Parasocial Romances as Infidelity: Comparing Perceptions of Real-Life, Online, and Parasocial Extradyadic Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Parasocial relationships are perceived friendships with media figures that are not reciprocated (Horton and Wohl 1956). Although parasocial relationships can be romantic (Adam and Sizemore 2013), it is unclear whether parasocial romances are perceived as infidelity. In this study, we compared men's and women's perceptions of offline, online, and parasocial extradyadic behavior. The sample included 188 undergraduate college students, who were administered one of three versions of a two-sentence story prompt about a couple in which one partner is involved in either an offline, online, or parasocial relationship. The participants were asked to write a brief story based on the prompt. Stories were content-analyzed for whether the behavior was seen as betrayal, reasons why it was or was not seen as such, and the impact on the couple's relationship. The majority of participants in the parasocial condition identified the parasocial relationship as an act of betrayal, although this percentage was smaller compared to the offline and online conditions. The majority of participants in this condition also described the "victim" as being hurt or upset by the behavior. These results indicate that even parasocial extradyadic relationships may have negative consequences on real-life relationships.

KEY WORDS Parasocial relationships; infidelity; story completion

Relationships are an important aspect of social interaction for many people. Stable romantic relationships are positively correlated with mental health factors such as happiness (Braithwaite, Delevi, and Fincham 2010) and are negatively correlated with depression (Coombs 1991). Partner infidelity, however, can result in lower life

satisfaction and self-esteem (Spanier and Margolis 1983), and it is a leading cause of divorce (Amato and Previti 2003). How people define infidelity is complex, and different people view different behaviors as more distressing than others. Although sexual and emotional infidelity have been well studied, it is less clear whether imagined relationships are perceived as examples of infidelity, and whether such relationships influence real-life romantic relationships. Parasocial relationships are attachments to figures in the media that are not reciprocated (Horton and Wohl 1956), and they can be romantic in nature (Adam and Sizemore 2013; Tuchakinsky 2010). In the current article, we report on a study in which we investigated whether participants viewed offline, online, and parasocial behaviors as infidelity, why or why not, and potential influences of these behaviors on real-life relationships.

TYPES OF INFIDELITY

Although most people associate infidelity with extradyadic sexual intimacy, recent research distinguishes between emotional and sexual infidelity (Buss et al. 1992). Emotional infidelity refers to forming an intimate emotional attachment to someone, whereas sexual infidelity refers to sexual intimacy with another, in which an emotional connection may or may not be present (Buss et al. 1992). Overall, attitudes toward different types of infidelity differ across cultures, gender, and prior experience (for a review, see Blow and Hartnett 2005).

Some research has focused on less-traditional definitions of infidelity. Whitty (2003) investigated perceptions of offline and online behaviors such as cybersex, hot chat, pornography use, and emotional and sexual intimacy. Porn use was seen as a factor separate from sexual or emotional infidelity and was seen as less worrisome (Whitty 2003); in contrast, cybersexual behaviors were perceived similarly to offline sexual behaviors regarding infidelity, suggesting that what is perceived as betrayal in a romantic relationship is more complex than originally thought. Even sexually fantasizing about someone can be perceived as infidelity (Feldman and Cauffman 1999; Yarab, Allgeier, and Sensibaugh 1999) and as jealousy-provoking (Yarab et al. 1999). The more sexual fantasizing is seen as a threat to a relationship, the more it is considered to be infidelity (Yarab and Allgeier 1998).

PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Many people report forming parasocial relationships with real-life celebrities and fictional characters. These relationships, which are marked by intense emotional (and sometimes physical) attraction and feelings that one could be friends with, date, or turn to media figure in times of need, are formed through media use but are mentally maintained outside of the media environment. Although this is a well-established area, possible effects of parasocial relationships on real-life relationships have not been well studied. To further examine whether romantic parasocial relationships (parasocial romance) are perceived as infidelity, we extended research conducted by Whitty (2005) in which she used Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) story-completion task to investigate perceptions of

online relationships as cheating. Whitty demonstrated that about 84 percent of people considered having an Internet relationship to be an act of betrayal (compared to 90 percent if "seeing someone" offline, according to Kitzinger and Powell 1995). When people did not define cyber relationships as cheating, it was because of a lack of physical sexual intimacy (Whitty). In the current study, we also used Kitzinger and Powell's story-completion task to compare participants' reactions to parasocial romances with having an offline relationship or a cyber relationship. The first goal of the current study was to extend the research conducted by Kitzinger and Powell and by Whitty to investigate overall perceptions of parasocial romances as acts of betrayal compared to offline or cyber relationships.

SEX DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF INFIDELITY

Men and women differ in what they define as infidelity and in how distressing they find those behaviors. Overall, women define a wider range of behaviors as infidelity (Hackathorn 2009; Whitty 2003). Some research has demonstrated that men are more likely to find physical, sexual infidelity upsetting, whereas women find emotional infidelity more distressing (Buss et al. 1992; Cann, Mangum, and Wells 2001); however, other research indicates that both men and women find sexual infidelity, at least, to be equally distressing (Yarab et al. 1999). As previously indicated, cyber cheating can also be seen as an act of betrayal. Online relationships are considered by many to be as hurtful and detrimental to real-life relationships as offline infidelity (Whitty 2003, 2005). Women in particular are more likely to be distressed by both online infidelity (Hackathorn 2009; Whitty 2005) and sexual fantasizing (Yarab et al. 1999).

In the current study, we predicted that, similarly to cyber relationships, women would be more likely than men to identify romantic parasocial relationships as betrayal, via the story-completion task, and would also be more likely than men to voice negative effects of the parasocial relationship on a couple's relationship.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred eighty eight (188) students from a medium-sized regional university in the Midwest were recruited via the SONA system (an online research pool) from introductory psychology classes and were given access to a link to Survey Monkey to take part in an online study. Participants were age 18 and above (M = 19.39, SD = 2.71). The sample consisted of 137 women and 51 men, who were primarily white (89 percent). Participants were granted research credit through SONA upon completion of the study, which counted toward extra credit or course requirements.

Design/Procedure

We conducted a between-subjects experiment using Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) story-completion method, in which participants were given a two-line scenario describing

different behaviors. The independent variable in this study was type of behavior (parasocial, online, or offline infidelity). The scenario was worded the same for every condition except for when it came to the type of cheating. All participants' scenarios began, "Jennifer and Mark have been going out for over a year." In the offline condition, the second sentence reads, "Then Jennifer realizes that Mark is seeing someone else." This scenario was used in the original study by Kitzinger and Powell (1995), who used the names John and Claire. In the online condition, the second sentence is "Then Jennifer realizes that Mark has developed a relationship with someone else over the Internet." This scenario was used by Whitty (2005). In the parasocial condition, the second sentence reads, "Then Jennifer notices that Mark still talks all the time about his favorite celebrity and how attractive she is." Participants were randomly assigned to each condition.

Following this prompt, participants were asked to complete the story by writing one or two paragraphs. The two authors then blindly coded the stories separately. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and reconciled. We coded for three dependent variables: whether the participant viewed the scenario as an act of betrayal (from the viewpoint of Jennifer), why or why not, and what (if any) the impact on the relationship was. Whitty's (2005) results were used as initial coding categories, but other common reasons for why the behavior was or was not betrayal, and other frequently portrayed effects of the behavior on the relationship were also noted. If participants described multiple effects on the relationship, we noted all of them. Participants were also asked about their romantic relationship status, gender, age, and ethnicity.

