

**INFIDELITY IN INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL MARKETING RELATIONSHIPS:
AN APPLICATION OF THE MARITAL METAPHOR**

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ABSTRACT

Infidelity has been a common phenomenon in any inter-organizational marketing relationship, which can harm its smooth functioning, operating performance and long-term viability. Using the marriage metaphor, we explain the infidelity phenomenon in inter-organizational relationships. Specifically, we analyze how various structural, processual, and contextual characteristics of the relationship contribute to the emergence of infidelity incidents, what behavioral and attitudinal signs help to diagnose partner infidelity, how infidelity acts are manifested, what consequences infidelity could have on the victim, and how infidelity problems could be prevented or treated. Several theoretical, methodological, and managerial implications are derived from the study, as well as directions for future research.

Keywords

Infidelity; inter-organizational relationships; business ethics; marital metaphor

Competitive paper

INTRODUCTION

Infidelity is one of the most severe, deceptive, and unethical violations of an exchange business relationship, whereby one party explores, seeks, or establishes an illegitimate, parallel collaboration with another partner, who is a competitor of the other party (Drigotas and Barta, 2001). It is the ultimate form of betrayal, mainly because resources, which are critical for the smooth operation of the working relationship, are channeled to an alternative partner (Shackelford et al., 2000). It is basically the abrogation of an agreement and/or abandonment of a relationship to the advantage of the instigator, but without provision or remedy for the other party (Griesinger, 1990). As such, infidelity is a specific form of negative opportunism, in which the interacting parties have an explicit or implicit contract of exclusivity, and one of them violates that contract to reap the benefits of multiple partners (Weiser and Weigel, 2014). Despite its importance, marketing literature has shed virtually little light on infidelity in inter-organizational relationships, as opposed to other dark side issues, such as contract breach (e.g., Lusch et al., 2011), destructive acts (e.g., Hibbard et al., 2001), and opportunism (Barnes et al., 2010), that have received considerable attention. In fact, extant research has only tangentially tackled infidelity, with this focusing mainly on either the role of the intervention of alternative partners in terminating a business relationship or the importance of relational characteristics in preventing the involvement of illegitimate partners in a relationship (e.g., Tsiros et al., 2009).

In light of the above, the purpose of this study is to provide a thorough understanding of infidelity in inter-organizational marketing relationships. Specifically, we aim to identify the motives of interacting parties to engage in infidelity, the signs responsible for diagnosing infidelity, the various forms that infidelity can take, the aftermath of infidelity on the exposed party, and the available ways to prevent or heal the relational damage caused by infidelity (see **Table 1**). In doing so, we draw a parallel with infidelity in marital relationships, because they share many commonalities with inter-organizational relationships. The *raison d'être* for conducting this study derives from the fact that infidelity: (a) can seriously jeopardize the efficiency and effectiveness of a relationship and harm its financial outcomes (Johnston and Hausman, 2006); (b) is undertaken by a partner who is assumed to be trustworthy, and can therefore cause disappointment on the part of the victim (Rachman, 2010); (c) may lead to a termination of the relationship, which means that the investments involved will be lost and additional investments will be required to build a new relationship (Grünhagen et al., 2017); and (d) has implications beyond the existing relationship, with the victim losing self-esteem and the offending party damaging its reputation in the wider community (Kowalski, 2001).

Table 1: Organizing framework of infidelity in inter-organizational relationships

Motives	Signs	Manifestations	Consequences	Remedies
Structural	Attitudinal	Ambiguous	Passive	Pre-emptive
Processual	Behavioral	Explicit	Mild	Post-hoc
Contextual		Deceptive	Aggressive	

MOTIVES FOR INFIDELITY

Infidelity in inter-organizational relationships can be driven by three broad categories of motives. The *first* group comprise **structural motives** comprising incompatibility, low partner dependence, and limited commitment. Infidelity is very likely to arise in the case of *incompatibility* of goals, strategies, and expectations between partners in a relationship. When partners are incompatible, it is very likely that a party will seek to promote its own interests at the expense of the other, will be reluctant to devote necessary resources to the relationship, and will engage in non-collaborative behavior, which can create instability in the relationship, promote non-reciprocal actions, and weaken relational bonds (Das and Rahman, 2010). *Low dependence* can also lead a party to seek another illegitimate relationship, because it has little

