (Huang, 2016). This in turn, heightens the adulterous spouse's feelings of being cared for or valued by the extradyadic partner especially if receiving unsought support is considered a weakness in the spouse. On the other hand, if the adulterous spouse is providing that same level of support to the extradyadic partner and is receiving positive responses from the partner, this too heightens the adulterous spouse's feelings of being valued and cared for. This can also heighten the adulterous spouse's perceived value of maintaining the extramarital relationship especially if this level of emotional support is rejected by the off-line spouse.

The social penetration theory explains that the reciprocal disclosure and support is perceived by both as a reciprocal reward, causing them to perceive the relational benefits of their involvement to be higher than the potential consequences (Huang, 2016; Kashian et al., 2017). Their joint acknowledgement of their bond, mutual intimate feelings, and reflection on their individual areas of personal improvement resulting from their

reciprocal disclosure, confirms their mutual feelings of trust and appreciation and deepens exchange levels (Huang, 2016; Kashian et al., 2017). This also facilitates mutual commitment to maintain the role of providing emotional support to one another (Kashian et al., 2017). This emotion-binding agreement causes an adverse effect on the adulterous spouse's level of emotional investment and commitment to the marriage, and the overall quality of the marriage (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014). The participation of the social penetration process as the bonding glue between the adulterous spouse and the extradyadic partner was confirmed in the study of Huang (2016) as it reported that high intimate disclosure not only plays a direct role in the development of intimate relationships, but it also plays a direct role in their maintenance.

The gradual increase in the perceived value of the online emotional affair causes an adverse decline in the marital quality of the off-line relationship (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017). Recent studies report that the destructive value of an online emotional affair is comparable to that of a sexual affair (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017). One of the most reported factors of an emotional online affair is the amount of time and attention directed away from the marriage due to the amount of time that the adulterous spouse spends compulsively communicating with the extradyadic partner via Facebook communicative features (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017).

Existing literature states that the adulterous spouse's symptoms of Facebook Intrusion are often used to their advantage as it is used as a tool to not only have their needs met but also as a tool of escape from the turmoil of their marriage (Abbasi, &

Alghamdi, 2017). Although it may work for the moment, it intensifies the ongoing marital conflicts because the time that the adulterous spouse could benefit from using to address their differences with their spouse, is dumped into what the spouse perceives to be their Facebook addiction (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017). As explained by Cravens and Whiting (2016), Facebook intrusion does not consist of the adulterous spouse's severe attachment to the site itself. The adulterous spouse is significantly attached and psychologically dependent upon the romantic alternative that they linked themselves to through Facebook. This allows the romantic alternative to consume a large portion of their daily routine that would normally be directed towards taking care of personal and professional responsibilities.

Relational studies report that marital conflicts stemming from excessive Facebook use is negatively related to perceived marital satisfaction, marital quality, love, trust, and commitment (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017). Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017) expanded on Smith (2014) reports, stating that adulterous spouses demonstrating symptoms of Facebook intrusion reported more frequent arguments related to their lack of engagement in the home, decreased desire to engage in intimate behaviors with their spouse, decreased disclosure, and secretive, and emotionally distant behaviors. The adulterous spouses further reported that this also triggered low trust, jealousy, and surveillance behaviors in their spouses.

The Traumatic Impact of Online Emotional Infidelity on Marital Quality

In support of the findings of Smith (2014) and Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017), Cravens et al. (2013) stated that the spouse's observation of emotional and behavioral

differences in the adulterous spouse such as changes in sleep patterns, increased demand for privacy while utilizing Facebook communication features, ignoring responsibilities, evidence of lying, personality changes, loss of interest in sex, and declining investment in the relationship, evoked their suspicion regarding the potential culprit causing marital disengagement in their spouse. According to Cravens et al. (2013), the spouse's observations and suspiciousness gave rise to their individual presentation of Facebook intrusion symptoms to include compulsive investigatory behaviors. Ultimately, this led to the discovery of the adulterous spouse's emotional extramarital communication with Facebook friends of another sex.

The discovery of the adulterous spouse's online emotional infidelity is traumatic in nature as it causes a damaging effect to both spouses as well as the quality of the marriage. Existing literature emphasized that the manner of which the infidelity is discovered, presents a greater level of trauma to both spouses, with discovery through a third-party source being cited as the most damaging method (Cravens et al., 2013; Cravens, & Whiting, 2014; Schade & Sandberg, 2012). "Red-handed", explicit information-seeking, and discovery through the adulterous spouse's unsolicited disclosure were also cited but listed as methods of discovery (Cravens & Whiting, 2014).

The degree of threat to the identity of the nonparticipating spouse and privacy of the marriage is considered an additional source of trauma in the discovery of infidelity (Cravens & Whiting, 2014). Cravens et al. (2013) explained the importance of considering the nature of the Facebook status posting and tagging features when assessing its influence on the spouse's experiences of heightened symptoms. That said, if

these features were used by the adulterous spouse, extradyadic partner, the non-participating spouse, or friends and family of the trio that were knowledgeable about the affair, the use of those features made the affair public knowledge to their entire online network of Facebook Friends. Not only does this present a severe level of embarrassment to the non-participating spouse but it has also stripped the married couple of the power to mutually decide who the affair will be disclosed to, how it will be disclosed, and the most suitable time to disclose the affair (Zurbriggen et al. 2016). Their lack of privacy in this sensitive issue totally depletes their autonomy to plan how they will move forward or protect their marriage from the influence of manipulation and negative encouragement from their Facebook friends and family members (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013; Zurbriggen et al. 2016).

Furthermore, spouses who have experienced emotional infidelity at the hands of their partners, are referred to as injured spouses in existing literature due to the level of psychological and emotional trauma experienced upon discovery (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens et al., 2013). For that reason, the non-participating spouse will now be referred to as the injured spouse.

New research has honed-in on the psychological response of the injured spouse to the discovery of the adulterous spouse's emotional extradyadic behaviors via Facebook. Studies now highlight it as a multi-layered trauma-based clinical issue presenting with emotional and behavioral effects such as suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, helplessness, victimization, feelings of abandonment, overwhelming feelings of powerlessness, panic attacks, disturbing thoughts and feelings, vivid dreams, responses of

mental and physical distress to infidelity related cues, and domestic violence (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens et al., 2013). Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017) provided more insight on the psychological experiences of the injured spouse as they further explained that the presentation of the as forementioned symptoms resembles that of the symptoms of a trauma disorder.

Studies report that the discovery of the infidelity also triggers similar symptoms of psychological distress in the adulterous spouse such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and homicidal ideation, helplessness, feelings of abandonment, panic attacks, disturbing thoughts and feelings, vivid dreams, and domestic violence, especially if the discovery led to an abrupt loss of the assets associated with the marriage, a marital separation, or divorce (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018). Complications experienced while trying to maintain or the separate from the affair with the extradyadic partner also serves as a trigger for the adulterous spouse's psychological distress as this could also result in an abrupt loss of assets. Whether together or apart, having to cope with the symptoms of all the above, post-discovery, presents a more significant level of impact on their marital quality being that both partners could experience ongoing mental health issues ranging in severity, that negatively influences their ability to function. This in turn, could also impact the dynamics of the home (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018).

According to Cravens et al. (2013), studies focusing on the systemic consequences and emotional investment needed to manage the marital effects of online emotional infidelity and how it affects both spouses, are few and far in between. However, those that did found that the marital experiences following the discovery of the

infidelity consisted of a three stage, complex and interactive process (Cravens et al., 2013). Stage 1, the emotional roller coaster stage is characterized by a period of intense emotional reactions and uncertainty about the future of the marriage. Stage 2, the moratorium stage is described as the stage during which both spouses spend more time apart, with people of their support system or participating in therapeutic activities to cope and regroup. Lastly, stage 3, the trust building stage presents as the most challenging stage in that it is the starting point of the couples attempt to rebuild their marriage through joint effort in establishing better communication and working towards forgiveness (Cravens et al., 2013). Joint engagement in this process has both a direct and indirect effect on the restoration of commitment, satisfaction, and quality of the marriage (Cravens et al., 2013).

Current research states that the couple may experience regression as they attempt to restore the marriage (Cravens et al., 2013). Rumination on the extent of the adulterous spouse's emotional affair, depth and frequency of the reciprocal disclosure between the adulterous spouse and the extradyadic partner, as well as the types of interaction facilitated through the Facebook communication features frequently surface and trigger feelings of hurt, anger, retaliatory behaviors, fighting, excessive arguing, loss of trust, shock, jealousy, and embarrassment in both spouses, throughout the process. Despite of their repetitive attempts to restore their commitment in their marriage, research states that both spouses will commonly fluctuate in their decision to either remain in the marriage or move forward with a divorce (Cravens, & Whiting, 2014, 2016). The study of Abbasi and Alghamdi, (2017) supports the findings of Cravens and Whiting (2014) and Cravens and

Whiting (2016), confirming the commonality of married couples experiencing difficulty with moving forward from their traumatic experiences of Facebook infidelity. Abbasi and Alghamdi, (2017) also identified the nature of online emotional infidelity via Facebook communication features as a primary contributing factor, further complicating the couples attempts of restoration. It was further explained that the complications also stem from low sufficient resources and vague, poorly structured Facebook disclosure boundaries.

The Correlational Relationship Between Netiquette Use and Marital Quality

Current relational studies have reported that equivocal boundaries and vaguely established guidelines regarding the limitations on communication via Facebook features, can significantly jeopardize the quality of a marriage (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Carter, 2016). Mutually establishing clear, detailed, and realistic expectations for Facebook use is essential in stabilizing fragile marriages with a history of transgressions such as infidelity, as failure to enforce netiquette is a detriment to the quality of the marriage (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Carter, 2016). The rationale behind this is that it places marriages in a vulnerable position, causing them to be more susceptible to marital traumas such as online emotional infidelity.

Carter (2016) reported that injured spouses as well as adulterous spouses expressed having conflicting views about what they considered extramarital behaviors via Facebook and what was considered not to fall along those lines and that their conflicting views only surfaced after the discovery of the affair. Carter (2016) further reported that both spouses expressed that they did not consider implementing any form of boundaries

for Facebook use prior to the discovery because they both assumed that knowing what was inappropriate was “common sense” and therefore did not need to be mutually discussed or agreed on. Strikingly similar to Carter (2016), research conducted by Cravens (2013) also revealed that spouses who did attempt to implement netiquette into their daily interactions with Facebook friends, had not mutually clarified and agreed on the use of the boundaries. Again, it was assumed that they shared the same views, and it was not until online extramarital behaviors were detected that both communicated their differential views on which behaviors and forms of communication should be deemed inappropriate in their marriage (Abbasi, and Alghamdi, 2018).

