Gender Differences in Extramarital Behaviors Among Couples in Long-Distance Marriages in the Digital Age: A Study in Kigali, Rwanda

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Abstract. This study investigated gender differences in extramarital behaviors in long-distance marriages, with a focus on the role of digital platforms in facilitating infidelity and the impact on marital commitment and satisfaction. The rationale for the study stems from the increasing prevalence of long-distance marriages in the digital age, where technology serves as both a means of maintaining connection and a potential risk factor for infidelity. A sample of 300 participants (150 men, 150 women) in long-distance marriages was recruited. Participants completed the Extramarital Behavior Scale (EBS), the Digital Communication and Infidelity Scale (DCIS), and the Marital Commitment and Satisfaction Scale (MCSS). Results showed that men reported higher levels of physical extramarital behaviors (mean = 3.2), while women exhibited more emotional extramarital behaviors (mean = 3.8). The use of digital platforms was strongly correlated with both physical ($r = .55$, $p < .01$) and emotional extramarital behaviors ($r = .50$, $p < .01$). Lower marital commitment ($B = -.30$, $p = .002$) and satisfaction ($B = -.25$, $p = .038$) were significant predictors of increased extramarital behaviors. In conclusion, digital platforms play a critical role in infidelity among long-distance couples, with notable gender differences in behavior patterns.

Keywords: Gender differences, digital communication, extramarital behaviors, long-distance marriages

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.15575/psy.v11i2.38942

Psympathic :
Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi
Vol.11:2, December 2024,
Page 107-114

eISSN: 2502-2903
pISSN: 2356-3591

Article Info
Received:
September 9, 2024
Accepted:
December 5, 2024
Published:
December 31, 2024

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Introduction

Long-distance marriages have become increasingly common due to the demands of work, education, and global mobility, creating unique challenges for maintaining emotional and physical intimacy. In these relationships, couples are often separated for extended periods, which can strain the marital bond and increase feelings of loneliness, insecurity, and detachment (Billedo et al., 2020). To bridge this gap, digital communication platforms such as social media, messaging apps, and video calls have become essential tools for maintaining connection (Dunn & Billett, 2017). However, while these platforms help sustain intimacy, they also introduce new risks, particularly the opportunity for emotional or physical relationships outside of marriage. The ease of accessing alternative partners through digital means can complicate marital fidelity, especially when partners are not physically present to monitor or engage with one another regularly (Hertlein & Blumer, 2014).

Gender differences in extramarital behaviors have been well-documented, with studies showing that men are 1.6 times more likely to engage in physical infidelity than women (Mark et al., 2011). Conversely, women are more prone to emotional infidelity, seeking connection rather than physical satisfaction (Treas & Giesen, 2004). Digital communication further accentuates these differences (Park, 2015). Evolutionary psychology offers one explanation for this phenomenon, suggesting that men are driven by sexual novelty and the desire to spread their genes, whereas women seek emotional stability and support (Schmitt, 2005). Mark et al. (2011) further emphasized that men often justify infidelity based on unmet sexual needs, while women are more likely to engage in infidelity when they feel emotionally neglected. Research by Treas and Giesen

(2004) confirms these trends, finding that men report higher rates of physical infidelity across cultures, while women are more likely to seek emotional intimacy through nonsexual relationships. Other studies suggest that digital communication exacerbates these gender differences, with men more frequently engaging in sexually explicit interactions online, while women tend to develop emotionally intimate relationships through social media and messaging platforms (Weber et al., 2018; Fox & Anderegg, 2014). Although these patterns have been observed across various cultures and socioeconomic groups, the rise of digital communication has added a new dimension to infidelity. The question of how these gender-specific behaviors play out in long-distance marriages, where both physical and emotional needs may go unmet for extended periods, remains underexplored.