to lose if the relationship is terminated (Kumar et al., 1995). Over time, the offending party may acquire new knowledge, skills and superior status in the market, which may reduce its dependence on the relationship, as well allowing it to find better alternatives that were non-existent when the relationship was initiated (Buss et al., 2017). The existence of *low commitment* can also push one party in the relationship to cheat on the other with an illegitimate partner. Usually, a committed party wants to stay in a relationship for a long time and reap long-term benefits, thus reducing the chances of being unfaithful (Finkel et al., 2002). The *second* group refers to **processual motives**, such as *low satisfaction* with the relationship will also increase the chances of infidelity, mainly because any positive expectations of the existing partner are not being met. In fact, a dissatisfied partner will seek to obtain benefits from a relationship with another external partner, due to the perception that the rewards gained from the existing relationship are not enough to outweigh the costs suffered (Buunk and Dijkstra, 2006). *Less cooperative* relationships are also more vulnerable to infidelity incidents. This can be attributed to the fact that the offending party: (a) is very likely to act in its own self-interest, rather than caring about its partner and the relationship as a whole; (b) no longer values the relationship with the current partner and, therefore, seeks to transfer resources to alternative firms which are more attractive; (c) finds that the benefits of collaborating with the existing partner are less than the costs paid and the sacrifices made; and (d) no longer bothers to put energy, time, and effort into a relationship from which there is no equitable exchange (Fitness, 2001). The existence of an *ongoing conflict* between the interacting parties can also be conducive to infidelity. This is because conflict impedes the smooth functioning of the relationship by decreasing the value attached to it, makes striving for joint goals meaningless, and increases doubts about its future development and success (Skarmeas, 2006). Ongoing conflict results in the withholding of the resources needed by the partner, which subsequently leads the latter to search for these resources elsewhere (Kim and Frazier, 1997). The *third* group are **contextual motives**, having their roots on uncertainty and distance. Under *high uncertainty*, difficulties arise in accurately measuring the costs and benefits of the relationship, thus creating a reluctance to invest additional resources and stimulating a desire to channel these resources into alternative, illegitimate relationships. The existence of high uncertainty also leads to both ill-defined and unfulfilled relational expectations, which is responsible for reducing relation-specific investments and promoting deceptive behavior (Elangovan and Shapiro, 1998). Moreover, a climate of high uncertainty makes the monitoring of the performance of the relationship a rather cumbersome task (Anderson and Gatignon, 1986), while it deters the detection of such inequitable and deceptive acts as infidelity. An inter-organizational relationship characterized by *high distance* is also vulnerable to infidelity incidents, because: (a) it makes each party's goals less clear and the investments devoted to the relationship less visible, thus increasing the possibility of transferring resources to alternative partners (Hallén and Sandström, 1991); (b) it causes communication breakdowns between the interacting parties, which makes the monitoring of each party's intentions and activities difficult (Bello et al., 2003); (c) it creates difficulties in building close social relationships between boundary spanners of the two parties (Kaufmann and Carter, 2006); and (d) it facilitates a tendency to separate, due to the existence of inconsistent frames of reference, different interpretation of strategic issues, and incongruent expectations (Obadia, 2013).

SIGNS OF INFIDELITY

Changes in the attitudes and behavior of the instigator may help in the diagnosis of infidelity. **Attitudinal signs** include apathy and disinterest in the relationship, unusual anger, criticism, and argumentation directed at the partner, and anxiety and stress. Beginning to *feel apathy and disinterest* in the relationship with the partner is one of the symptoms of committing infidelity (Shackelford and Buss, 1997a). This is expressed, for example, by a reduction in the time, effort,

