

Forgive, not forget: Exploring the influence of perception of dating infidelity to forgiveness behaviour in women

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Abstract

Infidelity in relationships is increasingly common in marriage and dating relationships. Its strong effect on mental health makes this topic worthy of further research, especially in perceptions of dating infidelity relationships. Perceptions of dating infidelity have three dimensions: ambiguous, deceptive, and explicit infidelity. This study uses a quantitative design with a total of 77 women and using convenience sampling. We analysed using simple regression analysis. Data collection used The Forgiveness Scale and Perception of Dating Infidelity Scale. The results of this study indicate a significant negative effect between the perception of dating infidelity and forgiveness behaviour in the women population who are victims of infidelity value $F(1.75) = 5.114$, $p = 0.027$, adj. $R^2 = 0.051$, and regression coefficient ($\beta = -0.091$). Ambiguous behaviour ($F(1.75) = 4.582$, $p = 0.036$, adj. $R^2 = 0.045$, and regression coefficient ($\beta = -0.077$)) and deceptive behaviour ($F(1.75) = 4.035$, $p = 0.048$, adj. $R^2 = 0.038$, and regression coefficient ($\beta = -0.054$)) dimensions have a significant relationship with forgiveness. Whereas explicit behaviour is not significant ($F(1.75) = 1.425$, $p = 0.236$, adj. $R^2 = 0.006$, and regression coefficient ($\beta = -0.028$)). This research is an initial study on the perception of dating infidelity in Indonesia. It can be expected to be helpful as a study material in designing educational activities such as preventing infidelity in marriage preparation.

Keywords

Ambiguous behaviour, dating infidelity perception, deceptive behaviour, explicit behaviour, forgiveness

Introduction

Infidelity is one of immoral behaviours which may be committed by both unmarried and married couples and often has couples lose their commitment to separation. According to the JustDating application, Indonesia ranks second as a country in Asia that commits infidelity, where the first rank is held by Thailand (Salsabilla, 2022). From across the globe, the Statistics Brain Research Institute reported that 41% of married couples are having an affair on a sexual or emotional basis (Alexopoulos & Taylor, 2020). Then, further research revealed that between men and women, as many as 20-40% of men and 14-25% of women disclosed sexual infidelity outside of their primary relationship (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2016). Projectively, from year to year, infidelity will be more prevalent, especially among committed or married people.

Infidelity of any kind is very painful, especially one based on emotion (Adam, 2019). Several studies also report that men are more often the perpetrators of infidelity than women (Abdulghani et al., 2018; Martins et al., 2016; Toplu-Demirtaş & Fincham, 2018). This is what impacts women's mental and emotional health, so it is necessary to find a strategy for managing their stress (Darab et al., 2020; Roos et al., 2019). Of the many strategies for managing stress on victims of infidelity, there is one variable that is important in acceptance of a traumatic incident, namely forgiveness (Côté et al., 2022; Jeter & Brannon, 2017; Witvliet et al., 2020).

Forgiveness plays a critical role in addressing the emotional aftermath of infidelity in romantic relationships. It represents a prosocial response, diminishing the desire to retaliate

against the offending partner. When faced with infidelity, individuals often experience intense negative emotions such as anger, shame, depression, and feelings of abandonment. These emotions can have profound impacts on mental health. By choosing to forgive, individuals engage in a process that mitigates these traumatic effects, fostering healing and potentially improving their quality of life. Forgiveness involves a shift from negative to positive responses towards the perpetrator. This shift is twofold: firstly, it involves the reduction or elimination of negative feelings and reactions; secondly, it encompasses the cultivation of positive attitudes and behaviors towards the offending partner. This dual nature of forgiveness — moving away from negativity and towards positivity — is essential in transforming the painful experience of infidelity into an opportunity for personal growth and relationship improvement. Conceptually, forgiveness involves releasing negative affection, such as hatred; negative cognition, such as thoughts of revenge; negative behaviour, such as verbal aggression; and affects positive behaviour, such as compassion (Johns et al., 2015; McCullough, 2001; Rye et al., 2001).

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The way individuals perceive the type of infidelity significantly influences their willingness to forgive. Infidelity, traditionally understood as sexual behavior outside the primary relationship, now includes emotional intimacy with others, extending to interactions via digital means like smartphones and computers. This expanded definition, encompassing both physical and emotional aspects, affects how people view and respond to infidelity, impacting the process of forgiveness in relationships (Mahambrey, 2020; Moller & Vossler, 2015; Sahni & Jain, 2018). Emotional infidelity occurs when someone in a relationship creates emotional distance by spending more time with their partner or thinking about them so much that their original partner is ignored or rejected emotionally. Sexual or physical infidelity is when someone in a relationship or marriage has sex with someone outside the relationship (Guitar et al., 2017; Moreno & Kahumoku-Fessler, 2018).