The role of digital communication in facilitating extramarital behaviors is particularly relevant in long-distance marriages because it offers both a lifeline and a risk. On one hand, digital platforms allow couples to maintain connection and intimacy across distances. On the other, they provide opportunities for individuals to engage in infidelity, often without the knowledge of their spouse. Arriaga's (2013) application of Interdependence Theory suggests that relationships are maintained through a balance of rewards and costs. In long-distance marriages, the physical separation increases the perceived costs of the relationship, making extramarital behaviors more likely as individuals seek alternative rewards, such as emotional or sexual fulfillment from outside partners. Recent studies confirm that digital platforms, such as social media and messaging apps, make it easier for individuals to engage in infidelity by offering anonymity, accessibility, and reduced accountability (Nascimento et al., 2023). These platforms effectively lower the barriers to extramarital behaviors, providing a sense of emotional or sexual fulfillment that may be missing due to physical separation. This ease of access further complicates the dynamics of trust and fidelity in long-distance marriages, where digital communication becomes a double-edged sword.

Given the rising prevalence of long-distance marriages and the pervasive role of digital communication in modern relationships, it is crucial to understand how gender differences influence extramarital behaviors in this context. While much research has been conducted on traditional forms of infidelity, the impact of digital communication on marital fidelity remains underexplored, particularly in long-distance marriages. Recent studies suggest that digital infidelity has become increasingly common, yet gender differences in these behaviors remain under-investigated. Men are more likely to engage in physical and sexual extramarital behaviors online, while women tend to prioritize emotional connections. However, how these patterns play out in long-distance marriages, where physical needs are less easily met, remains unclear (Clayton et al., 2013). This study aims to fill this gap by examining how gender differences manifest in extramarital behaviors facilitated by digital platforms and the subsequent effects on marital commitment and satisfaction. By investigating these dynamics, this research will provide valuable insights into the unique challenges faced by couples in long-distance marriages in the digital age and offer recommendations for mitigating the risks associated with digital infidelity.

Methods

This study adopts a quantitative, descriptive-correlational research design to examine the relationship between gender and extramarital behaviors among couples in long-distance marriages in the digital age. The study included a large population of 300 participants, evenly split between 150 men and 150 women, to ensure balanced gender representation and robust comparisons. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the College of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of Rwanda (Reference No. CMHS/IRB/471/2024). The study is also registered in The Pan African Clinical Trials Registry (PACTR) under the registration number PACTR202407243122471, ensuring compliance with international research standards..

Participants

Participants were recruited through community notices, targeted social media advertisements, and outreach initiatives conducted by community-based organizations in Kigali, aiming for diverse demographic representation. A purposive sampling method was used to select 300 individuals meeting the study's criteria, with an equal distribution of 150 men and 150 women to ensure unbiased gender comparisons. Recruitment materials emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, allowing withdrawal at any time without penalty (American Psychological Association, 2021). The sample size was determined based on updated statistical guidelines for sufficient power to detect meaningful differences in extramarital behaviors and digital platform usage between genders (Svensson et al., 2022), aligning with recent findings on gender differences in extramarital behaviors (Djamba & Kimuna, 2020). Participants were required to be legally married, aged 25–50 years, living apart from their spouse for over a year, and actively engaging with their partner through digital platforms such as social media, messaging apps, or video calls.

These criteria targeted individuals likely to face challenges specific to long-distance marriages while utilizing digital communication, a key aspect of the study.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasizing confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation. To encourage candid responses and reduce social desirability bias, data were collected anonymously through self-administered online questionnaires hosted on a secure platform (Podsakoff et al., 2012). The survey utilized validated measures of extramarital behavior, relationship satisfaction, and digital communication usage, with additional items to examine moderators such as socioeconomic status and the duration of long-distance marriage (Finkel et al., 2017). The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the latest Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human subjects, prioritizing participant autonomy, privacy, and well-being. Participants received debriefing materials and contact information for psychological support services in case of distress.

