

An Exploration of Sexting as a Form of Infidelity in Consensually Non-Monogamous Relationships

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Abstract: In romantic relationships, three forms of infidelity exist: emotional (flirting, developing feelings, etc.), physical (touching, hand-holding, etc.), and sexual (intercourse; Spitzburg and Cupach 203). However, individuals hold differing perceptions of infidelity in a romantic relationship based on past life experiences, perceptions of the relationship, relational quality and among others. In dyadic romantic relationships, cheating occurs when one partner seeks attention/affection from someone outside the partnership. With the advent of new communication technologies, sexting (i.e. the sharing of sexually suggestive photos/messages through mobile devices) has become part of the dating process (Lenhart 1). Yet research suggests sexting outside of a committed relationship has negative implications for relationship quality (Wysocki and Childers 217). Our research explores sexting in Consensual Non-Monogamy (CNM) relationships and what constitutes “crossing the line” when sexting outside of the CNM relationship occurs. Furthermore, our research also explores what may motivate us as individuals in CNM relationships to sext outside of their relationship? Using an open-ended questionnaire, our study furthers sexting research by highlighting individuals' experiences and exploring emergent themes regarding the nature of sexting in CNM relationships.

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With the advent of new communication technologies, the way individuals develop, maintain, and stray from romantic relationships is changing as well as the content of our communication in those interactions. Arguably, due to the public nature of social networking websites (SNS), sexual communication has become more commonplace on dating platforms and adult-centered websites such as Reddit.com and OnlyFans.com (Goren 498). The sending and receiving of sexual images and messages via mobile phones or other electronic media (i.e., sexting) is one such sexually charged form of communication (Garcia et al. 428). Online dating platforms, such as Tinder and Grindr, have made sexting a normal part of the dating process. Although the name suggests sexual and intimate communication, sexting can perform a variety of functions in romantic relationships, this includes bonding, intimacy, increased self-esteem and entertainment (Chaflen 263; Parker et al. 3; Walker et al. 698). A common perception is that sexting is only engaged in by adolescents and young adults. However, recent research demonstrates the prevalence of sexting among adults is 53% higher than previously believed (Klettke et al. 45). Investigating and understanding sexting practices among adults is important because sexting has become a dating norm that can result in significant risks.

The present study is exploratory in nature and investigates sexting as a form of infidelity by asking if partners believe sexting outside the boundaries of a consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationship is considered cheating. In particular, this paper further questions what behaviors constitute infidelity in CNM relationships and how infidelity is different in CNM versus monogamous relationships. Existing research demonstrates sexting is not limited to monogamous romantic relationships, the phenomenon spans sexual orientation and romantic relationship type (Frisco et al. 291; Garcia et al. 428; Klettke et al. 44). Thus, individuals in CNM relationships are as likely to engage in sexting as those in monogamous relationships (Falconer and Humphreys 134). The distinction is the commitment level, for instance, partners in committed relationships tend to 'sext' the most (Drouin et al. A27). While some partners sext as a form of relationship maintenance or for fun, sexting outside of one's primary romantic relationship may constitute as emotional or sexual infidelity (Wysocki and Childers 221). This may also have negative implications for relationship quality (Wysocki and Childers 221). Our study brings greater awareness to sexting as a potential form of infidelity in relationships that do not practice monogamy.

CNM relationships are defined as any relationship in which the partners agree to have extra-dyadic sexual or romantic (emotional) relationships (i.e., open, polyamorous, swinging, etc; Conley et al. 206). Currently, communication research on CNM relationships remains limited. For example, this type of research can predominantly be seen in fields of psychology and sexual health. With that in mind, current research focuses primarily on

specific CNM relationship types including polyamory (Barker 76; Burris 258; Klesse 566), friends with benefits (Bisson and Levine 67; Owen et al. 1) and open relationships (Cohen 295; Levine et al. 1439). Given that more than 20% of adults will engage in a CNM relationship during their lifetime (Hauptert et al. 2), still more research on specific communication behavior is needed.

Individuals hold differing ideas of what constitutes infidelity in romantic relationships. Within CNM relationships, individuals explicitly acknowledge that their partner(s) may engage emotionally and/or sexually with others. Thereby, reshaping traditional perceptions of infidelity. Research should address how these relationships are negotiated, maintained, and how individuals in multi-partner relationships perceive infidelity. Our exploratory investigation on addressing infidelity in CNM relationships begins to fill this gap by bringing together past research examining individual perceptions of sexting and infidelity. Specifically, our aim is to investigate sexting as a form of infidelity in CNM relationships and what constitutes “crossing the line” when partners interact with individuals outside of their CNM relationship.

Literature Review

Sexting

A consistent definition for sexting does not exist. Barrense-Dias et al. explored various definitions of sexting and found a number of elements vary across studies. This included the actions involved in sexting, how the messages are transmitted, sexual characteristics and media type. One clear definition states that sexting is “the sending and receiving of sexually explicit imagery via some form of virtual messaging” (Anatassiou 2231). Sexting may include sexually explicit or suggestive text, picture and voice-to-text messages typically sent via mobile phones or other electronic media (Garcia, et al. 429; Klettke, et al. 45). Initially, sexting was considered a deviant behavior. For instance, it has been viewed negatively due to legal concerns, the potential for mental health repercussions and risky sexual behaviors (Judge 92). However, sexting can also serve significant beneficial functions for individuals and romantic partners (Drouin et al. 749). To elucidate this, research has identified sexting as positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Parker et al. 3) and is often used to please a partner (Renfrow and Rollo 914). Furthermore, sexting may provide individuals with a venue to develop their sexuality, form a relationship (Smahel and Subrahmanyam 62) or express sexual interests (Valkenburg and Peter 82).

In the past, research has investigated self-representation (Albury 1734), body valuation (Meltzer and McNulty 2), risk prevention (Anastassiou 2236; Doring 1), attachment (Davis et al. 466), relationship satisfaction and motivation (Jeanfreau et al. 17; Meltzer & McNulty 2; Parker et al. 3) and infidelity (Falconer and Humphreys 135; O’Sullivan and Ronis 175; Weiser et al. 29). A recent review of qualitative literature on teen sexting identified the effects of sexting on the well-being of young people (Anastassiou 2236). Many individuals report sexting as being fun (Lippman and Campbell 374), amusing (Burkett 835) and a part of their sexual experimentation. Although past research demonstrates sexting as commonplace in romantic relationships, limited research exists on

sexting in CNM relationships specifically. Our study aims to rectify this gap and more fully understand sexting behavior across romantic relationship arrangements.