RESULTS

Behavior as Betrayal

Thirteen (13) participants did not complete the task as instructed; they did not write a story but instead discussed possible actions that Jennifer could or should do. These participants were excluded from analyses. In Whitty's (2005) study, 84 percent of the sample perceived the online condition to be an act of betrayal. In the current study, we found that 90 percent of participants in the online condition perceived the behavior as an act of betrayal from the viewpoint of Jennifer. In addition, we found that 95 percent of participants in the offline infidelity condition saw Mark's behavior as a definitive act of betrayal, which was similar to the 90 percent found by Kitzinger and Powell (1995). Finally, 76 percent of participants in the parasocial condition saw the behavior as an act of betrayal. Thus, although there was a difference in how parasocial behaviors were perceived, most participants still felt that it was a behavior harmful to the real-life romantic relationship (Table 1). Some participants wrote stories indicating that although Jennifer was suspicious and hurt at first, she later found out that her worries were unfounded. Because in these stories Jennifer still felt that she was being betrayed, we did not classify them as straightforward acts of betrayal or lack of betrayal, instead giving them their own category.

Table 1. Frequency of Perceptions of an Act as Betrayal

Act of Betrayal	Offline	Online	Parasocial
Yes	70	53	34
No	1	0	11
First yes, then no	3	6	0
Did not complete	4	4	5

Behavior as Infidelity: Why or Why Not?

In the original Whitty (2005) study, the categories used for why the behavior was an act of betrayal included that the partner couldn't have a relationship with more than one person, that the behavior constituted emotional or sexual infidelity, or that the partner was keeping secrets. In the current study, participants rarely discussed sexual behavior, focusing on other reasons that Jennifer was upset. For both the offline and cyber scenarios, the most common reason given for the behavior being an act of betrayal included betrayal of trust or emotional betrayal (Table 2). For example:

> Jennifer gets really upset with Mark because she trusted him. Now the trust between Mark and Jennifer is gone or at least damaged. (female, offline)

> She confronts Mark about the other relationship and he denies it. She gets really upset because he broke her trust. She decides to break up with him. (male, online)

Table 2. Explanations for Why the Behavior Was Seen as Betrayal

Why Betrayal?	Offline	Online	Parasocial
	N (%)	*N* (%)	*N* (%)
Betrayal of trust/emotion	29 (41.1)	21 (35.5)	1 (2.9)
There can be only one	18 (25.7)	11 (18.6)	1 (2.9)
Feelings of inadequacy	2 (2.9)	6 (10.2)	26 (76.5)

Similar to Whitty's (2005) findings, another common reason that the offline and online behaviors were seen as betrayal was that the partner can't have a relationship with more than one person:

> After thinking about it, Jennifer decided it was best for them to break up. She reasoned with him that if he did like her, then the other girl would have never been in the picture. They each went their separate ways and they never spoke again. (female, offline)

Interestingly, only one person indicated that offline cheating was *not* an act of infidelity:

> Jennifer was okay with this because she has always wanted
> to be a swinger. She decides to come clean to Mark that she
> actually finds this to be a great idea and says she would like
> to start seeing another man on the side but remain committed
> to Mark. Mark loves this idea as well and they both become
> swingers who love each other. They live their lives in this
> manner and get married. They live in reasonable comfort and
> are moderately happy till the end of their days.

In addition, *no* participants explicitly indicated that online infidelity was *not* an act of betrayal, unlike in Whitty's (2005) study, in which 9 percent of responses indicated that the online scenario was not cheating. Four participants completed the story in such a way that Jennifer was hurt at first but then found out that it was all some kind of mistake. For example:

> Jennifer did not want to jump to any conclusions before she
> knew and understood the whole story. Jennifer read Marks
> [sic] conversions and learned that he was not cheating on
> her and that he had just met a new friend online. Their
> conversations were harmless and just friendly
> conversations. (female, online)

In the parasocial scenario, a theme that emerged was that most people viewed the behavior to be an act of betrayal because it made the victim (Jennifer) feel worse about herself and question her worth in the relationship. For example:

> Mark is trying to picture himself with this celebrity. He must
> believe he could see himself with this celebrity, and believes
> she is an all-around, perfect girl. Therefore, Jennifer decides
> that Mark is trying to low-key tell Jennifer how he would
> like her to act or change to better meet Mark's desires.
> Jennifer becomes jealous. (female, parasocial)

