PRJAH.ORG ISSN 2788-4597

Progressive Research Journal of Arts & Humanities
ISSN 2788-4597 (Online) ISSN 2707-7314 (Print)
An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

A Comparison of Objective and Subjective Measures of Social Media Usage to Predict Online Infidelity: Mediation by Technoference

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Abstract

The present study aimed to compare the self-reported and objective measures of social media usage in predicting online infidelity while mediating the role of technoference. Data was collected from Islamabad and Gujranwala with sample included 310 married individuals (Male, n = 116, and females (n = 194), age (M = 35 years). A cross sectional survey research design, using purposive sampling technique was employed, with validated instruments including Technology Device Interference Scale, Internet Infidelity Scale, self-version and Social Desirability scale. Additionally, social media usage was assessed using both self-reported measures (daily usage hours) and objective measure of weekly time (Monday to Sunday) spend on social media apps from their smartphone usage logs including the three most frequently used apps along with the objectively recorded time spent on each apps. Findings show significant discrepancies in subjective and objective measures of social media usage, as individuals overestimate or underestimate their actual usage. Social media usage was significantly positively correlated with online infidelity, while technoference significantly mediated this relationship. Furthermore, gender differences were observed, with males reporting higher technoference and online infidelity than females. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating objective measures alongside with subjective measures of social media usage.

Keywords: Social Media; Infidelity; Technoference; Cyber Affairs; Digital Interruption; Online Cheating.

1. Introduction

With the emergence of digital connectivity online infidelity has become a prevalent issue from last two decades (Angelina et al., 2008; Kaya & Sakiroglu, 2023). Unlike traditional forms of infidelity, online infidelity includes any sexual or romantic online activity that one partner in relationship considers to be crossing limits (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008). Studies suggest that about

15 to 40% individuals in committed relationships engage in online conversations or activities that their partner might see as inappropriate or disloyal (Alexopoulos et al., 2020; Botnen et al., 2018; Orosz et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2017).

Social media has changed the way people socialize, communicate (Hand et al., 2013), and how they initiate and maintain intimate relationships (Currin et al., 2016). It makes it easy for people to flirt with others, whether openly or through private messages and even sometimes online sexual interactions (Clayton et al., 2013; Clayton et al., 2014; Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015; Drouin et al., 2014; Drouin et al., 2015; Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010). A report from Statista in (2021) shows that over 3.6 billion people worldwide use social media and the number is expected to increase to around 4.41 billion by 2025. They provide constant connectivity accessibility, and anonymity that may blur relational boundaries and provide opportunities for alternative relationships (Cooper, 1998; Maheu & Subotnik, 2001; Young, 2008).

However, the methods to measure social media usage vary across studies that may influence how strongly it appears to be related to relationship outcomes. Previous studies rely on subjective self-report measures (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Hand et al., 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2014), where individuals report how much time they believe they spend on social media. Although these measures are considered to be convenient, that may not accurately reflect actual behavior because people often underestimate or overestimate their actual social media usage (Janco, 2013; Scharkow, 2016). While objective measures provide more accurate information on how much time individuals actually spend on social media (Baum et al., 2024; Freyth et al., 2023). None of the studies have focused collectively on both forms of measures in studies, so examining both subjective and objective measures will provide a clear understanding of how social media leads to behaviors like online infidelity.

Moreover, excessive technology use led to decreased time spent in-person or face to face interaction with a partner, increasing the likelihood of engaging in alternative online relationships (Twenge et al., 2019). Technoference refers to interruption caused by technological devices that divert focus from face-to-face interaction or significant times spent with loved ones (McDaniel & Coyne, 2017; Stockdale et al., 2018). Studies indicate that over 60% of couples experience daily interruptions from technology, and 73% continue device use even during face-to-face interactions (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Russell & Waldon, 2017). This indicates a critical role of technoference in this relationship between social media usage and online infidelity, however technoference didn't receive due gravity. In the present study, it is hypothesized that social media usage increases risk of online infidelity mediated through technoference. We assume that this conceptual mediation model will provide a complete understanding of how digital interruptions influence relationship dynamics.