Infidelity

Like sexting, infidelity lacks an agreed upon definition. How individuals understand infidelity depends upon their own belief systems. Therefore, classifying what is, and what is not judged to be cheating proves challenging. Infidelity has been associated with a variety of characteristics such as: promiscuity, relationship dissatisfaction, sexual opportunism (Van Anders et al. 455) and hypersexuality (Allen et al. 244). Often, infidelity is associated with a hierarchy of behaviors, with sexual intercourse being the most extreme infraction (Moller and Vossler 494). Given the range of behaviors that constitute infidelity, perceptions vary (Moller and Vossler 491) Thus, demanding a greater understanding of infidelity across romantic relationship arrangements is needed.

Historically, research on infidelity has focused on heterosexual, married couples. More recently, research has expanded to include dating, cohabitating, engaged (Mao and Raguram 302) and CNM relationships (Wosick-Correa 45). Infidelity is common in romantic relationships; one quarter of married and cohabiting individuals have either cheated, been cheated upon, or both report having sex with someone else other than their primary partner (Frisco et al. 4). Additionally, research suggests when an individual engages in infidelity, their indiscretion does not lead to the termination of a relationship. In particular, research indicates that the victim of the indiscretion is more likely to end the relationship (Frisco et al. 5). Our study goes beyond the typical understanding of infidelity in monogamous relationships to address how one type of indiscretion is experienced in non-monogamous relationships.

The association of sexual intercourse with infidelity proves challenging for individuals in non-traditional relationship arrangements such as polyamorous couples (Jamieson 37), swinging couples (De Visser and McDonald 459) and same-sex couples (Heaphy et al. 222). The reason for this is because infidelity is not always associated with monogamy. Despite varying definitions, underlying themes of infidelity consist of breaking trust, breach of agreement and threatening a relational bond (Mao and Raguram 302). Rethinking and clarifying the definition of infidelity is an area in need of critical debate. Limited research exists regarding the connection between infidelity and sexting. With that in mind, even less research bridges the gap between sexting, infidelity and CNM relationships. It has been widely regarded that physical intercourse is associated with infidelity because it is seen that non-physical activity such as sexting creates ambiguity. With the greater role played by technology in establishing and maintaining romantic relationships, it is important to understand the connection between infidelity and sexting.

Consensually Non-Monogamous Relationships

Throughout history, humans have had open romantic relationships (Taormino 2). Therefore, engaging in multiple sexual and/or romantic relationships are not a new phenomenon. Although monogamy is still perceived as the ideal structure for successful romantic relationships, monogamy still proves limiting for some individuals. Additionally,

monogamy has been viewed as the morally correct way to engage in a relationship. Whereas non-monogamy has been commonly associated with adultery or infidelity. This has often resulted in causing those practicing non-monogamy to feel ridiculed and stigmatized (Peoples et al. 137).

Hardy and Easton embrace the infinite possibilities of consensual sexual relationships in their book, *The Ethical Slut*. Further to this, there is a growing body of research on the types of CNM relationships (e.g., polyamory, swinging, open, etc.) and their unique characteristics is expanding our understanding of such relationships (Barker and Landridge 748; Parsons et al. 303). CNM relationships vary according to the classification (sexual, emotional, or both) and frequency of contact with other individuals. For example, an open relationship is a type of CNM relationship in which partners express the desire to be in a romantic relationship with one another. However, partners agree that it is acceptable for one or both partners to have romantic and/or sexual relations outside their relationship (Cohen 296). Despite an attempt to define and classify CNM relationships, each relationship possesses distinct expectations, boundaries and idiosyncrasies. Our study is significant because it highlights the complexities within CNM relationships and encourages future research on this unique relationship arrangement.

One theme permeating research on CNM relationships is the need for open and honest communication with one's partner(s) (Barker 77; Oppenheimer "Married, With Infidelities"). A growing body of literature on CNM relationships suggests such relationships involve high degrees of honesty, closeness, happiness, communication and low degrees of jealousy (Barker 84; Bonello and Cross 118; Klesse 580; De Visser and McDonald 459). Additionally, partners in CNM relationships experience the same or higher levels of satisfaction than monogamous partners (Garner et al. 117; Mogilski et al. 22; Tahler, 21). Understanding the various types of CNM relationships is important due to the societal stigmas still attached to non-monogamy. Research must dismantle the assumption that there is only one correct way to engage in a successful romantic relationship. Instead, research should highlight the skills and behaviors that help relationships thrive. The following discusses a new communication model which boils the foundation of a romantic relationship down to three essential components. This is known as the Triple-C model. Our study utilizes the Triple-C model, as it is the framework for understanding sexting as a form of infidelity in CNM relationships.

The Triple-C Model

Proposed by Hangen, Crasta, and Rogge (2), the Triple-C model builds on previous research to understand the foundation of healthy, successful romantic relationships. Drawing from Karney and Bradbury's vulnerability-stress-adaption (VSA) model of relationship functioning, the Triple-C model takes their model a step further by focusing on the three fundamental processes: (1) mutual consent, (2) ongoing communication and (3) mutual comfort (Hangen et al. 3).

Mutual Consent

The first component of the model is mutual consent; asserting that the foundation of any relationship is consent from both/all partners explicitly agreeing to the relationship arrangement (Hangen et al. 3). Any relationship structure is based on a set of rules. These rules might include agreements about sexual and emotional exclusivity. Breaking relationship rules is linked to decreased relational quality and success in both monogamous and non-monogamous couples (Hosking 715). Mutual consent in CNM relationships may play a more significant role. For instance, all parties must agree to engage in the CNM arrangement, as well as the potential for differing relationship rules between different partners. Therefore, understanding mutual consent in CNM relationships will provide a better understanding for how such relationships are negotiated.