Many hypotheses support the claim that men have the most difficulty forgiving physical or sexual infidelity towards their partners and women have the most difficulty forgiving emotional infidelity (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021; Mattingly et al., 2010; Urooj & Anjum, 2015; Wilson et al., 2011). Other research has proven that the more innocuous or ambiguous an infidelity is, the greater the chance for the victim to forgive (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2019). Women are also the gender that most easily forgives cheating by their partners (Kňážko, 2022). Concerning gender, there is research that argues that women and men experience differences in forgiveness in the characteristics of infidelity. One study stated that both genders are exposed to the same distress on emotional infidelity rather than sexual infidelity (Carpenter, 2012; Kato, 2021).

Infidelity has several vital effects on mental health due to a person's perception of feelings of being betrayed and a person's unpreparedness to accept the behaviour of their partner behind their back (Shrout & Weigel, 2018). Some of the impacts are divorce (Warach & Josephs, 2021), use of illegal drugs and alcohol abuse (Kreuz, 2018), and mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, decreased self-esteem, and loss of sexual confidence (Azhar et al., 2018; Ejeh, 2022; Shrout & Weigel, 2018).

Because of this effect, some literature discussed the types of views of victims of infidelity to make boundaries for when partners are considered to be cheating. The concept by Wilson et al. (2011) explains how a person's perception of infidelity will affect one's mental state and forgiveness. Past research has addressed this by identifying which behaviours constitute infidelity and how situational and individual differences relate to those perceptions. Three types of infidelity are summarised in the perception of infidelity (PDI), including: A) ambiguous behaviour, namely the perceived factor that someone is having infidelity when carrying out the behaviour with no apparent motivation but already indicating that the perpetrator is close to the opposite sex; B) deceptive behaviour, which relates to behaviour to deceive or manipulate the victim; and C) explicit behaviour refers to behaviour that indicates infidelity because it involves elements of sexual relations with other people (Mattingly et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2011).

Women's perceptions of infidelity are shaped by a range of factors, including the reasons behind infidelity in romantic relationships and the distinctions between dating

and marital infidelity. Evolutionary psychology suggests gender differences in how infidelity is perceived. This theory posits that women are more affected by emotional infidelity, valuing emotional intimacy and connection in relationships. In contrast, men are often more impacted by physical or sexual infidelity. These differences highlight how gender influences the understanding and response to infidelity in romantic relationships (Leeker & Carozzi, 2014; Mattingly et al., 2010; Oberle et al., 2017; Tregger & Sprecher, 2011; Wilson et al., 2011). There are several studies indicating that in women, infidelity has a considerable impact.

This research focuses on women as victims of infidelity, where several claims argue that there is no gender difference in the type of perception of infidelity. The novelty of this research is to find out which kinds of infidelity women are more forgiving. This research is also rare, especially in Indonesia's female population and those with romantic relationships outside of marriage. Four hypotheses are proposed in this study. The first hypothesis is "there is an influence of perceptions of dating infidelity on forgiveness in the women population". The second hypothesis is "ambiguous behaviour's influence on forgiveness in the women population". The third hypothesis is "there is an influence of deceptive behaviour on forgiveness in the women population". The last hypothesis is, "There is an influence of explicit behaviour on forgiveness in the women population".

Based on the background above, this study aims to see the influence of perceptions of dating infidelity on forgiveness in the women population and its three dimensions, namely ambiguous behaviour, deception behaviour, and explicit behaviour. The results of this study are also expected to be a material consideration in making premarital education activities to prevent infidelity and strengthen forgiveness aspects in relationships.

Method

Participants

This research was conducted using a convenience sampling technique, with all participants being women aged 18-40 (M: 22.6; SD: 4.14) years who had had romantic relationships and had been victims of dating infidelity. Seventy-seven participants were recruited, and the majority came from the island of Java, Indonesia. This research was carried out in December 2022. The procedure carried out in this study was to use a Google form containing informed consent. The researcher informed that the respondent's participation is voluntary, and the respondent has the right to cancel the involvement if he so desires.

Research Instruments

The Forgiveness Scale measures individual forgiveness toward offenders (Rye et al., 2001). This instrument has two dimensions: Absence of negative and presence of positive. This instrument has been adapted to Indonesian and uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with 15 items. In the study, this instrument has an internal consistency of 0.79. An example of an item in this instrument is "I spend time thinking about how I can repay people who

treat me unfairly.” The total score was obtained by summing all of the responses.