According to Cravens et al. (2013), it is common for the adulterous and injured spouse to acknowledge their need for netiquette by putting forth effort to discuss and mutually agree on disclosure boundaries once they have reached the trust building stage of the discovery process. With feelings of fight or flight at an all-time high, at this point, both spouses are so disturbed by their experiences of marital trauma that they approach this new stage eager to commit to implementing disclosure boundaries in their individual Facebook interactions with another sex. This stage also evokes mutual desire to recommit and re-establish trust and marital satisfaction. For some, doing so served as their saving grace, their final tool of success to support their transition into a healthier chapter of marriage (Cravens et al., 2013). However, according to Abbasi and Alghamdi (2017), trouble strikes the couple at this stage too.

One of the primary reasons infidelity is the most cited reason for divorce is because it is the heaviest and most complicated marital trauma for couples to cope with.

It is a marital trauma that marital literature states sways in its daily presentation (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017). Research shows that married couples with a history of online emotional infidelity exhibit significantly higher rates of volatile marital conflicts to include physical and verbal aggression, than couples without a history of infidelity. That said, in order for any couple to withstand the lingering effects and transcend back to a place of high marital quality, high commitment to enforcing netiquette in the marriage is needed.

It is imperative for couples who desire to restore the quality of their marriage, to emotionally invest into the process of restoration, and take purposeful strides with resolution, acceptance, empathy, and creativity (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2018). That includes demonstrating patience with spouse's who are still excessively arguing, and demonstrating symptoms of Facebook intrusion, jealousy, surveillance behaviors, loss of trust, shock, hurt, anger, and retaliatory behaviors, as this is not an overnight healing process (Cravens, & Whiting, 2014, 2016). When both spouses demonstrate strong commitment, it becomes a healthy cycle. It communicates feelings of remorse for individual shortcomings as a spouse, emotional support, devotion, positive intentions, and trust, which further facilitates high commitment (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2018). It also reciprocates comfort in being vulnerable and joint perseverance to put forth great effort to apply the agreed upon disclosure boundaries to their ongoing individual Facebook use (Abbasi, 2018).

Essential Components of Netiquette's Influence on Marital Quality

Structurally, it is essential to the marriage for both spouses to establish and agree upon clear, realistic rules for each area of concern in terms of any Facebook engagement with virtual friends of another sex, and to specify in detail, what form and degrees of communication is deemed acceptable and unacceptable (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Zurbriggen et al. 2016). Existing literature places great emphasis on honest dialogue, as it is significant to the success of their use of netiquette, for both spouses to express their reasoning for why all rules should be in place and how the rules will be enforced. This should also include specification of which rules apply to which Facebook features, and the consequences resulting from violated rules (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Helsper & Whitty, 2010).

Zurbriggen et al., (2016) placed high importance on spouses discussing all contributing factors influencing the refutation or support of specific rules, even if it reveals underlying insecurities. According to Zurbriggen et al., (2016) cultural differences, triggers for symptoms of mental health disorders, traumatic experiences, as well as self-esteem, the need for popularity, and identification of individual need for and views on public affection are all sensitive areas that must be discussed due to their heavy influence on what spouses consider to be appropriate and inappropriate disclosure on Facebook. The negotiation of disclosure boundaries presents as an emotional challenge within itself. However, both spouses must again, commit to and tolerate the process in effort to prevent regression and to protect the quality of the marriage from future trauma (Zurbriggen et al. 2016).

In closing, Abbasi and Alghamdi (2018) and Cravens and Whiting (2014) explained that in addition to precise construction of disclosure boundaries, couples should also challenge themselves to engage in cautious Facebook use, meaning purposefully avoiding disclosure of any form of intimate information with Facebook friends of another sex to decrease their chances of violating the rules. To supplement the disclosure boundaries, it was also recommended that couples purposefully present themselves as a happy couple on both of their profile's despite of their present marital issues, and challenge themselves to engage in a higher level of trust by sharing their Facebook information to include the names and passwords to all accounts. Couples who deposit this level of investment into their marriages also reap the benefits of a higher quality of marriage (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2018).

Summary of Existing Literature Related to the Study

New relational literature grounds were broken in the study of Helsper and Whitty (2010), setting themselves apart as the first in this area of study to focus on netiquette and its influence on relationship quality. To my knowledge, their study currently remains as the only study in this area of focus as all others have primarily focused on the use of netiquette in professional online correspondence (Helsper, & Whitty, 2010; Lee et al., 2019). This was further confirmed by it being the only study referenced in all core articles highlighting the potential benefits of couples implementing netiquette in their daily Facebook use (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens, & Whiting, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013).

Closely related to the focus of this study, Helsper and Whitty (2010) conducted a quantitative study examining whether married heterosexual spouses develop a similar set of rules and expectations regarding disclosure and participation in activities via the internet and if any contrasting data could be explained by gender differences. Their study also explored how couples utilize the internet to engage in surveillance behaviors to monitor each other's online pursuits. The reports of their study revealed that the highest percentage of agreement between partners was found for those activities that have been labeled "infidelity" behaviors (Helsper & Whitty, 2010). In 90% of couples both partners were unhappy for the other partner to fall in love with someone else online, and 84% of couples both were unhappy for the other engaging in cybersex. For the other extramarital online behavior's, the level of agreement ranged between 69% of couples who were unhappy (flirting online) to 79% of couples unhappy with the behavior (disclosing intimate details about themselves) (Helsper & Whitty, 2010). Existing literature has pinpointed several gaps in the literature, to include that little is known about the use of netiquette by couples during online interactions via internet or social media sites (Lee et al., 2019; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Cravens & Whiting, 2016). There is also an immense gap in existing literature examining netiquette's affect on relationship quality (Lee et al., 2019; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Cravens & Whiting, 2016). Thus, this study was a necessity to reduce the gap and extend knowledge in relational literature.

With significant divergence from the study of Helsper and Whitty (2010), this study provided numerical data clarifying the relationships between netiquette, online emotional infidelity, and marital quality in heterosexual married Facebook users. This

study also provided numerical data that clarified netiquette's role as a mediating factor in the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality. Furthermore, the numerical data generated from this study supported the rationale behind existing literature identifying netiquette as a tool of defense to prevent the occurrence of marital trauma resulting from online emotional infidelity via Facebook.

Summary and Conclusions

The fact that there are limited studies of similar focus, presents this topic as open research-grounds (Cravens, & Whiting, 2016; Lee et al., 2019; Helsper, & Whitty, 2010). However, understanding these relationships from a statistical perspective could help pinpoint imperative areas for future research and provide implications for therapeutic practice. Within a quantitative design, I provide a detailed plan of methodology for this study in Chapter 3. I also discussed details of the research design and its connection to the RQs and hypotheses to include details regarding the three assessments (EDB, PAUM, and Happily (N)ever After Survey) as instrumentation for the study. Information on the targeted population, sampling strategy, method for data collection, and data analysis plan was provided. Rationale supporting the selection of the multiple regression analysis and Sobel test as statistical tests to test the hypotheses, was also discussed in the forthcoming chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 demonstrated that online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) is negatively related to marital quality.

Comparatively, those existing studies have also suggested that online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) could be used to intervene against the detriment of such behaviors, on the marital quality of heterosexual married Facebook users (Zurbriggen et al., 2016). However, there is insufficient existing literature that provides statistical research on these postulations, hence, validating the purpose of this study.

For these reasons, my objective was to evaluate the significance of the relationships between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity), online disclosure boundaries (netiquette), and marital quality. I wanted to further existing research (e.g., Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al., 2016). I also sought to determine the degree of mediation presented by online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality. The degree to which both online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) predicted or showed significant correlation with marital quality was also determined in this study.

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology for this study. In the Research Design and Rationale section, I provide justification for the approach, purpose, and methods utilized within the study. The sampling frame is also explained. Following is a discussion of the instrumentation utilized for all variables, to include details of background information and the reliability and validity scores of each measure. The conclusion of this chapter consists of a description of the data collection and analysis plan, potential threats

to the validity of the study, and an assurance of ethical procedures, followed by a summary of the chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

To my knowledge, Helsper and Whitty's (2010) study remains unaccompanied in marital quality research focusing on the correlation between online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and marital quality in internet users. This was confirmed during the review of the literature process as their article was the only one referenced in existing studies focusing on Facebook infidelity and its influence on marital quality (i.e., Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al., 2016). Helsper and Whitty's (2010) study broke ground in marital and social media literature, stepping forward as the first to examine whether partners within married couples shared similar views on acceptable and unacceptable online behaviors (netiquette).

Helsper and Whitty (2010) reported favorable results, indicating that the highest percentage of agreement on netiquette and expectations between partners was found for those activities that are considered online infidelity behaviors to include intimate disclosure with another sex. In this study, I expanded upon the findings and recommendations of Helsper and Whitty, shifting the focus to examining the influence of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) as the mediator in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality in heterosexual married Facebook users. I also sought to determine the extent to which both online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and online intimate disclosure with

another sex (online emotional infidelity) predict or show significant correlation with marital quality. I predicted that expounding upon the existing studies from that angle would advance knowledge in specialized areas of research focusing on online interpersonal development, marital quality, and social media use. Specifically, that approach also provided a more in-depth scope of the true function of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and its relationships with online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and marital quality in heterosexual Facebook users.

As stated by Warner (2021), nonexperimental research designs, also referenced as correlational studies, are those that measure two or more variables that are meaningfully interrelated in a mechanism that sheds light on a naturally occurring relationship. Verification of the interrelation between the variables typically takes place during the literature review process. It is imperative that the researcher verify whether there is a causal or correlational relationship between the variables as doing so determines the most appropriate research design and statistical analysis test for the study (Warner, 2021). To my knowledge, other researchers have not manipulated either of the predictive variables nor established temporal precedence, thus preventing the ability to conclude a causal interference between the variables (see Warner, 2021). However, the strong correlation between the two predictive variables and the outcome variable (as two separately grouped variable pairs) was heavily emphasized throughout existing literature. The literature also emphasized the influence that online disclosure boundaries had on the relationship between online intimate disclosure and marital quality.