Ongoing Communication

The second element of the model is ongoing communication as a means to maintain relationship satisfaction and stability (Hangen et al. 3; Karney and Bradbury 23). Specifically, communication around extra-dyadic sexual activity plays a key role in non-monogamous relationships. As an example, communication allows partners to negotiate sexual activity with others while maintaining respect and consideration for their primary partner (Hangen et al. 3). Current literature suggests poor communication leads to discrepancies in relationship agreements (Hoff et al. 827) and secrecy about extra-dyadic sexual activity links to lower relationship satisfaction (Wagner et al. 31). In addition to this, mutual consent and ongoing communication in CNM relationships is more complex due to the involvement of multiple partners, varying relationships agreements, and differing perceptions. Therefore, partners must continually express their needs, wants, and expectations for the relationship to thrive.

Mutual Comfort

The final element of the Triple-C model asserts that comfort with the agreed upon relationship structure is essential (Hangen et al. 3). If one partner feels forced into agreeing to a non-monogamous relationship or feels less comfortable with the relationship structure, then ongoing extra-dyadic sexual activity could lead to hurt feelings and jealousy (Hangen et al. 3). In relationships that have discrepancies, such as relationships which have agreed upon a degree of monogamy, typically experience higher levels of sexual jealousy (Parsons et al. 310). The notion of mutual comfort might shed light on participants' responses to sexting as a form of infidelity, as well as other behaviors that constitute infidelity in CNM relationships.

As the Triple-C model is a newly developed method for understanding the foundation of healthy romantic relationships, little research using the model exists. The novelty of the model allows for further exploration of its utility across disciplines and methodologies. Creators have utilized the model in a quantitative analysis to specifically "clarify which of those monogamous or non-monogamous structures represented healthy and vitalizing vs. maladaptive approaches to relationship structures" (439). The researchers acknowledge potential limitations to using the model in their analysis of

relationship structures. With that being said, researchers encourage to further research using the Triple-C model in order to investigate its veracity in examining both monogamous and non-monogamous relationships (455).

Building upon previous literature, this study uses the Triple-C model as a sensitizing framework through which to understand sexting as a potential form of infidelity in CNM relationships. To further add, due to the study's exploratory nature, we asked the following research questions:

RQ1: Do individuals believe sexting outside of the boundaries of a CNM relationship is considered infidelity? Why or why not?

RQ2: What constitutes infidelity in CNM relationships?

RQ2a: How is infidelity different in CNM relationships versus monogamous relationships?

Method

Exploratory research is designed to show how a phenomenon is manifested, namely a phenomenon about which little knowledge exists (Hunter et al. 1). A qualitative exploratory research design gives the researcher the opportunity to explore a topic. By doing this, it allows the participants to contribute to the development of new knowledge in that specific area. Stebbins defined exploratory research as "a broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, rearranged undertaking designed to maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to description and understanding of an area of social or psychological life (2)." Per this definition, our study seeks to gain a general understanding of individuals' perceptions of sexting and infidelity in consensually non-monogamous relationships. Our study is concerned with laying a foundation for what this phenomenon is. This allows the opportunity for future research to be conducted on why sexting and infidelity in CNM relationships is similar or disparate from monogamous relationships. For this reason, data was collected using an online questionnaire containing open- and closed-end questions, as well as a descriptive qualitative analysis. As a result, findings are presented using rich examples of participants' responses.

Participants

Study participants were only eligible to participate in the study if they met the following criteria: (a) at least 18 years old, (b) English speaking and (c) either currently in a CNM relationship or have been in a CNM in the last 3 years. If a participant reported they were not or had never been in a CNM relationship, they were immediately taken to the end of the survey and their responses were not included for analysis. The sample included 176 participants with an age range of 18-62, average age of 30. The majority of our participants were female (60.2%), heterosexual (23.2%) and they were married (22%) or committed to one person (23.2%). See Table 1 for additional demographic information.

Procedure

Participants were recruited using network and snowball sampling from the researchers' online social networks, purposeful sampling from Reddit.com (i.e., subreddits) and convenience sampling of students attending a medium-sized northwestern university. A recruitment message included information about the study, eligibility requirements and a link to the online questionnaire. The message was posted on Facebook and Twitter. In particular, these social media posts called for participants and invited friends to share the recruitment message with their online social networks. In addition to this, subreddits were utilized to recruit participants. For instance, the subreddits were discussion forums on non-monogamy, polyamory and swinging. Online communities, such as Reddit, invited people identifying as a member of a certain community or who are interested in a specific topic into a virtual safe space for interacting, asking questions, sharing information and so on. Thus, by posting our recruitment message to topic-specific subreddits we could reach individuals practicing different forms of non-monogamy.

Data was collected through an online questionnaire containing both closed- and open-ended questions regarding participants' perceptions and experiences of sexting in CNM relationships. The goal of descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics. Therefore, questionnaires are often used to gather data and collect both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a more holistic understanding of the participants, their opinion, perspectives and attitudes (Nassaji 129). Our survey began with a virtual informed consent page, once completed participants were instructed to answer the survey questions to the best of their ability. Respondents could skip any question or leave the study at any time. Data collection occurred over a two-week period; due to the asynchronous nature of completing an online survey, participants responded at their convenience. All procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

After completing the virtual informed consent and first set of questions, participants were asked to consider the following definition of sexting when responding to the survey: "sexting is the transmission of sexual images and messages via mobile phones or other electronic media" (Garcia et al. 428). Next, a set of closed-ended questions were used to understand participants' experiences of sexting with a partner/potential partner. Especially, to determine how many participants have engaged in sexting outside of their romantic relationships. The closed-ended questions were analyzed using a simple count of the yes/no answers. Then, individuals were asked if they believe, generally speaking, whether sexting with someone outside of a romantic relationship is a form of infidelity. They were then offered the opportunity to explain their response. Finally, participants were asked "do you believe sexting (outside of one's romantic relationships) is a form of infidelity/cheating if someone is in a consensually non-monogamous relationship?" This section used open-ended questions to ask participants what they consider infidelity or 'crossing the line' in CNM relationships are. In particular, this section gave the opportunity for participants to think how infidelity is different in CNM relationships versus monogamous relationships. Participants' responses to the open-ended questions varied in length from a few words to an in-depth explanation of their perceptions or experiences. Demographic information was collected at the end of the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using an exploratory-descriptive qualitative (EDQ) approach (Hunter et al. 1). EDQ is appropriate for our study because the study is exploratory in nature. Therefore, we took a descriptive approach (Gall et al.; Hunter et al. 1) to gain a general understanding of sexting and infidelity in CNM relationships. The study's aim was not to seek to confirm an already established typology. We conducted a descriptive analysis to determine descriptive themes to address each research question (Nassaji 129). Although the Triple-C model was used as a sensitizing framework through which to understand the foundation of successful romantic relationships, the three elements of the model were not used to categorize or segment the data. To begin our analysis, we read and reread the survey responses, making notes of our early thoughts and impressions. Then, we generated initial codes by reducing the data into small chunks of meaning, whilst continually working to develop and modify the codes. Next, we began to search for descriptive themes in the codes. Specifically, we were looking for patterns that captured something of significance to answer our research questions. Then, we reviewed, revised and developed preliminary descriptive themes. During each step, we coded independently compared codes and resolved any inconsistencies. Subsequently, we decided on the final labels for each descriptive theme. This included definitions that captured the essence of each theme in a clear and concise manner. Finally, we transformed the data analysis into an interpretable piece of writing which included compelling examples that relate to the descriptive themes, research questions and past literature.