2. Methodology

The study used quantitative Cross-sectional design. Through purposive sampling technique data were collected from 310 married individual's male (n=116) and female (n=194) that were recruited across various settings, including housing societies, public places, and workplaces/offices from Islamabad and Gujranwala. Mean age range of participants was (M =35; SD = 10.7) and their partners age was (M =36; SD = 10.2) belongs to different family system (nuclear = 49%; joint = 51%). The type of marriage in the sample included arrange marriage (n = 257; % = 81) and love marriage (n = 57; % = 18). Moreover, inclusion criteria to the study are; married individuals with minimum one year of marriage duration and being living together within the same household. Individuals who use smart phones, social media, or other digital devices regularly and had minimum matric education level, and who comprehend Urdu language were included in the study. Exclusion criteria to the study are;

individuals currently undergoing marital counseling or therapy, and those who are with diagnosed psychiatric disorders.

2.1 Procedure

Each participant was then given a questionnaire, which required approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Throughout the data collection process, all ethical guidelines were strictly followed. These included describing the purpose of the research, obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality. Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were thanked and appreciated for their time and contribution to the research.

3. Measures

3.1 Social Media Usage

Social media usage was measured using both objective screen time data and subjective self-reported daily usage hours. In subjective measures participants were asked, how much time do you spend on social media apps per day? The responses were self-reported in hours and minutes. While in objective measures participants provided their detail of weekly time (Monday to Sunday) spend on social media apps from their smartphone usage logs including the three most frequently used apps along with the objectively recorded time spent on each apps. All usage data were recorded in hours and minutes and then converted into minutes for statistical analysis.

3.2 Technology Device Interference Scale (TDIS)

The Technoference in married individuals was measured by using Urdu version of Technology Device Interference Scale (TDIS), developed by McDaniel and Coyne (2016), evaluates how often technology devices disrupt face-to-face interactions, especially within romantic relationships. This scale consists of 6 items, each designed to measure the frequency with which particular devices (such as smartphones, TVs, tablets, and computers) interrupt daily interactions with one's partner. Participants indicate typical daily disruptions using a 6-point scale, ranging from 0 = none to 5 = always, having alpha reliability is .69 to .82 (Mushquash et al., 2022). Higher scores on the scale indicate higher technoference.

3.3 Internet infidelity Scale (Self- Version)

This scale was developed by Docan-Morgan and Docan (2007). In the present study internet infidelity scale: self-infidelity (i.e., your own action) version was used. The Urdu version of internet infidelity scale: Self infidelity (i.e., your own actions) included 40 items. In the present study 27 items was used as author himself discarded other items in confirmatory analysis (Morgan & Docan, 2007). In this particular form, participants were instructed to assume that you itself is engaging in the problematic behaviors. Each of the items was evaluated by the respondents on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not infidelity) to 5 (highest degree of infidelity). The scale consists of two subscales namely superficial/informal talks and goal directed acts. Superficial/informal talks composed of 15 items which includes chatting about sports, talking about current events, joking. The alpha reliability for this subscale is .95. The second subscale is goal directed acts composed of 12 items which includes disclosing love, making plans to meet someone. The alpha reliability for this subscale is .92 (Morgan & Docan, 2007). High scores indicate higher partner infidelity on specific component.

4. Results

The study performed both descriptive and inferential analysis. The descriptive analysis included frequency, percentage, mean, standard-deviation, skewness, kurtosis, and correlation. The inferential analysis included t-tests and mediation analysis by process macro.

Table 1 shows alpha reliabilities of the study variables. All the variables were normally distributed, where scales and sub-scales used in the study have alpha coefficients ranging from .65 to .93 which is with the acceptable range. Table 2 shows Pearson bivariate correlation among study variables. Objective measure of time spent on social media apps is significantly positively correlated with technoference and goal directed acts. Similarly, social media usage self-report is also significantly positively correlated with objectively measured social media, technoference, online infidelity and it's both dimensions i.e., superficial talks and goal directed acts. Furthermore, objectively measured social media is also positively correlated with online infidelity, and its dimensions i.e., superficial talks and goal directed acts. Moreover, technoference is positively correlated with online infidelity, and it's both dimensions (superficial talks, and goal directed acts). Finally, online infidelity is positively correlated with goal directed acts and superficial talks.