Perception of Dating Infidelity Scale (PDIS) serves to measure attitudes toward specific behaviours that are perceived as infidelity in romantic relationships (Wilson *et al.*, 2011). This measure has a multidimensionality construct and has three factors. This instrument has three dimensions, namely ambiguous behaviour, deceptive behaviour, and explicit behaviour. This instrument uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) with 14 items. The researcher added two other items from the original 12 items in the Deceptive Behaviour dimension, namely “avoiding interaction” and “playing victim”, with the intuitive assumption and theoretical support that these two things are one of the signals from a partner who is having an infidelity (Cravens & Whiting, 2014; Shackelford & Buss, 1997). In the study, when testing the validity and reliability using Rasch modelling, this model has an internal consistency of 0.94. Next, a Cronbach Alpha for three dimensions was obtained for each dimension. First, ambiguous behaviour has an alpha of 0.89, deceptive behaviour has an alpha of 0.90, and explicit behaviour has an alpha of 0.96. One example of an item representing each dimension in this instrument is “Going somewhere,” “Lying,” and “Making out”. The total score was obtained by summing all of the responses.

Data Analysis Technique

In this study, the data analysis employs Pearson product-moment correlation and simple regression analysis to examine the relationship between two variables. For processing the statistical data, we use SPSS software version 22.0 for Windows. Additionally, to ensure the validity and reliability of the instruments used in the study, we utilize the Winsteps application version 3.73. This comprehensive approach ensures a robust analysis of the data. The logit value generated from the Rasch modelling is also used in data statistics in this study. Before conducting the regression analysis, the researcher conducted an assumption test by applying the normality and linearity tests. First, the data in this study are normal because they meet the requirements for a value of $p > \alpha$ (.61 > 0.05). Second, the data in this study are linear because they meet the requirements for the linearity value $p < \alpha$ (.01 < .05) and meet the requirements for the deviation from linearity value $p > \alpha$ (.07 > 0.05).

Result

This study used a sample of 77 women who had an age range of 18-40 years (M: 22.6; SD: 4.14) and had experiences of being cheated on by their partners. The following results of the distribution of data are explained using tables in table 1.

Table 1 presents the demographic breakdown of the participants. In terms of age, a majority, 60 participants (78%), are between 18-25 years, while 17 participants (22%) fall in the 26-40 year age range. Occupation-wise, the sample includes 14 private employees (18%), 56 students (73%), and a combined total of 7 participants (9%) who are civil servants, unemployed, or self-employed. Regarding relationship status, the majority, 42 participants (55%), are in a dating relationship, and 35 participants (45%) are single. Lastly, when asked about their current relationship status with

Table 1. Demographic Variable

Sample Characteristics	Frequency	%
Age Range		
18-25	60	78
26-40	17	22
Total	77	100
Occupation		
Private Employees	14	18
Student	56	73
Civil Servant	2	3
Unemployed	4	5
Self-Employed	1	1
Total	77	100
Relationship Status		
Dating	42	55
Single	35	45
Total	77	100
Still in The Relationship With Offender		
Yes	15	19
No	62	81
Total	77	100

the offender, 15 participants (19%) reported they are still in a relationship, whereas 62 participants (81%) are no longer in a relationship.

Table 2 depicts the means and SD of the three variables and the Pearson correlation coefficients. The variable perception of dating infidelity has a negative correlation with forgiveness. The additional information is that the ambiguous and deceptive dimensions negatively correlate with forgiveness. Meanwhile, the explicit dimension does not correlate with forgiveness.

The analysis of the first hypothesis reveals that the coefficient of Adjusted R^2 is .051. This indicates that the perception of dating infidelity accounts for 5.1% of the variance in forgiveness, suggesting a modest but notable impact. Furthermore, the F value of 5.114, coupled with a p -value of .027, signifies that this relationship is statistically significant. This means that the perception of dating infidelity does indeed have a meaningful influence on forgiveness levels. The regression coefficient (β) is also -.091, highlighting a negative relationship between the perception of dating infidelity and forgiveness. In simpler words, as perceptions of infidelity increase, the likelihood of forgiveness decreases.

Then, to prove hypothesis 2, namely “There is an influence of Ambiguous Behaviour on forgiveness in the women population”. From the results above, it can be concluded that the coefficient of Adjusted R^2 is .045, which concludes that ambiguous behaviour effectively contributes a variance of 4.5% to forgiveness. The F value given is 4.582 with a p -value of .036, meaning ambiguous behaviour significantly affects forgiveness. Then, as additional information, the value of β has a value of -.077, which implies that ambiguous behaviour has a negative effect on forgiveness.