Findings

The questionnaire asked participants to share their perceptions of sexting and infidelity in CNM relationships. The analysis of participant responses identified main descriptive themes and corresponding subthemes for each research question. Overall, the Triple-C model provides additional understanding of the themes and our findings support past research on the importance of open and honest communication in romantic relationships, the significance of clear relationship agreements and the perceived differences between monogamy and consensual non-monogamy.

The questionnaire began with a definition of sexting and preliminary questions to help orient participants to the focus of the study. Participants were asked if they had ever engaged in sexting with a person outside the boundaries of their romantic relationships. Nearly 64% of participants had engaged in sexting with someone outside of their romantic relationships, while 36% reported that they had not. As previously discussed, exploratory-descriptive research often includes quantitative data to help thoroughly explain the phenomenon (Nassaji 129). We reviewed the responses of those who reported that they engaged in sexting. We then evaluated whether their responses supported past research on motivations for sexting such as sexting for fun, to initiate a potential romantic relationship, sexual satisfaction or sexual relations, to increase one's self-esteem and to fulfill the need to connect with another person (Chaflen 263; Parker et al. 3; Walker et al. 698). In other words, participants briefly shared why they engage in sexting and their responses were

similar to the motivations suggested by past research. Interestingly, when asked if they believe sexting with someone outside of their relationships is a form of infidelity, 51% of participants responded “yes” and 49% responded “no.”

Infidelity or Not Infidelity

As part of the research questions, participants were asked whether they believe sexting with someone outside the boundaries of a CNM relationship would be considered infidelity. When responding, participants were asked to think about CNM relationships in general, instead of focusing on current or past relationships. The question was crafted to avoid receiving responses full of relationship idiosyncrasies. As previously mentioned, our study is exploratory in nature. Therefore, a general understanding of sexting as infidelity is needed before more focused, qualitative research can be performed. After analyzing participant responses, three main descriptive themes emerged: breaking the relationship agreement, secrecy and intimacy. The following defines and unpacks each theme and subtheme, while providing rich examples from the data.

Theme one was that sexting outside of a CNM relationship constitutes infidelity because it involves breaking the relationship agreement. A relationship agreement consists of the rules agreed upon by the individuals in the romantic relationship. The agreement governs all aspects of the relationship. However, in the context of our study the rules refer to acceptable sexual and emotional interactions with others. Thus, if a behavior, such as sexting, goes against the relationship agreement, then it would be considered infidelity. For instance, one participant shared, “if you and your partner have not agreed ahead of time, and you choose to send suggestive photos to someone, in my mind that’s cheating” (107). Another responded said,

this answer depends on the structure of your relationship and whether or not your relationship allows for this to be acceptable. To be cheating you need to be breaking rules. If there are no rules to break, you are not cheating. Therefore, ‘in general’ I wrote that it was considered cheating because most people don’t opt to change these rules in their relationships. (77)

As a final point, one respondent put it simply, “if it is outside of the bounds of the rules of your relationships, it is dishonest behavior which to me is cheating” (135). Such suggest that infidelity is less about the behavior or action itself and instead it is more about respect for the rules of the relationship.

The second theme was secrecy. Secrecy refers to concealing information or one’s behavior. Therefore, if an individual engages in sexting outside of their relationship and conceals their actions, regardless of their relationship agreement, this is perceived as infidelity. Simply stated, “if you have to hide it, it’s cheating” (150). Another participant argued,

It is also a form of cheating because you are hiding something that you are sharing with someone sexually-that is not your partner, meaning that you are not wanting your partner to find out what you are talking about to that other person. (173)

Finally, one respondent stated, “I believe sexting is a form of cheating because that person would be going behind their partners back to receive sexual things from another” (134). Under the theme of secrecy, two subthemes emerged: consent and intention. Consent was defined by the respondents as explicitly discussing one’s desires with a partner(s) to obtain permission before acting upon those desires. Participants explained sexting outside of the CNM relationship counts as infidelity if an individual conceals their actions because they did not receive consent or do not want to ask for consent from their partner(s). One participant confirmed this by stating, “anything outside of a relationship without consent from your partner is infidelity” (26). Another argued that, “unless all parties were aware [of] it and ok [with it], it is cheating” (67). The subtheme of intention refers to underlying motivations for one’s actions, namely, one’s intention behind sexting someone outside of the relationship. Participants explained that if the intention is to engage in sexual communication without the knowledge of a partner(s), then sexting would be considered infidelity. One participant simply stated, “the intent is what matters” (172). Another shared, “well without the other person’s knowledge you are deliberately trying to have sexual satisfaction from another person without your main partner’s concurrence” (50). The following quote from a respondent exemplifies the significance of and interplay between secrecy, consent: and intention: “if it’s done without consent or knowledge of your present romantic partners, it is being intentionally deceitful and is therefore cheating” (155).