Table 3 shows mean differences on study variables across gender. (Male n=116; female n= 194). Male scored significantly higher than females on technoference, online infidelity and it's both dimensions (superficial talks, and goal directed acts). Furthermore, Table 4 shows mediation model in which 9 independent mediation analysis were tested by using PROCESS macro-Model 4 (Hayes, 2013). Technoference significantly mediated the relationship between self-report social media usage and online infidelity. Moreover, technoference significantly mediated the relationship between objectively measured time spend on social media apps and online infidelity.

Table 1

Alpha Reliabilities and Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N=310)

Variables	*K*	*α*	*M*	*SD*	Range		Skew	Kurt
					Actual	Potential		
TDIS	6	.68	6.34	4.39	0-27	0-36	1.52	3.25
IIS	26	.93	51.3	18.0	26-112	26-130	.57	-.44
GDA	11	.89	20.6	8.45	11-49	11-55	.77	-.25
ST	15	.85	30.6	10.0	15-63	15-75	.41	-.49
BDIR	12	.65	32.3	4.46	21-46	12-48	.36	.20

Note. TDIS = Technology Device Interference Scale; IIS = Internet Infidelity Scale; GDA = Goal Directed acts; ST = Superficial Talks; BDIR = Balanced Inventory Desirable Responding

Table 2

Pearson Product Correlation among Study Variables (N = 310)

No.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	SMA	-	.34**	.59**	.179*	.14	.13	.15*
2	SM Self report		-	.45**	.22**	.23**	.24**	.22**
3	SM Objective			-	.09	.12*	.14*	.10
4	Technoference				-	.33**	.33**	.30**
5	Online Infidelity					-	.98**	.98**
6	Superficial Talks						-	.90**
7	Goal Directed Acts							-

Note. SMA = Social Media Apps; SM = Social Media

Table 3

Mean Differences on Study Variables across Gender (N=310)

	Male (*n*=116)		Female (*n*=194)				95% *CI*		
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*(308)	*p*	*LL*	*UL*	Cohen's *d*
Social Media Apps	3.1	2.23	2.8	1.8	.92	.36	-3.2	0.87	-
SM self-report	4.3	2.9	3.8	2.4	1.6	1.2	-0.14	1.1	-
SM Objective	4.1	2.2	3.8	2.0	1.2	.22	-0.18	0.81	-
Technoference	7.0	4.6	5.9	4.1	2.12	.04	0.08	2.07	.24
Online Infidelity	55.8	17.2	48.6	17.9	3.5	.001	3.1	11.3	.04
Superficial Talks	33.1	9.5	29.3	10.1	3.3	.00	1.6	6.1	.39
Goal Directed acts	22.7	8.3	19.3	8.3	3.5	.00	1.5	5.3	.40

Note. SM objective = Social Media Objective measures; SM Self -report = Social Media Self-Report

Table 4

Mediating Role of Technoference in Relationship between Objectively measured Social Media usage, objectively measured social media apps, self-report measured of social media usage with online Infidelity, superficial talks and goal directed acts.