After a thorough review of correlational literature and potential statistical methods, I concluded that a quantitative, nonexperimental correlational research method was appropriate to determine the significance between the predictor and outcome variables. Moreover, I determined, through an analysis of the behaviors associated with each variable, that performing a parametric test such as a multiple regression analysis, followed by a Sobel test, would be most applicable for generating definite results that better clarified whether notable relationships truly exist between the variables (see Warner, 2021). The multiple regression analysis analyzed online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 / online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (X_2 / netiquette) as predictor variables to determine their potential correlation with marital quality, (Y) the outcome variable. A Sobel test was performed to further analyze the relationship between the variables, as it was anticipated that doing so would provide insight on the extent to which the effect of emotional online infidelity on marital quality is reduced when online disclosure boundaries (mediator variable) is used.

According to Warner (2021) the following assumptions must be met in order for the research design and results to be deemed reliable, valid, predictable, and unaltered by the researcher:

- Linear relationship: A scatterplot must show a linear relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1) and marital quality (Y) and online disclosure boundaries (X_2) and marital quality (Y) as quantitative variable pairs.

- Homogenous variance: A scatterplot must demonstrate homogeneous variance between the variable pairs.
- Multivariate normality: An examination of a histogram must show a normal distribution of scores.
- Outliers: There must be no extreme outliers. However, if outliers are present, the researcher is required to address this issue by removing or modifying the scores. The modification process could consist of the researcher examining the plots of residuals and (or) requesting and examining additional information provided by the participant. This additional information should also be saved in SPSS with data.

Warner further explained that it is often complicated to satisfy the assumptions of parametric tests such as a multiple regression analysis. In the event that the assumptions were violated, I would have used a suitable nonparametric analysis.

Utilizing the survey method is effective in collecting generalizable attitudinal, behavioral, or factual data that can be used to present commonality and draw conclusions from the sample to the population (Creswell, 2009). Online, self-report surveys often serve in the role of advocacy for participants as this form of data collection provides a notable level of privacy, allowing for optimal comfortability while divulging personal information to often sensitive questions (Creswell, 2009). Considering that the nature of this study focused on a sensitive topic that would require participants to report information that would typically be undisclosed and kept private, I determined that the online, self-report survey method would be most suitable for the research design and data

collection needs of this study. This method also aligned with this study's progress goals as online self-report surveys have a higher potential to provide a quick return of completed surveys than traditional data collection methods, which was beneficial to this study (Creswell, 2009). The survey was administered upon receipt of approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The inclusion of questions from three instruments—EDB, PAUM, and the Happily (N)ever After Survey—supported the research design and helped to reveal significant relationships between the variables. The resulting knowledge provides insight on additional areas for future research.

Methodology

Population

The units of analysis in this study consisted of active Facebook users over the age of 18 who self-identified as adult male and female, married, heterosexual individuals. I was unable to approximate the targeted population size. However, the targeted goal was to obtain 100 participants. Participants met criteria for this study based on their current marriage or relationship status, sexual orientation, current Facebook membership status, and ability to reflect on their previous experiences of disclosing intimate information to Facebook friends of another sex and utilizing disclosure boundaries via the Facebook communication features offered through the site. Facebook offers several features that serve as avenues of emotional online infidelity such as the status updates feature to share current personal needs, feelings, family issues, marital woes, pictures with picture tagging options, sexual interests, and livestreaming of videos. Facebook also offers more personal communication features such as private messages, private videos, and audio

calls through the users account (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Anis-ul-Haque & Anjum, 2015; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013).

Sampling and Sampling Procedures

Non-probability sampling techniques such as opportunistic sampling and snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for this study. In support of the researchers sampling selections, Balnaves and Caputi (2001) explained that non-probability sampling techniques are commonly used in studies where researchers are unable to guarantee that all units in their proposed population will have an equal chance of being selected. Snowball sampling was used by way of Facebook as use of the social networking platform has become prevalent in survey research assessing attitudes and behaviors among diverse adult age groups (Pedersen & Kurz, 2017). The snowball sampling strategy is reliant upon the judgement and expertise of the researcher to refer relevant people to the survey. It is also reliant on the participants to refer other relevant Facebook users to the survey, and so forth (Pedersen & Kurz, 2017; Balnaves & Caputi, 2001). On the other hand, opportunistic sampling by way of the Walden Participant Pool, was also used as an additional method of sampling. This method consists of the researcher selecting participants based on the likeliness that they will participate in the study (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001).

Facebook has been cited as a great platform for researchers utilizing the snowball sampling method, also referred to as respondent driven sampling, for recruitment (Pedersen & Kurz, 2017). According to Pedersen and Kurz (2017), current clinical mental health studies reported that recruitment via Facebook has been successful in

reaching groups that are typically difficult to reach through traditional participant recruiting methods. Researchers have also reported that recruitment through Facebook generated adequate samples in brief periods of time, was cost-effective, and provided an adequate way to locate participants for follow-up research (Pedersen & Kurz, 2017). The affordances of the site (i.e. communication features) offers the researcher instantaneous access to countless Facebook user participants to refer to the survey. Likewise, these affordances are also available to the participants, which also gives them a convenient and instantaneous method to refer additional Facebook users to the survey (Pedersen & Kurz, 2017). Comparatively, similar affordances of convenience and instantaneous access to countless participants are also offered to the researcher by the Walden Participant Pool as well.

Alternative non-probability sampling strategies such as stratified random sampling and simple random sampling were considered for this study as they both generate samples that would serve as accurate representations of the population. The findings of both sample strategies would be highly generalizable to the population as well (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001). However, in comparison to the opportunistic sampling and snowball sampling strategies, it was determined that the potential costs and increased duration time associated with those methods would not be feasible and, therefore, less advantageous for the researcher (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001; Pedersen & Kurz, 2017). Opportunistic sampling and snowball sampling were determined to be the most advantageous choices as they offer a more proficient way to screen out participants who do not meet criteria to its entirety. Additionally, the participant-selection role that the

researcher plays in both methods allows for the researcher to formulate a sample frame with high potential to elucidate the experiences of heterosexual married couples who actively utilize the Facebook social networking site. For those reasons, the opportunistic sampling and snowball sampling strategies were selected for this study.

Sampling Criteria and Size

The inclusionary criteria for this study specified that all participants must be active Facebook members, at least 18 years of age, and have been legally married or in a committed heterosexual relationship for at least 1 year. It was also included in the inclusionary criteria that all units of analysis must be able to fluently read and comprehend the English language. This requirement ensured that the participants had the ability to read and understand the items on the survey as well as the debriefing information and informed consent form.

Gall et al. (2007) recommended that researchers use at least 15 participants per predictor variable when referencing an alpha of 0.05. Gall et al. (2007) also emphasized the importance of researchers aiming to secure a range of 30 to 500 participants when using parametric tests such a multiple regression analysis. Similar to Gall et al.'s (2007) recommendations for determining appropriate sample sizes, Balnaves and Caputi (2001), recommended that researchers set the targeted number of participants at 10 times as large as the number of variables in the study (p.94). After consideration of their recommendations as they relate to this study, I determined that setting a targeted number of participants ranging from 30 to 100 participants would be most appropriate for this

study. It was also my desired goal to achieve a medium effect size value of .15 and a statistical power of .80.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participants were recruited through the Godly Marriages, Church on Sunday, Therapy on Monday, and other relevant Facebook social groups. For the purposes of establishing a rapport with the administrators and additional members of the groups, I submitted several posts regarding couples and marriage motivational quotes and therapeutic marriage maintenance ideas based on their daily topics. I also participated by responding to the weekly group topics related to couples and marriages.

I was granted the permission to utilize the as forementioned groups to disperse the SurveyMonkey link for this study by the administrators of several relevant Facebook social groups. The SurveyMonkey link included a brief description of study to include my name, the title, purpose of the study, and required time commitment. A screening protocol was also included, which explained that all participants must be at least 18 years age, currently in a legal heterosexual marriage or committed relationship for at least 1 year, and able to thoroughly read and comprehend the English language. After acknowledging that they meet all criteria, participants were required to complete a consent form and provide their electronic signature prior to submitting the form and initiating the survey completion process.

The Walden Participant Pool data collection process consisted of several steps. To initiate this process, an email was sent to the Walden University's Participant Pool to request an application and express interest in adding the Participant Pool as a recruitment

method. Upon receipt, the Request for Change in Procedures form was completed and submitted to the IRB. After receiving approval from the IRB and the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, the researcher account was created. Next, supportive documents and information was uploaded to the account to include, all three self-report questionnaires, and population and sampling information such as details of exclusionary and inclusionary criteria. As an online survey study, the account was constructed so that upon initiation to join the study, each potential participant was provided a brief description of study to include my name, the title, purpose of the study, and required time commitment. The inclusionary criteria was also included, which explained that all participants must be an active Facebook member, at least 18 years of age, in a legal heterosexual marriage or committed relationship for at least 1 year and able to thoroughly read and comprehend the English language. To satisfy the university requirements, the IRB approval number (01-24-22-0397548) was also included. The EDB, PAUM, and Happily (N)ever After Survey were uploaded in the order listed to create a flow similar to the presentation of the relationship between the variables in the literature.

As mandated by the university, I ensured that all as forementioned recruitment procedural steps and information received approval before being made available for potential participants. I eliminated the need for names and other identifying information in effort to protect the personal information of all participants. Lastly, an informed consent form was structured so that each participant was able to provide their consent simply by scrolling down to complete and submit the survey. The consent form

thoroughly explained that scrolling or progressing forward to the survey indicates that one has read the entire consent form and agrees to participate.

Instrumentation and Operationalization of Constructs

I included questions from three published self-report instruments in the survey: EDB, PAUM, and the Happily (N)ever After Survey. The EDB (Luo et al., 2010; was used to assess the predictive variable, online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity). The PAUM (Gerson et al., 2017;) was used to assess the predictive variable, online disclosure boundaries (netiquette). Last, Finn et al.'s (2020) Happily (N)ever After Survey was used to assess the outcome variable, marital quality.

Within the validation studies of each measure, it was reported that the “test content may be used for non-commercial” research and educational purposes without seeking written permission, therefore authorizing use of all 3 assessments in this study (Luo et al., 2010; Gerson et al., 2017; Finn et al., 2020).