The third theme is intimacy. Intimacy was perceived by respondents as relational closeness. In regard to sexting, intimacy may include intimate communication, an emotional connection and the disclosure of private information. For instance, one participant stated, “sexting is a form of romantic intimacy. Therefore, any form of romantic intimacy that occurs outside of your relationship, unless in a polyamorous relationship, or in a consensus situation among all parties, is cheating” (60). In addition to this, one participant shared their personal beliefs, stating, “I believe that it’s sharing a personal and intimate part of yourself that shouldn’t be shared with anyone who you are not currently involved with romantically or physically” (163). Similarly, to theme one, participants do not appear bothered by a particular behavior, it is more so the meaning behind said behavior that is interpreted as infidelity. The intimacy theme contained the subtheme of emotional connection. An emotional connection means feeling connected to someone who cares about us. Participants expressed although they may consent to their partner(s) engaging in sexual relations with outsiders, the forming an emotional bond with someone unknown to their partner(s) or without consent would constitute as infidelity. One participant called it “emotional/psychological cheating” (141). Another respondent described this type of infidelity as, “investing romantic or sexual feeling and emotion into someone else” (54).

While many participants believed sexting outside of a CNM relationship counts as infidelity, some did not. After analyzing their responses, three main descriptive themes emerged: relationship agreement, open communication and autonomy. Interestingly, participants’ responses reflected similar descriptions for what constitutes or does not constitute infidelity in CNM relationships. For example, both supporters and opponents noted the importance of the relationship agreement, emphasizing that agreements are either upheld or broken. The following explores each theme opposing sexting as infidelity, whilst providing rich examples from the data.

The first theme shared through participant responses was sexting does not break the relationship agreement. As previously discussed, a relationship agreement consists of

the rules set by the persons in the relationship. Furthermore, in our study the rules referred specifically to acceptable sexual and emotional interactions with others. Participants explained in their understanding of CNM relationships that extra-dyadic sexual interactions/activity is acceptable. Therefore, sexting would not constitute a form of infidelity. To further illustrate this point, one participant stated that,

it depends, of course, about the agreements you made with your partner(s). But if you're in a CNM relationship and you've talked the issue through and it is fine for all parties and you then engage in it, it's not cheating. It is cheating when it goes against your agreements. (127)

In support, another participant stated that "as long as it's communicated, discussed, and agreed upon it isn't cheating. However, if you break the rules or do something your partner doesn't consent to, then it's definitely cheating" (96). Finally, one participant expressed that relationships are unique and should not be influenced by societal assumptions stating,

Relationships are built upon agreements as a couple, not just the societal construct of monogamy. If sexting has been agreed by both partners as acceptable, then it's not cheating. (88)

Moreover, partners must negotiate their relationship agreement. If the agreement specifies that sexual communication with outside individuals is acceptable; sexting is not a form of infidelity.

The second theme was open communication. Participants explained CNM relationships require a significant amount of open communication to be successful, this means continually communicating one's wants and desires (sexual and emotional). Therefore, due to the level of communication in CNM relationships, sexting outside one's CNM relationship may not be considered infidelity. One participant responded and explained that, "as long as it is communicated about and accepted as ok by all parties in the relationship there is nothing wrong with it" (149). Another participant simply stated, "as long as you are completely open with your partner and not hiding, it is not cheating" (162). Finally, one individual said, "as long as you are open and honest and it is agreed upon as fine to do so, it is okay. Cheating and infidelity is done without consent whilst hiding/lying about it" (90). Theme two had the underlying subtheme of trust. Trust is the belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone, such as a romantic partner. This is because individuals in CNM relationships emphasize the importance of open communication in their relationships if sexting outside of a CNM relationship does not breach the trust built between partners, respondents did not view it as infidelity. As for instance, one participant shared their personal experience saying, "I think that it can be, but in my relationships I have a level of honesty I maintain with my partner but we do what we want with other people" (89). In support, one respondent simply stated, "I do not keep it a secret from my significant other" (142).

The final theme was autonomy. Participants perceived autonomy as the belief that people in CNM relationships are independent individuals choosing to engage in romantic relationships with more than one person. Additionally, autonomy involves one's ability to make their own decisions in accordance with their personal values, beliefs, wants and

desires. One participant explained, “for my own, we believe in the fundamental right to autonomy which is incompatible with the rules, restrictions, and control seen in traditional monogamous dynamics, so infidelity is not something we even acknowledge in our dynamic” (45). With that being said, another respondent shared their view on autonomy and stated:

People are allowed to do what they want with who they want. I only really care about when relationship agreements are formed and I make that known at the very beginning of any new relationship. If I met someone who needed me to report in every time I wanted to be flirty/sexually explicit with someone else there’s probably a compatibility problem. (101)

Lastly, the phenomenon known as relationship anarchy emerged. For example, a participant in the study explained that they, “believe in full autonomy and do not attempt to control each other or curb desires, so infidelity is not possible in our dynamic” (45). Relationship anarchy refers to a decision to not take one partner as a “primary” and other’s as “secondary” (or any other hierarchy). Instead, an individual maintains each relationship as separate and to make as few rules as possible (Hardy & Easton 2017). The theme of autonomy supports previous research on CNM relationships, relationship anarchy, polyamorous and other non-monogamous relationship arrangements.

Infidelity in CNM Relationships

Research question two asked “what constitutes infidelity in CNM relationships?” In particular, the questionnaire asked participants what they perceive as infidelity, cheating or “crossing the line” in CNM relationships. After a thorough analysis, four main descriptive themes emerged: secrecy, breaking relationship agreements, emotional connection and infidelity as relationship dependent. The following explores each theme and subtheme, while providing rich examples from the data.

The most prominent theme was secrecy. Per participant responses, secrecy means intentionally hiding any behaviors, sexual or emotional from one’s partner(s). Such behaviors include, concealing information, dishonesty, lying and “going behind someone’s back”. For instance, a participant in the study stated that infidelity occurs when someone is “sneaking around behind your significant other’s back to talk to or see someone else in a sexual or emotional manner” (157). Another participant stated that infidelity occurs, “when there are lies, active hiding of information or crossing a boundary that has been previously set” (62). Similar to the sentiment shared by many respondents, one participant simply answered infidelity occurs when you are “lying about what you’re doing/hiding things” (88). Secrecy contained two subthemes: consent and lack of communication. Respondents perceived consent as explicitly discussing one’s desires with one’s partner(s) to obtain permission before acting upon those desires. Participants explained that infidelity can occur if an individual conceals their actions because they did not receive consent or did not want to ask for consent from their partner(s). However, another participant from the study expressed infidelity in CNM relationships consists of “anything without the consent of your primary partner, including dates, kissing and physical contact” (14). With that being said, a respondent expressed that infidelity involves “performing any acts that have not previously

been discussed and consented to with all parties/making your new activities or partners a secret” (115). The second subtheme was a lack of communication. Communication is essential for successful romantic relationships and arguably more so for CNM relationships. Similar to consent, participants explained that what could constitute as infidelity is if partners are not openly discussing their relationship and the emotional/sexual relations they are engaging in or wish to engage in with others. As an example, one participant stated that:

I consider it to be crossing the line when I wasn't communicated to about romantic and sexual interactions, especially since all my partners know that all I want is to be told what's happening and I'll generally be ok with it. (175)

Other respondents explained that even if the act would not normally be considered infidelity, the fact that their partner did not communicate about it constitutes infidelity.