and resources put into the working relationship, as well as a reluctance to perform its duties and obligations in the same way as before. Such signs indicate that the offending party no longer cares about creating value in the working relationship or contributing to its performance, but wants to channel its efforts toward another competing business. *Being “uncharacteristically” angry, critical, and argumentative* toward the partner may also be a signal that the offending party has committed infidelity (Shackelford and Buss, 1997a). This rebellious behavior can be ascribed to the guilt the party feels about the infidelity it has committed, particularly if it believes that the victim is suspicious of the deception. Another explanation of this behavior has to do with an attempt by the offending party to hide the infidelity incident from the victim by diverting the latter’s attention to other issues. Another sign of infidelity is when the offending party *adopts an anxious and stressful attitude*. The instigator may express anxiety by becoming unusually apologetic and/or avoiding any interaction with the current partner (Shackelford and Buss, 1997a). This can be attributed to the fear of revealing the infidelity sooner or later, thus making the instigator accountable for the transgression. Under such conditions, the violator may come up with unreasonable demands, cause emotional unrest, and even exert strong pressure on the victim. This will gradually strain the working relationship and reduce the benefits associated with it. **Behavioral signs**, on the other hand, include changes in normal routine and behavior, passive rejection, and inconsiderateness, and providing hints that the relationship has come to an end. *Changes in the normal routine and behavior with the partner* in the relationship can also be a sign of infidelity (Shackelford and Buss, 1997a). For instance, the instigator may suddenly start to stage an unusually low performance because of devoting limited resources to more than one partner with different goals. Moreover, the instigator may make improvements to its own resources, which are not used in the relationship with the current partner. Infidelity can also be caused when the partner proceeds with a *passive rejection and behaves in an inconsiderate way* (Shackelford and Buss, 1997a). Passive rejection involves an indirect, rather than a direct, rejection of the partner (Shackelford and Buss, 1997a). This may be expressed by inventing excuses for not having time to put effort into the relationship (e.g., machinery breakdowns). Inconsiderateness, on the other hand, represents carelessness about the feelings, expectations, and rights of the partner. The victim may notice that social bonds with the boundary spanners of the instigator are starting to weaken. *Providing hints* to the other partner that the *relationship has come to an end* may also be a sign of infidelity. Some of these hints are: the slowdown or complete interruption of contacts with the victim, the withholding of resources that are critical for the smooth functioning of the working relationship, and showing indifference about its long-term prospects. Under such conditions, the victim becomes less central to the life of the offending party, which now places the value of the working relationship with the victim at a low level.

MANIFESTATIONS OF INFIDELITY

Infidelity is manifested in various ways, which can be categorized into ambiguous, explicit, and deceptive. One type of **ambiguous infidelity** is when a party in a relationship is systematically *attentive to competitive offers*. Such offers may take the form of providing higher quality, lower prices, better payment/selling terms, and so on, and can serve mainly to balance the costs of defecting from the existing relationship. The instigator searches for companies with better offers, in order to obtain resources that will help to secure its long-term survival and improve its financial performance (Schmitt and Buss, 2001). Making efforts to *contact a partner’s competitor* for the purpose of exploring the possibility of doing business together is another type of ambiguous infidelity. Such contacts (e.g., planned business meetings) represent a more real intention to switch to the competitors, compared to only paying attention to them. In fact, this behavior might be considered as a tactic by the instigator to ensure stability and performance in the market, especially when there is a decrease in the value

of the current business partner or an increase in the value of the partner's competitor due to external (e.g., economic crisis) or internal (e.g., bad liquidity) factors (Buss et al., 2017). *Actively negotiating with a partner's competitor* to achieve better terms, compared to those offered by the current partner, provides a form of **explicit infidelity**. Such negotiations aim to find a back-up partner and help the instigator to have a more thorough evaluation of alternative partners on various aspects (e.g., goal compatibility). During this evaluation process, the instigator constantly compares and contrasts the value of its current partner to that of the potential new partner, as well as calculating the possible costs from exiting the relationship (e.g., financial penalties from possible law suits) (Buss et al., 2017). *Actual dealing with another firm*, which is a direct competitor of the other party in the relationship, comprises the most severe form of infidelity. Here, the offending party disregards the victim and the relationship, looks after its own interests, and intentionally violates the contractual agreement (Weiser and Weigel, 2014). Developing a working relationship requires financial, human, and allied investments, which in cases of infidelity are shared between the victim and another partner, and the instigator has to set priorities as to their allocation (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). This will usually leave the victim with less resources, which can be a cause of conflict in the relationship, especially in light of the fact that it has already made significant tangible and intangible investments. **Deceptive infidelity** can arise when one party in the relationship *discloses vital information* that was given in confidence by the other party to a firm outside the relationship. Although informational resources devoted to the instigator may be denied after infidelity, the knowledge accumulated during years of interacting with the victim cannot be retrieved. This situation becomes even more crucial, when the extra-dyadic party is a firm that is a direct competitor of the victim, and therefore can use this information against it. *Telling lies* on issues relating to a planned or actual association with an illegitimate partner is also responsible for distorting the quality of the information exchanged, and harms the integrity of the working relationship (Lewicki, 1983). This will prevent the victim from attaining its own goals, because misguidedly, it will make false decisions about critical aspects of a relationship that is doomed to fail (Lewicki, 1983).