However, this theme also emerged in the other conditions as well:

> Anna also suggests that no matter what Mark says, it is
> NOT Jennifer's fault and she must try to move on because
> both people have to be trying in a relationship to make
> things work and no women [*sic*]as beautiful as she should
> let someone do that to her. Jennifer agrees to take her
> sister's advice, but she can't help the feeling of
> worthlessness that has come over her. (female, online)

The only condition in which more than one participant explicitly indicated that the behavior was not an act of betrayal was the parasocial condition ($N = 11$). Responses for why the parasocial scenario would *not* be considered infidelity included "because everyone does it" ($N = 4$), "because it's not real/just a celebrity" ($N = 4$), and that it was innocent/not harmful ($N = 3$). For example:

> Jennifer decides that when Mark talks about his favorite
> celebrity that she has nothing to worry about. Yes it hurts
> her feelings when he constantly talks about how attractive
> she is, but it's not like he is ever going to actually be with
> her. (female, parasocial)

Impact on Relationship

In all three scenarios, more than half of participants explicitly indicated that Jennifer was upset by Mark's behavior, and in both the offline and cyber conditions, participants indicated more than half the time that Jennifer broke up with Mark (Table 3). Different themes emerged depending upon the scenario viewed, however. In the offline scenario, Jennifer tended to be very upset and to confront Mark, who often lied about his behavior (30 percent of the time), which resulted in Jennifer breaking up with Mark (79 percent). In the online scenario, Jennifer was upset but often hid her knowledge of the online affair for a while (32 percent of the time) prior to confronting Mark, who often lied (29 percent of the time). Upon demonstrating the truth via technology (e-mails and messages, for example), Jennifer would then break up with Mark (51 percent); in this scenario, a quarter of respondents indicated that some kind of revenge or karma took place (and three participants indicated that Mark was physically harmed as a result of his infidelity). Again, this is very similar to Whitty's (2005) study, in which she found that 46 percent of couples in the cyber condition broke up.

In the parasocial scenario, a different theme emerged: Often, Jennifer was depicted as upset and feeling inadequate, but when she confronted Mark, they discussed her feelings (38 percent) and reconciled (33 percent). Generally, participants indicated that Mark didn't understand the impact of his behavior and would change his behavior. For example:

> Jennifer decides that when Mark talks about his favorite
> celebrity that she has nothing to worry about. Yes it hurts
> her feelings when he constantly talks about how
> attractive she is, but it's not like he is ever going to
> actually be with her. Jennifer one day tells mark that it
> hurts her feelings. Mark then realizes how it would hurt
> his feelings if Jennifer did the same. They both talk
> about it and move on with a happier and better
> relationship. (Female, parasocial)

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for How Mark's Behavior Affected Jennifer and Mark's Relationship

Effect on Relationship	Offline	Online	Parasocial
	N (%)	*N* (%)	*N* (%)
J. upset/hurt	43 (60.6)	30 (50.8)	31 (68.9)
Confrontation	45 (63.4)	45 (76.3)	25 (55.6)
Increased communication	1 (1.4)	8 (13.6)	17 (37.8)
Reconciliation	4 (5.6)	6 (10.2)	15 (33.3)
Breakup	61 (85.9)	40 (67.8)	7 (15.6)
None	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	6 (13.3)
Hid knowledge	7 (9.9)	19 (32.2)	5 (11.1)
Negative outcome	2 (2.8)	0 (0.0)	5 (11.1)
Revenge/M. hurt	6 (8.5)	17 (28.8)	0 (0.0)
M. lies	21 (29.6)	17 (28.8)	0 (0.0)
Shock	2 (2.8)	4 (6.8)	0 (0.0)
M. angry at J.	6 (8.5)	4 (6.8)	0 (0.0)

Interestingly, the parasocial scenario still resulted in the dissolution of the relationship by one or both parties 16 percent of the time, compared to 80 percent for the offline scenario and 68 percent for the cyber scenario.