The Extradynamic Behavior Inventory (EDB)

The EDB developed by Luo et al. (2010) was significantly influenced by the reports of current infidelity studies and constructed to assess a more relevant and diverse range of extradynamic behaviors such as online and face to face physical and emotional behaviors. The EDB inventory consists of a comprehensive list of 23 face to face and 13 online clearly identified physical and emotional extradynamic behaviors that have been found to be ambiguous in previous studies (Luo et al., 2010). This inventory uses a 5-point Likert scale format (1 = “Did not participate in this behavior because you didn’t want to”, 2 = “Did not participate in this behavior because there was no opportunity”, 3

= “Have participated in this behavior only once”, 4 = “Have participated in this behavior more than once with the same person”, and 5 = “Have participated in this behavior with different people.”) (Luo et al., 2010).

According to Luo et al. (2010), the previous EDB measure was amongst the list of ambiguous measures identified in extradyadic studies, which gave rise to their desire to reassess the measure. Luo et al. (2010) explained the critical importance associated with refining the measure due to the limited scope, vague terms, lack of acknowledgement of online extradyadic interactions, and brief examination of the underlying structure of extradyadic behaviors presented in the previous measure. They further explained that failure to address those limitations with a sense of urgency, through empirical research, would serve as an impediment to future extradyadic behavior studies.

Working from their primary objectives of reconstructing the conceptualization and measurement of EDB and testing its underlying structure of face to face and online extradyadic behaviors, Luo et al. (2010) conducted an Exploratory Factor Analysis on a sample of 342 heterosexual male and female partners who reported being in a committed relationship at the time of participation (Luo et al., 2010). Luo et al. (2010) reported success in their ability to refine and finalize a new EDB based on the results of their study. They also reported that the results of their factor analyses showed that a single-factor model fit face-to-face EDB, whereas a two-factor model was identified as a better fit for online extradyadic interactions: online sexual and online emotional EDB (Luo et al., 2010). The results of their study revealed an alpha reliability of .96 on the final scale of the face-to-face extradyadic behaviors and an alpha reliability of .81 for the first factor

and .83 for the second factor of the two-factor model (Luo et al., 2010). Luo et al. (2010) explained that their results reflected that they accomplished the sole purpose of the study; it presented extradyadic behavior studies with a new measure that covers a clear and comprehensive set of extradyadic behaviors.

The EDB was utilized to measure the online emotional infidelity predictive variable of this study because it closely aligns with and captures the concept of the relational, extramarital, and social media literature referenced in the previous chapter. To support the focus of this study, the online emotional and sexual behavior scales was utilized only. The items of both scales are constructed to assess whether a partner has engaged in online extradyadic sexual and emotional behaviors, frequency of extradyadic encounters, and amount of extradyadic partners. Furthermore, its clearly detailed list of online extradyadic behaviors are almost identical to the extradyadic behaviors highlighted in the literature, spotlighting it as a potential good fit for this study.

The Passive and Active Facebook Use Measure (PAUM)

Gerson et al. (2017) were motivated to develop the PAUM due to the limited availability of published assessments equipped to measure frequency and forms of engagement in a manner that compliments the rapid increase of social research focusing on Facebook use. They further explained that their review of the current literature allowed for them to hone in on the need for measures that are constructed to support the rapid production of social media studies focusing on the interpersonal interactions facilitated using Facebook features, motivational factors for the use of the Facebook site, the dynamics of Facebook relationships, and Facebook-related jealousy and envy (Gerson

et al., 2017). As stated by Gerson et al. (2017), previous Facebook measures reflect accuracy in capturing a full scope of Facebook use. However, they have yet to demonstrate mastery in capturing the full scope of how its members engage with one another in utilizing the most recent additions of communication features offered through the site.

Gerson et al. (2017) clarified the sense of urgency associated with adapting the previous Facebook activity questionnaire (FAQ) to create a more relevant Facebook measure. They emphasized that failure to do so could increase the occurrences of invalid statistical reports in current studies focusing on the impact of present-day Facebook use (Gerson et al., 2017).

To address this issue, Gerson et al.'s (2017) primary objectives were to design and validate a questionnaire to measure the frequency and forms of engagement displayed during passive and active Facebook use and to pinpoint the associations of these factors with the reinforcement sensitivity theory of personality. Gerson et al. (2017) conducted an exploratory factor analysis on a sample of 234 Facebook members recruited online through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The results revealed that the PAUM shows good evidence of measuring three separate but moderately related constructs: active social, active non-social, and passive use. The Cronbach's alphas for all three factors demonstrated adequate internal reliability (active social $\alpha = 0.80$; active non-social $\alpha = 0.78$; passive $\alpha = 0.70$) and good discriminant validity (Gerson et al., 2017).

The PAUM consists of 13 items using a 5-point Likert scale format (*never* = 1/0%, *rarely* = 2/25%, *sometimes* = 3/50%, *somewhat frequently* = 4/75%, *very frequently*

= 5/100%). This measure was assigned to measure the online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) predictive variable of this study because it closely aligns with and captures the concept of the general behaviors related to online disclosure boundaries (i.e. frequency of posting pics, commenting/liking posts/pictures, chatting on Facebook chat) as highlighted in the relational, extramarital, and social media literature referenced in the previous chapter. I predicted that full use of all items on the measurement would be most advantageous in obtaining an accurate measure of the online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) predictive variable. The items on the assessment are constructed to assess the frequency and forms of engagement demonstrated by Facebook users. I also predicted that the data generated from this measure would provide scores reflecting the frequency of Facebook communication features use as well as scores reflecting the degree of engagement. I anticipated that collectively, both scores would determine the extent to which the participants utilized online disclosure boundaries; it therefore served as an effective tool of measurement for the online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) variable of this study.

The Happily (N)ever After Survey

Finn et al. (2020) developed the Happily (N)ever After Survey to examine and compare the paths of relationship development and the co-development of partner changes in continuing and dissolving couples. Finn et al. expounded on the significance of their study as they proposed that their study would fill a gap in current literature by integrating the distress model into the accumulating distress model to clarify and emphasize the importance of exploring the individual nature of both partners. They also

proposed that integrating those two models would assess for the dynamics of the partners co-dependence and broaden the focus of existing literature from newlywed or longer-term married couples to heterosexual unmarried and married young and middle-aged adults.

In view of their objective, thirteen items were used from the previous measure, Partnership Climate Scales to measure the following constructs of the Happily (N)ever After Survey (Finn et al., 2020): connectedness, autonomy in the relationship, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and frequency of conflicts. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on a sample of 1,965 heterosexual couples reporting involvement in romantic relationships. The couples were separated into two groups of young adult and middle-aged adults. According to Finn et al., the results of their study indicated that the autonomy, connectedness, satisfaction, and commitment scales reflected a moderate correlation, and that the frequency of conflict scale was negatively correlated with all other variables. These results supported their assumption that the long-term condition of romantic unions is influenced or determined by patterns of intimate relationship development. Finn et al. (2020) also stated that their results reflect that the accumulating distress model is applicable to the development of relationship satisfaction, commitment, and conflict. Co-development in romantic partners was also evident for connectedness and relationship autonomy which was deemed as additional areas of favorable outcomes for their study. These results were consistent in both age groups (Finn et al., 2020). Results indicated that the study scales were moderately correlated with each other. Finn et al. (2020) reported the following internal consistency scores for each variable:

- Connectedness, the coefficient ω was .74 at the first and .82 at the last measurement for women, and .72 and .81, respectively, for men.
- Autonomy of the Relationship, the coefficient ω was .70 at the first and .78 at the last measurement for women, and .69 and .74 for men, respectively.
- Commitment, the coefficient ω was .62 at the first and .87 at the last measurement for women, and .73 and .80, respectively, for men.
- Frequency of conflicts, the coefficient ω was .80 at the first and .83 at the last measurement for women, and .75 and .80, respectively, for men.

The Happily (N)ever After Survey was used to measure the marital quality outcome variable of this study because it closely aligns with and captures the themes (i.e., connectedness, commitment, frequency of conflict, and marital satisfaction) and concept of marital quality experienced in heterosexual married Facebook users as highlighted in the relational, extramarital, and social media literature referenced in the previous chapter. To ensure that the items related to marital quality closely aligned with the existing literature and the focus of this study, the connectedness scales (measures self-disclosure within the relationship and the degree of appreciation by one's partner), relationship satisfaction scales (measures overall relationship satisfaction), commitment scales (measures future orientation; plans for or expectation of, a long-term future as a couple), frequency of conflict scales (measures the frequency of arguments and disagreements between romantic partners) were used only. Three of the selected scales consist of 9 items and use a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=never to 5=always). The satisfaction scale uses a 11-point Likert scale format (0=very dissatisfied to 10= very satisfied).

The items of all four selected scales are constructed to assess the full scope of marital quality to include the potential areas affected by online intimate disclosure and protected by online disclosure boundaries as highlighted in current marital and social media literature. Hence, the results supported my decision to retain it as a tool of measurement for the marital quality outcome variable.

Data Analysis Plan

Online questionnaires were utilized to collect data from the participants of the study. I did not allow for the interference of incomplete or missing questionnaires as incomplete questionnaires from SurveyMonkey or the Walden participant pool were not used in the study. Three instruments were thoroughly reviewed and assigned to measure each variable individually, totaling 35 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Once the sampling goal was reached, data was transferred from the Survey Monkey and the Walden Participant Pool, inputted, and analyzed using the SPSS IBM software.

Marital and social media literature have referenced their expectations regarding the relationship between the variables, highlighting that online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality would have a negative correlation and that online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) will positively correlate with marital quality. Online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) has also been presented in existing literature as a potential catalyst of mediation in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality. However, the extent to which each is involved was unknown. To build upon this expectation, separate scores were obtained for both predictive variables, and the outcome

variable. Suitably, a multiple regression analysis was conducted, followed by a Sobel test to analyze the sample data.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The RQs and hypotheses of the study were as follows:

RQ1: To what degree do the two predictive variables—intimate online disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette)—correlate with the marital quality (the outcome variable) of heterosexual married Facebook users?

RQ2: To what degree do online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) mediate the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality?

H₀1: Netiquette will not demonstrate a positive correlation with marital quality as measured by the PAUM.

H₁1: Netiquette will demonstrate a positive correlation with marital quality as measured by the PAUM.

H₀2: Online emotional infidelity will not demonstrate a negative correlation with marital quality as measured by the EDB.

H₁2: Online emotional infidelity will demonstrate a negative correlation with marital quality as measured by the EDB.

H₀3: Netiquette will not demonstrate a negative correlation with online emotional infidelity as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₁₃: Netiquette will demonstrate a negative correlation with online emotional infidelity as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₀₄: Netiquette will not mediate the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality.