CONSEQUENCES OF INFIDELITY

Adopting a **passive stance** is one of the victim's reactions toward business partner infidelity. In this context, one possible reaction to an infidelity incidence is to *offer forgiveness* to the offending party, especially if the latter provides reasonable excuses and apologizes for the mistake made (Kowalski, 2003). By forgiving, the victim tries to understand the reason for the other party behaving in this way, accepts that everyone can make a mistake, and hopes that there will be no more infidelity incidences in the future. The likelihood of forgiveness is higher when the infidelity is not so serious, the victim has made substantial investments in the relationship, and the instigator makes some positive amendments after the infidelity (Guerrero and Bachman, 2010). The victim may also *accommodate* the offending party, in the hope that there will be no repetition of infidelity. In other words, the victim deliberately chooses not to react in a disruptive manner to the partner's infidelity act, but instead maintains a low profile, by taking into consideration the long-term orientation of the relationship (Rusbult et al., 1991). Another consequence of infidelity is for the victim to **react mildly** by adopting various *positive reassessment measures*, such as constructive discussions, compromise agreements, and business behavior improvement (Weiser and Weigel, 2014). This is usually associated with a reconsideration of the transgression by the victim (e.g., shifting the blame to external factors) in the light of excuses and justifications provided by the instigator (Tedeschi and Bond, 2001). Exhibiting an **aggressive response** by the victim is a common consequence of infidelity. For example, the victim may *impose punitive measures* against the violator (and sometimes against the illegitimate party), the purpose of which is to bring the latter back to conformity, prevent

any similar actions from occurring in the future, and restore the balance of power in the relationship (Finkel et al., 2002). Such measures may take the form of withholding important support, delaying certain operational procedures, threatening to terminate the relationship, derogating the instigator to potential new partners, or releasing confidential information to third parties that will harm the instigator (Buss et al., 2017). In severe cases of infidelity, the victim may *disengage from the relationship*. The decision to disengage is mainly the result of an analysis, in which the victim compares the costs and benefits of remaining in the relationship against those of leaving the relationship (Chen et al., 2013). On the costs side, the victim considers the financial losses incurred from terminating the relationship, the opportunity costs of having a better partner after releasing the instigator, and the undergoing psychological distress in the aftermath of infidelity (Shackelford and Buss, 1997b). On the benefits side, the victim considers the avoidance of time, effort, and uncertainty associated with finding a new partner, as well as any long-term rewards expected to be gained from the existing relationship (Shackelford and Buss, 1997b). As a last resort, the victim may *take revenge*, which can be expressed in various ways, such as disseminating bad news about the instigator in order to decrease its value to the business community, seeking financial compensation by legally suing the offending party, or engaging in various ambiguous or explicit forms of infidelity (Buss, 1988; Buss et al., 2017).

REMEDIES OF INFIDELITY

Partners could protect a relationship against the infidelity threat by taking various **pre-emptive measures**, such as maintaining a *healthy relationship atmosphere*, in which trust, commitment, cooperation, and satisfaction are kept at high levels between the interacting parties. In this way, the rewards gained from the working relationship remain higher than its costs, while both parties work in a transparent, reciprocal, and honest way toward achieving common goals. Another way to prevent infidelity is to establish measures that *guard the relationship* against external temptations to find alternative business partners (Buss, 1988). Examples of such measures may include ‘monopolization’ of the other party’s time in order to keep its exclusive attention through intensive communication and continuous adaptations; devotion of a greater amount and the constant improvement of own resources in the relationship to maintain its value at high levels; and derogation of alternative partners in terms of their quality of offers, behavior, and performance (Buss, 1988). *Maintaining direct and open communication*, whereby reliable, timely, and in-depth information is exchanged on a constant basis between the two parties, is also vital to prevent infidelity incidences in an inter-organizational relationship. Communication acts as the ‘glue’ that keeps the members of the relationship together, by boosting confidence about the value of the relationship, enhancing belief in the honesty of the transactions made, and offering transparency concerning each other’s intentions or actions (Eckerd and Hill, 2012). Certain **post-hoc actions** can heal the relationship after infidelity is revealed. For instance, both parties may take steps to *rebuild trust* in the relationship. This requires the instigator offering an apology and express its regret for what happened; promising that its unacceptable behavior will not be repeated with the same or another external partner; and expressing its willingness to offer compensation for any financial, material, and other costs incurred by its infidelity to the other party (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). It is also important to *redefine the relationship on a more solid basis* by: (a) restating relational norms and rules; (b) setting realistic goals regarding the relationship; (c) formulating a relational code of conduct in order to discourage any infidelity episodes in the future; and (d) cultivating the expectation that working together offers better rewards and returns as opposed to other alternative relationships (Anderson and Jap, 2005). Finally, the establishment of a *crisis resolution mechanism*, can also be therapeutic because it will help: (a) spot any abnormalities in the collaboration between the interacting parties and understand the reasons for what has gone wrong in the relationship (b)