> Jennifer tends to get discouraged by what Mark says and begins to compare herself to him [*sic*]. After a few months, they end up [breaking] up because she feels she is not good enough for him. (female, parasocial)

Sex Differences in Perceptions of Infidelity

Across all prompts, women wrote significantly more in response to the prompt (M_{Women} = 121.51 words, SD = 43.15) than did men (M_{Men} = 75.17, SD = 67.08); $t(173)$ = 5.37, $p <$ .001, d = .82. Women also discussed more ways in which the behavior affected the relationship (M_{Women} = 3.14, SD = 1.15) than did men (M_{Men} = 2.69, SD = 1.25); $t(173)$ = 2.24, p = .02, d = .37. As previously stated, in both the offline and cyber scenarios, there was little variation in whether the behavior was seen as betrayal—participants, both male and female, saw Mark's behavior as infidelity. Only in the parasocial condition did more than one person explicitly indicate that there was no betrayal. In this condition, 27 women indicated that it was an act of betrayal, and 8 indicated that it was not. Of the men, 4 indicated that it was betrayal, and 3 indicated that it was not. The differences between the genders were not significant ($\chi^2(1)$ = 1.20, p = .27); thus, this prediction was not supported. There were so few men in this condition that conclusions should be drawn cautiously, however.

Regarding reasons why the behavior was seen as an act of infidelity, in the offline condition, men were more likely to indicate that the offline extradyadic relationship was

an act of betrayal because there could be only two people in a relationship (47 percent compared to women's 17 percent). In comparison, women were more likely to indicate that it was an act of betrayal because it violated the trust between partners (37 percent, compared to men's 11 percent). A similar pattern was found for the online condition. This is similar to the results of Whitty's (2005) study, which found that women were more likely to indicate that online relationships were considered betrayal because of the emotional impact. In the parasocial condition, 43 percent of men and 61 percent of women indicated that the act was betrayal because it made Jennifer feel badly about herself (this was also the only reason that men gave). These results may indicate that men and women may view extradyadic parasocial crushes similarly; however, additional research is needed to draw stronger conclusions.

A subset of relationship outcomes was selected to compare between genders. Specifically, we were interested in whether participants described Jennifer as being hurt or upset by the behavior, in order to test our hypothesis. We also combined all breakup outcomes for comparison between genders and compared positive outcomes (reconciliation). Across all conditions, a greater percentage of women described Jennifer as being hurt by the behavior (Table 4); however, a chi-square test conducted to see if more women than men described Jennifer as hurt (out of all women and men in that condition) was not significant: $\chi^2(1) = .53$, $p = .47$. This hypothesis was not supported. There were no other differences in how men and women described the impact of the extradyadic behavior on Jennifer and Mark's relationship (Table 4).

Table 4. Gender Differences in How the Behavior Affected Jennifer and Mark's Relationship (Selected Categories)

	Offline		Online		Parasocial	
Effect	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**	**Men**	**Women**
	(*N* = 19)	(*N* = 52)	(*N* = 21)	(*N* = 38)	(*N* = 7)	(*N* = 38)
	N (%)	*N* (%)	*N* (%)	*N* (%)	*N* (%)	*N* (%)
J. upset	6 (31.6)	37 (71.2)	10 (47.6)	20 (52.6)	4 (57.1)	27 (71.1)
Breakup	16 (84.2)	41 (78.9)	14 (66.7)	26 (68.4)	2 (28.6)	5 (13.2)
Reconciliation	2 (10.5)	2 (3.8)	1 (4.8)	6 (15.8)	0 (0.0)	7 (18.4)

One theme that emerged only in the parasocial condition and was expressed only by women was that Jennifer changed her appearance to please Mark and win him back from his parasocial crush. Four (4) of the 38 women in the parasocial condition indicated that Jennifer changed to please Mark. For example:

> Jennifer seems to feel a bit threatened and starts to wonder
> why Mark seems to be attracted to her. Jennifer then starts
> to think that Mark likes the way the celebrity looks and
> starts to change her appearance so she can resemble that

celebrity. Mark starts to notice Jennifer's changes and comments on how he likes how she has changed. Jennifer feels better about herself and Mark now that she has done this. (female, parasocial)

DISCUSSION

First, we replicated Whitty's (2005) findings, in that most participants portrayed online extradyadic behavior as an act of betrayal and as negatively affecting real-life romantic relationships (including dissolution of the relationship). An interesting finding that emerged from the cyber/online condition was that participants indicated that Jennifer often initially waited to confront Mark and used technology to spy on him to verify her suspicions. Participants had Jennifer read his text messages and e-mails, check out his discussion forums and social media posts, go through his browser history, usurp his media accounts, and even create fake online profiles in order to investigate Mark. In this scenario, Mark often blames Jennifer for violating his privacy. Although Whitty (2005) indicated that some of her participants responded similarly, this trend seems in direct conflict with a main theme of the parasocial condition, which is that Jennifer brings her fears to Mark, they discuss his behavior, and they reconcile. Further research on how participants understand and use technology to deal with online infidelity is warranted.

A main goal of this research was to expand what is known about perceptions of offline and online infidelity to explore perceptions of parasocial romances. We demonstrated that although parasocial behavior was less likely to be seen as infidelity than were offline or cyber infidelity, most participants *did* perceive extradyadic parasocial relationships to be a form of betrayal and as potentially harmful to real-life romantic relationships. Almost all participants in the parasocial condition (96 percent) mentioned some kind of negative effect of the attachment, including being upset, feeling inadequate, breaking up, or other negative outcome, even if Jennifer and Mark eventually increased communication and reconciled. It is clear that participants felt that Jennifer's self-esteem might be threatened by Mark's parasocial romance; however, further research is needed to examine the role of participant self-esteem on perceptions of extradyadic parasocial relationships. It is important to note that not all participants were convinced that parasocial romances would ever affect real romantic relationships: Four out of five of participants who were in the parasocial condition and did not complete it correctly indicated that they did not see anything wrong with the scenario. It is evident, however, that many young people do view this type of mental infidelity as distressing and potentially harmful to a relationship. Participants also suggested that the key to diminishing the effect of this type of behavior is honest communication between partners.

Although we hypothesized gender differences in perceptions of extradyadic parasocial romances, these hypotheses were not supported, though we found that some women in the parasocial condition indicated that Jennifer changed her physical appearance or behavior to be more like Mark's parasocial ideal, which did not happen in the other two conditions. This could be due to how sensitive young women are to perfected celebrity depictions. Celebrities are more accessible than ever and have a lot of

control over their appearance through their own social media accounts, which could change how people form and strengthen parasocial relationships. Instant access to a multitude of perfected celebrity images could also increase upward appearance-based social comparisons to a partner's parasocial crush, which can negatively affect self-esteem (Martin and Gentry 1997; Richins 1991). Comparing oneself to a celebrity when one is constantly bombarded by celebrity images may be largely automatic (Lyubomirsky and Ross 1997). More research is needed to further understand the role of media use, social comparison, and self-esteem in perceptions of a partner's romantic parasocial relationship as infidelity.

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the young age of the participants. Most participants from this age group have had few long-term romantic relationships, which could affect the way the participant responds to the scenarios. Future researchers could expand this area to better understand how older adults view both parasocial and online extradyadic behavior. In addition, the small number of male participants, particularly in the parasocial condition, limits the interpretation of gender differences in perceptions of parasocial behaviors. Additional research is needed to further explore gender differences in perceptions of extradyadic parasocial romances.

In the current study, Mark was always depicted as the betrayer. In both Whitty's (2005) study and the original Kitzinger and Powell (1995) study, the partner enacting the extradyadic behavior varied, and the researchers found that the gender of the betrayer did influence perceptions of betrayal. This dynamic should be further explored regarding parasocial behaviors; it seems likely that if Jennifer were the betrayer, participants might evaluate her actions differently as well.

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