Research Instruments

Extramarital Behavior Scale (EBS): Developed by Buunk and Bakker (1995), the Extramarital Behavior Scale (EBS) is a self-report instrument designed to assess the frequency and nature of extramarital behaviors, encompassing emotional and physical infidelity. The scale comprises 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "never" (1) to "always" (5), with total scores ranging from 20 to 100. Higher scores reflect more frequent engagement in extramarital behaviors. The EBS demonstrates excellent psychometric properties, including strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .89, and test-retest reliability of .86 over a two-week interval. Confirmatory factor analysis supports its unidimensional structure (CFI = .96, RMSEA = .05), and its convergent validity has been established through significant correlations with measures of marital dissatisfaction (r = .62).

The Digital Communication and Infidelity Scale (DCIS), developed by Clayton et al. (2013), is a 15-item questionnaire designed to assess the use of digital platforms, such as social media and messaging apps, in extramarital behaviors. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "never" (1) to "very frequently" (5), with total scores ranging from 15 to 75; higher scores indicate more frequent use of digital communication for extramarital purposes. The scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .85) and test-retest reliability (r = .78), as well as evidence of convergent validity through significant correlations with related constructs such as marital dissatisfaction and trust issues.

Rusbult and Van Lange (2003) developed the Marital Commitment and Satisfaction Scale (MCSS), a reliable tool for measuring commitment and satisfaction in marital relationships. Comprising 30 items evenly divided between commitment and satisfaction subscales, each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). Total scores span from 30 to 150, with higher scores indicating greater commitment and marital satisfaction. The scale demonstrates excellent reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values of .91 for the commitment subscale and .93 for the satisfaction subscale. Additional psychometric evaluations report a test-retest reliability of .89 over a four-week interval and strong convergent validity, correlating highly with related measures such as the Couples Satisfaction Index (r = .84).

Analysis Technique

Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics and overall patterns of extramarital behaviors among the participants. Independent t-tests were performed to examine gender differences in extramarital behaviors, highlighting any significant disparities between men and women. Pearson correlation analysis was employed to investigate the relationship between the use of digital communication platforms and the frequency of extramarital behaviors. Additionally, multivariate regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of digital communication and marital satisfaction on extramarital behaviors, while controlling for gender. All analyses were carried out using SPSS software, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

Results and Discussion

Results

As presented in Table 1, the detailed demographic table provides a comprehensive overview of the participant characteristics in the study on long-distance marriages. It reveals a diverse age range from 25 to 50 years, with an average age of 35.4 years, indicating a predominantly middle-aged cohort. The equal gender distribution ensures balanced insights across male and female perspectives. Participants have been in their marriages for a wide range of durations, from as little as one year up to 20 years, with most averaging 8.2 years, suggesting a mix of relatively newer and more established relationships. The duration of the long-distance arrangement also varies significantly, demonstrating how couples have

Table 1
Demographic Results

Demographic Category	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Standard Deviation	Most Common (Mode)	Median
Age (years)	25	50	35.4	6.5	-	35
Length of Marriage (years)	1	20	8.2	4.2	5	8
Duration of Long-Distance (years)	.5	10	3.5	2.1	3	3.5
Number of Children	0	4	2	1	2	2
Frequency of Digital Communication (times per week)	1	14	5	3	5	5

Table 2
Independent t-tests results that compares gender differences across key variables

Variable	Mean (Male)	Mean (Female)	t-value	p-value	Significance
Physical Extramarital Behaviors	3.2	2.4	4.15	.001	Significant
Emotional Extramarital Behaviors	3.0	3.8	-3.22	.002	Significant
Use of Digital Platforms for Infidelity	3.5	2.9	2.75	.006	Significant
Marital Commitment	4.2	4.5	-1.50	.135	Not Significant
Marital Satisfaction	3.9	4.1	-1.10	.270	Not Significant

Table 3
Pearson Correlation Analysis showing the relationship between key variables