*H*₁₄: Netiquette will mediate the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality.

Statistical Analysis Plan

Multiple regression statistical tests are used to evaluate the accuracy of a theory or to test a supposition regarding a phenomenon that specified predictive variables predict or influence scores on the specified outcome variable (Warner, 2021). Furthermore, they provide a numerical description of the relationship between one continuous dependent variable often referenced as the outcome variable and two or more continuous independent variables, known as predictive variables. Whereas a Sobel test is used to determine the extent to which a variable mediates the effect of a predictive or independent variable on the outcome or dependent variable (Warner, 2021). It provides a numerical explanation regarding whether the predictive or independent variable has an indirect effect on the outcome or dependent variable due to the influence of a third variable, referenced as the mediator variable (Warner, 2021). That explained, a multiple regression analysis was used to determine the significance of the relationships between the two continuous predictive variables, online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and their correlation with the marital quality (continuous outcome variable) of heterosexual

married Facebook users. A Sobel test succeeded the multiple regression analysis to further clarify the depth of the relationship between the variables by providing insight as to whether online disclosure boundaries mediate the relationship between online intimate disclosure with the opposite sex and marital quality.

According to Warner (2021), there are eight assumptions associated with a multiple regression analysis:

1. The outcome variable must be continuous in nature.
2. The predictive variable must be continuous in nature.
3. There must be a linear relationship between the outcome variables and the predictive variables.
4. The charted data must reflect multivariate normality, in the form of normally distributed residuals.
5. Multicollinearity must not be present in the data meaning, the data of predictive variables must reflect a negative correlation with each other. (Tested using a variance inflation factor).
6. Data must reflect homoscedasticity as the variance of error terms must be similar across the values of the independent variables.

Outliers were identified through a scatterplot generated through SPSS. Scatterplot and histogram distributions, and Levene F test, were employed to ensure that the multiple regression analysis assumptions were met. However, in the event that the assumptions for the multiple regression analysis were not met, a non-parametric equivalent would have been used. A 95% confidence interval was used in all forms of analyses. The parameter

estimates, confidence intervals, and effect sizes for the interaction of each predictive and outcome variable pair, were interpreted (i.e. X₁ and Y pair: online intimate disclosure (online emotional infidelity)/ marital quality) and X₂ and Y pair: online disclosure boundaries (netiquette)/marital quality).

In conclusion of this section, I ensured that precision and caution was exercised while carefully conducting the referenced stages of the statistical analysis process in effort to prevent unintentional, compromising changes to the data. I anticipated that the existing literature, RQs, and selected measures would align with the assumptions, therefore validating my decision to utilize the multiple regression analysis and Sobel test for the study. A thorough review of the results was provided in Chapter 4, to include charted and graphed visual descriptions.

Threats to Validity

Quantitative studies that have strong internal and external validity are considered trustworthy, as researchers often hold them in high regard as sources of well-grounded and credible conclusions (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001). However, studies that utilize altered measures are often perceived to have compromised internal validity; thus being the potential backlash received by this study. As encouraged by Balnaves and Caputi (2001), the researcher assessed the potential repercussions associated with utilizing specific scales on The Happily (N)ever After Survey and how that could possibly decrease the internal validity, construct validity, and overall reliability of the instrument. Finn et al. (2020) reported strong validity and reliability scores for The Happily (N)ever After Survey. I reviewed the validity article of the measure to ensure that the developing

researchers did not warn against compromising the validity of the measure by utilizing individual subscales. The measure did not restrict nor warn against the use of specific scales in the instrument, therefore, granting me permission to utilize specific scales at my discretion.

An additional potential threat to the internal validity are the sampling and recruitment strategies selected for this study (Pedersen & Kurz, 2017; Balnaves & Caputi, 2001). Participants were recruited through the Godly Marriages, Church on Sunday, Therapy on Monday, and other relevant Facebook social groups and the Walden Participant Pool. Pedersen and Kurz (2017) reported that utilizing the snowball sampling strategy and recruiting participants through Facebook has received substantial reports of success in current studies. However, that success is also coupled with the consequence of receiving limited data that primarily reflects the responses of young to mid aged adults, especially because some older spouses may not use Facebook frequent enough to identify with the focus of the study, may not have access to the internet on their phone and computer, or utilize Facebook to any extent. I recruited participants outside of the relevant Facebook social groups to access participants from a broad range of age groups. Utilizing the opportunistic sampling strategy to recruit participants through the Walden Participant Pool offered a greater potential to access diverse adult age groups on a global scale. However, this strategy was also associated with drawbacks as opportunistic sampling is difficult to replicate (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001).

The growing rate of marital dissolution stemming from naturally occurring correspondence with Facebook friends outside of the marriage has shown prevalence in

the reports of American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, which reported that the number of divorce cases citing Facebook use as the culprit rose as high as 33% in 2011, with one of the primary reported issues being inappropriate messages to friends of another sex (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017; Cravens et al., 2013). According to Warner (2021), those reports in itself, serve as confirmation of high external validity in this study as Warner (2021) stated that an accurate measure of external validity is how aligned the focus of the study is to current prevalent real-life situations that are based on naturally occurring behaviors and relationships. However, the fact that existing literature is significantly limited, poses the uncertainty of whether there is enough research to support generalizing the results to homosexual Facebook users who are currently married or in committed relationships. I used published, valid measurements to address the potential external threats to the validity of this study.

Ethical Procedures

The American Psychological Association's (APA) ethical principles of psychologists and codes of conduct for research and publication were thoroughly reviewed to ensure that the proposed methodology plans for this study were in compliance with all ethical standards and guidelines. Upon approval, as mandated by the APA (2017), data collection for this study was conducted in accordance with the research protocol of Walden University's IRB and the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. Participants were provided details regarding the established confidentiality measures utilized by the researcher to protect all questionnaires and data collected in the study. To further clarify protections for confidential data, participants were informed that

the data was only accessible by the researcher and that demographic information collected will not include their name for the sole purpose of ensuring the highest level of confidentiality. They were also informed that all electronic data will be stored for a minimum of 5 years, as required by the university.

Participants were encouraged to retain the consent form for their records. They were also informed that they could ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact information provided by the researcher. In accordance with the APA (2017), the informed consent forms were written in a manner that well-explains the purpose of the research, estimated survey-completion time, and process to complete, save data, and exit the survey. It also informed the participant of their right to decline participation and withdraw from the research process at anytime, after initiation of the survey. I ensured that the informed consent forms thoroughly explained the limits of confidentiality as mandated by the APA (2017) and provided my contact information as the point of contact in the event that questions arose about the research and (or) research participants rights following the submission of the survey.

The voluntary nature of participation in this study was thoroughly explained. In adherence to the APA's (2017) standards for debriefing protocols, participants were provided an opportunity to acquire detailed information regarding the nature of the study in a prompt manner. I made myself accessible throughout the duration of the data collection process in effort to put forth reasonable effort to correct any misconceptions as communicated by the participant (APA, 2017). There were no incentives provided to the participants in exchange for their participation in the study. However, upon the

submission of the survey, a short letter of appreciation was displayed expressing gratitude for their partnership in contributing to current marital and social media research.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the degree of mediation presented by online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) in the relationship between intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality. This study also determined the degree at which both online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) predicted or showed significant correlation with marital quality. The methodology of this study was constructed from a quantitative perspective, with a correlational design. The sample was drawn from the Godly Marriages, Church on Sunday, Therapy on Monday, and other relevant Facebook social groups and the Walden Participant Pool. The sample units of analysis were Facebook members and Walden University students, aged 18 and over, who self-reported as active Facebook users, and currently in a legal heterosexual marriage or committed relationship for at least one year. Participants were provided an informed consent form prior to completing and submitting the survey.

I administered the selected scales from the EDB, PAUM, and Happily (N)ever After Survey to collect data. Data collected were retrieved from SurveyMonkey and the Walden Participant Pool and inputted into SPSS IBM software. A multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the data and test the hypotheses. A thorough interpretation of the results and statistical analysis was provided in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Social media and marriage and family researchers have voiced concern about the continual increase in the number of divorce cases citing inappropriate Facebook use as the reasoning for dissolution of marriage (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016). Current marital and social media literature suggests that online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) have some relationship with the marital quality of married heterosexual Facebook users and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) carries the pivotal role of mediation. However, in spite of the phenomenal popularity of Facebook, there are limited studies that provide numerical evidence that clarifies such relationships (Carter, 2016; Cravens, & Whiting, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013). There are also few marital studies providing numerical evidence on the advantageous role of the use of netiquette by couples during Facebook interactions (Abbasi, & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016).

The purpose of this research study was to further existing literature by evaluating the significance of the relationships between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity), online disclosure boundaries (netiquette), and marital quality. I also examined the influence of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) as the mediator in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality in heterosexual married Facebook users. A

thorough interpretation of the statistical analysis and results will be reviewed in later sections.

Research Question and Hypotheses

I used a quantitative, nonexperimental, correlational research method and survey design to address the identified RQs and alternative hypotheses. The RQs and hypotheses were as follows:

RQ1: To what degree do the two predictive variables—intimate online disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette)—correlate with the marital quality (the outcome variable) of heterosexual married Facebook users?

RQ2: To what degree do online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) mediate the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality?

*H*₀1: Netiquette will not demonstrate a positive correlation with marital quality as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₁1: Netiquette will demonstrate a positive correlation with marital quality as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₀2: Online emotional infidelity will not demonstrate a negative correlation with marital quality as measured by the EDB.

*H*₁2: Online emotional infidelity will demonstrate a negative correlation with marital quality as measured by the EDB.

*H*₀₃: Netiquette will not demonstrate a negative correlation with online emotional infidelity as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₁₃: Netiquette will demonstrate a negative correlation with online emotional infidelity as measured by the PAUM.

*H*₀₄: Netiquette will not mediate the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality.

*H*₁₄: Netiquette will mediate the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality.

The variables were measured using the EDB, PAUM, and Happily (N)ever After Survey. This chapter will also include a review of the data collection process and statistical analyses, presentation of results, and a summary of the findings in relationship to the RQs and hypotheses.

Data Collection

I began the data collection process on January 29th, 2022, following approval from Walden's IRB. I used the snowball sampling method via Facebook Messenger to recruit general Facebook users as well as members of relevant Facebook social groups (i.e. Church on Sundays, Therapy on Mondays, Strengthen Your Marriage) who met criteria. As discussed in Chapter 3, I attempted to post the survey on several other relevant social group forums. However, there was no response provided by the administrators of the social groups. The survey was also launched in the Walden Participant Pool following approval from Walden's IRB.