The second theme was breaking relationship agreements. A relationship agreement is the rules set by the individuals in the relationship. The agreement governs all aspects of a romantic relationship. However, in the context of our study it refers to acceptable sexual and emotional interactions with others. To put it simply, participants perceived that any breach of the relationship agreement could be considered infidelity. For instance, one participant in the study shared an example of infidelity and stated:

When someone goes against previously agreed upon expectations. Say I'm fluid bonded with Andy and Bob. Now let's say Andy had a night out and experienced a condom malfunction. Mistakes happen and if Andy told me about it as soon as he could or at the very minimum before we had sex again then it's okay since there's no deceit. If Andy said nothing, waited until after we had sex again, or just forgot to let me know then that would be crossing the line. (101)

This view was widely shared amongst the other participants, as they expressed the importance of not violating the agreement, rules or boundaries of the romantic relationship. For instance, one participant in the study stated infidelity occurs when a partner is “not abiding by whatever agreements BOTH parties agree to” (7). Furthermore, some participants discussed specific sexual acts likely to constitute infidelity. These acts are based on the rules agreed upon by those in the CNM relationship. This included, but is not limited to, fluid bonding, unprotected sex, sexting, sexual intercourse, kissing and flirting. With that in mind, one participant stated that, “talking sexually, sending body images, asking questions about pleasure and what someone is wearing” (114) would all count as infidelity. In support of this, a participant in the study shared an example from their relationship, stating:

For instance, we have agreed upon using protection when having sex. If he did not use protection/did not tell me right away, I would consider that a betrayal. We tell each other when we're interested in someone, meeting someone, and how far along it's progressed. We have open communication. We require complete honesty and trust. (90)

Theme three was an emotional connection. Some participants believed infidelity in CNM relationships is less about the sexual acts with outside individuals and more about the emotional connections formed. In other words, creating an emotional connection or “catching feelings” for someone outside of the CNM relationship is a form of infidelity. As for instance, one participant in the study believed the most significant form of infidelity would be “falling in love with someone else” (53). Whereas another respondent stated that infidelity includes, “emotionally giving someone else part of yourself that is intimate and more than just a friend” (138). Finally, one respondent argued infidelity is a “romantic relationship behind your SO’s [significant other’s] back. One that involves strong feelings and talk of LOVE” (17). The final theme is infidelity is relationship dependent. Some participants felt they could not explain what constitutes infidelity because the understanding of infidelity. In particular, participants felt that the rules governing infidelity are determined on a case-by-case basis and, therefore, depend solely on each, unique CNM relationship. With that being said, a participant in the study observed that this argues, “all depends on the agreements you made with your partner(s). These can be different from one relationship to another” (127). In support of this, another participant stated that, “it varies depending on the relationship. People have to determine that with their partner(s)” (48). Similarly, one responded stated, “whatever the other person’s limits are I guess. It is case-to-case” (91).

Infidelity in CNM vs. Monogamous Relationships

Regarding research question 2a, the questionnaire asked participants how/if they believed infidelity was different in CNM relationships versus monogamous relationships. After analysis, three main descriptive themes emerged: no difference, CNM relationship rules are not set and CNM relationships require open communication. Each theme contained corresponding subthemes. The following unpacks each theme and subtheme based on participant responses, while providing rich descriptions from the data.

The most prominent theme was that no difference exists between what participants believe constitutes infidelity in CNM versus monogamous relationships. Participants expressed despite the differences in the relationship structure, infidelity is infidelity. There is no inherent difference. Simply stating that, “cheating is cheating” (17). One participant expressed,

I don’t think it’s different. I think the only difference is that consensual non-monogamy allows you to do more physical and emotional things with people. But cheating/infidelity are all rooted in the same level of disrespect for their partner. (90)

The main subtheme was infidelity depends on the rules of the relationship. That is, regardless of the relationship arrangement, the individuals engaged in a romantic relationship must agree to their own rules regarding infidelity. One participant explained, “It’s not different. At all. cheating is just going outside of the boundaries that you have placed upon your relationship” (34). Similarly, another participant stated, “It’s not. Anything that crosses a line that’s been agreed upon by the existing partnership as being a boundary is cheating” (3). The main theme for what constitutes infidelity in CNM

relationships was breaking relationship agreements, as these can be seen by the participant responses to RQ2.

Theme two is CNM relationship agreements are not set in stone. In other words, infidelity in CNM relationships is different because no correct way exists for how to engage in consensual non-monogamy. Each CNM relationship is different. CNM relationship agreements can change, adjust and be negotiated depending on the needs/desires of each individual. One respondent explained, “cheating is different between the two because in a monogamous relationship there are set boundaries and agreements of what you should and should not do. There is a bit more flexibility in non-monogamous relationships” (103). Another participant shared, “I think there’s more flexibility for people to make their own rules and decide on their own script for what is considered cheating/breaking relationship rules” (107). Regarding CNM relationships one participant explained, “I think the lines blur a lot when you have multiple relationships when it comes to cheating” (177). After this analysis, one subtheme emerged, and this was ‘sexual freedom’. Sexual freedom is the liberation of sexual expression from arbitrary restraints prescribed by tradition or societal norms. Furthermore, sexual freedom demonstrates a clear distinction between monogamous and CNM relationships. For instance, participants shared that the main difference in CNM relationships are sexual relations with outside individuals is acceptable and is sometimes even encouraged. With that being said, one participant shared that sexual freedom is expected, stating, “I think that if someone is in a non-monogamous relationship, there is an understanding that you can explore options without being worried the person won’t understand” (131). Another participant in the study stated that “in CNM, outside romantic/sexual connections are the expectation, usually also with the expectation of being informed” (140).