Variables	Extramarital Behaviors (Physical)	Extramarital Behaviors (Emotional)	Use of Digital Platforms for Infidelity	Marital Commitment	Marital Satisfaction
Extramarital Behaviors (Physical)	1.00				
Extramarital Behaviors (Emotional)	.45**	1.00			
Use of Digital Platforms for Infidelity	.55**	.50**	1.00		
Marital Commitment	-.30**	-.35**	-.40**	1.00	
Marital Satisfaction	-.28**	-.32**	-.38**	.60**	1.00

Note: $p < .01$

Table 4
Multivariate Regression Analysis, showing how key variables predict extramarital behaviors

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standard Error (SE)	Standardized Coefficients (Beta)	t-value	p-value	Significance
Use of Digital Platforms for Infidelity	.48	.08	.52	6.00	.001	Significant
Marital Commitment	-.30	.10	-.28	-3.00	.002	Significant
Marital Satisfaction	-.25	.12	-.22	-2.08	.038	Significant
Gender (Male)	.35	.15	.18	2.33	.020	Significant

managed separation from six months to a decade, with an average of 3.5 years. The number of children among participants, ranges from none to four, with two being the most common, reflecting typical family sizes. Lastly, the frequency of digital communication highlights a high engagement level, ranging from once to fourteen times per week, with an average of five times, underscoring the critical role of digital tools in maintaining marital connections in long-distance settings. This detailed demographic profiling provides essential context for understanding the dynamics at play in maintaining marital satisfaction and commitment under the strain of physical separation.

The Independent t-tests reveal significant gender differences in several key variables. Men reported significantly higher levels of physical extramarital behaviors ($p = .001$) and greater use of digital platforms for infidelity ($p = .006$) compared to women. Conversely, women reported significantly higher levels of emotional extramarital behaviors than men ($p = .002$). No significant gender differences were found in marital commitment ($p = .135$) or marital satisfaction ($p = .270$), suggesting that while extramarital behaviors differ by gender, these differences do not appear to affect overall commitment or satisfaction within the marriage.

The Pearson correlation analysis reveals significant relationships between key variables. Physical and emotional extramarital behaviors are positively correlated ($r = .45$, $p < .01$), suggesting that individuals engaging in one form of infidelity may also engage in the other. The use of digital platforms for infidelity is strongly correlated with both physical ($r = .55$, $p < .01$) and emotional extramarital behaviors ($r = .50$, $p < .01$). Negative correlations were found between extramarital behaviors and both marital

commitment (r = -.30 to -.40, p < .01) and marital satisfaction (r = -.28 to -.38, p < .01), indicating that higher levels of infidelity are associated with lower marital commitment and satisfaction. Additionally, marital commitment and satisfaction are positively correlated (r = .60, p < .01), suggesting that higher commitment enhances marital satisfaction.

The multivariate regression analysis shows that the use of digital platforms for infidelity is the strongest predictor of extramarital behaviors (B = .48, p = .001), followed by lower levels of marital commitment (B = -.30, p = .002) and marital satisfaction (B = -.25, p = .038), indicating that greater digital engagement and lower commitment and satisfaction are associated with higher extramarital behaviors. Additionally, gender (being male) also significantly predicts extramarital behaviors (B = .35, p = .020).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into gender differences in extramarital behaviors among couples in long-distance marriages in the digital age. The result showing that men reported significantly higher levels of physical extramarital behaviors (mean = 3.2) compared to women (mean = 2.4; t = 4.15, p = .001) is consistent with recent research that suggests men are more likely to engage in physical infidelity (March et al., 2024). This supports evolutionary theories that posit men's biological drive to seek multiple partners as a way to spread their genes, leading to higher incidences of physical infidelity (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2022).

On the other hand, the significantly higher levels of emotional extramarital behaviors in women (mean = 3.8) compared to men (mean = 3.0; t = -3.22, p = .002) align with findings that women prioritize emotional connections, which may serve as a form of relationship security when their primary relationship is emotionally unfulfilling (Choy & Li, 2021). This distinction between physical and emotional infidelity reinforces the notion that men and women engage in extramarital behaviors for different psychological reasons, with men seeking sexual novelty and women seeking emotional connection.