A minimum of 100 qualifying respondents was needed to ensure that the results of the study were valid and reliable. Within 3 days of posting, I met my target goal of 100 questionnaires. However, I allowed the survey to circulate for a total of 18 days to maximize the number of volunteers. By Day 18, a total of 165 questionnaires were collected. The study sample consisted of active Facebook members who were at least 18 years of age and who had been legally married or in a committed heterosexual relationship for at least 1 year. All questionnaires were completed online.

Respondents consisted of 129 women and 34 men as shown in Table 1. Approximately 1.2% of respondents were aged 18 to 24 years old, 5.5% of respondents were aged 25 to 29, 50% of respondents were aged 30 to 39 years old, 26.8% of respondents were aged 40 to 49 years old, and 15.9% of respondents were 50 years of age and older as shown in Table 2. More than half of the participants (56.7%) self-reported as married. Approximately 25% of the participants reported that they were currently in a committed relationship. As presented in Table 3, the remaining classifications of relationship status such as separated (2.4%), divorced (4.3%), and single (11%) accounted for 17.7% of the total 165 respondents. In addition to those demographic characteristics, the majority of the participants reported frequent use of Facebook. The majority (79.14%) of respondents indicated that they accessed their Facebook account multiple times a day whereas 13.50% reported that they only accessed their account once a day. On the other hand, 7.36% of the respondents reported less frequent Facebook use, estimating that they access their account once a week or less, as shown in Table 4.

Table 1*Gender of Participants*

	Gender	Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Male	34	20.7	20.9	20.9
	Female	129	78.7	79.1	100.0
	Total	163	99.4	100.0	
Missing	System	1	.6		
Total		164	100.0		

Table 2*Age of Participants*

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative%
Valid	18-24	2	1.2	1.2	1.2
	25-29	9	5.5	5.5	6.7
	30-39	82	50.0	50.3	57.1
	40-49	44	26.8	27.0	84.0
	>50	26	15.9	16.0	100.0
	Total	163	99.4	100.0	
Missing	System	1	.6		
Total		164	100.0		

Table 3*Relationship Status of Participants*

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Single	18	11.0	11.0	11.0
	Currently in a Committed Relationship	41	25.0	25.2	36.2
	Married	93	56.7	57.1	93.3
	Separated	4	2.4	2.5	95.7
	Divorced	7	4.3	4.3	100.0
	Total	163	99.4	100.0	
Missing	System	1	.6		
Total		164	100.0		

Table 4*Frequency of Facebook Use*

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %	
Valid	Once a day	22	13.4	13.5	13.5	
	Multiple times a day	129	78.7	79.1	92.6	
	Once a week	3	1.8	1.8	100.0	
	Few times a month	6	3.7	3.7	98.2	
	I rarely access my Facebook account	3	1.8	1.8	100.0	
	Total	163	99.4	100.0		
	Missing	System	1	.6		
	Total		164	100.0		

Statistical Analysis

I used a multiple regression analysis to determine the significance of the relationships between the two continuous predictive variables, online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and their correlation with the marital quality (continuous outcome variable) of heterosexual married Facebook users. I also utilized a Sobel test to further clarify the depth of the relationship between the variables by providing insight as to whether online disclosure boundaries mediate the relationship between online intimate disclosure with the opposite sex and marital quality. To supplement the Sobel test, a Pearson product-moment correlation (Pearson correlation coefficient) was run to determine the relationship between the demographic variable, frequency of Facebook use and the two continuous predictive variables, online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity), online disclosure boundaries (netiquette), and the continuous outcome variable, marital quality of heterosexual married Facebook users.

Multiple regression statistical tests are commonly used in research to evaluate the accuracy of a theory or to test a supposition regarding a phenomenon that specified predictive variables predict or influence scores on the specified outcome variable (Warner, 2021). Furthermore, they provide a numerical description of the relationship between one continuous dependent variable often referenced as the outcome variable and two or more continuous independent variables, known as predictive variables (citation). Researchers commonly use the Sobel test to determine the extent to which a variable mediates the effect of a predictive or independent variable on the outcome or dependent

variable (Warner, 2021). It provides a numerical explanation regarding whether the predictive or independent variable has an indirect effect on the outcome or dependent variable due to the influence of a third variable, referenced as the mediator variable (Warner, 2021). Researchers commonly couple the Pearson correlation coefficient with the Sobel test because of its accuracy in measuring the strength of a potential linear association between two variables (Laerd, 2018).

A multiple regression analysis was conducted using the data collected from the Marriage and Facebook questionnaire to determine the significance of the relationships between the two continuous predictive variables, online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (X_2 netiquette) and their correlation with the marital quality (Y continuous outcome variable) of heterosexual married Facebook users. A Sobel test was also conducted using the data collected from the Marriage and Facebook questionnaire to further clarify the depth of the relationship between the variables by providing insight as to whether online disclosure boundaries (M /Netiquette) mediates the relationship between online intimate disclosure with the opposite sex (X_1 /Emotional Infidelity) and marital quality (Y). All assumptions for the multiple regression analysis were met with the exception of the requirement that there must be a linear relationship between the outcome variable and both predictive variables. A simple scatterplot was generated to test this assumption and determine whether there was a linear relationship between the X_1 /emotional infidelity and marital quality (Y) pair and the X_2 /netiquette and marital quality (Y) pair. Based on the presentation of Figures 1 and 2, it was determined that there was a linear relationship between the X_1 /emotional

infidelity and marital quality (Y) pair. However, there is not an evident linear relationship between the X₂ /netiquette and marital quality (Y) pair.

Table 5

Multiple Regression Analysis Correlations Table

		Frequency of Facebook Use	Netiquette	Marital Quality	Emotional Infidelity
Frequency of Facebook Use	Pearson	1	-.358**	.137	-.049
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.083	.537
	N	163	161	162	162
Netiquette	Pearson	-.358**	1	.009	.040
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.906	.612
	N	161	161	160	160
Marital Quality	Pearson	.137	.009	1	-.494
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.083	.906		.000
	N	162	160	162	161
Emotional Infidelity	Pearson	-.049	.040	-.494	1
	Correlation				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.537	.612	.000	
	N	162	160	161	162

Figure 1

Scatterplot of Emotional Online Infidelity and Marital Quality

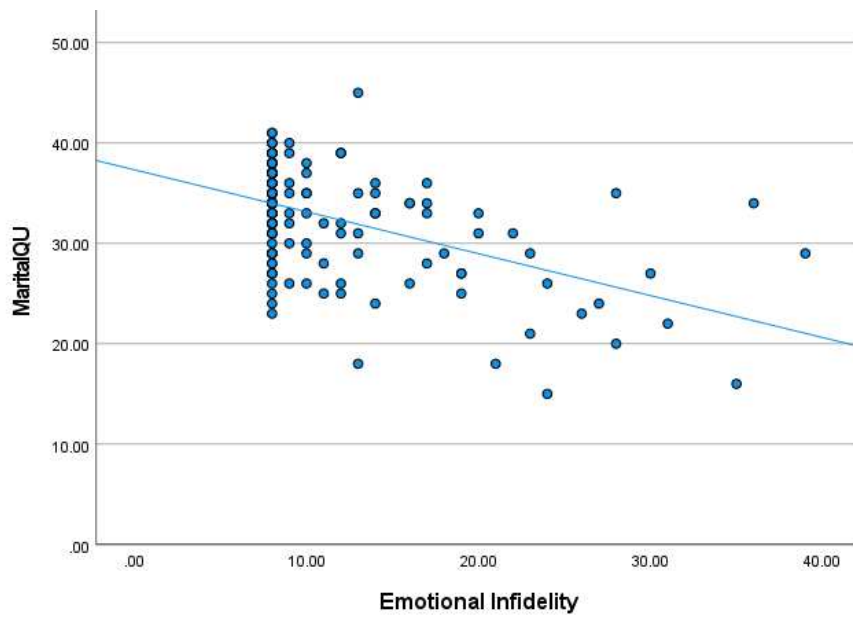
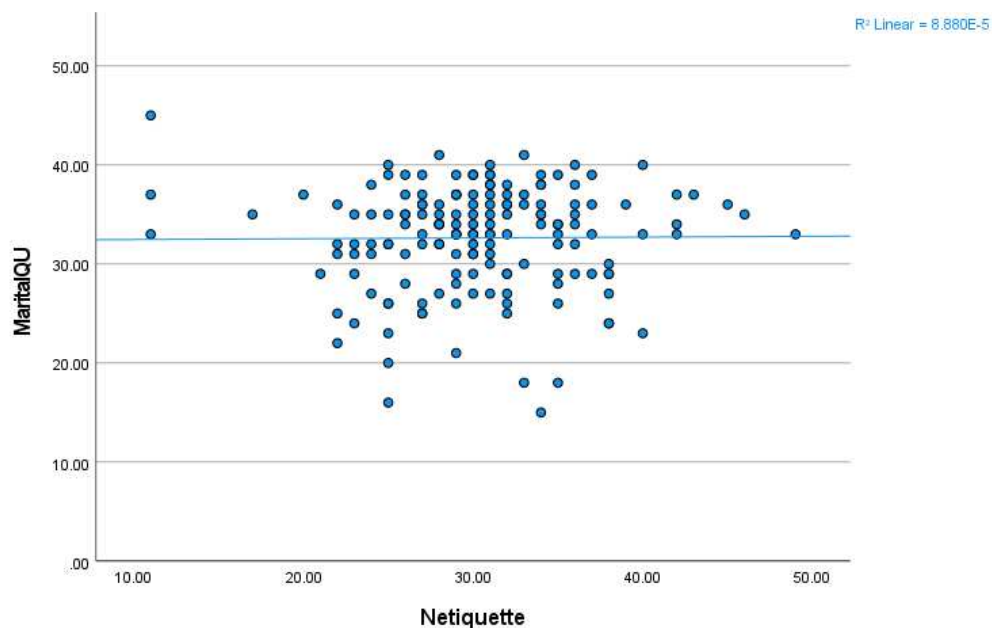


Figure 2*Scatterplot of Marital Quality and Netiquette*

The Pearson correlation coefficient determined that there was a medium, negative correlation between frequency of Facebook use and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette), which was statistically significant ($r = -.358, n = 161, p = .000$). It further revealed that there was a medium, negative correlation between online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and marital quality, which was statistically significant ($r = -.494, n = 161, p = .000$). To initiate the process of the Sobel test, a simple linear regression was conducted. Based on the results of the simple linear regression, it was determined that there is a low degree of correlation between online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries ((M)Mediator variable/ netiquette) ($R=0.040$). $R^2=.002$ indicates that only 0.002 or 0.22% of the total variation in online intimate disclosure with another sex

(emotional online infidelity) can be explained by online disclosure boundaries (netiquette). It was further determined that the regression model does not predict the dependent variable/ marital quality (Y) significantly well ($p > 0.05$ $p = 0.612$). The p value indicates that overall, the regression model does not statistically predict the outcome variable. As explained by Barry and Kenny (1986), the relationship between the online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (M Mediator variable/ netiquette) was determined to be statistically insignificant, so for that reason mediation cannot be assumed and therefore, is determined to be unlikely or impossible. Hence, forfeiting reasoning to proceed to the remaining conditions for mediation and steps of the Sobel test which states that:

1. (Not met): The independent variable/ online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) must be a significant predictor of the mediator variable.
2. (Not met): The mediation variable must be a statistically significant predictor of the dependent variable, marital quality, while controlling for the effect of online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity).