prevent the partners from making a quick decision on the basis of their initial reactions to the infidelity incident; and (c) examine the possibility of making changes in the relationship that will re-establish confidence and trust between the interacting parties (Snyder et al., 2008).

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The previous analysis has amply demonstrated the deleterious, destructive, and devastating effects that infidelity can have on an inter-organizational relationship. Infidelity violates the basic relational assumptions that the partner is reliable and trustworthy, the exchange process is predictable, and the relationship is controllable. Obviously, the relationship will not be the same as it was before the infidelity is revealed, as the history of learning, adaptations, and investments lose their meaning and many costs are incurred in order to heal the relationship or start a new one. This study contributes to the literature in various ways. First, it introduces infidelity, a new construct, which can have serious direct and indirect impact on other relational constructs (e.g., trust) and jeopardize operating performance. Second, it enhances our limited understanding of infidelity in inter-organizational relationships by synthesizing scattered knowledge on the subject. Third, it underscores the dynamic role of infidelity, by proposing a stages-approach to its conceptualization, with each stage characterized by distinctive characteristics. Finally, it demonstrates how theories and ideas developed in non-business disciplines (e.g., social psychology) can be used with some modifications (and under certain circumstances) to explain similar phenomena in inter-organizational relationships.

Our study offers important theoretical, methodological, and managerial implications. *Theoretically*, we have shown that various ideas developed within the sphere of marital studies can be transferred (with some modifications) to a business-to-business context. In light of the fact that the field of social psychology has given considerable attention to the study of infidelity more input can be derived from this discipline by marketing researchers. For example, it would be interesting to determine whether some emotional triggering-cues (e.g., neglect) and consequences (e.g., distress) of infidelity in interpersonal relationships could be applicable to inter-organizational interactions. *Methodologically*, the relatively unexplored nature of infidelity in inter-organizational relationships necessitates the development of valid scales. Moreover, since infidelity involves both parties in the working relationship, it would be more appropriate to follow a dyadic approach in data collection, in order to double-check the views of both the instigator and the victim. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the infidelity phenomenon necessitates the adoption of longitudinal research designs that would help to capture its developmental pattern. *Managerially*, to minimize chances of infidelity in business-to-business relationships, firms should carefully select partners who are reliable, dependable, and trustworthy, as well as having compatible expectations, goals, and strategies. Of particular importance is to establish a communication channel with the partner's organization that would help to develop sensitivity to potential relational problems, discover undesired behavior that could evolve to infidelity, and take measures to prevent infidelity.

Some issues that future research could address include: (a) What motives and symptoms are associated with each type of infidelity? (b) Which types of infidelity are more likely to be forgiven, accommodated, reconsidered, or followed by aggressive reactions? (c) Which pre-emptive measures are more effective in preventing infidelity in the working relationship? (d) What actions need to be taken in order to rebuild trust between the interacting parties in the aftermath of infidelity? (e) What is the role of age, stage, value, contractual nature, and internationality of the working relationship on the development of infidelity incidences? (f) How does infidelity affect future relationships of the victim with regard to partner selection criteria, control mechanisms, and level of trust? (g) How are various network members affected by infidelity actions in the dyad? and (h) What role do the environmental factors play in the emergence of infidelity in business-to-business relationships?

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