The final theme was open communication. In regards to infidelity, participants felt the difference between CNM and monogamous relationships is that CNM relationships must have more communication to be successful. Communication between partners should be intentional and frequent regarding the relationship agreement, this includes open dialogue on what should be considered as infidelity in the relationship. One respondent explained in “...a non-monogamous relationship you have to communicate your expectations about what is considered okay or not okay in your relationships with other people” (141). Another participant in the study expressed that they “don’t think they are that different. Either way, communication is needed” (82). To put simply, for another participant in the study “it’s all about communication” (121). Open communication contained three subthemes: honest communication, trust and consent. The first subtheme was honest communication and is operationalized as being straightforward in expressing the truth without being misleading. As an example, a participant in the study stated that, “it goes back to being open and honest and not hiding things from your partner. I guess the other big piece is both parties are ok with the act” (163). Whereas, another participant expressed, “I think the foundation is the same. It’s based around honesty and communication. The difference is between what’s allowed and what’s agreed upon” (97). The second subtheme was a trust; the belief in the reliability, truth and ability of someone. One participant explained the importance of trust saying, “I would say ideally both are the same: don’t do something with someone else that your partner(s) haven’t given their full, complete, and enthusiastic consent to! Trust is still foundational” (134). Another respondent stated, “in monogamy, cheating is typically much more cut and dry and is most

always a disregard for the boundaries and trust of the relationship” (36). The final subtheme was consent. In the study, consent was defined as explicitly discussing one’s desires with a partner(s) to obtain permission before acting upon those desires. However, for one participant they explained that consent is key, saying, “consent to engage partners is the difference. Without consent to be involved with another partner then it constitutes infidelity” (33). With that in mind, a participant in the study stated, “the difference is that both partners agree and consent. Nothing is done in secret” (24). Overall, participants’ responses demonstrate the complexity of CNM relationships while signaling the importance of open communication regarding relationship rules, boundaries and expectations.

Discussion

In this study we explored sexting and infidelity with a focus upon CNM relationships. Specifically, we examined participants’ perceptions of sexting as a form of infidelity, what constitutes infidelity and the difference between infidelity in monogamous versus CNM relationships. Given its prevalence, we argue that it is important to have a richer understanding of sexting and how it impacts relationships. Our findings align with past research supporting the possibility for sexual betrayals in non-monogamous relationships (Hosking 715). The findings also support the Triple-C model, as they provide evidence of consent, comfort, and communication as the foundation for successful romantic relationships regardless of relationship structure. Furthermore, our findings are significant and relevant, as they speak directly to the perceived disparity between monogamous and CNM relationships. Our study suggests CNM relationships are now becoming more widely accepted, recognized and understood. Arguably, confronting such ridicule head on by demonstrating monogamous and non-monogamous relationships is more alike than previously perceived. While participants acknowledge definitional differences between monogamous and CNM relationships, the functional discrepancies center upon the relationship agreement. In particular, the difference is based on how the partners view infidelity, rather than the sexting act itself. Finally, results uncovered a dialectical tension between individuals’ need for connection in CNM relationships and their need for autonomy and sexual freedom.

Arguably, infidelity occurs in CNM relationships when someone violates the rules of the relationship. With that being said, these rules may or may not include sexting. Our findings align with Hosking, who states individuals who practice non-monogamy can perceive sexual betrayals (715). This viewpoint is not unique to monogamy. Despite the permissibility of sexual relations with outsiders, sexting (among other behaviors) may be judged to constitute infidelity. Just over half of our respondents believed sexting outside of one’s relationships is a form of infidelity. To further add, participants noted even if the behavior is not explicitly discussed, then it violates the relationship agreement because it counts as infidelity. Such findings support research, as it demonstrates that poor communication leads to discrepancies in understanding relationship agreements (Hoff et al. 827). It also elucidates that secrecy about extra-dyadic sexual activity links to lower relationship satisfaction (Wagner et al. 31). Interestingly, 49% of participants did not

believe sexting outside of one's relationship was a form of infidelity. Perhaps, those who have engaged in sexting outside of their primary relationship are reluctant to label it as a form of infidelity, due to how their potentially unethical behavior might affect their self-concept.

The Triple-C model suggests that three fundamental processes support a successful romantic relationship: (1) mutual consent, (2) ongoing communication, and (3) mutual comfort (Hangen et al. 2). All three pillars of the model are clearly represented in participant responses. Research question one asked, if individuals believe sexting with someone outside of a CNM relationship constitutes infidelity. Under the main theme of secrecy, one subtheme was consent. Participants explained sexting counts as infidelity, if an individual conceals their actions. The reason for this is because they did not receive consent or do not want to ask for consent from their partner(s). The Triple-C model clearly explains the emergence of consent as a subtheme. For instance, according to the model, the foundation of any successful relationship is consent from both/all partners explicitly agreeing to the relationship arrangement (Hangen et al. 3).

Research question two asked what acts participants consider infidelity or 'crossing the line' in CNM relationships. Four main themes emerged: secrecy, breaking relationship agreements, emotional connection and infidelity as relationship dependent. Three of these themes (i.e., secrecy, breaking relationship agreements and infidelity as relationship dependent) can be explained by the Triple-C model. The second element observes that ongoing communication is required to maintain relationship satisfaction and stability (Hangen et al. 3). Communication around extra-dyadic sexual activity plays a key role in non-monogamous relationships. For example, it allows partners to negotiate sexual activity with others, while maintaining respect and consideration for their primary partner (Hangen et al. 3). The responses from the participants in the study reflect the need to communicate with one's partner(s) especially when discussing rules and personal information. The theme of emotional connection is explained by the final element of the Triple-C model, comfort. Respondents clearly expressed discomfort with the idea that their partner(s) would emotionally bond with someone outside of their relationship.

Research question 2a asked how infidelity is different in CNM versus monogamous relationships. Three main themes emerged: no difference, CNM relationship rules are not set and CNM relationships require open communication. While the first requires no discussion, the second and third themes are easily understood by applying the second element of the Triple-C model: ongoing communication (Hangen et al. 3). As previously stated, ongoing communication helps to maintain relationship satisfaction and stability (Hangen et al. 3). The reason for this is because relationship rules may be more flexible in CNM relationships. Such relationships cannot succeed unless partners discuss, negotiate and clarify relationship rules as the relationship evolves. Furthermore, the third theme stating that CNM relationships require more open communication is a direct reflection of the Triple-C model. For instance it provides additional support for the use of the model as a sensitizing concept of our study.