A critical aspect of this study was the role of digital platforms in facilitating extramarital behaviors. The significant association between the use of digital communication tools, such as social media and messaging apps, and both physical (r = .55, p < .01) and emotional extramarital behaviors (r = .50, p < .01) suggests that digital platforms provide a new and accessible avenue for extramarital interactions. These findings align with recent literature, such as the work of Strauss et al. (2024), which highlight how digital communication lowers the barriers for engaging in infidelity. By offering anonymity and convenience, digital platforms allow individuals to interact with potential alternative partners in ways that were not previously possible, thus exacerbating the risk of extramarital behaviors. The regression analysis showed that frequent use of digital platforms was the strongest predictor of extramarital behaviors (B = .48, p = .001), indicating that digital tools can play a central role in infidelity, particularly in long-distance relationships where face-to-face interactions are limited.

The study also revealed a significant negative correlation between extramarital behaviors and both marital commitment (r = -.30 to -.40, p < .01) and satisfaction (r = -.28 to -.38, p < .01), demonstrating the detrimental impact of infidelity on marital relationships. Participants who engaged in more extramarital behaviors reported lower levels of both commitment and satisfaction, supporting previous research on the adverse effects of infidelity on marital stability (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2023). The regression analysis confirmed that lower marital commitment (B = -.30, p = .002) and satisfaction (B = -.25, p = .038) were significant predictors of increased extramarital behaviors, further highlighting the importance of these factors in maintaining fidelity. These findings suggest that digital infidelity has similar consequences to traditional infidelity, eroding trust, emotional intimacy, and the overall quality of the marital relationship.

Interestingly, while both marital commitment and satisfaction were negatively affected by extramarital behaviors, marital commitment had a stronger association with infidelity than satisfaction. his finding aligns with recent developments in Interdependence Theory (Ahmad et al., 2023), which posits that commitment is a critical factor in relationship maintenance. Even when individuals experience low satisfaction, a high level of commitment can serve as a protective factor against infidelity. This has important implications for relationship counseling, particularly for couples in long-distance marriages. Interventions that focus on strengthening commitment may be more effective in reducing infidelity compared to those that solely address satisfaction. Enhancing commitment through counseling may help individuals resist the temptation to engage in extramarital behaviors, even when the relationship faces challenges related to physical separation or emotional discontent.

This study provides valuable insights but has limitations. Self-reported data may introduce bias, with participants potentially underreporting extramarital behaviors or overstating marital commitment. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish causality between digital platform use and infidelity. Additionally, focusing on couples

in Kigali, Rwanda, may restrict generalizability to other cultural contexts. The findings highlight the societal impact of digital communication on marital fidelity, especially in long-distance relationships. While digital platforms foster connections, they also heighten risks of extramarital behaviors. Counselors can leverage these insights to design interventions that enhance commitment. Future research should examine specific digital interactions, employ longitudinal studies to explore causality, and investigate these dynamics across diverse cultural contexts for broader understanding.

Conclusion

This study provides valuable insights into gender differences in extramarital behaviors among couples in long-distance marriages, with a particular focus on the role of digital communication. The findings reveal that men are more likely to engage in physical infidelity, while women tend to seek emotional connections outside the marriage. The increasing use of digital platforms has been shown to significantly facilitate both physical and emotional infidelity, highlighting the impact of technology on modern relationships. Furthermore, lower levels of marital commitment and satisfaction were strongly associated with higher levels of extramarital behaviors, emphasizing the negative effect of infidelity on relationship quality. These results underscore the need for couples in long-distance marriages to navigate the challenges posed by physical separation and digital technology. Relationship interventions should focus on strengthening commitment and managing digital communication in a way that supports fidelity. Future research should continue exploring the evolving impact of digital platforms on marital relationships, particularly in the context of long-distance marriages, to provide more targeted support for couples facing these unique challenges.

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