Next, to prove hypothesis 3, namely “There is an influence of Deceptive Behaviour on forgiveness in the women population”. From the results above, it can be concluded that the coefficient of Adjusted R^2 is .038, which concludes that deceptive behaviour effectively contributes a variance of

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Pearson's Correlation Coefficient for Perception of Dating Infidelity and Forgiveness

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. PDIS	0.02	1.59	1	–	–	–	–
2. AB	–0.43	1.79	0.92**	1	–	–	–
3. DB	1.16	2.42	0.85**	0.77**	1	–	–
4. EB	1.14	2.86	0.75**	0.62**	0.55**	1	–
5. FOR	0.07	0.59	–0.25*	–0.24*	–0.23*	–0.14	1

Note: 1. PDIS: Perception of Dating Infidelity; 2. AB: Ambiguous Behaviour; 3. DB: Deceptive Behaviour; 4. EB: Explicit Behaviour; 5. FOR: Forgiveness; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. In this study, we divided the simple regression analysis into four analyses; the first was to prove hypothesis one, namely, "There is an influence of perceptions of dating infidelity on forgiveness in the women population". These results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of Simple Regression Analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		<i>t</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>p</i>
	β	<i>SE</i>	β					
Variable perception of dating infidelity	–0.09	0.04	–0.25	–2.26	5.11	0.05	0.03*	
1. Dimensions ambiguous behavior	–0.08	0.04	–0.24	–2.14	4.58	0.05	0.04*	
2. Dimensions deceptive behavior	–0.05	0.03	–0.03	–2.01	4.04	0.04	0.05*	
3. Dimensions explicit behavior	–0.03	0.02	–0.14	–1.19	1.43	0.01	0.24	

3.8% to forgiveness. The *F* value given is 4.035 with a *p*-value of 0.048, meaning that deceptive behaviour significantly influences forgiveness. Then, as additional information, the value of β has a value of $-.054$, which implies that deceptive behaviour has a negative effect on forgiveness.

Last, to prove hypothesis 4, namely "There is an influence of Explicit Behaviour on forgiveness in the women population". From the results above, it can be concluded that the *F* value given is 1.425 with a *p*-value of .236, which means that explicit behaviour does not significantly affect forgiveness.

Discussion

The findings of this study are significant and align with conclusions drawn in several prior studies. Specifically, our data reveal a notable negative correlation between women's perceptions of dating infidelity and their propensity to forgive. This implies that as women's awareness and recognition of dating infidelity increase, their inclination to exhibit forgiving behavior towards the perpetrators decreases. Essentially, higher perceptions of infidelity make it more challenging for women, as victims, to forgive those who have wronged them in romantic contexts. The results of this study are not in line with previous research, which found that, in general, women more easily forgive their partner's infidelity, regardless of the form of the infidelity committed (Kňazko, 2022). Perceptions of dating infidelity can predict forgiveness by 5.1%, with the other 94.9% being influenced by various factors. These factors include the ability to empathise, personality traits, and individual relationship quality (Chi et al., 2019).

Women show difficulty in displaying forgiving behaviour on the perception of infidelity with ambiguous behaviour and deceptive behaviour types. This statement was indicated by the data analysis results showing a negative effect of ambiguous and deceptive Behaviour on forgiveness behaviour. Examples of infidelity behaviour that fall under ambiguous behaviour include eating with someone of the opposite sex

who is not their partner or chatting with the opposite sex who does not talk about work. Meanwhile, examples of behaviour in the deceptive behaviour dimension include, for example, when a partner intentionally covers up or manipulates information that has the potential to arouse suspicion. In the women population, the results of this study support gender differences in dealing with infidelity, where women are more likely to perceive emotional infidelity as a more unambiguous indication of infidelity. On the other hand, if a man commits emotional infidelity, he most likely has also committed sexual infidelity (Harris & Christenfeld, 1996).