Our findings address the perceived disparity between monogamous and CNM relationships. Schippers argues the monogamous couple is "a discursively constructed, institutionalized, and compulsory relationship form, is central to the production, maintenance and legitimization of hetero-masculine domination" (Schippers 28). In short, monogamy has been created and perpetuated by society and does not necessarily reflect

human nature. Societal beliefs have led to the stigmatization of alternative romantic relationships. Our study contradicts this notion as participants acknowledged definitional differences between monogamous and CNM relationships. However, functional discrepancies focused on the relationship agreement and not the moral or ethical dilemmas commonly associated with non-monogamy. As an example, one participant shared, “I don’t think they’re different, except that in monogamous relationships society has created a structured framework for right and wrong. In non-monogamous relationships, the partners establish their own right and wrong” (129). Our findings align with past literature, as it supports healthy and successful CNM relationships (Barker and Langdridge 748; Hangen et al. 3; Rubel and Bogaert 961).

Limitations and Future Research

We acknowledge that the exploratory nature of our study limited the amount of data collected and the type of qualitative analysis performed. However, the findings are significant in their own right, as they contribute to the current body of literature and also lay the groundwork for future research of sexting and infidelity in CNM relationships. The following acknowledges the study’s limitations as well as opportunities for future research.

First, although commonly used, self-reported information collected with an online questionnaire may lead people to be inherently biased when reporting their experiences. More specifically, individuals are influenced by social desirability. That is, participants are likely to report experiences considered to be socially acceptable. Yet, sexting outside of the boundaries of a romantic relationship is more likely to be considered taboo. Therefore, participants may find it difficult to be completely honest.

Secondly, participant selection was determined using a convenience sampling approach where participation was the result of a voluntary decision to respond. It is possible, that those who completed the survey may not be representative of the entire population. Additionally, while the study focused on CNM relationships, participants were asked their relationship status at the time of the study and also participants were not asked for their specific CNM relationship arrangement (e.g., polyamorous, swinging, etc.). It is possible some participants were in multiple relationship status categories, but only selected one (e.g., currently single but traditionally engages in polyamorous relationships). Future research should collect CNM relationship arrangement information to ensure richer data and potential for data comparison between relationship structures. Additionally, relationship longevity should be considered. A sample focusing on long-term relationships may exhibit different sexting trends. Also given the greater level of investment in maintenance of the relationship, this may distinguish the perceptions of infidelity.

Beyond the issues of sample selection, a third potential limitation is the homogeneity of the sample regarding their background and demographic characteristics. The majority of the participants in the current study were Caucasian and heterosexual. Sexting in heterosexual samples may be different than sexting in LGBTQ+ samples. This sample used may also impact the way partners understand infidelity. With that in mind, future research should explore sexting and CNM relationships specifically for the LGBTQ+

community. In addition to this, a comparison between genders or sexuality could reveal more detailed findings regarding sexting and CNM relationships.

Beyond supporting the Triple-C model, our findings align with Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics theory (RDT). As for instance, RDT explains how communication creates and changes interpersonal relationships due to a constant interplay between opposing tendencies (Baxter & Montgomery, 1988). For example, as children grow, they rely on their parents, but also begin to communicate the need for independence. Therefore, this creates a tension known in RDT as connectedness-autonomy (Baxter and Montgomery 265). Research question one's theme of autonomy supports RDT and individuals' need for integration in CNM relationships. Furthermore, autonomy aligns with literature on CNM relationships and the idea of relationship anarchy. Relationship anarchy refers to a decision to not take one partner as a "primary" and other's as "secondary". Instead, an individual maintains each relationship as separate and makes as few rules as possible (Hardy and Easton 63). Future research should utilize RDT and the idea of relational anarchy to investigate individual's desire for mutual consent, ongoing communication and mutual comfort in CNM relationships.

Conclusion

Using the Triple-C model as a sensitizing concept, our study investigated sexting as a form of infidelity in CNM relationships. Our findings provide valuable insight for understanding fidelity, trust and maintenance in such relationships. Whilst also challenging the stereotypes and perceived differences between monogamy and non-monogamy. Overall, participants expressed the need for open, honest communication about relationship rules regarding infidelity. Findings focused less on the differences between monogamy and non-monogamy. Instead, the findings highlighted best practices for any relationship arrangement. The study's findings are both theoretically and practically significant. Theoretically, the study applies the Triple-C model to a unique relationship dynamic in need of further investigation. The study's findings are practically significant in that they provide professionals with a greater understanding of interpersonal communication. This is specifically true for open communication, consent and comfort occurring in CNM relationships. By arming practitioners with a greater understanding of issues facing individuals in CNM relationships, they are better able to assist those struggling with relational turmoil.

Table 1 – Demographic information of the study sample

| Demographic Categories | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Gender</i> | | |
| Female | 106 | 60.2% |
| Male | 53 | 30.1% |
| Other | 13 | 7.4% |
| Chose not to identify | 4 | 2.3% |
| <i>Sexual Orientation</i> | | |
| Heterosexual | 97 | 55.1% |
| Bisexual | 55 | 31.6% |
| Gay/Lesbian | 2 | 1.1% |
| Other | 16 | 9.1% |
| Chose not to identify | 6 | 3.4% |
| <i>Relationship Status</i> | | |
| Married | 39 | 22% |
| Engaged | 4 | 2.3% |
| Domestic Partnership | 7 | 3.5% |
| Committed to one person | 41 | 23.2% |
| Committed to more than one person | 18 | 10.2% |
| Casually dating one person | 8 | 4.5% |
| Casually dating multiple people | 11 | 6.2% |
| Single | 23 | 13% |
| Divorced | 2 | 1.1% |
| Other | 23 | 13% |
| <i>Race/Ethnicity</i> | | |
| Caucasian | 142 | 79.1% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 9 | 5.1% |
| African American | 5 | 2.8% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 9 | 5.1% |
| Multiracial | 7 | 4% |
| Chose not to identify | 5 | 2.8% |

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