Results

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the significance of the relationships between the two continuous predictive variables, online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and their correlation with the marital quality (continuous outcome variable) of heterosexual married Facebook users.

Research Question 1

RQ1 was, To what degree do the two predictive variables—intimate online disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette)—correlate with the marital quality, the outcome variable, of heterosexual married Facebook users? I conducted a multiple regression analysis to answer this RQ. The multiple regression analysis determined that there was a statistically significant relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and the outcome variable (marital quality (Y)) ($p=.000$). Therefore, I reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. The multiple regression analysis revealed that for every one unit of increase in the outcome variable (marital quality (Y)), online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) would decrease by $-.416$ ($B=-.416$). The effect size for online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) ($\eta^2 = .242$) was relatively weak at the 95% confidence level. Moreover, online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) accounted for 24% of the variance in a respondent's degree of marital quality experienced ($R^2=.242$).

On the other hand, the multiple regression analysis determined that the relationship between online disclosure boundaries (X_2 netiquette) and the outcome variable (marital quality (Y)) was not statistically significant ($p>.05$ $p=.722$). Hence, serving as support that the null hypothesis was true. It also revealed that online disclosure boundaries (X_2 netiquette) was not a significant contributor to the outcome variable

(marital quality (Y)) in that for every unit of increase in marital quality, online disclosure boundaries (X₂ netiquette) would only increase by .022 (B=.022).

Table 6*Multiple Regression Analysis Model Summary Table*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.492 ^a	.242	.232	4.65362

a. Predictors: (Constant), Emotional Infidelity, Netiquette

Table 7*Multiple Regression Analysis ANOVA Table*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1076.747	2	538.374	24.860	.000 ^b
	Residual	3378.360	156	21.656		
	Total	4455.107	158			

a. Dependent Variable: Marital Quality

b. Predictors: (Constant), Emotional Infidelity, Netiquette

Table 8*Multiple Regression Analysis Coefficients Table*

Model		Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Lower Bound	Interval for B Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	36.666	1.989		18.436	.000	32.738	40.595
	Netiquette	.022	.061	.025	.356	.722	-.099	.143
	Emotional Infidelity	-.416	.059	-.492	-7.050	.000	-.533	-.300

a. Dependent Variable: Marital Quality

Research Question 2

RQ2 was, To what degree do online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) mediate the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality? To address this RQ, I used a Pearson correlation coefficient and Sobel test ; these statistics further clarified the depth of the relationship between the variables by providing insight as to whether online disclosure boundaries mediate the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex and marital quality. The Pearson correlation coefficient determined that there was a medium, negative correlation between frequency of Facebook use and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette), which was statistically significant ($r = -.358, n = 161, p = .000$). It further revealed that there was a medium, negative correlation between online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and marital quality, which was statistically significant ($r = -.494, n = 161, p = .000$). It was determined during the beginning stages of the Sobel test that there is a low degree of correlation between online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries ((M)Mediator variable/ netiquette) ($R=0.040$). Based on the Sobel test output, it was determined that .02% of the total variation in online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) can be explained by online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) ($R^2=.002$). It was further determined that the regression model does not significantly predict the dependent variable/ marital quality (Y) ($p>0.05$ $p=0.612$). As explained by Barry and Kenny (1986), the relationship between the online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure

boundaries (M; Mediator variable/ netiquette) was determined to be statistically insignificant, so for that reason mediation cannot be assumed and therefore is determined to be unlikely or impossible.

Table 9

Sobel Test Model Summary Table

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.040 ^a	.002	-.005	6.07973	1.839

a. Predictors: (Constant), Emotional Infidelity

b. Dependent Variable: Netiquette

Table 10

Sobel Test ANOVA Table

Model		Sum of Square	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	9.570	1	9.570	.259	.612 ^b
	Residual	5840.173	158	36.963		
	Total	5849.744	159			

a. Dependent Variable: Netiquette

b. Predictors: (Constant) Emotional Infidelity

Table 11*Sobel Test Coefficients Table*

Model		Unstandardized B	Coefficients Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Significance	95.0% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95.0% Confidence Interval Upper Bound	Collinearity Statistics Tolerance	Collinearity Statistics VIF
1	(Constant)	29.938	.994		30.104	.000	27.974	31.902		
	Emotional Infidelity	.039	.077	.040	.509	.612	-.113	.191	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Netiquette

Summary

Utilizing this study as a contrivance, it was my intention to determine the significance of the relationships between the two continuous predictive variables, online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and their correlation with the marital quality (continuous outcome variable) of heterosexual married Facebook users. My objective was to also to clarify the depth of the relationship between the variables by providing insight as to whether online disclosure boundaries mediate the relationship between online intimate disclosure with the opposite sex and marital quality. The RQs were addressed as the results from the output of the multiple regression analysis and Pearson correlation coefficient revealed that there was a statistically significant relationship between online intimate disclosure

with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and the outcome variable (marital quality (Y)) ($p=.000$). Therefore, the alternative hypothesis was accepted. The output further revealed that the relationship between online disclosure boundaries (X_2 netiquette) and the outcome variable (marital quality (Y)) was not statistically significant ($p>.05$ $p=.722$) nor was online disclosure boundaries (X_2 netiquette) considered to be a significant contributor to the outcome variable. Hence, this served as proof that the null hypothesis was accepted. However, this was not a surprise as all assumptions for the multiple regression analysis were met with the exception that a simple scatterplot revealed that there is not an evident linear relationship between the X_2 /netiquette and marital quality (Y) pair. This was determined to be a true violation because the assumptions of a multiple regression analysis requires that there must be a linear relationship between the outcome variable and both predictive variables. The violation of this assumption was acknowledged. However, no changes were recommended at this time. In Chapter 5, I evaluate the results of this study in comparison to previous research pertaining to the significance of the relationships between online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and their correlation with the marital quality (outcome variable) of heterosexual married Facebook users. Clinical implications as well as implications for social change will also be discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The primary purpose of this study was to evaluate the significance of the relationships between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity), online disclosure boundaries (netiquette), and marital quality. I wanted to add to the literature that has been conducted on the topic (e.g., Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens et al., 2013; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Smith, 2014; Zurbriggen et al. 2016). I also wanted to examine the influence of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) as the mediator in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality in heterosexual married Facebook users.

The survey contained demographic questions related to age, gender, frequency of Facebook use, and marital status, in addition to 35 items from three instruments: the EDB, the PAUM, and the Happily (N)ever After Survey. The items from the instruments were rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Upon approval from Walden's IRB, I disseminated the questionnaire via the Walden Participant Pool, Facebook Messenger, and Facebook social groups to recruit Facebook users who met eligibility criteria. The groups included Church on Sundays, Therapy on Mondays, and Strengthen Your Marriage, to name a few. Once the sampling goal was reached, data were transferred from SurveyMonkey and the Walden Participant Pool, inputted, and analyzed using the SPSS IBM software.

I used a quantitative, nonexperimental correlational research method to determine the significance between the predictor and outcome variables. A multiple regression

analysis was performed to analyze online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 / online emotional infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (X_2 / netiquette) as predictor variables to determine their potential correlation with marital quality, (Y) the outcome variable. The multiple regression analysis determined that there was a statistically significant relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and the outcome variable (marital quality (Y; $p = .000$). On the other hand, the multiple regression analysis revealed that a statistically significant relationship did not exist between online disclosure boundaries (X_2 netiquette) and the outcome variable (marital quality. Y; $p > .05$, $p = .722$). It also revealed that online disclosure boundaries (X_2 netiquette) were not a significant contributor to the outcome variable (marital quality (Y)) in that for every unit of increase in marital quality, online disclosure boundaries (X_2 netiquette) would only increase by .022 ($B = .022$).

I then performed a Sobel test to further analyze the relationship between the variables. I anticipated that doing so would provide insight on the extent to which the effect of online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) on marital quality is reduced when online disclosure boundaries (mediator variable) are used. There was a low degree of correlation between online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries ((M)Mediator variable/ netiquette) ($R = 0.040$). The relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries ((M)Mediator variable/ netiquette) was statistically insignificant. For that reason, mediation cannot be assumed and, therefore, is determined to be unlikely or

impossible (see Barry & Kenny, 1986). Hence, there is no reason to proceed to the remaining conditions for mediation and steps of the Sobel test. The Sobel test process was terminated prematurely.

To supplement the Sobel test, I ran a Pearson product-moment correlation (Pearson correlation coefficient) to determine the relationship between the demographic variable, frequency of Facebook use, and the two continuous predictive variables, online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (netiquette), and the continuous outcome variable, marital quality of heterosexual married Facebook users. The result of the Pearson correlation coefficient supported the results of multiple regression analysis as it also determined that there was a medium, negative correlation between online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and marital quality, which was statistically significant ($r = -.494, n = 161, p = .000$).

Interpretation of the Findings

The study findings support current literature reporting that inappropriate online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) is negatively correlated with marital quality (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Mao & Raguram, 2009). The multiple regression analysis revealed insight on the significance of the relationship that expands knowledge in the discipline from an in-depth statistical perspective. My study clarified the extent to which online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) is significantly correlated with marital quality as it revealed that for every one

unit of increase in the outcome variable (marital quality (Y)), online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) would decrease by $-.416$ ($B = -.416$).