This behaviour raises doubts about the line between cheating and not cheating. However, the results of this study did not support the claim that the more innocuous or ambiguous an infidelity is, the greater the chance for the victim to forgive (Beltrán-Morillas et al., 2019). It is precisely in this study that women who perceive this type of behaviour as an indication of infidelity will find it challenging to display forgiving behaviour to their partners. It aligns with (Pettijohn II & Ndoni, 2013) and the results of this study which found that women are more upset and do not want to forgive their partners who commit emotional infidelity (e.g., eating together, chatting, etc.). Both dimensions of ambiguous behaviour and deceptive behaviour are more towards emotional infidelity, so the results of this study are consistent with various claims which say that men find it more challenging to forgive physical or sexual infidelity towards their partners and women are more difficult to forgive emotional infidelity (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021; Mattingly et al., 2010; Urooj & Anjum, 2015; Wilson et al., 2011).

However, the results in this study regarding explicit behaviour are not in line with various previous studies where women should have shown significant positive results on this dimension, namely, women more easily forgive cheating behaviour with sexual and physical types (Hackathorn & Ashdown, 2021; Mattingly et al., 2010; Urooj & Anjum, 2015; Wilson et al., 2011). Women tend to think that physical and

sexual infidelity does not always indicate betrayal in their romantic relationships (Buss et al., 1992; Treger & Sprecher, 2011). In this study, there was no significant relationship between perceptions of infidelity in the explicit behaviour dimension and forgiveness behaviour in women. Some of the arguments are, for example, related to the nature of the interpersonal relationships of this explicit behaviour.

In cases of deceptive behavior in infidelity, the actions primarily stem from the individual and their partner, not external influences. While a third person may be involved in explicit cheating scenarios, they typically do not significantly influence the cheating behavior, which is rooted in the dynamics of the primary relationship (Mattingly et al., 2010). This explanation causes other factors outside the partner's self that cannot be controlled (e.g., being teased, framed, etc.) so that the relationship between forgiveness and this behaviour becomes less clear. In addition, another possibility can also explain this finding, namely the existence of a different concept of forgiveness in explaining the dynamics of infidelity relationships, which may not be captured in this study. Worthington & Scherer (2004) introduced the concepts of emotional forgiveness and decisional forgiveness in explaining the dynamics of forgiving individuals who have been cheated on. In decisional forgiveness, the victim can forgive the perpetrator of the infidelity by considering the value of that person in his life. However, the victim may not necessarily do emotional forgiveness, namely reducing negative emotions such as anger, resentment, bitterness, etc., to the perpetrator (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). This condition might happen to the research sample that finds distinguishing the type of forgiveness they feel difficult. Hence, the data shows no relationship between perceptions of explicit behaviour and forgiveness behaviour.

Despite the various shortcomings, one of the strengths of this study is the researcher's attempt to conduct research with a quantitative design to answer the influence of perception variables on dating infidelity on forgiveness behaviour. Previous research used more qualitative methods in clinical case studies regarding the relationship between the two variables (Gordon et al., 2004; Olson et al., 2002). This condition makes generalisations in terms of research results and location context challenging to do in general. The approach in this study is expected to be a new point in developing scientific literature on perceptions of dating infidelity in Indonesia.

Despite the contribution to our knowledge, we must acknowledge several limitations of this study. First, research concepts and variables refer more to Western literature, especially the idea of forgiveness. The results of related research are more focused on Western countries, which are proven to have different nuances from Asian countries, especially Indonesia. Second, this study used a relatively limited number of samples, namely 77 individuals with homogeneous sex. Using a limited sample of the same sex has its advantages and disadvantages. One of the areas that can be highlighted is the need for generalisation power and the strength of the results of the data analysis itself. With more samples from various locations in Indonesia, the research data can be used more widely.

The results of this study also provide some concrete implications for the community, especially in the case of

infidelity and forgiveness. Researchers hope that the results of this study can be used as a consideration in designing educational studies to prevent infidelity in relationships. These activities are carried out in premarital education activities. In terms of handling, strengthening aspects of forgiveness can be used as one of the solutions or activities in mediating divorce cases in Religious Courts or Institutions.

Conclusion and Implications

The results of this study refute the researchers' initial assumption that women should show significantly positive results in this dimension; for example, women would more easily forgive cheating behaviour with sexual and physical types. This initial hypothesis stems from the notion that women perceive sexual infidelity by men as usual and do not always indicate that they betray their romantic relationship. This finding is a novelty in research on the perception of infidelity, namely the possibility that there are no longer gender differences in viewing infidelity, especially in this new era that continues to develop. The results of this study are also expected to be useful as study material in designing educational activities to prevent infidelity in relationships. Furthermore, research results related to strengthening forgiveness can also be used as activities in the preparation of marriage or mediation of divorce in the Religious Courts.

Declaration

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Author contributions

DY designed the study and analyzed the data, WM wrote the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

There is no competing interest in writing this research, from financial to personal relationship relevant to this research.

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