Predictors	Dependent								
	Online infidelity			Superficial Talks			Goal directed-acts		
		95% *CI*			95% *CI*			95% *CI*	
	B	*LL*	*UL*	*B*	*LL*	*UL*	*B*	*LL*	*UL*
Constant	101**	70.7	132	54.3**	38.8	69.8	45.3**	30.7	59.9
Age	-.003	-.59	.58	-.06	-.38	.25	.06	.25	.37
Partner's Age	-.54	1.09	.01	-.28	-.59	.02	-.16	-.48	.16
Gender	-2.7	-8.9	3.4	-2.06	-5.4	1.3	-2.5	-5.9	.81
Education	-1.5**	-2.3	-.71	-.69**	-1.1	-.28	-.70	-1.1	-.27
Monthly Income	.00**	.00	.00	.00**	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Family System	1.1	-3.4	5.6	1.1	-1.4	3.4	.21	-2.1	2.6
Duration of marriage	.31	-.17	.79	.24	-.01	.48	.00	-.24	.25
Type of Marriage	-4.0	-9.8	1.7	-.66	-3.7	2.4	-2.9	-5.9	.03
Social Desirability	-.53*	-.99	-.07	-.23	-.47	.01	-.33	-.55	-.10
SM Objective	.91	-.15	1.9	.07	-.22	.37	.38	-.14	.89
SM Self-report	.98**	.14	1.8	.59*	.13	1.1	.39	-.02	.79
Social Media Apps	.55	-.61	1.7	.29	-.36	.94	.26	-.29	.82
Technoference	1.2**	.77	1.7	.60**	.34	.86	.62	.34	.89
SM Objective → Tech-fer	.09	-.32	.57	.05	-.18	.34	.04	-.13	.24
SM self-report → Tech-fer	.50	.19	.87	.29	.11	.49	.22	.08	.39
SMA → Tech-fer	.53	.03	.64	.29	.04	.79	.23	.03	.64
R^2	.27			.11			.32		
F	7.3**			2.7*			5.8**		

ΔR^2	.19	.21

Note. OI= Online infidelity; ST = Superficial Talks; GDA = Goal directed acts; SMA = Social media apps; Tech-fer = Technoference

5. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was threefold. At first, it aimed to examine the relationship between social media usage, online infidelity and technoference. Secondly, it aimed to compare subjective and objective measures of social media usage. And finally the third objective was to explore the mediating role of technoference between social media usage and online infidelity.

Studies showed that social media provide constant excess to dating apps and private messaging, making it easier for individuals to communicate secretly with potential alternative partners (Anzani et al., 2018; Blumler & Katz, 1974; Clayton, Faruq et al., 2017; Nagurney, & Smith, 2013). So previous studies align with our study finding that shows a significant positive correlation between social media usage and online infidelity.

An important aspect of this study was to compare subjective (self-report) and objective measures of social media usage. Our findings indicate that individual's perceptions about social media usage do not always match with actual social media usage. According to literature sometimes we overestimate or underestimate our self-report social media usage as compared to objective measures (Scharkow, 2016). Additionally, another reason for this difference is recall bias, while reporting on the self-report measures of social media usage individuals did not accurately recall how much time they spent on social media (Marciano & Camirini, 2020).

Our study further shows that men were significantly higher in technoference and online infidelity. As our findings are consistent with previous studies men are more likely than women to engage in goal directed acts outside their primary relationships or to cheat on their spouses or partners (Camille & Daniel, 2011; Laumann et al., 1994; McAlister et al., 2005; Wiederman & Hurd, 1999). It also shows that men were higher in technoference than females (Chi et al., 2022).

Moreover, not all social media users directly engage in online infidelity, technoference acts as an active mediating factor. The mediation analysis reveals that technoference significantly mediates the relationship between subjective measure of social media usage and online infidelity, as well as objective measure of time spent on social media apps and online infidelity. Results are consistent with previous studies that explain excessive use of social media often interrupts couple interactions, increases conflict, and create emotional distance between partners (McDaniel & Coyne, 2021; Roberts & David, 2016; Zoppolat et al., 2022; Hand et al., 2013). However, when attention is repeatedly diverted to phones, partners may feel disconnected, which can increase the likelihood of engaging in online infidelity and other boundary crossing behaviors (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2017a, 2017b; Abbasi, 2018; Ellison et al., 2007; Kerkhof et al., 2011; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011).

6. Limitations and Suggestions

Based on findings of present study there are few recommendations for future research, relationship counseling and individuals using social media. Firstly, the present study primarily examined technoference as a mediating variable, while other relevant factors were not included. Variables such as relationship satisfaction, attachment style, trust, jealousy, and loneliness may also influence the relationship between social media use and online infidelity. Future research should consider these variables to develop a more comprehensive understanding about the impact of technology on romantic relationships. Secondly, technoference was measured only through participant's subjective perceptions that may not fully reflect actual technology related interruptions during interactions.

Future studies should incorporate observational methods, such as observing couples during everyday activities.

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