The study findings further revealed that online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) accounted for 24% of the variance in a heterosexual married Facebook users' degree of marital quality ($R^2=.242$). The findings extends knowledge in the discipline and confirm current marital and social media literature highlighting that extradyadic behaviors with an emotional component facilitated through the features of Facebook (i.e., disclosing deeply intimate information, exchanging pictures, engaging in frequent private communication via video chats or phone calls via Facebook) negatively affects marriage quality (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Carter, 2016; Cravens & Whiting, 2014, 2016; Smith, 2014; Urooj et al., 2015). The social penetration theory further clarifies the findings of this study as it explains that the Facebook users perceived rewards of the emotionally charged extramarital bond with their romantic alternative resulting from reciprocal online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) that overrode the benefits of the bond and commitment to the off-line partner. Therefore, it precipitated the decline of marital quality between the adulterous spouse and their off-line partner who is considered the injured spouse in the literature (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Huang, 2016; Kashian et al., 2017).

Online Disclosure Boundaries (Netiquette)

The data generated from this study focusing on the online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) variable was rather noteworthy. My study confirmed the postulation in

current literature that there is a positive correlation between online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and marital quality (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018). However, it extended knowledge in the discipline by unveiling that the relationship is not significant enough for online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) to be considered a significant contributor to the marital quality of heterosexual married Facebook users.

The findings of this study clarify the influence of online disclosure boundaries on the marital quality of Facebook users. Current literature references the use of online disclosure boundaries as a beneficial option or possible therapy implication that is recommended because it has the potential to be an effective solution-focused intervention for couples who have experienced relational discord as a result of Facebook infidelity or behaviors that could possibly lead to such (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2018; Zurbriggen et al. 2016). Reflecting on the literature covered in Chapter 2, I suspect that the use of online disclosure boundaries is labeled as an alternative simply because there is not enough research on the use of netiquette by married Facebook users for marital and social media researchers to truly take a confident stance. I made an aggressive effort to address this issue. However, more research is needed to truly grasp the full role of netiquette in heterosexual married Facebook users.

Limitations of the Study

A possible limitation may have been associated with the fact that the Happily (N)ever After questionnaire did not directly focus on the full scope of the topic of this study. The questionnaire did not directly focus on married Facebook users or assess the use of netiquette with the intention to refrain from inappropriate disclosure or to protect

their marital quality. A thorough search was generated. However, a questionnaire with a similar focus was not available.

Another limitation may have been related to the nature of the study and the sensitivity of the topic. Although there were no inquiries about the potential of their confidentiality being breached, fear of possible identity exposure could have prevented participants from responding accurately or from participating in the study in general. Considering the as forementioned limitations of the study, it is safe to conclude that the results may be generalizable to the sample as well as married heterosexual users of other social media platforms with similar features.

Recruiting participants via the Godly Marriages and the Church on Sunday, Therapy on Monday and other relevant Facebook social groups presents with limitations as well. Similarly, utilizing the Walden Participant Pool also presented with the limitation of soliciting the participation of those that have requested to participate in the participant pool. This in turn, hindered individuals who are not students of Walden University or who do not utilize the Facebook social networking site from participating in the study (Pedersen & Kurz, 2017). The study could have possibly generated a larger sample had the researcher utilized the paid recruitment services available through survey monkey and the Facebook site.

Recommendations

Previous researchers have recommended studies of the use of netiquette by couples during online interactions via internet or social media sites from a qualitative and quantitative perspective (Cravens & Whiting, 2016; Helsper & Whitty, 2010; Lee et al.,

2019). They also recommended that future researchers examine netiquette's effect on relationship quality. This study expanded upon the findings and recommendations of Helsper and Whitty (2010), shifting the focus to examining the influence of online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) as the mediator in the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) and marital quality in heterosexual married Facebook users. This study also determined the extent of which both online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and online intimate disclosure with another sex (online emotional infidelity) predict or show significant correlation with marital quality.

The findings of this study revealed that there was a statistically significant relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and the outcome variable, marital quality. On the other hand, it also revealed that a statistically significant relationship did not exist between online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and the outcome variable, marital quality. The findings determined that online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) were not a significant contributor to the outcome variable (marital quality) as postulated in the literature. Moreover, the results of this study also cleared up the assumptions surrounding netiquette's role as a mediating factor in the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality. The Sobel test determined that the relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (M) Mediator variable/ netiquette) was determined to be

statistically insignificant. Hence, leading to the conclusion that mediation cannot be assumed and therefore, is determined to be unlikely or impossible.

Based on the limitations of the study, a recommendation could include constructing a more tailored questionnaire that directly assesses how marital quality is affected when specific online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) are used with the intention to protect one's union from infidelity and other ramifications associated with uninhibited intimate disclosure through the features of the Facebook and other social media sites. Another recommendation could be to conduct a qualitative study to gain a more in-depth understanding of disclosure boundaries (netiquette) that have been independently implemented by couples and the effectiveness of those boundaries. It is also recommended that future studies expand upon the focus of this study by extending the focus to married and unmarried homosexual and heterosexual users of other social media platforms.

Implications

Positive Social Change Implications

Several implications were influenced by the findings of this study. This study offers awareness in educating heterosexual spouses on the value of jointly implementing disclosure boundaries as a mechanism to merge Facebook into their lifestyle without allowing the use of the site to cause detrimental effects on their psychological well-being and quality of their off-line marriage. This study also offers awareness of marital issues related to poor disclosure boundaries and unspecified online behaviors that has been founded to constitute emotional online infidelity in current social media and marital

literature. Undoubtedly, the findings of this study could indirectly intervene in the continual increase in divorce filings citing infidelity in the form of extramarital behaviors and relationships via Facebook, as the reasoning for filing a fault divorce.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical framework for this study was the social penetration theory. The social penetration theory conceptualizes self-disclosure as the driving fuel structuring the dynamics of relationships progressing from superficial to more intimate, bonding stages (Cozby, 1973; Huang, 2016; Jiang et al., 2011). According to Huang (2016), Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor regarded the structure of the bonding and interpersonal developmental stages between individuals as identical to a multilayered onion. Similarly, it is the social penetration theory belief that individuals exuviate defensive layers to their inner self as they become more familiar with one another through voluntary, intentional disclosure. Self-disclosure plays the role of propulsion in the four-stage social penetration process of relational growth (Huang, 2016). An additional facet of the social penetration theory is its emphasis on interpersonal reward/cost factors and how it influences the relational development process. It is the social penetration theory's belief that the rate of progression through the social penetration process is influenced by personality characteristics, situational determinants, and reward and costs factors of the past, present, and anticipated future interactions, as determined by both individuals (Cozby, 1973).

The Social Penetration Theory correlated with this study's objective to provide an in-depth understanding of how Facebook friendships initially ignited by superficial casual self-disclosure, progresses to an emotionally bonded, psychologically dependent

adulterous virtual relationship, maintained by disclosure of intimate information. It also provided insight of how the rewards of the bond encompassing this new emotionally charged extramarital online affair, has overridden the benefits of the bond and commitment to the off-line partner. Significant in its theoretical foundation, this study will pioneer the combination of the social penetration theory, with infidelity and social media research to explain the underlying dynamics of how disclosure serves as the power source of progression throughout the stages of the social penetration process via Facebook and potentially other social media platforms. Existing literature reports that this ultimately leads to an emotional extramarital affair between an adulterous spouse and a romantic alternative.

Clinical Implications

The statistical research generated from this study serves as a tool of advancement, educating the field of psychology, particularly those who specialize in marriage and family therapy, on the importance of conceptualizing both spouses' psychological response to the discovery of a Facebook affair, as a multi-layered trauma-based clinical issue (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens et al., 2013). Current studies recommend that clinicians proceed with intervention in a manner similar to treating clients demonstrating symptoms of PTSD. This implication is backed by current infidelity studies as they report that spouses who have experienced marital trauma in the form of inappropriate online intimate disclosure (emotional online infidelity) often present with emotional and behavioral effects that are almost identical to symptoms of PTSD such as suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, helplessness, victimization, feelings

of abandonment, panic attacks, disturbing thoughts and feelings, vivid dreams, responses of mental and physical distress to infidelity related cues, and domestic violence (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Cravens et al., 2013).

This study also clarifies the nature of Facebook Intrusion, also known as Facebook addiction, as an evolving clinical issue and how it has been shown to affect the well-being of marriages (Abbasi, 2018; Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017, 2018; Smith, 2014; Cravens et al., 2013). It is highly important that Marriage and family therapists acknowledge the crucial importance of staying abreast of the growing digital media communication trends. Thus, will support the implementation of practical interventions that support married couples in mutually establishing online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) to safeguard their overall marital quality (Carter, 2016).

Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that there was a statistically significant relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (emotional online infidelity) and the outcome variable, marital quality. On the other hand, the findings also unveiled that contrary to the assumptions of current literature, a statistically significant relationship did not exist between online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) and the outcome variable, marital quality. The findings also determined that online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) were not a significant contributor to the outcome variable (marital quality) as postulated in the literature. Furthermore, the results of this study cleared up the assumptions surrounding netiquette's role as a mediating factor in the relationship between online emotional infidelity and marital quality as it was determined that the

relationship between online intimate disclosure with another sex (X_1 emotional online infidelity) and online disclosure boundaries (M) Mediator variable/ netiquette) was statistically insignificant. Hence, leading to the conclusion that mediation cannot be assumed and therefore, is determined to be unlikely or impossible.

All findings considered, it was determined that the Facebook behaviors of the adulterous spouse such as high disclosure of personal, emotionally charged information such as personal needs, family issues, marital woes, pictures, sexual interests, and feelings with Facebook friends of another sex possessed the most negative influence on the quality of marriage. Unfortunately, Facebook and other social media platforms have become so intertwined into our daily lives that it would be unrealistic to conclude this study with the recommendation of terminating all Facebook and social media use. The most feasible recommendation for combating negative repercussions associated with online intimate disclosure with another sex is for couples to be mindful of the information disclosed and to refrain from sharing any intimate information that could potentially disrupt the stability and quality of one's off-line intimate relationship. However, even that recommendation is grounded in online disclosure boundaries (netiquette) meaning that there is a beneficial relationship even if it was found to be of minimal significance. Despite of the findings of this study, it is highly important that marriage and family therapists call attention to the use of netiquette as underexplored lifeblood for married couples who utilize social networking sites.

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